The Politics of Choice: Women's Experiences of Deciding to Be Childfree

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of childfree women and examines how they navigate the choice not to have children and how they understand their decision in relation to western societal norms and cultural expectations. I bring attention to how the personal decisions and experiences of childfree women are influenced by prevailing social norms. The purpose of this research was to explore the following questions: (1) How do women navigate and understand their choice to be childfree? (2) What do women believe an intentionally childfree life looks like? and (3) Do different women experience the pressures to have children differently? How? I conducted interviews with 13 intentionally childfree, heterosexual women between the ages of 20 and 40. I then used a feminist, intersectional theoretical lens to analyze the data. My findings indicated that gendered social expectations for women's lives are upheld by various social structures that have an impact on women's decisions to be childfree. While these expectations are placed on all women, there is variability in women's experiences related to factors including, but not limited to, religious affiliation and racial or ethnic identity. I also found that childfree women desire community and benefit from spaces where they can be validated for their decision and learn more about the implications of being childfree. They also hope that open dialogue about the possibility of being childfree will normalize this decision for women. I found that while women recognize that their decision to be childfree places them outside of the social norm of what is typically expected of women, they rarely seem to challenge the social structures which limit their choices, turning instead to individual level solutions. I conclude that to grant women full access to the choice to be childfree, feminist social movements ought to focus on women's liberation not only in terms of reproductive autonomy, but also by challenging the nuclear family and some of the broader structures that hold it in place, like neoliberal capitalism.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

From kindergarten through to high-school, I went to Catholic school. Although my parents were both raised by religious, European immigrant parents, neither of them are particularly religious. Aside from weddings, funerals, and the times my sister and I were approaching the Catholic sacraments of communion and confirmation, we rarely attended church. Early on my mother would encourage us to go on religious holidays, but eventually her philosophy became: "We never go any other time of the year, why should we go for the holidays?" She took the most drastic stance towards Catholicism I ever heard from her one sunny evening last July when she apologized for sending my sister and me to Catholic school. This apology came a couple weeks after I told my parents about the chastity club at my high school, members of which would give a presentation in each homeroom class once a year. They would pass around a single piece of Scotch tape and tell everyone to stick it to their hand, pull it off, and pass it to the next student. By the time the piece of tape got to the last person in the class, it would hardly stick to them. The chastity club speakers would then tell us that much like a piece of tape, our bodies should only be given to one person, or else they would lose their worth. It was a weak metaphor, but it was effective in instilling guilt in my young, impressionable mind about sex and romantic relationships. The tape demonstration was but one example of the strict boundaries I was taught to maintain. In religion class, I was told that I could have sex, even just for pleasure, if it was with a man I was married to. I was also taught that contraception was against Catholic beliefs, and that women should track their menstrual cycles to be able to know when they could have sex for pleasure without getting pregnant.

The underlying lesson of these messages was that heterosexual marriage and children were normal and expected of me. Lives that were not lived with a nuclear family at their centre

were not only rarely acknowledged, but they were portrayed as deviant, unfulfilling, and sinful. My parents, although not religious, consider themselves to be "old-school" in that they always hoped that my sister and I would get married and have children, in that order. Conversations while I was growing up commonly included phrases loaded with the assumption that this is what my sister and I wanted for ourselves too: "when you are married" or "when you have children." Interestingly, in completing this project and discussing it with my parents, particularly my mother, their tone has shifted dramatically.

Going away to university was the start of a gradual shift in my understanding of what is possible for my life. Although the majority of students who attend Queen's University are white and middle class (Human Rights and Equity Office, 2020), the simple fact of being outside of the Toronto suburbs and getting an education that was not explicitly guided by Catholic values introduced me to different ways of thinking about my own life. Since then, I have come into my own with each passing year of my twenties. I am now approaching the time in my life when I would be expected to fulfill the much-anticipated tasks of finding a man to marry and having children. At the age of 26, feeling lifetimes away from my high school self, I have decided I do not want these things for myself. Most notably, I have decided that I do not want to have children. The realization that I do not need to follow the heteronormative roadmap to the nuclear family has been an extremely empowering, yet often isolating experience. Pursuing a master's degree in a program that seeks to understand and challenge societal norms and expectations has given me an avenue to validate the lifepath I want for myself and help me make sense of it. It has allowed me to identify parts of myself I did not realize I was not yet familiar or comfortable with, and made me feel like a life different from the one everyone else seems to want for me is

not only an option, but possible. Feminist theory, which I will use to guide my research, has been particularly useful for this.

The validation I have felt in making these decisions and discussing them in an academic environment has not erased their complexity. I have recognized how difficult it is to convince others that the decision to not have children is reasonable, valid, and does not mean I will live a life absent of value and happiness. I am now, more than ever, aware of both the subtle and overt ways marriage and children are frequently being pushed on me. It is not only my parents and teachers who have felt they know what is best for my life, but my manager at work, my friends' mothers, my partner's friends and family, and even customers at my former retail job. How is it that despite the fact that deciding not to have children has been an on-going, intensely personal process for me, strangers feel no hesitation bringing my marital and parental status into casual conversation? After making the decision that I do not want children, I had a new-founded discomfort around discussions of marriage and children, anxious that I would be met, as I often am, with hesitation, disbelief, or disappointment. Remarkably, in completing this research project and discussing it with peers, friends, and family, I have come to realize that more people than I anticipated are understanding, encouraging, and commonly on the same page as me about being childfree.

In my research I sought to explore the experiences of childfree women. I specifically wanted to know how they made the choice not to have children, how their choice has been received by their friends and family, and how they understand their decision in light of western societal norms and cultural expectations. I also wanted to bring a feminist and intersectional lens to this issue. I sought to understand how other women's experiences relate to and differ from my own. Prior research on the experiences of childfree women have displayed the many ways

women might be ostracized from their social milieus and made to feel as though their lives are less valuable than those of women who have children (See: Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2018; Bays, 2017; Somers, 1993; Mueller & Yoder 1999). I also wanted to include a historical analysis to contextualize childfree women's experiences and examine whether this social ostracization has changed in recent years.

At 26-years-old, I know few other women around my age who are as certain as I am that they do not want children, and although many of the women I know who have or want children support my decision, I still often feel like an outcast. There are certain groups in which I do feel more accepted, specifically among friends I have met during my master's, who take a similar, critical approach to family structures. Previous academic literature suggests that women who choose not to have children are often viewed as abnormal (Kelly, 2009). My own experiences suggest that this view has yet to be overturned. It is no surprise, therefore, that childfree women, myself included, would benefit from community. The goal of this project is to make childfree women feel heard, valued, and validated and to give them space to share their experiences openly and without judgement. I situate these experiences within a broader social context that centres one type of woman: a cisgender, heterosexual, educated, white, mother. Relying on feminist critiques of the family and motherhood, and specifically drawing upon the work of Shulamith Firestone, Patricia Hill Collins, Stephanie Coontz, Orna Donath, M.E. O'Brien, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Kim Tallbear, and Sylvia Van Kirk, among others, I bring attention to how the individual decisions and experiences of women are not isolated, but rather are influenced by normative social expectations. I want to give women a space to not only voice their experiences, but make sense of them.

Writer, historian, and activist, Rebecca Solnit, was one of the first women to make me believe I could live out this 'alternative,' childfree lifestyle. Her 2017 book, *Mother of All Questions,* contains a collection of feminist essays pertaining to women's experiences around mothering, silencing, and bodily autonomy. In the book's introduction, Solnit writes about an experience she had with an interviewer who hounded her with questions about why she does not have children rather than asking her questions pertaining to her work. Reflecting on this experience, she wrote:

> Just because the question can be answered doesn't mean that anyone is obliged to answer it, or that it ought to be asked. The interviewer's question to me was indecent, because it presumed that women should have children, and that a woman's reproductive activities were naturally public business. More fundamentally, the question assumed that there was only one proper way for a woman to live. (p.14)

While reading this book for the first time, I began to think back on my own experiences of being questioned about my choices, especially by people very far removed from them, including complete strangers. As it turns out, Rebecca Solnit and I are not the only two women who have opinions on this topic. For example, the Instagram account, Childfree Firecrackers (@childfreefirecrackers), formally The Uprising Spark (@theuprisingspark), is run by a woman named Isabel. The biography on her page reads, "I'm the Badass Childfree friend you didn't know you needed! Contact me if you feel the pressure to be a mom is too much" (Childfree Firecrackers, 2022). A post on to the account from June 2022 includes a red background with large, pink text that states, "NORMALIZE ANSWERING 'THANKS, BUT I DIDN'T ASK FOR YOUR OPINION'" and is captioned, "A couple days ago someone close to me said something not constructive about a decision I made some time ago. My reaction was quick:

‘Thank you, but I didn’t ask for your opinion,’ He changed the subject, I felt proud. Is it hard for you to tell people to keep their opinions about your life to themselves?” (Childfree Firecrackers, 2022). The comment section following this post contains messages of solidarity, such as user @ameliaxstephensx’s response: “when the topic is my uterus & reproducing, if I did not ask you then this is not the place to give your opinion” (Childfree Firecrackers, 2022). Users suggested alternate ways to give the same message to those who offer unwarranted and unwanted opinions on women’s decision to be childfree.

Public academic, writer, and lecturer, Rachel Elizabeth Cargle, has also spoken out about the experience of being childfree. In an *LA Times* article, “Being childfree lets me live my most productive life” (a title she did not choose and has been vocal about disliking due to its neoliberal tone), Cargle voiced many common reasons for women choosing to be childfree, along with a personal account of how she navigated this decision (Cargle, 2022). She has even gone so far as to create the Instagram account, Rich Auntie Supreme (@richauntiesupreme), which is described as “our little corner of the internet. Celebrating & creating community with those who indulge in the lifestyle of being childfree by choice” (Rich Auntie Supreme, 2022). The page is full of memes and informative articles pertaining to life as a childfree woman. The comment sections on her posts are littered with solidarity, appreciation, and similar personal experiences.

Women who oppose social norms about reproduction often receive backlash and so it is not surprising that they desire community and acceptance. I have identified these trends in my own life and the lives of women whom I hold very close to me. In completing this project, I sought to understand the specific repercussions of women’s choice to not have children. I acknowledge that as a white, middle-class, cisgender woman living in Canada, my experiences

are not indicative of all childfree women's experiences. Additionally, two factors that separate my project from some of the earlier literature I read are the escalating global climate crisis and the growing cost of raising children. With those factors in mind, the questions I ask in this project are as follows:

1. How do women navigate and understand their choice to be childfree?
    - To what extent do women see their choice as individual and personal? What connections do they see between their experiences and the social context in which they make these choices?
2. What do women believe an intentionally childfree life looks like?
    - What are their hopes for a childfree life?
3. Do different women experience the pressures to have children differently? How?

Before describing the project, I would like to clarify the language I am using in my work. Most notably, my use of the word "woman." The wide-spread understanding of gender in North American and Western societies is rooted in a binary understanding of biological sex (Gill-Peterson, 2018). Although this black and white depiction of biological sex as either female or male is reductive, ignoring variability, such as intersex anatomy, and overlap on either side of the binary, it remains widely accepted in western contexts. The concept of gender refers to the social and cultural performances and expectations that are anticipated based on a person's biological sex (Butler, 1990). My project is concerned specifically with gender, and therefore I am interested in all people who identify as women, regardless of their anatomy or the gender that was assigned to them at birth.

While the concept of gender has been employed by feminists as a means of de-emphasizing biology and recognizing the importance of social organization and structures, it too

has tended to be used in binary fashion. While the gender binary is constraining, and I challenge its limitations in my own life and thinking, it is instrumental in understanding gender performance and the regulation of gender within North American social worlds. Women are expected to act in accordance with context-specific definitions of womanhood. Thus, the scope of my project reflects the continued existence of a gender binary that divides humans into separate categories of men and women with each group subject to different cultural expectations for how gender should be performed. To the extent that non-binary people are working to live beyond the gender binary, their experiences will not be reflected in this study.

There is also variation, and some debate, over what language to use when referring to childfree women. The term "childless" was used in early research and indicates a person who does not have children, perhaps due to barriers, rather than choice (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). In contrast, "voluntary childlessness" is used to describe fertile women of childbearing age who do not intend to have children. The term also encompasses women of childbearing age who have opted for sterilization, and women who were fertile and past childbearing age who decided not to have children (Kelly, 2009). "Temporarily childless" describes women who intend to have children in the future, while "involuntary childlessness" refers to women who wanted to have biological children, but experience fertility issues (Kelly, 2009).

Recent research has shifted to a childless-by-choice framework with the introduction of the term "childfree," which describes someone who does not plan to have children, regardless of their ability to do so (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). However, as Kelly (2009) points out, all these terms depict a deviation from a norm and a lack. She stated that "there is no term that suggests that both mothering and choosing not to mother are equally acceptable options" (p.160). Harrington (2019) added to the conversation a decade later that

"[the terms childless and childfree], unfortunately, fail to capture the complexity of 'childlessness' and reflect a pronatalist, patriarchal culture wherein having children remains at the core of identity" (p. 23). Blackstone and Stewart (2012) noted that the term "childfree" has been most frequently used in recent literature concerning women who decided not to have children, as it steers us away from the suffix "less," offering an indication of choice rather than a lacking. Although "childfree" does not entirely overcome the limitations to the existing language around the issue, it is the term I will use going forward since it is used in the recent literature and aims to acknowledge the nuance of this decision.

To provide an overview of my project, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 heterosexual, childfree women between the ages of 20 and 40 years old. I then used a feminist intersectional lens to analyze the data. My findings indicate that while women are aware and critical of the social and political influences on their decision to be childfree, they consider their choice primarily on an individual level. Factors including the climate crisis, the current state of the economy, the cost of raising children, systemic racism and homophobia, potential risks of pregnancy, and expecting less autonomy with time and money were common considerations participants listed when describing their decision to be childfree. Participants also described the social repercussions of their decisions including both supportive and unsupportive comments they have received from friends, family, doctors, co-workers, and acquaintances. While my findings indicate that childfree women face pressure to have children, which differs between women based on factors including ethnicity, race, religion, and age, the choice for women to be childfree has become more accessible. I also found that having social support that validates women's decisions to be childfree is useful for recognizing and actualizing the desire to be childfree. In my interviews, women described the usefulness and importance of having spaces in

which they can voice their honest opinions about being childfree and find relationships with "like-minded" people. In finding or yearning for these spaces and relationships, childfree women also hope that being childfree will become more "normalized" and accepted within North America. I argue that neoliberal capitalism complicates this goal, as it encourages us to consider individual-level solutions to structural problems. Childfree women, myself included, tend to demonstrate neoliberal thinking when considering the changes they would like to see for them to be more accepted.

The remainder of my thesis consists of an overview of prior literature regarding childfree women to contextualize where we are today and what my project contributes to the conversation around the choice to be childfree. I then outline the methods used throughout my project before offering an analysis of my data across two chapters. My analysis covers the social and political influences on women's decisions to be childfree, how women navigate their decision, and the importance of community, support, and validation for childfree women. I close with a conclusion that offers an overview of my findings and makes connections between the most significant themes I cover. I suggest that the social change childfree women desire will come not from individuals, but rather social mobilization which addresses the structural, political systems that limit women's decisions pertaining to family life and motherhood. I hope that my thesis can encourage childfree women, and all feminists, to consider how the experiences of childfree women are reflective of the social context and to shift readers perspectives on what needs to be done, as well as what their part may be in actualizing these social changes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter, I review relevant literature to frame the experiences of childfree women in modern North American. I start with a brief history of the nuclear family and its role in forming social and cultural norms pertaining to family life and women's decision to have children. I then discuss the context that childfree women are living in today, focusing on gendered expectations of women and assumptions about their connections to motherhood. Next, I summarize previous literature that focused on women's decisions to be childfree and how women without children are perceived within a society that values them less than mothers. Finally, I demonstrate the relevance of this literature to my analysis in the chapters that follow.

A History of the Nuclear Family

Central to women's decision to be childfree, and to the social repercussions of this decision, is the nuclear family. To explain the role of the family in western societies, Patricia Hill Collins (1998) drew our attention to the notion of "family values" and how they shape politics and national identity. She argued that when we talk about family values, what we mean is an idealized nuclear family form comprised of a heterosexual couple and their biological children. The family is a structure through which people can replicate heteronormative gender roles and sexuality (Oswald et al., 2009). At its inception, the idealized family form was comprised of a father-head of house, who was the breadwinner, and a stay-at-home wife. Significant to this family form was its private nature, where the family was understood as a "private haven from a public world" and was "held together by primary emotional bonds of loving and care" (Collins, 1998, p. 62). Collins also described women's ideal roles as being within the home to tend to

childrearing and housework, while men engaged in the public workforce, solidifying the private household as a feminine space and the public as a masculine space. Importantly, the family remains a site to maintain social norms and political structures. Collins explained that the role of the family is to socialize each member according to the family values of a given nation, which in North America include hierarchies of "gender, wealth, age, and sexuality" (p. 64). The family also teaches one where one is socially located in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and class. While families are commonly understood to be the gold standard of love and care, they are also "organized around varying patterns of hierarchy" (Collins, 1998, p. 64) and function to naturalize national social hierarchies.

Radical feminists, such as Shulamith Firestone (1970), have deemed this family structure as a site of oppression, specifically for women and children. In her book, *The Dialectic of Sex*, she wrote, "The heart of woman's oppression is her childbearing and childrearing roles" (p. 65). Firestone specifically identified women's biological ability to have children as the foundation of our oppression:

> The biological family—the basic reproductive unit of male/female/infant, in whatever form of social organization—is characterized by these fundamental—if not immutable—facts: 1) That women throughout history before the advent of birth control were at the continual mercy of their biology—menstruation, menopause, and "female ills," constant painful childbirth, wet nursing and care of infants, all of which made them dependent on males (whether brother, father, husband, lover, or clan, government, community-at-large) for physical survival. 2) That human infants take an even longer time to grow up than animals, and thus are helpless and, for some short period at least, dependent on adults for physical survival. 3) That a basic mother/child interdependency has existed in some form

> in every society, past or present, and thus has shaped the psychology of every mature female and every infant. 4) That the natural reproductive difference between the sexes led directly to the first division of labor at the origins of class, as well as furnishing the paradigm of caste (discrimination based on biological characteristics). (p. 9)

In identifying the role of women's biology in our oppression, Firestone explained that it is the source of the dichotomy between men and women's social roles and the unequal division of power within and outside of the home. Socially constructed gender norms also deem motherhood to be the actualization of womanhood and femininity. Thus, women's lives are viewed as respectable and successful only if they create and prioritize their own nuclear families. In doing so, women are subject to strict gender roles and are expected to conform to heteronormative expectations of how to spend their time and organize their social lives. However, expectations for women differ according to factors such as age, race, and class (Collins, 1998). In the next section, I provide a brief history of the nuclear family in the North American context to help situate my research project within present-day North American expectations of the family.

