

# **A phenomenological exploration into the lived experience of childfree women aged 45-55**

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Life is a sum of all your choices

~ Camus

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## **Abstract**

One fifth of women in Britain reach the age of 45 without having children, yet psychological and developmental theories often begin with the assumption that all women become mothers. The aim of this study is to explore how the decade between 45 and 55 is experienced by women who have chosen non-motherhood. Ten voluntarily childfree women participated in semi-structured interviews, and the data produced were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Results indicate that the childfree choice is influenced by a gravitation towards meaningful areas of life other than motherhood, as well as a rejection of its perceived drawbacks. For these participants the decision to be childfree is mainly felt to be finalized within the 30s such that the biological end of fertility is not experienced as an ending of choice. The present decade is one of gladness about being childfree and appreciation of the freedom it affords, though there is some curiosity and wistfulness regarding what has not been chosen. For the majority of the participants the childfree choice is accepted by others, but there were also some experiences of stigma. Management of this is primarily through the creation of diverse social circles in which childfreedom is more the 'norm'. Friendships are also viewed as important sources of support for a childfree future, which is itself perceived with some anxiety regarding old-age care.

Recommendations are made for the professions of psychotherapy and counselling which include the ability to openly explore oscillating desires and ambivalence without believing in a 'right' choice, normalizing childfreedom, and helping clients to navigate the social world and plan ahead. It is suggested that further research into this topic and into the male experience of being childfree is needed.

## **Keywords**

Childfreedom, women, choice, pronatalism, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, existential psychotherapy, age group 45-55

## **Statement of Authorship**

This dissertation is written by Josephine Davies and has ethical clearance from the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University for the Degree of Doctor of Existential Psychotherapy. The author reports no conflicts of interest, and is alone responsible for the content and writing of the dissertation.

## Anonymisation and Transcript Notation

The verbatim transcripts in this dissertation were edited to ensure the participants' anonymity and confidentiality.

{ }	words omitted to preserve confidentiality
(pause)	added non-verbal information
...	link between two parts of a transcript
Ch-	word begun but not finished

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## Terminology

As the awkward absence of a genderless possessive pronoun subsumes 'woman' into the human representative 'man', the lack of an unladen term for non-mothers again subsumes women into primarily biological beings. Frustrations are encountered by many as we reach for a term that doesn't exist; *childless* denotes lack thus seems derogatory to the woman, *childfree* has connotations of nuisance and seems derogatory to children. Both are labels that position a woman in reference to not having children. Lisle (1999) suggests 'otherhood', but I find this cements the norm of woman as mother against which is a subset of women who do not fit. I hope that in time women will cease to be primarily identified by their reproductive choices, and each individual woman's status will be interesting and unique in itself. Until that time however, and acknowledging my own assumptions, I have opted for the less than satisfactory 'childfree' to convey freedom and choice over lack or absence.

# Chapter 1 Introduction

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“there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women” (Butler, 1990, p.1).

Typing ‘childfree’ into Google generates over one million results in less than a second. At the same time, many people will look puzzled at this relatively new term, perhaps querying its meaning. Tracking my purchasing history, Amazon recommends dozens of books and guides for childfree living, yet it is doubtful that the average bookshop employee would be familiar with the genre. Recent years have shown a plethora of media articles, internet forums, web and radio broadcasts, and YouTube videos about childfree living, reflecting the current statistics of 1 in 5 women born in the UK in 1967 reaching age 45 without having children (ONS, 2013). But much of this media presence is in frustrated response to personal and public criticism or ignorance about being childfree (Shriver, Guardian, 2005; Vernon, Guardian, 2009; Leipholtz, Huffington Post, 2014). This is further complicated by the myriad reasons why women do not mother; voluntary choice, circumstance, infertility, partner’s preference, and all the diverse experiences within each of these categories are not expressed within the statistics. Thus the topic of childfreedom is both currently visible and invisible, proudly proclaimed as a modern valid choice for women whilst simultaneously being defensively justified against accusations of selfishness (Filipovic, 2013; Miranda, 2013).

Research shows that despite the growing numbers of childfree women, they are often ‘different’ or unusual within their immediate social worlds which can lead to doubt about what might feel like a natural position of non-motherhood (Morrell, 1994; Peterson and Engwall, 2013), as well as isolation due to the confusion or scorn of others (Safer, 1996; Park, 2002). The aim of this study is to further the knowledge about women’s experience of being childfree in order to contribute to the professions of psychotherapy and counselling. Little research has been done within the psychotherapy paradigm, and even less from an existential perspective. Existential philosophy is a broad field which focuses on human existence as meaning-seeking, free within certain given limitations, and as fundamentally situated in a social realm. All of these principles seem greatly relevant to the experience of becoming and being childfree.

Although I am very interested in men’s experience, I chose to limit this study to women because twentieth century theories of female development and psychology have focused primarily on reproduction and motherhood in a way that is not true of theories of male development (Lippert, 1997). Non-mothers are thereby theoretically absent, which would be inadequate even with a smaller minority, but with 20% of the female population of the UK fitting this category, psychological knowledge must broaden its understanding to include women who choose childfreedom. I hope with this research to add to existing literature that gives voice to women who have chosen a path in life different from motherhood.

My choice to narrow this study to women aged 45-55 was informed by both academic interest and professional experience. As a psychotherapist in a London low cost service I saw many women aged around 50, of varying family status, who were experiencing great existential challenges and changes in life. Without wishing to generalize based upon this limited work, I

became very interested in what seemed to be a time of growth, anxiety and emotional richness, which I found matched relevant research done into women's midlife experiences (Apter, 1995; Howell, 2001). Midlife is a term used to denote a much broader age category than I wanted to include in this research (Lachman, 2004), and I also thought it would be interesting to look at the experiences of childfree women around the end of their fertility. However, this interest was offset by awareness that this decade of women's lives is so often understood with reference to biology and motherhood, neglecting the full context and narrative of a life (Gergen, 1990; Hargrave, 2006). Existentially it is unsatisfactory to reduce women's rich experience of this age to bodily changes; the physical world is only one aspect of a person's totality (van Deurzen, 1997). This research therefore incorporates how childfree women experience the end of their fertility, but I do not have any assumptions of what this experience consists of, nor of how the menopause itself is experienced or thought about.

As statistics show that only 0.09% of births in the UK are to mothers over the age of 45 (ONS, 2013), I decided to set this as my lower limit; I felt it was ethically sound to exclude women who may still be in the choice making process, and for sampling reasons I set my upper limit to a decade above this in order to maintain a fairly homogeneous age group.

My research topic is of a personal nature as well as of professional and academic interest; as is discussed further in my reflexivity section, I do define myself as a childfree woman, but this definition is insignificant compared with aspects of my identity that *are* important. It is simply the unusual nature of wishing to remain childfree that makes it of any interest, and is therefore more of a social than personal 'self'. The curiosity I experience from others about my choice has led me to turn a philosophical lens upon it and I have frequently assessed childfreedom from an existential perspective in terms of the notions of freedom, ethics, responsibility, autonomy, self-in-process and anxiety. Discussing all of this with my existential therapist has led to a desire to discover how other women experience being childfree, and to describe similarities and differences within these experiences.

The study begins with a review of the literature and research about childfree women, followed by a methodology and methods chapter where I describe how I conducted this research and why I made certain choices. Chapters 4 and 5 are the results of my research and a discussion of these results with reference to relevant literature and philosophy. Lastly is a concluding chapter encompassing clinical relevance, critical reflections and suggestions for future research.

# Chapter 2 Literature Review

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This chapter incorporates literature on the topic of childfree women, and literature wherein they are notably absent through the theoretical definitions of *woman*. This is because I believe it is important to contextualize the present experiences of childfree women, whom I will be researching, through outlining the history of how others have been perceived and understood. I was surprised by the extent to which the topic of childfreedom itself has been written about over the past 30 years; I accessed nearly 30 articles and read 10 books about mainly childfree women, but sometimes also men and couples. Much of this was from sociological and feminist perspectives though more recently there has been interest from counselling and psychotherapeutic paradigms. As outlined in the introduction, the media has also demonstrated a growing interest in the topic in the last 10 years, contributing to an on-going debate about why and how women choose not to mother. Little has been written specifically about the experience of being childfree aged 45-55; this age group is usually subsumed into wider accounts of 'midlife', which can mean a variety of different ages according to the author's definition, but the boundaries are generally accepted as aged 40-65 (Howell, 2001). This chapter looks at the perspectives of psychoanalytic, feminist, sociological, psychological, and social constructionist paradigms and how theories stemming from within them affect the perception of childfree women. It concludes with a discussion of how existentialist concepts might aid an understanding of this experience.

## 2.1 Psychoanalytic Perspectives

The psychoanalytic paradigm is one that has influenced all walks of Western life including art, literature and everyday thought as well as the worlds of academia, psychology and sociology (Levine and Scotch, 1968). As such it will be explored in depth with reference to the linking of women to motherhood and how childfree women are situated in comparison.

Beginning with Freud, whose theories about female sexuality are still cause for debate, the childfree woman is not posited in a particularly favourable light. Freud's oft quoted slogan "anatomy is destiny" (1924, p.274) can be misleading; his theory is not that the male or female anatomy with which one is born determines their way of behaving in a gendered fashion – this would be the question of a person's *essence*. Freud's actual question is, given their anatomy, how is a person then *constructed* psychologically? How does a male or female child become man or woman? The main thesis throughout Freud's extensive body of work is an exploration of sexuality and the unconscious, which he believes will answer this question. Both of these strands are re-evaluated throughout his life, leading to contradictions and confusions, and particularly to the 'great debate' of the 1920s and '30s wherein he was strongly challenged from many corners about his views.

In order to understand Freud's theory of female sexuality, the heart of which positions motherhood as the developmentally normal route, it is necessary to first outline his theory of male sexuality as this is undoubtedly Freud's own beginning:

The early stages of life for the male infant include the oral and anal stages in which there is no awareness of being male or different to the female. The third stage, beginning at around age four is the 'phallic' or 'Oedipal' stage; the boy maintains the libidinal attachment to the mother as she is the primary love object for both him as well as the female child. He also has aggressive or hostile feelings towards the father who is seen as a rival for the mother's affections. These feelings trigger 'castration anxiety', which is a concept that stemmed originally from the case of 'Little Hans' (Freud, 1909) where literal castration was threatened, and later developed into a theory of universal repression of these incestuous and patricidal feelings into the unconscious (Freud, 1924). The normal outcome for the boy is a relinquishing of aggression towards the father and libido for the mother, which leads to entering the latency stage from which he emerges into the final genital stage as a heterosexual adult.

The female infant goes through exactly the same processes in the first two stages of life, and then in the Oedipal stage embarks on a separate path due to the dawning awareness of anatomical difference. Freud encountered a problem when formulating the female resolution of the Oedipal stage as, without the anxiety that stems from the fear of castration, how does she relinquish her libidinal attachment to the mother and transfer her affections to the father, then from there to other men when she reaches the genital stage? Freud overcame this difficulty by replacing the *object* of anxiety; he states that although females "have a castration complex they cannot have a fear of being castrated. Its place is taken in their sex by fear of loss of love" (1933, p.119). The separation from the mother and anxiety about losing this connection and love is greater for the female because she cannot symbolically reunite with the mother through sexual intercourse with another woman as can the male (Freud, 1926).

As well as making the above transition, the girl simultaneously makes what Freud describes as the "momentous discovery" (1925, p.335) of the male genitalia, in comparison with which her own visible organ, the clitoris, appears small, stunted and inferior. This realization leads to envy of the male anatomy, which may or may not be resolved; the 'normal' path to the equivalent male latency period and ultimate heterosexual partnership is achieved through accepting that the mother and therefore all women are already castrated, so turning to the father to satisfy her wish for a penis, which is then replaced by a wish for a baby;

"Her Oedipus complex culminates in a desire, which is long retained, to receive a baby from her father as a gift – to bear him a child" (Freud, 1924, p.321).

Thus for Freud, female desire for motherhood is not an intrinsic aspect of being born female, but a complicated path stemming from a position of anatomical inferiority. This seems like a poor goal for normal development, but the alternative of non-motherhood is not viewed any more sympathetically. The girl may persist in her belief that she either does have a penis or will get one for herself in the future, which Freud termed the "masculinity complex" (1931, p.376) or "process of disavowal" (1925, p.337). This can result in homosexuality or denial of the proper feminine outcome of heterosexuality and motherhood.

To me, the psychological gymnastics a girl must go through to become a woman in Freudian theory obfuscates what is most interesting about his overall thought and most relevant to the choice to be childfree. This is the idea of 'lack' itself as an aspect of the human condition rather than the specificity of female lack of a phallus, be it symbolic or literal. This notion, hinted at by

Freud in his perusals of fearing loss of love, is taken further by his contemporary Ernest Jones (1927) who coined the term *Aphanisis* (from the Greek, meaning to disappear or become invisible) to designate castration anxiety for both sexes as actually a fear of losing sexual potency. Lacan (1964) later develops this theme into something that is much more philosophical and much closer to an existential understanding of what it means to be *human*, which is the fundamental division, or *fading* of the subject. This is an essential aspect of development that stems from separation from the mother into the symbolic realm of language in which 'I' as signified through speech is at a distance from, or split from, experiential being. Nevertheless, Lacan's philosophical endeavours also circle back to anatomical lack as wholeness in language becomes symbolized by the phallus, which is either present or absent; as Lacanian psychoanalyst Bruce Fink puts it, "*having* is always phallic in Freudian and Lacanian theory" (2004, p.18). By extension therefore, so is lack, which returns us to the childfree woman as possessing neither penis nor child, as missing something more than the symbolic absence of completion or wholeness *qua* the human condition.

This latter concept is explored without recourse to phallus, baby, or indeed division of the sexes by existential philosophy, most notably by Martin Heidegger in his main work *Being and Time* (1927). In Heidegger's view, it is not the unconscious or castration complex that creates a division in the human psyche, but the idea of death; he says that death completes us, but when we die we are no longer experiencing beings, thus we can never be whole. In philosophical terms then, to exist is to lack wholeness; yet childfree women stand in representation of this lack through reification of it into absence of a phallus and an empty womb (Ireland, 1993).

On an academic as well as personal level, I believe that Freud came close to a brilliant insight about being human that was lost through a focus on explaining being female. Moreover, his insistence on attributing 'lack' itself to the inferiority of female anatomy meant that the psychoanalytic 'great debate' mentioned earlier became rooted in this very concept, and parted from a philosophical discussion about the nature of being fundamentally incomplete as a human being. It is to the other voices in this debate I now turn in order to further contextualize contemporary childfree women.

Psychoanalyst Karen Horney was one of the first to voice dissent regarding the notion of female genital inferiority (1924). Questioning the symbolic and actual superiority of the phallus, she observes instead that girls may well envy the way in which boys are able to both handle and see their own anatomy during urination. The girl's anatomy remains hidden, she does not need to touch herself when urinating and is not supposed to touch herself at other times therefore is in this sense at an unfair disadvantage in terms of self-exploration and anatomical recognition from care-givers. In seeking a less phallicentric, and more female-centric psychology, Horney rejects the convoluted path which Freud outlined from girlhood to motherhood, and posits motherhood as being an innate disposition or primary feminine drive (Horney, 1924). Furthermore, she inverts the notion of penis-envy by asserting feminine superiority through women's ability to conceive and bear children, leading to a concept of male 'womb-envy' (Horney, 1926). Although Horney might in some ways be understood as one of the first feminist psychoanalysts due to her positioning of motherhood as a remarkable and joyful aspect of female capability rather than compensation for a 'lack' (Paris, 1994), this perspective also means that childfree women are again placed as other to the norm. However, Horney ([1967] 1935, p.216) also states that "little

or nothing is known of psychically healthy women” thus opening the possibility for a non-universalized psychological theory of women that includes non-motherhood as an equally valid and healthy choice.

Horney’s theories are interesting in that she argues from both a cultural and a biological perspective; in terms of culture, emerging feminist ideas can be seen in her account of the fact that the society in which we exist *is* masculine, that female psychology has been explored from the perspectives of men, and that women may be unconsciously yielding to a male understanding (Horney, 1926). Male envy of women’s ability to conceive and bear children is easily sublimated in the social world because of the opportunities available to men. Women’s envy of men stems from their actual social position of inferiority; not only are they barred from the male professions, but the female ‘work’ of motherhood is disparaged by men in an effort to repress envy of this very capacity. However, as motherhood is positioned as the biologically superior and naturally fulfilling role of women, those who reject or do not find satisfaction in this role are theorized as having a masculinity complex that stems from an unconscious fear of internal, vaginal destruction (Horney, 1926). Thus although Horney highlights the socially constructed fact of women’s lower status and male depreciation of motherhood, the childfree choice is not yet valued as another option for women.

It is interesting that other female analysts do not posit such a female-centric view. Helene Deutsch, a Polish psychoanalyst and pupil of Freud, was another early theorist of female sexuality and psychology who both agrees with and questions Freud’s developmental views. Deutsch (1925) cites penis-envy as a secondary matter that is sometimes seen as part of a neurotic person but isn’t a universal aspect of development. Nevertheless, her theory of women remains phallogentric in that female sexuality depends on the male and upon mothering. The process of motherhood begins in sexual activity which for the male is the satisfaction of orgasm but for the female is passive and primarily procreative as a “prize that is appended to her service to the species” (Deutsch, 1945, p.77). Deutsch (1945) outlines a theory of a femininity that at its core is both passive and masochistic because of woman’s acceptance of the suffering of pregnancy and childbirth, yet simultaneously women are naturally inclined towards motherhood and to serving others. This means that at the biological loss of reproductive capacity during menopause, a woman’s fundamental femininity and sense of herself as useful is also lost;

“woman has ended her existence as a bearer of future life and has reached her natural end – her partial death – as a servant of the species. She is now engaged in an active struggle against her decline” (Deutsch, 1945, p.459).

Deutsch’s theories are unsatisfactory for childfree women who are seen to be refusing the natural feminine role of passivity and masochistic pleasure in childbirth and motherhood, thus remaining in a masculine phase. But Deutsch’s thinking brings up further problems in that *all* women at menopausal age are viewed in what I feel is a very negative light; non-mothers have ignored their uniquely female potential and are now faced with decline, and mothers have reached the end of their ‘service’ of propagating the species and must struggle with this sense of having no further purpose. As a medical doctor as well as a psychoanalyst, Deutsch seems to mix biology and psychology whilst ignoring the social and spiritual needs of women which could not easily be fulfilled in areas other than motherhood.



The early psychoanalytic theorists hold differing views on the development of female sexuality, but they do agree that motherhood is the pinnacle of this development, rendering childless women as those who could not give up their masculine traits and are therefore not as developed as mothers.

### 2.1.1 Object Relations Theory

The discussion so far has focused upon so-called 'one-person' psychology (Mitchell, 1974) wherein human development is understood through individual or *intrapsychic* processes. In tandem with Freudian psychoanalysis, grew the British school of 'Object-Relations' which focuses on 'two-person' psychology of infant and primary care-giver, usually the mother. At the London Tavistock clinic important observation was done by Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott amongst others, on infants and mothers in order to establish how the early relationship with the mother is internalized and impacts upon the personality of the infant. Winnicott (1945a, 1945c) made central the mother's ability to create a holding environment for the baby, and emphasized the baby's process of realizing that the mother is a separate person with her own desires, which aids the process of separation. This work was continued throughout and immediately following World War II by child analyst John Bowlby (1956) as the impact of the evacuation programme for children was assessed. Important though this research was, it had the unfortunate result of further idealizing motherhood at precisely the time of post-World War II economic need for women to return to the home so that men could take back their jobs. Thus the notion of 'good enough mothering' (Winnicott, 1953) becomes prescriptive rather than theoretical, and the perspective of women remains that motherhood is their greatest achievement and highest goal.

Mitchell (1974) suggests that with this burgeoning interest in the mother-child dyad, the exploration of female psychology and sexuality was neglected throughout the 1950s. The political and social climate of this time aligned itself with the idealization of motherhood as women's most important endeavour. And yet when Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 the reality of the subjective state of the full-time mother and housewife was shown to be one of deep dissatisfaction and unfulfillment. It is here that psychoanalysis merges with sociology and feminism, but before turning to these paradigms for their perspective of childfree women, it is important to situate them in the theories of Freud's one time protégé Carl Jung, and the developmental psychoanalyst Erik Erikson because of the visibility and influence these two thinkers had on psychological understanding.

### 2.1.2 Jung

As with Horney and Deutsch, Jung (1938) posits innate characteristics within each sex, but his theory of the collective unconscious as a historical and hereditary aspect of the psyche means that each sex has something of the opposite. The male psyche retains the 'archetype' of the *anima*, or the feminine, and the female psyche retains the *animus*, or masculine. Although this initially sounds like a progressive viewpoint wherein childfree women might be at least seen as normal with a strong *animus*, Jung (1938) goes on to posit the 'mother-complex' wherein the desire not to mother is seen as pathological. This complex stems from over-identification with the mother, resulting in 'hypertrophy' or 'atrophy' of the feminine instinct. It is this latter development that has relevance for the childfree woman, though the former puts Deutsch's view into question as Jung states that being overly servatile signifies a stultified personality which is unable to truly relate and make sacrifices to others.

Atrophy of what Jung (1938, p.23) refers to as the “maternal instinct” (more about this forthwith) leads to an unconscious repudiation of the mother and everything maternal. In some women ‘masculine’ traits, in particular the intellect, will then become over-developed. It is interesting that for Jung, intellectuality is not necessarily the highest quality, as it has been throughout the enlightenment period (Barrett, 1958); instead, he places a high value on its opposite, nature. However, although Jung emphasizes the need for men to heed both ends of the polarities of rational and irrational, he fails to recognize that women might well need the same, and that rejection of the maternal role might simply be a greater interest in pursuits of a ‘rational’, or intellectual quality.

As an aside observation, polarities such as intellect/nature are often divided and attributed to male and female, which renders them masculine and feminine traits. One of the reasons I am drawn to an existential approach to psychotherapy is that these polarities are understood to exist non-hierarchically in all people independent of sex or gender. The existential ‘prescription’ is not to live in accordance with what a woman is understood to be theoretically, but to live according to acceptance of one’s own position as a free and ethical agent. Psychotherapeutically, the childfree woman may exist anywhere on the masculine/feminine spectrum and feel any number of ways towards her choice.

### 2.1.3 Erikson

Although influenced by the stage theories of Freud, Erikson’s theory differs in two fundamental ways; firstly his is a *psycho-social* theory as opposed to a *psycho-sexual* one, and secondly the person is understood in more essentialist terms. At first glance the essentialist and social aspects of Erikson’s theory might seem contradictory, but he posits that each stage of life includes a developmental, largely social, crisis that can be resolved because of the ‘epigenetic principle’ (Erikson, 1959). This holds that although at birth the capacity to resolve each developmental crisis is not yet fully formed, the potential, or ‘plan’ for doing so is present and will evolve according to a timetable of maturation;

“anything that grows has a *ground plan*, and that out of this ground plan the *parts* arise, each part having its *time* of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a *functioning whole*” (1959, p.53, italics in original).

Successful resolution of the tensions of early life results in a basic sense of trust, autonomy, competence, and identity. Once a strong sense of identity and ego has been established, the next stage of life, between the ages of 18-35, holds the polarities of intimacy and isolation. Commitment to and fusion with a partner achieves “true genitality” and is expressed through “heterosexual mutuality” (1950, pp.237-238). The assumption of heterosexuality extends into an assumption of parenting in the stage of ‘generativity versus stagnation’ through ages 35-64 wherein the main task is guiding and nurturing the next generation. Although Erikson (1950) states that having a family does not of itself bring about generativity, he posits motherhood as something that should be desired and achieved unless for reasons of religion, infertility, or extreme giftedness. These three reasons are interesting in that they do not necessarily challenge the notion of woman as mother; nuns and women who cannot conceive may be understood as utilizing their motherly qualities elsewhere, and women of ‘extreme giftedness’ are somehow

separated off from the general body of womanhood. The average woman who has chosen to be childfree remains absent from Erikson's theory.

Although there is a strong emphasis on the social aspects of development, Erikson also reiterates the biologic, essentialist theory of the female body as lack, or absence. The notion of emptiness designates both the highest fulfilment of woman as well as her greatest fear. She has a "valuable inside, an inside on which depends her fulfilment as an organism, a person, and as a role-bearer" (Erikson, 1950, p.370). The emphasis on this valuable inside means that the basic feminine fear is of being left empty, which is felt at each menstruation and intensifies at the menopause. The childfree woman aged 45-55, in the generativity versus stagnation stage of life is by implication a misfortunate being who feels fearful of the menopause.

Overall, psychoanalysis from its inception up until the social upheavals of the 1960s either ignores the possibility of choosing non-motherhood, pathologizes it, or idealizes motherhood to the extent that social policy and general thought mean that childfreedom is not an acceptable path for women. There is another inherent problem with the above theories from an existential perspective and that is their use of universal stages. The concept of invariant, chronological stages of life is problematic as it implies a passivity which is contrary to this paradigm's understanding of the person as an agent of his or her own existence (Adams, 2006, 2013). The deconstruction of fixed stages through which humans develop was part of a general deconstruction of many 'truths' of the enlightenment period, of which Freud and the beginnings of psychoanalysis were a part (Frie, 2003). The 1960s and '70s saw radical social changes, including second wave feminism, and it is to feminist psychoanalysis that I now turn in order to assess how childfree women become perceived throughout this mid-late twentieth century period.

## 2.2 Feminist Psychoanalysis

Nancy Chodorow, a feminist psychoanalyst, felt that current theories of the causation of female oppression such as capitalist division of labour, marriage law, and objectification of the female body did not adequately explain the length and breadth of said oppression and emphasized the need to include psychoanalytic theory, encompassing an understanding of the unconscious upon social divisions (Chodorow, (1978). She (1978, 1989) posits two important strands of thought; firstly, through an object-relations influence, she theorizes the interaction between infant and primary care-giver and how this relates to masculine and feminine tendencies. Unlike in Freudian theory, Chodorow posits that pre-oedipal experience differs for girls and boys because of what she describes as a 'double identification' (1989, p.48). A girl identifies with her mother, is cared for by her mother, and then in later becoming a mother herself re-experiences this relationship through identifying with her own daughter. Chodorow (1978) suggests that most mothers will identify more strongly with their daughters such that it is easy for the male child to separate himself more fully as different and autonomous. The daughter on the other hand formulates a sense of self which remains connected with the mother, affiliative, and similar.

Importantly however, a mother's treatment of her sons and daughters is not pre-determined but culturally influenced; mothers identify not only with the fact of biologically given sex, but with the societal meaning this will hold throughout the life of the child. Furthermore, the mother herself

has already been culturally 'gendered' thus children learn the social mores through the gendered behaviour of each parent. This leads to the second strand of Chodorow's theory (1978) – if women are not biologically pre-destined to be the primary care-giver, then it should not be a societal assumption that they will take on this role. If there is no innate, gender derived, caring 'instinct' then *either* parent can be primary carer for a child. Chodorow also suggests that motherhood itself is not the pinnacle of female development, and that if it is part of a woman's life, it is not the whole of it, as had come to be positioned through earlier object relations theories of Winnicott (1945) and Bowlby (1956);

“women's lives should not be totally constrained by child-care or childbearing. Women should be free to choose not to bear children; should have easy access to safe contraception and abortion” (Chodorow, 1989, p.79).

Finally then, 'woman' in psychoanalytic theory ceases to be a homogeneous entity of being-towards-motherhood, and becomes a diverse group of subjective, agentic beings for whom motherhood is a choice rather than an essential aspect of development.

Whilst Chodorow outlines a theory of *why* the female path of development retains more connection and identification with the mother than the male path towards independence and individualization, Jean Baker Miller (1976) and the Stone Centre founded by her were formulating a theory of self-in-relation and promotion of a feminine based ethics of care. Like Chodorow, the Stone Centre psychologists suggest that mothers relate to their sons and daughters differently, promoting autonomy and separation in the former, and mutual empathy and connection in the latter (Miller, 1982; Surrey, 1985). The mother is believed to be more emotionally open with her daughter thus the daughter learns to become attuned to the mother's feelings. Yet as Westcott (1989) points out, a great burden is placed upon the daughter to be a mutually empathic 'peer' to the mother and the difference in age, status, and need of child and adult becomes ignored in favour of this mutuality.

The theories of the Stone Centre, though important for gaining valuation and recognition of traditionally female qualities such as empathy, relationality and connection, are problematic for women who choose not to mother. Taking Janet Surrey's definition of the girl's development in mutual empathic relationship with her mother, there is an assumption that the traits just mentioned are the ones that the girl *should* develop, which will stand her in good stead for the inevitable mothering she will do herself;

“part of learning to be a 'good enough' daughter involves learning to be a 'good enough' mother or 'empathic relator' to one's mother and later to other important people. This ongoing process begins to allow for experience and practice-in 'mothering' and 'relational caretaking'” (Surrey, 1985, p.5).

Women who choose childfreedom may or may not be motherly or empathically attuned to their own mothers and other people, but either way they do not readily fit within the theoretical definitions of 'woman' as outlined by Surrey and other Stone Centre psychologists (Miller, 1982; 1984; Jordan, 1984). Moreover, as the traditional 'feminine' qualities become valued and even idealized, a polarity is set up wherein women are seen as innately relational and naturally suited to mothering, and men exclusively own the 'masculine' qualities of autonomy and individualization. Research demonstrates that many childfree women express themselves as

independent, autonomous individuals (Bartlett, 1994; Gillespie, 1999; Bonnici, 2010), but as these traits fall on the 'masculine' pole a danger ensues of perceiving these women as unfeminine or underdeveloped. In flouting this version of the feminine ideal, non-mothers may become doubtful about their own identity as women (Ireland, 1993). As Eichenbaum and Orbach (1982, p.29) highlight, "The social taboo against being an autonomous woman is internalized. Self-containment and separateness feel selfish, self-centered, and even aggressive for a woman". Unlike in the writings of Nancy Chodorow (1978), the Stone Centre psychologists edge towards a *prescriptive* rather than *descriptive* theory of woman as mothering being.

## 2.3 Maternal and Nurturing Instinct

The notion of woman as maternal and nurturing is so prevalent in our culture that it is worth looking at this more closely in order to assess the impact of this view upon women who choose not to mother.

Chodorow (1978) put forth a well-researched argument highlighting the fact that there is no evidence for an instinctual or biological basis towards motherhood. In some ways this is a return to Freud, who maintained throughout his work that there is no innate instinct towards parenthood and that it is achieved through complex, constructed unconscious processes. Most other analytic theories, as outlined above, then posit a more essentialist view such that the notion of maternal instinct became part of a societal understanding of women, persisting, as will be shown, into the present. Chodorow's purpose in this part of her theory is to upset the assumption of mother as primary care-taker based on her 'innate' nurturing and maternal qualities.

It is of course true that some women *do* have strong urges, perhaps felt as a 'drive' towards motherhood, though it is not known what proportion of women who become mothers actually experience this. It is as if the assumption of heterogeneous female desire for motherhood is so pervasive that the question is not even on the horizon of awareness, let alone actually asked. However, a great deal of the research into childfree women demonstrates that part of the choice is due to having an absence of any kind of instinct, drive, desire, or other ways of describing an urge to mother (Morrell, 1994; Gillespie, 1999; Delyser, 2007; Bonnici, 2010).

A recent Swedish study by Peterson and Engwall (2013) asks specifically about the embodied experiences of childfree women. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 30 heterosexual women aged 29-54; lesbian women were excluded because the authors were also interested in women's contraceptive choices and feelings about sterilization. They found that rather than accepting a discourse of lacking some kind of normal feminine quality, childfree women understand their bodies as being naturally 'silent';

"They constitute a 'natural childfree position' for themselves by using embodied knowledge about a body that does not 'speak' a longing for children" (Peterson and Engwall, 2013, p.379).

Interestingly, this position falls within the biological paradigm in which the body dictates *not* wanting children in the same way it is believed to dictate wanting them. Some of the participants in this study felt that this absence of bodily urge was genetic, and others felt that though it

stemmed from the natural body, it wasn't quite 'right'. Thus there remains for some a feeling that other women have bodies that long for children, and they set themselves up in contrast to this.

Without wishing to diminish or question the truth of women's bodily urges towards motherhood, it strikes me that the notion of maternal *instinct* might be equally appealing and destructive depending on one's attitude. Those that do not have this experience but believe that they *should* are not helped by this discourse as it posits a 'natural' way of being female that does not correspond to the embodied being of all women. But for those who perhaps do not want to confront the degree of freedom to create their own lives, believing in the feminine destiny of needing to create life might be seductive. The work of Frankl (1967) may be used to elucidate; he asserted that (wo)man has suffered a twofold loss of instincts and tradition, therefore (s)he is left knowing neither what (s)he *must* do, nor what (s)he *ought* to do. I posit that the concept of maternal instinct slots right into this void in its postulation of what is both natural and developmentally correct for women. And yet where does that leave men? Perhaps there is comfort for men in the belief that women are homogenous, instinctive and pre-determined? Does this idea of woman as feminine *essence* help to dispel the angst of humans as existing as *processes*, and does this contribute to the way in which both sexes appear to find the rejection of motherhood threatening?

Perhaps the concept of maternal instinct also contributes to the feeling that *choosing* childfreedom is less acceptable than infertility as the latter is ascribed to misfortune and does not directly challenge the "cherished moral values" of family and childrearing as intrinsic to being female (Park, 2002, p.25). Letherby (1999, p.364) posits that although infertility might in itself be stigmatized, it is usually positioned "within normative sexuality", but the choice not to mother when biologically able is seen as a rejection of the norm and therefore less acceptable.

The discourse of instinct or lack thereof as the determining factor for motherhood or childfreedom also diminishes appreciation for female agency in *all* women, thereby further entrenching the notion of feminine passivity (Ulrich and Weatherall, 2000). However, dispensing with the notion of passive instinct brings its own problem for childfree women who are then perceived to be actively pursuing a life which primarily satisfies their own desires. The front cover of a recent issue of Time Magazine (August 2013) shows an attractive young couple lounging on the beach under the heading *The Childfree Life: when having it all means not having children*. To which the popular American religious leader Father Barron responded with a criticism of this article's overt focus on subjective, individual desire (Barron, 2013). Fr. Barron argues persuasively that one's values should transcend 'private desire' through contributing to what is outside of their immediate individual world and inside the wider context of community and ultimately God. He states that the fact that we have freedom to choose whether or not to parent is a contemporary phenomenon that means some people do not experience the self-transcendence and true liberation of parenting; this freedom becomes destructive because it means we can live without value.

This is an interesting perspective in that as is discussed presently, the childfree choice is often seen as selfish. But from an existential perspective, freedom and values are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, for the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1844), often referred to as the

father of existentialism, acknowledging the extent of our freedom creates anxiety in the face of our need to discover our own values and morality. This anxiety is not to be fled from because it forms the awareness of choice and necessity to act from a personal, subjective knowledge of freedom and responsibility. Kierkegaard would criticize Fr. Barron's perspective as being one that requires people to merely do as others do, to follow the pre-made 'rules' or customs and to be "fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 9:7). The anxious acknowledgement of being free means that one cannot authentically have children simply because others do, and because others find it transcends their own subjectivity; to do so is to deny that one is a subject to begin with, which is as Sartre describes it, to act in 'bad-faith' (Sartre, 1943). To be in good faith is to accept responsibility of freedom, to decide for oneself what is most morally correct, not merely because we live in an era of 'private desires', but because *as* individuals we are free to choose and must accept responsibility for our choices.

For me, the problem is one of bias; in criticizing the childfree life, Fr. Barron situates his own value system as being one that serves community, family and God, without consideration of other value systems. Conversely, articles demonstrating the responsibility-free, holiday-laden lifestyle of the childfree offer only a snapshot of these lives without situating them in the wider context of whatever values are held by these individuals. Whilst it is true that research shows many childfree people do not have strong religious affiliations (Abma and Martinez, 2006,) they often hold nature and the human race in high regard; these values lead many childfree people to cite *not* having children as the morally responsible thing to do that also transcends private desire (Cain, 2001). Philosopher and ethicist Christine Overall furthers this argument from another perspective in her recent book *Why have Children: The Ethical Debate* (2013). She argues that due to the risk of harm being far greater when children are involved, the burden of justification should be placed upon those who parent rather than those who do not. Overall also suggests that the debate about whether or not there is a biological drive towards parenting is missing the crucial perspective of ethics;

"The questions we should ask are whether such a desire is either immune to or incapable of analysis and why this desire, unlike virtually all others, should not be subject to ethical assessment... Naturalness alone is not a justification for action, for it is still reasonable to ask whether human beings should give in to their supposed 'parenting drive' or resist it" (Overall, 2013, p.4).

## 2.4 Sociological and Psychological Theory

The absence of instinct or desire to mother is one reason among many to remain childfree, and the 1970s and '80s saw a plethora of research questioning who chooses not to mother and why. This was sparked in part by Ellen Peck's bestseller *The Baby Trap* (1971), which not only brought to public consciousness the fact that many women felt ambivalent towards motherhood and were actively choosing a life without children, but also in its success highlighted the public need for such a book. Yet the continuing research into the reasons why women choose not to mother perhaps reinforces the need for justification of this choice in a way that motherhood is not required to be justified (Hird, 2003; Vernon, 2009). Indeed, Meyers (2001) suggests that research asking specifically why women remain childfree de-emphasizes adult female autonomy and maintains the polarity between the sexes. It seems that the assumption of motherhood being the

natural and normal path for women is still as deeply entrenched as the assumption of heterosexuality; childfree women, like lesbian women, are positioned as 'other' and in need of explanation (Rich, 1980).

For some women, asking for an explanation for their choice is puzzling; childfreedom is felt to be a foregone conclusion because without the desire or intent to mother, *motherhood* would be the experienced choice and childfreedom is merely a "*consequence* of choosing to live their present lives" (Morrell, 1994, pp.49-50). This is eloquently explained by a participant in Bonnici's study (2010, p.95, outlined below) who states "I know I've never wanted them so as opposed to being a decision *not* to have them I've never felt impelled to make the decision *to* have them".

This creates a tension within the very nature of sociological research – why is there such an urgency to understand the motivations that lead women to choose non-motherhood? A partial answer to this (albeit one which raises a further question) may be found in the research of British sociologist Rosemary Gillespie. Researching within the feminist social science paradigm, Gillespie's (1999) doctoral work seeks to come to a deeper understanding of the motivations behind the childfree choice than that offered by macro social trends such as easier access to birth control and greater work opportunities for women. Gillespie carried out a quantitative survey with 269 women found through contacting a family planning clinic, of which 33 stated they were voluntarily childless. Using these data, an interview schedule was planned and conducted with 25 of these latter women, and a key finding was the way in which they experienced their choice being "*sanitized*" by others (p.127). By this, Gillespie means that the truth of women's real desire *not* to become mothers is discounted through disbelief or disregard for the choice. Reactions from others include assumptions of hidden infertility, categorization as a 'career woman' wherein career is seen as an obstacle to motherhood, and beliefs that there will be either a change of mind or future regret.

Thus perhaps the urgency to understand the motivation to remain childfree is bound up in a social need to place this choice within existing definitions of femininity rather than broadening the definitions to accommodate an *un-sanitized* childfree choice. Returning to the notions of nurturing and being for others, Gillespie (1999, p. 132) posits that this process of sanitization allows for the maintenance of "traditional feminine images of self-sacrifice, self-denial and selflessness". The question that now arises for me is why is it so necessary to maintain these images, and why is letting go of them so threatening? Having stated all these provisos however, it is relevant to look at the findings of research into who chooses childfreedom and why:

In 1980, sociologist Dr Jean Veevers published *Childless by Choice* as the result of conducting interviews with 156 married persons (120 women, 36 men) between 1972 and 1977 in Canada. Initially Veevers constructed a self-report questionnaire but this seemed inappropriate for such an intricate subject, particularly as the topic was somewhat new to social science and she did not yet know what kind of questions would best capture the reality of being childless by choice. Unstructured interviews were therefore scheduled and in line with Denzin (1970), encouragement was given to the participants to give as full a narrative as they liked but with an orientation towards their attitudes to marriage and parenting. Rather than systematic analysis, Veevers wrote for herself a short biography of each participant and a précis of each interview. Extracts of the recordings were then used according to each topic presented in her book. Her



goal was to shed light on the unexplored area of voluntary childlessness through understanding the motivations behind the choice and the consequences of it.

Veevers (1980) theorized two groups of childfree people, firstly the 'early articulators' which was a term borrowed from Houseknecht's research into childless marriages (1979a). These are the people who make a firm decision early in life, often as adolescents, and do not experience a change in their outlook and preferences as they grow older. Some describe their desire to remain childfree as an "immutable characteristic" and are often in favour of sterilization as the most effective and permanent form of pregnancy prevention (Veevers, 1980, p.29).

Veevers' second and larger group was made up of 'postponers' and this postponement can be seen to incorporate four stages: firstly for a definite period of time such as until a house is bought and college finished. This then becomes an indefinite period of time until a vaguely defined future such as when things are more settled. The third stage is conscious discussion as a couple about the pros and cons of parenthood, and finally an acceptance of the permanence of living without children. However, this research might be less relevant now due to changing marital trends; late and second marriages as well as divorce are common, resulting in less structured societal expectations of young people entering into heterosexual marriage and immediately embarking on raising a family (Kirasic, 2004). More recent research has found another reason for 'postponing' parenthood – that of feeling not yet emotionally equipped (Ireland, 1993; Doyle, Pooley and Breen, 2013). This is in effect the opposite of a psychoanalytic formulation of motherhood being the culmination of female development; in these latter studies women themselves are assessing whether or not they are yet at a point in their development where motherhood feels to be the right step. It can therefore be surmised that development is not a universal step by step route to a finished 'product' (i.e. heterosexual parent) but an individual on-going process of change.

I wonder if the term postponement also fails to encapsulate those who experience ambivalence or fluctuating desires and are taking time to commit to one or other pole of this 'digital' decision, but do not feel themselves to be *postponing* motherhood (Safer, 1996). Poet Molly Peacock's (1998) autobiographical account of becoming childfree is an interesting example of ambivalence; although in some ways she is an 'early articulator', she nevertheless revisits her choice throughout her development. Peacock did not feel that she was passively postponing, but was in a continuous process of active and conscious choice; "this is a decision you do not make once, but many times" (Peacock, 1998, p.9). The existential 'slogan' "*existence precedes essence*" (Sartre, 1946, p.26) has relevance here; according to Sartre (1943), we are not *en-soi* (being-*in-itself*, a thing complete in itself that does not have consciousness of itself), but *pour-soi* (being-*for-itself*, a necessarily incomplete, conscious being capable of self-awareness). To strive to exist as the former *essence* is to be in bad faith as it is attempting to ignore the freedom we have to create ourselves through our choices, and the way in which our 'project', our aims, desires and possibilities, are in constant flux, including all that pertains to childfreedom or mothering.

The language of postponement implies an inevitability that does not always match the felt truth of women who are choosing in the present not to have children, but who acknowledge they are not fixed in this position (Peterson and Engwall, 2013). Acknowledging this continuous process of change and the consequent necessity of on-going choice is experienced differently according to

the individual. The autobiographical accounts of psychoanalyst Jeanne Safer (1996) and poet Molly Peacock (1998) demonstrate a constant grappling with the momentousness of this life-changing decision. The oscillation between two disparate points of desire lasted until their forties, wherein peace was found within their decision not to mother precisely because it had been a hard-won and carefully thought through choice. Safer (1996) emphasizes that acknowledging what is missed in choosing a life without children is part of the process of choice, and that this acknowledgment is equally felt by parents in their own sacrifice of the opportunities available to non-parents. For Safer, there is no such thing as 'having it all'; every choice entails sacrifice and this should not be shied away from. This is the central ethos of existential psychotherapy wherein anxiety, freedom, and responsibility are fundamental aspects of being human. The decision of whether or not to have children is sometimes postponed, but not always; more often there is oscillation, ambivalence, doubt and difficulty that might *lead* to postponing the decision, but the term postponement itself I feel does not capture these complexities.

Veevers (1980) further categorized her participants according to whether they were 'aficionados' of a childfree lifestyle or 'rejectors' of parenthood. The latter group were those who have a strong commitment to childfreedom, tend to dislike children, and are often vocal about their decision. In contrast, the aficionados are those who are reluctant to change an enjoyed lifestyle in order to have children even though they like them, are apolitical about their childfree status and have less varied backgrounds than the rejectors thus are 'more like parents'. This last is a curious homogenization of parents and aficionados which seems to dismiss the diversity within both categories of people. Moreover, it seems to collude with the notion of parents as the 'norm' and therefore better (Meyers, 2002). However, Veevers felt it was important to maintain these categories, and this resonates with Gillespie's (1999) description of 'pull' factors towards a childfree lifestyle such as freedom, not being responsible for a child, and more time to contribute to relationships. This is in contrast to the more radical 'push' from, or rejection of motherhood which was perceived as a loss of both freedom and identity. These latter concerns directly challenge the synonymy of woman and mother, as well as the pronatalist assumption of woman's ultimate fulfilment being through motherhood.

Further research agrees with Veevers (1980) about the group of early articulators, but demonstrates that this is a minority within the minority, and also that there is more diversity in the way women become childfree than the two categories posited by Veevers (Ireland, 1993; Campbell, 1999; Cain, 2002). Although not always coming to the decision as early in life, there are also women who are very certain that not having children is the unselfish and right thing to do in the face of overpopulation and global resource depletion (Campbell, 1999). In 2001 Madelyn Cain published *The Childless Revolution*, a book challenging the misconceptions about all types of women without children, and itself a result of speaking to 100 American women. She found enough women who had chosen childfreedom precisely because of concern over environmental factors to warrant their own category. Cain suggests that the motivating factors of being environmentally childfree are political and therefore thought rather than feeling based, but I wonder about this. The passion and sadness evident in the women's voices as they bemoan the state of the planet is far from emotion-less.

Religion, traditional psychology and the media may all perpetuate the synonymy of woman and mother, positing respectively duty, instinct and fulfilment, but the realm of family, as more

experiential and immediate, is equally influential. Universalizing psychoanalytic views of motherhood neglect to account for the individuality of the mother and the way in which she relates both to herself and to her offspring, but a fascinating aspect of the literature on childfree women demonstrates that the relationship with their own mothers can sometimes have an impact on the choice (Campbell, 1983; Ireland, 1993). This is by no means a unified experience and does not offer evidence for a negative assumption of childfree women being somehow stunted emotionally; nevertheless, I am interested in this 'split' between public pronatalism and private 'anti-natalism'.

Sociologist Elaine Campbell (1983) contacted a family planning clinic in a Scottish city for participants in a study to discover the motivations that lead to the decision not to parent. As she wanted to situate this adult decision within the context of an entire biography, interviews with 78 married people were unstructured. Campbell found that 30% of the women saw motherhood as a threat to their identity. Part of this was witnessing their own mothers as becoming invisibilized through the domesticity and selflessness of their daily routines; "Mothers were described as 'cabbages' buried beneath the trivia of childbearing and childrearing" (Campbell, 1983, p.310). Although not the topic for this particular dissertation, I am reminded that there is a gap between belief and practice in pronatalism; the joys of motherhood are proudly proclaimed, whilst the reality of motherhood being unpaid and often isolated is ignored (Letherby, 1994; Lisle, 1999). There is also another gap; many young girls are exposed to a kind of domestic 'anti-natalism' as parents attempt to protect them from unwanted pregnancy which becomes something taboo or fearsome (Peacock, 1998; Campbell, 1999). Upon reaching adulthood this indoctrination then supposedly (though tacitly) disappears and is replaced by desire for motherhood. This highlights the contingency of pronatalism wherein only the 'right' sort of woman is expected to become, and condoned in becoming, a mother. Young, old, single, lesbian and disabled women are assumed to be different and therefore neither desirous nor capable of motherhood (Letherby, 1999; Morrell, 2000).

Becoming childfree is not a homogeneous experience, but a patchwork of preferences, anxieties, ambivalence, surety, reasons and concerns that is better described by sociologist Gayle Letherby's term a "continuum of childlessness" (2002, p.8) at either end of which are those who feel certain about their position, and in the middle those whose standpoint is not so fixed. Of course it is not only the reasons behind being childfree that are diverse but the experience itself and it is to this exploration in the research literature that I now turn.

