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# Defying Mandatory Motherhood: The Social Experiences Of Childfree Women

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**DEFYING MANDATORY MOTHERHOOD: THE SOCIAL EXPERIENCES OF  
CHILDFREE WOMEN**

by

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**THESIS**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

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Advisor

Date

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## INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is dynamic in its reflection of the prevailing gendered belief system, revealing how ideas of motherhood are socially (re)constructed within and shaped by sociopolitical and cultural contexts over time (Arendell 2000; Bartlett 1994; Gillespie 2000; Kelly 2009; Lynch 2005; Nakano Glenn et al. 1994; Ridgeway & Correll 2004). The current ideology of motherhood is characterized by *intensive mothering*, the “exclusive, wholly child centered, emotionally involving, and time-consuming” (Arendell 2000: 1193). Hays (1996:8) described this as “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive.” Mothering embodies nurturing and caring for children, and prioritizing others’ needs. As the primary caregivers of children, women perform the majority of *emotion work*, the emotional activities that a person takes on in their personal relationships (Hochschild 1979).

Despite the influence of the gendered belief system that presupposes all women desire motherhood and will eventually become mothers, some women choose not to have children and defy these motherhood expectations. In this thesis, I focus on a group of women who choose to avoid motherhood. The purpose of this qualitative case study of childfree women in the Metro Detroit area is to explore these women’s experiences and perceptions of a childfree life. Based on data from in-depth interviews with 20 childfree women between the ages of 20 and 66, I answered three questions: (1) What were the reasons women chose to remain childfree, and how did they reach this decision? (2) How did these women experience and manage stigma associated with this decision? (3) How did these reasons and experiences differ among this sample of childfree women?

This study shows that there were differences among women who shared the experience of being childfree, but there was also a common thread regarding the reasons and stigma, confirming the strength of societal expectations of women’s familial roles. In fact, the most obvious weakness

in the childfree literature is the demographics of the women in the studies. Feminists of color have argued that the literature has a white, middle class bias. The dearth of research on childfree women of color seems to support that point. Virtually every study has focused on white women; race, age, and class statuses have been largely ignored. Further, most studies only compare childfree women to women with children, rather than compare within the childfree group to each other. I aim to partly address this deficiency by interviewing and comparing women of different backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses.

Nakano Glenn (1994) argues that motherhood is not just gendered with differential expectations of parenting between women and men, but it is also racialized in that there are distinct framings of motherhood depending on race. As a result, the many constructions of motherhood like “soccer moms, welfare queens, waitress moms, and super moms” (Parker West 2002) characterize women distinctly. The stereotype of the soccer mom and the super mom are dominated by white, middle class women who “should” mother, while the waitress mom and welfare queen are excluded because of their race or class. In addition to the minority status of the welfare queen, she is perceived as a single mother and faces societal scorn (Parker West 2002). Further, deviations from the “ideal family size” of one or two children are frowned upon, especially among lower-income women. Another group of women who are excluded from mandatory motherhood are teenage mothers, who are deemed unfit, undereducated, and “a significant problem” (Parker West 2002:14).

For women who are positioned as desirable mothers, motherhood is situated as central to their adult identity and position in society (Gillespie 2003; Ireland 1993; Letherby 2002; Nakano Glenn et al. 1994; Park 2005). Motherhood is celebrated whereas “women who intentionally say no to motherhood are commonly represented as unfulfilled” (Morell 2000:1). A pronatalist culture,

the “political, ideological, or religious project to encourage childbearing” makes it difficult for women to free themselves from mandatory motherhood (Brown & Ferree 2005:8; Callan 1983; Russo 1976). This is true around the world, as pronatalism “occurs in virtually every society” (Callan 1983:179). Pronatalism operates on several levels:

“Culturally, when childbearing and motherhood are perceived as ‘natural’ and central to a woman’s identity; ideologically, when the motherhood mandate becomes a patriotic, ethnic or eugenic obligation; psychologically, when childbearing is identified with the micro level of personal aspirations, emotions and rational (or irrational) decision-making.” (Heitlinger 1991:344-45)

Pronatalist ideals are visible in the media (Brown & Ferree 2005, King 1998; Mezey 2002; Morell 2000), religion (Bartlett 1994, Heaton 1989; Mezey 2002; Morell 2000) and politics (Heitlinger 1991, King 2008; Mezey 2002). The cultural expectation for a woman to bear children is so strong that motherhood appears as the only normal path for a woman’s life (McQuillan et. al. 2008).

Despite the influence of pronatalism, an increasing number of women do not bear children. In 2008, about 18% of women age 40-44 had never had a child, almost double the rate in 1976. This trend is also rising among women age 25-29, from 31% in 1976 to about 46% in 2008 (U.S. Department of Commerce 2011). Importantly, these statistics do not differentiate between women who cannot and do not wish to have children, but infertility rates have fallen in recent decades (Somers 1993). Childfree women are traditionally defined as “women of childbearing age who are fertile and state that they do not wish to have children, women of childbearing age who have chosen sterilization, or women past childbearing age who were fertile but chose not to have children” (Kelly 2009:157). However, many childfree women have not investigated their fertility status, so I have omitted this qualification for participants.

Research conceptualizes women who choose not to have children through a variety of



terms. I use *childfree* (Bartlett 1994; Gillespie 2003; Ireland 1993; McEvoy et. al. 1984; Mezey 2002; Lisle 1996) throughout this thesis. Other terms include *voluntary childless* (Callan 1983; Callan 1986; Gillespie 2000; Heaton et. al. 1999; Kelly 2009; Majumdar 2004; Morell 2000; Park 2002), *intentionally childless* (Feldman 1981; Morell 1994; Morell 2000), *voluntarily childfree* (Koropeckyj-Cox, Romano, and Moras 2007), *childless by choice* (Park 2005) and *childless* (McAllister & Clarke 1995). I chose the term *childfree* because the term *childless* intonates a loss of something, while the women in this study focused on what their lives have gained as a result of choosing non-motherhood. I have also chosen to utilize the term *childfreedom* as a state of being used to describe a childfree lifestyle (Vesper 2008; Vinson, Mollen & Smith 2010).

The remainder of this thesis is as follows. In chapter two, I present an overview of the existing literature on childfree women. Chapter three focuses on research design and methodology. In chapters four through six, I discuss the results of my research. Specifically, in chapter four I analyze the active and passive decision making pathways that childfree women take to make their decision, and the reasons women give for remaining childfree. In chapter five, I examine the responses and stigma that childfree women face from their families and others. Chapter six discusses the implications of this research and suggests ideas for further exploration of the topic.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarship on childfree women illustrates the complexity surrounding their choices and challenges (Table 1). Macro-level explanations of childfree women include their increased participation in the workforce, the women's rights movement, and advancements in reproductive freedom (Bartlett 1996; Blackstone & Dyer Stewart 2012; Gerson 1985; Gillespie 2003; Ireland 1993; Mezey 2002; Park 2005). However, if social change was the sole cause for women's increased likelihood to remain childfree, I argue that more women would not bear children, suggesting that scholars should focus on micro-level explanations on processes of how and why women make this choice. Micro-level explanations include a "nagging ambivalence about motherhood" (Lisle 1996:6), motherhood perceived as a "barrier to self-fulfillment, personal freedom, and marital happiness" (Callan 1986:180), freedom, autonomy, and "the pull, or advantages associated with a childfree lifestyle, such as a career and enhanced financial position" (Gillespie 2003:123). Some women desire independence, adventure, or self-defined development. Other women reflect on their childhood as they engage in the decision making process (Gerson 1985; Mezey 2002; Morell 2000). Gerson (1985) suggests childhood experiences such as "mother-daughter dynamics, parental expectations, family dynamics, and the wider social milieu" (Mezey 2002:15) to explain a woman's desire to mother or not. Refraining from motherhood is not always an aversion to children. It may be an attempt to obtain a higher education, focus on a career, act upon reproductive choice, or retain the potential of other adult freedoms (Gillespie 2000; Kelly 2009; McAllister & Clarke 1998; McEvoy et. al. 1984; Morell 1994). Or, avoiding motherhood may simply be the result of their economic circumstances. When women compare the costs of raising children to the socially prescribed benefits, some choose not to mother (Callan 1986; Gerson 1985; Gillespie 2000, 2003; Ireland 1993; Kelly 2009; Lisle 1996; Morell 2000; Russo

1976).

### **TAKING A FEMINIST LENS TO UNDERSTANDING CHILDFREE WOMEN**

Gender is (re)created through human interactions and “is the texture and order of social life” (Lorber 1994:13). West & Zimmerman (1987) argue gender is a performance. They suggest *doing gender* casts “particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (1987:126). Physical characteristics, such as clothing, hair style, and presence or absence of makeup are used by society to mark purportedly essential characteristics. Through gender processes, everyday life “is organized in relation to a reproductive arena” Connell (1995:71). Risman (2009) contends that every society has a gender structure that shapes individuals, interactions, and institutions. Western society’s gender structure is heteronormative, assuming that men and women have natural roles, are heterosexual, and aspire to form a family; it is aberrant for a woman to fail to adhere to this norm. In short, gender and its associated expectations are social constructs. In this thesis, I take the position that childfree women challenge gender norms, and thus are *undoing gender*.

Social construction is the framework for a great deal of research on childfree women (Arendell 2000; Bartlett 1994; McEvoy et. al.1984; Nakano Glenn 1994; Gillespie 2000; Ireland 1993; Kelly 2009; McAllister & Clarke 1998). The social construction framework “looks at the structure of the gendered social order as a whole and at the processes that construct and maintain it” and “sees gender as a society-wide institution” (Lorber 2005:242). Social constructionists argue gender is constantly created and recreated through social interactions. Similarly, motherhood is socially created and “viewed as dynamic social interactions and relationships, located in a societal context organized by gender and in accord with the prevailing gender belief system” (Arendell 2000: 1193). Women’s roles in society, and thus motherhood, are dynamic and redefined over time.

The choice to refrain from having children stems from societal changes in women's roles. Most notably, contraception is more available and acceptable. This combined with the gains women have made in the workplace increases women's choices of when and if to have children. Morell (1999:30-31) points to other forces contradicting the reproduction of mothering. First, some women may desire independence, adventure, or self-defined development. This desire may have always existed in women, but I argue it has only recently become acceptable to vocalize not having maternal desires. Second, the economic circumstances of women's childhood may shape their hope to not repeat this situation. Third, women's failure to adhere to traditional beauty norms, along with stereotypically masculine interests such as sports, may lead to the development of nonconformist ideas. In fact, a distinct theme in Morell's (1999) research is women's exclusion from the traditional courtship of a man. Women claim to not have traditionally beautiful characteristics, or were outsiders in some way which "disrupted achievement of a traditional female goal – attracting male attention and approval" (1999:43).

Fourth, women's desire for a career alongside persistent constraints and inequalities in the workplace shape women's decisions on mothering. Almost 25 years ago, Felice N. Schwartz argued that the "mommy track" meant women with familial desires or responsibilities find their career aspirations stunted and end up in jobs with little advancement opportunities. Schwartz states that this is because "the cost of employing women in management is greater than the cost of employing men" because the "rate of turnover in management positions is 2½ times higher among top-performing women than it is among men" (Schwartz 1989:3). Over the past several decades, research has discussed at length the costs to women who have children while remaining employed outside the home, commonly referred to as the "motherhood penalty" in which employed mothers in the United States lose, on average, a 5% wage penalty per child (Budig & England, 2001;

Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Budig and England (2001) contend that mothers lose job experience, are less productive at work, trade off higher wages for mother-friendly jobs, and/or are discriminated against by employers because of real or perceived higher levels of work-family conflict.

Despite these constraints, the men-as-breadwinners and women-as-caregivers model, prevalent only among white, middle class families in the 1950s through the 1970s, is increasingly uncommon in the new millennium (Avellar & Smock 2003). In 2000, 51% of all married couples were dual-income, compared with 33% in 1976 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). However, research continues to show that women who take time off of work to have children generally see their wages plateau (Williams 2010), and ultimately give up as much as \$1 million in lost salary, promotions, and benefits (Caplan as cited in Sandler, 2013). In fact, while research shows that maternity leave is beneficial to women, there is a cut-off point when more time off negatively impacts women's careers and earnings (Misra, Budig, & Boeckmann 2011). Even when women take minimal time off, they face obstacles in the workplace because it is assumed they have responsibilities outside of work, and in turn are less committed. In contrast, men presumably have few responsibilities outside of work and are more committed to work (Acker 2006; Brumley 2014; Golden 2008).