The Origins of the Nuclear Family

The nuclear family as we know it today is a recent development in world history and began to form in the 14th century. In Europe during the Middle Ages, the family was understood through ancestry and bloodline relations; it was not understood to be a household set of relations formed through marriage (Firestone, 1970). Living arrangements often involved numerous families cohabitating, with several generations in one household. Over the course of many centuries, family structures in Europe and North America transformed dramatically. The formation of the nuclear family was closely related to the emergence of capitalism and the

industrial revolution (Medick, 1976). Historian of the family, Stephanie Coontz (2004), provided a brief history of the nuclear family that focused on "the contemporary revolution in marriage" (p. 974) in her journal article *The World Historical Transformation of Marriage.* She described that for thousands of years, marriage was fundamentally different than is it today. It was not sought out of love or affection, but to "organize people's places in the economic and political hierarchy of society" (p. 977). Coontz went on to explain:

> [Marriage] was a way of raising capital, constructing political alliances, organizing the division of labor by age and gender, and deciding what claim, if any, children had on their parents, and what rights parents had in their children. Marriage served so many political, social, and economic functions that the individual needs and desires of its members (especially women and children, its subordinate members) were secondary considerations. In fact, for most people, whether rich or poor, marriage was as much about getting in-laws as about finding a mate and having a child. (p. 977)

Economic class was a primary consideration when one decided who to marry. Coontz described that until the late 18th century, land, money, and all other assets were primarily transferred through marriage. Even for those of lower classes who did not own land, marriage remained a strategic economic "transaction" (p. 977) and organized social life according to age and gender. In the centuries preceding the 18th century, children participated in manual labour alongside both men and women. Frader (2020) explained that political and economic advances in Europe between the 14th and 18th centuries contributed to "growing gender divisions and the devaluation of women's labor" and "allowed kings and their bureaucrats to distinguish more carefully between men's and women's rights" (p. 31). Women's work became domestic labour and included tasks such as childrearing, sewing, and cooking while men and boys worked in the

fields completing manual farm labour. This was the beginning of gendered divisions of labour which contribute to women's oppression within the nuclear family form. To explain how women's oppression is intertwined with class and the nuclear family structure, Firestone (1970) re-wrote the words of Engels in her own words to "take [his] class analysis one step further to its roots in the biological division of the sexes" (p. 12). She wrote:

> Historical materialism is that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all historic events in the dialectic of sex: the division of society into two distinct biological classes for procreative reproduction, and the struggles of these classes with one another; in the changes in the modes of marriage, reproduction and childcare created by these struggles; in the connected development of other physically-differentiated classes [castes]; and in the first division of labor based on sex which developed into the [economic-cultural] class system. (p. 12)

To summarize, Firestone argued that the separation of the sexes into gender-specific social roles contributed to the formation of the class system as we know it today. This identification of how sex and class together contribute to women's oppression is widely agreed upon by feminist historians (see: De Beauvoir, 2007; Frader 2020; Kerber, 1988; Newton et al., 2012).

In addition to the impact marriage had on women's roles in the labour force, it also transformed private life. Writer and speaker M.E. O'Brien (2022) focuses on gender freedom and capitalism in her work. Her book *Family Abolition: Capitalism and the Communizing of Care* provided an in-depth history of the nuclear family as it relates to capitalism. O'Brien uses socialist theory to critique the nuclear family and offer radical alternatives. She explained that, while marriage was an economic matter for all classes, for the upper class, its fundamental principles also included privacy, sexual purity, and monogamy. These principles brought

oppression for children and women since “Children belonged to their parents, as wives belonged to their husbands” (O’Brien, 2022, p. 70). Upper class family formations also introduced the ideals of “feminine virginity, true love, and innocent childhood” (O’Brien, 2022, p. 70). These principles contributed to the formation of an idealized patriarchal family form, consisting of a male breadwinner and stay-at-home wife. This family structure contributed to the construction of the home as a private sphere.

O’Brien (2022) also showed that the use of marriage as a strictly economic contract, as described by Coontz (2004), was ended by capitalism. Following feudalism and amid the emergence of capitalism, people of the lower-class including men, unmarried women, and children, worked in factories (Frader, 2020; O’Brien, 2022). Meanwhile, married working-class women remained in the home where they earned wages through subcontracted manufacturing work, known as the putting-out system (Medick, 1976). Succeeding the industrial revolution and development of capitalism, the final two decades of the 19th century through to the 20th century signified a considerable transformation of politics pertaining to family life. Come the turn of the 20th century, the idealized middle class nuclear family form became accessible to the working class for the first time (O’Brien, 2022). In Europe, the United States, and Canada the accessibility of this family structure rose steeply in the 1880s and 1890s. Cheapening commodities and wage increases contributed to the success of working-class families. However, these wage increases applied primarily to men, pushing women further out of the labour force, and contributing to justifications for privileging male-breadwinner households. New laws prevented children from participating in the labour force giving them time to attend mandatory public school, where curricula promoted upper class family and sexual moralities (Firestone, 1970).

Importantly, many feminists have identified the role of racism in the development of the nuclear family (see: Tallbear, 2018; Van Kirk, 2002; Simpson, 2017; O'Brien, 2022). O'Brien stated that the formation of the nuclear family was defined by a "logic of racial heteronormativity," in which the family form "came to represent and demarcate the distinction between 'civilized' white people and 'uncivilized' others" (p. 117). While Black and Indigenous peoples in North America were cast to the outskirts of society, the nuclear family form continued to be strictly imposed on them. To explain the role of racism in the development of the nuclear family, I provide an explanation of relevant literature in the following section.

Racial Capitalism and Racial Heteronormativity in North America

Related to the rise of industrial capitalism in Europe and North America, slavery and colonialism in the United States and Canada stripped Black and Indigenous people of kin relations to preserve white, heterosexual family life. O'Brien (2022) argued: "Capitalism in North America was founded on two overarching white supremacist projects: the genocidal displacement of Indigenous people with a settler colonial, white society; and the enslavement of African people for plantation agriculture" (p. 77). While European colonizers from England and France first came to Canada in the late 15th century, the 17th to 19th centuries saw the most significant advances in the colonization of Canada (Lackenbauer et al., 2010; Simpson, 2017; Van Kirk, 2002). The destruction of Indigenous culture, including social and family organization, was rampant during this period (Van Kirk, 2002). Colonizers forced their religious and cultural practices onto Indigenous peoples in Canada, while actively wiping-out Indigenous ways of life, including nonmonogamy, divorce, and a range of multi-generational living arrangements (Van Kirk, 2002; Simpson, 2017). Colonization also involved the accumulation of land for settlers and

the subsequent displacement of Indigenous peoples to promote nuclear family forms which relied heavily on the acquisition of private property (Tallbear, 2018).

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) explained the significance of the nuclear family and control over Indigenous women's bodies to colonialism in Canada in her book *As We Have Always Done*. She explained that following the War of 1812, United Empire Loyalists were presented with land grants in Ontario, which dispossessed the Nishnaabeg. This flood of white, Methodist settlers was the start of a "non-Native majority" (p. 96) in Canada. Simpson also explained that since capitalism requires the continued acquisition of Indigenous land and resources, settlers strove to assimilate Indigenous peoples into Canadian society to overcome the "financial" and "political burden of honoring treaties" (p. 96). This process involved a cultural genocide that began with Methodist missions across Ontario in the 1820s. Simpson wrote:

> These missions were intense sites of assimilative education designed to make Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg devout Methodists, the men and boys farmers and carpenters, the women and girls managers of effective British households and patriarchal nuclear families in village-like settings, thus removing Indigenous peoples from the land completely and erasing those who did not conform to the colonial gender binary completely. (p. 96)

Simpson also specified the impact this cultural genocide had on Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg women. In the eyes of the colonial project, "white women were the ideal" (p. 96) and the goal of the missions was to obliterate Nishnaabeg nationhood through an attack on Nishnaabeg women.

Simpson described the racist beliefs settlers held about Indigenous peoples that "are used as justification for dispossession, residential schools, the Indian Act, and the violence against

Indigenous women that is normalized in settler Canadian society, and for the continued paternalism of *helping* Indigenous peoples and dealing with the 'Indian problem'" (p. 100). She drew attention to the significance of legislation, particularly The Indian Act in 1876, for the policing of gender and sexuality among Indigenous peoples in Canada. To summarize the violent imposition of European heteronormative family structure on Indigenous peoples, Simpson wrote:

> The church, the state, and broader Canadian society worked in concert to surveil and confine Indigenous bodies and intimacies to Euro-Canadian heteropatriarchal marriages, that is, singular, lifelong monogamous relationships designed to reproduce the building blocks of Canadian nationalism instead of the replication of Nishnaabewin and Nishnaabeg nationhood, while also placing Indigenous conceptualizations and forms of intimacy and relationship as transgressive, immoral, uncivilized, and criminal. The "bedrock" of the Canadian nation-building project rested on the creation of "moral and responsible citizens" born out of "moral families, based on Western (largely Anglo) middle-class notions of sexual purity, marital monogamy, and distinct gender roles" in which women were domesticated and men were breadwinners. (p. 104)

While white femininity and the white family were advertised as morals in need of protection and used to justify colonialism in Canada, these ideals also laid the foundation of the American Civil War, Black Reconstruction, and Jim Crow in the United States (O'Brien, 2022). From the late 18th century to the late 19th century, slavery in the United States prohibited the formation of Black families (Spillers, 1987; Davis, 1981). To explain, Black feminist activist and scholar Angela Davis (1981) wrote:

> The American brand of slavery strove toward a rigidified disorganization in family life, just as it had to proscribe all potential social structures within which black people might

> forge a collective and conscious existence. Mothers and fathers were brutally separated; children, when they became of age, were branded and frequently severed from their mothers. (p. 4)

Other scholars, including Orlando Patterson (1993) and Saidiya Hartman (1997), have identified this tearing apart of Black families during slavery in the United States as the foundation of American racial politics and, specifically, systemic anti-Black racism.

Following the American Civil War and the subsequent emancipation of slavery in 1865 was the Radical Reconstruction, or Black Reconstruction (O'Brien, 2022). In this Black people in the United States reclaimed social, political, and sexual liberation by way of radical social organization. An important aspect of their newfound freedom was the ability to restructure the family. O'Brien (2022) writes: "Black people expressed wide variation in how they defined their heterosexual relationships, unprecedented elsewhere in American life" (p. 103). These variations were not well-received by white Americans, and the norms of white family and sexual life were violently imposed upon Black people through the imposition of the Jim Crow laws in the 1890s. White women in the southern United States set the standard for femininity and were "imagined as emblems of pure virtue" (O'Brien, 2022, p. 80). Thus, white women and white families were depicted as requiring protection from the threat of "nonnormative" Black family life (Cohen, 2001; O'Brien, 2022). During this time, Black people could only acquire land if they were married. Single Black adults or families that opposed white, heteronormative family expectations were refused land. O'Brien described the significance of Jim Crow for Black family life when she wrote:

> This is a crucial and underemphasized dimension of Black American history: heterosexual marriage was a forced feature of Jim Crow white supremacy through the

> concrete mechanism of access to land in sharecropping. Jim Crow was an imposition not only of poverty, racial terror, political exclusion, and legal subordination, but also of a particularly rigid patriarchal family. (pp. 88-89)

The church, government, and police, among other social institutions, also enforced laws that mandated legal marriage for Black people to regulate Black life. While many of the Black people at the time wanted the right to marry, the rigidity of these norms stripped Black people of their freedom to experiment with the structure of their lives, as the newly emancipated Black people had set out to (O'Brien, 2022).

During the 1960s and 1970s, anti-poverty policies were also a direct attack on Black families, and particularly Black women (Davis, 1981; Spillers, 1987; Cohen, 2001). White society blamed Black women for "the crisis and pathologies" (Cohen, 2001, p. 455) of the Black family structure. The myth of the "matriarchal Black woman" (Davis, 1981, p. 4) was used to accuse Black women of being responsible for increasing "'illegitimate births' and, of course, increasing welfare dependency" (Cohen, 2001, p. 455). Cohen (2001) argued that the "perceived nonnormative sexual behaviour and family structure of these individuals" (p. 456) was seen as a threat to white social life. She went on:

> It is this pattern of regulating the behavior and denigrating the identities of those heterosexuals on the outside of heteronormative privilege, in particular those perceived as threatening systems of white supremacy, male domination, and capitalist advancement that I want to highlight. An understanding of the ways in which heteronormativity works to support and reinforce institutional racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation must therefore be a part of how we problematize current constructions of heterosexuality. (p. 455)

Here, Cohen encapsulated the relationship between race, class, and heteronormativity. Since the formation of the United States and Canada as nations, violence has been used against Black, Indigenous, and other racialized people to impose and maintain the white, heteronormative family life. Slavery in the United States and colonialism in Canada not only stripped Black and Indigenous people of their kin but resulted in extensive death and loss of culture. While the form and function of the nuclear family have transformed over time, systemic racism and ongoing colonialism continue to prioritize the European nuclear family form for all people.

The Red Decade

"The Red Decade" is a term used to describe the period of the mid 1960s to mid 1970s during which global rebellions fought against the white nuclear family form. Civil wars, riots, and strikes occurred globally, and in the United States, Black women radicals, radical feminists, and gay and trans liberationists rose in numbers. For feminist and queer radicals of the time, liberation meant a dismantling of the nuclear family defined by heterosexual gender roles, as they believed that "the bourgeois nuclear family perpetuates the false categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality by creating sex roles, sex definitions, and sexual exploitation" (Come Out!, 1970, p. 16). While there were inconsistencies with the goals of feminism between liberal and racial thinkers, all agreed that "to be a housewife was both a horrible fate, and also somehow an embodiment of what it meant to be a woman in an oppressive society" (O'Brien, 2022, p. 131). The Black women radicals, radical feminists, and gay liberationists of The Red Decade made connections between the state, suburban whiteness, the worker's movement, and heteronormative patriarchal family structures and envisioned alternative possibilities for home life that were absent of isolation and control.

The Nuclear Family Today

Today, the idealized family form is, for most, but a fantasy; accessible once again to only upper-class and middle-class people. This has been brought on by the collapse of useful government social supports, falling wages, inflation, and lack of sufficient social movements. The political right continues to attempt to turn back the social progress made for women, queer people, and BIPOC organizers under the guiding principle of returning to the family (O'Brien, 2022; Collins, 1998). However, while white upper-class and middle-class men and women have successfully defended the nuclear family structure across decades, their grip is loosening in the wake of the current economic and political state.

As Stephanie Coontz (2004) argued, "the social role and mutual relationship of marriage, divorce, and singlehood in the contemporary world is qualitatively different from anything to be found in the past" (p. 974). She explained that the accessibility of alternative forms of structuring one's home and social life has never before been available to the capacity it is today. While normative family structures today maintain aspects of the history of the nuclear family, legal progress has been made, such as legislation permitting same-sex marriage, which helps us to stretch our imaginations and challenge traditional marriage (Coontz, 2004). However, as O'Brien (2022) wrote, "Freedom from the normative patriarchal family may be an improvement for many, but it has not made a free society" (p. 153). Fifty years ago, Shulamith Firestone (1970) argued that to achieve a fully liberated society, social activism must address capitalism *and* oppressive family structures simultaneously. Fitting women into a heteropatriarchal, capitalist society will not bring the liberation for all women that feminists have been demanding for decades.

Conclusion

In summary, the privileging of the nuclear family continues today. While the principals of the white, heteronormative nuclear family ideal are promoted as the epitome of morality, we can see its on-going oppressive effects. Importantly, as feminists have argued for years, the "private household" is in fact deeply political and cannot be removed from its broader social context. In the following chapters, I will continue to explore the ideas that support the dominance of the idealized family form and how it is reflected in childfree women's experiences of deciding not to have children.

Contextualizing the Modern Childfree Woman

In her book, *Gender Trouble,* Judith Butler (1990) describes the notion of "gender policing," which is the upholding of hegemonic norms regarding gender expression within a society which demands that people perform the gender they were assigned at birth based on their biological sex. As I have mentioned, the cultural belief that all women want to have children and that it is their sole purpose in life is tied to the history of the nuclear family. Regents Professor of Psychology, Nancy Felipe Russo (1976), named this idea "the motherhood mandate" in the 1970s. However, recent trends in the prevalence of childfree women disprove this notion of "the motherhood mandate." Literature regarding childfree women began to emerge in the early 1970s, as the prevalence of childless and childfree women grew in western countries including Canada and the United States. Many scholars associate this increased prevalence with social and economic changes including the broader availability of birth control and women's increased participation in the workforce (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Bartlett 1995; McAllister and Clarke 1998). The term "childfree" was first introduced in the 1970s. Before then, the prevalence of

childfree women was not recorded separately from "childless" women who *wanted* children but did not have them. Thus, it is difficult to determine whether women refusing motherhood is a contemporary phenomenon. However, the prevalence of childfree women indicates that, contrary to the motherhood mandate, not all women want to be mothers. Current literature on the prevalence of childfree women has focused largely on the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, and has found similar trends in each region regarding increasing rates of childfree women over the past several decades (Kelly, 2009). A recent report from Statistics Canada (2023) stated that the average number of children per woman has been decreasing for over a decade, declining from 1.69 in 2009 to 1.43 in 2021. It also indicated that as of 2022, an estimated one-third of Canadians between the ages of 15 to 49 intend to be childfree. Younger women were also more likely to report having no intention of having children than their older counterparts. While recent data from the United States have not specifically differentiated between childfree women and those who do not have children due to circumstance, birthrates in the United States have also been declining. It is estimated that one in four women are childless and that younger women are less likely to want to have children (Stone, 2022). Scholars have attributed the increased prevalence of childfree and childless women to social changes such as increased accessibility of contraception and abortion, more women getting a university education and pursuing a career, the development of a new social outlook on being a mother, and increased concern for the environmental impact of having children or having anxieties around climate change and how it will impact their children (Helm et al., 2021; Kelly, 2009).

The literature from the 1980s seemed to prioritize the demographics of white women and heterosexual couples who are "voluntarily childless" (Baber & Dreyer, 1986; Burgwyn, 1983). By the 2000s, the scope of research had broadened to include older women (Blackstone &

Stewart, 2012) and had begun to focus more heavily on gender, race, and sexuality and the influence these structural categories have on "childlessness" (Gillespie 2003; Hird 2003; Hird and Abshoff 2000; Maher and Saugeres 2007). As stated by Settle and Brumley (2014), "the specific ideals associated with mandatory motherhood are not universal and differ by race, class, and sexuality. Societal expectations encourage white, heterosexual, middle class, and college-educated women to fulfill the idealized model of motherhood." They also bring attention to how policies and practices exclude poor, working-class, and racialized women. Despite the recent shift to acknowledge differences in experiences related to gender, race, and sexuality, few studies have been done with the intention of accounting for these differences and seem only to acknowledge them if they happen to exist among the participants. Recent studies have also suggested that more work needs to be done that intentionally seeks to understand the influence of identity on the experiences of childfree women (Settle & Brumley, 2014).

Reasons for Deciding Not to Have Children

Both quantitative and qualitative researchers have examined rates of childfree women. The quantitative researchers have sought to determine which variables are statistically significant including age, race and ethnicity, marital status, work experience, and religion. The qualitative scholars in this field, alternatively, has sought to understand the 'why' behind these trends (Kelly, 2009). Although the literature does not outline a clear timeframe for what age women determine whether they desire to have children, it has been consistently found that as a childfree woman's age increases, so does her likelihood of remaining childfree (Kelly, 2009; Heaton et al., 1999). In terms of race and ethnicity, not only are white American women more likely to be childfree, but racialized women, including Black and Latinx women, are more likely to have children at a

younger age, have more children, and have children outside of marriage than white women (Dye, 2008; Abma & Martinez, 2006; Heaton et al., 1999). The most reliable determinant of being childfree across qualitative and quantitative studies has been marital status, specifically being unmarried (Connidis & McMullin, 1996; McAllister & Clarke, 1998). Socioeconomic status and the pursuit of a career are other relevant factors. As a woman's level of education and annual income increase, so does the likelihood of her remaining childfree or delaying having children (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Heaton, et al.,1999; Krishnan, 1993; Somers, 1993). Research regarding the relationship of socio-economic status on women's decision to be childfree has also resulted in some inconsistencies. For example, Heaton et al. (1999) and Krishnan (1993) did not find any correlation between increased income and a higher likelihood of being childfree. While factors such as age, race, sexuality, and socio-economic status have been increasingly paid attention to in the available research, there is room to apply a more intersectional lens to the analysis of childfree women's experiences.