#### **2.4.1 Identity and Femininity of Childfree Women**

Gillespie (1999) asked what implications childfreedom has for feminine identity and discovered that her participants' identities as women were often defined in part by their status as non-mothers without this impacting upon their sense of their own femininity. Childlessness was found to be a major aspect of identity but not in a negative way and not in a way that makes them masculine or androgynous. Although work and career was felt to be a large part of the self-perception, as traditionally associated with men, many of Gillespie's participants felt that the more conventional, visible aspects of a feminine identity such as dress and appearance were important to their sense of self;

“Although childless femininity was radical in the ways it epitomised a rejection of traditional ideologies of femininity analogous to motherhood, it embraced other, often equally conventional constructions of femininity” (Gillespie, 1999, pp.259-260).

Bonnici’s (2010) phenomenological study for her doctorate in existential counselling psychology offers a slightly different perspective of the impact of voluntary childlessness on how women define themselves. Through analysing the data gathered from semi-structured interviews with six women in their forties in long term (8 years +) heterosexual relationships, Bonnici found that the decision not to mother was *not* a defining factor of their feminine identities. The fact of being childfree was considered to be irrelevant to identity, which for me highlights the inadequacy of the terminology that researchers, myself included, have little choice but to use; ‘childless’ and ‘childfree’ both position women in relation to children regardless of the absence or presence of the latter and women’s feelings about them.

Ireland (1993) formulated three categories of women through the data generated from 100 questionnaires of women aged 38-50. She then conducted in-depth interviews with each of these women, and asked them to complete the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) in order to assess masculine, feminine and androgynous orientations. The results of this inventory demonstrate that those who made a definite choice typically orientated towards masculine traits, and those who wanted children but weren’t able to have them towards feminine ones. However, I would not wish to make any assumptions based upon this data for two reasons. Firstly, Ireland’s research took place over twenty years ago in America thus the participants may have grown up with different expectations placed upon them than my own sample. Secondly, the BSRI is based on gender stereotypes within which the participant must rate herself on a score of 1-7. This constricts the answer to pre-formulated language that reduces the opportunity to express what might be a more complex subjective position. The three categories of women without children that Ireland describes range from the ‘traditional’ woman who wants to have children but cannot, through the ‘transitional’ woman who is ambivalent about having children, or perhaps cannot align current life with motherhood, to the ‘transformative’ woman – the trailblazer resistant to societal expectations of what women *should* be.

Ireland (1993) found that within the category of ‘transitional’ women, a common theme was a frustration with the experience of ambivalence which meant that childlessness was not felt to be wholly an agentic, chosen position. This is reflected in a more recent study by Gail Delyser (2007, outlined below); some of her participants felt they were choosing not to choose through leaving the decision to fate, and thereby struggling to amalgamate this lack of assertiveness into their sense of themselves as otherwise autonomous. Ireland suggests that for those who experience this degree of ambivalence, becoming permanently childfree in midlife allows space to open up for the discovery of new desires, as well as consolidation of one’s identity as a childfree woman;

“The psychic encounter of a woman and the absence of a child often occurs in midlife, but the midlife crossing accentuates a woman’s own particular identity evolution, *apart from* as well as including the issues of childlessness” (Ireland, 1993, p.143).

Veevers (1980, p.47) postulates an inherent cultural paradox within the two definitions of feminine identity as mother and sexual object; “If mothers are platonic, sex objects are erotic; if mothers are pregnant, sex objects are slim; if mothers focus on the child, sex objects focus on the

male". It strikes me, uncomfortably, that both of these definitions are based upon being-for-others – the child or the male – so what is the effect of this, and of the paradox itself? Although much has been said about the psychology and identity of childfree women, data about feelings towards the body and the bodily changes of pregnancy and childbirth are strangely lacking. Veevers (1980) found that a few women perceived childbirth as hazardous, particularly those who had witnessed it going wrong and endangering the mother. There were also those who felt averse to the long term unattractive effects of pregnancy and childbirth on the body. However, one participant also describes wanting to experience these uniquely female bodily occurrences for herself but was not interested in being a mother at the end of it. The Swedish study mentioned previously (Peterson and Engwall, 2013) goes deeper into this topic as the lived body of childfree women is their research subject. Although many of them felt somehow sad about or neglectful of not using the reproductive capacity of their bodies, others experienced a strong aversion to putting the body through pregnancy. This was not felt to be a valid enough reason in and of itself to refrain from mothering, but there was a feeling that the bodily changes endured in pregnancy would diminish sexual appeal, affirming the aforementioned cultural paradox. Peterson and Engwall summarize with; "While a pregnant body thus fulfils the functional requirements for 'normal femininity' it can be alienated from a feminine physical ideal" (2013, p.385).

As can be seen, the identity of all women is subject to societal complexity and paradox, but it is the childfree choice that is often criticized as being 'unfeminine'. I now discuss the effects on childfree women of this perception, and how psychotherapists would benefit from an understanding of this.

#### **2.4.2 Perception of Childfree Women**

Earlier I discussed the notion of women being seen as nurturers, and as *for-others*; therefore it may be difficult to extricate oneself from this perception in order to be *for-self*. Within the literature is the frequent theme of women who have deliberately chosen non-motherhood depicting themselves as selfish or abnormal, regardless of how else they may envisage their identities, or how comfortable they are with their choice (Gillespie, 1999; Letherby, 2002; Shaw, 2011). But the literature also shows that the childfree choice is often viewed negatively; common belief remains immersed in a psychoanalytic view of woman being synonymous with mother so that women who reject this are considered to demonstrate stunted growth, immaturity and selfishness (Somers, 1993; Mollen, 2006).

American researcher Kristin Park (2002) asked what management strategies voluntarily childless people used in the face of stigma. She interviewed 22 heterosexual and partnered people (14 women and 8 men) over 30. Lesbian women were excluded on the grounds that homosexuality has its own set of stigma attached. Park also held a focus group with 7 of these participants and the resulting data of this as well as the interviews was analysed using grounded theory. Three strands of management strategies emerged; firstly are those who do not advertise that it has been a choice. People may 'pass' as infertile or give an ambiguous answer thereby precluding further intrusive questioning, discussion or criticism. Secondly are those who admit to their choice but 'neutralize' the negativity associated with it by condemning parents as selfish or as having unthinkingly had children because that is what others do. Within this stand are also those who 'excuse' themselves from parenting because of an absence of maternal instinct or

broodiness, though this in itself may bring up feelings of being abnormal (Shaw, 2011; Peterson and Engwall, 2013). Lastly are those that challenge the normative discourse by questioning the questioners. People who ask 'why no kids?' are met with 'why kids?', often leading to puzzlement from the person who has not seen fit to question parenthood. It seems that little has changed since 1976 when Sally Macintyre put forth her contention that reproduction is taken to be the natural order, therefore not a subject for enquiry in the same way that any kind of deviation from the norm has been.

Park (2002) suggests that the three strategies lie on a continuum of acceptance to challenge of pronatal ideology. Passing or disassembling is seen to be a defensive and reactive strategy, whereas questioning and redefining normality is considered to be *offensive* and proactive. Neutralization, or condemning unconscious parenthood lies somewhere in the middle – “not merely defensive, but neither does it represent a full-fledged attack on dominant ideologies” (Park, 2002, p.35). As each individual has a different level of comfort in confronting and challenging others, it would be helpful for therapists to be aware of options in addressing stigma and working with clients to find the best way for *them* to navigate the social world.

The perception of women as primarily mothers or potential mothers can be seen in British sociologist Annily Campbell's (1999) study of women who choose to become sterilized as a permanent form of contraception. Campbell invited 23 women aged 22-51 to write a journal about their journeys to becoming sterilized, as well as conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with them. Her methodology is feminist in orientation in that she strives for a relationship of equality with her participants; her own patronizing experience at the hands of the medical profession when asking to be sterilized herself was an influence on wanting to avoid being interrogating, detached or intrusive as an interviewer. The women were diverse in terms of class and socio-economic status but all were Caucasian despite attempts to include more diversity. Campbell's participants expressed many instances of being belittled as well as encountering ageism and sexism in their quest to be sterilized; single women were often told they would meet a husband and therefore change their minds, and young women were felt to be incapable of autonomous decision making. There also seemed to be no guidelines for allowing or disallowing the operation; referral was made purely on the subjective stance of whichever doctor they happened to see.

The questionable ethics involved in this medical side of childfreedom emphasizes the importance for the psychotherapeutic profession to take seriously the desires of women and avoid infantilization. It would be beneficial for therapists of all orientations to be aware of the diversity within women's experiences of their thoughts, feelings and bodies towards motherhood and non-motherhood. Mollen (2006) argues for therapists and counsellors to help women avoid internalizing these stigmatizing views as well as helping to implement ways of negotiating the social experiences wherein they are questioned and judged regarding their choice.

Despite these negative experiences of childfree women, research also shows a more positive perspective; they are sometimes envied and applauded for their choice (Mollen, 2006), perceived as vibrant and lucky (Ireland, 1993; Cain, 2001), as well as refusing to engage with the discourse of selfishness (Park, 2002). As Park (2002) suggests, the effects of either positive or negative social perception on an individual often depends upon the robustness and certainty of their

childfree position; those who are less ambivalent are more likely to find a means of combating negative perception than those who share similar doubts about for example future regret.

As with the route to becoming childfree, the social experiences of women who make this choice and the perception of the choice itself are diverse. Research into the midlife experiences of women reveals that this is by no means a static period of life, but is one of growth, change, and uncertainty (Apter, 1995; Howell, 2001). Childfree women, as a minority group subject to social stigma as well as a diverse group with varied experience of being childfree, are as likely as any other woman to undergo changes in midlife. However, as this chapter has thus far outlined, childfreedom is more than a private, personal act but situated in the wider social and political spheres. The paradigm of social constructionism is now looked at in order to further contextualize the childfree choice.

## 2.5 Social Constructionist Theory

Unlike theories that base the psychology of the individual upon biological age such as those outlined in the section on traditional psychoanalytic thought (Freud, 1925, 1931; Jung, 1933; Erikson, 1959), later theorists take into account the influence of culture, language and society upon on-going development (Neugarten, 1968; Gergen, 1990; Banister, 1999). Neugarten (1968) introduces the notion of 'social clocking' to gauge our standpoint within the life-span which is influenced by culturally defined 'norms';

“Middle-aged people look to their positions within different life contexts - body, career, family – rather than to chronological age for their primary cues in clocking themselves” (Neugarten, 1968, p. 94).

However, these positions and cues may be complicated by contemporary deviations from the norm in that it is not unusual to find a 65 year old college student or a 40 year old grandmother (Kirasic, 2004). Social worker Carolyn Morrell found in her research a definite impact of childfreedom upon the 'social clocking' of her participants who “reported feeling chronologically out-of-sync” (Morrell, 1994, p.29). Morrell's approach is feminist post-structural, wherein she questions the homogeneity of gender and deconstructs and demystifies patriarchal and pronatal discourses. She seeks a deeper understanding of intentionally childless women without further marginalizing them, therefore analysis was based within the same paradigm; implications were that the data was scrutinized with two fundamentals in mind – the nature of language as constructing reality rather than merely reflecting it, and childfreedom as both a personal and political act. Morrell conducted lengthy interviews with 34 women aged 40-78, all heterosexual and married or partnered because this category of women experiences the most pressure to become mothers. Participants spoke of being both ageless and un-grown-up. This was influenced by social networks of younger and older friends, but also an absence of seeing their own children grow up. Parenthood was felt to 'clock' life in that it is experienced socially amongst other parents as well as being a reminder of all the ages gone through oneself as one's children reach those ages.

The complexities and conflicts in female childfree midlife development become apparent through research into how women experience their ageing selves in relation to societal structures. This

demonstrates the necessity for research that stresses the *contextualized* nature of the individual rather than theorizing female development as a universal, biological process (Kirasic, 2004). Dannefer (1984) comments that periods of life may be experienced dissimilarly by different cohorts as the context in which society educates people has changed rapidly throughout the twentieth century. For example, a 48 year old participant in Morrell's (1994) study felt that younger women throughout the 1980s had been affected by the 'maternalist' ideology of this post-feminism era and were not validating the childfree choice as much as had been seen throughout the '60s and '70s.

Even within the relatively small age group I am studying, societal structures and education may be experienced differently by those who entered young adulthood in the mid-1970s to those in the mid-1980s. Shaw's (2011) phenomenological study of women's experiential journeys toward childfreedom incorporated semi-structured interviews with 3 women aged 47, 40 and 28. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to extract themes including that of the *legacy of feminism*. The eldest was most strongly influenced by the feminist ideals of the era in which she grew up, and consciously resisted traditional gender norms in a way that the younger women did not. Interestingly, it is the youngest who feels most judged by others as well as judging herself to be abnormal because she is not following the traditional path to female fulfilment in motherhood. This makes me wonder if our post-feminist era is forgetting to instil in its young the notion of equality and freedom of choice for which feminism fought. Of course, such a small sample should not be generalized; in my own therapy practice I see such diversity in women of all ages that the impact of feminist ideals according to age is difficult to formulate.

### 2.5.1 Menopause

The contextual and holistic nature of human existence has often been ignored in theories of women that make biological factors central to understanding female psychology. As motherhood is often seen as women's main source of meaning and fulfilment, so the menopause is presumed to be the biggest issue and main source of distress during this period of life (Trethewey, 2001). Feminist writers have criticized the medical model of menopause which posits it as a 'deficiency disease' to be treated and medicalized by men, rather than a natural process of female life to be owned by women (Greer, 1991; Lippert, 1997). As so much knowledge was generated before reflexivity became part of rigorous research, women may have been interpreted to fit a theory rather than theory being generated on the basis of women's experience (Greer, 1991; Dannefer, 1984). Furthermore, as Betty Friedan (1963) famously pointed out in *The Feminine Mystique*, women may have experienced great dissatisfaction with their lives, possibly leading to depression or anger, these then being trivialized or glossed over as temporary effects of 'The Change'. Greer (1991, p. 2) summarizes these points;

"The irrational certainty that the womb was the real cause of the ageing woman's anger or melancholy effectively obscured the inconvenient possibility that she may have had genuine grounds for protest; women on the other hand obligingly internalized their own rage and produced a bewildering array of symptoms, many of which responded to hideous invasive procedures that can have had no genuine therapeutic function at all".

Although menopause and depression may well be concurrent for many women, simplistic cause and effect theory is nonsensical from an existential perspective as it sets up not merely a duality



of individual and world, but a triality of psyche, soma, and world. Nicholson (1980) argues that researchers have been guilty in the past of attributing all psychological change to this biological event and emphasizes that a woman's well-being throughout her forties and fifties is dependent upon so much more than the physical process of menopause. Indeed, even physical 'symptoms' such as hot flushes are subjectively experienced and not necessarily unpleasurable for all (Apter, 1995; Ussher, 2006). Avis (1999) posits that the association between menopause and depression is heightened in medical understanding due to the percentage of women who enter clinics with menopausal 'problems', and that these data should not be automatically universalized to the rest of the female population.

As little research has been done specifically on childfree women aged 45-55, data about the experience of the end of fertility, including the biological fact of menopause, is scarce. However, some studies do incorporate relevant data, and American clinical social worker Gail Delyser (2007) conducted research into women's childfree midlife experience for her PhD. Delyser situates her research within the paradigm of self-psychology which is itself underpinned by Stern's (1985) developmental theory. She conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 married, heterosexual women and analysed the results using grounded theory. Her interest focused on the present experience of being childfree including the participants' feelings about the end of fertility, menopause and the future. Within this study and those that include relevant data I found five broad themes. Firstly, there are those for whom a firm decision has been made and integrated into a sense of self thus the menopause does not trigger feelings of grief or panic (Morrell, 1994; Lisle, 1999; Delyser, 2007). For many of these women menopause is in fact a relief, both from the inconvenience of monthly bleeding, and of the necessity of birth control in heterosexual partnerships.

Secondly, there are women who definitely do not want children but nevertheless feel a sense of unwanted finality, that menopause "closes the door" (Delyser, 2007, p.82). Morrell (1994) found that for some, the finality of the menopause meant a shift in self-identification from 'not having children' to 'did not have children'; somehow the identity of being a non-mother is felt to be cemented as it becomes no longer biologically possible. It appears that there is a sense of time passing; the possibilities of the future, even those that hold no appeal, become paths not taken in the past.

Thirdly, and perhaps overlapping the first area, are women who speak of their menopausal experience *without* reference to children or childfreedom at all. Delyser (2007, p.81) states that her participants "more accurately interpreted menopause in its broader context as it relates to aging (sic) and an array of changes". In this sense menopause becomes a social construct as well as a biological event, linked as it is to the societal context of loss of youth and the meaning of this for women. Conversely, Delyser (2007) found that menopause as a symbol of ageing may also bring up recognition of future old age and the potential for needing care.

Fourthly, but seldom cited, menopause can bring up feelings of regret. Of Delyser's 15 participants, one expressed that though she was generally happy, she was also regretful of not having had children. She saw clearly that as she was an only child and her parents were dead, when her much older husband died too she would be without any family, which was not something she desired. This could be seen as a stark confrontation with the 'given' of existential

isolation, of being ultimately alone in the universe. Existential psychotherapy could offer help to recognize how this confrontation has the potential to lead into either growth or stuntedness;

“if we are able to acknowledge our isolated situations in existence and confront them with resoluteness, we will be able to turn lovingly towards others. If, on the other hand, we are overcome with dread before the abyss of loneliness, we will not reach out towards others but instead will flail at them in order not to drown in the sea of existence”  
Yalom (1980, p. 363).

Lastly, psychologist Terri Apter (1995), who included 13 childfree women in her study of 80 women aged 40-55, found that menopause “could ring a panic button as it brought them face to face with their past decisions” (p.212). Interestingly though, the childfree woman’s voice she uses to exemplify this point is concerned about losing menstruation as the natural marker of her feminine existence, which has little to do with the consequences of past choices. Unfortunately, this woman’s feelings are not explored further, and I am left wondering about a link to pronatal expectations; if childfree women are somehow unfeminine or unwomanly then ‘natural feminine markers’ may hold added significance (Morrell, 1994). There are of course women who do act on the ‘panic button’ that menopause may press (Hewlitt, 2002). Although women who become first time mothers at this stage of their lives will not be included in this study, their voices are also extremely valid and this is another area in which phenomenological research is needed.

## 2.6 Existential Perspectives

Existential philosophy is not just about ideas. It is the opposition to the “divorce of mind from life” that was the legacy of the enlightenment era (Barrett, 1958, p.9). It is the passionate exhortation to discover what it means to exist as a human being, and to bridge the divide between thinking about life and living it. In general it does not pay close attention to issues of gender, women, or maternity, but the rich descriptions and understanding of the lived experience of *people* allows for a unique perspective of childfree women to add to those outlined above.

### 2.6.1 Being-in-the-world

Central to this paradigm is paradox, and this begins with the fundamental interrelation of person and world. The human mind is not enclosed and separated off from the world but is always projected towards it, always in dialogue and co-existing with it (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Consequently the ‘self’ both determines and is determined by the world, is inescapably both connected to others and aware of a separateness from them (Frie, 2003). The person is not an ‘essence’ that exists outside of the context into which she or he is born or ‘thrown’, nor is a person wholly determined by this context (Heidegger, 1927). Taking these concepts as the basis of all human existence, the notion of woman as synonymous with mother becomes neither logical nor fitting. Women are not exempt from the notion of contextual being, therefore are not essences that are pre-determined or pre-destined towards anything, including motherhood. Furthermore, women, again as contextual, are not a homogeneous group that experiences the same desires in life (Butler, 1990).

This said however, clearly there are differences between the sexes which cannot simply be glossed over by arguing for a more contextual rather than merely biological understanding of

women. The French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (herself a childfree woman) was one of few 'existentialists' to address this problem in her major work on women and oppression *The Second Sex* (1949). At the time of writing, the Western European social structure was very much one in which women became wives and mothers, and men worked outside the home. De Beauvoir discusses the effect of this in terms of immanence and transcendence. The former is to turn the focus upon oneself, to be primarily subjective and interior; transcendence in contrast is to project outwards from oneself into the world, to actively and freely engage with what is external. As bound up in monthly menstruation, pregnancy and lactation, woman is seen as tethered to herself, her body, her biology. She is *immanence* and is refused transcendence by a patriarchal and pronatal society. But as we have seen, this is to attempt to place women outside of their context which is to deny the fundamental interrelation of person and world. As de Beauvoir argues, "In truth, all human existence is transcendence and immanence at the same time" (1949, p.455). Another way of understanding this is through Merleau-Ponty's (1945) assertion that consciousness and biology, as with transcendence and immanence, are synchronous. There is no dichotomy, determinism, nor manifestation of gender in these phenomena; they are the inescapable 'givens' of all human existence. The late existential psychotherapist Hans Cohn (1997) posits that though there are differences between the sexes, it would be un-phenomenological to simplistically equate psychological and behavioural differences on the basis of these;

"Anatomically and physiologically, men and women find themselves in the realm of the 'given'. But anatomical and physiological differences have given rise to sociocultural assumptions that do not necessarily follow" (Cohn, 1997, p. 90).

Though Cohn's argument is regarding attribution of 'masculine' and 'feminine' polarities such as passivity and aggression, his point is entirely applicable to the topic of childfreedom and motherhood; to conflate woman and mother is to encase her in her physiology at the expense of individual difference, projection towards the world, and transcendence of what is 'given' anatomically.

### 2.6.2 Authenticity

However, another key principle of the philosophy of Heidegger (1927) and Sartre (1939-40, 1943) is that as fallible humans, we are liable to 'fall' into the inauthentic mode of pretending that we are indeed essences, that we do not have freedom to choose our actions but must do as others do, or as we believe we are pre-destined to do in order to escape the anguish of freedom and its consequent responsibility. To be authentic is not necessarily to *do* anything differently; as Sartre argues, it is more about becoming consciously aware and responsible for what one *is* doing;

"To be authentic is to realize fully one's being-in-situation, whatever this situation may happen to be: with a profound awareness that, through the authentic realization of the being-in-situation, one brings to full existence the situation on the one hand and human reality on the other" (Sartre, 1939-40, p.54).

The aforementioned paradox of being simultaneously subjective and relational creates an inherent tension in human existence; in being created within language and culture we conform to it by speaking and taking part in it. Yet our lived experience as 'self' demands an individual

response to that of which we are part. Society values and promotes a natural desire in women for children, but the individual woman does not automatically experience such a desire. Whilst motherhood remains hierarchically more acceptable than childfreedom, only women for whom motherhood is a chosen 'project' satisfy both the needs of the self for authenticity and the needs of a pronatal society for conformity:

Figure 1: *Self and Society: Authenticity and Conformity*

	Motherhood	Childfreedom
Needs of Self	Conforms Authentic	Non-conforming, Authentic
Needs of Society	Conforms Inauthentic	Not Applicable

Figure 1 does not include a box for an inauthentic childfree stance because society does not promote this choice, but this is as likely as any other possibility and is demonstrated by research that shows women becoming childfree by default through for example a partner's wishes or by choosing not to choose (Delyser, 2007; Shaw, 2011). The emphasis here is on childfreedom being more than a personal choice, engaged as it is and as women are in a society that promotes motherhood. The existential focus upon authenticity as a primary element of individual existence serves as a polemic to the pronatal discourse of motherhood as the 'normal' route for all women. Within the existential paradigm the 'norm' is replaced by authenticity; motherhood and childfreedom are not placed within a hierarchy but become equally valid choices that are each engaged with authentically or inauthentically.

### 2.6.3 Anxiety

Research demonstrates that societal discourse is deeply immersed in the notion of regret in the childfree choice (Morrell, 1994; Campbell, 1999; Gillespie, 1999; Delyser, 2007). I find this interesting as from an existential perspective, *all* choice holds this possibility; it is central to our existence as temporal, changing, mortal beings. Though we live chronologically through time, it is not experienced in a linear fashion; choices are made in the present with the future in mind, but the future is unknown and uncertain, and when we get there the past looks different (Heidegger, 1927; Cohn, 1997). The freedom and hence responsibility to make choices and live through time with the choices we have made is described by Kierkegaard as the "dizziness of freedom" (1844, p.61). For some women the childfree choice is indeed a heady one, but for others it is not; Meg

Barker (2013) offers a helpful analogy of the 'self' as actually a 'community' of selves that often works towards the same goal. In the case of being childfree, this community might be undivided in those who are unambivalent and without anxiety about their choice. For the more ambivalent the community is divided, causing anxiety about which route to take and indeed opening up the potential for regret *whichever* choice is made. Thus anxiety and uncertainty may often be difficult aspects of choosing childfreedom, but they are also embedded in all aspects of human existence and are a challenge for both sexes in areas other than to parent or not to parent.

## Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter delineates childfree women's forties and fifties as a time of transition, change, sometimes crisis and regret, often of questioning, doubting, and rejoicing. For all these, existential psychotherapy offers a space in which a woman may be encouraged in her process and explorations, her anxiety and her deepening sense of agency. To conclude, I would like to turn to the words of writer Laurie Lisle, herself a childfree woman, who gives much needed voice to this growing minority:

*"Who are we as we reach middle age? No longer maidens, but not yet matrons or matriarchs either, we are something else yet to be named. Occasionally we wonder if we are girlish or grown-up, as we exist uneasily on the edges of our extended families. When we look ahead, we sometimes wonder who will take care of us in old age. Without children, the idea of mortality also has an extra edge. Who will remember us? What will we leave behind? But above all, as we reach the age when we can no longer have children, it gradually dawns on us that no one notices whether or not we are mothers. It is time to value our nulliparous lives ourselves as well as to win the respect from others and, in turn, to heal any rifts with mothers. After the age of fifty, at least for me, there has been the realization that it is finally time to put the issue of childlessness behind me and get on with the rest of my life" (Lisle, 1999, p.223).*

# Chapter 3 Methodology and Method

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This research project began with a desire for knowledge and a hope that this knowledge will contribute to a greater understanding of childfree women within the therapeutic professions. It also began within my own immersion in existential philosophy which is not merely an orientation for my psychotherapy practice; it is a body of writing which profoundly resonates with my understanding and perception of existence. This chapter discusses the philosophical underpinnings of knowledge, and what implications are held for conducting research into the experience of childfree women aged 45-55. It is divided into 3 sections – methodology, including my rationale for choosing a method, followed by how I devised the project and what ethical considerations I made. Lastly is the research itself including what I learnt about interviewing from my pilot study, difficulties I encountered, and my process of analysis.

## 3.1 Methodology

### 3.1.1 Why Qualitative?

It is generally understood that the means by which data is accessed (the *how*) directly affects the findings (the *what*) (Willig, 2008). In order to apply rigour from the outset of this research process it was therefore necessary to evaluate my own epistemological view of the world and reality in order to assess what assumptions I may be bringing to the initial research stages. Firstly, I resonated to a much greater degree with qualitative rather than quantitative research methodology, but I needed to explore this before making an unreflected judgment on the basis that most psychotherapy research is of the former paradigm.

The success of quantitative methods within the natural sciences was such that psychology, a discipline emerging within an era celebrating this success, perhaps inevitably attempted to adopt these methods (Ashworth, 2003). Furthermore, with a fundamental departure from a Cartesian positioning of mental phenomena as non-material, the mental and the physical were no longer split, and both were perceived to be measurable (Michell, 2004). However, measurement of the mental realm differs markedly from that of the natural, physical world because it is not in fact measuring what *is* but how it is perceived through manifestation in behaviour or attributes. Therefore there is an unacknowledged degree of assumption about, and social construction of, what *should* be; behaviour and attributes are not fixed entities but understood and evaluated in reference to previously decided upon 'norms'.

Quantitative methodology also assumes a position, again taken from natural science, of positivity; reality is something that we receive rather than create and therefore the researcher needs to have as little presence as possible in order not to influence the data (Laverty, 2003). Existential, post-modern, social-constructionist and feminist perspectives have all questioned this view of reality, instead positing a shared world of symbols, language and meaning. We are each born into this shared world, but within it we develop unique sets of assumptions, values and ways of interacting with others, meaning that there is no one human truth to be objectively uncovered (Ashworth, 2003). Furthermore, theories that universalize and reify the person as a fixed set of

instincts and behaviour are fundamentally unsatisfactory from an existential perspective as there is no room for the concepts of freedom and agency (Adams, 2006, 2013).

Nietzsche (1882, §373, p.335) pours poetic scorn on the idea of human thought and motivations being reducible to mechanistic science. He argues that scientific interpretation alone amounts to meaningless counting; it is “an indoor diversion for mathematicians” that cannot capture the subtleties and complexities of human nature. Similarly with any topic involving human experience, the measurement, or the ‘how much’ may be very interesting, even necessary, but without a deeper knowledge of the ‘what *is*’, it cannot be wholly understood.

Qualitative methodology is a term for a number of different approaches, but they all have in common a rejection of the notion of a unitary world, instead emphasizing the individual’s perspective and understood experience of their *own* world. Langdrige (2007, p.9) outlines four attributes that denote a qualitative as opposed to quantitative approach:

- ❖ A focus on human experience
- ❖ A focus on meaning
- ❖ Description and relationship rather than interpretation and causation
- ❖ Emphasis on the role the researcher plays in co-constructing the data

My own stance questions the possibility of measuring the experience of childfreedom in midlife; I am making the assumption that every woman will hold a different and unique experience of this phenomenon, thus attempting to get close to and describe this for each participant is an important means of generating knowledge. The qualitative focus on meaning and description of lived experience fits my own epistemological stance and is appropriate for understanding women’s experience of being childfree at the age of 45-55.

### 3.1.2 Why Phenomenology?

The foundations of phenomenology lie in the German philosopher Brentano’s (1874) statement that the difference in studying psychological phenomena, as opposed to for example geological, is that the latter studies the object but the former studies an *idea*:

“And I understand here by ‘idea’ not that which is conceived but the act of conceiving. That is, the hearing of a tone, the seeing of a coloured object, or the thinking of a general idea... No physical phenomenon shows anything like this intentional existence. And thus we can define psychical phenomena by saying that they are such phenomena as contain objects in themselves by way of intention” (Brentano, 1874, p. 39, cited in Warnock, 1970, pp.24-25).

The active *intention* of consciousness towards the world is a radical break from the Cartesian divide of subject and object, instead positing an interrelated unity. Husserl, a former student of Brentano, took this idea further. He described our everyday, common-sensical understanding of the world as a ‘natural’ attitude; we ascribe meaning without noticing or reflecting upon how we are doing this thus the world is perceived through a mist of pre-ordained assumptions. Through a process of ‘bracketing’, or putting aside, our habitual bestowing of meaning to phenomena, Husserl (1913) states that we can arrive at the ‘phenomenological’ attitude which allows us to come to the essence or invariant structure of that which we perceive. In a further stage of

'eidetic reduction' we focus on the very process of bracketing in order to understand rather than experience the action of grasping something in our consciousness. Through this we come to the third level, referred to as 'transcendental reduction', in which we arrive at the essence of self, or 'ego' (Lavery, 2003). These stages together offer a new way into a detailed description of the whole interrelationship between person and world;

"There is always a subject, and object as well as a process connecting them that we call consciousness. Phenomenology seeks to address all of these aspects of our experience equally" (van Deurzen, 2014, p.71).

Phenomenology provides an opening to studying human experience that overcomes the primary problem in quantitative human research of studying *behaviour* which is itself perceived (and judged) through socially constructed attitudes.

### 3.1.3 Why Hermeneutic Phenomenology?

Phenomenology does not provide one way of approaching human research; rather it is a philosophical foundation and an attitude towards a number of methodological approaches. It is necessary to choose between remaining with a more Husserlian focus on the description of lived experience, or to follow Heidegger (1927) and Gadamer (1975) into a more interpretative or *hermeneutic* stance. Husserl's method encounters a problem in the positing of 'essences'; bracketing is supposed to be so rigorous and thorough that success is achieved through grasping these essences, but as Warnock asks, "How is one to know whether one has come upon a genuine essence?" (1970, p.33). Furthermore, it is this very *bracketing* that affords criticism from Heidegger and Gadamer. Husserl asks that the phenomenologist

"derive all knowledge from its ultimate sources... [is] not to be diverted by any prejudices, by any verbal contradictions or indeed by anything in the whole world" (Husserl, 1939, pp.116-117, cited in Warnock, 1970, p.34).

This is where I understand the point of divergence to be between descriptive and interpretative phenomenology; for Heidegger, it is not that we are either diverted or otherwise from the whole world, but that we are in indissoluble relationship with it; we *constitute* it as it constitutes us, therefore complete bracketing as posited by Husserl is impossible. Heidegger (1927) emphasizes this relationship between man and world by denoting human existence as *Dasein*, the being who is *there*, thus highlighting our embeddedness within a particular pre-existing social, cultural and political era that is the fore-structure of our own individual existence (Lavery, 2003). Heidegger (1927, p.59) states that descriptive phenomenology is tautological because all objects under discussion within a phenomenological science will as a matter of course be 'exhibited' and 'demonstrated'. Moreover, *Dasein* is interpretative by 'character' thus the meaning and understanding of Being (which, as Beings, is of primary concern to us), is given *through* interpretation;

"In interpretation, understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself. Such interpretation is grounded existentially in understanding; the latter does not arise from the former" (Heidegger, 1927, p.188).



There is a marked difference here between the *a priori* nature of Dasein as interpretative beings who by nature cannot *not* interpret, and the interpretation of other paradigms such as psychoanalysis that look to something outside of the experience to explain it. Hermeneutic Phenomenology thus offers a systematic method of coming closer to experience and seeks to understand the meaning of it through a circular mode of “interplay between parts and whole and between the interpreter and the object of interpretation” (Shinebourne, 2011, p.21).

The origins of hermeneutics lie in the interpretation of sacred texts that were often of another era and culture thereby needing a method of interacting with them, and it is interesting to note that these origins are exclusively language based (Ihde, 1998). Gadamer (1975), influenced by the later writings of Heidegger, asserted that understanding comes about through conversation and that the basis of conversation is language; therefore language and hermeneutics are essential structures of social existence;

“Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting” (Gadamer, 1975, p.407).

However, as is discussed further in my section on method limitations (3.1.7), language not only represents experience and allows access to an understanding of it; it also constructs meaning at the same time as being one step removed from it (Willing, 2008). Eugene Gendlin, notable for his emphasis on the body’s ‘felt sense’ (1992), suggests that much of our information and understanding in fact precedes language. The body experiences, and understands this experience prior to a thought-based articulation of the experience. Whilst I agree with Gendlin, I think that an interview based upon language can use phenomenology to delve deeper into the meanings expressed in language, including putting into language that which is *felt*.

My own understanding of existence is that we are inextricably situated within a context and particularly a *language*, and that everything is interpreted through each individual’s lens of *being-in-the-world*, therefore I have chosen to use hermeneutic rather than descriptive phenomenology to explore the lived experience of childfree women aged 45-55.

### **3.1.4 Why Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)?**

As a qualitative method positioned within the paradigm of hermeneutic phenomenology, IPA, as outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), also has at its core an idiographic commitment. People make sense of and create meaning in the *context* within which they exist. IPA seeks to engage with this meaning-making as it is for each individual and there is an interest in the particular rather than the general. Furthermore, the researcher is engaged in his or her own contextual meaning-making which needs to be rigorously reflected upon and made transparent in order to illuminate the influence of this upon the research interactions (Larkin and Thompson, 2012). This idiographic focus makes IPA a popular approach for psychotherapy orientated research, and I believe the idiographic perspective is important for my topic because my aim is to give voice and validity to the experience of a minority rather than to universally theorize.

IPA engages with hermeneutics in multiple ways. Throughout the analytic process the ‘hermeneutic circle’ is one of the principle ‘tools’ and works on different levels. It is the “dynamic relationship between the part and the whole” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.28), for example the word may be understood only in the context of the sentence, and the sentence

needs the word to give it coherence. The levels of part and whole then build to the relationships between the extract and the whole text, and the particular text amongst the entire research data. This process is iterative, meaning that the researcher moves in and out of part and whole repeatedly to deepen understanding, rather than work in a step by step fashion. This stance “focuses on coherence, sensitivity and making justifiable claims about a text that go beyond that text but always emanate from the text itself” (Medina, 2012, p.43).

The researcher also engages in a circular process of interacting with the text as well as reflexive use of self, intuition, and interpretation. Smith and Osborn (2003, p.51) describe this as a ‘double hermeneutic’ wherein “The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world”. In this sense the researcher does not seek to maintain an objective stance of being outside the research process, but is an engaged and active part of the co-created dialogue (Finlay and Evans, 2009). This active part of IPA uses a hermeneutics of empathy, which is the attempt to see from the perspective of the participant, to get into their shoes or “take their side” (Smith and Osborn, 2003, p.53). This is combined with a more questioning hermeneutics which is the detailed analysis through critical thinking about the text; questions may be asked about what is *beside* what the participant has said? What have they shown through their words that may not have been the immediate meaning? (Smith and Osborn, 2003).

### 3.1.5 Alternative Methods

There were two other methods in particular that I thought about using for this research project; critical narrative analysis (CNA), which is a particular form of narrative methodology that has existential underpinnings (Langdridge, 2007), and heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990).

CNA has similarities to IPA in that it springs from the hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy of Heidegger and Ricoeur, is idiographic in the sense of focusing on the individual rather than attempting to generalize on a wider scale, and inductive rather than deductive so grounded in the data rather than outside theories. Langdridge’s (2007) method differs from other narrative approaches through the inclusion of the ‘critical moment’; using Ricoeur’s (1970) hermeneutic of suspicion the text is interrogated from a number of critical social theories such as class, age, gender, sexuality and ethnicity analysis, or any other pertinent to one’s own research, thus emphasizing the need to recognize the embeddedness of both researcher and participant. However, Langdridge (2009) stresses that this is secondary to the primacy of entering the participant’s lived experience. Narrative appeals to me in its holistic inclusion of all that appears as important to a participant in the moment of telling, also that narrative is relevant in the context of one’s life-span. However, storytelling, with its characteristic of beginning, middle and end, implies *events*; as I am researching the experience of a ‘non-event’, as it were, including the emotions connected with this, I wonder about the suitability of this method. I also wonder whether an emphasis on narrative encourages immersion in the past, whereas I would like to explore the present and expected future lives of my participants.

In Moustakas’ heuristic inquiry (1990), there is a major focus on the self of the researcher and the use of his or her intuition, self-exploration and creativity. This was very appealing to me in that as a therapist I try to use my embodied thoughts, feelings and pre-verbal experience or intuition to help me explore the lived world of my clients. However, although my project is doctoral research as opposed to a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree, I remained fully cognizant that my background is

not in psychology and did not yet feel myself to be an experienced or knowledgeable researcher. I therefore felt wary of the openness of this method, and ultimately chose something more structured. Furthermore, I wondered if the fact that I am, at 36, significantly younger than my participants and therefore have no personal experience of being a childfree woman aged 45-55, would mean that the use of self as such a primary aspect of the research method might be inappropriate for this project. I decided rather to use IPA, but to bring with me the spirit I believe Moustakas (1990) speaks of in his urge towards passionate engagement with a topic, and a Buberian *being-with* another in a mutual, relationally orientated authentic meeting (Finlay and Evans, 2009).

There are of course other methods I could have chosen, though these seemed easier to vote against. Firstly, as discussed above, is descriptive phenomenology. To reiterate, although I do want to “capture as closely as possible the way in which the phenomenon is experienced” (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003, p.27), I am doubtful that the *essence* of the phenomenon is capturable in what is a co-constructed, or interpreted dialogue between researcher and participant at a moment in time.

Grounded Theory was a method developed in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss in their sociological work. Whilst I was attracted to the idea of ‘grounding’ a theory within the actual experience of people in their natural worlds, and the focus on “a *process* or an *action* that has distinct steps or phases that occur over time” (Cresswell, 2013, p.85), I was wary of then coming up with a “unified theoretical explanation” for the phenomenon (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.109). The *process* of becoming permanently childfree in the middle decade would perhaps have been interesting to look at from this angle, but ultimately I am more inclined to explore in detail than explain the lived experience of being childfree aged 45-55.

Creswell (2013) also outlines two other qualitative approaches – the case study and ethnography. I did not choose the case study because I wanted more than one participant’s voice in this project. Ethnographic research is primarily done with a population that shares a cultural background, and I wanted homogeneity in my sample only in terms of their choice to remain childfree and their age bracket.

IPA has been criticized for not acknowledging the constitutive role of language (Willig, 2008), and a method such as discourse analysis which focuses more extensively on this could have been used for this research. Varieties of discourse analysis forefront the construction of the psychological and social worlds through language and analyse the way in which language is used to create as well as reflect reality (Willig, 2008). However, semi-structured interviewing is the main method of data collection given the practical and ethical challenges in collecting data in natural situations; therefore much of the analysis might focus on the way in which the participant manages their role as interviewee (Willig, 2008). Although the relationship that exists between researcher and participant, and how this is managed, is hugely important, I wanted to forefront the lived experience with this in mind rather than make it the primary focus of analysis.

### **3.1.6 Validity**

As Finlay (2011) points out, qualitative research has been accused of subjective wooliness without proper scientific basis, but it cannot be assessed using the same measurements as quantitative

research such as replicability and objectivity as these are precisely the aspects of the latter that have been so forcefully questioned. It is important therefore to establish other means of assessing the quality and validity of these studies that is congruent with the methodological values. Throughout the research process I kept in my mind the four principles outlined by Yardley (2000) as well as the quality checks established by Smith (2011) with specific reference to IPA studies.

Yardley (2000) proposes firstly that the researcher maintain a 'sensitivity to context', to which Smith (2011) adds that a firm grounding within the central principles of IPA (phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography) must be demonstrated. I hope to have maintained sensitivity to the context of this topic within the current and historical prenatal Western society, as well as to the relationship between myself and my participants and to the data that has been produced through these encounters.

Secondly, Yardley asks for commitment and rigour. My commitment to the principles of my chosen methodology as well as to my perspective of existentialism and phenomenology can be seen throughout the project. I have been rigorous in both my analysis and my choices about which interviews were truly on this topic, and which might need to be excluded because they make my sample not homogenous in terms of 'voluntary' childfreedom. My inclusion criteria and rationale for them are discussed below (3.2.2).

Yardley's (2000) third principle centres on transparency and coherence. These have been split up in Smith's (2011) evaluation of quality which seems to make sense as they are not one and the same. In practical terms, transparency has been shown through providing examples for each stage of the analysis as well as how themes have been extracted and used to create a 'model' which is then discussed in terms of the extant literature. I hope to have also been transparent in my own on-going reflexive process. I have situated myself in the dissertation from the outset and hope that my own voice remains a strong and coherent one.

Coherency along with plausibility and interest make up Smith's (2011) third principle. Furthermore, in order for a paper to be not just acceptable, but of a very high quality, he wants the researcher to illustrate the "complexity, ambiguity and nuance in participants' accounts" (Smith, 2011, p.20). Within my collected data I discovered many contradictions, ambivalences and confusions, but I hope to have presented and analysed these with coherence and clarity rather than leaving the reader feeling confused or lost (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Smith's (2011) final criterion for IPA studies is to show sufficient evidence for each theme from a selection of participants' accounts, and I remained vigilant during my tabling of themes to include all voices for each of the themes. Verbatim quotes were then chosen to illuminate each theme in equal share throughout the findings chapter.

Yardley's (2000) fourth and final criterion, questioned by Langdrige (2007), is that of impact and importance. Although I believe that my topic is important to the profession of psychotherapy and will have an impact on how aware therapists are of the possible experiences of childfree women, like Langdrige I am wary that Yardley's criterion might influence a movement towards applied research becoming the only valid projects, which for me raises a question about why we generate knowledge.

### 3.1.7 Limitations and critiques of IPA

IPA has received criticism for being too focused on the psychology of the person to the detriment of other aspects of their lived experience (Langdridge, 2007). This seems curious given that the foundations of this method lie in a perspective that holds understanding to mean more than mere cognition but rather encompasses an embodied opening towards experience. This criticism perhaps stems from the fact that Jonathan Smith, creator of the method in the late 1990s, wanted an experiential approach that would nevertheless be accepted into mainstream psychology and be accessible to those without a philosophical background. However, it seems that his and other later texts (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Finlay, 2011) do emphasize the embodied, meaningful, and intuitive realms as well as the psychological or cognitive realm. Langdridge (2007) mitigates his point by asserting that the early focus on cognition has not necessarily been reflected in the engaged phenomenological practice of researchers.

My own epistemological stance is not only phenomenological, but also existential; we as beings are situated fundamentally in time, in culture, in our own bodies and in a social world (Heidegger, 1927; Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Furthermore, I am personally and professionally influenced by the concept of the four dimensional world as posited by Binswanger (1946) and van Deurzen (1997). I therefore find myself always looking at the embodied, social and spiritual or philosophical aspects of people's worlds, and hope to adhere to Finlay's understanding of what IPA studies should and shouldn't be:

“it is not sufficient to operate at just a cognitive level focusing on people's attitudes. Instead, IPA seeks the *meanings* of experience which include embodied, cognitive-affective and existential domains” (Finlay, 2011, p.140).

Willig (2008) asserts that the commonly used data collection method of semi-structured interviews relies for eliciting rich description upon the participant's ability to articulate their experience in language. There is a further limitation in that a transcription is a representation of the dialogical event, not the event itself; non-verbal interaction may therefore be lost in translation (van Manen, 1990), though this is mitigated to some extent when the researcher herself transcribes the interview. Along similar lines, Willig (2008) also questions whether IPA pays enough heed to the constructive role of language wherein the data generated is in fact the description by the participant *of* the experience; it is not the experience itself (Spinelli, 2005). However, the third stage of data analysis as described by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) is to pay close attention to the linguistic elements of the transcript.

Giorgi (2010) questions the validity of IPA studies in that the scientific criterion of replication is not met. Smith (2010, p.189) responds to this by asserting that this particular criterion is not necessarily appropriate for qualitative research which is a “complex, interactive, dynamic process and it is not clear exactly what one would be expecting to replicate”. My own stance on this is that I agree that a different researcher, or even the same two people on a different day, would elicit different data, but as Letherby (2002) suggests, I believe this would give the findings a different “flavour” rather than generate an opposing data set.

## 3.2 Method

### 3.2.1 Ethical Approval

My approved research proposal was submitted to NSPC and Middlesex University Ethics Board along with the ethics protocols (which can be found in Appendix A). Ethical approval was granted on 9<sup>th</sup> July 2013 and permission was given to me to conduct a pilot study. This became the basis of part 1 of the research project which was approved by my supervisors in September 2013 and officially marked and passed in November 2013. After discussion with my supervisors about any changes needing to be made I was given permission to begin recruitment and interviewing other participants.

### 3.2.2 Participation Criteria

My criteria for participating in the research as outlined in my information letter to potential participants (Appendix B) were as follows:

- ❖ The participants must be women aged 45-55
- ❖ The participants have chosen to remain childfree with no plans to have children in the future
- ❖ The participants are not adoptive mothers or have regular commitments as the primary carer for the children of someone else
- ❖ After telephone or email correspondence with me, the participants agree to meet face to face for a recorded interview lasting approximately an hour at an agreed time and place
- ❖ The participant signs a consent form demonstrating they are aware of what the interview will entail

Deciding upon other inclusion criteria was problematic as the research demonstrates very different experiences within superficially homogeneous groups. For example, many studies recruit only women who are married or partnered in a relationship of a certain duration (Veevers, 1980; Morrell, 1994; Bonnici, 2010) because these are the women who face the most social pressure to mother. Lesbian and single women are often excluded on the grounds that to bear a child in these circumstances would be more stigmatized. With single women there is the added question of whether they are postponing motherhood until in a committed relationship (Bonnici, 2010). However, results in these studies show a great deal of heterogeneity in the very areas that are supposedly similar; married women may be 'reactively' childfree due to their partner's more active decision (Veevers, 1980; Shaw, 2011), or may feel that despite their partner's desire for children they are adamant they do not want them (Campbell, 1999; Bonnici, 2010). They might simply feel unbothered by the absence of conception within the marriage though childlessness is not chosen per se (Shaw, 2011), or do not feel happy enough in a marriage to bring another life into it (Morrell, 1994). From the research into childfree couples it can be gleaned that marriage itself is not a homogeneous experience with regards to not having children. And nor is the feeling of certainty about the choice, which is sometimes another inclusion requirement (Bonnici, 2010). Women who identify themselves as voluntarily childless, or childfree, are also not homogeneous in their certainty about their choice, but might be adopting a stance of positivity and acceptance towards a present experience that is the result of circumstances rather than chosen for itself.