Societal changes have facilitated women's choice to delay or forego motherhood, but women still experience conflict between their roles at home and at work. And, choice comes with the burden of not living up to women's expected role as mothers. Nevertheless, some women consciously (or unconsciously) engage in a cost-benefit analysis with regard to motherhood. Rational choice/exchange theory offers another explanation for how women "choose" to be childfree. Exchange theory contains many of the theoretical foundations of rational choice theory

in that it focuses on worth based on costs and rewards. In rational choice theories, individuals are viewed as motivated by wants, needs, and goals. Individuals weigh the costs and benefits of specific actions and calculate the best option (Scott 2000). The worth of any choice is based upon weighing the benefits and the opportunity costs. *Opportunity costs* are “the loss of potential gain from other alternatives when one alternative is chosen” (New Oxford American Dictionary). Becker (1965) and Gerson (1985), argue as women earn higher wages, the opportunity cost of raising children is higher due to their removal from the workforce. There are direct and indirect costs and benefits associated with motherhood (e.g. emotional and financial investments, parent/child relationships, life course un/certainty) and childfree women have determined that the costs of motherhood outweigh the benefits (Bulcroft and Teachman 2011).

However, as many feminist scholars argue, the sociopolitical and cultural context within which women make their reproductive choices are experienced distinctly by race, age, sexual orientation, among other categories of difference (Nakano Glenn et al. 1994; Thornton Dill year; Baca Zinn and Dill 1996; Hill Collins 1997). This influences the mothering ideologies of both white women and women of color which, in turn, may shape the different reasons for choosing a childfree life. Historically in the United States, “African American, Latina, and Asian-American women were excluded from the dominant cult of domesticity” (Nakano Glenn 1994:5). Women of color were assimilated into dominant white culture to take advantage of their labor, leaving them with few or no policies to protect and preserve their families in comparison to white women’s families. Women of color have performed the mothering work for white children, resulting in the neglect with their own children. Whereas women of color have always worked, white, middle-class women have often had the option to concentrate only on motherhood and other caregiving responsibilities. Only recently lesbian women have been able to consider motherhood as an option,

albeit they still face considerable hurdles and discrimination (Mezey year). In sum, women's individual characteristics shape their decision making process and experiences. In this thesis, I consider the nuances of how decisions to be childfree and the experiences with this decision may vary based on the women's different characteristics.

## **STIGMA AND CHILDFREE RESEARCH**

Given societal pressures for women to fulfill their role as mothers, childfree is a deviant identity. Childfree women confront various forms of stigmatization (Bartlett 1994; Callan 1983; Gillespie 2000; Letherby 2002; Lisle 1996; Park 2002 Rowland 1982). The stigma childfree women face derives from not fulfilling their ascribed gender roles. Women who choose not to have children are deviant, as evidenced by many labels like the "sad spinster and the neurotic career bitch" (Bartlett 1994:14). A 1983 British study grouped childfree couples into four groups: altruistic individuals, easygoing hedonists, partisans of a particular lifestyle, and resigned ill and older people (Baum as cited in Lisle 1996). Selfishness dominates in interviews with childfree women (Gillespie 2003). In a 1986 study of perceptions of childfree women, the most common labels were "materialistic, non-conforming, self-fulfilled, ambitious, individualistic, and pleasure loving" (Callan 1986:186). Because women may decide to travel, enjoy a higher standard of living, and pursue hobbies or a career instead of raising children, pronatalism calls their motives into question.

Gillespie (2000) identifies three main stigmas associated with childfree women: disbelief, disregard, and deviance. In interviews with childfree women, Gillespie finds that others frequently *disbelieved* the active decision. Instead of accepting childfree as a choice, these women are recast as infertile or "career women." Women are denied the identity of voluntarily childfree, positing them as ill-fated and involuntarily *childless* through denied motherhood. A second form of stigma, *disregard*, the belief that a childfree woman will change her mind, is the most common form of

stigmatization (Gillespie 2000; Kelly 2009). Those who claim a woman will change her mind as she ages or when she meets the “right man” disregard her decision and position her not as a *non-mother*, but as a *future mother*. This occurs with greater frequency once a woman marries (Bartlett 1994). The third type of stigma is *deviance*. Deviance is the opinion that a woman is flawed if she does not have or want children. This deviance “lies not only in the fact that they do not *have* children, but primarily, and especially for women, in the fact that they do not *want* them” (Park 2002:22). As society deems it natural for a woman to want to bear children, she can be perceived as an outsider if she chooses not to have them.

While stigma is an undeniable aspect of childfree women, little attention has been paid to management strategies. Park (2002) asserts childfree women use techniques of information control, justifications or excuses, and redefinitions of the situation to manage stigma. Although this research suggests important types of stigma and labeling of women who choose not to have children, there are still gaps in our knowledge. I agree with Gillespie’s (2000) themes of disbelief, disregard, and deviance to explain the social stigma associated with childfree women, but I argue these stigmas and experiences may vary based on women’s personal characteristics like race and ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and age.

### **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

Drawing on feminist literature and stigma research, I placed childfree women into categories based upon their level of decision-making and reasons behind the decision. I created the following tables based on information I collected through reviews of existing literature, and used them as a tool for structuring the interviews and analyzing the transcriptions. Table one summarizes the decision making pathways of childfree women. Table two examines the reasons that women cite for remaining childfree, and table three depicts the stigma childfree women face and the different



aspects of disbelief, disregard, and deviance associated with that stigma.

**Table 1: Decision Making Pathways of Childfree Women**

Active	Passive
Certain	Accepting
Drifted into Decision, then Active	Ambivalent

Sources: Gillespie 1999; McAllister & Clarke 1998

As shown in Table 1, women become childfree through active and passive pathways. Active deciders are women who have made a firm and definite decision to not have children, and usually have made this choice early in their childbearing years (Gillespie 1999; Ireland 1993; Kelly 2009; McAllister and Clarke 1998). Passive deciders are women who are non-mothers by happenstance but eventually have claimed the identity of childfree. Life experiences, partners, careers, and other causes lead a woman to determine that she does or does not want children. Regardless of whether women make their decision through active or passive pathways, they may discuss any combination of reasons for which the women came to the decision. Table 2, below, illustrates the reasons that women choose to remain childfree.

**Table 2: Reasons for Remaining Childfree**

Benefits of Childfreedom	Costs of Childbearing	Constraints
Freedom of lifestyle	Children as disruptive	No "biological clock"
Autonomy/independence	Loss of independence	No partner
Self-development	Life-long responsibility	Lack of social support
More time with partner/others	Financial risk	Childhood experiences
Travel	Unequal marriage	No inherent longing toward motherhood
Greater financial position	Career vs Children	Emotional expectations

Sources: Firestone 1970; Gerson 1985; Gillespie 1999; Kelly 2009; Lisle 1996; McAllister & Clarke 1998; Morell 1994

Women who chose childfreedom weigh the costs and benefits of their decision with motherhood and decide what is more important to them. Some benefits attributed to childfreedom are enhanced autonomy and the ability to make choices solely for oneself. These benefits taken together with the costs of childrearing, such as physical, financial, and emotional risks shape a woman's decision

to remain childfree. Further, social constraints such as a lack of support (governmental or societal) or a lack of a suitable partner also have a role in such a decision.

The stigma that childfree women face is integral to shaping their experiences. Table 3 shows several examples of each type of stigma defined by Gillespie, and I used these to form a basic framework of stigmatization:

<b>Table 3: Types of Stigma</b>		
<b>Disbelief</b>	<b>Disregard</b>	<b>Deviance</b>
Infertile Career Woman Motherhood Denied	“You’ll Change Your Mind” Hasn’t Met the “Right Man” Future Mother	Flawed Selfish Lesbian

Source: Gillespie (2000)

I used this chart to determine what types of stigma women in specific social locations faced. For example, does an unmarried woman in her twenties face fewer stigmas than a married woman in her thirties? Do whites, African Americans, and Hispanics have similar experiences with stigma?

In sum, research shows that childfree women have a host of reasons for remaining childfree, including ambivalence toward motherhood, viewing motherhood as a barrier to personal fulfillment, and perceiving a life without children to be a life of freedom. These women face stigmatization for their decision due to societal pressures to have children. Stigma comes in many forms, and the three most dominant forms childfree women face are disbelief, disregard, and deviance. I based my analytical framework upon this existing research, and built upon it through interviews and grounded theory.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

I conducted what Stake (2008) refers to as a multiple or collective case study. In a multiple case study, “a number of cases may be studied jointly in order to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition” (Stake 2008:123). Each woman I interviewed represents an individual case, and all interviews taken together form a collective study. In this research, I examined twenty individual cases of the childfree population in Metro Detroit, which has the potential to lead to theorizing about the phenomenon at large. I also took a narrative methodological approach to the interviews, making the participants stories the object of study, and focusing on how the participants made sense of the events and actions in their lives that led them to choose childfreedom (Mitchell & Egudo 2003).

To understand the stigma, social experiences, and management strategies of childfree women, I conducted topical interviews. In topical interviews, the element of study is not known without previous knowledge of the participants. These in-depth interviews were semi-structured to allow the research participants to express their ideas freely and elaborate if necessary. Feminist scholars, according to Esterberg (2002), assert that semi structured interviews are a good way to study marginalized groups. This research is feminist as it aims to examine the lives of women and “unearth women’s subjugated knowledge” and “challenge the basic structures and ideologies that oppress women” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2007:4).

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To understand the reasons women choose to remain childfree and the experiences associated with it, I asked three questions. First, what were the reasons women chose to remain childfree, and how did they reach this decision? At the outset of this study, I expected that the primary reason women chose childfreedom was ambivalence toward motherhood. Existing research suggests that women

“drift into” childfreedom, and it is not a decision made at one point in a woman’s life and never revisited (Bartlett 1994; Blackstone & Dyer Stewart 2012; Ireland 1993; McAllister & Clarke 1995; Morell 2000). This suggests that most childfree women do not have a dislike of children or the idea of mothering, but are hesitant change their lives in such a profound way. In contrast, some women simply do not want children (Gillespie 1999; Lisle 1996). This study explored the reasons behind ambivalence and purposeful avoidance of motherhood.

Second, how did women experience and manage stigma regarding this decision? Because we live in a pronatalist society, childfree women experience stigma and judgment in their everyday interactions. When women state their preference for childfreedom, members of society react with surprise, disbelief, and sometimes disgust (Callan 1983; Gillespie 2000; Kelly 2009; Park 2002; Russo 1976). Women manage stigma in a variety of ways; some attempt to avoid the discussion, others use justifications that their careers, partnerships, or hobbies take precedence over motherhood. This study examines how women experienced these interactions, particularly with regard to feelings of stigma for having made the choice to remain childfree.

Third, I asked how reasons and experiences among the childfree differed based on location in the life span and other sociodemographic factors. Feminist sociologists argue that women are a “social group with internal diversities as well as commonalities” (Ferree, Khan, and Morimoto 2007:464). Social class, race, occupation, and level of education shape women’s decisions to not have children, and, in turn, frame their experiences as childfree. Given that there is a large body of research that demonstrates women’s experiences are not all the same, I expected to find distinct experiences. Since there is little research beyond white, middle-class women, this study aims to fill, in part, the gap in the literature.

Before beginning this study, I expected I would find differences between women based on

sociodemographic statuses such as race, class, age, and education level. Specifically, that white, middle-class women with education beyond high school would mirror previous research in their reasons for childfreedom, while women of color and those with a high school diploma or less would cite different reasons that have not been examined in the literature. Finally, I also expected to find that women who self-identified as feminists would discuss subordination or other ideals.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

I conducted twenty interviews of childfree women from April to August of 2012. Ten interviews were conducted with women between the ages of 18-39, and ten were with women who were 40 and older in order to ensure the examination of women in all phases of their adult lives. Interviews were conducted in coffee shops and in participants' homes around the Metro Detroit area, lasting approximately 30 to 90 minutes. Interviewing and comparing women who were in different stages of their reproductive lives gave this study a unique perspective that has not been addressed in previous scholarly work. Women still in their childbearing years are an important population to interview, even if there is still a possibility of having children.