Women have told researchers about a broad range of motivations for not having children: the possibility for early retirement; more opportunity for leisure, travel, community involvement, and activism; a desire to foster stronger relationships with other adults; a lack of desire to act in a maternal role; and feeling ill-equipped to fulfil the role of a mother (McAllister & Clarke, 1998; Somers, 1993; Houseknecht, 1987; Gillespie, 2003; Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007). Recent research pertaining to women's decisions about having children has also examined the influence of climate change (see: Schneider-Mayerson & Leong, 2020; Bielawska-Batorowicz et al., 2022; Palmer, 2019; Helm et al., 2021; Nakkerud, 2021). This research has shown that increasing concern pertaining to climate change and its implications for the future have contributed to women's decision to not have children in two common ways: to reduce their own carbon

footprint, or out of worry that climate change will negatively impact the lives of their potential children.

Qualitative studies have also examined the impacts of being childfree. One finding is that childfree adults who are married have higher marital satisfaction than those with children (Ireland, 1993; Somers, 1993; Koropecky-Cox, 2018). The World Happiness Report (2016) also found that worldwide there is a negative correlation between parenting and overall "life satisfaction" (Stanca, 2016). However, as Harrington (2019) pointed out, these findings do not serve to change the negative societal perceptions of childfree women. In fact, in 2009, the Pew Research Center conducted a poll which concluded that 38% of participants in the United States believe that a higher prevalence of childfree adults is "bad for society" (Livingston & Cohn, 2010).

Apart from the many reasons women have for firmly deciding not to have children, there remain women somewhere in between and those who do eventually have children. These groups include women who would have had children if they had found themselves in different circumstances and those who have always wanted to have children, but have not done so (Ireland, 1993; McAllister & Clarke, 1998; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). In their 2014 project, Settle and Brumley suggested a link to race with this latter group. Among their participants, all of those who had never felt particularly drawn to motherhood but also did not actively avoid having children were white. By contrast, all the racialized participants had, at some point, assumed that they would have children. The researchers tied these differences to white women occupying a position of privilege, thus having more autonomy. They also suggested that racialized women may feel more social pressure to have children. Previous literature also depicts racialized women as understanding motherhood and workforce participation as unified aspects of womanhood

(Collins, 1997; Lisle, 1999), while white women are often expected to prioritize being a mother over having a career.

Societal Perceptions of Childfree Women

The current literature has also suggested that nearly all women who are childfree face criticism from their families, friends, acquaintances, and medical professionals (Kelly, 2009; Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2018; Kelly, 2009). Words such as "self-centered," "cold," "materialistic," "immature," "unfortunate," "unnatural," "unhappily married," "irresponsible," and "unfulfilled" have been used to describe women who are childfree. Alternatively, women with children are described as "warm," "kind," and "caring" (Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2018; Bays, 2017; Somers, 1993; Mueller & Yoder 1999). However, even among women who do have children, those who are not "ideal" mothers—white, cisgender, educated, straight—such as teenage, low-income, or undereducated mothers also experience critique (Settle & Brumley, 2014). Many childfree women have also expressed that their femininity is often challenged. However, findings indicate that they did not feel unfeminine and most expressed disdain for this way of thinking, saying that they view their femininity as alternative to the norm and based in individuality and strength (Kelly, 2009).

Non-normative family structures that challenge heterosexual family life, such as lesbian couples, have also been subject to criticism. Lesbian women generally experience less social pressure to have children and when they do, they often face a distrust of their ability to be "good" mothers (Settle & Brumley, 2014). Interestingly, lesbians who intend to have children have been deemed "happier, more mature, and more individualistic" than those who do not (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008).

In general, childfree women are also accused of having a dislike of children and spending too much time in the labour-force (Somers, 2003; Harrington, 2019). Bays (2017) found that the women who are most accepted and spoken highly about, in order, were women with children, followed by women who wanted children and could not have them, and lastly, women who do not want children. Not only were childfree women not as accepted, but Bays' research participants, most of whom were university students, described feelings of envy, disgust, and harm towards these women. As the field has grown, more recent studies have been conducted on "cultural perceptions of childfree adults" (see: Copur & Koropeckyj-Cox, 2010; Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendell, 2007; Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2007; Lisle, 1999; McAllister, 1998; 2010; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). Vinson et al. (2010) also found that race influences perceptions of childfree women, specifically that research participants' views of childfree Black women in the United States are generally more negative than their view of childfree white women.

Mollen (2006) found that childfree women described experiences where pity and criticism were expressed toward them. Common themes in the literature are childfree women facing disbelief (Kelly, 2009; Gillespie, 2000), being told they will regret their decision (Kelly, 2009; Somers, 1993; Campbell, 1999), and being accused of selfishness or lacking femininity (Glenn, 1994; Kelly, 2009). Gillespie (2000) found that many childfree women reported having been refused sterilization by medical care professionals because they may change their minds, an experience that resulted in them feeling frustrated and belittled. It is important to note, however, that all but one woman in Gillespie's study were white and that the experiences of racialized women in this context may differ from those of the white women considered here, given the eugenic history of the regulation of racialized families through sterilization, and medical experimentation (O'Brien, 2022; Meadows-Fernandez, 2018). Childfree women have told

researchers that they are also often prompted to provide a justification for not having children (Somers, 1993; Campbell, 1999). Researchers have asked whether childfree women do, in fact, regret remaining childfree later in life; their results suggest that very few do (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012).

Connections to My Project

In summary, the existing literature pertaining to childfree women portrays a social understanding that women's lives ought to revolve around the formation of the nuclear family. This persistent norm, which is rooted in firm, heteronormative gender roles, contributes to the vilification of women who do not have children. The extent to which women face criticism also differs based on factors such as age, race, socio-economic status, ability to have children, and sexuality. However, there is room for a more critical analysis of why these trends exist and how, exactly, they impact women who have decided not to have children in different social contexts. By applying a feminist, intersectional lens to this social issue, my project critically analyses the link between social context and individual experiences.

Much of the available literature on childfree women was published between the 1970s and the early 2000s. As rates of childfree women are increasing again today, I sought to consider the relevance of this history to the present day and to understand how the experiences of childfree women today have been shaped by those before us. I also wanted to understand how the current social and political North American context contributes to the experiences of childfree women. What is different for childfree women today? What progress has been made? I also sought to explore how childfree women understand the trends depicted in the literature. Pursuing a socio-cultural master's degree helped me to recognize the ways my individual choices

are inevitably wrapped up in the social and political world around me and that my autonomy is limited in ways I had not considered. I wanted to add to the body of literature which re-counts childfree women's experiences by allowing them to describe their own lives and how they understand their place in North American society.

Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction

Over the past two years, I have been asked countless times what I am in school for, which typically leads to interest in what my research project is about. At times, I have found both questions difficult to answer. Being in a kinesiology department, but not explicitly researching health or sport has, understandably, caused confusion and prompted misconstrued assumptions about where my research interests lie. There have also been several situations where I have been hesitant to discuss my project or go into detail about it. Interestingly, this hesitancy directly reflects and relates to the social phenomenon I chose to examine: making the decision to be childfree. While my project stemmed from my own personal relationship to it, my decision not to have children was not something I generally spoke about, and I wasn't sure how the topic would be received. I was nervous that in discussing my project I would be asked, "Do *you* want children?" This question did come, but I have been pleasantly surprised by many of the reactions I have met with. Friends, family members, and colleagues have been very interested and excited about my work and supportive of my decision to be childfree. From these conversations, I also ended up with a list of people who were interested in participating in my research project or knew someone who might be interested.

Both my hesitancy to discuss my work and the support I received reflect aspects of my project and its findings. While I often felt isolated in my decision and avoided talking about it, I was also afraid of offending people with children. My approach to discussing (or not discussing) my status as a childfree woman reflected the discourse I engaged with online about childfree women's experiences navigating and discussing this decision. It was also much of the reason I wanted to pursue this topic. I wanted to explore why I felt so conflicted about a decision I knew

was right for me. I was concerned with whether other childfree women felt the way I did, if there were nuances to my decision I had not considered, and what it would take for me to feel more confident in my choice.

Another question I was met with when discussing my project, which initially confused me, was whether conducting research that hinged on talking to women about their decision to be childfree was hypocritical, considering that many of us do not want to be asked about our childfree status. To this, I confidently say no, it is not hypocritical. In fact, I found it necessary. In talking with women about their experiences of making the decision to be childfree, I wanted to offer a space where childfree women could consensually share aspects of their decision that are most important to them and talk about the nuances of their experiences with candor. As my project was optional and the participants have remained anonymous, I was hopeful that talking to women about their experiences in this context would generate conversation that could contribute to the changes they hoped to see. I believe I was successful in doing this, as my recruitment phase was extremely brief due to an abundance of interest. I also had more than one participant thank me for doing this work, as they felt that my research on childfree women validates their experiences.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 intentionally childfree women between the ages of 20 and 40 to answer my research questions about how women navigate the decision to be childfree, what a childfree life looks like for women, and how different women experience the pressures to have children. I also drew upon my own experiences by conducting a practice interview in which a colleague interviewed me using my interview guide. In this chapter, I offer an overview of the steps I took to complete my research project. The steps are described in the order in which they happened: applying for ethics approval, conducting practice interviews,

recruiting participants, selecting a methodological framework, conducting interviews, and analysing my data by using thematic coding.

Ethics

Before I began my research project, I had to receive approval from the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) of Queen's University. I submitted my initial application on February 13th, 2023. After two rounds of revisions and three drafts submitted, I received approval to proceed with my project on March 31st, 2023. While I found the process of acquiring ethics approval arduous and sometimes tedious, it ultimately set me up to embark on the rest of the project with ease. Reflecting on this process, I could not have figured out how to efficiently go about my application without the help of my peers who had previously conducted research. I am grateful for those who showed me generosity and support throughout the process.

Practice Interviews

As I had never conducted a formal interview for the purpose of research, I interviewed a childfree colleague for practice and to gain my bearings. This interview is not included in the project itself but was useful to help me understand and prepare to meet the participants. This practice interview took place in person on the Queen's University campus during the recruitment phase. I received verbal consent from the interviewee, used my finalized interview guide, and audio recorded the interview, which was one-hour in length. This process helped me gain confidence in my interviewing skills.

Prior to the commencement of my formal data collection, I had a different colleague interview me using my interview guide. This interview was also recorded and was one and a half

hours in length. My intention with this exercise was to determine whether my interview guide was successful in prompting discussion of the topics I was hoping to learn about. The exercise was useful for refreshing my sense of what initially drew me to this project and which aspects of it were of the greatest interest to me. The colleague who helped me with this is a close friend, which allowed for intimate conversation, prompted discussion on aspects of the topic that I had not yet considered, and deepened my perspective on many of those which I had. Overall, I found the experience to be rewarding. It re-grounded me within the topic and ignited my excitement to begin the data collection phase.

Recruitment

To recruit participants, my plan was to circulate posters on the Queen's University campus and in public spaces throughout Kingston, such as community centres and libraries. In addition to physical posters, I intended to post information about the project on social media platforms including Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. I also planned to contact online communities of childfree women, such as the Instagram accounts @childfreefirecrackers and @RichAuntieSupreme to request that they circulate informational posters about my project. Once I had recruited the first few participants, I was also hoping to encourage snowball sampling.

Upon receiving ethics approval on March 31st, I promptly shared my recruitment poster to social media, as planned. Some friends and colleagues also offered to share the poster on their accounts, which I graciously accepted. Within slightly over a week, I had 14 women reach out about participating, 13 of whom became participants. By April 30th, I had finished my recruitment and data collection phases. I am extremely fortunate to have been met with such

willingness and excitement to participate in my project. I will also emphasize that this displays an eagerness for women in this community to share their experiences in a context where they feel they will be taken seriously. During the interviews, I had a few participants ask if I was still accepting people to the study, as they knew someone who fit the criteria and would be interested. Unfortunately, by that stage in the project I no longer had room for more participants.

I personally had relationships with nine of the participants prior to my research project. Looking back on the recruitment and interview process, while this certainly helped with a swift recruitment phase, I did not intend for it to unfold this way. As the recruitment phase of my project approached, I frequently talked about my project with friends and family and the topic sparked interest and tended to resonate with people in ways I often did not expect it to. Everyone seemed to know someone who fit the criteria and wanted to participate. As a white, educated, middle-class woman, I am aware that the people I know tend to mirror me. However, in talking to each of my participants, I realized that while there are threads holding our experiences together, each of their stories are unique. I will not argue that my participant pool is the perfect blend of all experiences and social locations, but my data is diverse in a variety of ways and successfully addresses my research questions. However, there is much to be discussed about what was not said, who is missing from the project, what their absence says, and why.

I selected the following inclusion criteria for my participants: at the time of their participation, they should identify as a woman; be between the ages of 20 and 40; identify as heterosexual, in other words, have their primary sexual/romantic relationships with men; and be intentionally childfree (having decided they do not want children regardless of circumstance or ability to have biological children). When I began designing my project, I knew that I wanted to study childfree women and their experiences but struggled to narrow my scope to best reflect my

intentions and interests. I initially did not intend to place limitations on the sexuality of my participants, as I am interested in how women of varying sexualities experience the decision to be childfree differently. However, once I determined the goals of my project and specific research questions, I decided to focus on women who primarily seek romantic relationships with men. Since the patriarchal social norm for women to contribute to the reproduction of the nuclear family rests heavily on the ability to have biological children, the social expectations placed on these women best reflect the heteronormative social values I sought to challenge. Future projects could specifically examine the experiences of women whose primary sexual/romantic relationships are not with men, and non-binary childfree people. Although there are non-binary people who may present as women based on cultural expectations of how women ought to look, this study is organized around people's own identities, as they determine them, not around the perceptions of others. The gender binary, while socially constructed and constraining, is pervasive in western cultures. As such, it continues to shape the lives and experiences of those who identify as women. Thus, to answer the research questions at hand, the gender binary is central to my project.

I also initially intended to have a much broader age-range. I wanted to examine how the experiences of young women who are approaching or at the age they would generally be expected to have, or consider having, children compare to the experiences of older childfree women who have long experience of being childfree. However, I selected the age range of 20 to 40 as this tends to be the time in women's lives when they feel the most pressure to consider marriage and children. Talking to women between these ages worked well to answer my research questions as they are currently making the decision to be childfree and/or facing social repercussions related to this decision. I am grateful to my supervisor and advisory committee for

helping me focus on the questions that were troubling me the most and guiding me to a more manageable project for a master's thesis.

Participants

When I began recruitment, my goal was to interview 8 to 12 women, but I ended up including 13 participants. Prior to each interview, I asked participants to fill out a demographic survey, with the intention of using the responses to inform some of the interview prompts and to aid in my analysis. The demographic information I collected includes: age, gender identity, sexual orientation, relationship or marital status, dis/ability status, racial/ethnic identity, citizenship status, economic status, and religious beliefs/affiliation. Participants were not required to complete the entire questionnaire if they did not feel comfortable providing any demographic information. However, this information has been important for my analysis to help me understand how participants' personal and social backgrounds may have influenced and shaped their experiences. The full demographics survey, as it was sent to participants, can be seen in Appendix C.

The following description of my participant group uses the language they used to describe themselves on their demographic surveys. All participants identified themselves as women or "female" and are between the ages of 22 and 40. More specifically, nine are in their twenties, three are in their thirties, and one is in her forties. Nine participants identified their sexuality as heterosexual or "straight," three as bisexual (one of whom is also asexual), and one wrote, "primarily interested in men." While my participant criteria required that participants be heterosexual, I chose to include the three bisexual participants as their primary sexual and romantic relationships were still with men. Not all of them were 'out' and at least one stated that

while she identifies as bisexual, she did not feel that she could ever have a long-term, public relationship with a woman, as her family would not accept this. Thus, I determined that these women's experiences were relevant to my project and fit within the scope of my research questions, since they face the same social pressures as heterosexual women pertaining to marriage and motherhood.

When asked to describe their racial/ethnic identity, nine of the participants described themselves as white (or "Caucasian"), one as Middle Eastern, one as South Asian, one as Black/African, and one as East Asian/Chinese. All but one of my participants currently live in Canada (specifically in Ontario, Alberta, and PEI), and one is in the southern United States. While all the participants are citizens of the countries where they currently live, two are immigrants. In terms of romantic relationship status, three participants are in long-term relationships, three are married, one is engaged to be married, and six are single. All their partners at the time of the study were men. Eleven participants do not identify as having a disability, two stated that they have Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and one of those two also wrote that she has diagnosed depression and anxiety. The information from the demographics survey was useful for understanding each participant's unique experiences with deciding to be childfree. Participants often referenced information they had shared on their demographics surveys and provided more detail about their responses throughout our interviews to help explain their experiences. In my analysis chapters, I also make connections between the demographics that participant's shared and trends identified in prior literature on childfree women.

At the beginning of each interview, I asked participants to select a pseudonym to be used within my analysis. Eleven participants selected their pseudonym and two requested that I assign one to them. The following are brief introductions to each participant:

- Amelia is a 23-year-old Black, heterosexual woman who is a master's student. She is single, a Canadian citizen, middle-class, and Catholic.
- Amy is a 30-year-old white, bisexual woman who just completed a post-graduate college program. She is single, has ADHD, is a Canadian citizen, grew up middle-class, and did not list a religious belief or affiliation.
- Angie is a 40-year-old white, heterosexual woman who works in the field of communications. She is married, a Canadian citizen, middle-income, and "was raised Catholic but does not believe or identify with a particular religion."
- Dara is a 22-year-old Middle Eastern, heterosexual woman who is an undergraduate student. She is single, a Canadian citizen, and is agnostic. She did not list her economic status.
- Jessica is a 32-year-old white, heterosexual woman who works as a Clinical Social Worker. She is married, a Canadian citizen, does not identify with any religion, and did not specify her economic status.
- Joti is a 24-year-old South Asian woman who is a master's student. She is single, a Canadian citizen, middle class, Sikhi, and identified her sexual orientation as "primary romantic interest in men."
- Keeley is a 24-year-old Chinese, bisexual woman who is a teacher. She is in a relationship, a Canadian citizen, grew up working-class, and agnostic.

- Lindsay is a 24-year-old white, heterosexual woman who works as a real estate agent. She is in a relationship, a Canadian citizen, working class, and does not identify with any religion.
- Molly is a 26-year-old white, heterosexual woman who is a medical student. She is in a relationship, a Canadian citizen, listed her economic status as "student," and identifies as atheist.
- Rebecca is a 30-year-old white, heterosexual woman who works as an Assistant Professor. She is single, an American citizen, middle-class, and listed her religious affiliation/beliefs as "none but grew up Catholic."
- Sally is a 24-year-old white, heterosexual woman who recently completed her undergraduate degree. She is single, a Canadian citizen, listed her economic status as "working full time and about to be done with post-secondary education," and is agnostic.
- Sol is a 27-year-old white, bisexual and asexual woman who works as a barista. She is engaged to be married, a Canadian citizen, listed her economic class as "medium-high," and is "culturally Christian, spiritually agnostic."
- Wendy is a 27-year-old white, heterosexual woman who has a master's degree and works full time. She is married, a Canadian citizen, middle-class, and does not identify with any religion. She also has diagnosed ADHD, depression, and anxiety.