After much consideration I decided that I would not limit my sample to married or partnered women on the grounds that although IPA seeks individual difference within a homogeneous experience, the experience I am researching is that of being a childfree woman aged 45-55, and the experience of childfreedom within partnership does not appear to have fundamental similarities. The homogeneity in which to situate an IPA study is the experience of being a childfree woman aged 45-55, and I am not beginning with the assumption that this has been either a conscious and definitive choice or a less conscious result of circumstance. The route taken to being childfree is likely to be individual according to an entire life circumstance and not only whether or not each woman has been in a heterosexual partnership for the past decade. However, I wanted to include some boundaries, so inclusion criteria was women who had *chosen* to remain childfree rather than those who had problems conceiving yet came to think of themselves as voluntarily childfree. This in itself is an interesting experience that warrants its own research project but that I felt might be outside of my own parameters of homogeneity.

Although recent research shows that the route to motherhood may be more complicated for lesbian women, and that homophobia and assumptions of heterosexuality still exist in adoption agencies and the medical community (Tasker & Patterson, 2007; Newman, 2010), Park (2002) suggests that our society's inherent pronatalism now embraces more than the 'norm' of married heterosexual women of a certain age so that stigma around lesbian mothering is lessening. Research also suggests that choices towards motherhood are made irrespective of sexuality (Campbell, 1999; Cain 2001), and as my research is into the experience of childfreedom in this period of life rather than specifically why this choice was made, I have decided not to limit this study to heterosexual women. For the same reason I have also decided not to limit to women in a long relationship within which childfreedom may have been a joint decision. This may complicate the study in that it potentially includes single women who might have chosen to mother had they been in a relationship where that was desired and possible, but research shows that there are myriad routes to childfreedom (Ireland, 1993; Campbell, 1999; Cain, 2001) and I believe that the data will be richer for not limiting these routes. I have also chosen not to exclude participants on the basis of ethnicity, class, economic and educational background; some studies have attempted to dispel the belief that childfreedom is exclusively an issue for the white and wealthy (Campbell, 1999; Reissman, 2000; Mollen, 2006), the results of which show that although demographic factors influence life experience, reasons for choosing and experience of non-motherhood have similarities throughout varying backgrounds such as a questioning of gender roles, a sense of desiring freedom, seeking meaning through other outlets than one's own children and managing the curiosity or stigma directed at them by others.

### **3.2.3 Recruitment of Participants**

I initially sent an email to colleagues, friends and family, asking them to forward it to anyone they feel might be interested. I also asked the NSPC office to forward it to their large database of staff and students. My plan was then to place adverts in other psychotherapy schools, the BACP Magazine, and the Society of Existential Analysis' publication *The Hermeneutic Circular* as well as to set up a Facebook page. However, my initial email generated over 20 return emails from women asking for more information and some from women who expressed disappointment that they did not fit my criteria but had passed on the details to others who did fit. I quickly realized that it was preferable to me to pass my email address around and await contact rather than



initiate it myself. This had both a positive and negative side. Positive in that I avoided approaching women who may have felt uncomfortable participating but had difficulty refusing a direct request; as it was, many colleagues told me they'd forwarded my email to people from whom I never heard back. Negative in that during my write up stage I met a woman whom I vaguely knew previously but hadn't approached for fear of intrusion into such a personal area of her life, who then expressed regret that I hadn't invited her involvement as she would have loved to talk to me about her choice.

### **3.2.4 Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews are generally considered to be a suitable means of collecting data in IPA studies (Langdrige, 2007; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). I felt that unstructured interviews would not necessarily take us into the experience of being childfree aged 45-55, and structured interviews would not allow the participant's experience to be fully explored, so I generated a question schedule of six open-ended questions. As Smith and Osborn (2003, p.55) state, this allows "a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of the participants' responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which arise". My schedule was as follows:

- 1) What is your experience of being a childfree woman at this age?
- 2) What does it mean to you to be childfree?
- 3) Can you tell me about your experience of making this choice?
- 4) What is your experience of others' responses to you being childfree?
- 5) How do you feel about the end of your fertility?
- 6) How do you feel about the future having chosen to remain childfree?

I hoped that these questions would generate a natural, open dialogue that is in reference to the experience of being childfree aged 45-55 but is very much centred on the individual's unique lived world.

Other forms of data collection I could have used are focus groups or written accounts from the participants such as diaries (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Although these both would have generated interesting and in-depth data I decided against them for reasons of time constraints as well as wanting to establish a one-to-one relationship with my participant and dialogue with them about their experience. As Finlay and Evans (2009, p.69) state:

"Relational-centred research foregrounds the co-created relationship between researcher and co-researcher while recognizing this relationship is set within a wider social/relational field".

## **3.3 The Research**

### **3.3.1 The Pilot study**

Upon obtaining ethical approval I conducted a pilot interview in order to assess the strength and appropriateness of my questions and make any relevant changes. It was also an opportunity to assess myself as an interviewer as this is not something I had previously experienced. The interview itself was conducted in the participant's home as she was a friend of a friend. It lasted



an hour and 20 minutes and was recorded and transcribed. This pilot study brought up two important issues that I felt needed consideration before further research was done. The first was that on reflection, my second question 'what does it mean to you to be childfree?' perhaps encompasses an assumption that it means something, and means something other than what has been answered in the first question about the experience of being childfree at this age. My pilot participant in fact upon being asked this question took us into an area about motherhood rather than childfreedom and I felt that the question itself, rather than being open was in fact merely abstract. I decided that it would work better as a prompt rather than a question in itself and actually only used it when I felt that my participants did not give a lengthy answer from a personal viewpoint to question 1. Also, I realized that I had not scheduled a final completely open question of 'is there anything you'd like to add?', so I included this in my question schedule for further interviews.

The second issue was that I needed to be much more phenomenological as a researcher. In my pilot interview I had quickly fallen into the role of therapist and found myself sometimes making interpretations. Another problem was that my interviewee seemed very keen to speak about an unrelated topic and I struggled to bring her back to the questions I had posed. Although I hoped that further interviews would not bring this problem so greatly to the fore, I did reflect for a long time with my supervisor and therapist about how difficult I found it to bring her back to the topic of my research. I felt imposing as the researcher and was aware that I was in the uncomfortable place of wanting to allow this participant the space to explore her own topic, but realizing this wouldn't give me useable data. However, throughout the analytic process of this quite lengthy interview I realized that there was actually a huge amount of very relevant data. The fact that she spoke at length about her perception of motherhood, pregnancy, maternal instinct, and choice mixed with circumstance led me to decide that I had not simply analysed the data according to what I wished to find but had actually allowed her time to speak about what mattered to her as well as what was pertinent to my research topic. Because of this large quantity of relevant data it was decided with my supervisors that I would include this pilot in the final analysis, but that I would work on my phenomenological approach before further interviewing.

After studying the interviewer interventions in Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) and in the transcripts provided by other doctoral students in their dissertations, I set up 'practice' sessions with some willing friends. These were unstructured interviews on a topic decided in advance with the aim of remaining as phenomenological as possible. I conducted 3 of these practice interviews, recording them in order to listen and learn as well as to make it similar to the 'real' interviews I would soon be doing. I felt after the third that my interventions were much more often along the lines of 'can you tell me more about that', 'what is that like', or 'could you describe that more for me?' Although these requests for more and deeper information about what has been said are reflected in the interviews I later conducted, I noticed that participants would often jump quickly between ideas. I often wanted to ask for more clarity about something said a few minutes ago and therefore needed to first refer to what I was interested in. This can be seen in the transcript of my interview with Jane (found in appendix I), and I felt that it worked in the same way as did the above questions in my practice interviews.

### 3.3.2 The Participants

I interviewed thirteen women between October 2013 and February 2014. Some of these interviews were conducted at NSPC or Dilemma Consultancy, and some were in the participants' homes if they were a friend of someone I knew reasonably well. I decided not to use the data from three of these interviews; in two of them it emerged that childfreedom was not felt to be a choice but the result of circumstances they would have changed if they could. I felt that although we all exist with limitations to our freedom, there was a qualitative difference to these interviews in that they had very much wanted children. Although I found these two interviews to be very interesting as they both talked about the struggle to *become* childfree and assimilate this into their identities, I felt this phenomenon alone would warrant a separate research project. This was perhaps a limitation of keeping my inclusion criteria quite open and I recommend that future studies avoid this by choosing to interview samples for whom childfreedom is either the result of choice *or* circumstance. However, this is itself quite a complex question and clarity about what constitutes each of these phenomena as well as a lengthy initial conversation would be needed in order to make this a worthwhile endeavour.

I also decided against using an interview that was extremely short (26 minutes) and that I felt was not rich enough to allow me to do in-depth analysis. This participant stated that being childfree was simply not something she thought about, nor had ever thought about. Her experience was such that the complexities of choice and navigating a pronatal society, as will be seen to exist for the other participants, were not so apparent. Her narrative therefore was not one in which the topic of childfreedom could be spoken about at any great length. As Larkin and Thompson (2012) state, IPA studies work best with participants to whom the topic *matters*; who have an understanding and a personal experience of the phenomenon itself. Interestingly, although this participant had volunteered, she did not seem to feel that this topic had particular relevance; it did not really *matter* to her. I have no judgment on this, it is in fact pleasing to find women for whom childfreedom is absolutely no issue, but it left me wondering about her motivations for volunteering; in tentatively broaching this question in our debriefing session, Paula merely stated that she had been forwarded my email and fitted my participation criteria.

I thought carefully about the ethical issues involved in interviewing these three participants and then excluding their data. As two of them had expressed great interest in my finished dissertation I decided it would be unethical to leave them to assume that I had used their transcripts. I therefore spoke to two of them over the phone about my reasoning, which they both completely understood and told me that they had appreciated the opportunity to speak at length and in depth about being childfree at this age. I did not have the number of the participant whose interview was very short so I emailed her simply stating that the data I had gathered would not actually be used in the final write-up and that I would be happy to speak to her about this. I did not hear back from her and decided that as the interview did not seem to have brought up any sensitive issues for her I would not pursue further contact.

### 3.3.3 Demographic Data

In order to fit my study into the wider picture of this growing topic, I wanted to collect some demographic data about each participant. As this is sensitive material I felt it was more appropriate to collect this data at the beginning of our interview when contact has already been made, rather than ask them to fill in a form prior to meeting in person. This allowed me to clarify

that any question they were uncomfortable answering could be left blank. It also suits neither the epistemological position of the study nor my own personal stance to use a checkbox survey questionnaire as this might miss salient data, for example, the occupation of 'painter' could imply a very different lifestyle and income depending upon the type of painting done. Asking in person introduces a more qualitative feel so better to gather richer data than might be got through them filling in a form beforehand. Each form was numbered with a code rather than a name in order for it to remain confidential. The demographic forms were not kept in the same place as the signed consent forms. The demographic information I required is as follows, and the form itself can be found in appendix F:

Age: this I needed for comparison within my own study as it may be that there is a qualitative difference between the beginning and end of the decade I am studying which may be captured thematically.

Occupation, Educational Level, Income, Ethnicity, Class, Religious Upbringing and Current Religiosity: while some studies demonstrate that women of heterogeneous status and background have overlapping reasons for their choice and similar attitudes towards career and financial status (Mollen, 2006), others emphasize the potential impact of these factors upon the autonomy and freedom of women; Daniluk (1999, p.80) posits that the “economic and personal survival of women of certain ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes is contingent upon their ability to produce children” making the childfree choice one which places them in a much more precarious position within their immediate surroundings. Reissman (2000, p.126) suggests that a higher educational level allows women to “see through dominant ideologies” thus perhaps become more able to formulate a resistance to them. Although all women have a relationship with their fertility regardless of demographic factors, these may influence life experience and be salient to a qualitative study of this experience at a certain period of life.

Sexual orientation: as previously mentioned, the motherhood mandate has in the past focussed primarily on married, heterosexual women, thus stigma around childfreedom may be lesser in homosexual couples, though homosexuality itself has carried its own history of stigmatization. As this factor may impact upon how a participant experiences the reactions of others I felt it would be salient to collect this sensitive data. However, I again feel that asking this question in person is best as this is not necessarily a fixed phenomenon; a change in sexual preference may indeed have contributed to becoming childfree, and might be covered further during my interview question about experience of making this choice.

Current Relationship: as outlined above, I have not limited my inclusion criteria to married/partnered women because their experiences do not appear to be homogeneous, and I wanted a more open approach to looking at the routes taken to becoming childfree. However, research shows that supportive relationships are important for a positive experience of this period of life (Apter, 1995; Delsyer, 2007), and it might also impact upon the childfree choice, therefore I decided to collect data about each participant’s current relationship status and length.

The data collected is presented below in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic data

	Name	Age	Occupation	Educational Level	Ethnicity	Religious Upbringing/ current religiosity	Class	Sexual Orientation	Current Relationship Status/ Length of relationship
1	Bella	50	Lecturer	Masters	White European	Atheist/ Eastern spirituality	Middle	Hetero	Single
2	Helen	54	Nurse	Level 1 open university	White British	Loose Christianity/ Christianity Buddhism	Lower-middle	Hetero	Single
3	Alex	45	Artist	Masters	White British	None/ None	Middle	Hetero	Partnered/ 4 years
4	Amanda	55	Market Trader	A Levels	White British	None/ None	Lower-middle	Hetero	Partnered/ 16 years
5	Maria	53	Opera Singer	Bachelors	White British/ Jewish	Lutheran/ None	Middle	Hetero	Single
6	Charlotte	55	Dancer	Diploma	White British	Christianity/ Open, spiritual	Middle	Hetero	Partnered/ 21 years
7	Jane	51	Business Woman	Multiple degrees	White British	Evangelical Christianity/None	Middle	Lesbian	Partnered/ 22 years
8	Clio	55	Retired solicitor	Solicitor qualification	White British	C of E/ C of E	Lower-middle	Hetero	Married/ 34 years
9	Ruby	48	Manager	Bachelors	Asian	Hindu & Catholic/ None	---	Hetero	Single
10	Catherine	53	Academic	Multiple degrees	White British	Humanitarian, Atheist/ Unitarian	Professional	Nominally Hetero	Single

My participants were fairly homogeneous in terms of 'class', qualifications and employment, reflecting the findings of other studies wherein childfree women tend to be middle class professionals (Somers, 1993; Abma and Martinez, 2006; Bonnici, 2010). Interestingly, two of the women declined to give a definition of class; they felt that this categorization is no longer relevant to current society and questioned the meaning of it. Catherine also made the point that her parents were workers, but she has chosen to become a member of the professional class by seeking further education, therein highlighting the fact that people move class bracket. Although I would have liked more ethnic diversity because little is known about childfree experiences within other ethnicities, only one participant was not Caucasian. They were also diverse in terms of relationship status which was to be expected due to not putting any exclusion criteria in place about this. Only one was a practising Christian, though others had spiritual practices in place, and some had religious upbringings. This does reflect the general trend of childfree women to have little or no religious affiliation (Abma and Martinez, 2006).

### **3.3.4 Ethical Considerations**

This research was carried out in accordance with the BPS code of ethics (2010), a primary concern of which is to protect the participants from harm and preserve their autonomy and dignity. I therefore felt that the 'informed' part of informed consent was crucial and although I had sent my information letter to potential participants I first wanted to have an informal chat via phone or email to make sure they had understood what they were consenting to. I ensured that the following points were understood before beginning the interview:

- ❖ Informed consent: before the interview began I asked my participants to sign a consent form, first asking if they had any questions about the research, and reminding them that they retained the right to withdraw without giving a reason at any point up until submission of the dissertation. A sample copy is attached in appendix C, and the originals are stored in a safely locked place for reasons of anonymity and will be destroyed after the dissertation is marked.
- ❖ Transparency: I began the interview with a reiteration of the possibility of painful emotions arising, and that my participant could ask at any time to move on from the question, to pause, or to terminate the interview.
- ❖ Confidentiality: the interviews were recorded digitally and stored in a password protected file then deleted from the recorder. The files will be kept until the dissertation is marked after which they will be destroyed. All of this was made clear to each participant as well as the fact that all identifying information such as names, occupations, and details of significant others mentioned would be changed.
- ❖ Possibility of distress: although topics of a sensitive nature carry a risk of distress to the participant, in the same way that emotions such as tears or anger in the therapy room may be considered cathartic rather than harmful, it is also considered that expression of these feelings to a researcher is not inherently harmful (Holloway and Jefferson, 2000), but that counselling skills such as sensitivity and an empathic manner are important to make the participant feel safe (Finlay and Evans, 2009). My participants did at times express strong emotions and I made sure that this was not something they felt uncomfortable with or expected to turn into depressing or negative feeling post-interview. In each case the participant expressed that yes, the topic and its corollaries did bring up strong emotions, but that they weren't overwhelmed with pain or suffering, and that it was good to talk about these things. My therapeutic training benefitted these moments as I felt moved and empathetic rather than worried about these emotional

outpourings.

- ❖ Debriefing: this was given at the end of each interview in verbal form thus giving the participants time and space to respond. I asked how they found the interview, what feelings they were left with, and let them know how to find further support should they desire it. I also thanked them for agreeing to be part of my study. A debriefing letter was given (please see appendix D) which includes my own details, those of my primary supervisor, a recommended therapist and a list of women's centres, childfree forums, and low cost counselling centres. A follow up phone call was offered to discuss any concerns and two women accepted this offer, during which they expressed that they had found the interviews very interesting, and that they hadn't experienced any distress since.

Member checking: after much deliberation I decided against this as, in agreement with Larkin and Thompson (2012), I felt that the totality of the data generated from multiple participants demonstrated enough diversity and paradox that it was not appropriate to request this type of validation.

### **3.3.5 Data Collection - The interviews**

Etherington (2004) describes interviews as conversations and I wanted to approach my own interviews with this in mind. I began by trying to establish an informal, relaxed atmosphere by thanking them for their time, perhaps chatting about our location, and again outlining the interview procedure. I also asked if they had any questions at this time and reminded them that they could pause or stop the interview at any time. After the first few interviews it occurred to me to add my own thoughts about how I wanted it to be more of a conversation than an interview, though this did not make a noticeable difference to the level of open-ness and relaxation I judged the participant to feel. This was interesting as it reminded me of Willig's (2008) assertion that this form of data collection relies heavily on the ability of the interviewee to articulate their own experience in words. Furthermore, it relies on the ability of both parties in this conversation to be able to understand and respond to each other. Mishler (1986, pp.53-54) points out that questions themselves may be heard or interpreted differently by individuals, and that it may be helpful to conceptualize a question as

“part of a circular process through which its meaning and that of its answer are created in the discourse between interviewer and respondent as they try to make continuing sense of what they are saying to each other”.

I often found the initial moments of each interview quite challenging in that I was aware of my role as researcher not therapist therefore the boundaries felt different; I had come to them for something, not the other way around. I was free to disclose my own position with regards to childfreedom but did not wish to be the focus of the conversation. It was to be a conversation with a quite specific purpose, which was my own need to gather data about the topic in question, therefore I was 'steering' more than perhaps I would as a therapist.

As Smith and Osborn (2003) suggest, I familiarized myself with my question schedule ahead of the interviews so I did not need to refer to it. Instead, I used it as a guide to ensure that all of the areas had been covered, and to provide prompts to elicit more information about something. The question schedule with prompts is given in appendix E. In practice the conversation weaved in and out of topics, blurring the boundaries between each question and I often found myself

saying “you’ve spoken a bit about this already, but do you have anything to add about...” as an invitation to say more about something they had partially covered or hinted at earlier.

I noticed that the two interviews I conducted with friends of my family were the easiest to begin precisely because my participant and I seemed to fall into a naturally relaxed way of being together having begun the interviews with some ‘small’ talk about our mutual friends. Somehow this gave us the ideal balance between becoming more than complete strangers but less than colleagues or friends, and I felt they both opened up in a very in-depth and frank manner. Of course, this could be more to do with their personalities rather than to do with the relationship created during the interviews with me; these dynamics are worthy of a project in themselves! I did find that often the participants noticeably relaxed at the end of the interview when I turned the recorder off and I asked about their experience of the conversation. I also was aware of the recorder, and it seemed at times to become a third presence in the room; on occasion I felt that both my participant and I were making an effort to not allow it to impede too much upon our being together in dialogue.

Although I reflected constantly on how to be phenomenological rather than interpretative, I still struggled with this during most of the interviews. I also noticed a continuing trait that I have as a therapist as well as a researcher; that of spelling out possible answers to questions rather than simply asking for more information. This I felt was to be in direct opposition to the ‘gentle nudging’ described by Smith and Osborn (2003). Through exploration in both supervision and therapy I have come to the realization that I do not seem to trust people to come up with their own answers, indeed this is the opposite stance of an ‘unknowing’ researcher and I felt has hindered me in my phenomenological quest. It has been and continues to be a huge struggle to trust the process and allow the person I am interested in to show me their world. I managed this by remaining aware in each moment of interviewing how much I might be tempted to speak, and making a decision each time to stay close to what the participant has said. Thus when I wanted to know more about something, I would use the words already spoken, for example ‘you said you’d done quite a lot of soul searching about this?’ (see Jane’s interview, appendix I, line 50). This was a way to deepen the data without putting my own interpretation of what ‘soul searching’ might mean onto the participant.

As the interviews progressed it also became difficult to bracket things I had already heard from other participants. I strove to be open to each new person in front of me, and this was helped by each encounter being very different. Rather than trying not to think about the previous interviews at all, which was too effortful in itself, I simply noticed what I was reminded of, how this new participant was similar or different, and focused my attention on the present.

### **3.3.6 Reflexivity**

As part of an on-going reflexive process I was particularly interested in how I might be perceived by the women I spoke to, and part of this was worrying about the age difference. I felt that, as a woman 15 years younger than some of my participants I was therefore an ‘outsider’, but as a childfree woman who will become 45 in the not so distant future I am an ‘insider’. Interestingly it was only during one of the interviews that I felt an age difference; below are extracts from my

reflexive journal, written very soon after interviews with two women in the upper age bracket, and highlighting the felt difference:

*I felt a certain sense of peace, being with her in her flat, surrounded by books I myself had read and enjoyed; we spoke of spiritual matters, a mutual love of the countryside, we could have known each other for longer than the short period of time we spent together. I felt a deep respect for her ability to hold the paradox of beauty in the world and reality of being without family as she grows older and sees people around her struggling to cope alone.*

*A sense of dissatisfaction and despondency has taken root as I dragged my feet home. Was this interview 'good' enough? Could I have been different with her? I felt young, small, perhaps a bit of a nuisance, a first year undergrad rather than mature doctoral candidate – I am aware this is my default position taken when I feel slightly uncomfortable. How much did my own feelings of unease contribute to the co-constructed atmosphere?*

Although these women were the same age, the dynamic could not have been more different, and during transcription and analysis this dynamic continued to be felt as I perceived the second interview to be less rich in personal data and remaining on a more theoretical level. I remain unsure what I could have done to create an easier atmosphere; not being there in the capacity of therapist made it difficult to explore what feelings talking to a younger woman may have brought up, though this could potentially have been an interesting discussion.

### **3.3.7 Data Analysis and Writing up**

As Smith (2010) points out, IPA research is not a prescriptive approach but to be entered into in a spirit of creativity and personal skill. As the researcher I wanted to find the “balance between stricture and flexibility” (Smith, 2010, p.189) and therefore familiarized myself enough with the steps suggested by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), then adapted them where I felt the need.

I firstly read through the transcripts to familiarize myself with them; I found that at this point I could very clearly see and ‘feel’ the interview itself so I jotted down any thoughts and memories that came to me. I then wrote a ‘sketch’ of my memory of the experience including my own impressions about the participant, and any reflexive thoughts and feelings about myself in relationship with her. The purpose of this was to record the distracting thoughts I had about the overall meeting but that did not necessarily correspond to any of the text. As suggested by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), I found noting down all of this to begin with allowed me to approach the next step with a less cluttered mind.

I then embarked upon what I experienced as the more rigorous analytic process. The first stage of this was to note initial comments in the left hand column, taking care at this stage to remain descriptive and close to the participant’s words. I was cognizant of allowing my notes to emerge *from* the data itself, refraining from engaging with thoughts about the other interviews, the wider literature or the domain of existential philosophy and psychotherapy. The second stage of analysis was to make more interpretative and exploratory comments in the right hand column. This was a detailed line-by-line analysis of the text which engaged the hermeneutic circle in



moving in and out of the parts and the whole. Though line-by-line, this process was non-linear and iterative in its continuous motion between transcript, initial descriptive notes, and interpretative, psychological comments.

I found these initial stages to be a paradoxical process of both intuitively responding to the data and critically assessing my intuitive responses. In line with Heidegger (1927), I understand my responses as coming from my own being-in-the-world and not only from the data itself. But as I critically reflect upon them I can continually appraise how I might be tempted to morph the data through these responses, and keep this in check. The data is co-constituted through a dialogic encounter, but it is ultimately the participant's lived experience that I am seeking to illuminate. I strove to keep in mind each participant's reaction to reading my final research, wanting them to feel that I had accurately given voice and space to each of them and that in seeking to describe this phenomenon I did not disregard the unique nuances of the individual experience.

The third stage was to list the themes that had emerged from these initial analytic stages, clustering them into categories of commonality as well as divergence. After doing this for each individual transcript I created a table of superordinate themes across all ten narratives. This was a process of engaging with the hermeneutic circle in looking at the 'whole' of the ten transcripts against the 'part' of each one in order to ensure coherency within the final table and to always remain grounded within the data. In this stage of analysis some of the emergent themes of individual transcripts were dropped as I felt it important to 'evidence' each theme through the experience and verbatim quotation of at least three participants (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). However, themes were not dropped merely because they demonstrated variation or contradiction of another theme – one of the strengths of phenomenological research is that it can embrace paradox and divergence. The themes that did not become part of the final table were ones that were not deemed to be 'essential' to the experience of being a childfree woman aged 45-55 and I attempted to maintain a focus at all times on answering this specific research question.

The final table of superordinate themes can be found at the beginning of chapter 4 (Table 2). This is refined from my table of emergent themes extracted from the research data which is found in appendix G along with an example of my analytic stages. Keeping a paper trail was crucial to my own process of analysis in order to ensure coherency and rigour throughout initial engagement with the transcription to final writing up of the dissertation. But more than this, I deem it important to allow others to assess how my final claims were arrived at. This is to help keep my research credible and dependable (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) such that my conclusions remain grounded in the original data, and for this to be evident to others. This is not to say that a different researcher would make exactly the same findings if this research was repeated. IPA is fundamentally hermeneutic and interpretative, meaning that the data is understood from the 'horizon' of the interpreter which may differ to that of another (Kock, 1993). Furthermore, the data actually produced will be affected by the person of the interviewer, and the resonance or relationship with the interviewee (Etherington, 2004). However, the paper trail as well as my reflexivity and transparency throughout the research process ought to demonstrate clear and descriptive as well as interpretive findings. As Sandelowski (1986) posits, qualitative findings do

not need to be absolutely replicable, but another researcher should not be able to make contradictory conclusions based upon the same data.

# Chapter 4 The Findings

This chapter presents the findings from analysing the ten interviews that I chose to include in this study. The data from these interviews generated 20 sub-themes which are divided into 5 superordinate themes as shown in Table 2. These themes are each discussed using verbatim transcript examples.

*Table 2: Superordinate Themes and Sub-themes*

Childfreedom aged 45-55	Choosing childfreedom	The social world	End of Fertility	The Future
current feelings	how choice is felt	the childfree norm	end of fertility	perception of the future
no regret	no urge for children	negative experiences	menopause	guarantee of care
what is missed	desire for other pursuits	cultural assumptions		planning ahead
presence of children in life	choice and relationships			legacy
self-concept	feelings about pregnancy			
	other motivations			

## 4.1 The experience of childfreedom aged 45-55

Firstly described here is the participants' experience of being childfree in current life including the impact of this on everyday existence, ruminations on what is felt to be both advantageous and negative, relationships with the children of others, and reflections on their identity as childfree women.

### 4.1.1 Current Feelings

The experience of being childfree at this point in life was quite a unified sense of gladness. Six of the women expressed a joyous sense of feeling free, though freedom had a different flavour and meaning according to the individual. For Ruby, a student as well as full time worker, freedom is hugely appreciated and means she is able to make choices about her life that would be different if she were a mother:

At this age, at this point I'm loving it, because every time I look around me and I see people with children or see the fact of lack of freedom, I'm always so grateful I'm not in that place (3-4)... it feels like, honestly? From where I stand right now it's like a prison sentence (38-39)

For Helen there is an enjoyment of the literal freedom that means she is able to move unencumbered through the world if she so desires:

I'm quite pleased I suppose that I'm free...Freedom is my middle name basically, I like freedom...I could if I wanted to uproot and go, you know, move or, um, I could go abroad for 6 months, or, you know, um, I can come in when I like, I don't have to cook for people

(8-14)

Jane adds a comparison to a life with children and feels that the opportunities available to childfree people should be taken advantage of:

I just feel that it's a fantastic opportunity to do all sorts of things when you're not, it isn't – tied down is the wrong word... but I, I don't, there's no point living you know somehow the same way as everybody else but without the children. I thought why don't, you know, why don't we make the most of the fact that we don't have them, and I think we really are doing that (12-16)

Catherine adds to the external focus of freedom the fact that time and space in a childfree life offer the freedom to focus on the internal world and one's identity:

I'm very happy personally to not have children, to allow me to do all sorts of other things (13-14)... you have a lot of freedom to think about being who you want to be (47-48)

For Amanda and Maria, the two most unambivalently childfree women, there was not such a celebratory feel, but more a feeling that children were never part of the plan and therefore their presence or absence is not particularly relevant to current lived experience:

I'm glad that things went to plan and I never, I never had any! (5-6) I don't even think about it, maybe be-, too much (Maria: 85)

In as much as I've ever considered it probably relief, good job I didn't (5-6) it's not something that I do particularly think about (Amanda: 15-16)

#### **4.1.2 No Regret**

Five of the participants also stressed that they have no regrets about being childfree. For example,

I don't have any regret at all, no I've never yearned for children, grandchildren (Amanda: 20)

I feel very comfortable with it, I don't look back with regret at all, I don't look back and think ah, now it would be 16 (Jane: 226-228)

Having not had them I don't think I miss them (29-30)...I don't regret it, no (Helen: 136)

Rather than regret, Helen adds that she sometimes experiences envy of those that are in a family, but this seems to be more about her desire for security than wish for children of her own:

Perhaps in my work, then that's where I come across people that have children, going back to um, going back to families and stuff. And sometimes I might feel a little bit envious. More of the security of it than anything, I think (190-192)

Ruby puts a question to herself as she ponders the path of both circumstance and choice that has led to her current position, but concludes that in hindsight she would not have chosen differently:

I like where I am. I don't know if I could trade it in, and I don't know if I'd want to trade it in. I mean if I had to live my life over again would I have chosen differently? (Pause). In the

same circumstances, no, definitely not (108-111)

### 4.1.3 What is Missed

However, half of the women also reflected on what qualities children and motherhood provide, and what they might be missing out on by remaining childfree, but these feelings do not add up to a regret for their choices, even when the feeling is painful. For example, Alex experiences transient but acute awareness of what has *not* been chosen in life:

I think there's grief attached to that if you don't, and I think that needs processing and I've sort of met that a lot, I've met, I've looked at that in myself quite, when it's come up I've looked at it and I've felt pain and upsetness about that, but it doesn't last. It goes, if I let myself feel it, it goes. And it doesn't translate into 'I want to have a baby'. It's just a feeling of (pause) um, sadness that that isn't something that my body did, that I'm potentially capable of it and I didn't do it - that isn't sadness about having a child and bringing up a child (114-119)

Clio and Charlotte are both struggling to find meaning in their current lives, Charlotte particularly as her career dwindles and she begins to witness in others a meaning that is created through motherhood and grand-motherhood:

When you get to my stage where there's really not that much work out there... you kind of go 'oh, what was all that for?' And I think, I think the sort of whole children/grandchildren thing is something that you think that's been, whatever else I've done in my life, I've made this thing you know, it's been like a purpose in a way (33-37)

Clio maintains that although this search for something meaningful is a difficult one for her in the present, children are only one route to having this purpose in life and would not necessarily have been the right thing for her personally:

I realize that, that children give them a sense of purpose and meaning but I don't really think for one moment that would have been worth probably the 10 or the 20 years of being a parent to children. I think, you know I do see it that actually yes it's just a question of finding purpose and meaning somewhere else. Now I'm really struggling with that but I, I don't feel that you know, I made the wrong decision (143-147)

Similarly, Helen realizes the need to create meaning in action day by day as it is not readily available through the presence of family:

if you're married with children then there's a knock on effect from that; you get up in the morning and you know you have to look after the children, you have to look after the, you have to this, you have to do that. If you're single, if I don't get up in the morning there's, there's nothing (384-387)

The relationship between mother and child is seen to be unique by Ruby as she reflects on how she may be missing out on this particular emotional aspect of life:

In having children it opens up a part of my own being or, like, experiential side or attachments or whatever it is that I probably won't experience, and won't even dip into or won't even have, you know that pure joy or bliss or love or whatever it is that you get from these things, I will never know (324-327)

But Catherine and Bella have a different take on this mother-child love; Catherine feels that it is an idealized viewpoint that serves to limit women, and though real and significant, is not necessarily unique:

it's a bit like people saying if you're a woman you can, well you can only experience true love if you've had a child...to me that's part of the idealization of motherhood which serves to keep women in a certain position, you become a real woman, fulfilling your identity, really having a sense of yourself when you have been pregnant and given birth and looked after a small child and to me that's sort of a really demeaning way of looking at either a man or a woman's potential. And that's not to say that women who want to be mothers don't have that experience but the idea that if you don't have it then you've sort of lost out on something is not the corollary of that (384-392)

Bella simply states her confusion as to why love might be believed to exist hierarchically:

I don't get it, why is one kind of love more valuable or worthwhile than another kind of love? (690-691)

#### **4.1.4 Presence of Children in Life**

A common thread throughout the interviews was the importance of relationships with the children of others. For four women these were spoken of as profound and valued connections and Jane in particular feels that the relationships with her nieces and god-children have in fact benefitted her own growth:

I think having those connections has been very, and this might be the wrong word because I was never bereaved, but it is quite healing that, for a childfree person to have such strong connections with children. And, and, and I find it interesting that I used the word healing cos I'm not aware that there is something to heal (458-462)

Jane adds that as the children in her life grow into young adults her relationships with them deepen:

it's a different type of relationship and much more it, it's much more individual...the relationships feel like they're becoming um, differentiated and er, and particular and, and terribly rewarding for all of that (527-530)

Alex reflects on the love she feels for the children in her life, and how this might differ from parental love. This leads her to reflect on the demanding nature of loving one's child on an everyday domestic basis:

I have a love for the children in my life that is very profound. It just isn't based in domesticity or looking after them on a daily basis. But it's very much based on a desperately wanting nothing bad to happen to them and desperately wanting them to have an amazing life you know. I just don't have the care-taking role that the parents do (404-408)

For two others, being with children was a way of connecting with different, more playful or

creative sides of themselves:

I think when you don't have them around you can slightly lose that child quality which I think we all need to survive really (46-47)...they just make me laugh, children just make me laugh all the time (Charlotte: 62)

I do enjoy seeing the children upstairs, and I get really creative with them. Um, I'm quite, I think deep down I'm quite a creative person and if I know I'm going to go and babysit I'll start planning all these things (Helen: 30-32)

Amanda is the only one who has no relationships with children, which she feels is mitigated by the fact that she is not in contact with members of her family who do have children:

my sister has children who I have absolutely no interest in at all – I know this sounds a dreadful thing to say but I don't actually have much to do with my sister either (11-12)

Lastly, on being asked if she would adopt or foster a child, Ruby reflects that she prefers a less formal relationship wherein she can offer help and support to children in need:

I'm more the kind of person who'd be there for someone without the legalities of it, does that make sense? And I've done that in the past where, offer my home, give lots, give everything I have in terms of money and support and care (284-287)

#### **4.1.5 Self-concept**

Seven of the participants discussed how not being mothers influenced their perception of self in their present lives. Clio feels that she has somehow not truly entered adulthood, but later questions whether motherhood would have affected this:

part of me does actually feel that because I've never taken that step and never become responsible for another human being I haven't fully grown up (23-24)...Perhaps having children wouldn't have made me grow up in the way that I imagine it would (231-232)

And Jane felt strongly in the past that becoming fully adult is dependent on motherhood but now gets angry about this notion:

But, ah, for ages you see, I did, I had this, I remember saying to the therapist I really think my problem is I've got arrested development because I just feel of course I've never grown up because of course I never had children! (499-502)... It really pisses me off, that sort of sense of somehow you kind of remain eternally peter pan because you don't have children (493-494)

More frequently than the theme of 'adulthood' is that of what childfreedom means in terms selfishness or selflessness. Ruby states that the domesticity involved in bringing up a child is selfless, but that this wasn't something she rejected in choosing childfreedom:

I've never sat overnight looking after somebody or holding their hand or, does that make sense? There is selflessness in that; I didn't choose not to want to do that really (129-131)

She also feels that although she does a lot for other people, the fact that this is on her terms rather than the permanent and constant nature of parenthood serves to make it a selfish choice:

I make myself available for other people, so I do give of myself but maybe not as, as a, there's a selfishness in that that I'm aware of; I can shut off, I can say okay now enough is enough, it's my time, but you can't do that with children (47-49)...I *choose* not to make myself available 24/7 for another person, or another 2 or 3 people – I feel in some ways that's a selfish choice (128-129)

Maria seems to be quite conflicted about this aspect of herself. On the one hand she feels that as an opera singer she is naturally demanding of attention and when friends had babies felt that she perhaps became slightly ignored. But at the same time she adamantly states that she does not perceive herself to be selfish.

maybe I'm just a very selfish person but I find it quite difficult when children are around because they are bloody demanding, probably, possibly so am I (21-23)... actually I don't think I'm a selfish person at all (115)

However, Amanda and Catherine emphasize the opposite perspective; in an overpopulated world, and an overburdened society, refraining from adding to these problems by remaining childfree is not selfish at all:

women who are voluntarily childfree I often see them in common newspaper articles being described as selfish somehow, to which you know one could respond actually to not use more of the world's resources is a very unselfish um thing to do (Catherine: 328-330)

it's possible to take a view that my choice has been selfish – not having my life disrupted, taking on the responsibilities of a child – it isn't pure selfishness in the sense that as a member of society I've been a contributing member of that society in terms of paying taxes and all the rest of it most of my life (Amanda: 459-462)

Amanda adds her horror at the assumption that love will be automatically created through motherhood; this is seen as a selfish risk that if wrong will be detrimental to the child:

Certainly medical professionals tell you 'oh it'll be different if you've got your own' which I thought was a horrifying suggestion...I said, having always thought I did not want children, having no draw towards them, never planned to have them as part of my life, partially because I don't like them very much, how could I dare to experiment with somebody else's entire life at the risk that I might prove myself right? I'm just not that selfish! (90-95)

A theme that also came up in four of the interviews was that of thinking of and putting the hypothetical child first; there was a strong feeling of needing to act ethically:

The *only* reason to bring a child into this earth, and I know this is very idealistic and I'm not saying people do it, but the *only* reason is to give love, and attention. That's it (Bella: 678-680)

I think having children is a huge huge responsibility... it's so wrong, I feel so wrong to screw someone up...I just think it's easy to produce but it's more than that that's involved and unless you're willing to give it then don't do it. I really feel very strongly about it, just don't do it (Ruby: 215-227)



I think, if you're gonna have children have them properly, and bring them into a world where you can have a nice life. I could never have provided the, the um, what's the word I'm looking for? I could never have provided, given children, any child of mine a life, or a childhood that I had, sort of secure and um easy (Maria: 93-96)

### *Conclusion*

My participants generally felt pleased with their current lifestyle even though there were areas of dissatisfaction and an awareness of what might be unavailable to them as non-mothers. In the main the children in their lives were of great importance and added a valuable dimension. There were varied perceptions of self and a general wondering about how these would differ had they become mothers.

## **4.2. The experience of choosing childfreedom**

The notion of choice is an important theme in this study and therefore will be explored in depth. It has many aspects and is felt quite differently by each woman although there are certain commonalities. All of the women's voices will therefore be expressed here. Choice is discussed in varied ways including reflections on how definitely childfreedom was chosen, not having an urge towards motherhood, having desires for other things in life, and how choice and relationships interact.

### **4.2.1 How Choice is Felt**

For Amanda and Maria, childfreedom seemed like the obvious route due to a complete and unwavering lack of desire for children felt consistently throughout life. It therefore became a question about whether a choice was in fact made as they did not feel as if there was an array of possibilities from which a selection was necessary:

I don't think that I actually ever sort of sat down and in my head said 'I'm definitely not having children'. I always knew that I didn't want children...I don't think I ever really made that choice, but it was not something, you know how there are some things you think 'oh I really want this' (Maria: 150-156)

It was pretty much an automatic choice - of course I don't want children. Why not? Because I don't particularly like children. I didn't like them when I was one and nothing had particularly changed. I'm not drawn to children at all as a general rule (Amanda: 39-41)

Helen also questions whether or not a choice was actually made at any point, but for her it was more that she felt an acceptance towards whatever situation she found herself in and the role of happenstance:

I'm a bit philosophical about life, you know, if I was gonna have them, you know, I would have had them (136-137)

But later on she asserts that she is in fact more of an agentic decision maker in her own life which raises a question about her own ambivalence:

Actually, I've always made things happen (402-403)

Furthermore, she is clear about the fact that she did not actively *desire* children at any stage:

I never particularly wanted children (27-28)

Ambivalence was very definitely felt by Jane, and it therefore became a pressing need to take control and *make* a choice precisely so she did not end up succumbing to whatever fate chose for her:

there was that ambivalence despite never having this great I must do this at all costs thing (103-104)... it's not something that accidentally happened to me, it's something I've thought long and hard about ...it was very important me, for me not to be like that woman in the cartoon, famous cartoon that wakes up and goes 'oh my god I forgot to have children' (27-31)

Yet as someone in a same sex partnership, Jane simultaneously felt aggrieved that she could not merely leave it to fate. She then developed a fantasy of being given a baby which would, like accidental pregnancy, remove the feeling of needing to actively choose to become a mother. So she seems in equal parts both wanting to take charge of her childfree status, and feels frustrated that this is indeed what she must do:

a fantasy there would be a foundling in the, on the doorstep with a little label saying look after me I'm yours...I would have this baby without actually having to do anything like *have* the baby, it would just be miraculously presented to me like some kind of romantic fairy story (105-112)

Clio describes a lack of desire in either direction, and because pregnancy simply did not occur in her marriage, also questions the notion of choice:

I suppose it's a choice by default ...I'm not one of these women who say I definitely want to have children so it's never been strong. Um and Terry's never felt bothered either way so, and it just never happened. (How did you feel about the, it not happening?) Not strongly I have to say either way really, I suppose I, I was fairly ambivalent about it (123 - 134)

A similar 'ambivalence' is felt by Catherine who paints a picture of neutrality rather than being torn in different directions. She also highlights the societal context in which this choice is made by asserting that she *wouldn't* choose the kind of socially sanctioned route of marriage and family that has undertones of what a woman's life is destined to involve:

when I was in my 20s and early 30s I didn't actively think that I wouldn't have children, I didn't actively think that I would have children. I was sort of fairly neutral; it wasn't really on my radar (28-30)...I'm not sure that I made an active choice in I, I, I never actively thought in my 20s I won't have children. I very very definitely in my 20s *didn't* think finding somebody and getting married and having a child has to be my destiny and I really want to be a mother (137-139)

As a very young woman Bella had an expectation of motherhood and was engaged to be married to someone with whom she discussed having a large family. She then decided to go travelling and in hindsight questions how much of this decision was influenced by the notion of the ties of family:

In my twenties I had always thought that I would be a mother, even though it wasn't a burning desire... I had already assumed, always assumed that I would, and we were going to have lots of kids...I mean really now I look down deep maybe I was like running to freedom (126-134)

Bella then began a long journey towards better emotional and spiritual health and within this realized that if she did become a mother she would want to be a 'good' mother, something she feels only now capable of:

I made it an absolute condition that I wanted to be a very aware, enlightened mother, not enlightened like spiritually en-, but like someone who could see my child, who could be present with my child... And now, of course, I'm at the age where I would, I think, like 'Wow I could really do it!' and now of course it's too late to do it myself (187-191)

Ruby had a similar expectation in early life that she would become a wife and mother, and had a great deal of contact with children as a young girl through her babysitting duties:

I always imagined I was going to have children anyway, and I used to look after everybody's children, I was the babysitter for the world as far as I was concerned. You see I loved kids and I never thought I was never gonna have kids so it's interesting (16-18)

#### 4.2.2 No Urge for Children

Half of the women voiced a curiosity about a physical state they had either heard about or witnessed in other women. They described this variously as drive, broodiness, urge, or biological or maternal instinct, and all noted the total absence of it in themselves. Charlotte compares herself to a friend and concludes quite pragmatically that this bodily experience either occurs or not:

When she hit 30 she said she had a kind of physical thing in the pit of her stomach...I thought when I hit 30 I'll have the same feeling and then I didn't you know, so. And I think other women I've talked to, I mean it's been, other women that have really really wanted children, it's been like a, almost a kind of knowing, visceral thing in them. And I thought well, that's something you either have or you don't really (16-22)

Jane and Bella have similar thoughts, though Bella ponders the hormonal basis for this kind of desire, which itself may be affected by one's psychological state:

You know the way people describe this maternal instinct, I just don't, I just don't recognize that in myself, I've never had that (Jane: 76-77)

Some women have some kind of biological urge, you know, which if it's there it's there. I wonder about that as well, I mean I think hormones are very much affected by your mental realm (Bella: 460-462)

And Amanda highlights the biological element of instinctual need to procreate in terming this concept the *genetic imperative*. A passionate environmentalist, she is puzzled and frustrated by women who cannot have children naturally but still feel a great enough wish for their own to opt for medical intervention rather than adopt:

I suppose that's when it dawned on me that the genetic imperative was completely missing cos a big part of me and my not being very sympathetic to someone who, needing fertility treatment to have their own children... is the whole notion of why, if it's having a child that you want, why wouldn't you give one a home that's already here? You know, if it's the having a child that you want, there are plenty (274-278)

I deliberately titled this section using the term *urge* because it seemed that this urge or desire was understood differently to the term *maternal*. Maria explicitly states that she has not experienced the kind of visceral desire that some women have towards motherhood, but at the same time describes herself as maternal, by which she means protective of others and giving of herself:

I imagine it must be emotional, some sort of gut feeling, but it's not one that I've honestly and sincerely ever felt (34-36)... I think I'm actually quite a maternal person... I start sort of being maternal and protective and doing the things that a mother would do for younger people (119-122)

Maria further questions her own lack of 'broodiness' in terms of how the majority of women are expected to feel:

at some point I thought 'oh shit, you know, is there something not quite right with me?' because women are supposed to feel like that (36-38)

Alex's view is interesting in that she *has* experienced this kind of bodily urge towards pregnancy intermittently throughout her adulthood, but never wanted to act upon it or felt a more intellectual movement towards motherhood:

there have been times in my life where I've felt, I've felt a very strong desire to be pregnant and I've imagined what my child would be like (211)... it felt very sort of powerful, powerful at the time, it felt very um, but it was very short lived. Very very short lived and, it didn't drive me, it didn't become one of my drivers you know, it just was very moment- momentary (222-225)

Also, Alex understands the term 'maternal instinct' to mean someone who naturally looks after others, or has an urge to care for others, rather than a biological imperative. As she feels that she is someone who naturally performs this role in life, the challenge for her is to be aware of how much she is doing this and therefore not take on the role permanently through an actual maternal relationship i.e. motherhood:

My maternal instinct has always been really strong... I was always the person who was looking after everybody else and, and I think that's probably one of the reasons why I didn't have children (235-239)

### **4.2.3 Desire for Other Pursuits**

Though not specifically about career or work related pursuits, three of the women have been on a journey towards purpose and fulfilment that has taken precedence over, or distracted from, a desire for family. Bella, Ruby and Helen have been on a spiritual path throughout adulthood that has been the main focus for them:

for me the driving force was for spiritual realization more than being pregnant (152-153)...I guess the search for awareness, and the search for realization in this lifetime has

always been my number one goal and children were kind of like... if it happens, whatever (Bella: 177-179)

Where I put my thoughts and energy into travelling and going round my spiritual path, I've not had a chance to sit there and feel the loss or think about oh, what about children? (87-91)...Purpose comes in many different ways and it doesn't have to be just about having children (Ruby: 214-215)

It was always this need to push and search, and um, so there's a, I think in me there's a, there's always a desire to move forward and try and push and, and search um, so, beyond family and children (Helen: 292-293)

Four others describe a passion for other pursuits in life that were fulfilling; in the context of thinking about choices, they seem clear about what *was* chosen rather than what wasn't.