The interview guide included four sections. First, I asked about the reasons that the women decided to remain childfree. These questions explored the participant's childhood, life circumstances, and when and how they came to their decision. Second, I inquired about stigma; if women encountered it, and management strategies. Specifically, I explored management strategies for encounters with friends, family, and others. Third, I asked the participants about their experiences as women without children, focusing on how they believed their life was different than their friends or family members who had children, and when their decision is second-guessed or reaffirmed. I concluded the interview by asking if there was anything they would like to add to the interview that had not been addressed previously. This was to ensure that the participants'

voices were heard as completely as possible throughout the interview.

I had the women complete a face sheet that included a set of sociodemographic questions pertaining to age, race, marital status, and sexual preference. All sociodemographic questions were pertinent to data analysis because they provide a means for comparison among groups. Unexplored categories of comparison such as race and location in the lifespan are an important focus. While the sample size was not adequate for systematic analysis, the data collected suggested important trends. I used an interview guide, but because the questions were open-ended, the some answers led me to ask questions out of order. Likewise, depending on the responses, I asked follow-up questions for clarifying answers. I informed participants at the beginning of the interview that they may elect to not answer any question and were free to stop the interview at any time.

Feminist methodology purports that the researcher should reflect on his or her sociodemographic characteristics because they inform the research topic, questions asked, and how the data is understood and analyzed. Similar to the study participants, I am a childfree woman. However, I revealed my status only if asked, and attempted to move the conversation to after the interview. In those cases, the women seemed to open up once they realized I had a shared status. Coming from a feminist paradigm, I argue that neutral, unbiased research is unattainable and does not allow for the range of experiences of childfree women. Thus, I aimed to lessen the power dynamic between researcher and participant by attempting to make the interviews as much like a conversation as reliably possible. The power dynamic in interviews is especially important, as Ann Oakley states “What is good for interviewers is not necessarily good for interviewees” (1981:40). The researcher holds the power in the interview process because it is a one-sided conversation, with one person extracting information from another for personal gain. However, as a stigmatized group, qualitative interviewing gives the respondents the space to share their experiences.

## SAMPLING STRATEGIES

I used purposive and snowball sampling strategies to access the population because childfree women cannot be randomly sampled, nor are they visible to the naked eye. The purposive sampling recruitment included announcements in my graduate classes at Wayne State University, descriptions of my project to co-workers, friends, and family members, and general word of mouth through other contacts. At the completion of each interview, I asked participants if they knew any other women who were childfree and might be interested in participating in this study. I then asked them to pass my contact information to these potential respondents. I began the interview process with five women I knew personally. Table 4 can be used as reference for all participants:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Pathway</b>
Vaughn	37	Cohabiting	White	Professional	Active, Certain
Anne	33	Married	White	Professional	Active, Certain
Cecilia	52	Single	White	Semi-professional	Active, Certain
Julia	57	Single	White	Professional	Active, Certain
Chloe	30	Married	White	Semi-professional	Active, Certain
Erica	48	Married	White	Professional	Active, Certain
Kate	27	Single	White	Non-professional	Active, Certain
Britney	23	Single	White	Non-professional	Active, Certain
Jane	29	Single	African American	Semi-professional	Active, Drifted
Faye	58	Single	African American	Semi-professional	Active, Drifted
Cassie	35	Single	White	Semi-professional	Active, Drifted
Lindsey	31	Married	White	Professional	Passive, Ambivalent
Arizona	34	Cohabiting	White	Professional	Passive, Ambivalent
Angie	42	Single	Hispanic	Professional	Passive, Ambivalent
Courtney	20	Single	White	Semi-professional	Passive, Ambivalent
Samantha	49	Single	African American	Semi-professional	Passive, Accepting
Marissa	53	Single	White	Professional	Passive, Accepting
Sandra	43	Single	White	Professional	Passive, Accepting
Betty	66	Single	African American	Semi-professional	Passive, Accepting
Kathy	49	Single	White/Arab	Semi-professional	Passive, Accepting

The women in this study ranged in age from 20-66, with an average age of 40. The majority of these women were white (n=14), followed by African American (n=4), one Hispanic woman

and one woman of white and Arab heritage. Most of the women in this study were single (n=14), and had an average annual income of \$70,350 and had obtained at least a 4-year degree (n=17). Most women considered themselves feminists (n=13) and all reported a very high level of satisfaction with their life choices. More than half of all participants reported low levels of religious affiliation (n=13), and all women were heterosexual. It should be noted that all African American women in this study were single and made over \$30,000 annually, whereas the white women in this sample ranged in income from \$10,000 to over \$100,000, and more were single (n=9) than in a relationship (n=6). This sample reflects the literature in that the majority of childfree women are white, educated beyond high school, upper-middle class, and report little to no religious affiliation (Abma & Martinez 2006; Bartlett 1994; Feldman 1981; Gillespie 1999; Heaton, Jacobson & Holland 1999; Kelly 2009; Park 2005; Somers 1993). However, previous studies have not addressed marital status or self-identification as feminists.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

I recorded each interview and transcribed the recordings myself for consistency. Silences, hesitations, and stalling words such as “um” and “uh” were transcribed because these are important in determining if questions made the participant feel uncomfortable. I also took field notes on participants’ body language like crossed arms and frowns to capture reactions to my questions. After transcription was complete, I separated all interviews into three sections based on research questions. I further separated the interviews by question and created several tables, charts, and compilations of data. I used open coding to identify frequent themes mentioned by participants, indirect themes, emergent themes found from comparing interviews, and interrelated themes (Rubin & Rubin 2005). I also used closed coding to specify themes in relation to specific interview guide questions that corresponded to my overall research questions.



I used several pre-established codes, such as Gillespie's (1999) active and passive decision making pathways, and the subcategories of certain, drifted then active, accepting, and ambivalent (McAllister & Clarke 1998). I worked these codes into the interview guide by asking questions such as "did you feel in control of this decision?" and "when did you know you weren't going to have children?" I then coded interviews based on these themes, determining which decision-making category each woman fell into.

Following coding, I analyzed all codes and attempted to find common experiences related to the lives of childfree women. I compared the data across age, race, and socioeconomic status. While there is no "universal woman," generalizable concepts related to this group help understand the growing phenomenon of childfree women and their unique position in society.

## **METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES AND LIMITATIONS**

There are issues and limitations inherent in any research method. First, the small sample size means that this study is not generalizable to the entire childfree population, but is an exploratory study with implications for future research. Rather than making generalizations about childfree women, the study's goal was to understand how these women experience life with their decision in a pronatalist culture. Although my data is not quantifiable, it can provide rich and in-depth descriptions that could be used in future quantitative studies to develop survey questions. Second, this study is limited to the Metro Detroit area. I chose Metro Detroit as my research site because of the varied sociodemographic characteristics that the city has to offer. Metro Detroit is a six-county area with a population of 4,296,250. By race, Metro Detroit is 70.1% White, 22.8% African American, 0.3% Native American, 3.3% Asian, 0.02% Pacific Islander, 6.2% Hispanic or Latino/a, and 1.2% from other races, according to the 2010 U.S. Census. The median family income is \$62,119, but varies substantially. While a geographic area may be a limitation, Metro

Detroit has a population that allows for variation in the sample.

Third, the participants in this study claimed the identity of “childfree,” but those women still in their childbearing years have the opportunity to revisit the decision and become mothers. A longitudinal study of these women would be beneficial to more fully understand the choice of childfreedom. For those women no longer in their childbearing years, their narratives may be a reflection of their retrospective sense-making of how they came to claim the identity of childfree. I would suggest that this is not a justification for their status, but given they were reflecting back to their childbearing years this study can only examine their decision to be childfree retrospectively.

Fourth, gaining access to participants began smoothly because I had previously identified five women willing to participate in this study. Because I am a childfree woman and can identify with the reasons women indicate for this choice, I made sure to be careful to not make assumptions about my participants’ choices. As an “insider,” I ran the risk of missing questions that someone with children might ask. I addressed this limitation by having colleagues with children review my interview guide. Moreover, it was important to recognize my own gendered standpoint as a woman interviewing other women (Martin 2001), which is qualitatively different than a man interviewing women.

## **STUDY CONTRIBUTIONS**

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, this research uncovers the meanings associated with motherhood by examining an understudied group of women – childfree women. Existing research suggests that women “drift into” childlessness rather than make the decision at one point in their lives and never revisit the decision (Bartlett 1994; Ireland 1993; McAllister & Clarke 1995). Other women are ambivalent towards motherhood or simply do not want children

(Callan 1986; Gillespie 2003; Kelly 2009; Lisle 1996; McAllister & Clarke 1998). I explore how women framed their decision to remain childfree to illustrate the reasons behind ambivalence and purposeful avoidance of motherhood.

Second, most research has compared childfree women to those that have children (Callan 1983; Feldman 1981; Letherby 2002; Veevers 1973) as a “basis for contrast and comparison with the conventional conforming majority” (Veevers 1973:204), but there is a dearth of information about the differences within the group of childfree women. Research shows that most childfree women are white, educated beyond high school, upper-middle class, have little to no religious affiliation, and hold nontraditional gender roles (Abma & Martinez 2006; Bartlett 1994; Heaton et al. 1999; Kelly 2009; McEvoy et al. 1984; McAllister & Clarke 1998; Somers 1993). However, little research focuses on women in the margins of non-motherhood, such as women of color and women without a college degree. I attempt to address this white, middle-class bias to build on the work of multiracial feminists (Baca Zinn and Dill 1996; Hill Collins 1997; Nakano Glenn et al. 1994). This study compares childfree women’s decision making pathways by age, race, and other sociodemographic factors, giving this study a unique perspective. Women still in their childbearing years are an important population to interview, even if there is still a possibility of having children.

And, third, this research is timely because the number of childfree women has been steadily rising and is expected to do so in the future. As stated above, more women than ever do not have children. The statistics do not differentiate between women who cannot and do not wish to have children, but infertility rates have also fallen in recent decades, suggesting that women are increasingly choosing a childfree life (Somers 1993). I offer insights into the complexity of women’s decision making processes surrounding motherhood. Finally, I bring the research up to date, as few studies have been conducted recently on this topic (Blackstone & Dyer Stewart 2012;

Clark 2012; Delyser 2007; Tomczak 2012), despite the growing visibility of childfree women in the media.

In short, although some research has been done comparing childfree women to those that have children, there is a dearth of information about the differences within the group of childfree women. This thesis aims to fill that gap in part by focusing on how women decide to be childfree through active and passive decision making pathways and their experiences with this decision.

## CHAPTER 4: DECISION-MAKING PATHWAYS

Women make the decision to remain childfree through a multitude of active and passive pathways. Similar to Gillespie (1999:47) I defined *active deciders* as women who “had a strong sense of having chosen childlessness in order to concentrate on opportunities other than motherhood and to avoid the activities motherhood entailed.” I classified women who stated that they made their decision early in life, or made permanent decisions such as sterilization as active deciders. Alternatively, *passive deciders* described becoming childfree by happenstance, and childlessness was “the way it worked out” (Gillespie 1999:46). Several women in this study desired motherhood but found themselves in circumstances that they did not believe were appropriate to pursue it, such as poor financial position or lack of a suitable partner.

### ACTIVE DECIDERS

Slightly more than half of the women interviewed were *active deciders* (n=11). Most active deciders were women in their twenties and thirties (n=7). Interestingly, most women in higher income range, \$77,501-\$100,000+ (n=5), and lower income range, \$10,500-\$30,000 (n=3), were active deciders. I categorized active deciders into two categories, *certain* and *drifted then active*. Women who were *certain* made a concrete decision to remain childfree, usually at a young age, which was rarely revisited. Many of these women or their partners sought sterilization, or voiced their opposition to motherhood at a young age. The second trajectory, women who I categorized as *drifted, then active* “passively assumed they would eventually become mothers,” but reached a point where “they more actively acknowledged that they no longer desired motherhood” (Gillespie 1999:47). So while their original pathway may have been passive, “a passive choice often turned into an active one when the circumstances of their lives changed” (Gillespie 1999:47).

***“I’ve Never Really Wanted Kids:” Certain***

Women who were *certain* (n=8) made a firm and early decision to remain childfree that they rarely revisited. All the women identified as *certain* were white, and the majority of these women were under the age of 45 (n=5). There were no significant differences based on marital status or income. Chloe, a 33-year-old administrative assistant who had been married for 8 years sought sterilization at 22 and her husband attempted to get a vasectomy at 25; both were turned down by their doctors due to their age. She never felt a desire to have a child and felt an extreme aversion to pregnancy and childbirth:

I've never really wanted kids like it's never been something that I dreamed of having, I don't particularly like the idea of being pregnant. And I like kids I just like them to go home at the end of the day. So I just, it's not something I ever really wanted.