Methodological Frameworks

Much of the relevant literature that I read to prepare for this project discussed childfree women's lives in a quantitative way, which did not give me a nuanced understanding of women's experiences. While it is important to examine trends and statistics related to women's lives, I

wanted to design a project that would provide a platform for childfree women's stories as they understand them. While aiming to study the influences on women's decisions to be childfree, and how the social context of a white-supremist, patriarchal, capitalist society creates disbelief and distrust of childfree women, I also wanted to create space for women to focus on the parts of their experiences that are most important and meaningful to them. I wanted my interviews to allow the participants and myself to extend our understanding of what is possible and valid for our lives after shedding the widespread western belief that motherhood is necessary for happy, meaningful lives for women. This is much of what drew me to using a feminist theoretical framework to conduct interviews for my project, since, as Cuadraz and Uttal (1999) put it:

> …feminist in-depth interviewing research [is] especially useful for identifying, reframing, and revealing information about women's lives which previously had been ignored or neglected by traditional theories and concepts and call[s] for social change…Furthermore, the method of feminist in-depth interviewing encouraged individuals to explain how they viewed their circumstances, to define issues in their own terms, to identify processes leading to different outcomes, and to interpret the meaning of their lives to the researcher, rather than merely identifying the outcomes. (p. 160)

Approaching the data collection phase of my project, I was concerned about acting as a researcher for the first time. I felt a responsibility to carry and present myself in a particular way, which often meant holding back on sharing anything about myself within the interviews. Oakley (1981) describes this inclination, and many other aspects of typical qualitative interviewing, as "masculine" (p. 39) and something that feminist research practices seek to oppose. Additionally, under the patriarchy, women are socialized to take up as little space as possible and to be brief and concise with their contributions to conversations and social discourse. This was something I

wanted to disrupt in my interviews for the benefit of not only myself, but also my participants. My readings of feminist theory, and particularly Oakley (1981), made this feel possible, as she wrote that she

> …regarded sociological research as an essential way of giving the subjective situation of women greater visibility not only in sociology, but, more importantly, in society, than it has traditionally had. Interviewing women was, then, a strategy for documenting women's own accounts of their lives. What *was* important was not taken-for-granted sociological assumptions about the role of the interviewer but a new awareness of the interviewer as an instrument for promoting a sociology of women – that is, as a tool for making possible the articulated and recorded commentary of women on the very personal business of being female in a patriarchal capitalist society. (pp. 48-49)

While feminist theory attends to many of my concerns and reflects values pertaining to research, it has been commonly criticized for having too narrow of a scope. By this I mean that much of the literature is rooted in straight, white, educated women's experiences. Thus, the experiences of women who face various forms of oppression, such as racialized and queer women, have been marginalized in mainstream feminist thinking and mobilizing for much of the movement's history. While the term "feminist" has been used since the 1890s, its definition has often been limited to elite, white women. That is not to say that non-white feminist thinkers and groups did not exist, but they have not always been seen or accepted as central players in feminism and their views and goals have often been excluded from mainstream discourses pertaining to women's social and political position (Moses, 2012). In the 1960s and 1970s, Black feminists found themselves excluded from both the civil rights and feminist movements, and they strove to create a feminist movement that recognized and worked to mitigate their experiences of oppression.

Black women understood the unique form of oppression they faced related to both their race and gender (Hickman, 1989). They also acknowledged other identity categories, including nationality and social class. Black and other women of colour who were activists in the 1970s were engaging in the kind of analysis and organizing that would now be called intersectional.

Writings on intersectionality by Black women and other women of colour have influenced the way I have thought about this project. An aim of mine going into this project was to pay close attention to relevant factors of my participants' lives beyond gender, as a tight focus on gender would not allow me to attend to the complexities of our social world and the way it structures experiences through political social categories like race, ability, class, and age. Developed from Black feminist thought and named by Kimberlé Crenshaw (Kriger et al., 2022), intersectionality is a theoretical framework that describes "…the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (Collins, 2015, p. 2). Theorists who take an intersectional perspective argue that aspects of one's identity cannot be removed from each other to understand them. Instead, the focus should be on the way they combine and intersect to create one's experiences (Kriger et al., 2022).

This principal has been useful in my research, as I set out to understand how different women experience the process of deciding to be childfree. I wanted to know how my experience fit into the broader social landscape and how other women's lives have been affected by it. To do this, I need to understand how women's experiences are the result of specific histories and different structural positions. For example, the day after Roe versus Wade was overturned in the United States, Mary E. Miller, an American political representative from Illinois, gave a speech

at an anti-abortion rally. In her speech, she thanked former American president, Donald Trump, who was present at the time, on behalf of all American MAGA (make America great again) patriates for "the historic victory for white life in the Supreme Court" (WGN News, 2022). The statement was followed by cheers and applause from the crowd. Although this example has many implications for the ways women's choice is taken away and their bodies are controlled, Miller voiced her specific concern for "white life," which specifically draws attention to the white supremist society in which these events have taken place. This is just one example of how expectations of women's bodies vary based on aspects of their identity, including race. Aspects of women's lives, such as their socio-economic status, sexuality, and race, came up naturally throughout the interviews without specific prompting, displaying that women's social locations are central to this discussion; gender alone cannot explain the phenomena in question.

Despite understanding its importance, I struggled with how intersectionality would shape my project design. While literature is beginning to offer suggestions for the key tenets of intersectional research practices (for example: Choo & Ferree, 2010), the application of an intersectional framework within research remains quite open-ended. As Kriger et al. (2022) argued, while intersectionality has grown as a theoretical framework, the development of specific corresponding embodied methods and practices has not been a significant focus in research. Windsong (2018) argues that central ideas of intersectional theory are (1) rejecting additive thinking, (2) relationality, and (3) social constructionism. She explains that additive thinking is a mode of analysis which views oppression as dichotomous, where one may be ranked or compared to others on the basis of who is more or less oppressed. This approach assumes that aspects of one's positionality, such as race, class, gender, or disability, may be dissected and analyzed individually. However, aspects of people's identities cannot be separated; they are

experienced together and must be analyzed together (Collins, 1993). Relationality describes how categories such as race or gender can only be understood in relation to one another. For example, in terms of gender, constructions of womanhood and femininity cannot exist without corresponding constructions of manhood and masculinity (Windsong, 2018). Windsong argued that relationality is vital for an intersectional analysis as it critiques mainstream categories, displays how differences between the categorization of groups are inevitably related, and allows a starting point for analysis, while taking into consideration that analyses are not fixed. Finally, social constructionism refuses essentialist theoretical frameworks, accounting for how categories such as race and gender are subject to change depending on a given context. Taking a social constructionist standpoint is also key for mobilizing a rejection of additive thinking and incorporating relationality.

Kriger et al. (2022) developed the "operationalizing intersectionality framework" to direct E-Alliance, the Canadian research hub which addresses gender equity in sport. While the framework was designed to "advance cultural sport psychology and ultimately improve athletic well-being" (p. 302), I believe its core tenets may be applied to a variety of social issues. The authors describe taking an embodied approach to the frameworks design to allow:

> …researchers, sport psychologists, recreation managers, and other stakeholders in the sport community and system—especially people experiencing multiple forms of privilege (e.g., White, man, cisgender, heterosexual, middle class, nondisabled, not fat)—can undertake a journey to challenge the status quo and transform power relations in their own everyday practices. (p. 304)

The framework includes four "points of traction": learning, harm reduction, accountability and transparency, and transformation. Each of the points of traction highlight "an individual's ability

to disrupt systems of oppression by taking a variety of different approaches simultaneously, categorically, or sequentially—in whatever ways start to build traction and momentum" (p. 316). Learning describes an investment in widening one's education to guide social change. Harm reduction is the altering of existing systems with the intention of minimizing harm for all populations. Accountability and transparency involve clearly identifying and admitting responsibility for the ways we still need to "advance intersectional social justice" (p. 317). Lastly, transformation requires the generation of "deep, creative, transformational action" (p. 317) with the goal of creating worlds where everyone has equal opportunity to "flourish" (p. 317). The authors indicate that the framework can encourage those who apply it to consider how they may be able to improve in these areas. They also stress the usefulness of the question "Who is centered?" (p. 319). They explain that one must identify who is centred in one's work (whether it be research, policy, sports programs, etc.) and focus on centring those who are systemically marginalized. By applying an operationalizing intersectionality framework, the goal is to understand how systems of oppression are interwoven to create unique challenges for different people.

To apply an intersection framework to my project, I worked with the principles laid out by Windsong (2018) and Kriger et al.'s (2022) operationalizing intersectionality framework. For example, I opted to include open-ended questions which gave participants room to guide the interview in the direction most relevant to them. Questions such as "Tell me about your family background" and "Are there any aspects of your identity that I have not mentioned that influenced your decision to be childfree?" often prompted participants to discuss factors such as sexuality, age, race, and socio-economic status. Additionally, the use of a demographic survey helped me become familiar with my participants. It also allowed me to recognize the aspects of

one's identity one focused on in our interview. However, participants did not talk about every aspect of their identity listed on the demographic survey. This does not mean that those aspects of a participant's identity do not contribute to their experiences. Rather, it shows variability in experiences and how participants think about their experiences. There is no flawless way to encompass each participant's complete identity within the experiences they shared. Despite my best efforts, it was difficult to apply intersectionality throughout my project, and I do not claim to have done so perfectly. However, overall, an intersectional perspective helped me to consider participants' unique experiences within the social institution of the family and identify how categories such as race, age, and social class influence their decisions to be childfree.

Interviews

With all of this in mind, I opted to complete one-hour semi-structured interviews with my participants. Twelve interviews took place virtually, over Zoom, and one was conducted in-person on the Queen's University campus. I audio recorded interviews on Zoom and on the Apple Voice Memos application on either my phone or computer. Interviews ranged from 40 minutes to an hour and a half in length and, once transcribed, were between 17 and 33 pages each, for a total of 335 pages. I completed all 13 interviews in just under four weeks, holding the first and final interviews on April 4th and 30th, 2023, respectively. My interview guide consisted of 12 questions and can be found in Appendix B. My intention was to have enough control throughout the conversation to help participants stay on-track with their ideas, while allowing flexibility for them to bring in new ideas and guide me in directions I may not have anticipated. I asked all the prepared questions to each participant. If a participant answered a question I had not yet asked, I would still ask that question, stating that while they had already touched on it, I

wanted to give them an opportunity to add anything should they see fit. In these instances, I was often met with a more in-depth description of their previous answer or new ideas on the subject.

I generally asked the questions on my guide in the order they appeared, unless the participant brought the conversation in a direction related to a future question earlier on in the discussion. In these cases, I would ask the question that flowed best or, if it made more sense, state that we would revisit part of their answer down the line. I took brief notes throughout the interviews, primarily jotting down ideas that I wanted to come back to or noting follow-up questions. I asked open-ended follow-up questions based on the most relevant or interesting ideas shared. Sometimes they were quite simple, such as, "If you feel comfortable, can you tell me more about that?", while others were more specifically related to what they had shared. There were instances where participants shared details about their lives or discussed topics that, based on their body language and tone of voice, appeared to be difficult or uncomfortable for them to talk about. In these moments, I would thank them for sharing and, depending on the rapport I had built with them and the relevance of the topic to the project, I would either move on or ask whether they were comfortable discussing the topic further. While striving to collect in-depth information from my participants, I also wanted to respect their personal boundaries and avoid exploiting participants out of curiosity or for the sake of obtaining "interesting" data.

I also wanted participants to have an opportunity to share everything they felt was relevant. In the first few interviews, I noticed participants making comments such as "I am not sure if this is relevant" or "Sorry, that answer was really long." The responses in question were in-fact relevant and were no longer than what one typically might expect for an interview (if anything, some were quite short). Seeing this pattern and recognizing that women are commonly taught to speak infrequently and briefly, I began to make a point of starting the remaining

interviews by stating that there are no wrong answers to the questions, and if the participant felt something was relevant to the question, it was relevant and worth discussing. I also told them to not be afraid to take up space and reassured them that this time was for them to talk as much as they were willing to and felt they should. I did see a great reduction in the aforementioned comments, or similar remarks, but they did still come up occasionally.

I intended to interview as many participants in person as possible, as face-to-face interviews are commonly understood among qualitative researchers as allowing for better rapport between participants and researchers, and to allow for better interpretation of body language (Ritchie et al., 2013). However, more recent data suggests that phone and video interviews are not inferior to in-person interviews. There are also benefits to online interviews, as they allow access to a larger participant pool without travel for the researcher (Ritchie et al., 2013). Since my participants live across North America, I conducted 12 out of 13 interviews online. Throughout the data collection phase, I grew quite fond of online interviews and appreciated the ease and flexibility they allowed. I also did not feel our conversations were strained by the physical distance.

Data Analysis

To transcribe each interview, I used Otter, an online transcription software. I then read through each transcription while listening to the interview to ensure the Otter transcript was correct and to help familiarize myself with the data. While mostly accurate, I did have to revise aspects of each transcription to ensure they precisely reflected what was said. I completed each transcription within about one week of each interview, then emailed it to the participant for them to review. I requested that they email me with any questions or concerns. I also said that if I did

not hear from them, I would assume that they were satisfied with their transcript, and I would proceed with my analysis. I heard back from three participants about their transcripts. Angie requested minor changes, and Jessica and Amelia clarified and expanded on some of their answers to my interview questions. I made all the changes requested and integrated Jessica and Amelia's emails into their transcripts.

In the analysis stage, I used a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to organize and interpret the data. In describing how to conduct a thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) wrote,

> The process starts when the analyst begins to notice, and look for, patterns of meaning and issues of potential interest in the data -- this may be during data collection. The endpoint is the reporting of the content and meaning of patterns (themes) in the data, where 'themes are abstract (and often fuzzy) constructs the investigators identify [sic] before, during, and after analysis.' (p. 86)

They also outline six phases of analysis, which include: (1) Familiarizing yourself with your data, (2) Generating initial codes, (3) Searching for themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5) Defining and naming themes, (6) Producing the report. Importantly, Braun and Clarke stated that these phases are non-linear guidelines, which should "be applied flexibly to fit the research questions and data" (p. 86). To conduct my thematic analysis, I first read through physical copies of each transcript and wrote notes in the margins, summarizing what the participant was talking about or jotting down questions for myself to help process the information and determine how it fit into the project. Once I read through all the transcripts, I identified the most prevalent themes in the interviews. After my first read-through of the transcripts, I had compiled a list of 55 themes. I went through the list and added the pseudonyms of participants who spoke about each theme and

included some relevant quotations from their interviews. From here, I made several smaller lists by combining themes which had significant overlap or a strong relation to each other. The names of these lists became my next set of themes. For example, some of the themes on my initial list included: "anticipation of wanting a community of childfree women once friends start having children," "getting validation for their decision (from supportive family, people with kids, social media, role models and anti-role models)," and "feeling more confident in the decision to be childfree as participants are increasingly sure of it." I added these themes, among others, to a list titled "impact/importance of having support and validation." This list eventually became one of my core themes. After completing this process three times, I narrowed the data down to three core themes which encompass the most significant findings of my project and best address my research questions. Within each of the final three themes, I had three to four subthemes to help organize the data further and help plan my analyses. The main three themes and their subthemes included the following: (1) making the decision to be childfree (subheadings: age they decided/did they ever want children, what they considered/what contributed to their decision, hopes for a childfree life); (2) social/external influences (subheadings: having children as the norm, people in their lives who uphold social norms pertaining to the family, religious and cultural expectations/influences); and (3) community, support, and validation (subheadings: not knowing that having children was a choice until participants got validation from someone else, wanting community, spaces for learning and validation). Next, I made a colour-coded list of all the themes and the subthemes and read through the transcripts again, this time highlighting quotes based on which theme(s) they best related to. While doing this, I began to organize the remaining quotes by theme. Once I had gone through this process with all 13 interviews, I had about 150 pages of quotations organized by theme. From here, I read through the document and

pulled out the themes that were most central to my questions to create a second document with the quotations that I would use to ground my analysis.

The themes I identified as most relevant to my project and research questions are discussed at length in my analysis chapters. My analysis is inevitably informed by my position as a white, middle-class, childfree woman, and academic researcher within an established Canadian university. While there is a subjective nature to my project, "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see" (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). This indicates that one's experiences cannot be removed from one's social context to be understood. Knowledge is inherently the product of its context, and to understand one's experiences, we must first understand the context and how one is situated within it. Thus, avoiding subjectivity is not only impossible, but unwanted.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have articulated the process of designing and completing my research project. I focused on the feminist nature of the questions at hand and explained the justification for using feminist theory, a feminist intersectional perspective, and feminist methods to guide the recruitment, interview, and analysis stages of my project. I detailed the actions taken at each step, along with how I grappled with what has been a new, exciting process of doing research on a topic that is extremely meaningful to me. I outlined the overarching findings of my data which I will explain in the following chapters to paint a vivid picture of how women's lived experiences exist within and are shaped by the current North American social context.

Chapter 4: Analysis Part 1: Social and Political Influences on Women's Decision to be Childfree

Three themes emerged from the transcripts of my interviews. I will discuss these in this and the following chapter. The themes included the following: (1) social and political influences on women's decision to be childfree; (2) why women decided to be childfree; and (3) the importance of community, support, and validation for making the decision to be childfree. I have broken my analysis into two parts, or chapters: (1) social and political influences on women's decision to be childfree and (2) making the decision to be childfree. My results indicate that the decision to be childfree is typically not straightforward for women, and among the participants there is a yearning to normalize women being childfree. Participants would like to see the decision not to have children be as widely accepted as the decision to be a mother. Participants spoke of the ways that the ubiquitous expectation that they would want to have children is palpable in all aspects of their social lives, including in their relationships with their families, romantic partners, friends, colleagues, and doctors. Some women had known they did not want children from a young age, while others described the decision as more of a "slow burn," finalizing their stance once they arrived at an age where they would be expected to have children. Many women described being childfree as something that was never presented as an option for their lives and, therefore, they did not feel like it was something they could want for themselves. In this chapter, I focus on the social and political influences on women's experiences of deciding to be childfree. I show how a normative family structure is still expected to shape women's lives, and I discuss the ways that this expectation is commonly upheld in a range of social interactions. In the last section of the chapter, I discuss the impact such expectations have on women who are childfree.

Having Children as a Social Norm

Having children is such an expected part of women's lives that it can feel like there is no choice to be made at all, that it is a nonnegotiable step in one's life. Participants spoke to this in our interviews, such as when Dara said, "I thought it was more of an instinct of, 'Yeah of course I'm gonna have kids,' without having put any thought into it." The compulsion for women to strive to fulfil normative life milestones, including forming a nuclear family, reflects a "heteronormative ideological code that promotes rigidly defined conventional norms, heterosexuality, and 'traditional family values'" (Oswald et al., 2009, p. 45). As women grow up, they understand that they are expected to be working towards the eventual replication of a nuclear family household. This was displayed by participants, such as Lindsay who stated: "We have our own house, we're in the perfect kind of environment to be raising a kid… Especially if we were to get engaged or married. I feel like that is always the next step." It was clear in all my interviews that each participant was aware that her decision not to have children opposed these expectations for her life. In painting a picture of what is normal and expected, participants discussed the ways in which these norms were made known to them, particularly by their families. In response to the interview question, "How did your parents and/or caretakers talk to you about your future while you were growing up? What did they say about having children?" participants comments were very similar. Namely, while their parents, or other adults in their lives, often did not explicitly say, "We expect you to one day have children," it was clear that this was the case. More than one participant also indicated that such comments are normal and expected of parents:

> I think when I was younger, it was an implication that I would have kids. It was like, "You'll find a husband, and you'll get married and have kids." And that was definitely pushed, especially by extended family. (Amy)

> My dad always wanted us to find someone that we loved that was religious [and] polite. And [he] always pushed, "You're gonna be such a good mom. You're gonna be such a good wife." (Rebecca)

While participants described the way their families demonstrated and upheld heteronormative family values, these ideals reflect cultural norms. Heteronormativity is an "ideological composite" (p. 70) comprised of gender, racial, sexuality, and family binaries (Allen & Mendez, 2018). It is responsible for the way we organize our social world and ensures that those who conform to dominant binaries have "more power, privilege, status, and resources" (Oswald et al., 2009, p. 45) than those who do not. This explains why many participants felt as though having children was non-negotiable, as compulsory heterosexuality remains the standard in North America, with alternatives to the norms being less visible.