I was so in love with the theatre and so wanting to be a dancer and that was just completely like blinkered really (32-33)...I think I was just so clear about what I wanted to do (160)...whatever that tug is, that's been more important really (Charlotte: 228)

I um sort of get really passionate about other things so it's not all about, you know fulfilment doesn't have to be about children (Catherine: 172-173)

I love what I do and I think it defines me (Maria: 56)

#### **4.2.4 Choice and Relationships**

All of the participants spoke about the impact of relationships on their choices, and also vice versa: the impact of their choices on relationships. It is again an important theme that runs through each narrative but one which is felt and understood quite individually. Firstly there is the notion of wanting to maintain reproductive choice within a relationship. Alex began a relationship in her early 40s with a father of two and felt uncomfortable with the idea that her choice to be childfree would be concretized by his own feelings about further parenting:

So I suddenly was like, hang on a minute, you, your, the choice has been taken away from me now because you don't want to have any more children. It was that, it sounds a bit childish really but I like to have the choice, I wanna have the choice, I wanna have the option and, and I got really upset (97-100)

Upon witnessing Alex's distress about having her choice removed, her partner handed her back the option by opening up his own decisions – the feeling of being in control of her own choice in this matter seemed to be enough to allow Alex to once again feel confident in her choice to remain childfree for the foreseeable future:

And interestingly as soon as he said that I was fine, I didn't need to you know, it was almost like (pause), maybe it's control, I don't feel, but once I had the option back again I felt really sure that could, I, that I didn't want any (103-105)

Similarly, Jane feels that she would not have entered into a committed relationship with her partner 22 years ago if there had been a categorical refusal on the partner's part to consider the addition of children to their lives:

I don't think I would have got together with her if that hadn't been a po-, if that option had been taken away right from the beginning I wouldn't have done it (66-68)

From the opposite end of the spectrum, Clio reflects on how she might have felt if her husband had been the one with a desire for children. She feels that this would have put her in a very difficult and pressured situation that would have led to a feeling of obligation to mother:

I think if my husband had really wanted children and I'd have been put under pressure I'm not sure I'd have been terribly comfortable with that (134-136)...I think I probably would have felt that I should do it because I would have been depriving him of something that he wanted (308-309)

Yet interestingly, Clio then reflects on the fact that her marriage has not been a pairing of soul mates and is left pondering whether had she been in a relationship of a different quality would she have felt a desire to create another life within that:

I've often thought well if I had been blissfully happily married um, I've always wondered if I would have wanted that person's children (312-313)

Charlotte voices a similar idea about the nature of 'romantic' love and whether this affects the reproductive choice, but also questions the mythical status of this notion, and quickly returns to a place of being in touch with her more down to earth self:

Maybe it's just to do with romantic fiction or just what we're told as women... I suppose there's a bit of me that goes maybe I just never met a man that I wanted to reproduce with, I'm not sure. So I'm not quite sure how much but, it doesn't feel that way really, I couldn't imagine being swept off my feet. I'm quite sort of pragmatic about relationships (178-183)

Similarly to Clio, and unlike Alex and Jane, Charlotte is pleased to enter a relationship with an unambivalently childfree man who also believes that he is sterile:

It was a massive relief not to have to think about it when I met Peter who just never got anybody pregnant, had mumps when he was a child, reckoned he was sterile (283-284)...he loathes children, um, and he made it really plain from the start that he didn't want children. (How was that for you?) I think it was fine; again, a bit of pressure was off really (290-295)

When asked further about this 'pressure', Charlotte hypothesizes about how she might feel if she had been confronted with a situation in which she is encouraged to mother, and like Clio feels that a refusal would lead to feelings of guilt:

I think for women if you meet somebody who desperately wants to have a child and you don't I think the guilt on that must be awful really. (Pause). A bit like you're stopping your chap from sending his genes into the future (310-312)

Maria, a single woman, feels much less averse to the idea of a partner's desire for children even though she seems quite sure that she has no desire of her own:

I always knew that I didn't want children, um, that I didn't particularly want children but as I said if some partner had sort of said 'oh I really want to have a family' and I had ever thought that they were a, er, likely to be sticking around, but I've never had the experience (151-153)

The latter part of Maria's statement also highlights a need for stability within a relationship before adding to it with children. Ruby's concern seems to be for the potential child that would exist within an inharmonious marriage:

the relationship was so unstable that it didn't feel safe for me to even think about having a child...it wasn't okay to bring another life into this relationship because I don't know, to me it's a huge commit- it's a huge thing and it's not fair to bring somebody else into the equation if there is no emotional stability (20-24)

Bella feels that having a child within an unstable relationship may have resulted in being made solely responsible for the child, something that would be untenable to her:

the only times that I have considered getting pregnant are times that I've been like, deeply, passionately in love ... that's the only time I would've ever thought of having a baby. And those were the relationships that were the most unstable. Which would never, which would certainly have ended me up as a single mother (88-94)... I would never be a single mother. Never. (What would it be like to be a single mother?) Oh my God, to be a single mother, I just think of like, like, (pause) *poverty* (102-104)

Helen is a single woman who feels that though she never felt a particular desire for children, they may have been an 'add-on' to a marriage which was what she did want:

the focus would have been on the being married and being with somebody and then, if I'd had children, it would have been progression on from there. It wouldn't have been, you know, I want children, I need to get married, no, no way (23-25)

Finally, there was also the theme that not being in a relationship would not have hindered having children had that been what was desired:

If I had wanted it enough I would have gone ahead and done it, or I would have gone ahead and adopted (Jane: 62-63)

I spent a period of time being single when I was about 37, 38 till I was about my mid 40s then, before I met Matt. And I always thought then if I want to have kids I'll just, I'll either do it on my own or I'll adopt (Alex: 38-40)

I could have gone down to the sperm bank and got myself pregnant, seriously if that's what I really wanted um, there's nothing to stop me (Ruby: 50-53)

#### **4.2.5 Feelings about Pregnancy**

Seven of the participants expressed strong and often conflicting feelings about pregnancy and childbirth. Bella and Charlotte express a quite visceral aversion to the idea of pregnancy, while Amanda remembers her sister's description of the health aspects of it:

And the thought of like, having this like, animalistic, like, thing, you know, to have something growing inside of you, and then like, having someone suckle on your breast (makes disgusted face, laughs), just seemed like so, like a dog, or like a cat, I mean, it just seems like, like being a cow! (Bella: 183-187)

I just think of alien, no the idea of just having something growing in me always filled me with utter dread. Which is mad again cos it's the most natural thing in the world you know. But no, the very thought of having a human being growing inside you I thought was just bizarre (Charlotte: 343-345)

it's like carrying a parasite for 9 months – it'll leach the calcium out of your bones, teeth, the best of all your nutrition goes to the foetus at your expense, it's not very good for you (Amanda: 142-144)

Catherine has also witnessed her friends go through pregnancy and labour without feeling that it is something she would be drawn to. She returns to the idea of social 'myths' about women not being truly women until they've experienced this:

I'd never really bought into this idea that childbirth is the most natural lovely fantastic experience in the world, and certainly most of my friends that have children um, would kind of share that view (112-114)

For Alex there is more ambivalence as she had a wonderful experience being with her sister during her pregnancy and birth of her first child. Yet her feelings also include a degree of fearfulness about such an extraordinary bodily event, especially now she is older:

Post 40, I think it's a tough thing to do to your body you know. Um, but it, but it was wonderful watching Jess you know, get bigger and bigger and then having this baby, it was absolutely incredible, it was a text book birth (435-437)... I have both a gladness that I didn't have to do it and an envy that I haven't done it. It's quite a difficult you know, unravelling of that (446-448)

#### **4.2.6 Other Motivations**

The above discussions about choice and desire notwithstanding, there were parts of the women's narratives that demonstrated how different motivations for childfreedom were relevant to each individual. Two of the women, both incidentally working within the Arts, describe the impossibility of combining their careers with motherhood:

because of my occupation, being a singer, I can't see how children would fit into my life which is completely and utterly peripatetic (3-4)...it really isn't a profession, unless you're rich, moneyed and you know, can afford a nanny or whatever, where it goes together, being a singer and being a mother I think (Maria: 78-80)

And Charlotte (a ballet dancer), hints at an early choice being made between career and motherhood that, once made, allowed her to feel certain of her path:



I didn't know how you could do my job and have children (146)...I remember thinking in my 20s that it was, it was like a choice that I decided to have a career, and that that was it, and that that was, I didn't need to think about it then (187-189)

Three of the women cite their own mother's unhappiness as a direct influence on them; Alex and Charlotte picked up on the resentment and lack of fulfilment that their mothers felt and transmitted to the daughters:

she ended up having children and she has never been very happy in her life, I mean she loves us and she loves her grand-children and she loves being part of a family but also she, I know that she feels, um, unfulfilled as a, as a person... And I think that probably impacted, you know I'm prob- there's probably a bit of my life which is acting out what my Mum would've done had she not had children. And also, desperately not wanting to have her life, desperately not wanting to you know, to be someone who's unfulfilled (Alex: 250-261)

my mum did a bit of a story on me, cos she always used to go 'oh you kids have stopped me doing what I wanted to do with my life' and um, not in a huge way but there was always something slightly resentful about the fact that she could've been, she might have done something marvellous (104-107)...I think it's, only looking back, she might have done a bit of a number on me about don't have kids, it's too much like hard work, too, too much like drudgery, go off and have a more exciting life (Charlotte: 509-516)

Furthermore, Charlotte feels a societal influence in that as an educated school girl pregnancy was taboo, which continued into her college life:

I went to quite a posh girl's school... and I remember this girl got pregnant!...you're supposed to know better you know, you've been educated, you don't, you get on with your education, don't even think about having a child. So that was like the worst thing that could happen to you, and I remember even when I was at ballet school, all the girls kept a bit of money as what they called their abortion fund (275-281)

And Bella feels that her mother was so deeply unhappy that all of the siblings were affected by this aspect of their upbringing in terms of their parenting choice:

We had been a family of 5, my mother was very unhappy, my mother was a very unhappy mother. Very unhappy. And this I think, er there's only one person in my family who has had children. The rest of us remain childless (114-116)

A theme that occurs in seven of the participants' narratives is that of responsibility. As mentioned earlier, four of the women felt very strongly that people have a responsibility to choose parenthood only if they feel they can provide the things that a child needs. But Clio feels equally strongly that people should be responsible for others and struggles in the absence of being responsible as a mother to feel she is fulfilling this principle, leaving her wondering about her own level of maturity:

part of me does actually feel that because I've never taken that step and never become responsible for another human being I haven't fully grown up (23-24)

Amanda and Charlotte demonstrate a more general sense of the enormity of being permanently responsible for somebody else:

it's obviously an enormous commitment, a huge responsibility which will from the point of becoming pregnant last for the rest of your life (Amanda: 6-7)

I think it's always been a real fear of responsibility for somebody else's life...the absolute terror of having to keep this tiny little thing going, what if it dies in its cot? (Charlotte: 66-79)

Finally, five participants spoke of a preference for an adultcentric world; small children were not felt to be people with whom they particularly wanted to spend a routine amount of time with:

I've never been comfortable with small children around you know, I just don't know how to behave with them sort of thing. So I've never sort of envied my friends or my family when they've had small children. I mean it's always been a you know, oh thank goodness, I don't want that (Clio: 81-84)

I think I would have been driven mad by reading the same story book a thousand times, it's okay on a Saturday night when you've gone there for the weekend but every night er, not for me really (Catherine:124-126)

I'm not interested in anybody of whatever age that I can't have a conversation with (Maria: 38-39)

### *Conclusion*

Each participant had a different and entirely unique life narrative. There were therefore multiple layers of choice, circumstance and motivation that made up a complex tapestry within which childfreedom was just one aspect of the story. It can also be seen that becoming childfree does not occur within a vacuum but is part of the overall life context.

## **4.3. The Social World**

The social world has already been explored in some respects through looking at the influences of partners and mothers, but the participants all spoke at length about the wider social context in which their childfree choice is situated. This includes being childfree as both usual and unusual, a critique of motherhood, and the impact of cultural beliefs and assumptions.

### **4.3.1 The Childfree Norm**

Half of the participants feel that being childfree is not uncommon, especially amongst circles of people out of the 'mainstream' of society:

I think the fact that I hang out in very alternative circles and I hang out a lot with artists, and um, I know a few women who are now my age who have been professional actresses and did not have children (Bella: 445-447)

I think I know more people that don't have kids than I do who do (Charlotte: 222-223)

I have got a rag bag of friends for whom children and actually partnership have not been an issue, so single people without children (Catherine: 269-270)

I'm always surprised by the question actually...I don't think 'oh my god, stigma', I just think 'oh well I'm me and I don't have children'... I think 'why is that strange?' I forget that it might be considered to be a bit um, out of the norm if you like (Maria: 216-222)

Clio replies quite pragmatically to the question about other people's responses and demonstrates that she is not unique in her childlessness, but this aspect of her life has in fact led to other connections:

on the whole I think most people I've not had a problem with you know, most people just accept it and in fact I've got one or two, one or two other friends who haven't got children and it's, it's brought other people into my life you know because actually not having children has, has been a, a feature in common in a way (189-192)

This is something also experienced by Maria who feels that there is a kind of split between the two 'camps' of childfree and mothers and is welcomed into the former:

I do find actually that there is the club of the childless and the people who have children... most of my friends who I am now you know still very close to are in the childfree camp (12-14)...I think there's this sense of 'oh phew, another one, another one in our club, another one who um, is in the same boat as us' (198-200)

Helen does not seem to feel this split but reflects that she is a member of many groups that are an equal mixture of the two, though she does wonder how much of this might be due to living in such a diverse city:

I think one of the reasons I like living in London is that it absolutely does not matter... I'm surrounded all the time by other people that don't have children (182-190)

### **4.3.2 Negative Experiences**

However, not all the women experienced such general acceptance. From her late teens, Amanda fought hard for a referral for sterilization because she was sure that she would never want children and contraception was proving very inconvenient for her. Her outrage at the patronizing and depersonalizing experience she had at the hands of the medical profession peppers the interview:

I first asked whether I could be sterilized, have my tubes tied, when I was about 19 rather than continue to take hormone tablets. Um, and all I got then was a 45 minute lecture from my GP at the time about women changing their minds (86-88)... It was an outrageous thing to suggest that purely because I was biologically female I would be bound to change my mind; it's sort of denying the fact that I had a brain in my head and had sort of thought about this a bit (99-101)

Catherine also highlights the cultural perception of women which she sees as being quite patronizing:

Women in their late 30s are seen as very simple beings which is the whole dilemma about how can I have children, how can I be a mother et cetera (43-45)

Even Clio, who above cites a large degree of acceptance toward her choice, feels that she is perceived as immature and viewed by one particular friend with pity. However, she then questions how much she is interpreting this felt perception from others through her own filters of lacking purpose and meaning in her life:

I do sometimes um, er, imagine that people see me in that light, you know as a relatively immature woman who hasn't sort of come to full maturity (25-26)...there was a sense there of 'oh poor Clio, you know, hasn't seen the light'...Well she didn't say that, I think that's me sort of yeah it's like, well what are you going to do with your life then? (187-197)

Jane also is aware of the possible influence of her own self-concept affecting how she interprets her interactions with others, but has arrived at a point in her present life where she can hear a simple question without attributing hidden meaning to it:

if they did ask me I'd be very straight forward, I'd hear it as a straight forward question, I think there've been times when I've heard 'do you fit into mainstream society?' (384-386)... I'm aware enough to know now that it's my own paranoia and it's not coming from them (496-497)

Jane's experience of others has been complicated by the fact of being a lesbian and feeling that she therefore has neither of the 'norms' of husband and children to help her fit into the mainstream lifestyle for a woman. This has been very difficult for her as it has resulted in feeling disconnected from those around her;

you go to work and you tend to be defined a lot by your husband or lack of husband and your children and so um, you do tend to find yourself quite invisibilized...I like to make connections and, and feel connected in and so that invisibilizing of myself has always felt very unease, sat very uneasily (343-348)

Her own response to this social world has been to vary how much she discloses to others, including hinting at being infertile rather than admitting to choosing childfreedom. But this has not been a good solution for her as she feels an attraction towards being open and unhidden – happily, she has now reached a place of being unashamedly and openly childfree:

there have been times when I've said no, and they've sort of looked at me uncomprehendingly so I started to say yes and then I started to lie and say no I haven't because I can't and of course that elicits a whole different response...I just find it very difficult to dissemble, I just don't want to be anything other than me. So in the end I thought well I don't want to go round in the world somehow hiding my childless state and being embarrassed by it, just embrace it (94-100)

Even though Maria feels that the childfree choice is not odd but merely one aspect of her lived experience, she also feels a similar need to dissemble at times:

I feel compelled to um, er, defend myself and er, um explain myself...I say 'well I don't, it just, you know, it doesn't really fit in with my job (200-201)

For some, being childfree as friends become mothers can make those friendships difficult to navigate:

I think my my friendship with her actually started to go downhill at that point because I didn't understand what it was like to have children (Clio: 185-187)

as a childless person, or maybe because I'm a very selfish, performery type person and I want um, attention to myself, I tended to, when people started having babies, um, you sort of become a little bit estranged from them because I personally resented you know, A; you are always at their beck and call because of being, having children is always the excuse for um, you know, everybody else having to dance around you and B; (laughs) I sound like such a primadonna!, um, I didn't like the fact that people weren't giving me their full attention (Maria: 15-20)

But for others the opposite is true; the friendship with a woman becoming a mother is a deeply valuable experience:

she made me so much a part of it that I felt much less ignorant and inadequate cos I'd been through it with her so much more, and we were very close, are very close friends, and you know, I was sort of with her through it, it somehow seemed to help me find a footing as a woman without children but with something to offer women who do have children (Jane: 84-87)

I'm very close to my sister and I was with her when she had her first child which was incredible (Alex, 17-18)

### 4.3.3 Cultural Assumptions

Despite Amanda's anger towards the medical community, she feels unaffected by the cultural expectations that exist for a woman and is happy to stand away from the general societal discourse:

not something that overly bothered me to be honest, I've never really been much of a herd member, wanting to go along with all the societal norms (387-389)

Catherine gave herself a cut off point for children of age 40 and her feelings of relief upon reaching it made her question how much she herself may have absorbed the cultural pressure to follow the 'normal' route of marriage and children:

when I was 40 I was hugely relieved that I was childfree and I started then to really understand the social conditioning, which I'd kind of um been aware of intellectually but I started to really understand what that might, what that might mean (36-38)

Ruby, the only Asian in the study, as well as Bella who is white but lived in Asia most of her life, both reflect on the strangeness that childfreedom holds in the eyes of other communities. Bella is aware of the difference between British and Asian views of 30 something women and suffered through feeling pitied because of the perception that she was old when by the standards of her birth country she was still very young:

It was... the most painful experience. It was, you could see the pity in people's eyes – I was

treated with pity. I mean, here I was in my 30s – in the West is considered the prime time for getting a partner and getting pregnant and having babies, and there I was just like over the hill (25-28)

And Ruby muses about her place within the Asian community, how she is perceived and how she has arrived at a place of acceptance of their confusion over her choices:

I'm sure they must see me as an alien who walks my own way and my own path...It doesn't matter. I mean, sometimes it feels weird, I can feel the oddness, the fact that I, I stand alone all, I'm this odd being in the room. But I'm comfortable with it now – maybe it's age (100-108)

#### *Conclusion*

The participants portray an array of experiences within their social worlds that have had varying degrees of impact. The presence of other childfree people in their lives was common, often appreciated, and helped to combat cultural pressure or norms.

## **4.4. Experience of the End of Fertility**

Described here is the way the participants feel about coming to the end of their fertility both in terms of the actual biological end of menopause, and the more personal and social endings that they individually hold.

### **4.4.1 End of Fertility**

Seven of the participants felt that the menopause and the end of their fertility were not the same phenomena and were often separated temporally by a large number of years. Ruby feels strongly that although she is still technically fertile, her choice not to have children became a permanent one many years before:

Up until age 30 I'd probably still have thought yeah it'll be okay to have a child but after that no, so from the age of 30 onwards I certainly have not been thinking of that. I think I have chosen not to have a child from then onward (80-82)... I wouldn't want a child now for sure, god no, no, I'd have to work till I was 75 or something. No, no no no no no. So um, I don't feel it's an end, I just think if there was an end it ended a long time ago (146-148)

Helen feels similarly aghast at having a child later in life:

I finished my period at 52, so what was that, 2 years ago, 2 and a bit years ago. Um, and there was no way I would have had a child over, can you imagine having a child at 52? Crumbs! Yeah, you know, if it was going to happen it would have been early 30s (313-316)

Amanda of course, having opted for sterilization, did in fact choose to end her own fertility many years before the onset of the menopause:

The end of my fertility as far as I was concerned was when I had my tubes done, so that was the choice aspect (255-256)

She reflects on how the medical staff emphasized the permanency of the operation. The possibility of changing her mind was not something that matched her lived experience and she felt that change of this magnitude was supremely unlikely:

Ah, it'll mean you can *never* have children – that wasn't a change. Would I change my mind? I really doubted it. By the time you're 30 it's not really on the cards I don't think, that something you've been really quite certain about all your life up till then you're suddenly going to change your mind about (268-271)

Although not opting for sterilization, Catherine feels that she also chose the end of her fertility, or the end of the time within which she would consider having a child. Again, this is many years before the biological end:

40 was my absolute cut off point on the basis of all the sort of medical demographics (36)

Alex is slightly more ambivalent; although she feels that becoming pregnant now would result in the unappealing fact of bringing up a small child during her 50s, she is still happy not to have reached the end of her fertility and for the option of motherhood to remain open:

I still have the option of having children, i.e. I'm still fer- I'm still ovulating, I suppose there's a bit in my mind which suits me because I like to have choice. So I still feel like I have the choice (85-87)...I don't relish the idea of having a child at 45, and what I'll be doing at 55, isn't, for me it's not just about now...I don't at 55 or 60 want to be bringing up a teenager. (110-117)

Despite this appreciation of on-going choice, Alex does not feel a pressure from time running out, which she says was more the case in her 30s:

I felt that far more crucially at that point in my life than, in some ways than I feel it now, ironically (187-188)

Clio does feel the aspect of choice no longer being hers to make, but is quick to remember her reticence about motherhood:

It crosses my mind sometimes that you know, well I don't have a choice now. Um, but I've never really, I've never really regretted it. Um, I know I don't think I would have enjoyed being a mother to children anyway (141-142)

#### **4.4.2 Menopause**

Charlotte and Bella both felt that the menopause was a difficult process but this seemed more because it was seen as a symbol of old age. Bella feels that this process would in fact have been eased by being a mother:

I was dreading it...I think I thought I'd suddenly turn into an old woman ... But actually I just stopped and that was it. And it was fine. And it was quite a relief I think...I don't feel any different (Charlotte 244-257)

It was horrible, it *is* horrible (in what way?) Um, mostly the fear, er, the fear of looking older. (357-358)...what saves you is if you *are* a mother because if you're a mother while

you're going through menopause your main consideration is just taking care of your kids or whatever. You don't have time to worry (Bella: 364-366)

But Catherine has more to say about these fears which she believes to be unjustified, and indeed her comment does in fact closely correspond to Charlotte's experience:

Once women have gone through the menopause they say oh that wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it was going to be in the main. But because the menopause is taboo, because of everything it symbolizes or represents in society, younger women don't get to hear about, about what it's like (189-192)

At the same time, her own experience was both freeing and affected by these mythical symbols

Emancipatory! My menopause coincided with um, needing to have a hysterectomy...I kind of um, experienced that symbolically and in real terms as a sort of ancient Aristotelian belief about the um uselessness, worthlessness of older women (73-80)

At 51, Jane feels impatient for the end of her fertility which is very different from the way she felt during her mid to late 40s:

I am so ready for those things to stop. I think though up until 4 or 5 years ago I would have been not fine if they had because it was still possibly in my head you never know, but I, I'm so over that now, you know. So there must have been a level at which, you know, I wasn't ready to let go of it psychologically fully (158-161)

For Maria there *is* a felt connection between the end of fertility and the physical aspects of menopause, but the whole thing seems to be quite underwhelming:

Sort of a relief, but not a relief because you know, there's the biological stuff that happens when your fertility starts to end and you think 'oh this is really boring, all this stuff', you know, hot flushes, that sort of thing... it didn't seem relevant actually. It didn't seem er, I didn't feel as if I was any less a woman (226-230)

### *Conclusion*

The end of fertility was felt in the main to be a choice within the earlier decades of 30s and 40s rather an enforced biological event. The menopause itself is often equated with ageing but only in Bella's case was felt to be a definite negative experience.

## **4.5. The Future**

This section describes how the participants see their futures, what the impact of being childfree is on concerns about health and care and pragmatic thinking about dealing with these concerns, feelings about children caring for their parents, and reflections about the meaning of legacy.

### **4.5.1 Perception of the Future**

For the majority of the participants their perception of the future was quite conflictual. On the one hand there were feelings of spirituality, wisdom and peace. And on the other there was a fear of old age that was deepened by witnessing parents needing care and realizing that the usual person to don the caring role is an offspring. For example, Helen quite beautifully describes life's



paradoxical nature of being both wondrous and frightening:

Alzheimer's, having to have care all the time, terrifying, terrifying. So I try not to think about it (416)... It's a whole spectrum isn't it, of sort of you know, watching elderly people deteriorate and um, and then, you know, moments of incredible peace. So, acceptance of the whole thing I suppose. I think that's what I'm learning as I get older (452-455)

Similarly, Bella looks at both the pragmatic nature of her mother needing care which is provided by a sibling, as well as wishing to achieve a state of wisdom and grace in her own advanced years:

Now my mother is 87, she'll be 88 this year, and one of my sisters lives with her, and takes care of her, and the thing really is, is that when you're childless who's going to take care of you? (669-671)...everyone is scared of getting old whether they have kids or not. And, it's a difficult process, and I would hope that by the time I'm 70 or 80, that I have achieved, that I am in enough of a spiritual state, that I am a fountain of love and attention for other people. That's what I would rather, than me being 'I have someone to take care of me' (718-721)

Charlotte also looked after her elderly mother during her illness and death and this was a point of realization for her:

I just thought yeah, I haven't got one of those – I could do with a daughter to look after me in my old age. That's what I'd like. But then that's a, that's something that you don't realize until you get to a certain point (445-447)

Clio and Alex, however, remain focused on the present but for very different reasons. Clio's main concern is her lack of current direction and she re-asserts the given purpose to parental lives:

Still searching I think...what I do notice is this, you know the fact that I know that they've all got something to wake up for, they've got something to, you know, that they would drop anything to do to help and you know I, I don't really have that compulsion and that motivation (210-215)

And Alex spent her youth dreading the illness or death of her parents which she has already had to face, thus no longer sees the meaning in being fearful of the future:

It's a waste of time isn't it, thinking about future stuff, good or bad really, you know. I think I spent a long time as a kid, all that responsibility I had. I used to really worry about my parents getting ill and dying (505-507)

#### **4.5.2 Guarantee of Care**

Six of the participants also felt either that having children in order to ensure their own care was bad form, or that it was a foolish notion not based in realistic thinking. For example:

I can't have children just so there's someone to look after me, sorry it's not gonna work like that (Ruby: 303-304)

But then you have children in order to have a nursing system set up when you're an adult? Is that the right reason to have a child, so that you have a built-in, guaranteed nurse? Is that the way you want to treat another human being on this planet? (Bella: 675-677)

In terms of having children I only thought occasionally now 'oh shit who's gonna look after me when I'm old?', but I also know that having children is absolutely no guarantee of that anyway, so what am I moaning about? (Maria: 87-89)

I don't actually think very many older people get looked after terribly well by their children, often because you know this idealized relationship between parents and children it is just that – idealized (Catherine: 251-253)

### 4.5.3 Planning Ahead

Friendship was a continuous thread throughout most of the interviews and this was reflected in how the participants spoke about their childfree futures.

Stick with your friends, the ones who are childless, and I suppose that's my family in a way (Maria: 89-90)

I think probably when I was sort of maybe 50 I made a conscious decision to make, to start um, really um, the importance of friendships, um and making sure that I you know, supportive you know, have friendships that have um, so I put, which maybe years before I didn't think that way so much (216-219)...And all you can do is put in place as much as you can now (Helen: 417)

My friends and I, we will have to think differently, cos I do have quite a lot of friends who do not have children, and we will just have to think well what do we want to do about all this? And how do we want to make sure that you know, we can, we can manage. Um, and we will think about it. I don't think we need to think about it quite yet (Jane: 230-233)

Catherine feels that the idea of friends rather than relatives looking after each other is a progressive one and is in fact already being implemented elsewhere:

I think there's a lot more potential and a huge liberation to think that me and my friends, a bit like they are doing in Scandinavia at the moment, me and my friends who are, well, not in the mainstream, will just all end up living either near each other or together. And that's got to be a much more interesting prospect than um sort of reluctant children (253-256)

### 4.5.4 Legacy

Only four of the participants mentioned legacy, and all of these were in reference to not feeling the need to leave a legacy through having children. For Ruby a spiritual connection with the rest of humanity means blood ties become less important:

They don't have to be from my blood...I don't have this ego problem at this point anyway of wanting to see a replica of me running in this world... I think I'm quite spiritual in that way, I think, to believe it doesn't matter if they're mine or not mine, we're still one anyway you know, there really is no bearing whatsoever that I gave birth to them or somebody's given birth to them (65-75)

Charlotte struggles to express how she feels about lineage; she returns to the notion of children making life meaningful, but also finds that she doesn't have any emotional response to her own

genes not being passed on:

It's something to do with that lineage thing I s'pose, keeping your genes going. Um, er, yes, and I think it's like it suddenly gives you a sort of meaning to your life (30-31)... it stops, absolutely stops with me. Yeah I do have a sense of my own genes but that's the end now. My genes will go no further. But having a grand-nephew now you think you sort of do, you know, they're not mine but you're, we're all part of the same gene family pool really. So I suppose they are. (And what does that mean to you, that they kind of are?) I don't know if it means anything really, to be honest, Sort of feeling a part of something I suppose, blood's thicker than water and all that kind of thing... I'm not sure it means anything emotionally to me (316-325)

And Clio would rather be remembered for having offered something to society rather than leave a legacy through children:

I don't feel the need to, to leave a physical legacy in terms of my genes. Um no, just in terms of leaving, you know having, having lived a life well, um, and made some sort of contribution to the world in which I live is how I see a legacy rather than a, a physical thing (222-224)

### *Conclusion*

Although concerns were voiced about the future in terms of old age, illness and care, there was also a feeling of pragmatism and planning of futures that will be unlike the traditional family model. Again regret is not something felt as they ponder their own futures and beyond.

## **The Lived Experience of Childfree Women aged 45-55**

### **Current experience**

The present decade is one in which childfreedom is experienced gladly, from joyful appreciation of freedom, to mild relief, to a lack of strong emotion because it is not particularly relevant at this stage of life. These experiences seem to correspond to the degree to which ambivalence and choice have been experienced; the more difficult the choice has been, the more emotion is apparent towards being childfree in the present. An absence of regret is stated regardless of the journey taken to being childfree aged 45-55. However, half of the participants speak about what is absent from their childfree lives including the experience of pregnancy and motherhood, the meaningfulness of children, and the uniqueness of mother-child love, though this latter point is also critiqued by two participants.

Current experience often but not always includes close and meaningful relationships with children. These relationships sometimes offer entry into the childhood world of play and fun, but more often are seen to be important relationships with the individual children and are found to strengthen and become more rewarding as the children grow into young, conversational adults.

These relationships are valuable in themselves and are not spoken of in reference to fulfilling a need for a nurturing outlet.

The way the participants regard themselves in terms of developmental stage and degree of selfishness or selflessness is influenced by immediate social context as well as the wider social world. There are feelings of being immature or selfish in comparison to mothers, and also a critique and rejection of the notions of under-development and selfishness within childfreedom. This latter critique is also connected to the presence of putting children's needs ahead of one's own and a questioning of the ethics and authenticity of those who do decide to parent.

## **Choice**

The experience of choosing childfreedom operates within all four dimensions of existence. In physical terms of the bodily 'voice', with the exception of Alex the women have homogeneous experiences of 'silence' towards motherhood which is understood in comparison to other women's felt urges. In the absence of this, choices are often made in other areas of life; childfreedom then becomes the 'default' position from which one would need to *choose* motherhood in order to change the status quo.

The social realm is a large influence on choice, including the obvious element of relationship status and strength throughout the 30s, but also in the more subtle areas of the influence of one's own mother, family, and peers, the perception of what motherhood entails, as well as a general preference for the company of adults rather than children.

The spiritual, or philosophical, and the personal realms are those in which can be seen a fundamental need for meaning and purpose in life. Fulfilment is deemed to be more important or pressing than becoming a mother. The personal dimension also demonstrates a questioning of taking on the responsibility of motherhood. This links back to the notion of ethics, and a feeling of needing to be responsible in other areas of life.

## **The social world**

Actual experience in the social world ranges from childfreedom being a normal, shared, and common phenomenon to stigma connected to being without children, to medical and psychotherapeutic assumptions that womanhood equals motherhood thereby dismissing or disregarding agency and individuality. Responses to these experiences vary from a feeling of not being particularly bothered, through a negotiation of how childfree states are revealed, to a painful experience of feeling outcast and pitied.

The social dimension is also one in which 'camps' of childfree and parents are sometimes experienced, and occasionally friendships become broken when one friend becomes a parent. But equally, ties are often strengthened for the childfree woman through the children of family and friends.

## **End of fertility**

The decade of 45-55, regardless of actual fertility, is mainly felt to be one in which the decision to remain childfree is permanent. The actual end is felt to have been chosen either literally through sterilization or within earlier years due to an aversion to having children closer to age 50. Alex is the exception in that she does not feel permanently childfree at age 45. The end of fertility is therefore not felt to be the menopause; instead this physical event is a heterogeneous experience that is variously perceived to be emancipatory, anticipated, irrelevant, dreadful, or way off in the future. It is also felt to have ramifications for other dimensions, in particular the social world as it is seen as a reminder of ageing or a transition to being an 'old' woman.

### **The future**

Again this is understood four-dimensionally; socially and physically, there is a pragmatic need for friendships as well as an awareness that the 'common' route of children caring for their ailing elderly parents will not be available to them. However, there is then a frequent allusion to ethics in that children should not be had in order to guarantee old age care. Spiritually and personally there is often a sense of growth, peace, and wisdom, though for some there remains an on-going search for meaning and a sense that there is still growth to be done.

# Chapter 5 Discussion

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The findings from the previous chapter are now discussed with reference to the literature on this topic as well as relevant philosophical ideas.

## 5.1 The experience of childfreedom aged 45-55

In this section I discuss the participants' lived experience of being childfree at their current age. This includes feelings about the benefits of what has been chosen as well as the imagined merits of what has not. Also discussed are the various ways in which the children of others contribute to the lives of these ten women, and how being childfree impacts upon their identities.

### 5.1.1 Current feelings

Being childfree in this decade is for all ten participants felt to be a good experience which they express through pleasure in the lifestyle afforded to them by not having children, and the drawbacks they see in motherhood. Both of these views relate most strongly to a love of freedom and an aversion to the restrictions that children bring. This ties in with other research that cites freedom as both a reason for and an enjoyable aspect of non-parenthood (Cain, 2001; Mollen, 2006; Bonnici, 2010). Freedom itself, however, is not experienced uniformly by my participants. There is appreciation of literal freedom to study, travel, or stay out all night, freedom from the everyday domestic tasks inherent in parenting, as well as freedom to reflect on how and where one is in life. Curiously there was no mention of freedom to devote more time to partners as is sometimes cited in other studies (Mollen, 2006; Delyser, 2007; Scott, 2009), though partners are included in statements of what is enjoyed such as being free to travel. The absence of data about freedom to be with partners might be heightened by half of my sample being single, but the other half have more to say about navigating their relationships in terms of being childfree, than they do about the experience within a couple. This is discussed further below in the social dimension of choice (5.3.3).

Despite the enjoyment of freedom, the participants do not reflect the media image of the childfree lifestyle as hedonistic or decadent (Douthat, 2012; Sandler, 2013). Freedom was not so much a reason *for* becoming childfree as a happy consequence *of* it. As with the findings of Doyle, Pooley and Breen (2013), the women in this study describe lives in which responsibilities in areas of life other than motherhood, such as family and community, are taken very seriously. I find this interesting as it seems to highlight the existential notion of 'contingent' or 'situated' freedom (Sartre, 1943); although they are free to choose not to mother, and free from the responsibility for everyday childcare, the participants choose to bind themselves morally to other people and situations. Though 'childfree' is sometimes presumed to be synonymous with 'carefree', the participants are more accurately described by de Beauvoir's (1948) understanding of the ethics of adulthood; the difference between childhood and adulthood is that the child "escapes the anguish of freedom" (p.36) because he is insignificant, his deeds have little impact on the 'real' world of adults. Adulthood in contrast is to anxiously acknowledge that one's actions have consequences, but that one must act precisely because one is free to do so.

One interesting difference between the participants was the degree to which being childfree is felt to be enjoyed or relevant to current life and this was directly in relation to how sure or ambivalent they felt about non-motherhood. For Amanda and Maria, for whom motherhood was never part of their plans or desires, being childfree is not particularly thought about or relevant but is experienced with mild relief. Like some of the participants in Morrell's (1994) and Campbell's (1999) studies, not having children is irrelevant to them in the same way as any other lifestyle that was never considered might be. Conversely, the fact of being childfree *is* relevant to Jane and Alex who both experienced ambivalence towards motherhood and a sense of loss in what was not chosen. The present experience is a joyful gratitude for a hard-won contentment with their choice. This resonates with the autobiographical accounts of Peacock (1998) and Safer (1996) and makes me wonder if long and often difficult reflection about this choice is part of the journey towards being at peace with it. I also imagine that this kind of oscillation, doubt and acknowledgement of what is sacrificed in either choice would be seen in the therapy room both for individuals and couples. It would be imperative for therapists to refrain from the temptation to act as the expert by possessing the answer to such a complex and ever-changing question. A purely phenomenological approach to uncover what is felt, what is desired, and how a life of either childfreedom or motherhood might be led, would be more therapeutically beneficial.

### **5.1.2 The Search for Meaning**

Experiencing meaning and purpose in life was a core theme in the participants' narratives. As an integral aspect of the route to being childfree, the need for meaning is discussed at length below in the spiritual dimension of choice (5.3.4). In terms of current life, being childfree impacts upon Helen, Clio and Charlotte who are all at a point where they are questioning the purpose in and meaning of their lives, and compare themselves to parents who gain meaning through their children and grandchildren. Although there is an assertion that children are not the only means of creating purpose in life, it is clear that another means is necessary. This resonates with Frankl's (1967) belief that all humans are meaning seeking beings and it is up to each individual to create their own meaning. For me this cements the need to get away from deterministic thinking that posits motherhood as women's primary purpose. It might be a struggle to find or create purpose in life, but motherhood is not necessarily the answer.

There are other aspects of motherhood that are seen to be particularly profound and meaningful but are accepted as being part of what is not chosen through being childfree. Alex and Ruby do not experience a lack of meaning or purpose in their current lives, but both of them reflect upon the fact that they are missing out on the profound love of a mother for her child, and the experience of being pregnant. For these women there is awareness of the merits as well as the drawbacks of parenting which seems to be a more complex yet holistic perspective than the contemporary debate outlined in chapter 2 which views childfreedom as either 'having it all' (Sandler, 2013) or unfulfilling and meaningless (Barron, 2013). The five participants mentioned above demonstrate a disbelief in the notion of having it all as part of a life with or without children. This agrees with the argument put forth by psychoanalyst Jeanne Safer (1996) who states that all choice entails loss and this must be accepted as part of every person's life, parent or not.

Despite the above misgivings, a common theme in the interviews was that of no regret. Delyser (2007, p.79) helpfully provides a definition of her own understanding of regret with regards to being childfree at midlife which is a “painful feeling state of grief, longing, or disappointment”. Although the participants in my study acknowledge that there are aspects of motherhood that are missed, and there is on-going search for meaning as well as anxiety about a childfree future, these do not solidify into such a concrete concept of regret as understood in this painful sense. Rather there are statements to the effect that the choice to be childfree is one that feels right at this current age which corresponds to other literature that includes women over 40 (Lang, 1991; Morrell, 1994; Doyle, Pooley and Breen, 2013). Existential psychotherapy does not seek to reduce the tension of being free to create meaning through chosen pursuits, nor does it dismiss the anxiety produced in acknowledging what has been sacrificed. It accepts that these are necessary aspects of being the author of one’s own life; the challenge is to suffer well, and live creatively and meaningfully (van Deurzen, 2002). I feel that it is important for therapists to be able to allow women to explore meaninglessness, sadness or loss in being childfree without placing the notion of regret onto these experiences.

### **5.1.3 Relationships with Children**

Within the participants’ enjoyment of current lifestyle and absence of regret is also the absence of a felt gap which should be filled with children. Rather, most state that they enjoy the relationships that they do have with children in varying degrees of importance and depth. As with the findings of other studies (Morrell, 1994; Scott, 2009), for some of the participants there was evident enjoyment of the creative and playful elements of being with children, along with a gladness to be able to return to a childfree space of their own. Others expressed very loving relationships that deepened as the children grew into young adults with individual personalities and ability to enter into a conversational, mutual experience. Jane and Alex in particular describe their relationships with nieces, nephews and god-children as being profound and for Jane healing, yet all relationships with children are appreciated for their own merits and are not expressed as fulfilling a nurturing need.

I found this to be particularly interesting because so much of the literature about childfree women either presumes or demonstrates the existence of a nurturing element that needs to be fulfilled. Although data often stems from interviews with childfree women who enjoy nurturing others (Cain, 2001; Doyle, Pooley and Breen, 2013), some writers hold the assumption that this is an inevitability connected to an innate aspect of womanhood (Daniluk, 1999; Condren, 2006). The pronatal assumptions of woman being synonymous with mother silently extend into non-mothers through this angle of viewing their relationships and deeds as fulfilling an innate nurturing need. This maintains the status quo of perceiving womanhood as homogenous and uncomplicated. Morrell (1994) uses the term ‘compensatory discourses’ to outline this general perception, which may be impossible to escape as “*whatever a childless woman does have or does may be viewed as merely compensation for the missing real experience of motherhood*” (p.89, italics in original).

The participants’ descriptions of their relationships with children need to be understood for what they are rather than how they would be viewed through a ‘maternalized’ lens. Philosopher Diana Meyers (2002) argues that any actions or relationships that are viewed through this lens reduce



and diminish their intrinsic value to a mere substitute for motherhood. This view not only perpetuates the image of woman as a primarily maternal and biological creature, but also dismisses and depersonalizes the relationship itself into something that is merely fulfilling an instinctive need in the woman and ignoring the phenomenon of what in fact *does* exist. This has important implications for the practitioner in terms of needing to accept the valued nature of individual relationships and what these mean to the childfree *person* without interpreting them as satisfying something only because she is a *woman*.

Figure 2: Childfree women's relationships with children

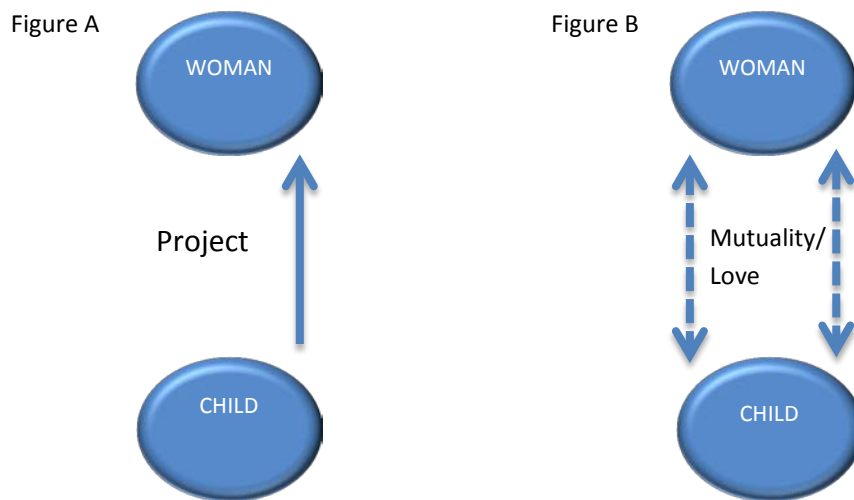


Figure A: In this perspective the woman needs to fulfil her nurturing needs through relationships with children. The child is the 'project' of the woman (Sartre, 1943), and as such there is a subject/object or self/other polarity.

Figure B: My participants describe a mutual relationship of love which is "not driven by any project other than to experience the other as an 'I'" (Tantam and van Deurzen, 2005, p.127).

#### 5.1.4 The Childfree Identity

The participants in this study all demonstrate that childfreedom is more than a personal experience. There is a social influence on the choice itself, as well as a social aspect of being childfree. These elements are discussed below in the sections on social dimension of choice (5.3.3), and the social world (5.4.1). Discussed here are two other elements of being childfree that are of a more personal nature in terms of how the participants see themselves, but remain socially influenced due to a comparison to mothers and what mothers do. These elements are the participants' view of themselves in terms of selfishness or selflessness, and consideration of their self-development.

The full-time nature of parenting and its focus on care and tending to another is viewed as *selfless*, against which half of the participants position themselves as the opposite – as *selfish*. The term 'selfish' is often used immediately after reflection on what is enjoyed in a childfree life, particularly the love of freedom. This aspect of the participants' lived experience may be

understood in reference to the feminist theories reviewed in chapter 2. They demonstrate a gladness for being childfree, and an ethical responsibility to others, whilst simultaneously assuming a position of 'selfish', which could be interpreted as being in opposition to being 'good' (Gilligan, 1982). Although they are not suppressing their own desires, or 'truth', in order to fulfil the identity of nurturing female (Greer, 1984; Apter, 1995), they are not wholly free of the consequent burden on identity that this brings.

The above notwithstanding, I was interested to see that this position of selfishness is in fact similar to the findings of a recent study about the male experience of being childfree. Gareth Terry and Virginia Braun (2012) interviewed 12 New Zealand men about their reasons for and experience of 'pre-emptive vasectomy', meaning male sterilization in order to prevent pregnancy. They found that the men frequently use the term 'selfish' to describe the way in which they are opting for a lifestyle which better suits them and allows them to do what they wish to do. The authors comment that this term situates the men within the dominant pronatal discourse, and although they resist this discourse by remaining childfree, their self-perception of selfishness means they are "almost apologetic for their flaws in relation to it" (Terry and Braun, 2012, p.214). Thus it would appear that men are also implicated in the polarity of parenting as selfless and non-parenting as consequently selfish.

However, the notion of selfishness was not adopted by all of my participants but was sometimes questioned, negated and inverted. Catherine and Amanda argue that in refraining from adding to global issues of overpopulation and resource depletion they are in fact acting *selflessly*. Amanda adds that as a tax payer, she contributes to societal need for schools and education that she has no use for, yet is happy to pay equal taxes to parents. This perspective corresponds to the 'environmentally childfree' category of women in Cain's (2001) study. Cain's participants described their childfree choice as one based on a selfless need to serve the planet rather than themselves, and that this stance is one of generosity rather than selfishness.

Falling somewhere between seeing herself as selfish or selfless, Maria's narrative is particularly interesting. During the interview she at first describes herself as a "selfish, performery type person" (line 15), later assertively telling me "I don't think I'm a selfish person at all" (line 115). Reflecting upon how well-fitting 'selfish' actually is makes her reject it. This is the interlinking of the personal and social which is excellently described by McAllister and Clarke (1998). They argue that selfishness is a social construction that seems to be easily adopted by childfree women but when they reflect on this term realize that actually it might not be as fitting as once believed;

"It was not uncommon for respondents to review the correctness of the term selfish, suggesting they use it as a shorthand for the way in which they feel perceived by others" (p.54).