Julia, a 57-year-old school psychologist was raised with a brother who had ADD and learning disability before they were widely diagnosed. Watching her parents raise a special needs child, she also made an early decision to remain childfree. Her forward thinking at a young age made her an active and certain decider. By actively deciding to remain childfree she avoided the possibility of having a child with similar disabilities:

Well, I looked around, I could have an impaired kid which would mean my whole life would be caring for that child, and that would be difficult. Or I could have a kid like my brother that would be a really bad kid.

***“At One Point I Wanted Children:” Drifted, then Active***

Women who grew up assuming they would become mothers, but gradually changed their minds were defined as *drifted, then active* (n=3). The majority of these women were African American (n=2), and all were single. These women changed their minds because of life circumstances such as financial instability, or in the case of Jane, 29, because she didn't want the responsibility:

At one point I wanted children. I thought it was cute, I was like 'oh everybody has a child,'

then as I've gotten older I don't want the responsibility. I think it takes a special person to become a parent and I don't think I'm that person.

Similarly, Cassie, 35, grew up assuming she would become a mother, but her idealized version of adulthood was disrupted after college:

When I was little I felt I wanted kids, when I'm young I assume I'm gonna be married and have kids and everything by the time I'm twenty-six... [laughs] By 26 I was still living with my parents and I was like this is completely unrealistic. Then the more I got out on my own it was like, no way, I'm not doing it.

All active decider women grew up assuming they would become mothers, but upon the realization that motherhood was a decision and not mandatory, they chose childfreedom.

### **PASSIVE DECIDERS**

Passive deciders consisted of almost half of the women I interviewed (n=9). Most women of color were passive deciders (n=4), as were most of the women in the middle-income range \$30,001-\$77,500 (n=7). According to Nakano Glenn (1994:6), "shared mothering has been a characteristic of African American communities since slavery. This tradition continues in many contemporary African American communities." However, the women of color seemed to actively avoid shared parenting in their purposeful avoidance of single motherhood. I categorized passive deciders as either *accepting* or *ambivalent*. Women who were *accepting* felt some draw toward motherhood but chose not to raise children as a single parent or chose not have children due to health issues, whereas *ambivalent* women made little efforts to have children or to avoid doing so, or acknowledged that they did not want children "right now" and felt no distinct pull toward motherhood.

#### ***"I Didn't Have Children Because I Never Married:" Accepting***

Women who I categorized as *accepting* (n=5) were all single, over age 40, and made at least

\$30,000 annually. Three of the women I categorized as *accepting* were women of color, two of which constituted half of the African American women in this study. The remaining two women were white. Betty, 66, did not believe she would have been able to take care of a child as a single mother because of her work schedule:

It wasn't a conscious decision... I didn't have children because I never married. I never felt that I would be able to deal with children by myself because of my work situation and my constant traveling, from a work standpoint.

Similarly, Marissa, 53, chose not pursue single motherhood:

It kind of just happened naturally. I just never met anybody to have children with. So I didn't choose – I chose not to do it alone. Meaning a lot of women will adapt if it comes to that because they refuse to be childless even if they don't have a husband. So I did choose to remain childless without a partner.

Marissa exemplifies my argument that although I have categorized these women as *accepting*, they have also made a distinct choice not to have children.

***“I’m Just Not Trying Very Hard:” Ambivalent***

Women who I categorized as *ambivalent* (n=4) were mostly white (n=3), and one Hispanic woman. Three women had professional careers, and one was in college working part-time, and planned on a career in dentistry. Lindsey, a 31-year-old elementary school teacher and Resident Assistant at an urban university, was married, and had recently completed her Master’s Degree. She believed her job had a great deal to do with her decision. When asked if she had made a choice to not have children:

At this point, yes. This is going to sound awful, but honestly, I think a huge part of it is because I teach elementary school [laughs]. I a) have seen what they can turn into and b) my job can be so tiring and so draining I can't imagine coming home and continuing to do



that. And also just never had the desire. Lots of women my age that's all they think about.

Not me. [laughs]

Arizona, 34, had never felt a distinct desire to be a mother, but admitted that her chosen method of birth control was not foolproof and she would not have an abortion if she became pregnant:

I believe so. I'm never really 100%... I don't really plan on having kids. [What about birth control?] I guess if anything it's just timing with your menstrual cycle and then not overdoing it when you think there is ovulation, so I guess if you want to call that birth control. I'm just not trying very hard. So that's why I always say I can't say that I've made the decision so concretely, because I'm gonna be 34 next month and also having an abortion at this time also isn't what I'd like to do.

All women I categorized as *ambivalent* stated that they did not want children, yet never felt a strong push toward or pull away from motherhood. However, these women are not undecided, or *fence-sitters*, because they are firm in their intention to remain childfree while acknowledging the real possibility that they will continue to revisit the situation throughout their childbearing years, or would choose motherhood in the face of an unplanned pregnancy.

## SUMMARY

In conclusion, most white women were either *certain* (n=8) or *ambivalent* (n=3), and the women of color dominated the *accepting* (n=3) and *drifted, then active* (n=2) categories. While it could be that white women are facing increasing acceptance for choosing a career over motherhood, it should be noted that the African American women in this study were mostly over 50 (n=3), and may view their decision as happenstance in retrospect. All women who were *drifted, then active* and *accepting* were single. Slightly more women under the age of 45 were *active deciders* (n=7) than women over the age of 45 (n=4). This could be due to three distinct reasons: first, women under the age of 45 may have felt they were making a firm decision, while women over the age of

45 were engaging in *retrospective sense-making*, an ongoing activity in which individuals understand events or decisions through their own experiences. Second, if viewing this through the social change model, one could argue that in recent decades, times have changed enough to allow younger generations of women to make this decision and feel comfortable voicing it.

## **REASONS FOR CHILDFREEDOM**

Research has identified several reasons women choose childfreedom. According to Lisle (1996:33), “one person’s motivation for parenthood – such as wishing for a role, or for influence, identity, intimacy, pleasure, or immortality – can be another’s reasons for *not* becoming a parent.” The purpose of this chapter is to analyze how the women reflected on their decision to remain childfree.

I categorized the reasons into three themes: the *benefits of childfreedom*, the *costs of childbearing*, and *constraints* placed on women by society and themselves. The *benefits of childfreedom*, such as greater financial position have arisen only in recent years as “historically, motherhood was considered a way to survive under patriarchy, but now... it is earning ability, not fertility, that promises more security” (Lisle 1996:38). Other reasons include education, economics, and personal development (Morell 1994). The *costs of childbearing* were generally associated with perceived personal losses, such as a belief that children would disrupt their daily lives or pose an emotional or financial risk. Other women understood motherhood to mean sacrifice, duty, or a burden. In addition to the financial commitment that raising a child warrants, there are many intangible costs. Mainstream media pressures women to believe that it is feasible to “have it all,” including a power-track career, a well-raised child, a fulfilling marriage, and good looks. Combined with the stalled gender revolution and the *second shift* posited by Arlie Hochschild (1989), where women are coming home from full-time employment to take on the

majority of childcare and housework, many women in this study have weighed the emotional benefits of children with the costs and decided to remain childfree. Finally, *constraints* included not meeting a partner with whom to have children, issues with one's own upbringing, an aversion to pregnancy or childbirth, and world problems such as wars, hunger, or childhood bullying. Constraints have generally been overlooked in the literature, although Gerson (1985:192) argued that women's choices about motherhood and domesticity "reflected an interaction between socially structured opportunities and constraints and active attempts to make sense of and respond to these structures."

### **THE BENEFITS OF CHILDFREEDOM**

Eighteen women discussed the benefits of childfreedom, often mentioning more than one benefit. The most often stated benefit was freedom of lifestyle. This includes the ability to "get up and go," to sleep in, to maintain a certain household atmosphere, and to spend more time with loved ones. Other reasons included greater financial position, self-improvement, and the ability to travel. While travel can be considered a facet of freedom of lifestyle, it was explicitly mentioned by over half the participants and should be addressed as a separate benefit.

#### ***"Having the Option to do Anything, Anytime:" Freedom of Lifestyle and Independence***

Childfree women of all sociodemographic backgrounds discussed the freedom of lifestyle afforded to them (n=16). Freedom was explained as doing what one pleases, and the ability to live life for oneself and not for the sake of children. Cecilia, a 52-year-old insurance adjuster who made an early decision that she rarely revisited not to have children, asserted "I don't have anyone to take care of but me." Lindsey, 31, an elementary school teacher, an active decider, put a priority on having a clean house and spending time with her husband, as she told me "it's just about us." Cassie, a 35-year-old administrative assistant, was an active decider who claimed a childfree

identity during college. She spoke about the idea she had as a child that she would be married with children by her mid-twenties but she said, “by 26, I was still living with my parents and I was like, this is completely unrealistic. Then the more I got on my own, it was like no way, I’m not doing it.” For Cassie, financial and personal freedoms allowed to her by childfreedom outweigh any perceived benefits of motherhood:

I think that having the option to do anything anytime is kinda priceless. Friends with kids can’t do that... ‘Well, let me see if I can get a sitter’ ... I’ve had friends cancel plans, ‘I couldn’t get a sitter,’ you know, ‘I can’t make it, I haven’t been out in months, this sucks’ and uh-huh bummer. Like, right now if I wanted to go back to school, take on a completely new career or up and move, I have that luxury, I have that option. If I find a good job opportunity out west I can just leave, you can’t do that when you’re a parent.

Angie, 42, had an extremely close relationship with her own parents and if she “could somehow guarantee I would have a relationship with a child like I have with my mother, I would almost want to do it. ‘Cause I don’t love any other human more, and I never will.” The ability to spend time with her parents multiple times a week was a huge benefit for her:

I live really close, like probably a 5-10 minute drive to my parents’ house, and I go over there 2-3 times a week to hang out, have dinner, socialize, maybe sit out on the deck, have a drink, whatever, and none of that would be possible if I had a family of my own. Not to say I wouldn’t see them, but I wouldn’t see them like that, you know.

Another benefit of childfreedom was the autonomy and independence associated with not mothering. The women in this study who discussed this point believed that motherhood meant decisions were based on a child’s wants and needs instead of her own. Vaughn, 37, was cohabiting with her significant other, and focused on the enormity of having a child:

I’m really independent and it’s kind of scary thinking about having this being that was

dependent on me pretty much for the rest of its life. Even after kids grow up and move out you still have that attachment and the worry and the stress... I mean, that's a big responsibility and a big decision that I don't think a lot of people really think about.

Faye, 58, enjoyed making decisions for herself and not for another person:

If I want to go to bed at six o'clock, I don't have to worry about nobody. If I want to go out I can go out, if I wanted to travel I could travel... I used to go to the gym all the time, leave work, go to the gym work out for two hours, then come back home. It was just more freedom – I made my own decision. If I decide I want a new car I can get a new car.

Chloe, 30, asked men early on in any relationship if they wanted children. Her now-husband felt ambivalent about parenthood, and they decided together they were not going to have children. She valued her independence and felt that she would not be able to do the things she likes as easily if she had a child:

I am pretty independent. I like being able to go out and do my own thing. I run a lot, and that would be kinda difficult to do that if there's a kid that I have to take with me.

***“I Want to See Stuff I've Only Seen in Books:” Travel***

Traveling as a facet of lifestyle and freedom was explicitly mentioned by more than half of all women (n=12). This was discussed more frequently by younger women earning less than \$55,000 annually (n=6) than younger women earning more than \$62,500 (n=2) or women over 50 (n=4). This could be because women on a more limited income must choose between the expenses of raising children or living their desired lifestyle. Britney, a 23-year-old bartender and student, first felt she did not want children when she went to amusement parks and saw parents pushing strollers:

This is going to sound so dumb, but seriously going to [the amusement park] Cedar Point. Like, I was talking to [my boyfriend] about this last night, because I was telling him about this interview, and I was like ‘seriously, when I see people at Cedar Point with a stroller... what the Hell are you going to do? You can't ride the rides with a stroller, or a baby, or an

infant, why are you even going to go?’

Cassie, 35, had dreams of traveling to places that she could not necessarily bring children safely:

I really want to travel. I want to see stuff I’ve only seen in books. And yes, I’d like to go to Hawaii and things of that nature but I also want to go to Egypt and Greece and take three months and do something exciting and you don’t have those options when you have kids. It’s tough enough finding someone to watch my dog for that long – but a kid?