While all participants described the ways that adults indicated that they ought to have children and conform to these norms, many stated that the adults in their lives also wanted to see them focus on education and the course of their career. However, a strong focus on education and career did not obviate expectations that a woman would also have children:

> My parents spent a lot more time talking about my academic future and my athletic future than they ever did about me getting married or having children…I don't really remember them ever talking about me having kids other than… People mak[ing] jokes all the time

about, “Your kids are going to be this, your kids are going to be that.” But I don't think it was a huge focus at all. (Molly)

It was mostly just offhanded comments like, “When you have kids, you'll realize.” Or “When you have kids, you'll do the same as me” …But [my parents] always said I can do whatever I want, and that education is really important. (Wendy)

Women make up roughly half of the workforce in Canada. It is therefore not surprising that many participants’ families discussed their futures in terms of education and career development (Drolet, 2022). However, these conversations rested on the underlying assumption that the participants would pursue a career while also being mothers. In her history of women in the American labour force, M.E. O’Brien (2022) showed that women are expected to have children regardless of their participation in the workforce. We can see this norm at work in the comments made to participants by their families. While participants who stated that their families focused more on education and career development than motherhood did not voice a particularly political view of this matter, I argue that this depicts a “neoliberal feminist” view of women’s social progress. The neoliberalistion of feminism ties women’s emancipation to labour force participation and understands women’s freedom as being economically independent (Rottenberg, 2018). This, however, ignores racial capitalism and its nature of granting power to “an elite few” (p. 37), namely white, middle-class women (Eisenstein, 2017). This then exploits the racialized ‘Other’:

Since it is most often working-class, black and minority ethnic and migrant women who serve as ‘unacknowledged care workers that enable professional women to strive towards

> balance in their lives,' 'neoliberal feminism'…is 'helping to produce and legitimise the exploitation of these Other female subjects.' (Dabrowski, 2021, p. 94)

Thus, while some participants described their family as being less focused on heteronormative family structures, framing their success through labour force participation upholds capitalist ideals and the exploitation that can follow them (Newman, 2013). Neoliberalism creates the cultural norm that one's success comes through an entrepreneurial mindset, maintaining that one's education and careers are of the utmost importance. Thus, while women remain oppressed under neoliberal capitalism, the economic structure functions by promoting individual solutions to social problems, including those pertaining to family norms and the pursuit of alternative families. These solutions are also more possible for some people and groups than others.

Most participants said their parents and other family members often shared their beliefs that having children was synonymous with being happy. Participants linked this belief to the pressure their parents put on them to have children. For example, Sol stated, "Because both of my parents love being parents…It's a bit hard for them to comprehend not wanting that." Similarly, Rebecca shared: "My parents really think that having children is what's going to make you happy, because that is what made them happy." This notion that having children equals happiness has bigger implications than indicated in these quotes. While participants stated that their families believe having children means they will be happy, the underlying message is that if they do not have children, they will be unhappy. However, there is no guarantee that either of these assumptions is true. For example, historian and writer, Rozsika Parker (1994), described the notion of "maternal ambivalence," or the coexistence of love and hatred for one's child. She explained this as conflicting feelings toward one's child which fluctuate throughout a child's life and vary among one's children. Sociologist, writer, and feminist activist Orna Donath (2015)

also argued that for some, motherhood brings "personal fulfillment, pleasure, love, pride, contentment, and joy;" however, "it may simultaneously be a realm of distress, helplessness, frustration, hostility, and disappointment" (Donath, 2015, p. 343-344). She went on to explain:

> The literature teaches us that within a pronatal monopoly, threatening women that they will inevitably regret not having children acts as powerful reproducer of the ideology of motherhood. Simultaneously, motherhood is constructed as a mythical nexus that lies outside and beyond the human terrain of regret, and therefore a desire to undo the maternal experience is conceived as an object of disbelief. (Donath, 2015, p. 342)

Parker and Donath depict the nuance and complexity of motherhood. However, we infrequently hear women speak publicly about how difficult motherhood can be. We hear even less about regretful mothers, though they do exist. For example, the Facebook page *I Regret Having Children* has over 55,000 likes and 67,000 followers (Facebook, n.d.). Thousands of anonymous users have shared their stories about the challenges of being a parent, many voicing that they wish they had decided against having children. While there is no universal experience of motherhood, arguing that childfree women will be unhappy is a baseless argument and one that has been disproven. Heteronormative, family-centred lives are understood as the acceptable, predictable lives. However, safety and predictability are not guaranteed by following social norms, either. Donath (2017) argues that by ignoring the fact that becoming a mother may also result in regret, or unhappiness, "our social field of vision is limited" (p. 2). Her argument is that by dismissing childfree women as unequal and less than women who are mothers, a childfree path for women's lives does not appear to exist. That is, if women are not presented with alternative paths for their lives which are understood to have equal opportunity to grant them

happiness, they are not understood as viable options. This was also something participants pointed out:

> I remember the day [I decided not to have children] because up until then I didn't really think about it…When you don't think about it, you don't think that the opposite is true. That you can [choose to] not have children. (Wendy)

In addition to connecting having children with being happy, some participants explained their families' expectations for their lives by making connections to religion, specifically Christianity:

> Marriage is a sacrament [in Catholicism], and part of the vows you make to each other in front of the priests…is that you'll have unprotected sex and raise your kids in that religious household…I think that influenced my parents' thinking a bit, because that's all you're raised with. [It] just really reinforces that is the normal thing to do. (Sol)

Similarly, Angie shared, "My parents were married in the church, and the priest initially wasn't going to marry them because [my dad] said he did not want children…His story is, 'So we had you!'" These quotes reflect the pronatalist teachings of Christianity, which emphasize the role of being a mother. However, these religious teachings do not only affect women who practice Christianity. Historians have widely argued that western culture was shaped by "the Christian religion, particularly western Christianity" (Kurth, 2004, p. 5). The gendered understandings of women's "maternal bodies" (Llewellyn, 2016, p. 65), as emphasized by Christianity, have made a significant contribution to western social norms and expectations for women's lives, in general. While Christianity has a significant influence on western norms, all religions, and their historical entanglement with politics, have influence on social norms within a given context (Roy, 2014). In addition to religion, participants also explained how their cultural backgrounds promote

certain ideals about women's roles and the family, some of which overlapped with religion. For instance, Dara shared: "My dad came from a more religious family…But again, we're Middle Eastern… I think that not having a kid was very taboo. [He] was expected to get married and have kids." Other examples include the following:

> My parents are Chinese immigrants, and they came [to Canada] quite late into their adulthood. My mom was also a Christian, so she has a mix of traditional Chinese values and fairly traditional Christian values… "Leftover woman" is a term that's super common in China when discussing relationships and marriage. I think her attitude is very much, "I don't want you to become a leftover woman." (Keeley)

> [In] my cultural background, getting married and having kids is pretty much what my mom lived for…And that is kind of generational. It goes down and it's expected from the kids to uphold this family image…There's just certain expectations of how you're supposed to perform as a woman and how you're supposed to care for your family… And then also, in a western context, because we grew up here, that's not always the norm. My sisters were also encouraged to pursue a career and make money and that's not necessarily something my mom had to do. But now that they have to do all of that and also go to school and make money. But they're still expected to find a husband and settle down and have kids and all of that. (Joti)

These women understand that culture and religion are especially influential for organizing thinking about family structures and women's role in forming a nuclear family. Since religious values contribute to the formation of social norms in a given culture, the two cannot be entirely separated. For example, Keeley described her mother as having both Chinese and Christian

values. However, since the arrival of Christianity in China, it has "become an important factor in reshaping Chinese values and morals" (Ruokanen et al., 2010, p. xi). Thus, religion shapes culture, upholding religious teachings even as they become adopted as secular ways of thinking. Religious and cultural expectations are also context specific. Joti's discussion of cultural expectations shifting as her parents immigrated to Canada shows that they are adaptable. Her family seeks to maintain South Asian cultural expectations while also integrating western cultural values into their beliefs.

The ideas voiced in these quotes also display that parents tend to expect of their children what was expected for them in terms of how to form a family and organize their time throughout adulthood. Straying from these social norms tends to invite criticism, or social exclusion such as the concept of "leftover women" that Keeley mentioned. For members of racialized groups who face racism in North America, the family may act as a primary source of political solidarity and safety (O'Brien, 2022). This could promote the maintenance of close ties to family members and their values. It may also explain why participants who are racialized as non-white explicitly cited cultural expectations for why their family wanted them to have children. The specific ways that racialized people experience pressure to have children is important for understating how social pressures affect women differently. Notably, while a handful of white participants made connections to religious expectations, none cited their whiteness, or specific ethnic backgrounds, as related to the pressures they felt. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that they do not consider their ethnicity when thinking about their decision to be childfree, but rather that it may be less of a conscious consideration for them, given the taken for grantedness of white experience among white North Americans. Yet, not thinking about the impacts or effects of whiteness does not mean they are not there.

As has been well established, social norms pertaining to the family, and specifically women's role in replicating a normative family structure, are pervasive in North American culture, but they impact women differently based on factors such as religion and racial or ethnic background. I will now focus on participants' experiences navigating discussions about their decision to be childfree and how the reactions they receive often reflect and work to sustain those norms.

Social Accountability: Upholding the Normative Family Structure

In discussing the social implications of women's decisions to be childfree, I found it important to specifically ask about what it has been like for women to 'go public' with this decision. The interview question, "Tell me about how your decision affected your close relationships," was intended to open dialogue about this. I also asked follow-up questions, if appropriate, including: (1) "How have [friends and family] reacted?"; (2) "Do you experience pressures from family, friends, [and/or] acquaintances about your decision?"; and (3) "Do you have any stories about people's reactions (positive or negative)?" While participants described comments made to them by friends, coworkers, doctors, neighbours, in-laws, and acquaintances, they tended to focus most on the reactions of people in their families. Participants typically described a mix of some positive and supportive reactions and some difficult, negative, or confusing reactions. Among the participants who had spoken to their families about their decision, most said they had received little support. For example, Rebecca said, "My mom told me, this is awful! She told me that I am going to die alone if I don't find a partner and have kids." Amelia also shared: "My mom doesn't believe me. She thinks I'm going to change my mind. She's like, 'You're gonna have kids, don't say that. Only witches say things like that.'" Finally,

Angie stated: “[My mom would] like me to have kids…She's always disappointed. ‘Are you sure?’ or ‘Maybe you'll change your mind.’” Participants also talked a lot about discussions with their current or former romantic partners. For example, Sally shared her experience with a former partner and stated: “…I really feel like he assumed I wanted children, because he never asked me.” Her partner seemed to reflect the normative assumption that all women inherently want children. For other participants, romantic partners swayed their thinking about having children:

> My partner really, really wants kids…I think he's also very open to not having kids if that means keeping me. He's open to adopting, he's open to revisiting this when we're in our 40s if we want to maybe consider a surrogate or adoption. And I think I've shown him some openness to considering that as well. As much as I don't want kids, who knows… I could be open to fostering kids or having a kid in my life in some way that can still make him happy…I guess it has influenced my decision a little bit. (Molly)

These quotes show the influence a romantic partner may have on one’s decision to be childfree, either in terms of swaying one’s opinion or making it increasingly difficult to solidify one’s own stance. This may also show variability in how strongly women feel about their decisions. For many participants, a potential romantic partner wanting children was a “dealbreaker,” and they stated they would never enter a long-term relationship with someone who wanted children.

Beyond their families and romantic partners, all participants described strong reactions to their decisions to be childfree from people in their lives with whom they are not particularly close, such as co-workers or acquaintances. For example:

> I remember at one point, I was like, "Yeah, I think I want to remain childfree, but if I have a partner, I'd be happy to get married and just have a childfree marriage.” And I can't even remember who said this, if it was an acquaintance or a friend, but they were like,

> "Oh, good luck with that!" …I think they were implying that if someone wants to get married, the default would also be wanting to have kids. (Keeley)

> I was like, "Oh, I don't think I want kids." And the place I worked at was super family oriented…I remember [my coworker] saying, "No, it'll change your life when you have kids. Your decision is going to change"…I think it's just assumed that when you say you don't want them, you're just lying. Or it's temporary. (Joti)

One of the most common reactions women received was disbelief. The phrase "You're going to change your mind" came up in 10 of the 13 interviews. In addition to each being told they would change their minds, participants were often met with questions that exhibit concern about their decisions and what their lives would look like without children:

> It's always been, I don't want to say super negative, but they've never been positive. It's always been somewhere in the middle. People telling me that I'm gonna change my mind, or I'm gonna grow up and realize that I am lonely, and that I should have had kids. (Amelia)

> "Who are you going to spend your time with?", "What is your purpose going to be?", "What are you going to do with your life?", "I can't believe you don't want kids", "That's crazy." I've had plenty of reactions. (Lindsay)

These quotes reflect normative expectations for one's life, and the belief that to stray from this path is irresponsible, not possible, or will result in an unhappy, unsuccessful life. This belief is so widely upheld that it is understood as an acceptable topic to discuss casually among co-workers

or acquaintances. However, participants had mixed feelings about discussing their decision not to have children with others.

In response to the interview questions: “In general, how do you feel about answering the question of whether you want to have children?” and “How do you feel about being asked *why* you decided not to have children?” I found participants had one of four reactions. I categorized these as: negative, conditional, neutral, and grounds for advocacy. There is some overlap between the categories, and some answers could be classified as more than one. In general, those who fit in the negative category described answering questions about their decision to be childfree as taxing, strange, or emotionally draining:

> To be honest, I don't talk about [not wanting to have children] a lot…There's just some people I just don't bring it up to because I feel like they would judge me, and I don't have the emotional energy to deal with that. (Rebecca)

> I just feel like it’s a really weird question, because we don't ask people why they want to have children as often because that's the norm…But I still think, “Why do we question some life choices and not others when they're just parallel or the opposite of each other?” So that's my main reason against [being asked about] it… It just feels quite one sided and I don't like it. (Sol)

Participants who said they were neutral about discussing their decision typically said they felt very sure of their decision and were therefore open to talking about it. However, they commonly also described some discomfort:

> I feel pretty neutral about [answering the question of whether I want to have children]. It's like asking me if I want lunch…I just feel confident in my choice. And like I said, it's been my reality for a while, and I don't feel particularly defensive about it. (Molly)

The most common category for participants to fall in was conditional, which indicated that whether they were willing to discuss their decision, and the amount of detail they were comfortable sharing, depended on whom they were talking to:

> I don't feel anything about [being asked if I want to have kids]. I'm very firm in the fact that I don't want kids, at least for now. So, it's not really something that I hide if people ask. Actually, no that's not true. If I'm around family…I can't really say anything because that will cause drama within the family. (Amelia)

> I guess a lot of times it depends on the person asking me. But, in general, I mostly feel like it's coworkers of mine, or people who are many degrees of separation away from my core people. And in that case…I don't like answering it. I don't think it's relevant. I don't think it's appropriate. (Wendy)

The final group, the advocates, saw being asked about their decision as an opportunity to normalize discussions about being childfree and to help people learn more about why women may choose not to have children.

> [I feel] empowered [when I answer the question of whether I want to have children] …I think from being more confident in my choice and being more vocal… I [can] advocate for childfree women…because it should be just as normalized as having children. (Jessica)

Dara also spoke about normalizing the decision to be childfree when she said, “I don't mind [being asked why] …Sometimes it's something that they haven't considered themselves and maybe they'll consider new things and change their mind.” Many participants are willing to discuss their decision and often want to normalize women being childfree. They saw being asked about their decision as an opportunity for critical discussion and education about social norms pertaining to gendered expectations for women’s lives. Their belief is that by normalizing the decision, childfree women would not need to have these often-unpleasant conversations or defend their decisions.

The normalization of a phenomenon that runs counter to heteronormative social norms, such as being childfree would change society. Feminists have mobilized for decades, fighting to alter norms pertaining to gender and heteronormativity. Yet, women still find themselves unsatisfied and limited in our choices. While the prevalence of childfree women tends to rise and fall over time, the social institutions which complicate and oppose the decision to be childfree remain largely in place, evidence that the feminist revolution of the 1970s and 1980s remains incomplete (Gill et al., 2017). Many scholars, with whom I agree, attest that the slow progress of women’s rights following the feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s is the result of a post-feminist approach to social change (see: McRobbie, 2004; Gill et al., 2017). Rising in prominence in the 1990s, a “postfeminist sensibility or regime” includes a focus on “‘choice’ and ‘agency,’ [an] emphasis upon individualism, the retreat from structural accounts of inequality, and the repudiation of sexism and (thus) of the need for feminism” (Gill et al., 2017, p. 227). Cultural theorist and feminist Angela McRobbie (2004) described post-feminism’s “double engagement,” which “comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life…with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and

diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations" (pp. 255-256). Post-feminism can be linked to neoliberal understandings of social change. By focusing on what individuals ought to be doing to normalize a social phenomenon, political and economic structures remain unquestioned. While individual discussions and actions are important and may contribute to social change, the normalizing of childfree women in North American society depends on more than this. Feminist social organizing is the reason we have seen progress in women's rights over the last few decades. However, the belief that the work is done, and women have nothing more to fight for contributes to social regression or stagnation. For example, Roe v. Wade, the 1973 Supreme Court Decision that granted Americans the right to abortion, was overturned in June 2022. In response, senior correspondent at *Time* magazine, Charlotte Alter (2022), wrote, "Many feminists—particularly rich, white, well-educated ones—assumed that changing hearts and minds was the difficult part. In a functioning democracy, winning seats and writing laws would inevitably follow" (para. 7). She goes on to argue that liberal feminism's focus on "empowerment" (para. 11), and thus choice and agency, resulted in the overlooking of the influence of political power on social change. The reversal of Roe v. Wade after nearly 50 years displays that women's liberation is an ongoing project. Post-feminist thought distracts us from this, and neoliberalism keeps us thinking about social change at an individual level, but individual-level changes cannot lead to the kind of broad cultural transformation we seek. Political and economic structures that create and uphold hetero-patriarchal norms must be directly addressed and altered to "normalize" childfree women.

To conclude, while my findings display a range of reactions to women's decisions not to have children, they also show that the desire to form a nuclear family is generally encouraged and accepted, while the desire to avoid motherhood opens women up to criticism. Even those

who said they felt neutral or positively about discussing their decision also spoke about difficult conversations they have had which made their decision feel invalid and, in some cases, which I will discuss below, immoral. My findings also indicate that the desire for childfree women to be more widely accepted is often justified through neoliberal ideologies around choice and individual empowerment. In the following section, I will talk more about the impact of a social landscape which centres women as mothers to show how it affects childfree women's lives and, specifically, their decision-making processes about remaining childfree.