The second, less prevalent theme within the participants' childfree identity relates to development and there are two different perspectives of this:

Firstly, Jane and Clio experience a feeling that not being a mother means not being fully grown-up. This echoes a great deal of participants' experiences in other literature, wherein the childfree woman is either overtly or subtly made to feel immature or abnormally developed (Veevers,

1980; Somers, 1993). At 51, Jane has now reached a place where she can dismiss this notion as a meaningless, yet pernicious, social construction. Clio however is engaged in an on-going struggle with the feeling that she lacks authority and agency. She is left wondering if, had she become a mother, would she have further developed these qualities? Curiously, theories that forefront motherhood as the pinnacle of female development do not actually outline what exactly is being developed; what is meant by maturity, and how is it supposed to be manifested? Psychoanalytically, as well as socially post World War II, maturity is reached when a woman accepts her feminine role of wife and mother (Freud, 1924; Deutsch, 1945; Erikson, 1950), yet this itself is questioned by Clio who doubts it would have led to fulfilment and happiness even if she had become more authoritative. Betty Freidan (1963) describes this supposed female bliss as 'the problem with no name' as it became clear that the traditional feminine role that millions of American women had willingly adopted was felt to be inadequate.

Secondly, and from the opposite perspective, is a feeling of not being emotionally prepared for motherhood during earlier decades. Bella describes a lengthy journey out of depression and towards better all-round health. She feels strongly that she had much work to do on herself and that at age 50, having achieved a state of inner peace, she could now be the kind of mother that she would like to be. This feeling of readiness in later life corresponds to the theme of not feeling 'emotionally equipped' to mother during the earlier decades (Doyle, Pooley and Breen, 2013). Turning briefly again to traditional psychoanalytic theory, women *become* mature and emotionally equipped through motherhood; this is seen to be a fundamental part of the developmental process (Freud, 1925; Deutsch 1944). However, Bella, Ruby and Amanda felt that to become a mother in the absence of readiness or desire would be an onerous risk and tantamount to child cruelty. They seemed to primarily have the potential child's interest at heart which reveals an ethical standpoint that is prevalent in these participants' narratives. As *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1927), they are immersed in the world with others, even not-yet-existing-others, and are assessing the potential impact of their choices on others. Traditional Freudian theory in contrast is ironically much more self-centred; it is a 'one-person psychology' based upon the monadic processes and drives of the subject (Garrison, 1981).

## 5.2 Childfreedom through Time

In describing how childfreedom is experienced within the decade 45-55, the participants situated themselves in the context of their whole lives. Narratives included reflections on earlier decades and how the present both encapsulates and differs from the past. Themes that emerged are changing desires and expectations about motherhood, childfreedom as fluid or stable, differences in the present, end of fertility, and perception of the future.

### 5.2.1 Changing Desires

In line with the literature (Veevers, 1980; Delyser, 2007), a minority of the participants in this study knew by a very young age that having children was not something they would ever wish to do. Amanda and Maria fit the category of 'early articulator' (Houseknecht, 1979a; Veevers, 1980), and have not experienced change in relation to wanting to be childfree. Clio also asserts that she never wanted children or saw herself as becoming a mother, but does not definitively state that childfreedom was chosen by her and her husband. Charlotte is in some ways similar to

Amanda and Maria but her feelings were influenced greatly by two women in her childhood. As a young girl, Charlotte perceived her mother as dutifully performing a role of drudgery and domesticity which she compared to the life of her mother's childless, unmarried friend whom she perceived as glamorous and exciting. Her talent for ballet contributed to her decision to choose a life in the theatre without children, and this preference is not something that has ever changed. For these four participants, there is certainty about what is *not* wanted in life.

The other participants express a much greater degree of change throughout their adult lives. Conversely to the early articulators of a childfree life, for some there was early expectation or assumption that motherhood would be a part of the future. Interestingly however, these reflections on what was thought or assumed in youth did not include in any of the narratives an early *desire* for motherhood. It could be concluded that these early expectations were of a socially constructed nature according to the usual life path, rather than of a more personally constructed nature according to what is most desired by the individual. As youth turns into young adulthood these constructions begin to be questioned and deconstructed according to what *is* in fact wanted in life. As discussed further in the spiritual dimension of choice (5.3.4), the 20s and 30s are a time of seeking out their own individual paths in life. The participants reflect on how their plans, career, relationships and self-development were central aspects of this period of life, leading to a change in their previous assumptions that children would be had at some point. Rather than motherhood as an inevitable part of life as a woman, it develops into one possibility amongst all possibilities.

Existentially, change is an immutable characteristic of human existence. At the heart of Sartre's philosophy (1943) is the notion of *nothingness*. We do not have a given essence, therefore must create ourselves through choices and action. The choice to be childfree is for most of the participants one which is repeatedly returned to throughout the 20s and 30s as their context, desires and selves unfold;

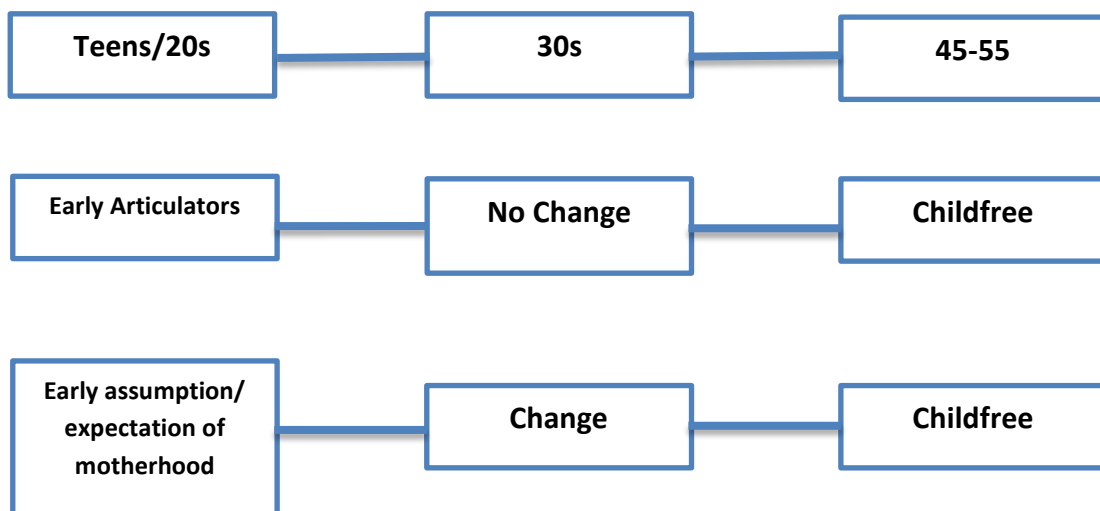
“Phenomenologically, life is dynamic, continuing, in flux, constantly changing, constantly uncertain. Life is change” (Adams, 2013, p.51).

If this is the case, how do the early articulators fit in? Amanda was so certain that she never wanted children that she began requesting sterilization when she was 18, finally receiving the operation when she was 30. The reason for the delay was belief within the medical profession that she would change her mind, was too young to know for certain what she wanted, and would regret it in the future. Amanda's experience corresponds to Campbell's (1999) study in which women describe their difficulty in persuading doctors to accept and act on the woman's current reality. There exists a tension between Amanda's knowledge of herself as someone who does not want, and feels will never want children, and the medical belief that either this will change or she will later regret her decision and consequent inability to have children. But not wanting children is just one element of Amanda's lived experience. She may change in many other ways, indeed as Adams (2013) puts it, life is change, but not everything must evolve into its diametrical opposite. For many, the childfreedom/motherhood decision is cloudy, complex and contextual. But for Amanda, as with the early articulators in previous research, the issue is clear, simple and more independent of context (Veevers, 1980; Campbell, 1999).

The tension between the medical stance of change and Amanda’s stance of stability is one that reflects a tension within existential philosophy and phenomenological practice. This is most commonly expressed in the area of sexuality and the question of whether our sexuality is fluid (Spinelli, 1997) or stable (Medina, 2014). What emerges for me from this discourse is that it can be either, depending upon the individual. In terms of being childfree, some women, like Ruby, Catherine and Bella, transition from expecting they will have children to being happy that they won’t have, and then didn’t have them. Others like Jane and Alex oscillate between different desires and stances in a more fluid ebb and flow within themselves as well as their context. And still others like Amanda, Helen, Maria, Charlotte, Helen and Clio experience themselves as unchanging in their absence of desire for motherhood.

Childfree women are not helped by societal perspectives that either focus exclusively on the inevitability of change or are reductionist in positioning them as different from the larger corpus of womanhood. Within these polarities they either do not know their own minds in comparison to those who know better, or they are abnormal (Gillespie, 1999; Campbell, 1999). What remains of central importance is that the practitioner’s phenomenological exploration of the client’s lived experience takes primacy over existential theory of a fluid self. The individual childfree woman must be allowed to experience for herself what is felt to be a ‘given’ and what might be in flux (Medina, 2014).

Figure 3: Childfreedom through Time



### 5.2.2 The Present

If the earlier adult decades are times of process and choice, the decade of 45-55 is one of consolidation of childfreedom. The process of choosing childfreedom is for all of the participants except Alex (whom I discuss below) finished and they regard themselves as women who *have not had* children (Morrell, 1994). They speak in the past tense about their individual journeys to becoming childfree and narrate their paths through their 20s and 30s as outlined above. The

current lived experience is spoken about in the present tense in terms of awareness of where they are, what has changed, and what implications childfreedom holds if any. These reflections for none of the women include a feeling of wanting a child in the present, and this is regardless of biological possibility.

The end of fertility is seen to be much later than their own 'ending' of potential motherhood – personal choice puts the question of children in the earlier decades and becomes finalized in their own minds before it is made permanent by their own bodies. This is not to express a Cartesian mind/body split however – as a unity a person exists as embodied consciousness through *time*. The participants demonstrate an awareness of a difference at this age from earlier decades that is not dictated by drawing close to the menopause, but is a feeling that motherhood if chosen would have been chosen at a younger age. Susan Lang (1991, p.176) expresses a similar finding within her midlife childfree participants when she concludes that “The issue of children fades, becoming an issue of youth”.

The participants' experience of feeling that if they did want children they wouldn't have them later than early 40s brings up a question about a possible difference between men and women. If the decision precedes the end of (presumed) biological possibility, then why do men frequently have children in *their* 40s and 50s? I suggest that women's awareness of their own biological end acts as what Karl Jaspers terms a 'limit situation' (1951). The knowledge of the 'limit' to fertility is felt and acted upon in the 30s meaning that the present decade is one in which the choice has already been made. The actual end of fertility, or 'limit situation' has therefore lost its meaning of being an *ending*. Men do not have this limit situation and therefore the lived experience of assimilating childfreedom may be qualitatively different. Further research into childfree men is evidently much needed.

Lang's (1991) sentiment regarding the fading of the issue at this age applies not only to my participants but also to those connected to them. Questioning and judgement about being childfree are less present in life, and discussions in partnerships are no longer regarding the choice. The frame that depicts women as mothers morphs into a picture of the individual woman as someone whose reproductive choices are not of primary interest. It seems that the societal view of women as mothers also situates this synonymity in the decades of 20s and 30s. This puts into question the common notion of menopause being a “major life transition for women, an end to the childbearing years” (Carter, 2001, p.463). This statement positions women not only as childbearers, but as childbearers up until the average menopausal age of 51 (NHS, 2013). For the participants in my study, the choice to be childfree is considered to be permanent by the late 40s which could be 5 or even 10 years before menopause, meaning that this biological event is not experienced as a felt end of potential motherhood.

The notion of menopause as a transition and an ending highlights a modernist perspective of people as essentially passive and universal in their experience of life as a series of stages dictated by physicality (Adams, 2006). Existential philosophy refutes these modernist assumptions and posits instead the person as an agent of their own existence. My participants are not passively awaiting a biological ending of their potential to mother, instead they have actively chosen an ending according to the context of their lives and their feelings towards motherhood and

childfreedom. The participants in this study do not use the term 'ending' to describe their experience of this decade. The menopause itself is experienced or anticipated with feelings that are mostly unrelated to being childfree except in terms of relief at no longer needing to use contraception. Corresponding to Delyser's (2007) study in which the menopause is more often spoken about with reference to a broader context of ageing, my participants describe this in terms of social constructions and symbols such as transitioning to being an 'old woman' and what this means in a society that glorifies youth. However, it could be argued that this symbolism does in fact directly relate back to pronatal ideology. The synonymy of woman and mother sets up a hierarchy at the top of which is the young, fertile, 'ripe' woman and at the bottom is the post-menopausal woman who has outlived her biological usefulness (Deutsch, 1945).

### 5.2.3 Alex's Case

At 45, Alex is the youngest of the participants and the only one who does not feel that she is yet permanently childfree. Despite loving her current childfree life and feeling averse to the idea of being a mother to a young child throughout her 50s, Alex enjoys the fact that her natural capacity for motherhood is on-going. Although I suggest that future studies incorporate the slightly smaller age category of 47-55, I also feel that Alex remains open to the possibility of motherhood due to more complex factors than simply being 45. These are that she is one of the more ambivalent participants and has experienced transient urges towards motherhood which is discussed below in the physical dimension of choice (5.3.2). Alex also states that she is living very much in the present, and part of this is not fixing the future. As someone who faced her worst fears through almost losing both of her parents to illness, she values each day and realizes that the future is unknown therefore she does not wish to categorically position herself as permanently childfree. Alex's current experience is qualitatively different from the other participants' in that she *can* imagine having a child now and feels that there is a possibility she may want one in the next few years.

### 5.2.4 The Future

In agreement with other research (Bartlett, 1994; Morrell, 1994; Delyser, 2007; Doyle, Pooley and Breen, 2013), there was a general acknowledgement that the future is uncertain and possibly difficult in terms of being isolated and in need of care. The participants have witnessed or are witnessing their parents needing to be cared for in their older years, this care most frequently being provided by an offspring. This becomes a point of assessing their own futures as excluding the possibility of this type of care. For most of the women, anxiety is one aspect of their current lived experience, and this is frequently spoken about conjointly with friendships and networks of support. Catherine in fact feels liberated by the idea of friends taking care of each other because they want to, rather than relatives doing so because they *must*. The synchronicity of anxiety about the future and pragmatic planning for it through friendship offers support for the existentially therapeutic mode of working with anxiety as a tool rather than as disorder (Kirkland-Handley and Mitchell, 2005). The participants experience and use anxiety to courageously anticipate the future rather than despairingly await it (Heidegger, 1927; Tillich, 1952). An existential therapeutic approach to worries about the future should not attempt to gloss over the possibilities of isolation and need of care, and the facts of ageing and death. Rather it should embrace the anxieties inherent in being a free yet mortal being, to be used in becoming the

autonomous creator of one's own present and future. As Manafi (2014, p.ix) expresses, anxiety is "an emotion that is inevitable and with which we need to coexist if we are to dare to live rather than merely survive".

Anxiety also intermittently expresses itself as the question 'should I have had children?' This was asked by Clio, Maria and Charlotte but was each time acknowledged to be a question that is circular. The past, in which the choice was made, did not include desire for children, meaning that the present question about the rightness of the choice always circles back to the past where the choice *was* the right one due to this lack of desire. As discussed earlier, this hypothetical and somewhat paradoxical question does not translate into regret or into actually wanting a child now. This experience is therefore very different to women of this age who realize they *do* want children and feel regretful of their earlier choices (Hewlett, 2002). For my participants the feeling is more opaque; the future is beginning to shine a dim light on the present, thereby throwing the shadows of past choices into definition. A fundamental principle of Heidegger's writing (1927) is that we are temporal; engagement with the world is always engagement with time. Our existence is always within the three tenses, or *ec-stasies*, of past, present and future which are neither linear nor disparate but multidimensional. As Cohn (1997, p.26) describes it; "The past is still present in a present that anticipates the future".

This notion of temporality raises a question about the terms 'midlife' or 'middle age' in which childfree women aged 45-55 are often subsumed (Lang, 1991; Ireland, 1993; Delyser, 2007). In some ways the terms are accurate because the participants are at a point of looking at their pasts in terms of their future and vice versa. Both are relevant to reflections on their current experience of being childfree. But this perspective is not exclusive to this age; the women narrate lives in which the present being or becoming childfree is *always* affected by the other realms. As Heidegger (1927) understands it, as temporal beings we cannot *not* be between the past and the future, affected and defined by them and thus by implication are middle aged throughout the majority of our lives.

Within reflections about the future another ethical dimension appears; anxiety about care is often expressed alongside statements that children should only be had for their own sake and not for guaranteed care. The participants also reflect other research in which this aspect of parenthood is deemed to be pointless as well as unethical because having children does not in fact guarantee care (McAllister and Clarke, 1998; Gillespie, 1999; Doyle, Pooley and Breen, 2013).

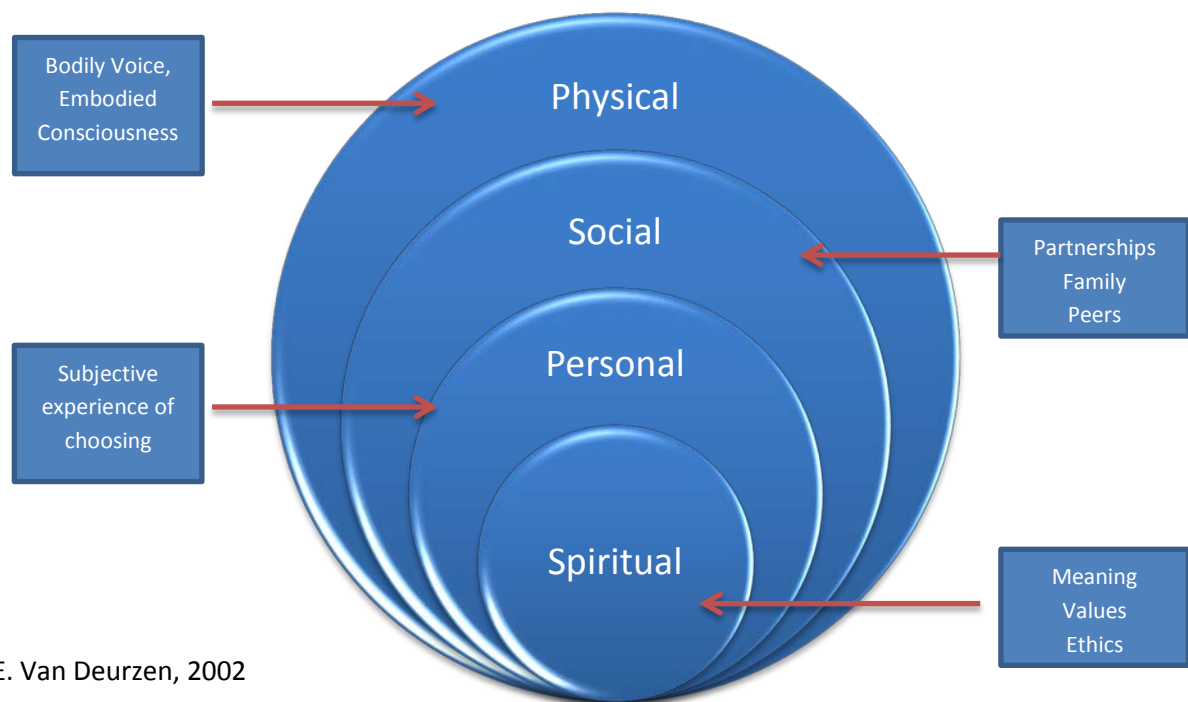
Unlike the findings of previous literature (Safer, 1996; McAllister and Clarke, 1998), the participants did not express sadness or worry about leaving a legacy or passing on material possessions and immaterial memories. Ruby feels that this kind of concern is in fact egotistical and takes a more spiritual stance of humanity as a oneness, meaning that she does not need to leave anything specifically of her behind. Charlotte's narrative is interesting in that her reflections about how she really feels about legacy arrive at a realization that actually she doesn't feel anything about this; "I'm not sure it means anything emotionally to me". In discussing the future, Jane points out that it does not need to be thought about quite yet, making me wonder if legacy might be something that becomes relevant in the future but is not part of the general lived experience of ages 45-55.



## 5.3 Choice

Although I deliberately avoided asking *why* these women are childfree in order to focus more on *how* childfreedom is experienced, motivations and influences meandered through the participants' narratives, some shared, some unique, but all an indistinguishable part of life as a whole. The term 'choice' was reflected upon at length, bringing to the fore the complexities and different meanings within this deceptively simple word. I have used the theoretical 'map' of a four dimensional world (Binswanger, 1946, 1963; van Deurzen, 1997) for purposes of clarity, but emphasize that these dimensions are overlapping and interconnected rather than disparate entities.

Figure 4: Choice within the interconnected four-dimensional world



### 5.3.1 Personal Dimension

The findings demonstrate that although these ten women are childfree by choice, their relationship with the process of choosing varies in importance of the decision, and ease or difficulty in making it. A crucial aspect of this variation is the emotional content, or feelings towards either childfreedom or motherhood, or indeed both. LeBon and Arnaud (2012, p.49) suggest six "existential concerns" that are relevant to the process of choice, including emotions and meaning. This makes sense when used to understand the way in which the participants engage with choice; how they *feel* about being childfree or mothers is intrinsic to the process. The term 'ambivalent' is here particularly interesting. I have described Jane as being the most ambivalent participant in this study due to her desire for both childfreedom and motherhood. The word ambivalent is perfectly fitting for this experience as it is derived from the Latin roots *ambi* (both) and *valere* (to be strong). The implication is a vacillation or indecision between two conflicting but equally desired choices. The difficulty involved in the necessity of choosing between childfreedom and motherhood is illuminated in Jane's fantasy of finding a founding on

the doorstep that she has *no choice* but to look after. Despite arguing for on-going freedom to choose, Jane simultaneously experiences the necessity of choice as a burden because she does not want to be childfree by circumstance or default. This is something also expressed by Jeanne Safer (1996), a similarly ambivalent woman who struggled continuously for five years with the choice. She felt it was necessary to make a decision through often painful reflection about herself, and empathizes with those who choose not to choose (Sartre, 1943);

“My anxiety and resistance to figuring out where I stood made me understand why so many women in my position deal with their ambivalence either by plunging into pregnancy or by continuing to avoid it with unexamined excuses” (Safer, 1996, p.10).

Despite describing herself as ambivalent, Clio is in fact the polar opposite of Jane in that her lack of strong desire for motherhood but absence of a definite stance on remaining childfree resulted in a different engagement with choice which she describes as ‘choice by default’. Her own experience of becoming childfree was not as urgent as Jane’s need to choose, but does that mean she is avoiding the choice through ‘unexamined excuses’? Or is it that this choice does not *matter* to Clio as it does to Jane? Jane’s stance on making sure that she does not end up having ‘forgotten to have children’ is remarkably similar to Jeanne Safer’s comment “It’s important to me to remember that I am childless by choice, not by default” (1996, p.41). There is a difference in how the participants choose childfreedom, but more importantly there is a difference in how much this choice matters to them, how much they *care* about the decision, how strong their feelings are towards being childfree, being a mother, or being both. For those who want the latter, the experience becomes one of difficulty for this is a digital decision in which the colourful palette of motivation may emerge only in a canvas of black or white.

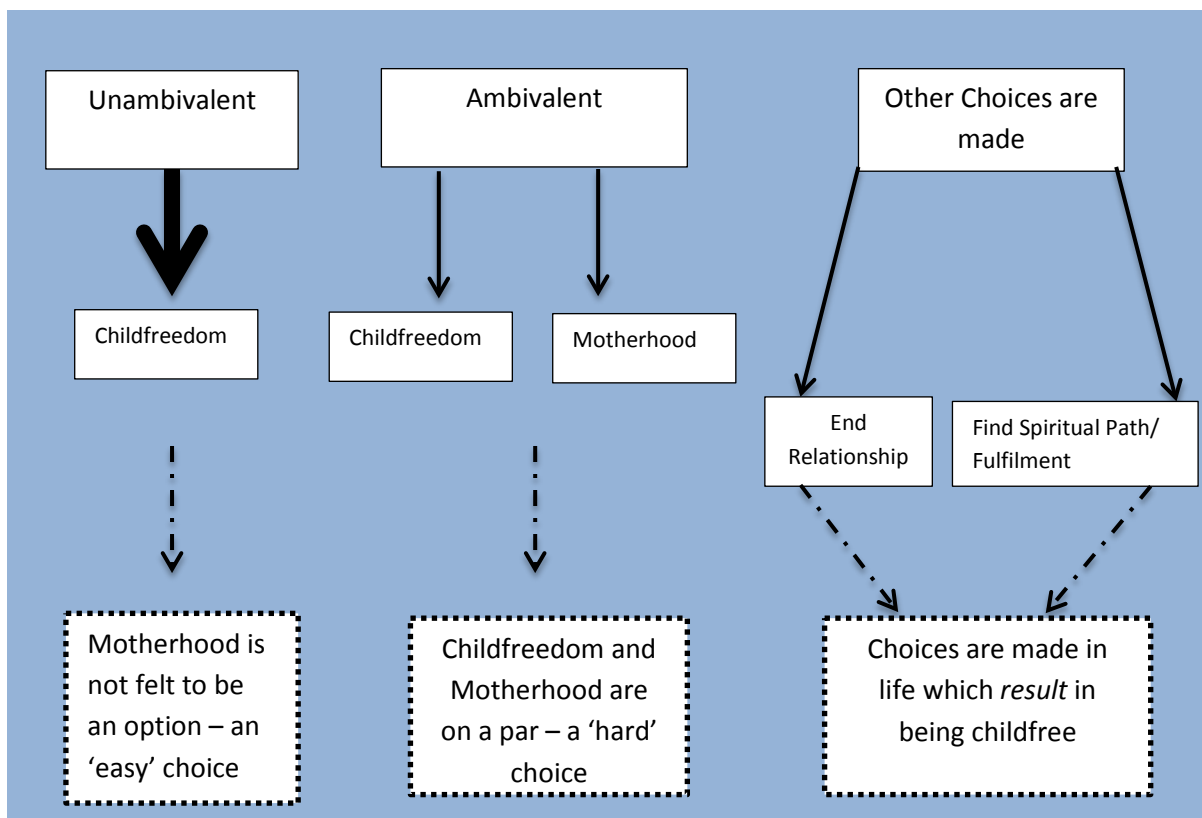
Thus ‘childfree by choice’ or ‘voluntarily childfree’ are terms that cover a multitude of choosing experiences and do not express the way in which this choice or voluntariness is felt. In a recent Ted talk *How to make hard choices* (2014), philosopher Ruth Chang suggests that choices are hard because they often involve options that are incomparable. Despite weighing up pros and cons, there is no one ‘best’ option because each has intrinsic value. Unlike comparison of scientifically measurable data, values are not quantifiable and therefore the options are *different* but not *more than, less than, or equal to*. The two options of childfreedom and motherhood, may for some, like Jane, be ‘on a par’. Each has its own merits and drawbacks, and each will lead to a very different outcome that will reverberate throughout life. It is a hard choice that entails values, emotions and agency.

For others, such as Charlotte, Amanda and Maria, the equation becomes much simpler because there is no desire for motherhood. It is not considered to be a viable option as it holds no merits and is therefore not on a par with childfreedom. Thus is the latter indeed a choice, or is it as Amanda describes it ‘automatic’? It is not a hard choice in the same way it has been experienced by Jane. For others like Clio and Ruby, the relationship with choice is not so clear cut – hard or easy – the two options are not really felt to *be* options. Other choices are made in life, perhaps ‘hard’ ones such as whether to live in a different country or end a relationship, and within these hard choices childfreedom emerges as a kind of ‘choice by default’.

The experience of and relationship with choice is discussed under the heading ‘personal dimension’ because although the other dimensions of existence influence the choice, the experience of emotions and *want* in choosing is subjective. As outlined in chapter 2, this realm is described as the ‘private’ by Fr. Barron (2013) and as such is one that he feels is a contemporary phenomenon that should be transcended in favour of the traditional values of family, community and God. But Barron is situating himself in a context that no longer exists; in the past, rural living meant children were *needed* whether they were *wanted* or not. Now, in urban, industrialized living, children are not *needed* therefore *want* becomes relevant. I would question the contemporary nature of private desire as this dimension has always existed, but was more difficult to act upon for women constrained by lack of adequate contraception and social opportunity (Ussher, 1989). I further question the notion of private desire being transcended by other values; the participants reflect on the intricacies of their choice, *part* of which is a personal preference for childfreedom, and simultaneously *part* of which is contextual and value driven. Indeed, the participants are not themselves without value systems, shaped by their own contexts of community, environment, family, and infrequently God; the difference is that these values are not felt to be served best by having children.

The diagram below demonstrates the different ways in which choice to be childfree is experienced.

Figure 5: The Ways in Which Choice is Experienced



### 5.3.2 Physical Dimension

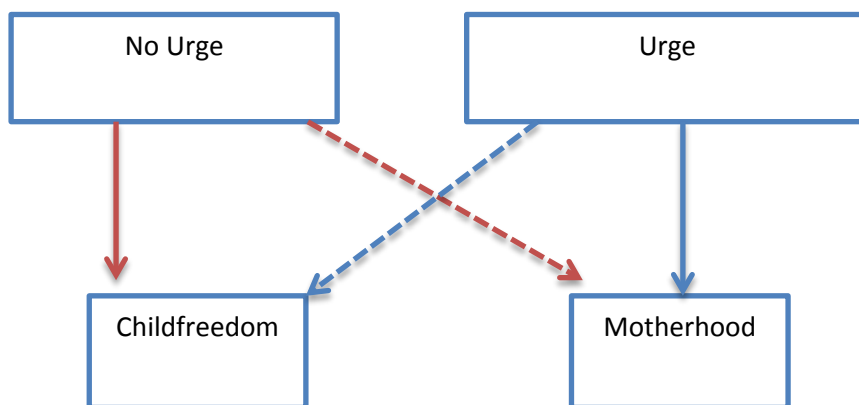
A large influence on becoming childfree is within the physical, or bodily, dimension. I have borrowed the term ‘bodily voice’ from Peterson and Engwall (2013) as it seems to aptly convey this aspect of lived experience and removes the problematic concept of ‘instinct’ from the discussion.

The participants use language that commonly describes what they either witness or assume exists in other women; ‘broodiness’, ‘maternal instinct’, ‘genetic imperative’, ‘gut feeling’ and ‘visceral thing’ are terms used to express what is absent from their own experience. Only Maria voices a doubt about whether this absence is in some way abnormal for a woman. Others state a simple acceptance of natural heterogeneity within the female sex; this urge either exists or it doesn’t.

However, it would be erroneous to extrapolate from this finding the simplistic equation {no urge=childfreedom, urge=motherhood}. Taking the narratives of two participants, Jane as perhaps the most ambivalent participant and someone who thought seriously about having a child, asserts that she did not experience this desire physically. And Alex states that she *did* experience transient bodily urges towards motherhood but these did not become her ‘drivers’. She was not compelled to act on them, but allowed them to simply be one aspect of her lived experience. Furthermore, some of the other participants thought about having children at various points in their lives but ultimately decided against it. There is also evidence that women choose to become mothers despite not feeling an urge to do so (Hager, 2011).

Although studies demonstrate that most childfree women do not experience an urge towards motherhood (Gillespie, 1999; Bonnici, 2010; Peterson and Engwall, 2013), the above points highlight the fact that both childfreedom and motherhood may be chosen despite bodily ‘voice’ or ‘silence’ towards either, rendering inadequate the discourse of women as primarily biological beings who merely follow an instinctive urge for motherhood. It is not only childfree women who are implicated in this discourse; to posit women who choose to become mothers as doing so merely as the result of a biological drive takes away from the richness of *their* experience of choice. Bodily ‘voice’ and what is ultimately chosen is influential but not pre-ordained:

Figure 6: The Physical Dimension of Childfreedom or Motherhood



Regardless of the differences in physical experience, the participants all have an awareness of the influence of this dimension. They experience themselves as *embodied consciousness* wherein the experience of choosing childfreedom occurs through both thinking and feeling states; physicality and desire are not separate from mentality and logic but are experienced as an un-determined unity. For Merleau-Ponty, this is the way we actually exist in the world, as opposed to the body being an inarticulate but necessary housing for the superior intellect as it had been viewed in the modernist era;

“The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be intervolved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p.82).

The bodily realm is further discussed by my participants in terms of the physical aspects of pregnancy and childbirth. In line with the findings of Veevers (1980), these experiences are viewed with a mixture of emotions. Firstly, and more commonly stated, is an aversion to the various aspects of biological motherhood; the foetus is described as a parasite, birth is cited as painful and dangerous, and the new-born equated to animalistic images of suckling. Concerns are also expressed about the lasting physical toll, especially on an older body, and Bella makes a link between her own concern about this and the societal obsession with remaining young and slim in appearance. Interestingly however, these thoughts are not restricted to women who choose not to have children but are shared by mothers who experience their own pregnant bodies as ‘obscene’ (Oakley, 1986, p.59) or ‘disgusting’ (Ussher, 1989, p.98). There is a split between the idealized version of pregnancy as a natural, blissful state and the recognition by many women that this does not match their own feelings towards it. I am reminded here of the dual nature of the lived body as understood by Merleau-Ponty (1964); we are both subject and object, seeing and seen. Through this balance we become both the agents of our existence as well as the receivers of our experience. The pregnant body is not only subjective but is *perceived* by others; this perception then circles back to impact upon the consciousness of the subject in a continuous loop. As Veevers (1980) asserts, women are seen as both sexual object and mothering subject, and Bella in some ways feels that to become the latter is to sacrifice the former.

Conversely, Alex’s perception of pregnancy and childbirth is as a wonderful female capacity. Alex experienced her sister's pregnancy as an amazing and joyful period for both of them and is left with some sorrow about sacrificing this experience in choosing childfreedom for herself. However, she also demonstrates ambivalence about, and fear of these experiences, and agrees with Bella that there is a physical toll from pregnancy that becomes more pronounced with age. Catherine’s perspective is that these physical experiences are neither exceptional nor disagreeable but are in fact idealized as motherhood is idealized. She further asserts that the absence of pregnancy and motherhood in a woman’s life does not have to hold any particular meaning, particularly as a bodily experience; “I don't believe that for me that I could only have experienced my body if I'd become pregnant”.

The differences in these experiences and perspectives of the physical realm emphasizes the value of phenomenological therapy; discovering, accepting and normalizing the client’s felt bodily

experiences, even though they may differ from cultural expectations, could be enormously beneficial.

### 5.3.3 Social Dimension

The personal and physical aspects of choice are entwined with notions of identity that are also shaped within a social world. There is no such thing as a person without a world and we do not exist outside a context of other people (Heidegger, 1927). Even for Amanda, who feels that she is missing the 'genetic imperative' to procreate, there is first and foremost an early realization that the world is a place of far too many others and this is a large contribution to her childfree choice. More often however, the social influence is within the micro level of close relationships. The findings show that within partnerships there may be an agreement for childfreedom, corresponding to the large array of literature on couples making the choice together (Veevers, 1980; Cain, 2001; Scott, 2009). There were no participants whose partners wanted to have a child more than they did, but interestingly Charlotte and Clio spoke of how difficult they imagined they would find this scenario in terms of denying something important to their partners.

Two participants describe being with partners who expressed a definite preference for remaining childfree, thereby needing to navigate these relationships in order to maintain their freedom to choose. Jane and Alex both felt that when they entered into relationships, they could not categorically say that they would *never* want children and did not wish to commit to a scenario in which the possibility of motherhood was foreclosed. Happily, both of their partners agreed to this openness towards future choice rather than taking a definitive stance. Veevers (1980) might enclose these two participants in the category of 'postponers' but I feel this is not quite accurate. They are not postponing motherhood because motherhood is not inevitable; they are in fact engaged in a process of continuously choosing to be childfree. The acknowledgement that this *is* an on-going decision-making process means that, in Sartrean terms (1943), they are acting in 'good-faith'. They are not treating themselves as beings already determined towards a particular outcome but engage with on-going freedom to choose.

Another part of the social dimension of choosing childfreedom is the influence of family and peers. Whilst Bella and Alex experienced their mothers as unhappy or unfulfilled, Charlotte perceived her mother to have 'done a number' on her. Having the drudgery of motherhood continuously reiterated, as well as understanding in girlhood that pregnancy is taboo, and this continuing on into college life, resonates with the 'anti-natalism' I posited in the literature review. Charlotte is left wondering whether, had her mother been more enthusiastic about the idea of motherhood, she may have felt more enthused herself. This is an interesting contrast to Ruby, for example, who was brought up to believe that marriage and motherhood were her future. Her choices to marry outside of her community, divorcing and remaining single, and finding other creative outlets through travel, education and spirituality mean that her early belief does not become an actuality.

Charlotte and Ruby's experiences mirror Gillespie's (1999) formulation of 'push' and 'pull' influences in becoming childfree. Witnessing the drudgery of motherhood may act as a push away from this option, whereas other phenomena such as travel act as a pull into other areas of life. Again, this highlights how choices are not made in a vacuum but are an aspect of what

Heidegger (1927) describes as ‘thrownness’ into a world and to parents that already have customs, assumptions and experience that we cannot fail to be hugely influenced by. An existential therapist would have no answer to Charlotte’s hypothetical different life, but they might well explore with her what has been both sacrificed and chosen in this one.

### 5.3.4 Spiritual Dimension

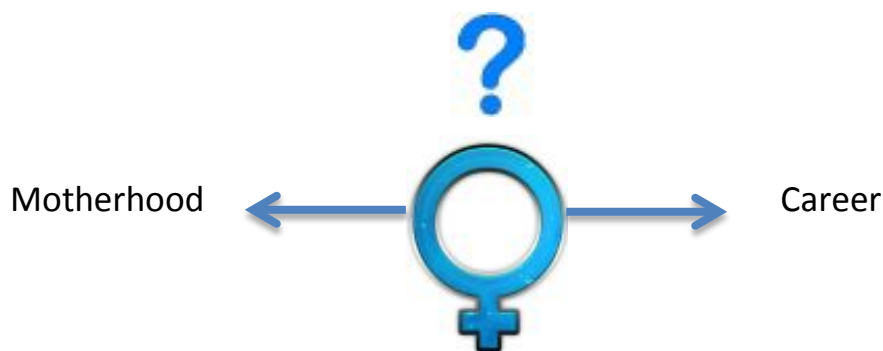
Within the ‘spiritual’ or philosophical realm is the way in which the participants’ choice to be childfree is influenced by their values, including their ethical standpoint towards children, and the need for meaning.

Within the participants’ narratives is the frequently recurring theme of responsibility. However, the childfree choice is not made due to responsibility being devalued, or seen to be merely an unpalatable aspect of motherhood. It is actually that responsibility for a child, part of which is caring and providing for them, is felt to be a weighty and permanent state that should not be entered into lightly. Echoing the argument of Christine Overall (2012), the participants state that people have an ethical responsibility to bring children into the world only when they are desired *for their own sake* by loving, capable parents. In the absence of felt desire or circumstances conducive to a secure upbringing for the child, motherhood is felt to be the irresponsible route.

Unlike the common perception of childfree women having chosen career over motherhood (Hewlett, 2002), only two of my participants cited how difficult it would be to combine the two. In line with Bonnici’s findings (2010), what seems more important to these women is finding a sense of fulfilment in their lives, not only through work but through study, travel, relationships and spirituality. Indeed, a main difference between the respondents’ quality of current life could be interpreted as the extent to which they feel fulfilled by it and find it meaningful. This has implications for research that attempts to ascertain differences in marital and life satisfaction between parents and the childfree (Callan, 1987; Somers, 1993); children, for many, are perhaps not the main variable in quality of life or marriage.

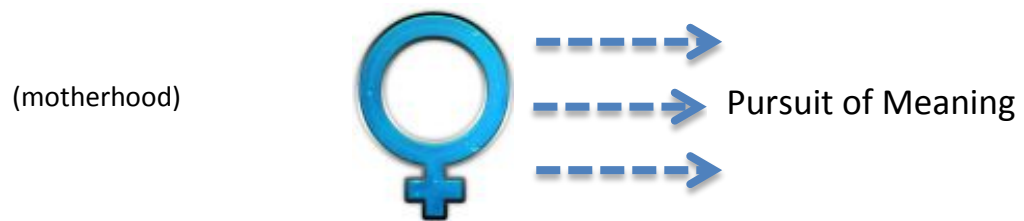
Although cultural discourse incorporates the notion of a simple dichotomy for women’s lives – motherhood or career – this is to simplify the lived experience of the individual’s need for meaning and fulfilment.

*Figure 7: Simplistic View of Binary Paths for Women*



Heidegger (1927) posits a tripartite structure of *Dasein* that consists of *thrownness* (*Geworfenheit*) into a certain time, place and body from which perspective we have the capacity and freedom to decide upon our actions. This is our individual and authentic *projection* (*Entwurf*) into the future, from which we are frequently *falling* (*Gefallenheit*) back into *Das Man*, the 'One' of everyday convention created by others. The women in this study to a greater or lesser extent reject the 'One' of becoming mothers, but to say that they instead chose career would not be accurate. Those who *do* cite career and motherhood as incompatible also state that they did not want children, and that their careers were more of a 'project' or fulfilment.

Figure 8: Women's 'Project' towards Meaning and Fulfilment



The above discussion brings up the question of whether the notion of 'choice' is an accurate one to portray these participants becoming childfree. For all except Jane and Alex, who do present a feeling of conscious choice for childfreedom, choices are being made in other areas of life with the consequence or outcome of childfree living. The participants make choices such as not having children in an unstable relationship or ending that relationship and remaining single; choosing not to pursue medical attention in the absence of becoming 'naturally' pregnant; or choosing to pursue meaning and fulfilment in other areas of life. This is a question also put forth by Morrell (1994) who argues that defining women in relation to their non-mothering status disregards their choices in other areas and keeps the focus on what is *absent*. This discussion also highlights the complexities involved in choosing to be childfree and in describing this process in non-reductionist terms.

## 5.4 The Social World

Previous research highlights the childfree choice as being one that is socially visible in its divergence from the 'norm' of women's mothering (Veevers, 1980; Gillespie, 1999; Park, 2002). This study agrees with these findings in that the participants all describe the impact of being childfree on their social worlds, but also adds to previous findings in the emergence of a childfree 'norm', at least in the greater London area in which this study was done. This childfree norm is discussed here as well as the more negative experiences of becoming and being childfree.

### 5.4.1 The Childfree Norm

Six of the participants expressed a general sense of community and normality in being childfree at this age, though often attributed this to the diversity of people within the circles they belong to. Interestingly, Helen believes the commonness of being without children is due to living in a large city, but Clio, who lives in a much smaller community, also feels part of a group. Perhaps this



reflects the statistics that show a fifth of women now reach 45 with no children (ONS, 2013). Although this percentage is not divided into those who have chosen childlessness and those who have not, I wonder if the sheer number of women without children has an impact on normalizing this aspect of life for some.

However, perhaps the same phenomenon of rising numbers of people without children contributes to Maria's feeling of there being two camps – parents and non-parents – and a resulting relief when another person of the latter camp is encountered, making me wonder about this divide. This is something assessed recently in a Times article (Day, 2012) wherein mothers and non-mothers are described as 'tribes'. Day argues for a more cohesive network of childless and childfree women in order to "survive in the Mumsnet era" (Day, 2012, last para.), which seems to perpetuate the presence and acceptance of this divide. This debate is in some ways reminiscent of the attempts of second wave feminism to unify womanhood into a political movement that could challenge patriarchal society. But as Butler (1990) argued, woman is not homogeneous, therefore attempts at unification and universalization inevitably cause rifts within the movement itself as well as with the challenged 'Other'. The organized sharing of similar experiences through groups such as 'Mumsnet' and 'NoKidding!' are both assertive demands for recognition and acceptance. However, until we create a society in which parents are treated to the kind of support seen in Sweden (Isacsson, 2012), and childfree people cease to be stigmatized, it is no wonder that camps are set in opposition to each other. Or perhaps, less optimistically, de Beauvoir's argument that "alterity is the fundamental category of human thought" (1948, p.6) will mean an on-going battle for status. This seems a shame when regarding the profoundly moving and 'healing' experiences of Jane and Alex in being involved as childfree women in others' experiences of becoming mothers.

#### **5.4.2 Negative Experiences**

Maria's narrative for me highlights the fact that friendships can go from being intimate time between two people to a focus on the third (the child) which can nullify the previous intimacy, itself serving to make the non-parental friend feel ousted. Although Maria interprets her own need for attention as selfishness, which conflicts with her actual identity as *not* being selfish, it could also be interpreted differently; there is a sense of belonging through friendship which changes to a sense of isolation when the focus of a friendship is felt to be lost and shifts to another, i.e. the child. Clio also describes the difficulty of maintaining a friendship when it changes in this way, but blames her own lack of understanding and coping ability for the breakdown of friendship. There is a sense that something changes when the friend has a child that is not directly addressed and can become destructive, or at least difficult to navigate. This is similar to Morrell's (1994, p.127) finding, described as a 'friendship wedge', which can be experienced by childfree women as well as mothers as they attempt to navigate the newness of the situation. A feeling of lack of understanding, support, time and focus are felt to be damaging to the friendship by both parties. The support networks (or 'tribes') of childfree women and mothers may be beneficial in many ways, but this separation does not teach or help women to maintain friendships *between* these two camps.

Two of the women in this study pointed to definite experiences of stigma. Interestingly these were both within Asian communities and were regarding not only motherhood but also marriage.

Bella's experience of being pitied was connected to being single as well as childless at 30, something highly unusual in the community she lived in. And Ruby's community views her choices in general as out of the norm and Ruby herself with puzzlement though she is not ostracized. Very little research has been done on childfree experiences in Asian countries; Reissman (2000) studied stigma management in South India which was mainly but not exclusively done with involuntarily childless women. She found that in India motherhood is seen as a sacred duty as well as an important aspect of a woman's identity, therefore non-motherhood generally incurs interest, pity or scorn. It may be that these views are more prevalent in Asian countries where subjective personal choice is less forefronted than community and religious living, although these values are exactly what Fr. Barron (2013) outlines as remaining central to moral living in North America.

Jane's feeling was that she was invisibilized by her co-workers who tended to define people by their husbands and children. As a childfree lesbian woman, Jane therefore felt somehow *undefined* and disconnected in these environments, leading to trying out untruths such as being a mother and being infertile. In this regard Jane does not agree with Newman's (2010) suggestion that motherhood can be a threat to the identity of lesbian women because of the tagged assumption of heterosexuality.

That choosing to remain childfree does not yet feel truly acceptable may be seen in Jane and Maria's use of 'passing' (Goffman, 1963; Park, 2002). They describe how in encountering questions about their childless state they hinted that this was due to infertility and career. Somehow they were reluctant to discuss or reveal the nature of it actually being a lack of desire for children. This is in line with the ideas of Letherby (1999) and Gillespie (1999) who suggest that the choice not to mother is not felt to be socially acceptable and is therefore 'sanitized' through understandable routes, either by the other party or, as here, by the childfree woman herself. Within infertility and career there may remain an assumption that motherhood was in fact wanted, it just wasn't possible either biologically or within a certain lifestyle.

In contrast, Amanda refuses to hide her rejection of motherhood, vocalizing within groups that she has no interest in children and feeling unbothered by the reactions from others. It seems that the responses given depend on how the respondent wishes to be perceived and how well she is able to cope with being viewed as odd or out of the norm. As Jane enters her fifties she feels that she no longer wants to dissemble and will simply deal with the responses to her openness. This corresponds to Park's suggestion that a declaration such as this "may be seen as a final stage in the moral career, and as one that is often experienced as a tranquil state of grace given the self-acceptance it suggests" (Park, 2002, p.34). Ironically, as Jane reaches a place of ability to face any stigma, the topic of childlessness comes up much less frequently; it seems that post forties, women are not asked so much about their circumstances in relation to children (Delyser, 2007). This is difficult to interpret, but, optimistically, I might tentatively suggest that as many women deepen their acceptance of self, perhaps they become more interested in the *person* whom they encounter rather than merely their mothering and married status.

Catherine and Amanda both criticize areas of the social world that are perhaps less personal but nevertheless highly corrosive. They attest to witnessing belittling views within the

psychotherapeutic and medical professions that render women's voices as insignificant in the face of 'expert' knowledge. Amanda's experience closely matches that of the respondents in Campbell's (1999) study wherein personal preference is dismissed on the belief that they will change their mind. The outrage that both of these women expressed seems to surpass the "tranquil state of grace" mentioned above; neither Catherine nor Amanda doubt the validity of their choice to be childless, and the lack of acceptance with which this is met by professionals is simply untenable to them. The profession of psychotherapy would benefit from a deeper understanding of the impact of patronization, belittlement, or simple puzzlement on childfree women. An existential-phenomenological way of working is particularly appropriate because it views the client herself as the 'expert' on her own life; applying outside theories or assumptions about women's experiences to the individual would be un-phenomenological.