Arizona, 34, believed her lifestyle did not and would not accommodate children:

I like to travel a lot more than just within the United States, and I don't want to be the person on an airplane with a screaming child. I don't wanna be in a restaurant with a little kid. I don't know. I wish I could elaborate on that I just don't think it fits my lifestyle. I’ve always kinda felt like it doesn’t fit my lifestyle and it’s not going to.

### ***“I Can Spend My Money as I Want:” Greater Financial Position***

Six women discussed the financial advantages of remaining childfree. Five were white, and most were under the age of 45 (n=4). Further, only two of these women made over \$55,000 annually. Samantha, a 49-year-old administrative assistant helped care for her older sister’s children and was impressed with the responsibility of childcare at a young age and chose to refrain from motherhood unless she was married, and in doing so appreciated that “my money is my own.” When asked how she thought her life was different from her friends with children, Chloe, 30, felt she could do as she pleased and spend her money as she chose:

I think I definitely have more freedom to do what I want, more financial freedom; I can spend my money as I want. I don't have to think about well junior needs shoes next month or whatever, it’s just that I need shoes this month. I *want* shoes this month.

### **THE COSTS OF RAISING CHILDREN**

The costs of raising children were discussed by virtually every participant. Costs were cited more

often than benefits or constraints (n=59). The reasons most often described was the sentiment that children were disruptive (n=12), and the choice of children versus career (n=12). Other costs of raising children included financial risks (n=5) and self-identification as selfish (n=5).

***“I Never Wanted to Change my Lifestyle:” Children as Disruptive***

In this study, twelve women described children as disruptive. This cost was discussed by women regardless of socioeconomic status. One of the biggest limitations for Vaughn, 37, and the majority of the other women interviewed was “not being able to do the things that I’d like to do. Even at this point in my life, there’s a lot of things I haven’t done and when you have a child you’re even more limited to the things you can do.” These women discussed luxuries of being childfree such as free weekends, living in hip, urban locations, and the freedom of mobility, which would all have to be given up if they were to choose to become mothers. Britney, 23, viewed motherhood as imposing on her time and independence:

Not being able to do anything for at least eighteen years. Anything. Without someone else.

Anything I want. Leave my house alone without getting a babysitter, have a full time job without worrying about daycare, travel...

Jane, 29, thought about how much she still relied on her parents for her general well-being and did not want to be responsible for another person for the rest of her life:

You’re a parent forever and I don't think people understand that. I still call my mom and dad and I’m damn near 30 and I’m on the phone and they're probably like, ‘get a grip!’ Like did you think about this when you signed up? Probably think ‘oh she’s gone away to college, she bought a house, and... she can take care of herself’ but when I’m sick the first person I call is my mom. Then I call my dad, ‘oh can you do this and can you do that?’

And even to this day I think they're like, she’s a lot of work.

Angie, 42, thought it would be difficult to change, especially with regards to the restrictions

imposed on pregnant women:

I used to think when I was younger and I used to go out a lot more, I thought oh my God I don't know if I could go all that time without drinking or whatever, and I don't even drink that often anymore, I don't know if it would matter but, I think at the time it would've. Don't get me wrong it's not like I was some big drunk, but the point is you have to think about every single thing that goes into your body.

***“I am Egalitarian, Dual Income, Dual Earning Household:” Children vs. Career***

Many women in this study (n=12) understood the struggles they would face trying to balance work and family. Most of the women who discussed the choice between children or a successful career earned more than \$62,500 (n=8). Arizona, 34, felt that her career as a college professor did not lend itself to motherhood, and enjoyed equal financial contribution in her relationship:

My career, there's not much time off because if you take any time off in the semester you might as well take the whole semester off. Because I teach all year pretty much, it doesn't seem like I necessarily have the best career for that. Plus I am egalitarian, dual income, dual earning household situation so it would hurt if I didn't work as much as I do already. And I just feel like since I was in school for so long there's so much more that I have to do. And I don't think I will be able to do all that having a child.

Cassie, 35, had seen women forced to give up their jobs because of the high cost of childcare:

I've known a lot of women who have quit working because they're losing money, they're working just to pay for daycare. And that definitely doesn't make sense and that's not what having a kid is supposed to be about.

Anne, 33, felt she would not fulfill her career aspirations if she was a mother:

My husband and I live in a loft downtown, we'd probably have to move, we travel a lot; that would probably stop. We're both really career-focused, we're both in I.T. so we work a lot of hours, and that would definitely have to change if we did have kids.



Jane, a 29-year-old fund development officer at an urban university, made the active decision to remain childfree while she was an undergraduate. During this time her mother became ill and Jane spent her time caring for her, taking veterinary classes, and working full time. Faced with the responsibility of working and caring for someone else, she decided that the “huge burden” of motherhood was not something she wanted to experience:

I was going to school to become a veterinarian so I was taking care of animals, and somewhere along the line I just woke up and said I don't want... any responsibility. Any more responsibility. I think, it takes a special person... to become a parent. I just don't think I'm that person right now. I just don't think I'll ever be that person so I just decided, you know what focus on your career.

Faye, 58, a retired police officer, did not feel that her career was conducive to having children, especially while she was unmarried:

Being a police officer back then, I worked midnights when I was on patrol. We worked midnights, afternoons, days; we would rotate every thirty days, and then I was going to grad school so I was most focused on the education and my career.

***“I Can't Imagine Being Able to Support Another Being:” Financial Risks***

According to the USDA's report on Expenditures on Children by Families (Lino 2013), the annual cost to raise a child is nearly \$241,000 from birth through age seventeen. This does not include college education or health insurance beyond age seventeen. Several women (n=5) expressed concern about the financial responsibility of raising a child, the majority of whom earned less than \$55,000 annually (n=3), and were white (n=4). Vaughn, 37, felt that she did not make enough money to raise a child:

Money is another part of it. I don't make a lot of money, I can't imagine being able to support another being on the money I do make. I mean, I'm not struggling, but if I did have

a kid it would be really difficult for me.

Marissa, 53, was hesitant about motherhood because her career has uncertain aspects to it:

I just was worried about taking on that responsibility and then finding myself in a situation where I'm financially in a tough spot. So I just tried to keep it simple until I had somebody to share it with because I didn't want anything seriously to go wrong.

Kathy, 49, had been on her own since her mother passed away shortly after Kathy graduated high school. As a result, she never felt financially secure to raise a child, especially without a partner:

So I actually think it's due, mostly to economic... 'cause I sort of been in survival mode the whole time, basically. So it was mostly, I would say probably 95% economic 'cause I just knew that it just, it's hard enough to keep yourself going, and to bring a child or children into the picture makes it that much more difficult...

***“It Was Very Selfish of Me, All Selfish Reasons:” Self-Identification as Selfish***

A common type of stigma childfree women face is the sentiment that women choose not to have children for selfish reasons. Many women internalize this assumption and self-identify as selfish.

Five women in this study described their own selfishness as reasons to refrain from having children, all of whom were white. Lindsey, a 31 year old elementary school teacher stated:

I'm also super selfish and some of my favorite things in the world you have to give up when you have children. So I don't want to give them up yet. And free time, being able to go visit friends for the weekend, or sleep in really late on the weekends. And just having quiet time. And I think some of that is connected to the teaching piece. I'm 'on' all day and when I come home I just wanna sit. I don't want to entertain anymore.

Erica, a 48-year-old senior vice president made an active decision to remain childfree, but revisited her decision multiple times. In her first marriage they decided it was not for them as a couple, and her current husband had a vasectomy prior to their meeting. She reflected on her decision as beneficial because it allowed her to advance in her career and maintain her lifestyle:

I never wanted to change my lifestyle 'cause I knew it would change a lot. [With regards to] freedom. Doing what I would want to do in life and not so much what my kids would wanna do, or revolving around soccer, revolving around whatever it was. I think that it was very selfish of me, all selfish reasons, I just didn't wanna change the way I was living and give up a lot of things.

Cassie, 35, watched her parents sacrifice financially for her wellbeing:

I think I would rather spend my earnings on myself. When it comes to that fact I'm pretty selfish... It's my money, I work hard for it, I don't want to have to just fork it all over for the benefit of someone else, even if it's my offspring. I think I would just end up resenting my kid in the long run. I look at my parents, they didn't travel, they didn't do anything. Both my parents had to work... and my mom had stopped working then had to go back to put me through college... I don't want to have to share it with anybody.

#### **SOCIETAL AND PERSONAL CONSTRAINTS**

Societal and personal constraints included the women's own perceived lack of a "biological clock," aversions or fear of pregnancy and childbirth, lack of a suitable partner, issues with the current state of the world, and issues with her own parents. Constraints are different than costs of childbearing or benefits of childfreedom because they rely on outside influences mostly out of women's control but that affect their decision making.

#### ***"I Don't Have that Mother Instinct:" No Biological Clock***

Many women (n=13) discussed their perceived lack of a "biological clock." The lack of a "biological clock" was discussed more often by women in their late twenties and thirties (n=8) than women in their forties and fifties (n=5). Only one African American woman discussed this belief. With these women, the nagging feeling that their maternal instinct was lacking was pervasive. Some women, like Vaughn, 37, feared that if they were to get pregnant, they would not

develop the “unconditional love and caring:”

I don't have that desire to have them. I don't feel like I need that. You know, a lot of people are like 'aren't you afraid you're not leaving a piece of you behind and when you die, that's just it... you're done.' That doesn't affect me either way. You know a lot of people are like 'Well when you grow up, who's going to take care of you when you're old?' Well, you know, I don't think that's another being's responsibility, first of all. And second of all, I'll figure it out when I get there, if I even do get there.

Anne, 33:

I don't have any desire to have kids and it's really... I feel like if I did have kids the only reason I would be is so I had someone when I was old [laughs] to take care of me and I really don't feel like that's a good enough reason to have children. And you know, everyone that I know that's having kids is because they *want* to have kids and they *want* to reproduce... I just don't have that... I don't have that mother instinct.

Jane, 29:

So I guess some women say they have this “urge” to be a mother, I don't have that. At all. And maybe I'm a weirdo or... I'm sure society frowns upon me. But I don't feel the need, it's not appealing to me at all. I don't look at a baby and get goose bumps.

***“I Probably Would Have Been the World’s Worst Mom:” Emotional Risks***

The emotional risks of motherhood (n=12) were discussed overwhelmingly by women who earned more than \$62,500 (n=8), and the majority of the African American women (n=3). Kathy, 49, believed that her own personality traits would have made her an overbearing mother:

I am actually a very anxious person. So sometimes I sit back and I think about that, I just probably would have been the world's worst mom.

Marissa, 53, had a difficult time with disrespectful children:

Even though I love little babies and little kids, once they turn 13 I don't want anything to

do with them. And it's like okay, what do you do now that you've made the commitment as a parent? You can't just say, go to boot camp until you're 18. Some people I think who decide to have children, I don't know if they think that far ahead, or they are okay with that time frame. I see it with other people and it's not fun. I don't know how I would've handled it. Especially now it seems that kids have become a lot more disrespectful.

Julia, 57, viewed freedom from worry as one of the greatest benefits of her childfree status:

You know, not worry about children, not worry that they're safe. That would be an issue for me and that's partly why I'd be so neurotic and I'd be like, not letting them be independent or free. I'd see being too, I don't know, hovering.

***“It's Very Alien-Like to Me:” Aversions to Pregnancy and Childbirth***

An aversion to pregnancy and childbirth was expressed as a reason for the decision to remain childfree by eleven women. This was one of only two subcategories of constraints that was dominated by women under 45 (n=8). The majority of women who discussed an aversion to pregnancy or childbirth were white (n=9) and earned less than \$55,000 annually (n=7). Arizona, 34, did not want to experience pregnancy or childbirth:

I know how much birthing a child can change your body, and I want nothing to do with that. It doesn't sound like any fun to me whatsoever. It does kind of sound like an invasion. It sounds tiring, it sounds stressful. You hear about how this pregnancy is beautiful and stuff, and I don't believe it whatsoever. I think it's all a crock [laughs]. I don't find it to be all that beautiful. I don't want to see naked pregnant people on the cover of magazines, I just don't... And interestingly enough one of the biggest reasons I don't want children, on top of wanting to travel and it doesn't fit my lifestyle, is not wanting to BE pregnant. Not wanting to give birth.