Implications of Normative Family Expectations for Childfree Women

While many participants expressed confidence in their choice to be childfree and articulated excitement for having made this decision, they also discussed the disbelief and criticism they face from their friends, families, in-laws, doctors, co-workers, and acquaintances. Regardless of whether discussions of their decision to be childfree are perceived as an exciting opportunity for dialogue or an uncomfortable probing at their personal lives, such conversations have consequences. Many participants described how dismissive and negative responses to their decisions made them feel:

> There's almost a guilt in making that decision. I think maybe it comes from the fact [that having children] is something that people want for me, and I don't want it for myself. And that makes me feel guilty and almost shameful. (Joti)

Lindsay also shared, "[My parents] are not very accepting of my decision. They make me feel like I'm making the wrong choice or that I'm being selfish." While it may be difficult for some women to realize that a childfree life is possible for them, there are additional hindrances to actualizing this decision once it is made. Childfree women being met with reactions of worry and

disregard or getting called “selfish” often makes them doubt themselves or experience guilt for having made this decision. Most notably, many participants stated that negative reactions from their families had a particularly significant impact on them:

> I feel like it invalidates me and my choice. When it's clear that you're disappointing people you love, that's disappointing to me. Their disappointment disappoints me. In terms of my mom, it almost makes me feel like I'm not enough for her. Like, in order to fulfill my full meaning to her, I have to have a child. (Sally)

> If someone disagrees with me... I don't usually get offended or anything. I kind of always just sweep it under the rug. I don't really care that much what people think. It's more so when it comes from family. (Lindsay)

In being made aware of their family’s unsupportive feelings about their decisions, participants described feeling “selfish,” as though they are “not enough,” or like they “don’t have love to give.” A lack of social support can lead to confusion pertaining to what they want for their lives and how accessible a childfree life feels for them:

> I think [the fear that I won’t be fulfilled without children] comes from people telling me "Oh, you're going to change your mind,” as if they know for certain that I will. I do definitely have to remind myself I know what's best. (Sally)

> I feel like I might get pressured into having children. Like, [from] family pressure. I see it happening more and more, and so I wouldn't be surprised if in five years or seven years, I end up having a kid because of the pressure. I think if I was around more people that supported my decision and didn't pressure me that I would be okay... But because I have

> so much pressure, I feel like I might succumb to that pressure and have children. (Rebecca)

These quotes indicate that the "decision" to be childfree is not an individual and personal decision but is entangled with our relationships, which are themselves shaped by social and political ideologies that reproduce cultural norms. In Rebecca's case, the social pressure she feels may even outweigh her desire to remain childfree. Normative expectations are reinforced in all aspects of our social worlds, including within our families, as participants have demonstrated. In general, family relations are also understood by many as being able to fill needs that can be filled by no other relationships, and they typically are thought to bring one as close as possible to receiving unconditional love (O'Brien, 2022). Families are often assumed to be places where one might receive unwavering care and support that one could not expect of employers, neighbours, roommates, or even friends.

In a class society, familial relations may also be important for maintaining economic stability (O'Brien, 2022). For some, this support may be coercive. In describing the ways some families may offer necessary financial support, O'Brien (2022) stated that "If one cannot easily leave, one cannot choose to stay" (p. 43). The importance that many people place on their families for emotional and financial support helps to explain why participants in this study were most concerned with the reactions they received from their families. However, as feminists have long pointed out, centering families in one's life to this extent can be extremely limiting and families are not always places of safety. A nuclear family should not be the only way to get the care and resources necessary for a safe, healthy life. For example, while Canada has universal healthcare, it does not cover all necessary medical expenses or dental care (Canada Life, 2022a). Hence, many people have additional health benefits through their employer. Such benefits may

be extended to a spouse or common-law partner and children under the age of 22 (or 26 if they are full-time students) (Canada Life, 2022b). However, if one does not have one's own benefits or meet this eligibility criteria, one cannot be a dependent on someone else's insurance and may be left without additional health benefits altogether. This dependency on the nuclear family may also force people to settle in unsatisfactory or dangerous family conditions, just as leaving could put them in a state of economic precarity (O'Brien, 2022).

In response to this social issue, the Law Commission of Canada (LCC) published a report in 2001 titled *Beyond Conjugality: Recognizing and Supporting Close Personal Adult Relationships*. The report documented that while marriage remains the most common form of relationship for heterosexual couples in Canada, heterosexual marriage is just one of many types of intimate/mutually supportive relationships. Examples of other forms of relationships include adults who live together in "non-conjugal relationships" (p. x), single parents who live with their children, adult siblings who share homes and care for each other, blended families, and intergenerational households. The report also stated that these relationships, and others, deserve respect and recognition that the law has failed to grant them. Thus, the authors posited:

> Canadians have always formed a diverse array of personal adult relationships. Recognizing and supporting personal adult relationships that involve caring and interdependence is an important state objective. In the past, many policies were framed to apply only to married persons. Governments have taken important steps forward in recent years by extending rights and obligations to persons who are living in non-marital relationships, whether same-sex or opposite-sex. But this extension of rights and obligations has maintained the legal focus on conjugal relationships. A more principled

> and comprehensive approach is needed to encompass the full range of Canadians' close personal adult relationships. (xi)

To achieve this goal, the report recommended the implementation of the following "methodology" in Canada:

> It is time to try to imagine a legislative regime that more effectively accomplishes its goals by relying less on whether people are living in particular kinds of relationships. The Law Commission proposes a new methodology for assessing any existing or proposed law that employs relational terms to accomplish its objectives. It consists of four questions. First Question: Are the objectives of the law legitimate? If not, should the law be repealed or fundamentally revised? Second Question: Do relationships matter? If the law's objectives are sound, are the relationships included in the law important or relevant to the law's objectives? Third Question: If relationships matter, can individuals be permitted to designate the relevant relationships themselves? Could the law allow individuals to choose which of their close personal relationships they want to be subject to the particular law? Fourth Question: If relationships matter, and self-designation is not feasible or appropriate, is there a better way to include relationships? (pp. xii-xiii)

The report suggested that by implementing these guidelines, "government reliance on relationship status" (p. xix) would be reduced. While it stated that the government would remain responsible for "providing the legal framework for the voluntary assumption of rights and obligations" (p. xix) between two people, it would "broaden the range of relationships that receive this kind of state recognition and support through the creation of a registration scheme and the legalization of same-sex marriage" (p. xix). Thus, Canadians would have autonomy to extend their "rights and obligations," which are typically extended to a spouse and their children,

to a person of their choosing, such as a sibling, friend, roommate, personal support worker, or a partner they are not married to. This would decentre the nuclear family and subsequently reduce one's reliance on it for economic support. While this report was a hopeful step in the right direction, just a few years later, a Conservative government with a "strikingly neo-liberal, managerial, and anti-intellectual approach to government" (p. 239) was elected to federal office in 2006. They promptly withdrew all funding to the LCC in response to the report, shutting down its operations and declining to follow its recommendations (Cossman & Ryder, 2017). This shows that political forces act to instate legislation (or not) which align with social norms. Eighteen years later, the Canadian government has yet to implement the full recommendations of the report. However, it is encouraging that a sector of the Canadian government has considered and recommended alternatives to the way we organize family life that would decenter the nuclear family. While participants specifically described social interactions with their families and how meaningful they were to them, my analysis displays that their reactions are informed by social discourses and political structures that centre the nuclear family as one's most important source of support.

In a study of women who regret motherhood, Orna Donath (2017) reminded us of the power of political ideologies in relation to so-called personal decisions. Donath stated that "…the idea that every woman becomes a mother as a result of her own inner will is partly formed by modernity, capitalism, and neoliberal politics, which increasingly recognize our ownership over our bodies, decisions, and fate" (p. 4). She went on to argue that neoliberal politics revolve around the individualistic belief that the success of one's life is the result of one's choices, yet this notion assumes an unrealistic, unachievable autonomy given the political and economic structures in place. This notion of choice has been challenged at length by feminist thinkers

including Angela McRobbie, Rosalind Gill, Rickie Solinger, and Kinneret Lahad (Donath, 2017). It indicates that while we may think of our choices as personal, the reality is that social structures uphold social norms while simultaneously suppressing alternatives to these norms. We see evidence of this in participants' discussions of women in their lives who are mothers but who would maybe not have had children under different circumstances:

> We've told [my partner's grandma] we were planning on not having kids. And she was just like, "Well, no one wants to have them, but you have to." And it's just really funny, because she had four kids, and she does not like children… I think she's an example of someone who would have been childfree in our generation, but back then was like, "I need to have kids because it's what you do. No one actually wants to do this, no one actually wants to hang out with them, but you do it and then it's fine." (Sol)

> [My decision was received] really well [by my family]! Even my grandmas, which is an entirely different generation, have been like, "[Jessica], I get it. I totally understand." And in fact, they've said that they questioned having children back in their day…They've even said to me if they were my age right now, in this day and age, they would choose not to [have children]. (Jessica)

These quotes demonstrate when a woman becomes a mother, it does not necessarily mean she *wanted* to have children. An important consideration here is that external social expectations may have led these women to have children, despite their own lack of desire for them. As Donath writes, historically, women have had children because there has been no alternative option available for their lives. There has definitely been some social progress for some women over recent decades. For example, Sol stated that her partner's grandmother understood that women

"have to" have children, showing that the consideration to forego children was not accessible to her. At the time that she was having children, access to birth control and abortion were much more limited and there was less opportunity for women to work and be economically independent. Scholars have attributed these changes in more recent decades to higher rates of childfree women (see: Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Bartlett 1995; McAllister & Clarke 1998). While childfree women are often still met with disapproval and political structures unevenly support nuclear families, it is *possible* for women to be childfree today in a way that it historically has not been. Participants found comfort in these discussions. They often used them to show that they have made the right decision and that their decision is valid, as there are women in their lives who, to varying extents, have been examples of what they do not want for their lives.

Childfree Women: Challenging the Normative Family Structure

In making the decision to be childfree, participants challenge the normative family structure. Whether or not this feels political for them, and regardless of how much attention they pay to the ways their experiences with navigating the decision to be childfree are the result of social norms, participants were generally aware that they were, at some level, opposing a norm. Many also connected the negative statements made towards them to the ways childfree women are perceived broadly within the western social context, and they expressed explicit opposition to this line of thinking.

Feminist philosopher Diane Meyers (2017), whose work primarily focuses on human rights, feminist ethics, and agency, has helped me to understand why it is easier for women to concede to social norms and have children, despite the drastic change this has on their lives and the challenges that come with motherhood. She offers feminist perspectives on women's

autonomy, which may be applied to women's choice between motherhood and being childfree. Her discussion of moral agency is particularly useful here. Meyers described the moral agent as someone who is able to choose to act in a way that aligns with what is broadly accepted as "right, wrong, good, bad, worthy, or unworthy" (p. 372). The moral agent is then responsible for what they do, and judged for it, since they are understood as having freedom to make choices. In the case of deciding to have children or remain childfree, having children is popularly seen as the "right" choice, while being childfree often results in judgement, such as being deemed "selfish." Meyers explained that any choice made by the moral agent inherently requires deliberation rooted in both self-interest and consideration for others. Notably, she stated that: "Since people are profoundly influenced by their social experience, no choice is insulated from cultural norms and pressures. Thus, social conformity is the rule" (p. 372). Here, Meyers argued that it is easier for women to do what is expected of them than make decisions that oppose social norms, such as not having children. Specifically highlighting a feminist approach to the notion of the moral agent, she indicated a gender bias rooted in oppressive social expectations for women, including assuming the role of nurturers of their husbands and children. Strict social expectations for women to act as nurturing mothers, in turn, limit their agency pertaining to deciding whether to have children. Meyers also explained that while cultural expectations pertaining to femininity subordinate women, they are also commonly accepted by women. This acceptance results in feelings of shame and guilt when women are unable to live up to the standards expected of them and explains participants' conflicted feelings about being referred to as "selfish" for being childfree. Since women's role in society is to be a nurturing mother and wife, deciding to oppose these norms and facing the judgment that comes with this decision, forces women to internalize the isolation and guilt that commonly follows. These feelings, coupled with social structures and

policies which favour nuclear families, make the decision to have children easier than the decision to be childfree.

A common observation made by participants about negative reactions to their decisions was that these comments typically came from people who were parents themselves. For example, Angie said, "I've never had somebody who's childless say, 'Oh, you might change your mind.' It's always been people who have children." To extend and apply Meyers' argument, I argue that those who confirm to social norms, and perhaps have not considered alternatives to these norms, tend to also uphold them for others. For example, in Sol's discussion of her partner's grandmother, she said that she had children despite seeming disinterested in being a mother and not liking children. However, she still put pressure on Sol to have children of her own. Alternatively, Jessica's grandmothers had considered being childfree themselves, and were more receptive to her decision to remain childfree. Some of the participants who discussed people with children's negative reactions toward their decision, as Angie did, also explained their own understanding of where they believe these reactions came from:

> I think maybe it's just because they've done it, and they think that that's what everyone should be doing. I think maybe sometimes it comes from a little bit of envy. I could be overstepping, but I feel like when people have kids, they push it on you to have kids because they've made that decision and they feel like if you're not making the same decisions that they did, then they kind of take offense to it. (Lindsay)

Lindsay sees an individual, personal connection between social perceptions of childfree women and those who are parents. While this, to some extent, reflects aspects of Meyers' argument and could contribute to the pervasiveness of the nuclear family form, it is important to also account for the structural forces upholding these norms, shaping the reactions of their family and friends.

In fact, no participant made explicit connections to the structural, political, or cultural forces that prioritize the nuclear family form. The closest was Sol, who made a brief connection to feudalism, stating that she believes the availability of the decision to be childfree is relatively new for women:

> Having children previously was important in order to pass on your family line, [and] to have labour for your family. It was an economic necessity…Being able to choose not to have children, I think, is a pretty recent phenomenon. (Sol)

While others did not make such connections to the history of the nuclear family, some participants described conversations where they pushed back on criticism from people who have children about being childfree. Some also challenged the norms they have been taught pertaining to women's roles or the critiques they have been met with when they have discussed their decisions. Discussion pertaining to the idea of childfree women being "selfish" was common and participants had mixed attitudes towards this. Some argued that being childfree is not, in fact, a selfish decision, while others stated that there are aspects of having children that are selfish. Alternatively, in a follow-up email after our interview, Jessica expressed her opposition to the use of the word "selfish" altogether:

> Reducing complex individuals by assuming that their character, morality, or values are determined by their parental status is oversimplifying human nature…Branding all parents as selfish is overly generalizing, false, and insulting, just like it is to name childfree individuals in this manner. (Jessica)

Meyers' discussion of the moral agent is also useful in understanding the impulse to call childfree women "selfish." Since the moral agent is expected to make the right decision, and in

this case have children, those who oppose these expectations are seen as making "wrong," "bad," or "unworthy" (p. 372) decisions.

In addition to the discussion of selfishness, many participants addressed the perception that they will regret not having children. In response to the common question -- "If you don't have children, who will take care of you when you're old?" -- participants stated:

> I used to volunteer at a senior home…A lot of [the senior patients'] children would never come visit them. It was honestly more depressing to know that there's someone who's supposed to visit you that wasn't coming… Some of them didn't have any children, and they would just make friends in the wards with other patients. And it almost seemed like they were happier not waiting for the son or daughter to come visit them. That was another factor that influenced my decision. (Keeley)

> I know somebody who recently had a child who once told me that they wanted a kid because they were scared about when they got older. And I think about that, but I also worked in long term care home…I know having children does not mean that they're going to look after you… [I saw] people who did still have children who did not come to visit, who embezzled money from them… Having a child is not a guarantee that they're going to look out for you later in life. (Angie)

These quotes show that participants had given thought to the concerns voiced about their decision not to have children and were critical of them. Participants critiques are justified, as the literature indicates that childfree women typically report high life satisfaction (see: Chang et al., 2010; Peterson, 2015; Stahnke et al., 2022; Jeffries & Konnert, 2002; Umberson et al., 2010), and that as women age, they tend to be increasingly content with their decision to be childfree

(Stahnke et al., 2022). Hansen (2012) defined life satisfaction as "a cognitive evaluation of well-being that is based upon comparisons of actual achievements to aspired conditions" (p. 30). Researchers have attributed the association between childfree people and high life satisfaction to having increased financial stability, autonomy with their time, opportunity to travel, close relationships with other adults, success in their careers, and a chance to grow their sense of self (Chang et al., 2010; Keith, 1983; Peterson, 2015; Author et al., 2020; Stahnke et al., 2022; Callan, 1987; Rajaei & Jensen, 2020). In a study that compared life satisfaction between parents and childfree people, Pollman-Schult (2014) stated: "Almost all empirical studies on the association between parenthood and subjective well-being…have ascertained that parents of minor children are no happier or are even less happy than childless people" (p. 319). He also referenced several other studies that confirmed having children does not increase overall well-being relative to childfree people (see: McLanahan & Adams, 1987; Evenson & Simon, 2005; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). Additionally, the rise of childfree women has prompted research that examined the link between being childfree and the state of one's mental health among middle-aged and older adults (Zhang and Hayward, 2001; Bures et al., 2009; Hansen et al., 2009; Umberson et al., 2010; Gibney et al., 2017; Penning et al., 2022). Penning et al. (2022) stated that it is commonly believed that children are vital sources of social and emotional support. Thus, the absence of children in one's life is commonly believed to bring loneliness and "deficits in older adults' support networks, with negative implications for feelings of loneliness and other aspects of mental health and wellbeing among older adults" (p. 2). However, in a study that examined whether "childless" women are more likely to experience loneliness or depression relative to other adults, Koropeckyj-Cox (1998) found no significant correlation.

While choosing to be childfree may not be straightforward for women, participants also expressed certainty, enthusiasm, and contentment for having come to this decision. Some also explicitly said that in making the decision not to have children, they were refusing to succumb to the social pressure they felt, and that this in itself was fulfilling. For example, Jessica said: "It feels like a triumph to have escaped all the social conditioning and to make my own choices that align best with my values, rather than the values projected onto me." Similarly, Joti stated:

> When I started to think about it, I realized that having kids just because that's what's expected of you isn't a good enough reason to have them, and I actually have a lot more reasons why I wouldn't want kids. (Joti)

These quotes depict clarity and assurance with the decision to be childfree and show that while being childfree may not feel like an obvious path for everyone's life, it is a valid one. As I have displayed in this chapter, while the decision to be childfree is more accessible to women than it has been in the past, it is still not as accessible as having children. Western social norms are based in pronatalist ideologies, which shape political policies and structures. These social norms also influence interpersonal relationships, as normative discourses inform expectations for us to make the "right" life choices. Under neoliberal capitalism, childfree women understand their experiences as individual and focus on interpersonal relationships when thinking about the social changes they hope to see. However, as I have made clear in this chapter, we need to address social and political discourses and structures to make the choice to be childfree more accessible to women.