# Chapter 6 Concluding Remarks

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## 6.1 Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore phenomenologically the lived experience of being a childfree woman aged 45-55. 13 semi-structured interviews were carried out, and 10 subsequently analysed and presented. This was for reasons of exclusion criteria in 2 cases and the absence of rich enough data in the other.

The results of this research demonstrate a unanimous gladness for being childfree at this age, particularly to enjoy the freedom afforded by non-parenthood. The extent to which this enjoyment is felt changes with the difficulty with which childfreedom has been chosen; unambivalence develops into mild relief whereas ambivalence becomes joyous celebration of having made the right choice. There are some remaining misgivings about being childfree, which pertain primarily to the future in terms of anxiety about care in old age. Simultaneously is the perspective that having children to ensure future care is neither ethical nor sensible. Also acknowledged is the wondrous side of motherhood in terms of unconditional love, the experience of pregnancy, and the meaningfulness of children that will not be a part of the childfree life. These feelings do not equate to regret or a felt absence of a child but are better described as curiosity or wistfulness about what has not been chosen, without undermining what *has* been chosen.

The experience of choice is multifaceted, complex and influenced by personal preference as well as context, relationships, and values. The notion of 'choice' itself is problematic when either complete certainty towards being childfree or lack of actual preference is felt. In these cases becoming childfree is not so much a choice as either an automatic life-path or a result of circumstance. 'Choice' is more applicable when ambivalence is truly felt, i.e. when both childfreedom and motherhood are desired. In this case there is greater engagement with the difficult process of selecting one outcome over another. Regardless of how *choice* is engaged with, there was a homogeneous experience of no *urge* towards motherhood which was assumed to be different from the majority of women's experience. Alex is the only one who did have transient urges, but these were short lived and not acted upon. The physical aspects of pregnancy and motherhood are viewed with both aversion and wonder, but there is also acknowledgement that these phenomena are often idealized and do not match the reality of women who *do* become mothers.

Choice is influenced by the values held which include an ethical dimension of thinking about the welfare of potential children. In the absence of ideal circumstances, stable relationship, and definite desire for a child, the women in this study feel that childfreedom is the ethical choice. Also demonstrated is the overarching need for meaning and fulfilment which complicates the childfree choice and can be seen from two angles. Witnessing their own mothers as being unfulfilled by motherhood can lead to wariness about and acknowledgement of the potential difficulties of motherhood. This perspective acts as a 'push' from motherhood. But more often there is a 'pull' towards a life which brings about the greatest fulfilment and general satisfaction.

This pursuit of a meaningful life becomes the path that is important and *chosen*, childfreedom then becoming a *result* of the primary choice rather than a choice in itself.

The social dimension of choice is complex and reflects the myriad experiences within sexual relationships. For those who never wanted children and are in long-term relationships there is relief to have remained childfree and to be have partnered with men who did not want children. Those who were not in a relationship during the 30s, which was felt to be the only time in which motherhood would have been considered if at all, also feel relief that they did not have children and reiterate that it was never something they desired. For the more ambivalent there is a need to navigate their relationships so that their choice may remain open rather than fore-closed by their partners' wish to remain childfree. The *quality* of a relationship was sometimes deemed to be important; as previously stated, bringing children into an unstable or difficult relationship was considered to be unwise and unethical. Some participants also add that the presence or absence of a relationship is not particularly relevant to the childfree choice because they could have got pregnant or adopted if the desire to mother had been strong enough.

The wider social world plays an important part in the present as well as the past and the predicted future. Current life often includes valued relationships with the children of others, and childfreedom itself is not unusual within the social circles of these participants. The younger decades are a time of more difficult navigation of the social world in which questioning and judgment about the childfree choice are common. Entrenched societal beliefs and assumptions create a structure in which *all* women are expected to want motherhood, rendering those who choose not to mother as 'other'. This impacts upon the childfree identity, often leading to assumptions of selfishness, but also to a refutation of this label and a position of self/lessness. Social connections are an important aspect of a childfree future; the women demonstrate pragmatic awareness of needing to put in place their own networks of support and friendship, though anxieties about isolation, illness and need of care are evidenced.

The desire to be childfree is experienced by some from a very young age and remains static through time. Others hold early assumptions that children will be had at some point, and later find that the childfree life is preferable to them thus decide during adulthood to forgo motherhood. Both of these experiences result in the current decade being one in which childfreedom is felt to be permanent regardless of whether or not pregnancy is still presumably biologically possible. The 30s are considered to be the period in which the choice to be childfree is thought about and made, and the late 40s to early 50s a time which does not feel like an ending of fertility because the choice is no longer relevant and motherhood is no longer felt to be a possibility. Alex is again the exception to this as she enjoys the fact that she is still free to choose and is open to deciding upon motherhood in the future.

Curiously, the aspect of non-motherhood in the participants' lives is simultaneously both relevant and irrelevant, both intensely private and completely public. This paradox is reflected in the difficulty of researching a phenomenon that is the presence of an absence, without assuming that the absence (children) has any given meaning. The experience of being childfree aged 45-55 may or may not be relevant, difficult, judged, or celebrated, but it is always *different* despite its documented prevalence (ONS, 2013). The nature of phenomenological research, particularly

within the paradigm of existential thinking, means that I have been able to give space to this paradox, and the way in which my participants, though female, are not confined or defined by this fact. However, they do have to navigate a world which strives to understand and perceive them through the primary societal lens of woman as fertile being and potential mother, therefore their position in life is always open to being the *other* to the norm of mother.

## 6.2 Clinical Implications

A number of recommendations are made for working with childfree women aged 45-55, which can be widened to women of all ages, including those who ultimately decide upon motherhood. This is because the exploration of values, meaning, ambivalence, possible stigma, and perception of motherhood and pregnancy would be appropriate to help many women with their sometimes difficult choice. As the experience of childfreedom is one of complexity and nuance, for purposes of clarity I have here listed recommendations under the four worlds. However, the different dimensions as well as the suggestions below are neither disparate nor a 'check list'; people do not separate themselves into neat points but are complex and moving bundles of paradoxes, overlaps and contradictions.

### The Physical World

Women experience varying degrees of bodily 'speaking' or 'silence' with reference to mothering desires and therapists should attend to the embodied experiences of clients. Oscillating desires might be confusing, but are a natural process to be borne rather than poles to be reached and maintained. Assumptions about childfree women's experience of reaching the menopause need to be avoided as this is again a very individual experience; though a natural female process, the experience of it ranges from something gladly anticipated to an unpleasant reminder of ageing. Although none of the women in my study expressed regret for this choice, this is not an impossibility and may also be seen in therapy. The existential model of psychotherapy assumes that anxiety is part of being human because we are beings toward death. Acknowledgement that being childfree means leaving no genetic legacy after death is to be welcomed into the therapeutic environment, not covered over or hidden from view. Legacy may be felt to be what has been achieved or given during a lifetime, and how that life has been lived.

### The Personal World

Without direct responsibility for children, it is shown that it becomes easy to feel untethered or selfish without choosing other areas of life in which to connect and take responsibility; therapists may enable clients to recognize the dual nature of freedom *from* and responsibility *to* other aspects of their worlds.

Existential therapists also have a potentially difficult path to tread in terms of viewing people as ever changing and in flux, whilst simultaneously respecting what is felt as an unchanging personality trait. As shown by my participants, desiring childfreedom is experienced along a spectrum from unchanging certainty to continuous ebb and flow. Therapists need to be open to this spectrum without making assumptions based upon views of women or indeed personality 'type', as well as accepting that there is no 'right' answer to be arrived at. An existential approach

to psychotherapy recognizes the nature of choice being an unavoidable aspect of existence; by its very nature, choice means sacrifice in other areas and this is again something to be embraced rather than shied away from. This might be an aspect of the therapeutic relationship that could be beneficial to both client *and* therapist; both must choose, or be given in the form of fertility problems, a place on the parenting – childless spectrum (Letherby, 2002), and each must therefore recognize what has *not* been chosen. Without judgement or comparison, this could therefore be a mutual journey of learning and growth for both client and practitioner.

### **The Social World**

In this dimension women are free to choose how much to dedicate themselves to partners, friends and the children of others. This freedom sometimes brings up feelings of selfishness, which in turn causes confusion and guilt and is linked to feelings about their own identity as well as how they believe they are perceived by others. Existential psychotherapy has at its heart the phenomenological exploration of clients' lived experience, part of which could be to clarify a woman's sense of self and help her achieve self-esteem and autonomy, both qualities thought to aid midlife health (Giele, 1982; Apter, 1995). Simultaneously, work could focus on areas of navigating the social world including exploring degrees to which each client feels comfortable revealing or containing their privacy about being childfree. Normalizing the choice rather than pathologizing it is also hugely important.

My participants appeared to successfully manage their marriages and relationships in terms of differing preferences to childfreedom or parenting, but this might well be an aspect of therapy seen in both individual and couples work. As van Deurzen and Iacovou (2013) state, existential therapy encourages clients to confront conflict, difference and limitation within relationships. The meanings and implications for both parenthood and childfreedom should be explored in order for clients to achieve respect and compassion for their partner's desire, even when it is felt to be incompatible with their own. The therapist is not there to fix the situation but to help explore and clarify, and ultimately to help the client or clients take responsibility for their own actions and the consequences of them personally and in relationship.

### **The Spiritual World**

Non-parenthood for some means the freedom to take an inner, spiritual journey. The contrasting pole is experiencing meaninglessness within this freedom. It might be that meaning is seen to be inherent in the lives of parents, so therapists might aid childfree people in turning away from comparison to parents and seeking other areas in which meaning and purpose can be created and felt. An existential approach does not dictate where meaning might be found; the values of the practitioner are likely to draw him or her to various religious or secular writers such as Kierkegaard or Sartre, but these are personal values that may not be shared by the client. It might therefore be that the therapist is a fellow traveller along the path to seeking meaning in life, but each individual's path may end up in a very different place. Therapists who find great meaning in being parents themselves would need to bracket this as they would bracket any other difference in order to help clients explore their own values and seek their own meaning elsewhere.

All of the above would also apply to supervisors working with the therapists of childfree women.

### **Implications for Theory**

The participants describe a lived world of childfreedom that is not pathological, strange, selfish, immature, or irresponsible. They live diverse lives in their middle years, took diverse routes to being without children, and experience themselves within very different social and personal worlds. I therefore posit that reproductive choice should be free of notions of normality and difference; being without children, wherever one falls on the continuum of choice and agreeableness with this choice, should be without stigma or judgement. In line with Judith Butler's (1990) argument, the category 'woman' cannot be defined and understood as unified and as wholly discrete from 'man'; the random facticity of sex into which one is born without any choice should not dictate anything more than a potential or possibility to mother. In this way all women would benefit; those who cannot, those who will not, and those who simply did not, would become of equal visibility, relevance, and validity.

### **6.3 Significance of the study**

Whilst the United States has provided a large body of literature on the subject of childfree women and couples, British studies, particularly phenomenological ones, remain few. Furthermore, very little research has been done anywhere on the specific topic of childfreedom within the age bracket of 45-55, encompassing the choice becoming permanent. I hope this study begins to redress this balance, offering as it does an in-depth exploration of the experience of residents of Britain in this age group.

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of research into the lives of childfree women. I have contrasted my participants' experiences with those in other studies, but the philosophical approach has allowed me to do this without categorization or simplification. Indeed, I have shown the multi-faceted nature of life and choice as somewhat fractal; when one element is drawn out for examination, it turns out to be a microcosm of the whole. For example, the physical realm, whether it is experienced as urge or silence towards motherhood or somewhere in between, cannot be seen as wholly disparate from desires on other levels such as the need to create meaning in other areas of life. I have shown that the overall context of each participant is pivotal not only in what is chosen in life, but how these choices are then experienced.

The existential-phenomenological approach that I have used in this research allows for an important new exploration of themes that are ontological, or as relevant to *being* and *becoming*. The temporal nature of existence – with some things as transient such as relationships, some as constant such as being unambivalently childfree, and others as specifically time-based such as the feeling that choice is finalized within the thirties – is shown to be intrinsic to the lives of the participants but experienced uniquely by each of them. The existential paradigm within which this study is rooted also aids an exploration of the meaning of existence at both a micro level of individuality, and an over-arching level of contrast and similarity to others and the world. I hope therefore to have contributed to the notion of philosophy as a way to understand human living,



as opposed to a more psychological or medical perspective. Although these paradigms generate valuable data in their own right, the realm of meaning within human existence is one that philosophy has historically been more suited to answer (Barratt, 1958).

These points are crucial for the development of knowledge and understanding of childfree women, but also on a wider scale for the development of a more holistic perspective of women in general. This research, and hopefully its subsequent dissemination, will help develop a more up-to-date account of the realities of being childfree, and I hope that other researchers will be influenced to use a similar methodology in order to continue generating knowledge in this field.

Although this research is primarily geared towards the profession of psychotherapy, there are important implications for the fields of developmental psychology, gender and sexuality studies, and family and systems theory. These are all fields which influence the learning of psychotherapy trainees, therefore it is necessary that these fields also broaden their theories and understanding of women to incorporate the childfree choice as one aspect of normal female development. Beginning in these theoretical, academic, and professional fields will hopefully have favourable effects on the media and general social discourse. This would benefit all women, not only those who choose to remain childfree; in being truly free to choose without expectation, condemnation, or judgement, individuals will be more able to live in a way that feels compatible, chosen, and more fulfilled.

## **6.4 Critical Reflections**

### **6.4.1 Strengths and Limitations**

My choice of IPA for this research study may be viewed as both a strength and a limitation in that it offers a method of gathering rich and deep data from the participant herself who is considered to be the expert on her own life (Smith and Osborn, 2003). At the same time is this method's reliance on the participant's ability to express her experience articulately, coherently, and using language (Willig, 2008). This latter point must also be taken into account; it cannot be presumed that all experience is entirely available in language, or that nothing is lost in working primarily with transcript. I hope to have mitigated this to some extent by attempting to record all my thoughts and feelings about the non-verbal content of the interviews immediately after each one, and to maintain a reflexive stance about my own processes and possible impact on the meetings as well as the subsequent analysis. This of course cannot go so far as to mitigate the participants' ability to describe their experience in language; this is an inherent limitation of my chosen approach.

Through the process of transcription and analysis I was always aware of other interventions I could have made; comments from the participants that I did or didn't follow up on influenced the direction of the narrative, thereby highlighting the co-constructed nature of the data. Although I didn't feel that this is necessarily problematic in itself, I did wonder how the results would have been affected by a follow up interview. I think there are both advantages and disadvantages to a follow up; it would have allowed me to ask for more detail about things I realized I didn't fully understand when analysing. For example, Catherine describes the menopause as "emancipatory"

then begins to talk about her hysterectomy. I would have liked to know more about this emancipatory feeling, but Catherine didn't return to it and I became immersed in the continuing narrative thus neglected to ask for more information.

On the other hand, there is an intensity to a one-off encounter which offers spontaneity and the exploration of the here and now feelings and thoughts that arise. It is for this reason that I also did not want to give my participants the questions ahead of the interview; there was something very real and immediate about discussing areas of their lives that they perhaps had not given so much attention to recently. For instance, as we ended the interview, Alex discovered a new question about her own process towards childfreedom when she reflects on being a young girl witnessing a mother's distress upon losing her baby; this was very much a product of the here and now, affected by my imminent departure, that may have been lost if we had been making arrangements for another meeting.

On a practical note, follow up interviews with 10-12 participants would have been a vast amount of data to analyse for a project of this size, and I preferred to have more participants than two sets of data from a smaller sample. I also felt that asking for the larger commitment of two meetings may have impacted upon the number of women willing to be interviewed.

The sample size I have chosen, ultimately 10 participants, is in the upper limits of numbers as recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) which is also both a strength and limitation. The relatively small size allows for in-depth analysis and presentation of detailed themes and sub-themes. It also means that it is difficult to establish how much this study represents the wider population of childfree women aged 45-55. This is something I reflected on during the recruitment stage. For ethical reasons I chose to advertise and then allow participants to approach me rather than to directly approach women whom I had been told about and who *might* be willing to participate. Thus my sample were all people who felt able to discuss becoming childfree and I wondered about those I didn't hear from who might have felt unable or unwilling to describe something that may have felt more painful or unresolved. This research in some ways might not reflect the experiences of other childfree women, but at the same time, it offers ways of encountering and understanding different perspectives that themselves might be beneficial to someone struggling with their current life.

I would have preferred the sample to be more ethnically diverse in order to generate more data about experiences in the social world and values attached to women and mothers in other ethnic groups. Also, most of the participants described themselves as professional women; it would be interesting to find out about the experiences of non-professional women, and whether these show similarities. Interestingly, after interviewing one woman in the world of theatre, she emailed a number of her co-workers and I ultimately had to turn down most that approached me because I did not want the majority of my sample to share the same occupation. In hindsight however, a more homogeneous sample in terms of profession may have made it easier to establish common themes. I suggest that future research of childfree women of this age narrow the inclusion criteria to being either single or partnered throughout the 30s for ease of clarity about motivations to becoming childfree within the social realm.

### 6.4.2 A further look at reflexivity

This thesis is part of a doctorate in psychotherapy and is therefore designed primarily to benefit the fields of psychotherapy and counselling. At times I found it difficult to maintain this primary focus as my felt tendency was to stray into the areas of sociology and politics through championing the cause of women as *people*. I often became distracted by my deep respect for the desires of women who choose to mother, and my wish to see motherhood more understood, appreciated, and not marginalized to the privacy and possible isolation of the Western nuclear home. Throughout the writing process I kept a note above my computer stating 'STAY ON TOPIC'. It was painful but necessary to delete paragraphs which I felt were important to a *different* study of women.

During this research journey I was deeply impacted on a personal as well as professional and intellectual level. Various themes arose that led me to question what aspects of my own history might have contributed to an absence of interest in motherhood. I remembered the constant struggle my mother had in bringing up four children by herself on benefits, and although I do not believe in a simplistic cause and effect motion, it was certainly an experience of difficulty that has stayed with me, and that I remained aware of when writing this thesis. As my participants also talked about what they would miss in remaining childfree, I felt a deepening appreciation for how it would feel to have children and to create a sense of belonging and connection through family. This in turn led me to contemplate my strong need for independence and time to myself, which is perhaps another contributor to my childfree preference. This trait has been both a help and a hindrance throughout my life, and it has taken a great deal of work to find a healthy balance. Although the relationship I have built with my own therapist has taught me a great deal about intimacy, mutuality, and connection, this research has also profoundly enhanced my understanding of these relational elements. I have felt the impact of this in my therapeutic practice as I become more comfortable committing myself honestly and empathically to each client.

Interestingly, this research allowed me to understand a strange sense of guilt that I have always felt around my choice to be childfree, and that has confused me for many years. As I engaged with the ambivalence felt by some of my participants, I felt a real affinity for their struggle, because I know what it is like to be confronted with the necessity of making time-bound, life-changing choices that cannot be altered. It gradually became clear to me that my sense of guilt stemmed from the knowledge that I do not experience this struggle with regard to reproductive decision, but other women do and that somehow seems unfair. As I reach my late-thirties I see a startling difference between my own sense of time passing and that of my two closest friends who want children but are not in their ideal situation in which to have them. And I feel both a sense of relief that I do not have to feel this pressure, and a sense of upset that they do. I am left wondering if my decision to research the age group of 45-55 was more than a realization of the gap in literature and intellectual curiosity; would I have felt less comfortable interviewing younger women who may be experiencing in the present this pressure to make a choice? It remains a question for me, but I do know that I am very eager to do further research into this area and will perhaps need to look again at this sense of guilt and upset for others when that time comes.

As I began my research I felt some anxiety that it might change me to the extent that I wanted to have children, and as someone who *doesn't* want children, this was a frightening thought. I realized the illogical nature of this fear, as of course if I decided that I did want to have children, I would cease to be someone who doesn't want them! Nevertheless, having planned my future around remaining childfree, and enjoying the benefits of this lifestyle, the anxiety in all its illogicity remained. This introduced a secondary anxiety about how my feelings might impact upon my openness to my participants and the data generated in the interview, but this dissipated as I began to understand my fear as being that of losing the ability to *choose*. Despite my independence as mentioned above, I have been affected by the pronatal assumptions and language that exists in the society in which I grew up, meaning that the idea of a maternal instinct, a forceful bodily need that I cannot control, designed to kick in as I reach a certain age and contradicting all the experiences of decision making I have had so far, became a kind of fearful folklore for me. Therefore it seemed foolish to be anxious about this research – on the contrary, knowledge would itself shed light on my inherited societal beliefs, and dispel what is myth. Through researching the literature and then interviewing and analysing, I was fascinated to see that other women had been equally socialized into assuming a place of difference from the 'norm' of a naturally occurring female urge towards motherhood. Perhaps this autobiographical element contributed to my view of the participants' journeys as impacted by the four dimensions; I developed a deeper understanding of the holistic nature of choices, and how they are made not on a simple level of urge, but affected by thought, feeling, emotion, meaning and values. As Alex described how her transient urges towards motherhood did not drive her choices, I remembered my anxiety about being overtaken by a physical urge. I was struck by the obviousness of a physical urge existing without needing to be acted upon, and felt bewildered by how much I had come to fear any kind of urge at all, thinking that it would obliterate all intellectual thought, process of choice, indeed obliterate *me*. This aspect of my research has had deep and lasting resonance as I learnt to be more at ease with my physicality, to listen to my body and not be afraid that it might suddenly desire something that contradicts my mind's desire. I began to be at one with myself and to truly reject the notion of a duality of body and mind on a deeper level than purely intellectually.

I experienced this body-mind unity again as I found myself asking what the *meaning* is of having a female body that may or may not have the potential to conceive, and what it means to be a woman. Perhaps this was ultimately my true curiosity, perhaps also an unanswerable question because it must obviously be in reference to *not* being a woman, and this is something I can never know. In Heideggerian terms, it is impossible for me to transcend the context of my embodied self, and this may be my real frustration; phenomenology takes leaps and bounds towards exploration and understanding but I can never experience the experience of another. Wanting a child is foreign to my own processes thus far in life, yet I do not feel strange or unusual. At times I felt an affinity with those 'early articulators' who were never drawn to motherhood, and felt that our shared experience negates the synonymy of woman and mother. Simultaneously I also felt deeply curious about the more ambivalently childfree, and resonated with the difficulty of needing to choose. Although it would have been potentially simpler, I am pleased that I did not interview 10 women who felt no ambivalence about being childfree; I doubt that the research journey would have been as complex and fascinating had this been the case.

Finally, this first piece of research, from initial excitement about an idea, through reading about the topic, finessing my point of interest, talking to participants and engaging with the data, has been an incredible journey that I very much want to repeat in other areas. At times I felt overwhelmed by own inexperience as a researcher and wished that I had a background in psychology so that doing a literature review and choosing a method were not wholly unfamiliar. However, it was also exciting and challenging to develop these new skills over the three years of research, and ultimately I feel joyfully proud to have truly embodied the role of researcher and academic. I can now go forth into further research, talks, and publication with a desire to share my findings and generate more knowledge without the anxiety of being a complete novice.

### 6.4.3 Validity and Quality

The validity of qualitative research in general, and IPA in particular, as well as my own use of this methodology and method was discussed at length in chapter 3. It is important however to reiterate some key points with regards to this study. These are that I have attempted to be transparent in my own interest and position on the topic, and that I have explored my own biases and assumptions throughout. The nature of qualitative research is that it does not adhere to notions of there being one truth that can be discovered through objective and distant approaches from the researcher. Instead, the researcher situates herself in relation to the topic and the participants in a mutual exploration of the latter's experience. This does mean that there is reliance upon the participant's ability to articulate their experience in language as well as the researcher's ability to create a safe space for honesty and openness. I believe that my participants were made to feel comfortable and safe, and this manifested in what I perceived to be very honest, emotionally rich narratives. The one participant with whom I did not feel so comfortable and therefore questioned how open she might be was Catherine; as stated in sections on reflexivity, I felt that the age gap and her superior academic status meant that much of the interview remained on a theoretical rather than personal level.

IPA does not merely describe an experience, but is also an interpretative method. Throughout my interpretation of the texts, I strove to remain as close as possible to the participants' experience and hope that the reader can easily follow my own processes. Keeping a research journal was a way to further enhance the validity of this research. Constant questions occurred to me about my own potential assumptions and biases, for example my irritation with theories or statements that posit nurturing as innate to the female sex (Miller, 1976; Daniluk, 1999). I find this notion to be particularly irksome because it posits women as homogenous carers who are then expected to be *caretakers*, and also negates the very real caring of men. Through questioning the assumptions of others I became wary of my own bias; I did not set out to 'prove' anything through this research, and this included whether or not childfree women experience themselves as nurturing. In my section on 'relationships with children' I was therefore careful to iteratively go back and forth between the data, my discussion, and my research journal in which my personal reflections were always noted. This helped me take a more critical stance of my findings and to bracket the irritating claims that have historically been made about women (for these are indeed many!)

## 6.5 Recommendations for future research

There is evidently more scope for phenomenological research into the area of childfree women. Of particular importance for psychotherapy would be a study of how couples manage the choice when there are unequal parenting desires. Research into the experience of childfreedom in age groups above 45-55 would also benefit the field as well as giving people who are making the choice, or have already made the choice, more information about the lives of others. It would also be interesting to see a similar study done in the future to assess age cohort effects; are the young women of today being socialized differently such that there is less expectation of motherhood and less strangeness surrounding non-motherhood?

I presented my research at the 2014 Middlesex Conference and sparked an interesting discussion about choice as understood through the four-dimensional world. Other delegates posited that the route to motherhood was not always a definitive choice and that it would perhaps look very similar to the route to childfreedom. This would be a hugely interesting comparative study to follow up this one. As I have stated throughout, I believe that research about ambivalence towards motherhood in women who ultimately choose it would be very valuable for both psychotherapeutic and social understanding. Pronatal ideology might also be detrimental to those who have children but do not find the experience to match the 'cereal box' image of blissful domestic life.

Research suggests that it is the person of the therapist and the emotional connection between client and therapist, rather than their training orientation or 'technique' that is of the greatest benefit to the client's well-being (Norcross, 2002). Therefore research into the impact of childfreedom on the therapeutic relationship would be very valuable, particularly when both therapist and client are women of a similar age. The therapist experience of being with a client who is in the process of making the choice, regretting or revelling in it, might differ according to her own feelings about childfreedom and motherhood, and thereby affect the emotional content and the therapeutic process.

A neglected area of research is the male experience of being childfree. Although pronatal expectations focus primarily on women, and of course men do not have the same ending of fertility, there is a paucity of understanding of the lived experience, bodily voice, or 'paternal urge' towards fatherhood, and the process of choice to becoming childfree for men. Exploration of these experiences would also benefit the understanding of heterosexual couples making the choice together.

Finally, a theme that is not presented in this thesis because it was not directly relevant to the experience of being childfree came from two participants, Bella and Helen. This was the profound desire for belonging, partnership, companionship, and security through a relationship of love. This is something that neither has yet found in life, and now into their 50s they are questioning whether they still want this. This brought up questions for me about the experience of being single when one wishes to be in partnership, and also how and why has this changed in the 50s, and is this phenomenon shared by others?

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PSY OFFICE: Study Reference Number \_\_\_\_\_ 1

Middlesex University, Department of Psychology

REQUEST FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL (STUDENT)

Applicant (specify): ~~UG~~ PG (Module: ...DProf.....) PhD

Date submitted: .....

<i>Research area (please circle)</i>				
Clinical	Cognition + Emotion	Developmental	Forensic	Health
Occupational	Psychophysiological	Social	Sport + Exercise	
Other <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Psychotherapy _____			Sensitive Topic <input type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Methodology:</i>				
Empirical/Experimental	Questionnaire-based	Qualitative <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IPA	Other _____	
<p><b>No study may proceed until this form has been signed by an authorised person indicating that ethical approval has been granted.</b> For collaborative research with another institution, ethical approval must be obtained from all institutions involved.</p> <p>This form should be accompanied by any other relevant materials (e.g. questionnaire to be employed, letters to participants/institutions, advertisements or recruiting materials, information and debriefing sheet for participants<sup>1</sup>, consent form<sup>2</sup>, including approval by collaborating institutions).</p>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is this the first submission of the proposed study? Yes/<del>No</del></li> <li>Is this an amended proposal (resubmission)? <del>Yes</del>/No <i>Psychology Office: If YES, please send this back to the original referee</i></li> <li>Is this an urgent application? (To be answered by Staff/Supervisor only)<sup>1</sup> Yes/No</li> </ul>			Supervisor to initial here _____	
<u>Name(s) of investigator</u> Josephine Davies				
<u>Name of Supervisor (s)</u> Dr Chloe Paidoussis Mitchell, Dr Patricia Bonnici				
Title of Study: A Phenomenological Exploration into the Lived Experience of Voluntarily Childfree Women aged 45-55				
<u>Results of Application:</u>				
<i>REVIEWER – please tick and provide comments in section 5:</i>				

<sup>1</sup> See Guidelines on MyUniHub

<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6,7</sup> Guidelines are available from the Ethics folder on MyUniHub, General Psychology Area

APPROVED	APPROVED SUBJECT TO AMENDMENTS	APPROVED SUBJECT TO RECEIPT OF LETTERS	NOT APPROVED
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**SECTION 1**

<p>1. Please attach a brief description of the nature and purpose of the study, including details of the procedure to be employed. Identify the ethical issues involved, particularly in relation to the treatment/experiences of participants, session length, procedures, stimuli, responses, data collection, and the storage and reporting of data.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>SEE ATTACHED PROJECT PROPOSAL</b></p>	
<p>2. Could any of these procedures result in any adverse reactions? If "yes", what precautionary steps are to be taken?</p> <p>Due to the sensitive nature of this research, the interview may bring up painful emotions or memories for the participant resulting in some psychological distress; although these emotions may not be inherently harmful, it is my responsibility to make sure that I have done everything possible to offer a safe environment in which these feelings may occur. I am familiar with the BPS guidelines on psychological research and have read widely in the area of carrying out ethical qualitative research. My principles as a psychotherapist, researcher and as a person mean that I respect individuals' right to privacy, autonomy, dignity and non-maleficence, and that I hold a belief in promoting justice and beneficence. I will be using my therapeutic and counselling skills throughout the interview to note the extent to which the participant is distressed, offer a break or shift of focus if they need it, and offer to end the interview. If they wish to discontinue I will offer to reschedule and also remind them of their right to withdraw altogether, if they decide to withdraw then I will destroy whatever data I had already obtained and not use the information gathered from that particular interviewee.</p> <p>I am aware that a question that has not been distressful to one participant may bring up a very different and more painful reaction in another; similarly to my work as a therapist, I will endeavour to enter into each new relationship clear of assumptions and open to their unique lived experience. Although I have read exhaustively in the areas of both childfreedom and the psychology and experience of being aged 45-55, I hope to use this knowledge only as a means to develop a trusting and appreciative researcher/co-researcher encounter, and not as a means of categorizing and closing off the individuality of each different woman.</p> <p>I will also be giving a debriefing after the interview, including giving information on how to contact a therapist or counselling centre should they wish for further support. I will offer a follow up phone call 3 days after the interview in order to clarify any questions they may have, and to provide space for them to explore any doubts or concerns they have about having taken part. I will again remind them that they are free to withdraw from the study without giving any reason or justification. (Please see appendices A and C of the attached proposal).</p>	<p>YES/NO</p>

<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6,7</sup> Guidelines are available from the Ethics folder on MyUniHub, General Psychology Area

5a. Does the study involve:	
Clinical populations	<del>YES</del> /NO
Children (under 16 years)	<del>YES</del> /NO
Vulnerable adults such as individuals with mental or physical health problems, prisoners, vulnerable elderly, young offenders?	<del>YES</del> /NO
Political, ethnic or religious groups/minorities?	<del>YES</del> /NO
Sexually explicit material / issues relating to sexuality	<del>YES</del> /NO
5b. If the study involves any of the above, the researcher may need CRB (police check) Staff and PG students are expected to have CRB – please tick YES/NO UG students are advised that institutions may require them to have CRB please confirm that you are aware of this by ticking here _____	
6. How, and from whom (e.g. from parents, from participants via signature) will informed consent be obtained? (See consent guidelines <sup>2</sup> ; note special considerations for some questionnaire research) From the participants themselves via signature (please see appendix B of the attached proposal)	
7. Will you inform participants of their right to withdraw from the research at any time, without penalty? (see consent guidelines <sup>2</sup> ) Please see attached proposal (appendices A and B)	YES/ <del>NO</del>

8. Will you provide a full debriefing at the end of the data collection phase? (see debriefing guidelines <sup>3</sup> ) Please see attached proposal (appendix C)	YES/ <del>NO</del>
9. Will you be available to discuss the study with participants, if necessary, to monitor any negative effects or misconceptions? I will offer a follow up phone call 3 days after the interview, and they may email me at any time to discuss any problems, issues or doubts (please see attached proposal, appendix A)  <del>If "no", how do you propose to deal with any potential problems?</del>	YES/ <del>NO</del>
10. Under the Data Protection Act, participant information is confidential unless otherwise agreed in advance. Will confidentiality be guaranteed? (see confidentiality guidelines <sup>3</sup> )  If "yes" how will this be assured (see <sup>5</sup> ) I will be recording the interviews digitally and transcribing them myself. The data collected will be kept in a password protected file on my home computer. All identifying details will be changed so that the participants themselves as well as anyone else they may mention will be completely anonymised. As this study is IPA, sections of the interview transcripts will be used in the dissertation and subsequent potential publication – participants will be fully informed of this in the information letter and signed informed consent will be obtained before the interview begins (please see attached proposal, appendices A and B). All collected data, taped and transcribed, will be destroyed upon acceptance of the dissertation.  <del>If "no", how will participants be warned? (see<sup>5</sup>)</del>	YES/ <del>NO</del>

<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6,7</sup> Guidelines are available from the Ethics folder on MyUniHub, General Psychology Area

<i>(NB: You are not at liberty to publish material taken from your work with individuals without the prior agreement of those individuals).</i>	
11. Are there any ethical issues that concern you about this particular piece of research, not covered elsewhere on this form?	<del>YES</del> /NO
If "yes" please specify:	
12. Is this research or part of it going to be conducted in a language other than English?	<del>YES</del> /NO
If YES – Do you confirm that all documents and materials are enclosed here both in English and the other language, and that each one is an accurate translation of the other?	YES/NO

**(NB: If "yes" has been responded to any of questions 2, 3, 5, 11, 12 or "no" to any of questions 7-10, a full explanation of the reason should be provided – if necessary, on a separate sheet submitted with this form).**

<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6,7</sup> Guidelines are available from the Ethics folder on MyUniHub, General Psychology Area

**SECTION 2 (to be completed by all applicants – please tick as appropriate)**

	YES	NO
13. Some or all of this research is to be conducted away from Middlesex University	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If “yes” tick here to confirm that a Risk Assessment form has been submitted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. I am aware that any modifications to the design or method of this proposal will require me to submit a new application for ethical approval	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. I am aware that I need to keep all the materials/documents relating to this study (e.g. consent forms, filled questionnaires, etc) until completion of my degree / publication (as advised)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. I have read the British Psychological Society’s <i>Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human participants</i> <sup>4</sup> and believe this proposal to conform with them.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**SECTION 3 (to be completed by STUDENT applicants and supervisors)**

Researcher: (student signature)  date 20.04.13

**CHECKLIST FOR SUPERVISOR – please tick as appropriate**

	YES	NO
1. Is the UG/PG module specified?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. If it is a resubmission, has this been specified and the original form enclosed here?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
3. Is the name(s) of student/researcher(s) specified?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Is the name(s) of supervisor specified?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Is the consent form attached?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Are debriefing procedures specified? If appropriate, debriefing sheet enclosed – appropriate style?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Is an information sheet for participants enclosed? appropriate style?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Does the information sheet contain contact details for the researcher and supervisor?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Is the information sheet sufficiently informative about the study?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Has Section 2 been completed by the researcher on the ethics form?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Any parts of the study to be conducted outside the university? If so a Risk Assessment form must be attached – Is it?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Any parts of the study to be conducted on another institution’s premises? If so a letter of acceptance by the institution must be obtained - Letters of acceptance by all external	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6,7</sup> Guidelines are available from the Ethics folder on MyUniHub, General Psychology Area



institutions are attached.		
13. Letter(s) of acceptance from external institutions have been requested and will be submitted to the PSY office ASAP.		X
14. Has the student signed the form? If physical or electronic signatures are not available, an email endorsing the application must be attached.	X	
15. Is the proposal sufficiently informative about the study?	X	

**Signatures of approval:**

PSY OFFICE received



Supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_ date: 6/5/2013 date: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethics Panel: \_\_\_\_\_ date: \_\_\_\_\_ date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 (signed pending approval of Risk Assessment form) date: \_\_\_\_\_

If any of the following is required and not available when submitting this form, the Ethics Panel Reviewer will need to see them once they are received – please enclose with this form when they become available:

- letter of acceptance from other institution
- any other relevant document (e.g. ethical approval from other institution): \_\_\_\_\_

PSY OFFICE received

Required documents seen by Ethics Panel: \_\_\_\_\_ date: \_\_\_\_\_ date: \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6,7</sup> Guidelines are available from the Ethics folder on MyUniHub, General Psychology Area



# INDEPENDENT FIELD/LOCATION WORK RISK ASSESSMENT FRA1

*This proforma is applicable to, and must be completed in advance for, the following field/location work situations:*

1. *All field/location work undertaken independently by individual students, either in the UK or overseas, including in connection with proposition module or dissertations. Supervisor to complete with student(s).*
2. *All field/location work undertaken by postgraduate students. Supervisors to complete with student(s).*
3. *Field/location work undertaken by research students. Student to complete with supervisor.*
4. *Field/location work/visits by research staff. Researcher to complete with Research Centre Head.*
5. *Essential information for students travelling abroad can be found on [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)*

## FIELD/LOCATION WORK DETAILS

Name ...Josephine Davies Student No M00242628  
Research Centre (staff only).....  
Supervisor Dr Chloe Paidoussis Mitchell Degree course DProf in Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling

Telephone numbers and name of next of kin who may be contacted in the event of an accident

### NEXT OF KIN

Name Susan Coates (mother)  
Phone 01424429132/ 07974159658.

Physical or psychological limitations to carrying out the proposed field/location work

...None.....

Any health problems (full details) Which may be relevant to proposed field/location work activity in case of emergencies.

...None.....

Locality (Country and Region)

...London and Greater London, UK.....

Travel Arrangements

Participants will be able to travel to this location using public transport, bicycle or their own vehicle.....

NB: Comprehensive travel and health insurance must always be obtained for independent overseas field/location work.

Dates of Travel and Field/location work

...To be arranged with participants, interviews are proposed to take place throughout the summer 2013.....

**PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION VERY CAREFULLY**

**Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment**

List the localities to be visited or specify routes to be followed (Col. 1). For each locality, enter the potential hazards that may be identified beyond those accepted in everyday life. Add details giving cause for concern (Col. 2).

**Examples of Potential Hazards :**

- Adverse weather: exposure (heat, sunburn, lightning, wind, hypothermia)
- Terrain: rugged, unstable, fall, slip, trip, debris, and remoteness. Traffic: pollution.
- Demolition/building sites, assault, getting lost, animals, disease.
- Working on/near water: drowning, swept away, disease (wells disease, hepatitis, malaria, etc), parasites', flooding, tides and range.
- Lone working: difficult to summon help, alone or in isolation, lone interviews.
- Dealing with the public: personal attack, causing offence/intrusion, misinterpreted, political, ethnic, cultural, socio-economic differences/problems. Known or suspected criminal offenders.
- Safety Standards (other work organisations, transport, hotels, etc), working at night, areas of high crime.
- Ill health: personal considerations or vulnerabilities, pre-determined medical conditions (asthma, allergies, fitting) general fitness, disabilities, persons suited to task.
- Articles and equipment: inappropriate type and/or use, failure of equipment, insufficient training for use and repair, injury.
- Substances (chemicals, plants, bio- hazards, waste): ill health - poisoning, infection, irritation, burns, cuts, eye-damage.
- Manual handling: lifting, carrying, moving large or heavy items, physical unsuitability for task

If no hazard can be identified beyond those of everyday life, enter 'NONE'.

1. LOCALITY/ROUTE	2. POTENTIAL HAZARDS
<p><b>Public building – NSPC and Dilemma Consultancy. 254-256 Belsize Road London NW6 4BT.</b></p> <p>This location is close to overground, underground and bus routes.</p> <p>There are parking bays for metered parking and available bicycle parking.</p> <p>The route to these buildings is well lit and populated during the day and evening.</p>	<p>None beyond everyday life risk</p>

*The University Field/location work code of Practice booklet provides practical advice that should be followed in planning and conducting field/location work.*

**Risk Minimisation/Control Measures**

**PLEASE READ VERY CAREFULLY**

For each hazard identified (Col 2), list the precautions/control measures in place or that will be taken (Col 3) to "reduce the risk to acceptable levels", and the safety equipment (Col 5) that will be employed.

Assuming the safety precautions/control methods that will be adopted (Col. 3), categorise the field/location work risk for each location/route as negligible, low, moderate or high (Col. 4).

**Risk increases with both the increasing likelihood of an accident and the increasing severity of the consequences of an accident.**

**An acceptable level of risk is: a risk which can be safely controlled by person taking part in the activity using the precautions and control measures noted including the necessary instructions, information and training relevant to that risk. The resultant risk should not**

be significantly higher than that encountered in everyday life.

**Examples of control measures/precautions:**

Providing adequate training, information & instructions on field/location work tasks and the safe and correct use of any equipment, substances and personal protective equipment. Inspection and safety check of any equipment prior to use. Assessing individuals fitness and suitability to environment and tasks involved. Appropriate clothing, environmental information consulted and advice followed (weather conditions, tide times etc.). Seek advice on harmful plants, animals & substances that may be encountered, including information and instruction on safe procedures for handling hazardous substances. First aid provisions, inoculations, individual medical requirements, logging of location, route and expected return times of lone workers. Establish emergency procedures (means of raising an alarm, back up arrangements). Working with colleagues (pairs). Lone working is not permitted where the risk of physical or verbal violence is a realistic possibility. Training in interview techniques and avoiding /defusing conflict, following advice from local organisations, wearing of clothing unlikely to cause offence or unwanted attention. Interviews in neutral locations. Checks on Health and Safety standards & welfare facilities of travel, accommodation and outside organisations. Seek information on social/cultural/political status of field/location work area.

**Examples of Safety Equipment:** Hardhats, goggles, gloves, harness, waders, whistles, boots, mobile phone, ear protectors, bright fluorescent clothing (for roadside work), dust mask, etc.

If a proposed locality has not been visited previously, give your authority for the risk assessment stated or indicate that your visit will be preceded by a thorough risk assessment.

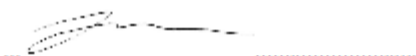
3. PRECAUTIONS/CONTROL MEASURES	4. RISK ASSESSMENT (low, moderate, high)	5. SAFETY/EQUIPMENT
<p>Public building with public liability insurance, precautions against fire, health and safety regulations in place. Participants will be shown the fire exits and locality of fire extinguishers upon arrival. I will be phoning a trusted friend before and after the interview, if they do not hear from me then they will have instructions and details to contact the building reception to check that I am unharmed.</p>	<p>Low  Low</p>	<p>None  I will always have access to my mobile phone when interviewing in case there is either a perceived threat to me, or need to call the emergency services for any reason.</p>

**PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION AND SIGN AS APPROPRIATE**

**DECLARATION:** The undersigned have assessed the activity and the associated risks and declare that there is no significant risk or that the risk will be controlled by the method(s) listed above/over. Those participating in the work have read the assessment and will put in place precautions/control measures identified.

*NB: Risk should be constantly reassessed during the field/location work period and additional precautions taken or field/location work discontinued if the risk is seen to be unacceptable.*

Signature of Field/location worker (Student/Staff)



Date 20.04.13

Signature of Student Supervisor



Date 6/5/2013.....

## Appendix B Participant Information Letter



Information about a research project: *A phenomenological exploration into the lived experience of voluntarily childfree women aged 45-55*, being carried out by Josephine Davies as a requirement for a DProf in Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling from NSPC and Middlesex University.

NSPC Ltd  
258 Belsize Road  
London NW6 4BT

Middlesex University  
The Burroughs  
London NW4 4BT

Dated: July 2013

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take your time to read the following information carefully, and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take your time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

### What is the purpose of the research?

Much of the research on women done in the past, both biological and psychological, has focused on women's reproductive capabilities, and the effects of phenomena such as childbirth, motherhood and menopause. The aim of this study is to explore the period of life from age 45-55 for women who have chosen not to have children so as to expand psychological understanding by including women's diverse experiences apart from motherhood.

### What will happen to me if I take part?

Participation will consist of a single interview of approximately 1 – 1 ½ hours at a time and place convenient to you, and if you wish I will phone you 3 days after the interview to discuss any concerns you may have. I will digitally record the interview and transcribe it myself. I will be using a qualitative research method to extract themes of what you and other interviewees speak about.

### What will you do with the information that I provide?

The recording will be transferred to a password protected file on my computer and will be deleted from the recording device immediately. The transcription of your interview will also be kept in a password protected file. All identifying features of both you and any significant other you mention will be fully disguised. Names, occupations and backgrounds will be changed so that

you are in no way identifiable. Extracts from the interview will be used with your permission, it may also be that I request permission to include the complete interview as an appendix to the dissertation; for this I will again request written consent.

The information will be kept at least until 6 months after I graduate, and will be treated as confidential. If my research is published, I will make sure that neither your name nor other identifying details are used.

Data will be stored according to the Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act.

#### What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, it is possible that painful memories or emotions will arise during the interview, but you will be able to discuss this in a confidential and respectful setting. You are also free to not answer any questions, terminate the interview at any time and withdraw from the study altogether up to the point when I submit the dissertation. You will also be given a debriefing letter including the details of a recommended therapist and a list of women's centres and low cost counselling centres should you decide to seek further support.

#### What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Being interviewed about your experience as a childfree woman has no direct benefit, but your own experiences will be listened to and written about which you might find to be empowering for both you as an individual and for women in general. You will be contributing to what I feel is an extremely important emerging area of literature about the diversity of women in this period of life.

#### Consent

You will be given a copy of this information sheet for your personal records, and if you agree to take part you will be asked to sign the attached consent form before the study begins.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you decide to take part you may withdraw at any time without giving a reason and with no adverse consequences.

#### Am I eligible to take part?

In order to take part you must be a woman between the ages of 45-55 who has voluntarily chosen not to have children, with no plans for any in the future, and that you are not an adoptive mother or have regular childcare commitments as primary carer for another's children.

Please contact me if you would like more information about the study before agreeing to participate. You can contact me at: JD802@live.mdx.ac.uk or my supervisor, Dr Chloe Paidoussis Mitchell at: chloe\_paidoussis@hotmail.com

I will be happy to share the findings with you upon completion of the research.

Thank you.

Josephine Davies



Title of Study: *A phenomenological exploration into the lived experience of voluntarily childfree women aged 45-55.*

Academic Year: 2013

Researcher: Josephine Davies

Research Supervisor: Dr Chloe Paidoussis-Mitchell

I have understood the details of the research as explained to me by the researcher, and confirm that I have consented to act as a participant.

I have been given contact details for the researcher and the research supervisor in the information sheet.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, neither I nor anyone I speak about will in any way be identifiable in the dissertation, and I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without any obligation to explain my reasons for doing so.

I further understand that the data I provide may be used for analysis and subsequent publication, and provide my consent that this might occur.

\_\_\_\_\_

Print name

\_\_\_\_\_

Sign name

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**To the participants:** Data may be inspected by the Chair of the Psychology Ethics panel and the Chair of the School of Social Sciences Ethics committee of Middlesex University, if required by institutional audits about the correctness of procedures. Although this would happen in strict confidentiality, please tick here if you do not wish your data to be included in audits:

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

## Participant Debriefing Letter



**Middlesex  
University**



Title of Study: *A phenomenological exploration into the lived experience of voluntarily childfree women aged 45-55.*

Academic Year: 2013

Researcher: Josephine Davies

Research Supervisor: Dr Chloe Paidoussis-Mitchell

I would like to thank you for participating in this research, and check that you are still willing for your contribution to be used.