Vaughn, 37, described pregnancy as analogous to an alien or a tumor:

Nightmare. It terrifies me. I am terrified of pregnancy. The thought of something growing

inside of my body really creeps me out. It's very alien-like to me. I know it's very natural and I know that I'm kind of one of the people who is not following biology by having this way of thinking, but it does creep me out. I don't like the thought of something growing in my body for nine months, it's very akin to a tumor in my mind. Which I know sounds kinda weird and wrong, but it's how I feel about it. And then, the childbirth process, I have absolutely no interest in having to go through something like that.

Faye, 58, had the unique experience of working in a hospital:

When they show somebody having a baby on TV I be like this [covers face] I can't even look at it! I think that was another reason, I didn't want any pain and I'd heard all these stories about 'I been in labor three days,' 'cause I worked my way through college as a nursing assistant on the maternity floor... When I was in housekeeping at the hospital I had to clean up the labor and delivery room... When I went in that room I said 'I don't think this is gonna happen!' I never forgot the sight in there when I had to clean it.

Faye was one of two women who had an aversion to pregnancy and childbirth, but not to motherhood. Both she and Kathy, 49 also cited the lack of a partner as a reason for their status as childfree; both women would have chosen to adopt had they been married.

***“I Chose Not to Do it Alone:” Lack of a Suitable Partner***

Eight women cited the lack of a partner with whom to have children as a reason they did not have children. Most earned over \$62,500 annually (n=6) and all were over the age of 40. The lack of partner was discussed least by white women (n=3), and all but one woman of color (n=5). As stated by Sandra, 43, marital status is not always a choice: “I'm not unmarried necessarily by choice. But it's the choices that you make that get you there.” Still, advances in medicine and the ability to adopt make motherhood attainable for most women. Faye, 58, realized she was not going to have children when she turned 42 and was unmarried:

It didn't look like I was going to get married so, I'm old fashioned, if I have a child I wanted

to be married, and by the time I was 42 it didn't look like I was getting married.

Angie, 42, did not want to have a child unless she was married:

I mean on the one hand, it's just how my life has worked out. I've never been married and, I'm not religious or anything, but I always thought from the time I was a small child that I would not have kids out of wedlock.

Betty, 66, traveled regularly for work and did not think motherhood was attainable:

I didn't have children because I never married... Had I married I probably would have had children. I never felt that I would be able to deal with children by myself because of my work situation and my constant traveling ... Because of the circumstances, I just felt that without a partner, I say married but let's say partner. Partner, in the wings, how am I gonna do all this business travel, and have kids?

This decision was based on their lack of an intimate relationship, and in their knowledge of the resources required to raise children, or their personal values in which they believed marriage was required for procreation.

***“I Don't Feel Like Anyone Should be Bringing People Into the World:” State of the World***

Overpopulation, orphaned children, high divorce rates, disobedience, and bullying were all influences that women discussed as reasons why they were choosing to forego motherhood. These women were mostly white (n=6), under 45 years old (n=6), and earned less than \$55,000 annually (n=5). Courtney, 20, felt that bringing children into the world was irresponsible, and that raising a child that was anything like herself would be a burden:

I don't feel like anyone should be bringing more people into this world... I just feel like kids these days are a little bit too corrupt and having to raise a child that I would just... If it came out anything like me when I was a kid I couldn't deal with it.

Vaughn, 37, felt that the world was already overpopulated:

That's a whole other kind of theory that I have about evolution where we're heading, and

this population explosion that we need people like me to kind of, put the brakes on that.

At a young age, Angie, 42, felt that the world was overpopulated and adoption was more responsible:

I felt at about the age of 16 the world was overpopulated, full of impoverished children who were dying daily. So it felt like if I ever felt compelled to be a parent, I would adopt, which would be more important than birthing a child in my opinion. I felt that I would adopt, or be a foster parent.

While some women who cited problems with the world were against motherhood in general, others were against birthing their own children, and felt it was more responsible to adopt, if they were to choose to mother.

### ***“I Was Always Dodging Bullets:” Issues with Own Parents***

Several women (n=5) chose not to have children, in part, because of issues with their own parents. Most of these women were in their forties and fifties (n=4), and were white (n=3). Cecilia, 52, had a tumultuous relationship with her mother:

I was not going to take a chance that they were going to turn out to be anything like my mother... I was always dodging bullets and I thought I am not going to do this to anybody else, oh my god, I can't do it.

She also had a distant relationship with her father:

My father was an alcoholic, he was functional from a working standpoint but I thought everybody's dad came home from work and went down to the corner bar until mom called to get him, or you were sent to get him. I thought that's what everybody's dad did.

Britney, 23, had a strained relationship with her parents and did not want to have a similar relationship with her own children:

My parents should have never had kids, so I feel that I shouldn't have kids because I don't want to be like them. Plus the divorce rate in my family and in life is so high, and I feel



like kids shouldn't have parents that aren't together.

Kathy, 49, grew up with single mother who was an alcoholic, and knowing that alcoholism is genetic, one reason she did not have children was so she could not subject them to the disease:

Even though I didn't give it a lot of... direct thought, because my mom was an alcoholic and a very, very severe and she died when she was 48 from the disease. So and that, even though I really guess I didn't distinctively think about that, that could have been an issue. And that I would just be horrified if I'd brought a child into this world and they had that. 'Cause it's very hard to watch somebody suffer from that.

These women may have felt as if they were incapable of providing a safe, nurturing environment for a child to grow up in, as they were never exposed to one themselves. Similarly, as diseases such as alcoholism are genetic, some women were concerned that their parents' issues would become their children's.

## SUMMARY

For some women, the benefits of childfreedom, such as enhanced freedom and autonomy, paired with the costs of raising children, and constraints placed upon them, led to a woman's decision to remain childfree. Women had various reasons that contributed to their decision, most citing a combination of factors. Almost all women discussed at least one benefit of childfreedom (n=18), with most indicating at least two benefits (n=11). Similar to Gillespie (2003:126), childfreedom "was often associated with wider choices and greater opportunities." Most benefits centered on freedom and autonomy, followed by travel, financial position, and self-improvement. All women interviewed discussed the costs of motherhood. The most often discussed cost of childbearing was the belief that children were disruptive, followed by the perception that one had to choose children or a career, financial risks, and self-identification as selfish. This shows how these women were more clearly able to imagine the "losses" of motherhood but not the rewards (Lisle 1996). Finally,

constraints, which were discussed by every woman, combined with benefits and costs to aid in a woman's decision. The most discussed constraint was the lack of a "biological clock," followed by emotional risks of motherhood, fear of pregnancy or childbirth, and the lack of a suitable partner.

## CHAPTER FIVE: RESPONSES TO THE DECISION

Scholarship suggests that childfree women are perceived as selfish, unfeminine, or are acting out a hedonistic lifestyle (Bartlett 1994; Callan 1983; Gillespie 2000; Lisle 1996; Park 2002; Park 2005; Somers 1993). Somers (1993:643) discusses how childfree women feel they are labeled as “selfish, maladjusted, unhappy, hedonistic, irresponsible, immature, abnormal, and unnatural.” Gillespie (2000) addresses three types of stigma childfree women face: *disbelief*, *disregard*, and *deviance*. I argue that disbelief occurs most frequently masked as support, while disregard and deviance are experienced as obvious backlash associated with the decision. This chapter focuses on the responses childfree women have experienced.

### DISBELIEF

Five women I interviewed spoke about *disbelief* as a stigma. Two women were white, two were African American, and one was Hispanic. Most were in the lower to middle income range, with only one woman earning over \$100,000. These people believed that women did not have children because of *motherhood denied* through careers or schooling. This redefines childfreedom not as a choice, but as a sacrifice. While these people were supportive, they were supportive on a superficial level in that they consistently interpreted something got in the way of motherhood and made excuses and justifications for childfree women, rather than accepting a rejection of motherhood. The women themselves, however, seemed to appreciate this “pretended postponement” (Park 2005), as it offered them the opportunity to deflect personal questions about future motherhood. This is a failure to address that while these women did want a career, they also simply did not want to be a mother. Lindsey, 31, said her family “rarely goes to the having children thing. There’s so much with career and I just finished my Master’s,” so her family accepts her decision solely because of her educational and career goals. Arizona, 34, discussed how female professors who

are childfree are simply assumed to have given up their desire to mother in order to further their careers:

It's understood by a lot of women that I work with that having children isn't necessarily conducive to academia and academia isn't super conducive to having children. Some of the time when you talk to a female professor that's having children, the conversation centers around 'ooh how difficult is that gonna be? How are you gonna manage that?'

Similarly, Faye, 58, was the first person in her family to receive a college degree and believed her family did not question her decision to be childfree because she was focused on her career:

They knew I've always been education, school, books, so they always knew... 'Faye, all she thinks about is school, work and her career, and books,' you know.

Her family regarded professional goals and motherhood as mutually exclusive, and supported her identification as childfree because of her professional goals. Had Faye held a less time-consuming job, her motives may have been called into question.

These experiences represented a minority of acquaintances and family members that appeared not to explicitly judge their decision to remain childless. But the decision was framed around occupations that have expectations of working long or irregular hours and so are not conducive to motherhood, particularly in the case of lawyers. In academia, wondering "if she could manage" was a testament to the expectations of achieving tenure, often requiring working evenings and weekends. This relates back to *motherhood denied* through the decision of family versus career. By framing the women's choice to not become a mother because of their career focus, the families justified why the women did not fulfill societal expectations for women's traditional roles as wife and mother.

## **DISREGARD**

Eight women I interviewed spoke about disregard as a stigma. Only one woman was African

American, and the rest were white. Women were mostly in the lower-middle income range. The opinion that a woman will change her mind is the most common form of disregard. Two women's mothers and many members of extended families believed the women would eventually change their minds. Britney expressed hesitation to her mother:

My mom says I'm going to change my mind... Every girl my dad ever dated was always like 'you'll change your mind, you'll change your mind.'

The most common form of disregard by extended family members was, "you'll change your mind," or "who will take care of you when you're old?" Vaughn, 37, experienced dismissive responses early and often, and so avoided the conversation:

It was very dismissive. If it came up, people would ask questions and I'd be like 'I'm not having any' and it was that immediate, dismissive, 'Oh, you don't know what you're talking about... You'll change your mind... We know you will.' And at that point, I learned there's no point in arguing and just try to change the subject.

Other women described how extended family members tried to sway their opinion. Chloe, 30, had generally received acceptance from her immediate and extended family, but her husband's grandmother regularly asked if she had changed her mind:

My husband's grandma was always saying like 'you should really get on that, you're getting older, who's gonna take care of you when you get older, you should really think about that' and... I just told her I don't really wanna bring a child into this world just so I have someone to take care of me when I'm 80, I mean that's not very nice.

In these instances, the women's extended family believed that the women would come around to fulfilling their expected role as a mother.

Other women discussed how acquaintances assumed they would change their mind. For instance, Samantha, 49, lost a work friendship because her coworkers disregarded her decision and

believed she would change her mind:

I caught it from some coworkers. I worked retail for twelve years. One of the young ladies that I befriended got pregnant, Lucille got pregnant, and then my manager Rebecca got pregnant, and it became this campaign – ‘you should get pregnant, you should have a child!’ And I’m like, ‘excuse me?’ Lucille was like, ‘I just want somebody to love me,’ and I said, ‘you’d better get a dog!’ I don’t think people understand – children do not replace the companionship of a significant other. They’re your children, they’re not your man, they’re not your woman, they are your child.

Samantha explained that the interactions turned unpleasant between her and her coworker Rebecca, effectively ending their friendship. She said she was upset that others would question her private business and could not understand her decision. Cassie, 35, also had coworkers, especially men, question her motives:

I’ve definitely had coworkers, more so men than women which I’ve found interesting but it was a lot more of the ‘how come you’re not married’ would be the jumping off point and I’d be like ‘well because I don’t want kids.’ ‘What are you crazy? Kids are the best blah blah blah.’ And it’s like well, no offense but you’re the dad. You didn’t have to carry the kid and birth the kid and more than likely do the majority of raising the kid.

Cassie went on to talk about other experiences with acquaintances who disregarded her decision:

Even my OB or my dentist say ‘well ya never know, when you get a little older...’ and I’m like seriously?! I’m thirty-four. I have zero, there’s nothing ticking. There’s nothing going on, but they will say ‘oh well you’re missing out, it’s different when it’s your own’ and I’m like I’m fully aware it’s different when it’s your own... My gyno was just saying the other day ‘you may change your mind,’ and I’m like no. And she’s kind of pushing me. ‘You seem like you’d be a really good mom.’ I’m not saying I wouldn’t be a good mom, I don’t want a kid. I don’t want to be someone’s mom.