Conclusion

The data I have presented in this chapter suggest that women generally understand their decisions to be childfree as primarily individual. While participants are aware of the social forces which oppose this decision, they saw this as an obstacle to overcome to pursue the childfree life they desired. Participants described the ways gendered social expectations for their lives were upheld by various social structures, yet little connection was made to how patriarchal, heteronormative, neoliberal ideologies fundamentally oppress women, including them. For example, while families were cited as a place to learn about social expectations for their lives and a source of pressure to uphold social norms, the general nature of families as a social site to instill and internalize gender norms and expectations of heterosexuality was not explicitly addressed (O'Brien, 2022). Yet, it is the normative family structure that lays the foundation for social life being organized around heterosexual logic and its associated gender norms. This also creates a social assumption that is inevitably intertwined with women's bodies and reproductive ability. Donath (2017) wrote: "This assessment of women traps us in nature's net, as the unquestioned assumption is that the reproductive *potential* of women's anatomy obligates us to become mothers; we are passively ruled by a fatalist command that leaves us no other *choice*" (p. 3) (importantly, she noted that this logic is also used to leave transgender women out of the category of "real women" and cast them as immoral). With expectations that women will be mothers comes expectations that women need to play a role within a family unit, which represents the Euro-Canadian heteronormative values of "pristine white femininity, innocent children, true love, the home as refuge and solace" (O'Brien, 2022, p. 37). These norms also overlap with Donath's (2017) argument that women are assumed to want children, and that they choose to become mothers through their own free will. However, as Meyers argued, free will is

an illusion and our individual choices are intertwined with cultural norms and expectations related to gender.

While these expectations are placed on all women, in response to my research question "Do different women experience the pressures to have children differently? How?," my findings indicate that there is variability in women's experiences that are related to factors including religious affiliation and racial identity or ethnicity. Religion certainly added to the pressure felt by some participants. Beyond family members, representatives of the church had a direct impact on some women's experiences deciding to be childfree, and at times made this decision feel impossible. Cultural expectations related to racial or ethnic background and the way they overlap with religion also solidified family members lack of support and resistance to participants' desires to be childfree. Meyers' (2017) feminist approach to choice is useful here. She maintains that autonomy is achievable if it is understood not as an "actualization of a core self, but rather as the exercise of skills that enable people to understand themselves, redefine themselves as needed, and direct their own lives, and exercising these skills enables individuals to identify their needs, desires, and values to translate them into action" (p. 381). Thus, feminist interpretations of autonomy consider and are rooted in an understanding of normative social experiences, not individualism. This notion will be explored, at length, in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Analysis Part 2: Making the Decision to be Childfree

Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on why participants decided to be childfree and the importance of community, support, and validation in making this decision. To begin, I discuss and analyze how participants determined that they did not want to have children or be mothers and what they considered while making this decision. I discuss contextual and personal factors that contributed to their decision. I then analyze participants' discussions of the importance of community and spaces where they can find validation for making the decision to be childfree. Participants stressed the usefulness of role models, speaking with like-minded or supportive people, positive media representations of childfree people, and access to online discussions about being childfree for solidifying what they wanted for their own lives.

Deciding to be Childfree

In this section, I outline the most common and impactful considerations participants took into account while deciding to be childfree. To address my research question of how women navigate and understand their decision to be childfree, I asked participants: "Tell me about your decision not to have children." I asked follow-up questions, such as whether they remember the process of coming to their decision, what factors influenced their decision the most, and how old they were when they began to think about being childfree. I also asked whether the climate crisis and cost of raising children were important considerations for them, as researchers have increasingly been citing these as reasons for women not wanting children (see: Schneider-Mayerson & Leong, 2020; Bielawska-Batorowicz et al., 2022; Palmer, 2019; Helmet al., 2021;

Nakkerud, 2021). I expected these factors to be particularly relevant due to the global climate crisis and the anticipation of an ongoing economic recession in Canada.

In response to my questions, a few participants stated that they always knew they did not want children. For example, Molly said, "I can't remember deciding not to have children because it was always my reality." However, most participants said that at some point they had wanted children or assumed they would have them, despite never feeling drawn to motherhood. Some, such as Joti, described feeling "anxious" and "always worried" when thinking about having children. I asked these participants when they began to think about not having children, and most said they seriously considered the possibility of being childfree in their late teens or early twenties. This was something that I related to as well. I had not realized that I would prefer to not have children until I reached my early twenties, when the prospects of marriage and parenting felt more relevant than at any other period in my life. As all participants in this study have university degrees or are in the process of completing a university degree, I also saw a common connection between finishing school in your early twenties and feeling like the next step for your life is to focus on starting a family.

In response to being asked what they considered while making the decision to be childfree, participants shared a wide range of factors including: the environment, socio-economic status, systemic racism, wanting autonomy with their time and money, having concerns with pregnancy and giving birth, their experiences at home as children, and the anticipation of gender imbalances pertaining to household work and childcare. I organized the most common and significant reasons participants offered into three categories: (1) The "state of the world," (2) Consideration for the impact children and motherhood could have on their lives, and (3)

Questioning the typical gendered organization of family life. In the remainder of this section, I explain my findings in each of these categories.

The "State of the World"

One of the most common reasons participants gave for not wanting to have children can be summed up by the phrase "the state of the world." Participants shared feelings of fear and exhaustion when thinking about having children. They often began the discussion with broad, ambiguous statements such as, "I don't feel like the future has anything hopeful, frankly" (Amy), or "We're not living in a world I would want to bring a child into" (Lindsay). When asked what they were thinking about when they shared these remarks, participants went on to discuss the Canadian economy, the climate crisis, racism, and homophobia across North America. For example, Rebecca, who lives in the United States, told me:

> In terms of the political and economic system, I don't think that the U.S. is a democracy, I don't think that capitalism is good, and you don't get to choose where you're born. So, I don't really think it's fair to pick that for the kid. I just had a lot of ethical issues [with] bringing a child into the world and the things that I can't control.

Rebecca's concerns here are warranted. In a 2021 *Globe and Mail* article, Canadian political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon stated that "By 2025, American democracy could collapse, causing extreme domestic political instability, including widespread civil violence. By 2030, if not sooner, the country could be governed by a rightwing dictatorship" (Homer-Dixon, 2021). Seven years after winning the 2016 presidential election and three years after attempting to overturn the 2020 election following his loss, Donald Trump has voiced his intention to run in

the November 2024 election. A recent *New York Times* article described Trump's 2024 election goal as the following:

> To alter the balance of power by increasing the president's authority over every part of the federal government that now operates, by either law or tradition, with any measure of independence from political interference by the White House. (Swan, et al., 2023, para. 3)

Until now, there has not been an American president who has attempted to "subvert the will of the people" (Wilentz, n.d., as cited in Brownstein, 2023, para 7), as Trump plans to. Trump also continues to claim electoral fraud in the United States, linking it to white, Christian conservatives "losing control of the country to a racially diverse, secular, and LGBTQ-friendly Democratic coalition centered in the nation's largest cities" (Brownstein, 2023, para. 23). In doing so, he has spread racist, anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric across the United States. This has contributed to these and other far-right ideologies becoming increasingly common within public discourse pertaining to social issues in the United States; they have also influenced Canadian politics. For example, far-right politicians in the United States supported the Canadian "Freedom Convoy" protests in 2022, which followed the American riot of the capital on January 6th, 2021. The convoy was fueled by much of the same racist and anti-LGBTQ+ ideologies spread by Trump himself (CTV News, 2023; Klassen, 2023). These parallels display the impact American politics have on North America as a whole and explain participants' concern for the state of North American politics and what this could mean for the futures of the next generation of children. Another example is given by Amelia, who is Nigerian and described hesitancy for returning to the United States, despite enjoying the access she had to a supportive, vibrant Nigerian community there. She stated, "I kind of wanted to go back to the States but I'm worried about that now because of all the things that are going on over there [with] abortion rights and police killings." She went on to

describe having “the talk” about what it means to be Black in North America with her father and siblings when she was around the age of 13. To Amelia, being Black would not only influence her child’s life, but also her experiences as a mother:

> I think it was either Trayvon Martin or Mike Brown. When they were murdered, it was like, "Okay, we need to have this conversation.” I'd never seen [my dad] look at me that way…Having your dad sit you down and tell you that you look different, people are always going to look at you different, you're always going to have to work twice as hard as other people to reach the same goal that they're reaching…That conversation took a huge toll on me when I was 13… [Having] that conversation with a kid is so stressful, and I know that I'd want to teach [my kids] that from a younger age… [but] knowing what it can do to somebody is something that has deterred me from wanting to have kids. (Amelia)

Systemic racism shapes women’s experiences as mothers. The anti-Black racism Amelia is talking about is something that might deter Black women from becoming mothers. In a TED Talk linking reproductive justice to the Black Lives Matter movement, poet, Pan-Africanist, and freedom fighter Mwende “FreeQuency” Katwiwa, made similar remarks about what it is like to consider motherhood in the United States as a Black woman:

> Over the years America has taught me more about parenting than any book on the subject. It has taught me that some women give birth to babies and others to suspects. It has taught me that this body will birth kin who are more likely to be held in prison cells than to hold college degrees. There is something about being Black in America that has made motherhood seem complicated. Seem like I don’t know what to do to raise my kids right and keep them alive. (Katwiwa, 2017)

The systemic anti-Black racism Katwiwa describes in this quote was one of the driving forces of the development of the reproductive justice movement that came about in response to the preexisting reproductive rights movement. While reproductive rights focused on the right to abortion or contraception or the right to conceive and to have children, the goals of reproductive justice offer a more critical, broader perspective by complicating the binary of pro-choice versus pro-life and fighting for parents' "rights to have children, to control birthing options, to parent the children they have, and to raise those children in safe and healthy communities" (Kirby, 2018). The movement pays specific attention to various systems of oppression and how they influence marginalized groups with respect to their reproductive autonomy. The experiences described in the aforementioned quotes and the development of the reproductive justice movement display that when it comes to reproductive autonomy in North America, racialized women must consider not only the broad social ailments that affect the entire population, such as the climate crisis or economic recession, but also what it means to have a child in a context where white-supremacist ideologies persist.

As it stands, Black women and Indigenous women do not have opportunities that are equal to those of white women to raise their children in safe conditions. In addition to being significantly more likely to be murdered at the hands of police, Black, Indigenous, and other racialized people in North America are more likely to be incarcerated and therefore taken away from their families. On average, Black and Indigenous people in North America also earn a lower annual household income than white people (Attewell et al., 2010; Wilson & Macdonald, 2010). Black and Indigenous mothers face life-long stress as a result of worrying about the security and safety of their children. While Amelia specifically discussed what it would be like for someone to have "the talk" with their children, she also mentioned that she feared for the

general safety and happiness of her hypothetical children. The systemic racism Amelia describes is not limited to the American context – it is also rampant in Canada. Slavery and colonialism have created and maintained anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, however systemic racism impacts everyone who is racialized as non-white in both the United States and Canada.

None of the white women I spoke with made specific references to race, as Amelia did. As white woman, I also would not have mentioned race had I been answering the questions I asked. While some participants noted their privilege as white women or spoke about disagreeing with the American economic system – Rebecca, for instance, described it as "exploitative, racist, and sexist" – only Amelia went into detail about how her race, racial politics, and racism would influence her prospective child's life. It is possible that the other racialized women in my study may not have been comfortable discussing race with me, a white woman, at length. In a context of white supremacy, white people get to be the "unraced" and "normal" standard to which people of other racial backgrounds are compared. Given this, it is not surprising that neither whiteness nor race was discussed by white participants as a major concern pertaining to reproductive autonomy. Regardless of whether participants talked about it, whiteness affects their experiences as well. For example, prior literature on the prevalence of childfree women displays that white women are more likely to be childfree (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Dye, 2008; Heaton et al., 1999). Settle and Brumley (2014) argued that whiteness grants women more autonomy and suggested that white women face less social pressure to have children than racialized women. However, as the goals of the reproductive justice movement indicate, for women to achieve reproductive autonomy, *all* women's experiences need to be considered. As I have discussed at length in Chapter 4, women's choices pertaining to their parental status are not individual but are inevitably influenced by the specific social context in which they make these decisions. Thus, in

North America racialized women's choices can be more constrained relative to those of white women, as racial oppression means they are not afforded the same opportunity to "choose" a safe life for their children.

While only five participants mentioned race, 12 discussed economic uncertainty, the cost of raising children, and the current state of the Canadian economy:

> I always knew I didn't want kids, but knowing how expensive children are [and] how much money my parents must have spent on myself and my brother is ludicrous. And our purchasing power has gone down by a lot in the recent years. We just don't have as much spare income as previous generations. (Sol)

> [Another reason I am childfree is] the cost of having children. I think about this now, especially with the recession, and inflation, and cost of living getting higher. I see a lot of parents talking about how their budgets are getting tighter and tighter because of their kids, but kids are a necessary expense... And it has made life [difficult] for them. (Keeley)

These quotes accurately reflect the current state of the Canadian economy, and the widespread feelings of defeat and panic among many Canadians. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, inflation has skyrocketed. Mortgage rates have also significantly increased, as a nation-wide housing crisis continues. While the cost of living remains extremely high in Canada, we have not seen equivalent wage increases. A report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2022) stated that "There is no province in Canada where workers can afford an apartment at minimum wage" (Macdonald & Tranjan, 2023, para. 1). With many Canadians living in a state of economic precarity, it is no wonder participants are concerned about having

children under these economic conditions. Statements along the lines of "I can barely afford things for myself, so I can't imagine trying to support a child" (Lindsay), were common.

Some participants also grew up in homes where there was financial insecurity and feared the possibility of replicating this for their children. For example, Joti shared:

> I grew up pretty poor. I've seen that a lot of my family died from cancer and things like that, but those things aren't really preventable in the conditions that we lived in. Seeing that growing up really made me not want to bring a kid into that.

While Joti did not make explicit links to race here, she is of South-Asian descent, and her parents immigrated to Canada. As I have previously mentioned, racial minorities, on average, have lower household incomes than white households (Block et al., 2019). Specifically, "The data show that 60% of racialized Canadians are in the bottom half of the distribution of family incomes, compared to 47% non-racialized families" (Simone & Walks, 2019, p. 18). Immigration also has economic consequences, including barriers to entering the Canadian labour market including:

> Lack of recognition of pre-immigration human capital (such as education and general labour market experience); lack of relevance of pre-immigration human capital in the Canadian context; language or literacy gaps that reduce the productivity or transferability of pre-Canadian human capital; and lack of complementary knowledge or networks to make immigrant human capital more productive. (Sweetman & Warman, 2010, p. 61)

This means that racialized people and immigrants to Canada are more likely to live in poverty and have fewer resources to provide for their families. This once again indicates that until all women experience reproductive justice, they do not have equal access to the mandatory resources for raising children.

Previous findings have shown that childfree women feared both the impact that having children could have on the climate crisis and the effects of the climate crisis on the health and safety of future generations (see: Helm et al., 2021; Kelly, 2009). My participants only discussed the latter reason. For example:

> Every time I saw climate crisis related news about how we're going to have water wars in 50 years or how resources are going to be scarcer, I would bring up to my ex [partner that] I would feel morally wrong for bringing children into a world that I knew was failing, and that I chose to ignore the fact that it was failing. (Keeley)

> What happens in 30 years? Nobody knows what that looks like. I know other generations before have grappled with that, but it just feels different. Is there going to be enough food for them one day? Is there going to be enough fresh water? (Angie)

Throughout the summer of 2023, as I have been writing my thesis, Ontario has seen three times the number of wildfires than the year before, consistent with the ongoing climate crisis (DeClerq, 2023). This past June, forest fires in Quebec resulted in a thick blanket of smoke enveloping surrounding regions including Southern Ontario. Having grown up in Ontario, I was shocked to have to wear a medical facemask outside, avoid working out outdoors, or needing to check the Air Quality Index before opening a window. This came six years after author, activist, and filmmaker Naomi Klein named the summer of 2017 "The summer of fire," describing the record-breaking fires which burned 3,453 square miles of land in one year. Klein wrote:

> Our collective house is on fire, with every alarm going off simultaneously, clanging desperately for our attention. Will we keep stumbling and wheezing through the low

> light, acting as if the emergency is not already upon us? Or will the warnings be enough to force many more of us to listen? (para. 118)

Come the summer 2023, the answers to these questions seem to be yes and no, respectively. Despite the warnings given by environmental experts over the past several decades, their predictions are coming to fruition. Participants' concerns for the climate crisis reflect a pragmatic understanding of the difficulties future generations will face if the climate crisis continues at the rate it is going. When I have voiced similar concerns about the future to friends and family, I have often been met with dismissive remarks, such as "the world has always been a messed-up place." While I believe this is true, present-day climate-related and political concerns are valid, and it is important to recognize the current changes are not the same as previous ones.

Notably, while participants show intense concern for "the state of the world" and expressed that they were unhappy with it, they did not directly challenge it. Participants generally did not describe how they wanted "the state of the world" to change, or what it would take to get there. They also did not discuss how political or economic improvements could benefit them, regardless of their status as parents. Amy came closest to thinking along these lines:

> I always sort of had this stance of not wanting kids and feeling like the world is terrible. And working for the government reinforced how things don't change as much as we want them to. We go to the streets, and we protest, and we do all these things... [But] the amount of racism and sexism and tone deafness that I saw working there, I was just horrified… I tried really hard to make changes and make things better and it was met with, "Be quiet, everything's perfect the way it is. Don't bring anything up, don't change anything. We at the top are happy, and we're privileged, and we're great, and so anything

that changes below us might jeopardize that position for the top tier." And I just saw the greed and I saw the complacency and the want for everything to stay the same.

Here, Amy makes some excellent points. While she fears for the world and hopes for it to change, having tried to contribute to these changes, she feels defeated. Despite all the participants discussing and challenging systems of oppression that impact people differently, the way they deal with this stress is, generally, by making individual decisions that help them through the anxiety and stress without addressing the systemic issues causing these feelings. I too have felt this defeat. This is neoliberalism at work, and it is not a new phenomenon, or one that is limited to childfree women. Neoliberal ideologies that guide dominant social discourses and politics in North America preach that individuals are responsible for the success of their lives, ignoring the social systems, such as capitalism, that create or limit opportunities based on factors such as race, socio-economic status, gender, sexuality, age, and dis/ability. Beyond identity categories, neoliberalism also ignores societal structures like the state of national economies and the environmental crisis and how they uniquely affect people. It is difficult to change social systems, and the goal of neoliberalism is for us to think about ourselves as individuals and how we can achieve our happiest, most productive and successful lives through the false sense of autonomy neoliberalism grants us, rather than asking what needs to change systemically and then taking action. Given the current political context, I was not surprised to learn that societal-level factors contribute to women's decisions to be childfree. However, women also spoke to the influence children have on the lives of their mothers, a factor also connected to broader social systems, which I will explore in the following section.