The nature of the research is to further understand the diverse experiences of women in this age group who have chosen not to have children. Due to the sensitive nature of the interview topic, it may be that you have re-evaluated your experiences or your decision to take part in the research, therefore if you have any further questions please feel free to contact me, the researcher, or my supervisor, Dr Chloe Paidoussis-Mitchell. If you wish I will phone you in 3 days to discuss any concerns you may have. Details of how to find a therapist are also included below should you desire further support.

### **Contacts for further information:**

**Researcher:** Josephine Davies, NSPC Ltd, 254-256 Belsize Road, London, NW6 4BT - JD802@live.mdx.ac.uk

**Research Supervisor:** Dr Chloe Paidoussis-Mitchell - [chloe\\_paidoussis@hotmail.com](mailto:chloe_paidoussis@hotmail.com)

**Recommended Therapist:** Dr Patricia Bonnici – [pbonnici@gmail.com](mailto:pbonnici@gmail.com)

### **Or you can find a therapist on the UKCP website:**

[http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/find\\_a\\_therapist.html](http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/find_a_therapist.html)

### **Other sources of support and low cost counselling:**

West Hampstead Women's centre: <http://www.whwc.co.uk/>

Waterloo Community Counselling: <http://www.waterloocc.co.uk/>

West London Women's Therapy: <http://www.westlondonwomenstherapy.co.uk/>

Hackney Centre for Better health: <http://www.centreforbetterhealth.org.uk/>

Wandsworth Low Cost Counselling: <http://www.wandsworthap.co.uk/>

Childfree Forum: <http://childfreelivinguk.yuku.com/>

- 1) Can you tell me about your experience of being a childfree woman at this age?**  
Prompts: how do you feel about it? Are there differences now? What do you gain and lose if anything by being childfree?
- 2) Can you tell me about your experience of making this choice?**  
Ambivalence? Certainty? Fate? Relationships?
- 3) What is your experience of others' responses to you being childfree?**  
Stigma? Acceptance? Questions? Feelings about responses? Standard response?
- 4) How do you feel about the end of your fertility?**  
Pressure? Regrets? Relief? Relevance?
- 5) How do you feel about the future having chosen to remain childfree?**  
Time, change, mortality, image of self in 10/20 years
- 6) Is there anything you would like to add?**



## Appendix F

## Demographic Questionnaire

### Participant Code:

Firstly, I would like to ask you a few demographic questions in order to situate my study amongst the current literature on this topic.

Age:

Occupation:

Educational level:

Ethnicity:

Religious Upbringing:

Current Religiosity:

Educational level:

Income:        0-12,000  
                  13-20,000  
                  21-30,000  
                  31-40,000  
                  41-50,000  
                  51,000+

Class:

Sexual orientation:

Current Relationship Status:

Length of Relationship (if applicable):

## Appendix G

## Example Analysis

Extract from Ruby's interview. Stage 1 and 2 analysis.

Initial Comments	Original Transcript	Exploratory/Interpretative Comments
<p>Narrative of earlier time – wanted them but difficult to have them here.</p> <p>Awareness of difference between here and Asia in bringing up children. What kind of support? Didn't run towards motherhood in her marriage. Motherhood as difficult and all consuming.</p> <p>Motherhood perceived as a prison sentence</p> <p>Motherhood as opening up other aspects of life, unconditional love, selflessness</p> <p>Awareness of an experience that will never happen</p> <p>Questioning, or mitigation of previous statement – happens to an extent</p> <p>Motherhood as giving up of self</p>	<p>I always thought I wanted them but I was also always aware that it's difficult to raise children here. There's so much less support than there is say when, if I was at home so that was why I was not running I don't think anyway and saying yes yes oh let's have children. It's a difficulty, it's really difficult; they consume your life and it's like, it feels like, honestly? From where I stand right now it's like a prison sentence, it sounds so bad, but I also am aware that when you have children they open up another side of of a person's life. The, the unconditional love that a mother has for a child – I realize that I'm probably never ever gonna have this feeling you know? Or the selflessness that one has, all that I will never be able to tap into maybe, to that extent. I'm sure we all tap into it every now and then but to that extent? Where you give yourself up completely?</p>	<p>'Thought wanted'; a more ambiguous or ambivalent expression than 'I wanted' – compare to later statement of 'if I really wanted'. Did she ever actually 'want' a child, or how much was expecting to want?</p> <p>She wasn't 'running' to motherhood – interesting metaphor of rushing (unreflectively?) at it. 'I don't think' - questioning truth of statement? It is past tense so she is checking with herself the validity. 'yes, yes' – was there the suggestion of parenting for her to agree with?</p> <p>Moving from 'rationalization' of motive, i.e. lack of support, to more personal stance – independence is 'consumed' by children.</p> <p>'honestly' – being candid about what is truly felt, which is felt to be a bad thing to express.</p> <p>Emphasizing the constraints on freedom, giving up of independence in motherhood. A powerful metaphor which is then mitigated by stating it is bad to feel that way. Why? What does she think she <i>should</i> feel about her own perception?</p> <p>Abrupt movement into the other side, what children bring aside from constraints, the 'good' as well as the 'bad' that she will miss out on.</p> <p>Emphasis on the permanency of this realization – childfreedom is forever.</p> <p>Selfless – connected to 'badness' of prison sentence? Selflessness as a phenomenon that will be missed.</p> <p>Actually we <u>do</u> tap into selflessness and love, but not to the extent of mothers – how is this measured? 'Maybe' – not definitive, perhaps there are other ways?</p> <p>Motherhood is complete giving up of the self. Is this related to 'they consume your life'? Is it a perspective of morphing self and other into one, or does child subsume mother? What is the quality of giving up of self?</p>

**Emergence of themes from the same extract.**

<b>Original Transcript</b>	<b>Emergent Themes</b>
<p>I always thought I wanted them but I was also always aware that it's difficult to raise children here. There's so much less support than there is say when, if I was at home so that was why I was not running I don't think anyway and saying yes yes oh let's have children. It's a difficulty, it's really difficult; they consume your life and it's like, it feels like, honestly? From where I stand right now it's like a prison sentence, it sounds so bad, but I also am aware that when you have children they open up another side of of a person's life. The, the unconditional love that a mother has for a child – I realize that I'm probably never ever gonna have this feeling you know? Or the selflessness that one has, all that I will never be able to tap into maybe, to that extent. I'm sure we all tap into it every now and then but to that extent? Where you give yourself up completely?</p>	<p>Desire and ambivalence towards motherhood  Time – assumption in youth of eventual motherhood  Community differences in rearing children  Choice – cognitive reflection of lack of support    Perception of children as life consuming    Perception of motherhood as prison  Negative perception of motherhood is bad    Perception of motherhood as opening up other aspects of life  Motherhood as unconditional love  Childfreedom as permanently giving something up  Motherhood as selfless    Giving up of self in motherhood</p>

## Appendix H

## Master Table of Emergent Themes

### SUPERORDINATE THEME

THEME (number of participants who gave data on this theme)

QUOTE (PARTICIPANT: LOCATION)

### 1 – CURRENT EXPERIENCE OF BEING CHILDFREE

#### **1.1 Gladness (8)**

*At this age, at this point I'm loving it, because every time I look around me and I see people with children or see the fact of lack of freedom, I'm always so grateful I'm not in that place (Ruby 3-4)*

*I'm glad that things went to plan and I never (laughs) I never had any! (5-6) I don't even think about it, maybe be-, too much, maybe because I surround myself with other people and friends and identify with many people who are in the same boat as me, and because I have no bodily or emotional yearning for that (Maria: 85-87)*

*In as much as I've ever considered it probably relief, good job I didn't (5-6) it's not something that I do particularly think about (Amanda: 15-16)*

*I think I'm probably quite pleased I haven't got any (2) I'm quite pleased I suppose that I'm free. I have that... Freedom is my middle name basically. I like freedom (Helen: 5-6)*

*At this stage of my life it's starting to feel like a very good thing (Jane: 4)*

*My life er, is great. I really like my situation (3-4) I am very much enjoying my life as a childless woman (51-92) I really, I very much enjoy my freedom (Alex: 13)*

*I suppose relatively carefree (Clio: 4)*

*very pleased I'm childfree. I'm very happy personally to not have children, to allow me to do all sorts of other things (13-14) you have a lot of freedom to think about being who you want to be and at the same time a lot of social pressure against that (Catherine: 47-48)*

#### **1.2 No Regret (5)**

*I like where I am. I don't know if I could trade it in, and I don't know if I'd want to trade it in. I mean if I had to live my life over again would I have chosen differently? (Pause) In the same circumstances, no, definitely not (Ruby: 108-111)*

*I feel no lack, never have (5) I don't have any regret at all, no I've never yearned for children, grandchildren (Amanda: 20)*

*I don't regret it, no, not really, I'm a bit philosophical about life, you know, if I was gonna have them, you know, I would have had them (Helen: 103-104)*

*there isn't a gap, there isn't a child gap there (179) I feel very comfortable with it, I don't look back with regret at all, I don't look back and think ah, now it would be 16 (226-228) I look at them now and I think thank god I'm not doing that! (Jane: 312-313)*

*I've never really regretted it. Um, I know I don't think I would have enjoyed being a mother to children anyway (Clio: 141-142)*

#### **1.3 What is missed (6)**

*I also am aware that when you have children they open up another side of of a person's life. The the unconditional love that a mother has for a child – I realize that I'm probably never ever gonna have this feeling (39-41) in having children it opens up a part of my own being or like experiential side or attachments or whatever it is that I probably won't experience, and won't even dip into or won't even have, you know that pure joy or bliss or love or whatever it is that you get from these things, I will never know (Ruby: 324-327)*

*Perhaps in my work, then that's where I come across people that have children, going back to um, going back to families and stuff. And sometimes I might feel a little bit envious. More of the security of it than anything, I think (Helen: 147-149)*

*I can imagine if there'd been my mum and me and a little girl, that might have been a very very nice little woman's*

triangle. And I think I probably would have understood her a bit better as well... that would have been a rather special little triangle I think (Charlotte: 505-509)

Um, and I just am prepared to feel that pain in order to live with it, to live, for it to be the right choice (374-377). I think there's grief attached to that if you don't, and I think that needs processing and I've sort of met that a lot, I've met, I've looked at that in myself quite, when it's come up I've looked at it and I've felt pain and upsetness about that, but it doesn't last. It goes, if I let myself feel it it goes. And it doesn't translate into 'I want to have a baby'. It's just a feeling of (pause) um, sadness that that isn't something that my body did, that I'm potentially capable of it and I didn't do it - that isn't sadness about having a child and bringing up a child. That's sadness about just how that would have felt and that profound experience that I didn't get to experience that I've heard about and witnessed through other women, what I imagine er being a parent um, the essence of it, I imagine what that would be like, and the pain of not having that is quite acute. And brief. And then I just get on and have a really good time (Alex: 377-378)

clearly it does give them a sense of um purpose. Um, which perhaps I don't have. Um so yeah I suppose I sort of look on it that you know my life feels quite lightweight in comparison because you know I don't have that sense of purpose really (Clio: 86-8)

if you're married with children then there's a knock on effect from that. You get up in the morning and you know you have to look after the children, you have to look after the, you have to this, you have to do that. If you're single, if I don't get up in the morning there's, there's nothing! (Helen: 298-302)

### **1.3.1 – idealization of motherhood**

it's a bit like people saying if you're a woman you can, well you can only experience true love if you've had a child...to me that's part of the idealization of motherhood which serves to keep women in a certain position, you become a real woman, fulfilling your identity, really having a sense of yourself when you have been pregnant and given birth and looked after a small child and to me that's sort of a really demeaning way of looking at either a man or a woman's potential. And that's not to say that women who want to be mothers don't have that experience but the idea that if you don't have it then you've sort of lost out on something is not the corollary of that (Catherine: 384-392)

I don't get it, why is one kind of love more valuable or worthwhile than another kind of love? (Bella: 690-691)

you sort of hear it everywhere and feel it and feel more and more kind of cut out from it (Jane: 508-509)

### **1.4 Search for meaning (6)**

I realize that that children give them a sense of purpose and meaning but I don't really think for one moment that would have been worth probably the 10 or the 20 years of being a parent to children. I think you know I do see it that actually yes it's just a question of finding purpose and meaning somewhere else. Now I'm really struggling with that but I I don't feel that you know, I made the wrong decision (Clio: 143-147)

when you get to my stage where there's really not that much work out there... you kind of go 'oh, what was all that for?' And I think, I think the sort of whole children/grandchildren thing is something that you think that's been, whatever else I've done in my life, I've made this thing you know, it's been like a purpose in a way (Charlotte: 33-37)

I think lots of women do [need meaning], I think most women do, even women who are sort of, part of them is overwhelmed by this belief that being a mother has to be their destiny (56-57). I'm glad I had the opportunity to do lots of other things, and I'm glad that I'm not a mother (141-142) I um sort of get really passionate about other things so it's not all about, you know fulfilment doesn't have to be about children (Catherine: 172-173)

are you having children cos you don't know what else to do in life? Or is it a conscious decision? (Bella: 310-311)

I see other women who are just desperate to have a child cos they're terrified not to. I think it can become your life's work if you don't know what to do with your life. I think there are lots of women who potentially diverted to that (Alex: 341-343)

if you're married with children then there's a knock on effect from that. You get up in the morning and you know you have to look after the children, you have to look after the, you have to this, you have to do that. If you're single, if I don't get up in the morning there's, there's nothing! (Helen: 298-302)

### **1.5 Relationships with children - important (6)**

*it's great to have the children upstairs. Um, little smiley faces, it's lovely. So, that's been a real gift actually (104-105) So I quite like to be around children somewhere, I wouldn't mind sort of, I have sort of thought about, oh maybe I should be a assistant teacher or something (Helen: 28-29)*

*I think when you don't have them around, you can slightly lose that child quality which I think we all need to survive really (46-47) they just make me laugh, children just make me laugh all the time (62)... but it's always been that enjoy their company and then you can hand them back (Charlotte: 66)*

*I love my nieces and nephews, and my god children and I'm very active in their lives (28-29) I think it's important for people to have that connection, those connections with, with children. I don't, I would not want a life without that (181-182) I think having those connections has been very, and this might be the wrong word because I was never bereaved, but it is quite healing that, for a childfree person to have such strong connections with children. And, and, and I find it interesting that I used the word healing cos I'm not aware that there is something to heal (Jane: 458-462)*

*I have a love for the children in my life that is very profound. It just isn't based in domesticity or looking after them on a daily basis. But it's very much based on a, desperately wanting nothing bad to happen to them and desperately wanting them to have an amazing life you know. I just don't have the care-taking role that the parents do. Um, and I think there, that's, that's a different kind of love isn't it, love in action, love in a daily sort of expression, because that's love when it's hardest to do things, when you probably are so tired and fucked off with them and they're screaming and having a tantrum on the floor and you've still got to love them and, you know. Every day forever, and that (laughs), that's a massive thing isn't it? (Alex: 403-409)*

*Very pleased to have children in my life that I've not given birth to or brought up (7-8) I do know lots of children, I like children, um, I suppose my nieces I'm quite close to.. I really like, I've always found them good company ever since they were tiny (Catherine: 121-124)*

*I'm more the kind of person who'd be there for someone without the legalities of it, does that make sense? And I've done that in the past where, offer my home, give lots, give everything I have in terms of money and support and care (284-287)*

#### **- not important (2)**

*my sister has children who I have absolutely no interest in at all – I know this sounds a dreadful thing to say but I don't actually have much to do with my sister either, we're very different people (Amanda: 11-13)*

*I've never been comfortable with small children around you know I just don't know how to behave with them sort of thing. So I've never sort of envied my friends or my family when they've had small children. I mean it's always been a you know oh thank goodness, I don't want that (Clio: 81-84)*

### **1.6 Self-concept**

#### **- Childfreedom as Selfish (5)**

*I make myself available for other people, so I do give of myself but maybe not as as a, there's a selfishness in that that I'm aware of; I can shut off, I can say okay now enough is enough, it's my time, but you can't do that with children (47-49) I choose not to make myself available 24/7 for another person, or another 2 or 3 people – I feel in some ways that's a selfish choice. I've never sat overnight looking after somebody or holding their hand or, does that make sense? There is a selflessness in that, I didn't choose not to want to do that really (Ruby: 128-131)*

*I er, maybe I'm not, maybe I'm just a very selfish person but I find it quite difficult when children are around because they are bloody demanding, probably, possibly so am I (23) actually I don't think I'm a selfish person at all (Maria: 115)*

*it's quite, I suppose it sounds quite selfish really (Helen: 9-10)*

*I think when you've got kids you stop being so damn selfish in a way cos there isn't time apart from anything else (Charlotte: 88-89)*

*I feel quite selfish because I don't have um you know, other people other than my elderly mother, but I don't have other people that take up so much time and energy; I'm relatively free to pursue my own interests (Clio: 7-9)*

#### **- Childfreedom as Selfless (2)**

women who are voluntarily childfree I often see them in common newspaper articles being described as selfish somehow, to which you know one could respond actually to not use more of the world's resources is a very unselfish um thing to do (Catherine: 328-330)

it's possible to take a view that my choice has been selfish – not having my life disrupted, taking on the responsibilities of a child – it isn't pure selfishness in the sense that as a member of society I've been a contributing member of that society in terms of paying taxes and all the rest of it most of my life (Amanda: 459-462)

### **- Maturity/Development (3)**

part of me does actually feel that because I've never taken that step and never become responsible for another human being I haven't fully grown up (23-24)...Perhaps having children wouldn't have made me grow up in the way that I imagine it would (Clio: 231-232)

I made it an absolute condition that I wanted to be a very aware, enlightened mother, not enlightened like spiritually en-, but like someone who could see my child, who could be present with my child... And now, of course, I'm at the age where I would, I think, like 'Wow I could really do it!' and now of course it's too late to do it myself (Bella: 187-191)

But, ah, for ages you see, I did, I had this, I remember saying to the therapist I really think my problem is I've got arrested development because I just feel of course I've never grown up because of course I never had children! You know, I did have this sense, I really have somehow you know, never grown up and it is connected with the children thing (499-502) it wasn't a particularly adult reaction really... My fantasies were not adult fantasies they were more, it was something out of like a fairy tale (286-287) the other one just drove me mad and I remember talking about this in therapy a lot – unless you've had children, you're never fully grown up, kind of thing. It really pisses me off, that sort of sense of somehow you kind of remain eternally peter pan because you don't have children (Jane: 492-494)

## **2 – THE EXPERIENCE OF CHOOSING CHILD FREEDOM**

### **2.1 How is choice felt? (8)**

[during post-marriage 30s] Didn't even cross my mind. Ever, not at all. See this is why I don't think it's something I I've been yearning for, does that make sense (Ruby: 57-58)

I don't think that I actually ever sort of sat down and in my head said 'I'm definitely not having children'. I always knew that I didn't want children (150-151) I don't think I ever really made that choice, but it was not something, you know how there are some things you think 'oh I really want this' (Maria: 155-156)

it was pretty much an automatic choice - of course I don't want children. Why not? Because I don't particularly like children. I didn't like them when I was one and nothing had particularly changed. I'm not drawn to children at all as a general rule (Amanda: 39-41)

I'm a bit philosophical about life, you know, if I was gonna have them, you know, I would have had them (103-104) actually, I've always made things happen (Helen: 313-314)

I'm not sure that I made an active choice in I I never actively thought in my 20s I won't have children. I very very definitely in my 20 didn't think finding somebody and getting married and having a child has to be my destiny and I really want to be a mother (Catherine: 137-139)

it's not something that accidentally happened to me, it's something I've thought long and hard about (26-27) it was very important me, for me not to be like that woman in the cartoon, famous cartoon that wakes up and goes oh my god I forgot to have children (27-29)... there were times when that decision was made for me by either circumstances or my own fears and insecurities or dis-ease or something (225-226) there was that ambivalence despite never having this great I must do this at all costs thing (Jane: 103-104)

There is an element of sacrifice of course. You choose one thing, you don't choose another, you know. That's choice isn't it? And it's a big choice, it's a really big choice. Um, and I just am prepared to feel that pain in order to live with it, to live, for it to be the right choice (Alex: 374-377)

I'm not one of these women who say I definitely want to have children so it's never been strong. Um and Terry's never felt bothered either way so, and it just never happened (124-126) [how did you feel about the, it not happening?] not strongly I have to say either way really, I suppose I I was fairly ambivalent about it (134) I can honestly say with my hand on my heart there's never there's never really been a moment where I've thought ah yeah I'd love one of those you know, little baby in arms you know, or a little 3 or 4 year old running around (293-295) I suppose it's a choice by default

almost um because I think you know, my husband and I never really talked about children before we got married (Clio: 123-124)

## **2.2 Change through time (3)**

*In my twenties I had always thought that I would be a mother, even though it wasn't a burning desire (105-106)... I had already assumed, always assumed that I would, and we were going to have lots of kids (108-109) I made it an absolute condition that I wanted to be a very aware, enlightened mother, not enlightened like spiritually en-, but like someone who could see my child, who could be present with my child... And now, of course, I'm at the age where I would, I think, like 'Wow I could really do it!' and now of course it's too late to do it myself (Bella: 187-191)*

*I always imagined I was going to have children anyway, and I used to look after everybody's children, I was the babysitter for the world as far as I was concerned. You see I loved kids and I never thought I was never gonna have kids so it's interesting (Ruby: 17-19)*

*it's been a really really long game, that one, for me... a lot of it done internally just with myself, a bit with, in therapy because it's, you know it's been something I've needed to get a handle on (Jane: 101-103)*

## **2.3 Desire for other pursuits (4)**

*I guess the search for awareness, and the search for realization in this lifetime has always been my number one goal and children were kind of like... if it happens, whatever (177-179) for me the driving force was for spiritual realization more than being pregnant (Bella: 152-153)*

*where I put my thoughts and energy into travelling and going round my spiritual path, I've not had a chance to sit there and feel the loss or think about oh, what about children? (87-91) Purpose comes in many different ways and it doesn't have to be just about having children (Ruby: 214-215)*

*it was always this need to push and search, and um, so there's a, I think in me there's a, there's always a desire to move forward and try and push and, and search. Um, so (pause), beyond family and children (Helen: 227)*

*I think I was too focused on wanting to do my own thing. (11-12) I was so in love with the theatre and so wanting to be a dancer and that was just completely like blinkered really (32-33) think I was just so clear about what I wanted to do (160) whatever that tug is, that's been more important really (Charlotte: 228)*

## **2.4 No urge for motherhood (7)**

*When people say they're broody I don't understand that, I don't know, I haven't had experience of that, I don't know where broody lives, is it there (puts hands to head) or there (to chest) or there (to abdomen)?... I imagine it must be emotional, some sort of gut feeling, but it's not one that I've honestly and sincerely ever felt (Maria: 32-36)*

*I suppose that's when it dawned on me that the genetic imperative was completely missing (Amanda: 274)*

*I do love kids, I just (pause), apart from one, two times that I can remember I've never ever had a burning desire to have any of my own. I've never had a desire to form a sort of satellite family (Alex: 29-31)*

*I never particularly wanted children (Helen: 20-23)*

*when she [friend] hit 30 she said she had a kind of physical thing in the pit of her stomach (16-17) I thought when I hit 30 I'll have the same feeling and then I didn't you know, so. And I think other women I've talked to, I mean it's been, other women that have really really wanted children, it's been like a almost a kind of knowing, visceral thing in them. And I thought well, that's something you either have or you don't really (Charlotte: 19-22)*

*you know the way people describe this maternal instinct, I just don't, I just don't recognize that in myself, I've never had that (Jane: 76-77)*

*some women have some kind of biological urge, you know, which if it's there it's there. I wonder about that as well, I mean I think hormones are every much affected by your mental realm (Bella: 460-462)*

### **2.4.1 Opposite - urge for motherhood (2)**

*there have been times in my life where I've felt, I've felt a very strong desire to be pregnant and I've imagined what my child would be like and... But it's never been something that I've sort of, you know how some girls have wedding dreams and child dreams, I've never had that, I never had that, I've had them in the moment, but I've never had a sort of prolonged 'that's what my future's gonna be'. That's never been part of my sort of imagining of the future.(211-215) it*



*felt very sort of powerful, powerful at the time, it felt very um, but it was very short lived. Very very short lived and (pause). It didn't drive me, it didn't become one of my drivers you know, it just was very moment- momentary (Alex: 222-225)*

*I went through this extraordinary stage where, and I wasn't even aware and I can only think it's some kind of great primeval force, in my early 40s um, quite a few of my friends had sort of late babies and every time they told me they were pregnant I would start sobbing uncontrollably, it was absolutely extraordinary, and I think that its, its, I put it down to my body, you know, saying something in a way that couldn't even access in my own head because it, it wasn't, genuinely never has been that I changed my mind (Jane: 70-75)*

### **2.5 Understanding of 'Maternal' (3)**

*I think I'm actually quite a maternal person... I start sort of being maternal and protective and doing the things that a mother would do for younger people (Maria: 119-122)*

*my maternal instinct has always been really strong... I was always the person who was looking after everybody else and, and I think that's probably one of the reasons why I didn't have children (Alex: 235-239)*

*I feel quite motherly anyway. (Mmm, what do you mean by motherly?) I, yeah, I feel quite, quite, I feel protective of people (Helen: 80-82)*

### **2.6 Partner's influence**

#### **2.6.1 Instability of a relationship (2)**

*the only times that I have considered getting pregnant are times that I've been like, deeply, passionately in love (88-89) That's the only time I would've ever thought of having a baby. And those were the relationships that were the most unstable. Which would never, which would certainly have ended me up as a single mother (Bella: 92-94)*

*it wasn't okay to bring another life into this relationship because I don't know, to me it's a huge commit- it's a huge thing and it's not fair to bring somebody else into the equation if there is no emotional stability (22-24) the relationship was so unstable that it didn't feel safe for me to even think about having a child (Ruby: 20-21)*

#### **2.6.2 Needing choice in relationship (3)**

*I don't think I would have got together with her if that hadn't been a po-, if that option had been taken away right from the beginning I wouldn't have done it (Jane: 66-68)*

*So I suddenly was like, hang on a minute, you, your, the choice has been taken away from me now because you don't want to have any more children. (97-98) [he then handed back the choice offering to have more children if that's what Alex wanted] And interestingly as soon as he said that I was fine, I didn't need to (103) once I had the option back again I felt really sure that could, I, that I didn't want any (Alex: 104-105)*

*I think if my husband had really wanted children and I'd have been put under pressure I'm not sure I'd have been terribly comfortable with that (Clio: 134-136)*

#### **2.6.3 Opposite – gladness of no choice in relationship (1)**

*he loathes children, um, and he made it really plain from the start that he didn't want children. (How was that for you?) I think it was fine, again, a bit of pressure was off really (Charlotte: 290-295)*

#### **2.6.4 Need or not of relationship (4)**

*I could have gotten myself into a relationship quite easily and had a child if that's what I wanted. Or I could have gone down to the sperm bank and got myself pregnant, seriously if that's what I really wanted um, there's nothing to stop me (Ruby: 50-53)*

*If I had wanted it enough I would have gone ahead and done it, or I would have gone ahead and adopted (62-63) I just didn't you know, didn't want it enough (Jane: 332-333)*

*I would never be a single mother. Never. (What would it be like to be a single mother?) Oh my God, to be a single mother, I just think of like, like, (pause) poverty (Bella: 102-104)*

*the situation had never arisen in a relationship which would probably have been the only situation where I might have considered children and it never did come up as an issue (Catherine: 33-35)*

#### **2.6.5 If had been in relationship may have had children (4)**

maybe if I had a partner at any point who was desperate to have children I would've thought 'oh, alright then, well let's not, let's give it a go' (55-56) I always knew that I didn't want children, um, that I didn't particularly want children but as I said if some partner had sort of said 'oh I really want to have a family' (Maria: 151-152)

the focus would have been on the being married and being with somebody and then, if I'd had children, it would have been progression on from there (Helen: 16-17)

there wasn't the right person at the right time I suppose. (11-12) maybe it's just to do with romantic fiction or just what we're told as women... I suppose there's a bit of me that goes maybe I just never met a man that I wanted to reproduce with, I'm not sure. So I'm not quite sure how much but, it doesn't feel that way really, I couldn't imagine being swept off my feet. I'm quite sort of pragmatic about relationships (Charlotte: 178-183)

I've often thought well if I had been blissfully happily married um, I've always wondered if I would have wanted that person's children (Clio: 312-313)

## **2.7 Mother's influence (4)**

We had been a family of 5, my mother was very unhappy, my mother was a very unhappy mother. Very unhappy. And this I think, er there's only one person in my family who has had children. The rest of us remain childless (Bella: 114-116)

I grew up with my mum who'd had 3 kids and she always said she didn't really want kids (94-95) my mum did a bit of a story on me, cos she always used to go 'oh you kids have stopped me doing what I wanted to do with my life' and um, not in a huge way but there was always something slightly resentful about the fact that she could've been, she might have done something marvellous (Charlotte: 104-107)

That comes from my mother, I think my mother feels that herself and um, I think that I've imbued an awful lot about my mother's own inferiority about herself (419-420) she's imagined herself to be invalided which is where I think I got the 'I will have an inferior child' from (427-428) I think for a long time I thought my child, the child that I would have would somehow be inferior. So those kinds of er, feelings do inform, did inform my reluctance (Jane: 139-141)

she ended up having children and she has never been very happy in her life, I mean she loves us and she loves her grandchildren and she loves being part of a family but also she, I know that she feels, um, unfulfilled as a, as a person. You know, it's really interesting to me that her, that family life didn't fulfil her. It was just something that she did. She, it was almost like something that passed the time, it was almost something that filled her life as a doctor's wife you know...And I think that probably impacted, you know I'm prob- there's probably a bit of my life which is acting out what my Mum would've done had she not had children. And also, desperately not wanting to have her life, desperately not wanting to you know, to be someone who's unfulfilled (Alex: 250-261)

## **2.8 Perception of career and motherhood (3)**

because of my occupation, being a singer, I can't see how children would fit into my life which is completely and utterly peripatetic (3-4) I love what I do and I think it defines me (56) you just sort of carry on doing what you know but it, it really isn't a profession, unless you're rich, monied and you know, can afford a nanny or whatever, where it goes together. Being a singer and being a mother I think. (Maria: 78-80)

I didn't know how you could do my job and have children (146) I remember thinking in my 20s that it was, it was like a choice that I decided to have a career, and that that was it, and that that was, I didn't need to think about it then (Charlotte: 187-189)

[IN CONTRAST] I've got the financial wherewithal to have supported a child and because of the nature of the way I work probably could have made the 2 work really well (Jane: 331-332)

## **2.9 Other motivations**

### **RESPONSIBILITY (2)**

it's obviously an enormous commitment, a huge responsibility which will from the point of becoming pregnant last for the rest of your life (Amanda: 6-7)

I think it's always been a real fear of responsibility for somebody else's life (66-67) I think it's the absolute terror of having to keep this tiny little thing going, what if it dies in its cot (Charlotte: 78-79)

### **OVERPOPULATION (3)**

I question people who are having children! First of all the planet has plenty of people, we're seven point what billion?(Bella: 268-269)

*it's not like the world doesn't have enough people, there are too many people. I have a sense that if I wanted a child one day, which I may do later on in life, I'll I'll adopt or foster. Loads of people in the world with bad starts and if I really wanted to do something like that I would take on a few people and give them a hand (Ruby: 61-64)*

*it seemed only logical to me that a quick squint around told me there were already too many people – didn't make any sense to contribute to that by having my own children, so why would I want them? I'd only make matters worse. And I think that's probably roughly where it began and actively got reinforced over the years (Amanda: 62-65)*

### **ADULTCENTRIC (3)**

*I'm not interested in anybody of whatever age that I can't have a conversation with (Maria: 38-39)*

*I've never been comfortable with small children around you know, I just don't know how to behave with them sort of thing. So I've never sort of envied my friends or my family when they've had small children. I mean it's always been a you know, oh thank goodness, I don't want that (Clio: 81-84)*

*I think I would have been driven mad by reading the same story book a thousand times, it's okay on a Saturday night when you've gone there for the weekend but every night er, not for me really (Catherine:124-126)*

**[ENERGY]** *I think I didn't have children because I was, I really wondered whether I had the energy, to be able to go through children day and night, the whole sleeplessness etc etc (Bella: 788-790)*

**[SUPPORT]** *I was also always aware that it's difficult to raise children here. There's so much less support than there is say when, if I was at home (Ruby: 35-36)*

**[SECURITY]** *I'm very, a lot of my security, I need to be financially secure and so, and that would, I think again it would be something that was out of my control is that, especially if you were left as a single parent or something, and suddenly you've got, you know, you're responsible. Well, you are whether you're single or, but you're responsible financially for 2 children, 1 or 2, 3 children. I think that would be really hard (Helen: 106-110)*

**[RISK]** *it's the other side of it isn't it, the other side of the joy, is the profound sort of pain if anything happens to your child (561-562) the risk of that sort of you know, love and investment and you know, the, you know, I guess it's the thing about somewhere in the spectrum of loving, and it being er, better to love than not. Some kind of loss just seems wrong. Children dying before their parents just, I can't, you know, you see people never recovering from that. So it's a big risk isn't it therefore? Gambling on having children who might die (Alex: 570-573)*

## **3 – THE SOCIAL WORLD**

### **3.1 Negative experiences (7)**

*I've certainly been discriminated against for it I would say (14-15) I certainly remember a lot of or quite a lot of annoying family comments, from my mother I would say predominantly around um, I remember one comment was something along the lines of 'oh when you were little and you had guinea pigs you had all the right instincts'. Um, so certainly some maternal pressure (160-163) I became much more aware in groups that the existential challenge for a woman was always described, in their sort of late 30s early 40s was always described as am I gonna have children, and my response to that was no, the existential challenge is is my belief that I will only be fulfilled if I have children? My belief or society's belief? And I think in therapy those 2 things are really not understood (38-42) in my experience in supervision groups women in their late 30s are seen as very simple beings which is the whole dilemma about how can I have children, how can I be a mother etc (Catherine: 43-45)*

*It was... the most painful experience. It was, you could see the pity in people's eyes – I was treated with pity. I mean, here I was in my 30s – in the West is considered the prime time for getting a partner and getting pregnant and having babies, and there I was just like over the hill (25-28) But the baby thing, people are more scared. People are more scared to ask you that, because 'Oh my God, you didn't use your uterus!' (Bella: 506-507)*

*I'm sure they must see me as an alien who walks my own way and my own path (100-101) It doesn't matter. I mean, sometimes it feels weird, I can feel the oddness, the fact that I stand alone all. I'm this odd being in the room. But I'm comfortable with it now – maybe it's age (107-108) I don't think they will ever understand and I don't choose to explain... there is no real honesty, I don't think they'll ever know the real me. Um, but I share parts of me that they will find acceptable, I find my balance that way (Ruby: 262-266)*

*I'm asked quite often 'oh have you got any children?' and I just say 'no I haven't', and people, I sense that people are*

surprised. I get the sense that people think 'oh, she should have had' or 'why not? Is she a lesbian? Is she, Is she um, you know, a weirdo, oh'. You know, I think, I do feel judged actually by people, not everybody obviously, by people who um, are new to me. And then I feel compelled to um, er, defend myself and er, um explain myself (200-204) I say 'well I don't, it just, you know, it doesn't really fit in with my job (209-210) I'm always surprised by the question actually. I always, I don't think, I don't think, I you know, I don't think 'oh my god, stigma', I just think 'oh well I'm me and I don't have children' (216-218) I think 'why is that strange?' I forget that it might be considered to be a bit um, out of the norm if you like (Maria: 221-222)

I first asked whether I could be sterilized, have my tubes tied, when I was about 19 rather than continue to take hormone tablets. Um, and all I got then was a 45 minute lecture from my GP at the time about women changing their minds (86-88) It was an outrageous thing to suggest that purely because I was biologically female I would be bound to change my mind; it's sort of denying the fact that I had a brain in my head and had sort of thought about this a bit (99-101) it's still so much of a given that you will have children if you are female and if you don't want them it's (long pause) it marks you out as odd and will give people yet another reason to look down at you (368-369) Not something that overly bothered me to be honest, I've never really been much of a herd member, wanting to go along with all the societal norms (Amanda: 388-389)

I even went through a stage when I lied to people (90)...and there have been times when I've said no, and they've sort of looked at me uncomprehendingly so I started to say yes and then I started to lie and say no I haven't because I can't and of course that elicits a whole different response (94-96) I just find it very difficult to dissemble, I just don't want to be anything other than me. So in the end I thought well I don't want to go round in the world somehow hiding my childless state and being embarrassed by it, just embrace it (98-100) I like to make connections and, and feel connected in and so that invisibilizing of myself has always felt very unease, sat very uneasily (346-348) Part of me must have been saying I'm fed up with not fitting in, I want to fit in. And I think, you know, I think that has been a huge thing for me in my life that notion of somehow always wanting to fit in but somehow never fitting in. um, and the whole thing about having children is you fit in, because that's what most people do – they have children (356-360) if they did ask me I'd be very straight forward, I'd hear it as a straight forward question, I think there've been times when I've heard 'do you fit into mainstream society?' (384-386) I'm aware enough to know now that it's my own paranoia and it's not coming from them (Jane: 496)

I do sometimes um, er, imagine that people see me in that light, you know as a relatively immature woman who hasn't sort of come to full maturity (25-26) I have come across some instances of people who clearly think I don't understand um, you know if I've offered to babysit they've declined because um, presumably because they don't think I would have been able to have um coped (182-184) there was a sense there of oh poor Clio you know, hasn't seen the light (187-188)...Well she didn't say that, I think that's me sort of yeah it's like well what are you going to do with your life then? (Clio: 196-197)

### **3.2 The norm/Acceptance (6)**

I think one of the reasons I like living in London is that it absolutely does not matter (139) And there're so many people, single people. I mean I go, oh let's think, my healing group, most of those I would say, at least 50% probably don't have children, even more than that. And I also belong to a walking group, and a lot of those people don't have chil- a lot of them do actually, they're divorced or, you know, some of them do have children but a lot of them don't have children. So I'm surrounded all the time by other people that don't have children (Helen: 142-147)

I've kind of really I suppose not really been in the normal mainstream in terms of the people I mix with every day (Catherine: 183-184)

I don't think I've ever felt there's been any anti thing (213-214) I know so many women that don't have kids. I think if I'd been the only one in a whole group of people that hadn't got kids then I think I probably might have felt a bit odd... I think I know more people that don't have kids than I do who do (Charlotte: 215-223)

on the whole I think most people I've not had a problem with you know, most people just accept it and in fact I've got one or two, one or two other friends who haven't got children. It's brought other people into my life you know because actually not having children has has been a a feature in common in a way (Clio: 189-192)

I do find actually that there is the club of the childless and the people who have children (12-13) I think there's this sense of 'oh phew, another one, another one in our club, another one who um, is in the same boat as us' (198-200) most of my friends who I am now, you know still very close to, are in the childfree camp (Maria: 13-14)

### **3.2 Friendships between childfree women and mothers (5)**

*I'm very close to my sister and I was with her when she had her first child which was incredible (Alex: 17-18)*

*she made me so much a part of it that I felt much less ignorant and inadequate cos I'd been through it with her so much more, and we were very close, are very close friends, and you know, I was sort of with her through it, it somehow seemed to help me find a footing as a woman without children but with something to offer women who do have children (Jane: 84-87)*

*I had a particularly close friend which, I think my my friendship with her actually started to go downhill at that point because I didn't understand what it was like to have children (185-187) my relationship with her then, well it didn't actually last that much longer to be perfectly honest with you after she had children (188-189) I suppose it it probably goes 2 ways it was you know things like you know, somehow the time you know you never got, you never had a chance to talk and do the things that you used to do and um you know there would always be, not that they were always talking to children but there would always be interruptions from children or they wouldn't have the time or something like that and um, so perhaps I lacked the understanding to to cope with that at the time (Clio: 197-201)*

*as a childless person, or maybe because I'm a very selfish, performery type person and I want um, attention to myself, I tended to, when people started having babies, um, you sort of become a little bit estranged from them because I personally resented you know, A; you are always at their beck and call because of being, having children is always the excuse for um, you know, everybody else having to dance around you and B; (laughs) I sound like such a prima donna!, um, I didn't like the fact that people weren't giving me their full attention when there were child-, when there were children, especially young children in the room, I couldn't fucking stand it to be honest. And um, yes I, I er, maybe I'm not, maybe I'm just a very selfish person but I find it quite difficult when children are around because they are bloody demanding, probably, possibly so am I (Maria: 15-23)*

*what used to really annoy me about my sister was she went into earth mother er you know, having children is so special, I am so special cos I've had them you know, kind of thing that served to make me feel really inadequate and really invisibilized (484-487) the effort you have to make as the childless part of your friends' children or your family's children is huge, you do need to make more of an effort than your friends or your siblings do (Jane: 189-191)*

#### **4 – PERCEPTION OF PREGNANCY (7)**

*And the thought of like, having this like, animalistic, like, thing, you know, to have something growing inside of you, and then like, having someone suckle on your breast (makes disgusted face, laughs), just seemed like so, like a dog, or like a cat, I mean, it just seems like, like being a cow, and then the knowledge that when you have babies when you're older your body goes (Bella: 183-187)*

*it was wonderful watching Jess you know, get bigger and bigger and then having this baby, it was absolutely incredible, it was a text book birth... it's a lovely, I love the fact that I was there with her, able to be with her, it's amazing. You know, it's the closest thing I'll ever get to childbirth and, yes, I'm, it's enough, I'm really really pleased to have been with her (436-443) there's also a bit of me that's quite glad I haven't put my body through that. I mean, it's traumatic (426-427) there is a little bit of me that's like I don't, it's traumatic, you know, especially at my age now. Post 40, I think it's a tough thing to do to your body (Alex: 434-436)*

*I went through this extraordinary stage where, and I wasn't even aware and I can only think it's some kind of great primeval force, in my early 40s um, quite a few of my friends had sort of late babies and every time they told me they were pregnant I would start sobbing uncontrollably, it was absolutely extraordinary, and I think that its, its, I put it down to my body, you know, saying something in a way that couldn't even access in my own head because it, it wasn't, genuinely never has been that I changed my mind (Jane: 70-75)*

*I just think of alien, no the idea of just having something growing in me always filled me with utter dread. Which is mad again cos it's the most natural thing in the world you know, but no the very thought of having a human being growing inside you I thought was just bizarre. I still think it's bizarre to be honest. Well it is, it's extraordinary... it is magical and it's amazing, but just that whole thing just used to kinda make me go argh (shudders). (Charlotte: 343-351)*

*being pregnant is, it is physically dangerous, even, even D- said it's, it's like carrying a parasite for 9 months – it'll leach the calcium out of your bones, teeth, the best of all your nutrition goes to the foetus at your expense, it's not very good for you (Amanda: 142-144)*

*I'm not a cowardly person but the pain threshold, you know, I often think to myself, I mean you see it on the television don't you, you think 'who'd wanna do that? Who'd wanna put themselves through that? The pain!' I mean that scares me, the pain (Maria: 157-160)*

*I'd never really bought into this idea that childbirth is the most natural lovely fantastic experience in the world, and certainly most of my friends that have children um, would kind of share that view... I'm glad I didn't go through the experience, um, not hugely, not hugely preoccupying my time I have to say (112-117) know I don't believe that for me that I could only have experience my body if I'd become pregnant (Catherine: 383-384)*

## **5 – END OF FERTILITY (10)**

*up until age 30 I probably still have thought yeah it'll be okay to have a child but after that no, so from the age of 30 onwards I certainly have not been thinking of that. I think I have chosen not to have a child from then onward (80-82) I wouldn't want a child now for sure, god no, no, I'd have to work til I was 75 or something (shared laughter). No, no no no no. so um, I don't feel it's an end, I just think if there was an end it ended a long time ago (Ruby: 146-148)*

*I did actually give myself an intellectual cut off point... 40 was my absolute cut off point on the basis of all the sort of medical demographics and when I was 40 I was hugely relieved that I was childfree (32-36) immaterial, you know, it's something that happened. Um, Biological fertility for women who want children is a really important thing. For women who don't want children it doesn't have to be, it isn't a big part of our identity unless we make it so (Catherine: 97-99)*

*sort of a relief, but not a relief because you know, there's the biological stuff that happens when your fertility starts to end and you think 'oh this is really boring, all this stuff', you know, hot flushes, that sort of thing (226-228) it didn't seem relevant actually. It didn't seem er, I didn't feel as if I was any less a woman (Maria: 229-230)*

*ah, it'll mean you can never have children – that wasn't a change. Would I change my mind? I really doubted it. By the time you're 30 it's not really on the cards I don't think, that something you've been really quite certain about all your life up till then you're suddenly going to change your mind about (268-271) the end of my fertility as far as I was concerned was when I had my tubes done, so that was the choice aspect (Amanda: 255-256)*

*I don't really mind. I don't mind at all. I think I'd think about it a lot in my early 30s. And that was a time that I was in a relationship, and it had all gone to pot and um, I did think, I did think about it then. I kind of got through it then almost (Helen: 191-194).*

*It crosses my mind sometimes that you know, well I don't have a choice now (141) from an age point of view, early 30s um, the possibility that you know, I mean, not that I kind of particularly wanted children, but the, the, the advancing years of having that option taken away. Um, but that was early 30s. I think by the time (pause) yeah, I think by the time I'd got to 40s it didn't really bother me. And it doesn't bother me now (Clio: 196-199)*

*contraception took up an awful lot of effort, it really did. So yes, it was a massive relief not to have to, well actually it was a massive relief not to have to think about it when I met R- who just never got anybody pregnant, had mumps when he was a child, reckoned he was sterile you know, which is fine (282-285) though I tried very hard with contraception not to have children, but it, I suppose there was a kind of final thing, I thought oh well that's it then (Charlotte: 266-267)*

*I did realize that god I am so ready for those things to stop. I think though up until 4 or 5 years ago I would have been not fine if they had because it was still possibly in my head you never know, but I, I'm so over that now. You know. So there must have been a level at which, you know, I wasn't ready to let go of it psychologically fully (158-161) until about 4 years ago I'd say, I would have felt really unready. It is a funny thing, it's a sort of unreadiness you feel and then you, and then you suddenly don't (218-219) I feel very happy about the end of my fertility (Jane: 223)*

*I don't relish the idea of having a child at 45, and what I'll be doing at 55, isn't, for me it's not just about now (110-111) I don't at 55 or 60 want to be bringing up a teenager. That isn't you know, I don't want to spend the next 15 years nurturing a child on an everyday 24 hour I don't want to do that (118-120) ALSO (Asked about early 30s & sense of time limit) I felt that far more crucially at that point in my life than, in some ways than I feel it now, ironically. (187-) ALSO I haven't really thought about it that much. Because I suppose I'm under the illusion that, or I'm under the belief that it will not be for ages (453-454) I still have the option of having children, i.e. I'm still fer- I'm still ovulating, I suppose there's a bit in my mind which suits me because I like to have choice. So I still feel like I have the choice (Alex: 85-87)*

### **5.1 Menopause (4)**

*it was horrible, it is horrible (in what way?) Um, mostly the fear, er, the fear of looking older. (357-358) I think most women think of going through menopause - what saves you is if you are a mother. Because if you're a mother while you're going through menopause your main consideration is just taking care of your kids or whatever. You don't have time to worry (Bella: 364-366)*

*Emancipatory! My menopause coincided with um, needing to have a hysterectomy...I kind of um, experienced that symbolically and in real terms as a sort of ancient Aristotelian belief about the um uselessness, worthlessness of older women (Catherine: 73-80)*

*I think I thought I'd suddenly turn into an old woman (254-255), I was dreading it. (244) But actually I just stopped and that was it. And it was fine. And it was quite a relief I think...I don't feel any different. (Charlotte: 253-257)*

*I don't think about that stuff to do with the menopause, I don't really, there's not a lot of point thinking about it now cos it's not happening, so you know, I'll deal with it when it happens. That's how I genuinely feel about it. I probably worry more about, I probably think more about getting female type cancer, that, I probably think about that more than I think about the end of my fertility, truthfully (Alex: 470-474)*

## **6 - FEELINGS ABOUT THE FUTURE**

### **6.1 Anxiety (5)**

*I do fear being lonely in my old age, but the fear was never great enough to, to prompt me. It's there. It's there. It's not like 'oh, I'm going to be fine'. It's there. But it was never enough to prompt me...(706-708) And everyone is scared of getting old whether they have kids or not. And, it's a difficult process, and I would hope that by the time I'm 70 or 80, that I have achieved, that I am in enough of a spiritual state, that I am a fountain of love and attention for other people. That's what I would rather, than me being 'I have someone to take care of me (Bella: 718-721)*