When a woman is told she will eventually “change her mind,” and have a child, her decision is disregarded and she is positioned as a *future mother* instead of a *non-mother*. This patronizes and infantilizes her because it assumes that she is not mature enough to make the decision about motherhood, as motherhood is central to an adult woman’s identity (Erikson 1964; Gillespie 2000, 2003; Ireland 1993; Kelly 2009; Letherby 2002; Nakano Glenn 1994; Russo 1976).

## DEVIANCE

The most common form of stigma was *deviance* (n=12). Two women’s mothers framed their daughters as *deviant* for their decision to remain childfree, mainly because of their failure to provide grandchildren. Courtney believed her mom hated the idea because she was an only child and this denied her mother the chance of being a grandmother. Vaughn explained that her mother was against the decision:

My mom is devastated [long pause] for many reasons. The typical, ‘who is going to take care of you when you’re old... don’t you want to leave a piece of you behind...’ She’s also devastated for selfish reasons. She wants grandchildren and she has actually said to me ‘Why do you think I had children? Because I want grandchildren!’ And I’m like, well, that’s your mistake because my purpose in life is not to provide you with grandchildren, so, sorry. I do feel bad, because she is upset about that, but what am I going to do? I’m not going to have a kid just because she wants more grandchildren.

Other women’s parents did not express a bold disagreement in their daughters’ decisions, but did articulate disapproval because of their own desires to be grandparents. It should be noted that three of these five women were only children, so the burden was on them to provide grandchildren. Courtney stated that her mom was “really upset about the fact that she’s not gonna be a grandma.” Lindsey and her sister had recently been asked by their mother if they had “changed their minds,” because she had seen her own friends with grandchildren:

My mom recently started expressing some desire to have grandchildren. I think because I have a sister who is a year older than I am and all of our friends are starting to have kids, and she sees all of our friends' parents having that first grandparent experience.

Anne explained her father was disappointed, but the pressure for her and her husband to have children lessened after her brother had children:

I think my parents are a little disappointed. I think my dad more than my mom. They have two grandchildren, and that has definitely taken a lot of pressure off of it. I keep thinking, they think I'm going to change my mind. But that's not going to happen.

Arizona was recently engaged, and her parents began expressing their interest in grandparenting:

My parents are fairly young. Neither really wanted grandchildren until shortly after I got engaged; they started talking to me about wanting grandchildren. And it wasn't really like they want ME to have a child, they want a grandchild and 'you're getting married, you're gonna want to start a family' and I still don't buy it.

Cassie said "I think my dad wishes I'd have a kid just because he likes babies and kids," but a statement made by Erica summarized the sentiment was shared by women whose parents pressured them to bear grandchildren:

I'll never forget when I was first married, it did come up if I was gonna have kids. A family friend, I think her daughter was having a baby... And I must have said something like I didn't know if I wanted kids or not and she said, 'do not have kids just to give your parents grandchildren,' 'cause I said something like 'I would love to give, you know my mom and dad, I feel bad they don't have grandkids' and she says 'that is not the reason to have 'em,' and I always remembered that 'cause she was right.

Deviance was most frequently framed with regards to grandchildren, as several (n=7) parents discussed their desire to grandparent.

One woman was expressly defined as a *deviant* by her father and her extended family, and



another by her brother. When asked why she chose not to have children, Julia, 57, responded “well, my father would say it’s because I’m so selfish.” Rationalizing a childfree woman’s decision as selfish takes away the “choice” because it implies the sole reason is an inherent personality flaw and casts her as a deviant individual. She was also questioned by her family:

They would ask if I was dating anybody. And I would ask them why, and it was more like they felt bad for me, that I was alone. I wasn’t alone because I was involved with somebody but they didn’t necessarily know that. And a lot of them assume I’m a lesbian.

This is another example of *deviance* because in the eyes of others, a woman cannot choose not to have children, but instead has it thrust upon her due to a deviant identity such as homosexuality.

Angie, 42, described how her brother did not understand her decision:

[My brother and I,] we’re really different. Matter of fact we don’t have much in common, so I really don’t think he understands. And I do think he thinks there’s something wrong with me. I don’t know, he’s made little snide remarks here and there... I remember one time he intonated that I was gay because I don’t have kids. My aunt is a lesbian, that’s not the issue at all. The point is I’m not. He should know me well enough to know that’s not the case but he meant it as an insult. It would be fine if he meant it as a matter-of-fact thing. So it’s like, if I’m not married with kids then I must be gay. And then I remember one time some years ago when of course I could have birthed children. I don’t know if my sister-in-law said something, or my mom might have said ‘oh you never know’ about me having kids, and my brother goes ‘oh no she’ll never have kids.’ He said it like it was such a bad thing if I don’t.

Angie’s brother’s justification of her choice is an example of the stigma of *deviance*. Since it is a deviant identity to choose not to mother, it is implied that another form of deviance, being a lesbian, is the cause. Although he knew she was not a lesbian, he implied that she was.

In addition to family members, several women (n=6) talked about conversations with

acquaintances in which they felt that their choice was not understood. While this was not always indicative of blatant disagreement, it reminded women of their deviance for violating the norm. Jane, 29, had a close relationship with a male coworker who she believed had her best interests at heart, although his comments were not always warranted:

I have a coworker who I'm really close to, he is... I call him über-religious. But maybe he's fanatical. Very, very, traditional. I have a good friend that comes to my job and we hang out and he has two children. And he'll say things like, 'oh you know he might really be interested in you but you don't want to have children so he's staying away from you. You should really settle down and pop some kids out...before it's too late.' I'm not interested. And he's even said things to him about you know, 'you think Jane will make a good mother?' And he's like 'yeah she would, she's really good with my children.'... and I'm thinking there are more things to do in life than have children. Do you say this to men or do you just find it something you say to me?

Chloe, 30, had also experienced resistance from men coworkers:

It is more women that are accepting than men. Most men are like 'really you don't want kids?' like they can't wrap their mind around it. It's just, I don't know it's just weird to them I guess... And probably 'cause most women are, they want kids and that's all that they think about. Especially when they're younger and they're looking to get married.

Angie, 42, had a conversation with a male coworker about another childless woman:

There's this woman in my office, maybe she's in her late 50's. She's been married for years, and they don't have any kids. I do not know why they don't have any kids; that's not my business. I'm certain this comment was made to me because I wasn't the age I am now, I remember a man describing her as 'weird' and I'm like 'why is she weird?' and he goes 'eh she doesn't have any kids.' Huh?! And now that I'm older, that was like at least 10-12 years ago, and I think 'gosh is that what people think of me? I'm that woman?'

The choice to refrain from motherhood is redefined as *not* a choice through these forms of dismissal and disapproval. Rather than childfree women, they are framed as temporarily childless, abnormal, or self-sacrificing “career women.”

## SUMMARY

In this study, the majority of responses to the women’s decision to remain childfree cast their non-motherhood status as unfortunate and the result of unplanned circumstance instead of a choice. *Disbelief* framed childfreedom with a “more legitimate explanation” (Gillespie 2000:227), such as a sacrifice a woman made in order to fulfill her career or educational aspirations. *Disregard* was as common as disbelief, infantilizing women by believing they were not old enough to make an informed decision about motherhood, and suggesting they would change their minds and become typical adult women. *Deviance* reminded women they were “strange” for being childfree and implied they were somehow flawed because they did not want children and refused to provide their parents with grandchildren.

## CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In the last several years, motherhood and childfreedom have been increasingly discussed in the media with debates on women “leaning in,” and “opting out.” In a 2012 issue of *The Atlantic*, Anne-Marie Slaughter argues that “Women Still Can’t Have it All;” after leaving her position as the first woman director of policy planning at the State Department to return to her home (and career as an Ivy League professor) with her family. She states:

I’d been the one telling young women at my lectures that you *can* have it all, regardless of what field you are in. Which means I’d been a part, albeit unwillingly, of making millions of women feel that *they* are to blame if they cannot manage to rise up the ladder as fast as men and also have a family and an active home life (and be thin and beautiful to boot).

Slaughter discusses the impossibility of “having it all” for most women, including the inability to balance a high powered career and motherhood. On the other hand, Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook, states women need to “lean in” to their careers. She argues that many women “lean back” and “rarely make one big decision to leave the workforce. Instead, they make a lot of small decisions along the way, making accommodations and sacrifices that they believe will be required to have a family” (2013:93). If a woman *leans in* to her career, she argues, she will be more fulfilled and excited to return to work once she has a child. She goes on to discuss “off-ramping” (2013:97), women leaving careers once they become mothers. Just as Joan C. Williams argues that “while some women stand nose pressed against the glass ceiling, many working mothers never get near it. What stops them is the ‘maternal wall.’” (Williams 2004) This is also discussed by Lisa Belkin in her *New York Times* article “The Opt-Out Revolution.” More women than men are earn Bachelor’s and Graduate degrees, and 50% of the graduates of Yale’s law school in 2003 were women (Belkin 2003). Despite degree attainment, some women “opt out” of high paying careers

to have children, arguing that their stay-at-home-mother status is “a temporary decision for just a few years, not a permanent decision for the rest of her life” (2003:8).

In a 2013 *Time Magazine* article, Lauren Sandler discusses the social imperative to have children, stigma associated with deciding not to have children, and coping strategies for the “social isolation” during a childfree woman’s late 30s and early 40s. She points to the fact that “the decision to have a child or not is a private one, but it takes place, in America at least, in a culture that often equates womanhood with motherhood” (2013). These articles generate debates among college-educated women throughout the country, and forced many women to rethink the possibility of having a powerful career, fulfilling marriage, well-behaved children, and a magazine-ready physique. Kristen Houghton wrote in the *Huffington Post* “if you want to be successful in your career, don’t have children” (2013).

The increasing visibility of childfree women (and couples) in today’s discourse points to the rising number of childfree women speaking out about their choices. My first research question “What were the reasons women chose childfreedom and how did they reach this decision?” attempted to explain, in part, why the number of childfree women has grown over the last several decades. Like Gillespie (1999), I found two distinct groups of decision making pathways; active and passive. I separated active deciders into two categories: *certain* and *drifted, then active* (Gillespie 1999; McAllister & Clarke 1998). Women who were *certain* were mostly white and under the age of 40, while women who *drifted* into the decision were mostly African American, and all were single. I then separated passive deciders into two categories: *accepting* and *ambivalent* (Lisle 1996). Women who I categorized as *accepting* were all single, over age 40, made at least \$30,000 annually, and constituted half of the African American women in the sample. *Ambivalent* women, on the other hand, were mostly white, with no significant differences with regards to

income or age.

Regardless of women as *active* or *passive deciders*, all discussed *benefits of childfreedom* and *costs of raising children* or *constraints*, and most women pointed to several reasons. The majority of women focused on the *benefits of childfreedom*. The most common benefits were freedom of lifestyle and travel, which were discussed regardless of race or socioeconomic status. This is similar to Houseknecht's (1987) findings, where freedom and independence were discussed as motives in 79% of all childfree literature from 1971 to 1981. Most women who discussed the ability for self-improvement and their financial position as greater than their peers with children were in the lower- to middle-income range. While the income is satisfactory for a single woman or a woman in a dual-income relationship, the women knew their budget would be stretched if they were to have children.

Every woman I interviewed addressed the *costs of raising children*. Regardless of age, race, or economic status, women identified similar costs like the idea of children as disruptive. This "rejection of motherhood" (Gillespie 1999) meant that motherhood was not an inherent longing for childfree women. The most common cost was the lack of a "biological clock," which was addressed more often by women in their twenties and thirties than women entering their last years of childbearing or beyond. That older women spoke less often about the biological clock could be attributed to their life course stage. However, in their retroactive sense-making, these women mentioned many different factors from their twenties and thirties, and the lack of a biological clock was not prominent among them. Many women contemplated the struggles of balancing work and family, mostly women earning more than \$62,500. Women with higher incomes and the majority of the women of color overwhelmingly addressed the emotional risks of motherhood, while white women with lower incomes focused on the financial risks of motherhood.