*I'm quite quite conscious that it might be the most painful, lonely anti part of, difficult part not so much anti, difficult part of um my life I think as I accept that change. It's hard enough to find you have no mobility but to have to do it on your own maybe? Um, very different. I can't say I'm looking forward to it so I'll have to make sure I stay healthy and never get there maybe. But these things aren't always in my hand, they are, I imagine it will be very hard for me. But I have spirituality on the other hand and so I imagine I'll have to get past whatever challenges I come up against, mmm. And we're not alone really in this world, we're human beings and we love, we care, it's okay now, I don't know its, I can't even, I don't know cos I'm not there, I really don't know, who knows? But I can only live for now, and this is what I try and do, just live for right now cos I really haven't a clue, maybe I'll be blessed and I won't have to face that. I'll be shocked if I didn't to be honest but anyhow, I mean I'm diabetic already but, yeah. But we get through everything so I don't see how I can't get through that too (Ruby: 309-319)*

*I worry a lot now about being old. And I, where, you know, where children might come into that, but that's just, then I say to myself well, why are you doing that? Wasting energy over that, because having children won't necessarily make any difference whatsoever, at all (98-101) Your health starts to fail, nobody thinks you're um, of any consequence, you begin to er, become invisible even as you know, a woman of my age, you can feel it and at least in theory you know, your children are supposed to um, you know, pay you a little bit of respect and look out for you and see if you're alright (Maria: 255-258)*

*sometimes there are so many simple things that you can just feel just in love with the universe, you know, moments. Moments of um, peace, deep peace. But you have to take that with the opposite as well. It's a whole range. It's a whole spectrum isn't it, of sort of you know, watching elderly people deteriorate and um, and then, you know, moments of incredible peace. So, acceptance of the whole thing I suppose. I think that's what I'm learning as I get older (Helen: 352-356)*

*you know, Alzheimer's, having to have care all the time, terrifying, terrifying. So I try not to think about it (Helen: 416)*

### **6.2 Opposite – no anxiety (2)**

*I try and live very much now. I just don't see the point in looking much further than the next couple of weeks even (485-486) I don't really want to live until I'm incapacitated um, and I don't, I only want to live until I can, if I can still do things, you know (Alex: 499-500) it's a waste of time isn't it, thinking about future stuff, good or bad really, you know. I think I spent a long time as a kid, all that responsibility I had I used to really worry about my parents getting ill and dying, and then my mum had breast cancer and obviously survived. And then my dad had this thing which you know, could and should in many ways have killed him and it didn't. So in a way I had to face this, like my biggest fears really, as a child that I carried into adulthood, it was like there and I had no choice but to look at it (505-510)*

*it's not really a question that enters my mind, it's just life really. I suppose in that question there's the possible thought around who's going to look after me when I get older? (Catherine: 250-251)*

### **6.3 illness/age of parents highlights need of care (3)**

*now my mother is 87, she'll be 88 this year, and one of my sisters lives with her, and takes care of her, and the thing really is is that when you're childless who's going to take care of you? (Bella: 669-671)*

*my mum is 87 and I'm having to er look after her quite a lot, and so, sort of being um brought face to face with your mortality, I'm beginning to, I'm, thinking at times 'shit, who's going to look after me when I'm, when I'm older?' (Maria: 7-9)*

*I just thought yeah, I haven't got one of those – I could do with a daughter to look after me in my old age. That's what I'd like. But then that's a, that's something that you don't realize until you get to a certain point (Charlotte: 445-447)*

#### **6.4 no expectation of relatives caring (2)**

*I wouldn't expect my nieces and nephews or my godchildren to do that for me (Jane: 237-238)*

*I wouldn't expect my nieces and nephews to look after me (Alex: 497-499)*

#### **6.5 children no guarantee of care (6)**

*having a child, i.e. my sister, is absolutely no guarantee of anything (45-46) I also know that having children is absolutely no guarantee of that anyway, so what am I moaning about (Maria: 88-89)*

*there's no guarantee that if you have children they're going to sit there and care for you, can be quite the opposite. So who knows? (189-192) I can't have children just so there's someone to look after me, sorry it's not gonna work like that (Ruby: 303-304)*

*Frightening. But, you could equally have children and they could be thousands of miles away (Helen: 319-320).*

*I might have lost the children, I mean there's all sorts of things. And of course, maybe the children would have turned out crap! (Jane: 398-400)*

*I don't actually think very many older people get looked after terribly well by their children, often because you know this idealized relationship between parents and children it is just that – idealized (Catherine: 251-253)*

*there is definitely no point in having kids so that you can, you know, you'll have company later on or someone to look out for you in your nursing home, it's just, cos they could die... it's a falsehood and I think it's um, it's very dodgy ground, you know, any of that sort of rationale for having children (Alex: 479-483)*

#### **6.6 planning ahead (4)**

*I can't say I'm looking forward to it so I'll have to make sure I stay healthy and never get there maybe (Ruby: 311-312)*

*And all you can do is put in place as much as you can now (324-326) I think probably when I was sort of maybe 50 I made a conscious decision to make, to start um, really (pause) um, the importance of friendships, um and making sure that I you know, supportive you know, have friendships that have um, so I put, which maybe years before I didn't think that way so much (Helen: 167-170)*

*My friends and I, we will have to think differently, cos I do have quite a lot of friends who do not have children, and we will just have to think well what do we want to do about all this? And how do we want to make sure that you know, we can, we can manage. Um, and we will think about it. I don't think we need to think about it quite yet (Jane: 230-233)*

*I think there's a lot more potential and a huge liberation to thing that me and my friends, a bit like they are doing in Scandinavia at the moment, me and my friends who are well not in the mainstream, will just all end up living either near each other or together. And that's got to be a much more interesting prospect than um sort of reluctant children or you know like me and my own mother (Catherine: 253-257)*

#### **6.7 legacy (4)**

*They don't have to be from my blood...I don't have this ego problem at this point anyway of wanting to see a replica of me running in this world...I think I'm quite spiritual in that way, I think, to believe it doesn't matter if they're mine or not mine, we're still one anyway you know, there really is no bearing whatsoever that I gave birth to them or somebody's given birth to them (Ruby: 65-75)*

*sometimes I think people have children because they want their bloodline to continue. I've thought about this a lot and and they are not exactly the best parents. I don't think people even think about, I don't, I'm not sure how much thought goes into having children, I'm not sure that everybody does think (Ruby: 66-68)*

*the genetic imperative clearly didn't work with me, doesn't matter, she's got children, to whatever extent it matters that the bloodline continues or whatever, that's okay, it's going on (Amanda: 14-15)*

*it's something to do with that (pause, sigh), lineage thing I spose, keeping your genes going. Um, er, yes, and I think it's like it suddenly gives you a sort of meaning to your life (30-31)... it stops, absolutely stops with me. Yeah I do have a*



sense of my own genes but that's the end now. My genes will go no further. But having a grand-nephew now you think you sort of do, you know, they're not mine but you're, we're all part of the same gene family pool really. So I suppose they are (And what does that mean to you, that they kind of are?)(sighs) I don't know if it means anything really, to be honest, Sort of feeling a part of something I suppose, blood's thicker than water and all that kind of thing (316-323)... I'm not sure it means anything emotionally to me (Charlotte: 325)

I don't feel the need to to leave a physical legacy in terms of my genes. Um no, just in terms of leaving, you know having having lived a life well um and made some sort of contribution to the world in which I live is how I see a legacy rather than a a physical thing (Clio: 222-224)

## **7 – ETHICAL POSITION IN RELATION TO CHILDREN (5)**

I think having children is a huge huge responsibility... it's so wrong, I feel so wrong to screw someone up (Ruby: 215-217)

I think, if you're gonna have children have them properly, and bring them into a world where you can have a nice life. I could never have provided the, the um, what's the word I'm looking for? I could never have provided, given children, any child of mine a life, or a childhood that I had, sort of secure and um easy (Maria: 93-96)

having a child, making the decision to have a child is such an immense decision for the sake of the person you're proposing to bring into the world, you should really think hard about it first, it shouldn't happen by accident, it's something that you should have given real deep consideration to before making that decision (Amanda: 392-395)

it would have been a major issue for my family, my parents and I would not have wanted to put a child through that (Jane: 57-58)

but then you have children in order to have a nursing system set up when you're an adult? Is that the right reason to have a child, so that you have a built-in, guaranteed nurse? Is that the way you want to treat another human being on this planet? (Bella: 675-677)

Certainly medical professionals tell you 'oh it'll be different if you've got your own' which I thought was a horrifying suggestion...I said, having always thought I did not want children, having no draw towards them, never planned to have them as part of my life, partially because I don't like them very much, how could I dare to experiment with somebody else's entire life at the risk that I might prove myself right? I'm just not that selfish! (Amanda: 90-95)

## Appendix I      Transcript of Interview with Jane

1    Okay, can we start with your experience of being a childfree women at this age, at this stage of  
2    your life?

3  
4    At this stage of my life it's starting to feel like a very good thing. So I'm trying to live my life as a  
5    childfree woman as well so I, you know, quite a lot of my friends had children relatively late so  
6    they're still young and I don't have to be tied down in the same way. So you know, I spent 4  
7    months travelling and working in Asia last year. I can choose to, I do a lot of travelling in my work,  
8    I can choose to take all sorts of risks I wouldn't take um if I had children. And, and I'm talking as if  
9    I'm only thinking about myself actually, we can afford to take all sorts of risks and we do. And it, it  
10   struck me, er, not that long ago, a few years ago, 2 or 3, if, you know, it's important, I observed  
11   quite a lot of other people that disappear into work for example, it becomes their child or, and I  
12   didn't want that to happen, well I'm very identified with my work but on the other hand I, I just  
13   feel that it's a fantastic opportunity to do all sorts of things when you're not, it isn't – tied down is  
14   the wrong word cos I, you know there's lots of richness in having children, and there are a lot of  
15   children in my life but I, I don't, there's no point living you know somehow the same way as  
16   everybody else but without the children. I thought why don't, you know, why don't we make the  
17   most of the fact that we don't have them, and I think we really are doing that. And every risk  
18   we've taken, or risk I've taken, cos I funnily enough, having said about this film thing – I'm not a  
19   director and I don't want to be an director but actually I started off life at film studies school, um  
20   years and years ago, and I thought oh, I know, I am passionate about that and I need something  
21   to stir up my work so I got, I'm actually at { } at the moment doing a masters, um, just er, by the  
22   by, I'm still working because I'm now in a position workwise where I can earn a lot of money  
23   doing the things I do so I've got this wonderful, beautiful balance in my life of work, doing  
24   something I really enjoy like the course, plus living my life you know. We've got our van, the  
25   motor home and we do a lot, we can just get in and go away for weekends and it sounds really  
26   idyllic and it is actually but it's been really hard fought. And there's been a lot of soul searching to  
27   get to that point, particularly for me, especially being a child-, a woman without children. So it has  
28   been um, it's not something that accidentally happened to me, it's something I've thought long  
29   and hard about. Cos I love my nieces and nephews, and my god children and I'm very active in  
30   their lives, um, and it was very important me, for me not to be like that woman in the cartoon,  
31   famous cartoon that wakes up and goes oh my god I forgot to have children. And I've had to do  
32   quite a lot of thinking about it all, so anyways, back in the present, it feels like a very, I feel like I,  
33   and we, are making the most of not having children, of the freedom that it does give you,  
34   particularly when um, you know, children are still at school age, whatever that means.

35  
36   And you said you can take more risks, you can both take more risks, what does that mean?

37  
38   Well financially you see I don't have to support anyone. Um, and that makes an enormous  
39   difference to what I can do. I don't have to see anyone through college, university, and you know,  
40   I don't have to do any of that, and it's remarkably freeing, and so why do I feel, I don't need to be  
41   a wage slave, and I have run my own business for nearly 20 years. And, I don't know what you do,  
42   but running your own business you constantly live as if the last per-, you know the last thing you  
43   earn is going to be the last thing you earn kind of idea, and of course, you know so you can get  
44   really hooked on I can't leave my business. And then I suddenly thought well *why* can't I? And I  
45   just know that if I'd have had children then of course I would have felt that I must you know,  
46   continue and all that. So, um, that's the main th-, the, the, hugely the main thing is the financial  
47   freedom, and the time freedom. Because you do have a lot, I think you do have a lot more time.  
48   I'm not sure how aware some of us get about that, because when you don't have children it  
49   becomes your norm and your reality, but there's an awful lot of mundane stuff you don't have to

50 do. And you just get more time. And you know, it's not to say, um, there's a load of mundane  
51 stuff in just life, there's quite a lot of grunt stuff, even just ferrying people around all the time

52

53 Yeah, absolutely, and you said you'd done quite a lot of soul searching about this?

54

55 Yeah cos I, you see, I mean it's interesting, you raised that thing about my family, there was,  
56 fundamentally I haven't had children because I haven't wanted them enough and that is base,  
57 that is at the root of it. If I had wanted them enough, I would have had them. However, it would  
58 have been a major issue for my family, my parents, and I would not have wanted to put a child  
59 through that. Partly because of my upbringing, and partly because it's what I think, I would not  
60 have had, chosen to have a child without an identifiable father, obviously I wouldn't, I would have  
61 had that child through some kind of insemination and it just all seemed like just not the right  
62 thing to be doing in my life. If I had wanted it enough I would have gone ahead and done it, or I  
63 would have gone ahead and adopted. My partner was married to a man and she actually, a long  
64 time ago obviously now, and she did leave him because he changed his mind and he wanted  
65 children – she's never wanted them so she's always been really adamant about it. However when  
66 we did get together she did say to me if you want children I won't stand in your way and I will  
67 support you to have them. Because I don't think I would have got together with her if that hadn't  
68 been a po-, if that option had been taken away right from the beginning I wouldn't have done it.  
69 However, you know, she never, she has continued to never, absolutely actively, like I say much  
70 like Susan never wanted them and I have been much more ambivalent. And I went through this  
71 extraordinary stage where, and I wasn't even aware and I can only think it's some kind of great  
72 primeval force, in my early 40s um, quite a few of my friends had sort of late babies and every  
73 time they told me they were pregnant I would start sobbing uncontrollably, it was absolutely  
74 extraordinary, and I think that its, its, I put it down to my body, you know, saying something in a  
75 way that couldn't even access in my own head because it, it wasn't, genuinely never has been  
76 that I changed my mind. And it was never when I, they said that to me I thought I wish that was  
77 me, that needs to be me, and you know the way people describe this maternal instinct, I just  
78 don't, I just don't recognize that in myself, I've never had that. So it wasn't that, but I still got this  
79 kind of like swelling thing that welled up and I'd cry and cry and this went on for, for a period of  
80 about a year it was like that. When my sister first had children I felt immensely cut out and  
81 immensely er, I went through a lot of those feelings about feeling somehow lesser as a woman, I  
82 really did. I found it very hard, um, it was saved by a very close friend of mine whose eldest son  
83 who's now 19 is my god, my first godson. I've got 6 godchildren. And he, er, she involved me in  
84 that pregnancy in a way that my sister hadn't cos my sister and I weren't very close then, we're  
85 closer now. But she made me so much a part of it that I felt much less ignorant and inadequate  
86 cos I'd been through it with her so much more, and we were very close, are very close friends,  
87 and you know, I was sort of with her through it, it somehow seemed to help me find a footing as a  
88 woman without children but with something to offer women who do have children. And I think  
89 that's very interesting, that way of putting it because for many many years I walked around with a  
90 sense of somehow being slight- somewhat inferior to women who had children, and I don't feel  
91 that anymore. I even went through a stage when I lied to people, because I meet lots of people  
92 and, in all sorts of walks of life, it's a great thing about the work I do all over the world, and often,  
93 especially if it was groups of women, one of the things that women will do, they will always say  
94 oh have you got any children? And particularly I've done lots of work in Africa and there are  
95 places in the world where you're defined by your children. And there have been times when I've  
96 said no, and they've sort of looked at me incomprehensibly so I started to say yes and then I  
97 started to lie and say no I haven't because I can't and of course that elicits a whole different  
98 response. I found it very interesting to watch all the different responses you elicit given what you  
99 choose to say, but the nature for me is someone, again probably my upbringing, I just find it very

100 difficult to dissemble, I just don't want to be anything other than me. So in the end I thought well  
101 I don't want to go round in the world somehow hiding my childless state and being embarrassed  
102 by it, just embrace it, so, but you know, it's been a really really long game, that one, for me. Um,  
103 and a lot of it done internally just with myself, a bit with, in therapy because it's, you know it's  
104 been something I've needed to get a handle on. Um, because (long pause) there was, you know,  
105 there was that ambivalence despite never having this great I must do this at all costs thing. Just, I  
106 went through, I even went through a phase, it is gone now and it went for ages, you know that, a  
107 fantasy there would be a foundling in the on the doorstep with a little label saying look after me  
108 I'm yours. I went through all that, and and you know, so it went on.

109

110 What was it about that fantasy that appeals?

111

112 Well, I would have this baby without actually having to do anything like *have* the baby, it would  
113 just be miraculously presented to me like some kind of romantic fairy story – there it would be  
114 and I wouldn't have to, you know, I wouldn't actually have to have the baby and do something to  
115 cause myself to have the baby. I couldn't face the notion of the whole adoption thing, so it would  
116 be just kind of this, just way of getting, you know, bypassing all of it and then it would just be like,  
117 you know, complete fantasy, it would just be there.

118

119 I'm interested in that, yeah I see that adoption is a whole rigmarole that you have to go through,  
120 what was it about pregnancy for you, insemination that would have been er, off-putting?

121

122 Well I you know, the feeling of dis-ease about it somehow not being the right thing to do and not  
123 because I you know, I have no problems around women who have children that way, it just didn't  
124 feel right for me. Um, and I had 2, it was quite awkward actually because there were 2, 1 who was  
125 the sort of, my boyfriend at university, and another guy very close to me in my life, both of whom  
126 are gay in fact, both of whom for years were wanting us to have children. And at first you see it  
127 was always, I, with one of them particularly, not Ben who was my boyfriend funnily enough but  
128 the other one um, I just thought well actually it wouldn't be a very, a bad idea at all, this is when I  
129 was in my late 20s, so I thought yeah I might do one day cos one day was, you know, and of  
130 course as time's gone on I've got less and less um, I've got more and more realistic about it and  
131 less and less keen, of course it got, quite difficult about 10 years ago because they're going 'well  
132 are you gonna do, are you gonna do this then?' As if somehow I kind of let them down or  
133 something and I'm, you know I'm not doing it, and so I had to say that. And, but it always felt like  
134 oh well, I suppose I always did somehow think well somehow amazingly something might happen  
135 but somehow it (sighs) I don't know, it always just felt like a long way away. So I you know, I could  
136 have done, you know, but it just felt wrong and I just, it just felt wrong. I will say and this has got,  
137 I think this does have some bearing if I was perfectly honest, my mother nearly died with both my  
138 sister and I and she lost the third baby and I have always been fearful that I wouldn't be able to  
139 have an easy pregnancy, so there is that part, that, and I suppose I've always thought I'd, you  
140 know, maybe I wouldn't manage to have a, and I think this is to do with a lot of years of  
141 depression I think caused by my own family upbringing but I think for a long time I thought my  
142 child, the child that I would have would somehow be inferior. So those kinds of er, feelings do  
143 inform, did inform my reluctance. So (pause).

144

145 Mmm, that's interesting, so the child that you would have somehow wouldn't be up to par?

146

147 Yeah, I thought I've always feared that. And, and, you know, it's been more visceral to me, that  
148 sense, than any, any maternal urge has ever been. So.

149

150 And yet you also had that kind of surging feeling when you saw your friends?

151

152 Yeah it's interesting, yeah, I didn't at first, you know in my 20, 30s, I thought, I think its hormones.  
153 You see I'm still, I still have periods every month, honestly they never bloody stop. And the next  
154 door neighbour interestingly she's um, she's a year, about a year younger than me, she had a  
155 baby, her own baby at 45 so, you know, she's now 6, and Sarah was saying to me the other day  
156 that she is absolutely distraught that she's stopped her periods. Because of course, and it became  
157 very clear to me the reason she's so distraught is she actually obviously wanted more kids. And  
158 cos I was saying to her god, you know, they never bloody stop, everybody else's stopped years  
159 ago, I'm nearly 52 and I've never missed a month, what's wrong with me? And um, she was going  
160 oh god I'd love that and I thought why, and realized, I did realize that, god, I am so ready for those  
161 things to stop. I think though up until 4 or 5 years ago I would have been not fine if they had  
162 because it was still possibly in my head you never know, but I, I'm so over that now. You know. So  
163 there must have been a level at which, you know, I wasn't ready to let go of it psychologically  
164 fully. I am so ready I wish my body would just, I'm sure I couldn't possibly get pregnant now but I  
165 really wish it would all stop, all that stuff. And but I was really amazed, I just thought, I, I realized  
166 as she was talking oh my goodness we are talking from such different ends of the spectrum – she  
167 really does want, did want another one and I am, just need it all to be over now.

168

169 What do you think's changed for you?

170

171 I think, I think a lot of it, you know, I've done a lot of work Josephine on you know, on my self in  
172 terms of you know why, how I am, why I am as I am, I've needed to because I have had some  
173 quite crippling depressions and, and I think I've just got happier. And I've just got much more self-  
174 accepting, um and I've just got much more understanding of, of me and my environment and I  
175 feel, I feel much much more fulfilled. I feel much much more forgiving of myself, it's all that stuff.  
176 And I think it took me till my 40s to even start that process really properly. So, and I would say, I  
177 was actually saying to Jennifer who's my partner, er this morning, I was saying, I think the last  
178 year's been the happiest year of my life, it honestly has. And I was saying that cos we're taking  
179 these risks, we're doing these things, I love my work, I've loved the life we have and the things we  
180 do and we're blessed, apart from the menopausal stuff, blessed with good health, you know, it  
181 just seems great, and there isn't a gap, there isn't a child gap there. And you know, partly the  
182 reason, because, I keep looking over there because seeing those pictures on the mantelpiece of  
183 the children, but they are so present in our lives and it feels very good and I think it's important  
184 for people to have that connection, those connections with, with children. I don't, I would not  
185 want a life without that. You know, that, that is very important. And I am looking forward to when  
186 they're grown up, they are growing up now, starting to, I'm looking forward to them being young  
187 people and me being the aunty and god mum and you know, having the kind of relationship that  
188 aunties and god mums can have that parents can't have, you know. And I already have that, you  
189 know, my nieces they're umbilically attached to their phones, and always on the bus text away,  
190 I'm on my bus they're on their bus, and it's lovely you know, and we just have very good  
191 relationships like that so it feels, I'm very glad, you have to make, the effort you have to make as  
192 the childless part of your friends' children or your family's children is huge, you do need to make  
193 more of an effort than your friends or your siblings do. Somehow that kind of thing that er,  
194 parents, whether they're single parents or whether they're together parents, what, or straight or  
195 gay get into that, you know, cos cos, because so much of it is doing, you know, just trying to keep  
196 the household going. So for years you know I trailed off to see my friends in their houses while  
197 they had the screaming babies and that sort of thing. Not all those friendships stood the t-, that  
198 test but the important ones did.

199

200 Mmm, thank you. I was just thinking about um, yeah the, the way you feel about it now is  
201 different and the way you say that you wouldn't have got together with Jennifer if she'd been  
202 adamant about not having children together so somehow there was always a possibility that you  
203 needed that now you don't need and you actually want the possibility to be *not* there anymore  
204

205 Yeah, yep, yes, and that's what a 22 year journey if you think of it like that, from the time we got  
206 together to the time of now, um, yeah.  
207

208 Cos one of my questions is actually how do you feel about the end of your fertility – I think you've  
209 kind of answered that.  
210

211 I have really, I mean I, I um, completely embrace it, I just really wish it would happen (laughs). I  
212 keep thinking, I have a very close friend who didn't stop menstruating until she was 59! and I'm  
213 thinking shit I hope that's not going to happen to me and every month I think (gasps) maybe I  
214 won't and I do. It's really annoying and I, I mean I feel deserted by everyone as they all fall by the  
215 wayside, and I keep wondering why you know, but it just is, there is no why. It's just how it is, I  
216 mean I've got all the, I have all sorts of, you know, I know that they're not sort of normal, I've got  
217 fibroids so really heavy periods, I went to the doctors they said oh you need a moreno, I thought  
218 Jesus I'm not gonna start having a coil at the age of fifty whatever, after all these years of not  
219 needing any con- what would I start doing that? Because in my head I'm thinking well surely next  
220 month it will all be over and of course it, but anyway, so I can't wait, it can't come quickly enough  
221 for me. You know, but I didn't feel that until about 4 years ago I'd say, I would have felt really  
222 unready. It is a funny thing, it's a sort of unreadiness you feel and then you, and then you  
223 suddenly don't, well for me, that was my experience, I feel highly ready, I can't wait, I feel like  
224 writing to Tony, not Tony Blair, what's his name, Cameron, and saying I think you know, we, we  
225 should have a kind of tampon benefit cos I don't see why I should spend all this money on these  
226 bloody things all the time, you know. So, um, you know, yeah, I feel very happy about the end of  
227 my fertility, it, and I think it's not, I haven't really thought about it in that way and I suppose it is  
228 (mumbles) me of the fact that I've come to terms with my decision, even though there were  
229 times when that decision was made for me by either circumstances or my own fears and  
230 insecurities or dis-ease or something, but the reality is actually I feel very comfortable with it, I  
231 don't look back with regret at all, I don't look back and think ah, now it would be 16 and they'll  
232 look after me in my old age. I do of course, er, do think around that stuff er but I do reason that  
233 you know, why should your kids look after you anyway. And we'll have to, I say 'we'll', I'm thinking  
234 about my friends and I, we will have to think differently, cos I do have quite a lot of friends who  
235 do not have children, and we will just have to think well what do we want to do about all this?  
236 And how do we want to make sure that you know, we can, we can manage. Um, and we will think  
237 about it. I don't think we need to think about it quite yet (laughs). So that is the main thing, now  
238 you think oh god, cos I will despite how I might think about my parents, I will do right by them,  
239 there's no way I'm gonna leave my parents rotting in some old people's home. They're not gonna  
240 come and live with me but I'm not going to just abandon them. And I don't abandon them, but  
241 the only people who'll ever do that for you is your kids I think. And I wouldn't expect my nieces  
242 and nephews or my godchildren to do that for me. So. But that is another, you know, I'm not, I'm  
243 not as yet losing sleep over it.  
244

245 Yeah. Yeah, and um, another one of my questions was um, can you tell me about the experience  
246 of making this choice – I think you've said quite a lot about that, so for you, would you, it is, it is a  
247 decision that you've made, but you've been quite ambivalent about that decision?  
248

249 I would say yeah, I think so cos the one, and I suppose, and again of course what would have been  
250 quite convenient but of course was entirely impossible was to become pregnant accidentally –  
251 well that was never an option for me post the age of about 28 so um there were times when I  
252 think, thought oh I wish I'd just accidentally got pregnant when I was young you know. Because  
253 I've never, I've never been pregnant, I've never had a scare, well I have had a scare I suppose but  
254 I've never you know, actually been pregnant, I've never had an abortion or anything like that so  
255 um, there was part of me that got slightly annoyed that it couldn't be an accident, at certain  
256 points in my life, because I just couldn't have that, just couldn't have an accident. Um, so

257

258 What would that accidental pregnancy give you then?

259

260 Well I just, I'd have to get on with it then wouldn't I? Cos I'd have a baby then, or maybe,  
261 hopefully, and well you know, er, (pause) that's how it would be, you know. But of course from  
262 the age of you know, relatively young I, it was all, that was of course only a fantasy cos it could  
263 never be that I could accidentally get pregnant. I would always have to be intentional, so of  
264 course I, it, I, the, the main thing about that was, the feeling was oh what a pity I can't  
265 accidentally get pregnant. And you know, I suppose at the time I was reading loads of novels  
266 where they're always accidentally getting pregnant, you know, or things like that, you know that  
267 sort of thirty something thing that seems to happen and of course I thought oh that can never  
268 happen to me oh what a pity. Um, but you know it was a completely ridiculous, you know  
269 irrational thought but there was part of me that did think god you know, the thing is you can't just  
270 accidentally get into that situation if you're me, how bloody annoying type idea but...

271

272 Was there something about not wanting to make the choice to intentionally get pregnant then?

273

274 Yeah, yeah, yes I was incapable of making that choice. I could not. Not because I didn't know what  
275 I wanted but I just knew I couldn't intentionally choose to have one. It just wasn't, wasn't the right  
276 thing to do. So of course it would be altogether highly convenient if one turned up on the  
277 doorstep or I got accidentally pregnant. And possibly er, the more, the ma-, you know, both of  
278 them are of such miraculous nature (laughs) it's never gonna happen.

279

280 And how did you feel when you just felt you, you couldn't choose to go to, you know move  
281 towards having a child but also you had this fantasy of there just miraculously appealing,  
282 appearing?

283

284 What I suppose I was aware of and thought very much of at the time was I was always checking  
285 out the level of my feeling. Because I think if the urge had become overwhelmingly the case I  
286 would have had to follow it, I just know myself and I know that I would have had to, but it never  
287 did you see. And what I was, and I remember actually, Jennifer had quite sharp words about this  
288 fantasy, about the, the, you know, cos she said some comment about it just being so completely  
289 um beyond, beyond any kind of possibility, it wasn't even a fantasy worth entertaining kind of  
290 idea, and, and of course she was right, I mean she was a bit sharp I thought at the time, but you  
291 know, it, she's got a point, and in, it wasn't, it wasn't a, it wasn't a particularly adult reaction  
292 really, not hers, I mean mine. My fantasies were not adult fantasies they were more, it was  
293 something out of like a fairy tale. And similarly the kind of, I think in a way the kind of getting  
294 pregnant by accident was seen as like immaculate conception type idea in my head. And you  
295 know, there's, the, the, the urge to do something about it just wasn't there. There's a woman in  
296 the street who, she's also gay and I suppose it's good, it's a good comparison in there was a sort  
297 of level of comparison going on at the time – she's quite a bit older than me, she's about 8 years  
298 older than me but I've known her for about 12 so she was 4 years younger than I am now, she

299 decided relatively late um, she's single, she's still single, to um, have a baby and she did, she did  
300 all that because she was quite old, she did all that you know what do you call it, those things  
301 where you have to pre-fertilit- you know all that stuff (hormones?), yeah, she had so many  
302 miscarriages and I remember thinking god I could not go through that. So then um, she gave up  
303 and, but she projected ever such a lot of her need on to me, for example, so she became  
304 convinced that I really wanted children and so she, she started saying oh I think you should have  
305 children Jane, I'll support you, I'll be the you know, and all this kind of thing, and I knew at the  
306 time it was all about her need not mine. And I realized that she had chosen, she had decided that  
307 I was in denial about my need to have children but actually the more she tried to persuade me  
308 that I was in denial to have children the more I knew that my denial was not a delusion, I really  
309 didn't want to have children and I needed somehow that experience. What's interesting is, and I  
310 suppose there was a pang, when she was 56 she went, god knows how she did this, she's never  
311 let on, she suddenly turned up with a child who's like one and a half, who was at the time one and  
312 a half from Russia! So then at the age of 56 as a single parent she's got this one and a half year  
313 old. It's worked out, she's still there, the child must be about 5 or 6 but I will say, um, there was a  
314 part of me that felt really kind of, I felt something in me (thumps chest) kind of, I don't know what  
315 it was er you know I'd think god, my god, she's gone and done it, you know like bloody hell! And  
316 then there was a part of me that felt oh well she's 56, oh well you know, I was, I was only about  
317 48 (laughing) I've got 8 years before I, but of course I, you know, I don't think that now,  
318 interestingly enough cos again that was 4 years ago or something and I don't have that same  
319 reaction. I look at them now and I think thank god I'm not doing that! It just seems quite an  
320 extraordinary thing to go and do. But that's what I mean, the lengths which obviously she felt the  
321 need to bring up a child were enormous. Now I have not even an iota in me really, I mean you  
322 know, I have to perfectly honest with myself, you know, the pang I felt must have been jealousy,  
323 but what I would want is for a Russian child to just turn up on the doorstep in the foundling way  
324 which clearly didn't happen, in that case, obviously. But um, you know (sighs). So I think that  
325 experience, knowing her as well as I did at that point, was all about, all that time when I just kept  
326 you know, not that long after I kept on having these crying fits and all that and I think it was quite  
327 an interesting sort of coming to recognize where I really stood in something, when there was  
328 somebody else who had a great need to want me to be desperate to have children cos she, she  
329 wanted someone to share that obvious huge loneliness she had, which, but I didn't share it, only  
330 very superficially and at the, at the level of fantasy. Um and I became very aware that that was  
331 the case. So, I mean you know, the funny thing is, quite apart from actually whether, I have no  
332 idea whether I could have had children, I, I, I have had an awful lot of potential opportunities to  
333 have had them, funnily enough, but not physically, psychologically, I've had at least 2 men who've  
334 wanted to be their on-going fathers and they would have both made brilliant fathers and I mean  
335 they still could, I mean that's the point about being male isn't it, as opposed to us although of  
336 course we could still adopt at 56, or I suppose we could still have babies now, now they do, but I  
337 wouldn't, but um, er, and and you know, I've had the opportun-, I've had the money, I've earned  
338 the money and I've, I've got the financial wherewithal to have supported a child and because of  
339 the nature of the way I work probably could have made the 2 work really well. I just didn't you  
340 know, didn't want it enough.

341

342 Mmm, thank you, that's really interesting, um, so what about your experience of others'  
343 responses to you being childfree? I mean, you kind of said a bit about that as in changing your  
344 um, the way that you tell people, give people information

345

346 Yeah, well I mean that was a, I think that, I found that really hard. I, I do actually think though that  
347 childfree and the business of being a lesbian are er, there is some overlap in so far as you're  
348 invisible anyway a lot of the time, um, in, in most circles. It's a, you know, one lives in London,



349 here like in lesbian mecca um accidentally you know, um kind of thing and everyone, um, there's  
350 a huge diversity in London but London is not the world and it's not even England and you know,  
351 you go to work and you tend to be defined a lot by your husband or lack of husband and your  
352 children and so um, you do tend to find yourself quite invisibilized and I am not a person as  
353 you've probably already worked out, who is somebody that stands, that tends to stand aloof from  
354 people, I like to make connections and, and feel connected in and so that invisibilizing of myself  
355 has always felt very unease, sat very uneasily and you know, I'm an, you know the kind of er,  
356 what, er, oh I've lost the word, the generation I'm in you know, I was in that generation where in  
357 my 20s and 30s, 30s really, it wasn't anything like as accepted and okay as it is now, and even  
358 that, you know, it's accepted okay in society by law but isn't in a lot of ways, so you got used to  
359 not saying anything about yourself. And so just like you didn't say you didn't have any children  
360 you also don't talk about your partner, and in, in a lot of work contexts. So, it, it's not the nature  
361 for me really, I come in and I bring my whole self to most things and so you know, always felt  
362 really sort of odd but the 2 things became very tied up and I think that's why I started, I went  
363 through that phase of lying, I thought well I can't say about my partner and so and you know, so I  
364 think I might lie about the children thing. Part of me must have been saying I'm fed up with not  
365 fitting in, I want to fit in. And I think, you know, I think that has been a huge thing for me in my  
366 life that notion of somehow always wanting to fit in but somehow never fitting in. Um, and the  
367 whole thing about having children is you fit in, because that's what most people do – they have  
368 children. So, um, you know I think it was all part of that and the 2 things became very  
369 intertwined. Less so of course, again, you know, again that whole self-acceptance, it's all just  
370 become much better. Um, but, somehow it would have been so, I, I've got a ma -, a gay male  
371 friend, gay and similar generation to me, and he did have a child with a lesbian, but he for some  
372 reason I don't know why, he's always been really really weird about being 'out' at work, he's a  
373 chief executive of an organisation, they wouldn't have batted 2 hoots about whether he was gay  
374 or straight but he's never let on, but he was able to hide behind the fact that he had a child, and I  
375 always remember getting, feeling cross, I thought god, you know Brian, you're right annoying  
376 here, you're not, you know, you're not, you know, you've decided that you don't want to come,  
377 you know, make one aspect of your life clear but by making the fact clear to everybody that you  
378 have a daughter you are actually, um, making a vast suggestion that you're straight. And, I, that  
379 just for some reason really annoyed me and part of the reason of course is not anything to do  
380 with him, it's me; it's me sort of wishing that I had had that kind of foil at the time in certain  
381 points in my life and you can, cos you can go into situations, I do a lot of conflict resolution, I do a  
382 lot of quite heavy work with people myself and you know, you go in there you feel terribly  
383 vulnerable and somehow being armed with the accoutrements of normality help and if you don't  
384 feel you've got them (laughs), you know. Again, it is past tense, I don't feel like that anymore. I  
385 can look back, fortunately can look back on myself with a bit of compassion rather than criticism  
386 for these lies or this stuff, I just think it was all part of a process you know.

387

388 Mmm, and what do you say now?

389

390 Interestingly enough people ask me the question less, and that I think is cos they sense me to be  
391 older, so they sense me to be potentially not with young kids, um, and, I can't remember the last  
392 time anyone's asked me funnily enough. I mean if they did ask me I'd be very straight forward, I'd  
393 hear it as a straight forward question, I think there've been times when I've heard 'do you fit into  
394 mainstream society?', I think I've honestly, I think I've heard them say that rather than, of course  
395 they haven't, that's my fantasy but um, I would just simply reply. I don't tend to ask other people,  
396 not because, there was a time because I knew how irritating I found it but the reason I don't ask  
397 people now is because I'm always far more interested in other things about them, and actually  
398 that's usually not got anything to do with their job or whether they've got children. I'm just

399 interest, you know, it just doesn't occur to me really to ask either question very often – what do  
400 you do or how many children have you got, I don't, I don't sort of think like that in the same way  
401 as I used to.

402  
403 Mmm, thank you. Um, I think you've already answered how you feel about the future having  
404 chosen to remain free, er childfree (yeah) – far off but needs to be thought about at some point...

405  
406 Yes, oh no it definitely does cos I think there are some logistical, potentially some logistical things  
407 that I may not have had to face if I'd had children but then you can never tell. I might have lost  
408 the children, I mean there's all sorts of things. And of course, maybe the children would have  
409 turned out crap! (laughs) you know, my sister has managed to turn out 3 of course amazing  
410 children and I love them dearly, I'm praying that the eldest one, James, the only boy, might  
411 accidentally turn out gay, but this is only cos I wanna get back at my sister (laughs).

412  
413 I sort of want to ask what that's about, I'm not sure it's completely relevant but

414  
415 No, no, it's just cos she actually stayed quite religious (uh huh), and, um but she's brought the  
416 children up not in that kind of horribly way we had, but she interestingly inherited quite a lot of  
417 my father's propensity to be quite tyrannical around them, er and she married this man who's like  
418 a saint, who's no ego and a wonderful provider and does everything she asks him to do. He's the  
419 proverbial henpecked husband and doesn't mind and lives only to support his family and of  
420 course in my fantasy that James who looks like a boy-band member and is 17 and hasn't had a  
421 girlfriend yet and has had the classic overbearing mother and quite by comparison weak father  
422 and may accidentally therefore have to be gay (both laugh).

423  
424 And I was just reminded cos you said er, about your father and your parents being quite religious  
425 and about you as somehow being, or you used to have this view of yourself as somehow er,  
426 inferior to womankind, do you think those two are related, or where does that feeling come  
427 from?

428  
429 That comes from my mother, I think my mother feels that herself and um, I think that I've imbued  
430 an awful lot about my mother's own inferiority about herself, um, it's not really got anything to  
431 do with the religious thing really, and everything to do with my mum, I think my mum feeling  
432 inferior as a woman completely, and I, I don't think being married to my father's helped. My  
433 father is very, conventionally very good looking. He's like, he's only 76 now, he's 6 foot 2 and he's  
434 still got a shock of blond hair and all of the women in every organization he's run, they all fall in  
435 love with him, I mean they, you know, it's that kind of. But he has remained extremely impervious  
436 to all of this but my mum hasn't and she's 4 foot 11 and she's not particularly massively attractive  
437 and she's very, got huge problems with hypochondria, it's a real disease with her so she's  
438 imagined herself to be invalided which is where I think I got the 'I will have an inferior child' from.  
439 She imagines herself to be ill all the time and this has been going on all my life so she's sort of  
440 almost decided that she's you know, a sort of weak figure, and there's my father who's never had  
441 a, apart from being bipolar and having a psychotic breakdown, { }, um, apart from that he's never  
442 had a day's illness in his life, so he's this like big strong person and all these women adore and  
443 love him and my mum's always felt very inferior to that. So I think that's where it comes from.

444  
445 Yeah, mmm, that's very insightful.

446  
447 Well it's years of therapy frankly Josephine, cos I, in the end I thought I can't keep you know,  
448 when my, my father had his breakdown, my father and I were very close when I was a child, they

449 chucked me out, my parents chucked me out at 16, I've never lived there since, my father read  
450 my diary and um, when he had his complete psychotic nervous breakdown and I of course  
451 became convinced that I would have one and I did about um 7 or 8 years later. Um, and of course  
452 that was a complete watershed and we both had a lot of getting better to do and I kind of think  
453 that mine, um it was all to do with my relationship with my father never having been resolved,  
454 you know he was like God to me and he chucked me out, and I, I felt you know, in the end it's  
455 bound to happen. It took years for it to happen and I was 37 or something when it finally did  
456 happen and years of feeling like this terrible sinner who'd somehow you know, damaged terribly  
457 the person who loved me most, and that, you know, so there's all of that. Um, I don't know what  
458 the question was, it's a sort of, this is all off the point really, oh yeah it's years, years of having to  
459 come to terms with all of that and stopping myself getting into a cycle of being ill myself. Which I  
460 have stopped myself from doing, but not easily at all you know. Um, and my relationship with my  
461 parents is an awful lot better, as it is with my sister. So there's only one way with all of that, I  
462 think, is to go forward. It feels like it's all in quite good, quite good places. Who knows?

463  
464 Well I think um, I think you've pretty much answered everything really, it's been great, is there  
465 anything you'd like to add that we haven't covered or...

466  
467 Just trying to think, I, I think (pause), no I don't think so. I think to reiterate, it does, it somehow  
468 feels very important to me, the on-going connections I have with children. I, I don't know what I'd  
469 feel, I think having those connections has been very, and this might be the wrong word because I  
470 was never bereaved, but it is quite healing that, for a childfree person to have such strong  
471 connections with children. And, and, and I find it interesting that I used the word healing cos I'm  
472 not aware that there is something to heal, except perhaps the horrible kind of er, I think abyss  
473 that does exist between people what have them and people what don't.

474  
475 Can you say more about that abyss?

476  
477 Yeah, you see, oh I don't know, I mean, what, oh it drives you mad, what you get, especially with  
478 what I call the born again mother which I think is quite interesting I've used the word born again  
479 but these are the mothers that inhabit Hampstead that didn't have children until they were in  
480 their late 30s at least and they go round going 'I didn't know I was born till I had children, having  
481 children has transformed my life'. Women without children by them, by, by er implication of  
482 course, women without children, it's the whole thing, the whole myth again, are lesser, um, do  
483 not even have the first glimmer of how life can be. So there's that, then there's the myth that's  
484 peddled on the telly all the time and in the papers – what's the thing you're most proud of in your  
485 life? They say to all these celebrities, my children, you know, the endless thing all the time. And  
486 that, that kind of sense of if you are, haven't you know crossed over the divide and gone, come in  
487 the club you can't really know what it's like to be a woman, and I feel like that is a real myth and  
488 it's, but it's very pervasive and it, it can make women without children feel massively um, left out,  
489 left, cut out somehow and and somehow not, as if they're not, they've got no right to call  
490 themselves women, it can feel like sometimes and I hate it in the workplace you see, cos I have to  
491 deal with lots of workplace issues and this business called oh well they can go, they've got to go  
492 home early cos they've got children whereas everybody who haven't got children then have to do  
493 all the bloody work, you know and all that stuff. Whereas actually we should be looking at flexible  
494 working practice for everyone, not you know, I don't think it makes you special. And I think what  
495 used to really annoy me about my sister was she went into earth mother er you know, having  
496 children is so special, I am so special cos I've had them you know, kind of thing that served to  
497 make me feel really inadequate and really invisibilized, you know. And again, I, I don't carry those  
498 feelings around anymore so I'm remembering them and they're coming up again and I, I, it used

499 to make me, and still ca-, er but make me very angry this sort of deification of, and it feels like it's  
500 always about women and children. Yes there is a, some myths getting up now about men and  
501 fathering, almost probably as pervasive but um, the whole, you know, you don't know you're  
502 born until you've had children and they are what you, oh I know, the other one just drove me  
503 mad and I remember talking about this in therapy a lot – unless you've had children, you're never  
504 fully grown up, kind of thing. It really pisses me off, that sort of sense of somehow you kind of  
505 remain eternally peter pan because you don't have children. And it is, again, you get that feeling  
506 an awful lot from um, you know the sort of, the motherhood collective type thing. Um, again I'm  
507 aware enough to know now that it's my own paranoia and it's not coming from them, and of  
508 course the relationships I've had with women with children that have been able to be really  
509 honest with each other have been really helpful for both of us because we've both, we've been  
510 able to have that conversation, um, and it has been useful, you know. But, ah, for ages you see, I  
511 did, I had this, I remember saying to the therapist I really think my problem is I've got arrested  
512 development because I just feel of course I've never grown up because of course I never had  
513 children! You know, I did have this sense, I really have somehow you know, never grown up and it  
514 is connected with the children thing, and because it's a myth pedalled by women who have them,  
515 you know, that they had to grow up because they had children and growing, er, having children's  
516 made them grow up, having children's made them put everything else in perspective and  
517 everything else, everything else pales in comparison to having children, oh and that's the other  
518 thing – any other love pales in comparison to having children, the love of a child and its parent or  
519 in this case mother, there is no other love greater, and again, you know you, you sort of hear it  
520 everywhere and feel it and feel more and more kind of cut out from it – I did, and I suppose I've  
521 always envied you know, you will have heard her speak much more about this and at much  
522 greater length than I've ever done because, through virtue of your research but I have always  
523 envied Susan who is able to go oh for god's sake, children, yuck, you know, and I've never felt  
524 that, that strong, I've always had, you know, I've felt like slings and arrows of everybody's stuff,  
525 you know, you're not complete, you know, I've really always you know, affected me in a way that  
526 in my fantasies don't affect somebody who, like Jennifer as well, Jennifer has never been affected  
527 by any of that, they, you know Jennifer, and so I would understand Susan, they were absolutely  
528 clear never want children, not an issue, don't have a problem with it, and I've always been  
529 thinking bloody hell you know, how do you get there? And I'm finally getting there, you know, it's  
530 been a journey!

531

532 And you started by saying it's important to have your nieces and nephews in your life because of  
533 that kind of pervasive myth about women without children so it's still important to you to have  
534 connections with children?

535

536 Yeah but partly cos you know I've got my own relationships, as they've grown up cos they, you  
537 know, the youngest one's now 12 so you know, and our 2 god children, Jennifer is godmother to 1  
538 and I'm godmother to the other and they're now like 11 and 13 and so they're little people and  
539 they are, yes of course they are still children but it's a different type of relationship and much  
540 more it, it's much more individual, it's not like they're children do you, if you see what I mean so it  
541 feels, the relationships feel like they're becoming um, differentiated and er, and particular and,  
542 and terribly rewarding for all of that so they feel extremely connected but I don't, er, we went to  
543 our next door neighbour's surprise birthday the other day and of course her life, and she's 51 or  
544 50 so she's 2 years younger than me, but of course her life is full of really really young kids,  
545 they're all like little cos she had the babies so late, so there we are in this fiftieth birthday party  
546 and everybody's like in the soft play! And and it's like, and I, and I did think oh I don't, I want, you  
547 know, this isn't making me feel in any shape or form I wish I was her or I wish I was, had this life at  
548 all, and I, I, what it did make me think was when I did sometimes feel I wish I'd had that life I was

549 actually quite a lot younger – I couldn't do that now, you know and all credit to her that she  
550 could, you know, but oh, it just felt, it seemed so strange to me, you know like, we're at a fiftieth  
551 birthday party and it's all about jelly and and and soft play and fine but I've I've gone past that  
552 stage even as a, even as a godparent and a, you know, funny.  
553  
554 Mmm, fantastic. Thank you.