All but two women discussed *constraints*. The most common constraint was an aversion to pregnancy, childbirth, and/or the bodily changes associated with pregnancy. This is in contrast to previous studies (Houseknecht 1987), where only 21% of women expressed concern about the physical aspects of childbirth. Most women who discussed this were white and earned less than \$55,000. Another common constraint was the lack of a suitable partner. Most of these women earned over \$62,500 and all were over the age of 40. All but one woman of color discussed the lack of a partner. Another widely cited constraint was world problems, with issues ranging from wars to school bullying. Most women who talked about world problems were white, under 45, and earned less than \$55,000. Finally, five women, mostly white and in their forties and fifties, talked about issues with their own parents as a reason for their decision to remain childfree. The majority of reasons given in all categories pointed to an aversion to motherhood, but not to children in general. In fact, the benefits of childlessness, constraints, and the majority of costs of childbearing identified by the women did not directly relate to children, but to the restrictions put upon parents. Several women either worked with children or acted as pseudo-parents to nieces or nephews and most did not cite a dislike of children.

My second research question, “How did family, friends, and others respond to the women’s decision not to have children?” examined the stigma associated with the choice. While I based my framework upon Gillespie’s (2000) disbelief, disregard, and deviance, I built upon this research by addressing the sociodemographic differences among women experiencing this stigma. *Disbelief* is the expectation that if a woman does not have children, it is because of motherhood denied due to career or educational goals. This was the least common form of stigma that women experienced, and the only category dominated by women of color. *Disregard* is the belief that a woman will change her mind and eventually become a mother, because women are perceived to be

“unfulfilled” if they do not become mothers (Morell 2000). This is another type of stigma that ignores the reality of the choice, by viewing childfree women as *future* mothers. Most women who experienced disregard were white and in the lower-to-middle income range. *Deviance* was the most common form of stigma. The most common forms of deviant labeling were the assertions that childfree women were lesbians, selfish, or “excessive individualists” (Park 2005). Many people simply did not understand the choice to refrain from motherhood, and reminded women of their deviance by questioning the decision. This deviant labeling reflects “the greater extent to which healthy, mature femininity is culturally defined by selflessness and nurturance” and how “opting out of the motherhood role is more deviant for women than is men’s foregoing fatherhood, as normal masculinity continues to be defined primarily by occupational achievement” (Park 2005:380).

The third research question, “How did childfree women experience their lives, and how did this differ based on location in the life span and other sociodemographic factors?” encompassed decisions, opinions, and interactions that childfree women experienced. This research question was based on the lack of research comparing childfree women to one another. First, I found that childfree women in this study said they would be more likely to continue a pregnancy than terminate it, regardless of age. Three of four African American women would have continued with the pregnancy, only one had previously sought an abortion. Second, most childfree women view their status positively, and associate their decision with attributes such as freedom, financial stability, and independence. Finally, for the majority of women in this study (n=14), childfree was not a major identifying factor. The only women who referred to themselves as “childfree” were white, hinting at differing racial beliefs about motherhood expectations. The area that was most heavily influenced by motherhood, regardless of race or age, was friendships. There



was the greatest divide among mothers and childfree women during a woman's thirties, because this is when most women have younger children who require the most time and attention. During a woman's early twenties and late forties onward, status as mother or non-mother is less important, perhaps because children are either not yet born or old enough to care for themselves. Once a woman's friends started to have children, childfree women felt that "mommy" became her friends' primary identity, and as such, the relationships tended to drift apart. In friendships with other childfree women, respondents discussed a variety of conversation topics. For example, the issue of not having children occasionally came up, and they discussed the costs of motherhood and benefits of childlessness. However, these friendships were focused on hobbies, work, or school.

There were many paths that led women to the decision to remain childfree. Women under age 45 were more likely to talk about the benefits of childlessness and the costs of motherhood, while women over 45 discussed constraints, such as the lack of a partner. The aspect of choice was inherent in each pathway, and the stigma associated with voluntary childlessness also centered on choice. All forms of stigma (disbelief, disregard, and deviance) frame childlessness *not* as a choice, but an unfortunate circumstance women either have thrust upon them or bring upon themselves. However, these women asserted their own choices led them to their status, and expressed few, if any, regrets. The primary area in which women communicated discord was the separation they experienced from their friends when they became mothers. Motherhood became such a pervasive identity for their friends, that their own status as non-mothers was more of an issue in these friendships than any other aspect of their lives. Generally, childfree women hesitated to label themselves as childfree or childless but included it as one of many facets of their identity. As expected, there was no universal childless woman, but a multitude of factors that shaped the decision and the women making it.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study is not an all-encompassing review of childfree women, and further research is needed to examine this rapidly growing phenomenon. Future research should focus on expanding the research beyond white, middle-class, women who are college-educated and report little to no religious affiliation. Instead of dividing the sample by age, I suggest attempting to obtain a sample which is more purposefully diverse and comparing between these groups. Additionally, there has been a dearth of research focusing on childfree men. I strongly suggest that the next step in the research of the choice to remain childfree focuses on men, because focusing exclusively on women ignores men's childfree decision making and the dyadic practices many couples experience while making such an important decision.

## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Decision-Making Questions

1. Have you made a choice not to have children?
  - a. Can you tell me how you came to this decision?
  - b. Did you feel in control of this decision?
2. Can you tell me about the reasons for your decision to not have children?
  - a. Probe: Career, partner, medical, family, hobbies, etc.
3. When did you know you weren't going to have children?
  - a. Can you talk about any experiences that stand out in your mind that contributed to your decision not to have children?
4. When you think of pregnancy and childbirth, what comes to mind for you?
5. Have you talked to your partner (or past partners) about children?
  - a. In your current or previous relationships, in what phase of the relationship do you generally have this discussion?
  - b. Why at this time?

### Responses by Families, Friends, and Others in Society Questions

6. Can you tell me how your family members have commented on your decision to not have children?
  - a. When you go to holiday or family events, can you describe for me what the conversations are like, with regards to children?
7. When you and your friends talk about children, what are those conversations like? What kinds of responses have your friends made about your decision to not have children?
8. In these next questions, I would like to talk about what you think it is like to be a woman without children.

- a. Can you tell me how you think your life is different than your friends or family members that have children (aside from having children)?
  - b. Have there been moments in your life where you second guess the decision, or moments where you think you made the right decision?
9. For women who are beyond their childbearing years: Have your experiences as a woman without children changed over time?
10. For women who are still in their childbearing years: Do you think you'll ever change your mind?
- a. Under what circumstances?
11. Do you have friends or colleagues that have also made the decision to not have children?  
Can you describe for me what you talk about when the issue of children comes up?
12. Is there a label you would give yourself, with regards to not having children?
- a. Would you consider yourself "childfree," "childless," or something else?
    - i. Do you even think of yourself in these terms?
  - b. When you think of the term "childfree," what does it mean to you? What about "childless"?
13. Is there anything we didn't cover that you'd like to talk about?
14. Do you know any other women who would be interested in participating in this study?

## APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Please fill out this information sheet to the best of your ability. This information will not be released, nor will it have your name attached to it. It will be used solely for analytic purposes. There are questions on the front and back of the first page.

1. What year were you born? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your sexual preference?
  - a) Heterosexual
  - b) Homosexual
  - c) Bisexual
  - d) Other \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your marital status?
  - a) Single
  - b) Cohabiting
  - c) Married
4. What is your annual income?
  - a) Under \$10,500
  - b) \$10,500 - \$18,500
  - c) \$18,501 - \$22,500
  - d) \$22,501 - \$30,000
  - e) \$30,001 - \$55,000
  - f) \$55,001 - \$62,500
  - g) \$62,501 - \$77,500
  - h) \$77,501 - \$100,000
  - i) Over \$100,000
5. Do you feel that you earn enough money to make your basic expenses?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
6. What are your current living arrangements?
  - a) Own a home
  - b) Rent a home
  - c) Live with parents or other relatives
  - d) Other \_\_\_\_\_
7. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
  - a) Less than High School, High School Degree, or Degree Equivalent
  - b) Some College, No Degree
  - c) 2-Year College Degree (Associates)
  - d) 4-Year College Degree (BA, BS) or higher
8. What is your current occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

9. What is your race? Feel free to specify after any selection.
- White
  - African American
  - Asian
  - Middle Eastern
  - European
  - Hispanic
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
10. Are you a religious person? (Do you attend church, temple, or mosque?)
- Yes
  - No
11. Do you consider yourself to be a feminist?
- Yes
  - No
12. How satisfied are you with your current life choices? (Five being very satisfied, one being very unsatisfied).
- 1 2 3 4 5
12. Can you list three to five goals that you are working towards in the next five years?
- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
  - 5.
13. Would you like to be e-mailed the final results of this research project?
- Yes \_\_\_\_\_
- No \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORMS

### Behavioral Research Informed Consent

Title of Study: *The Social Experiences of Voluntarily Childless Women*

Principal Investigator (PI): Braelin Settle  
Sociology  
(248)635-0031

### Purpose

You are being asked to be in a research study of voluntarily childless women because you have identified yourself as such. This study is being conducted at Wayne State University and various public locations and private homes. The estimated number of study participants is about twenty throughout the Metro-Detroit area. **Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.**

In this research study, I aim to examine the social experiences of women who choose to remain childless. Because there are a growing number of women who decide they do not want children, I believe that this is a population that deserves further attention. In 2000, almost twice as many women ages 40-44 were childless than in 1980. This case study focuses on the growing social phenomenon of voluntarily childless women in the United States. Participating in interviews of women, I examine the reasons behind their decision to remain childless and the experiences of being childless in their everyday lives. I am particularly interested in understanding the meanings that women and the broader society place on them when they choose not to have children.

### Study Procedures

If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be asked to participate in one interview, lasting anywhere from thirty to ninety minutes. At the end of the interview, I will give you a short survey with basic demographic information. There may be need for a follow up interview, at your consent, which will last about an hour.

### Benefits

As a participant in this research study, there may be no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

### Risks

By taking part in this study, you may experience the following risks: emotional risks (e.g. feelings of sadness or anxiety), social risk (e.g. possible loss of confidentiality). While no risks are overtly anticipated, sensitive topics may arise during the interview that will affect you personally.

### Compensation

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

### Confidentiality

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. Information that identifies you personally will not be released without your written permission. However, the study sponsor, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Wayne State University, or federal agencies with appropriate regulatory oversight [e.g., Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), Office of Civil Rights (OCR), etc.] may review your records.

When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

Audiotape recordings of you will be used for research or educational purposes, your identity will be protected or disguised. Audio tapes will be destroyed within one year of completion of the study, and only the principal investigator will have access to the tapes. Your personal identity will be linked to your participant number.

### **Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in the study you can later change your mind and withdraw from the study. You are free to only answer questions that you want to answer. You are free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time. Your decisions will not change any present or future relationship with Wayne State University or its affiliates, or other services you are entitled to receive.

The PI may stop your participation in this study without your consent. The PI will make the decision and let you know if it is not possible for you to continue. The decision that is made is to protect your health and safety, or because you did not follow the instructions to take part in the study

### **Questions**

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Braelin Settle at the following phone number (248) 635-0031. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call (313) 577-1628 to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.

### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. If you choose to take part in this study you may withdraw at any time. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by signing this form. Your signature below indicates that you have read, or had read to you, this entire consent form, including the risks and benefits, and have had all of your questions answered. You will be given a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Time



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Signature of person obtaining consent

---

Printed name of person obtaining consent

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Date

---

Time

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## Abstract

### DEFYING MANDATORY MOTHERHOOD: THE SOCIAL EXPERIENCES OF CHILDFREE WOMEN

by

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**Advisor:** Krista Brumley, PhD.

**Major:** Sociology

**Degree:** Master of Arts

Research suggests motherhood is central to a woman's adult identity. In 2000, however, almost twice as many women ages 40-44 were childless than in 1980 (U.S. Bureau of the Census). Scholarship points to the social, economic, and attitudinal factors shaping the dramatic increase in the number of childfree women, many of whom are white, educated beyond high school, and upper-middle class. This qualitative case study focuses on the growing social phenomenon of childfree women in the United States. Using in-depth interviews, I examine the reasons behind women's decisions to remain childfree and the experiences of being childfree in their everyday lives. I focus on the meanings that women and the broader society place on women when they choose not to have children. This research contributes to the feminist literature on motherhood by examining an understudied phenomenon of childfree women who occupy a stigmatized identity in a generally pronatalist society.

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

In 2005, I enrolled in an Introduction to Women and Gender Studies course at Oakland University in Rochester, MI. Within a semester, I had a new major. Since then I have committed my education to the sociology of gender. My academic interests include gender, motherhood, family, sociology of sport, intersectionality, men's studies, and feminist theory. I am currently living a childfree life with my partner in northwest Montana.