Considerations of the Impact of Children on Women's Lives

While social and contextual factors were concerns for many participants, they were commonly cited as issues which verified their decision to be childfree, rather than initiating it. It was typically the individual-level influences that had the biggest impact on women's decisions to be childfree. One of the most common concerns was pregnancy. While Amy and Rebecca described pregnancy as an experience that they believed they would enjoy and four of the women did not mention it at all, seven of the thirteen participants spoke about the possibility of adverse health outcomes related to pregnancy as a deterrent for having children. For example, Dara stated, "The idea of pregnancy in general is not very appealing to me." Other participants made similar remarks:

> When you're younger, pregnancy is a lot more shrouded in mystery. And just generally how we talk about it, even at this age, people don't really talk about the actual physical realities of it. It's always about more of the emotional experience, and the family building, and so on. But it is an intense medical, physical process and does change your body permanently… [You can experience] tearing, permanent body changes, stretching, and health complications. You can literally still die, which is crazy. That's always been a big turnoff. (Sol)

> I didn't realize how aggressive the labor and delivery room is. There's a lot of screaming, there's a lot of chaos…You're going to have a perineal tear [and] it's going to be repaired with sutures. A lot of the time the women still feel it. And if you don't go that way, you'll go the C section route, which is a major abdominal surgery. It's the most violent surgery I've ever seen. I think if more women had witnessed a vaginal birth or a C section themselves, less women would have kids. (Molly)

These quotes and the unspoken difficulties of pregnancy are supported by Firestone (1970), who referred to pregnancy as "barbaric" (p. 180). She wrote:

> Moreover, childbirth hurts. And it isn't good for you. Three thousand years ago, women giving birth "naturally" had no need to pretend that pregnancy was a real trip, some mystical orgasm (that far-away look). The Bible said it: pain and travail. The glamor was unnecessary: women had no choice. They didn't dare squawk. But at least they could scream as loudly as they wanted during their labor pains. And after it was over, even during it, they were admired in a limited way for their bravery; their valor was measured by how many children (sons) they could endure bringing into the world. (p. 181)

Much like Sol and Molly, Firestone argued: "Perhaps a mystification of childbirth, true faith, makes it easier for the women involved" (p. 181). Among comments made about the fears of what could go wrong and how their bodies could change, the idea that women typically do not have a comprehensive knowledge of what pregnancy entails was striking. Both Sol and Molly describe pregnancy as something that women are uninformed about to the extent that they should be. Participants described informal ways they gained knowledge about pregnancy including word of mouth or the internet. While these are useful sites for learning, when women are not provided with formal, candid, or comprehensive education about the possible realities of pregnancy (tears, diastasis, prolapse) and motherhood, they cannot make informed decisions pertaining to whether they have children. The possibility of significant trauma related to pregnancy, giving birth, or any aspect of mothering should not blindside women, as it often does. Participants including Sally, Rebecca, and Wendy, also voiced concern about the quality of healthcare women receive throughout pregnancy. Some also expressed anxiety about their access to necessary reproductive health care in light of the overturning of Roe v. Wade in the United States, as they worried this

may affect access to abortion in Canada. Importantly, there is also a national shortage of family doctors in Canada. Findings from a recent survey from the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) indicate that one in five Canadians do not have a family doctor and 30% of those who do have one said that getting an appointment is a challenge (Dangerfield, 2023). This shortage could also impact women's access to abortion and access to mandatory healthcare for all Canadians.

While participants did not explicitly frame their concerns with pregnancy and the general lack of knowledge about what it entails as political issues, they certainly are. There is overlap in the issues of women's quality of care and access to information about our health. To explain, women's health continues to be overlooked in research and healthcare settings. Until the 1990s, medical research excluded women participants almost entirely, yet the healthcare practices and prescription drugs that came of these studies are routinely used on women (Women's College Hospital, n.d.). Cisgender women's reproductive life stages, including menstruation, pregnancy, the postpartum stage, and menopause "adds to the complexity of care and treatment for women," but research continues to favour the experiences of men (Women's College Hospital, n.d.). However, there is research now being conducted with the goal of drawing attention to this gap and changing it (for example, see Wilson et al., 2020). Much of the reason women do not know what to expect of pregnancy is related to living in a patriarchal society that values the lives of men over those of women. It is also related to the persistent secrecy surrounding sex and a tendency to view sex and sexuality (especially as they pertain to women) as private rather than social issues. Despite the expectation that sex remain private in everyday life, unrealistic portraits of sex are frequently discussed and depicted within popular media.

In combination with gender-based discrimination, healthcare in the United States and Canada is also informed by white supremist ideologies. In a follow-up email after our interview, Amelia wrote:

> Learning about the really high mortality rate for Black women when they are pregnant/giving birth (both in terms of medical racism and femicide) has also changed my mind set about having children.

In a personal essay about her own near-death experience during childbirth, A. Rochaun Meadows-Fernandez (2018), an award-winning writer, speaker, and activist for Black women's rights, depicted the racist history of the field of gynecology. She wrote about its history of fatal experiments conducted on Black enslaved women, starting in 1845, where surgical procedures were practiced on these women without anesthesia. Once perfected, they were then applied as needed to white women using anesthesia. During this time, it was assumed that Black people were not sensitive enough to feel pain, and this racist idea has yet to fully disappear as some doctors still believe that Black women have a higher pain tolerance than other women. This has serious and potentially fatal implications for Black women today, as Amelia expressed. Maternal mortality rates of Black women in the United States are three to four times higher than those of white women (Standard et al., 2023). Meadows-Fernandez closed her essay by stating: "The medical industry is run mostly by white men telling others how to manage their bodies" (para. 17), and she argued that while improvements have been made over time, Black women continue to be mistreated in medical institutions. While women can make choices within these systems to address their individual concerns, their choices are extremely limited if they must choose between being childfree or risking their health or their lives.

I have been using examples from the United States, but similar events have happened, and continue to happen, in Canada. The eugenics movement began in North America in the late 19th century and early 20th century (Clement, 2023). Eugenicists believed that "undesirables" (Clement, 2023, para 2) should be eliminated from the population. Those who supported eugenics believed "Canadian society could be improved by encouraging reproduction among certain groups – particularly Anglo-Saxon Protestants – and discouraging or limiting reproduction among other groups, including Eastern European immigrants and, increasingly, Indigenous people" (de Bruin & Robertson, 2019, para. 5). Eugenics focused heavily on race, but "undesirables" also included people who had any of the following characteristics: "intellectual disability, mental illness, alcoholism, poverty, criminality, and various types of 'immoral' behavior, including prostitution" (de Bruin & Robertson, 2019, para. 4). Eugenics was a racist movement in response to increasing immigration and a belief that "undesirables" reproduced at higher rates than other people (de Bruin & Robertson, 2019; Clement, 2023). Legislation that allowed sex sterilization "was passed in 32 states in the United States, and in two Canadian provinces: Alberta (in 1928) and British Columbia (in 1933)" (de Bruin & Robertson, 2019, para. 8). Most sterilizations were performed without consent, and when consent was given, historians believe that people were coerced (Clement, 2023). While sex sterilization legislation in Canada was repealed in the 1970s, eugenics has had a lasting impact on Canadians. In 2017, a report by Boyer and Bartlett exposed that Indigenous women in Saskatoon were being coerced into sterilization by medical staff. In many cases, these women were pressured to sign consent forms during labour. The continuation of eugenics in North America further stresses the importance and necessity of the aforementioned reproductive justice movement, as women do not have full reproductive autonomy.

Participants described having limited knowledge about their health, due to a lack of easy access to reliable, comprehensive information. However, Sol's comment about how pregnancy is "shrouded in mystery," especially when one is young, is also linked to the lack of education women and girls (and everyone, frankly) receive about our bodies. Strides have been made over time to increase access to sex education in North America, but the current curriculum in Ontario refers to pregnancy only when discussing pregnancy prevention and unintentional pregnancy (Ontario, 2021-23). When I attended Catholic high school from 2012 to 2015, the sex education I received about pregnancy was even less informative, as we were taught that contraception and abortion were out of the question. In both cases this means that, as Molly and Sol pointed out, women receive no mandatory or formal education about what to expect if or when they become pregnant or about the potential risks of pregnancy. In light of Ontario's recent history with heavily contested updates to the sex education curriculum, I fear that young people will continue to be deprived of such information. In 2015, the Liberal government introduced an update to the sex education taught in schools in Ontario. This was the first update to childhood sexual education since 1998 (CBC, 2018). The new curriculum added topics including gender expression, masturbation, same-sex relationships, and dangers of sexting (Hutchinson, 2016). 87% of Canadians who participated in a study about the curriculum agreed that the changes were important (The Conversation, 2019). However, in July 2018 the newly elected Conservative government of Doug Ford removed the updated curriculum, reinstating the 1998 curriculum. Premier Doug Ford threatened to punish teachers who did not follow the old curriculum, and "encouraged the public to report teachers who were choosing to teach the 2015 sex-ed curriculum" (CBC, 2018, 02:34). The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario protested this change but growing "right-wing populism" (para. 18) in North America kept the 2015 updates

from classrooms (The Conversation, 2019). However, a strong public backlash led to the eventual reinstating of the 2015 curriculum, albeit with significant changes. Although this was not what many Canadians hoped for, the political organizing by students and teachers did bring us closer to a necessary, comprehensive curriculum which reflects socially relevant updates. While the updated curriculum did not add any new information pertaining to pregnancy, we can see from debates about it that sex, reproduction, gender identity, and sexuality, in general, are highly politicized. This informs women's relationship with their bodies and their experiences in healthcare settings.

In addition to concerns about pregnancy, participants described fears of replicating undesirable experiences they had with their own families when they were children. For example:

> My relationship with my mom was weird because I was neglected...A lot of things I needed from my parents I didn't really get, and I had to figure out ways to provide them for myself. And that obviously caused a lot of trauma for me…Seeing that happen to me and knowing that I could potentially put a child through that when you need to be able to be there and raise them…I just don't think I would be able to do that. (Joti)

> It was really hard for me growing up, emotionally. I just feel like I needed a lot more resources than were provided to me… And I still carry a lot of sadness, and just a range of emotions that I'm currently working through in therapy, because I still feel limited as a child. And I just can't put someone else through that. (Wendy)

These quotes illustrate that nuclear families do not necessarily meet the needs of children. As O'Brien (2022) stated, "The family is a joy for some, a necessity for most, and a nightmare for too many. Behind its closed doors, the household is a gamble" (p. 4). This quote depicts the

unpredictability of the nuclear family, despite being held as the gold standard of social organization. Participants described parenting as an important, time-consuming role and spoke to how the home one grows up in affects one for one's entire life. For example, Jessica described the mental health of her adult therapy clients and their relationships to their childhoods:

> Working with individuals day in and day out with their mental health, it always comes back to childhood. Every concern that I see in therapy. When you have a really wonderful childhood, that can make all the difference…Even if you think you had a wonderful childhood… In our day and age, there's no way that there weren't some emotional deficits, or financial [deficits] with the way that our world is set up. Most homes have to have mom, dad, or moms or dads and they have to be working. Both of them, typically. They're doing their long days of work, and then they're coming home and they're exhausted, and they're doing the best that they can, hopefully, to show up for their kids. But they're human. And there's going to be times where there's mis-attunement with kids. Or there's maybe not even intentional neglect, but some neglect. And that creates a narrative and belief systems that are perpetuated into adulthood for people and then that's what I'm working with, right? …I see how hard it is to be a parent and how hard it is to raise people so that they don't have significant trauma.

By discussing the need for two parents to be involved in the labour force, Jessica brings attention to the difficulties of parenting under neoliberal capitalism, and how the nuclear family form can be isolating. The expectation that two working parents will care for an entire family is exhausting and is built on individualistic ideologies, which also ignore the influence of factors such as race and class on the ability of parents to make a sufficient income to support a family and have enough free time to care for them (O'Brien, 2022). In a follow up email, Jessica went on to

explain that humans are inherently imperfect, which will unavoidably affect parenting. Amy is an example of a participant who demonstrated this as well:

> I often think to myself, "Man, my parents are great. It's kind of weird that I don't want kids." My parents are great, but they're flawed people as well. And there've been things in our relationship, in our life, that I've gone to a lot of therapy for… I took a lot of time to figure out what their traumas were and the way they were raised by their parents…When I figured out how my parents were raised, and why they do the things that they do, I was able to forgive them for anything that happened to me, or the way that they treated me. I understood. And I knew it wasn't an intentional thing.

Even if one has all of the resources needed to raise a child in safe environment, where they have all of their basic needs met, there is no way to completely protect a child from harm. However, by focusing solely on the complexity of interpersonal relationships, we do not address the ways that neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy, and systemic racism contribute to the complexities of familial relations. In response to the notion that the nuclear family structure is tied to political and economic contexts, O'Brien (2022) stated: "The psychic development of each generation necessarily entails the interweaving of both identification and differentiation against their upbringing. In binding together both care and coercion, the family is necessarily ambivalent, conflicted, and always failing" (p. 145). To put this idea to work, O'Brien described the impossible standard of the male-breadwinner nuclear family structure for the current economic period, stating that the single income family model, which was initially supported by adequate state institutions, is now a fantasy that only the very wealthy can actualize. Presently, inadequate and stagnant wages, diminished state support and healthcare infrastructure, and rapid growth of racism accelerated by the state affect experiences within private households (O'Brien, 2022). In

discussing the risks associated with pregnancy, ongoing systemic racism, and the challenges of raising children, participants addressed how difficult being a mother can be. Women do not have adequate or equal access to resources that are necessary for motherhood, thus limiting their choices when it comes to deciding whether to have children.

Questioning The Typical Gendered Organization of Family Life

My interviews unveiled that traditional gender roles within the home, which are central to the history and formation of the nuclear family, continue to negatively impact women. Participants said that gender imbalances pertaining to household work, and specifically childrearing, contributed to their decision not to have children. Gender expert, writer, and speaker, Kate Mangino (2022), wrote a book on this subject, titled *Equal Partners: Improving Gender Equality at Home.* In it, she described that in North America, gendered divisions of labour remain prevalent within dual-income families, despite both partners participating in the labour force. Academics describe this as a "neo-traditional" (p. 19) home and state that it is currently the most common family structure in North America. Mangino also drew attention to the 65/35 split, where "65 percent of physical household work is done by women and 35 precent is done by men" (p. 19). She defines housework typically done by women and men as aligning with either the "Female Role" or "Male Role" (p. 19) within a neo-traditional household. Tasks which may be attributed to the Female Role tend to be routine, needing consistent, daily completion and include: "cooking and meal preparation, washing dishes, bathing children, doing laundry, cleaning, grocery shopping, taking children to and from school, and caring for pets" (p. 20). Importantly, if any of these tasks are incomplete, it will be noticed by the entire household. Alternatively, tasks assigned to the Male Role are intermittent, such as mowing the lawn and

taking out the garbage. While these tasks are important, they occur less often and missing them will have less of an impact on the daily lives and routines of the family. This unequal division of household labour based on gender was commonly brought up by participants while describing the division of labour they saw in their homes as children:

> Another part of why I gradually came to the decision of being childfree was what I saw within my family…The default parent, [the parent who is automatically in charge when there is something to be managed in a child's life], was usually the mother, on top of the mother also working and being expected to manage the household. I didn't think that was something that was appealing to me in a partnership. (Keeley)

> When I was four years old, my mom went to nursing school and she also worked full time…My half siblings would have been about seven and nine, and she was taking care of the three of us. She was so busy all the time, I never really saw her relax…I just remember [my dad] not having that sense of responsibility that my mom had. She carried all the weight, and he didn't. (Sally)

Here, participants show a recognition that their mothers completed the majority of household and childrearing work and that this was something they did not want to replicate in their own lives. Mangino attributed the pervasiveness of gender roles in the home largely to "gender socialization," which she described as:

> The process of learning the "correct" gender behavior in a culture. This pattern repeats itself through generations of replicating behavior and practice. We use these assumptions to condition children to fit into social molds; we raise boys to fill the Male Role, and we raise girls to fill the Female Role. (p. 50)

Writer and journalist Anne Helen Petersen (2022) described the significance of gender socialization in the home and how the modeling of gender roles, inadvertently or not, as children will inevitably influence the way they interact with partners as adults. Amelia showed an awareness of this gender socialization in the home and a desire to oppose it:

> My dad was the head of the household, and my mom did what she could to support him. She was working but she'd always have to come home and do laundry, make dinner for everybody, do all that stuff until I got old enough to take over some of her roles. It was then put on me, because I'm the only girl, to be the mom of the house. And even to this day, my mom still calls me "everyone's mom." I don't want that for myself.

In 1989, researchers found that gender was the most significant predictor of the division of household labour, and research from the past three decades shows little change in this trend (Mangino, 2022). Participants such as Amelia, Sally, and Rebecca described what they saw in their homes and how they feared this would be replicated in their own lives, but also acknowledged how difficult it could be to oppose these norms, even with a partner who was determined to break them. For example, Amelia shared:

> I feel like if I find the right partner, we will make it a 50/50 split [and] things will work out the way they're supposed to. However, I know for right now, and for a lot of Nigerian people that I know, they go into relationships and things are fine…But as they grow older [and] as they settle down, get married, have kids, it becomes more of an issue. The [expectation is] that the wife should be at home raising the kids and not going back to work until the kids are old enough to go to school… [She should always be] making sure that food is always on the table, things are always ready for her husband and her kids.

Even among couples who strive for an equal division of household labour, there is a shift in this balance after having a child; this is something that Mangino addressed as well. She pointed to a *Washington Post* report which studied 200 heterosexual couples who strove for parity in their marriage. The report compared the division of labour among these couples prior to and after the birth of their first child and found that there was a significant shift in the division of household labour, with women taking on an average of 13 additional hours of household and childrearing work per week relative to their partners. While Amelia was concerned about the way the division of household labour could become unequal after having children, other participants expressed concern about the possibility of finding a partner who would be willing and able to split household labour at all. For example:

> To a certain extent, [I feel like] I have found [an adequate partner], but in some ways, [I don't]. That's another factor that maybe helps me not want to have children…Our dog, for example. I walk him every day, I take him out, I make sure he's fed, I go for an hour-long walk, and do the whole thing. And [my partner] doesn't do that. I'll go to work one night, and he won't feed him, won't take him for a walk, won't take him out to the washroom. If I did have a job and a child and I had to leave the child in the care of my partner, I would hope that they would know how to care for it when I'm not around. And I don't see that with our dog. (Lindsay)

> I really thought I wanted to [have kids] and then as I started to get a little more educated in college, I started kind of rethinking it. I think mostly because I am not a traditional woman and I really fear that I'm going to be pushed into being the primary caretaker, which is not what I want. If I was to ever have kids… I would want to have a partner that

> [will] split it to some degree. And I have never dated anyone that I felt like I could do that with. (Rebecca)

Clearly gender norms, which stem from the traditional nuclear family form of the late 19th century, continue to have an impact on women today. The popularization and increased accessibility of the nuclear family introduced the male-breadwinner household which was reliant on women staying home and completing unwaged labour (O'Brien, 2022). Prior to this period in time, women could complete contracted work within the home, for pay. However, with the introduction of the nuclear family form, this became less of an option for women, thus once a woman had a child, the idea was that she would withdraw from the workforce entirely (O'Brien, 2022). The ability to leave work was mostly available to middle-class women, but this ideal solidified gender norms pertaining to men and women's separate and different roles in society. Today we see the effects of this period of time, as women who are mothers and participate in the workforce spend an equal amount of time taking care of their children as stay-at-home mothers did in the 1970s (Mangino, 2022). Petersen (2022) attributes this lack of change to two things. First, that dividing household work into female and male roles has made them separate, but not equal. By this, she means that while men now help to take care of the home by fulfilling the Male Role, the tasks they complete are lopsided compared to the frequency and additional labour that the Female Role requires. Second, Peterson wrote that while men's participation in homelife has shifted drastically since the 1950s, that this is "as good as it gets" (para. 23). While data show that men complete tasks such as grocery shopping and changing diapers less frequently than women, men are doing this work, which was not the case previously and, therefore, signifies some progress. This leads to the mentality that we have come as far as we can with evening out the unequal division of labour in the home and should be happy that things are at

least more equal than they have been. However, gender norms within the home have a significant impact on our lives. Mangino (2022) wrote, “Gender inequality is not a women’s issue. It is a human rights issue that is a social construct: an historic imbalance of power between men and women” (p. 51). This claim was put forward decades ago by radical feminist Firestone (1970), who argued that women’s oppression lies in her ability to have children coupled with the oppressive nature of the capitalist economy. She stated that the nuclear family form is a function of capitalism and the way it oppresses women is two-fold: (1) women are the only source of children, thus it is our responsibility to rear children, and (2) capitalism is often overlooked as being oppressive to women. She argued that while many feminists see women’s liberation as being freed from the limitations of the home by being allowed to engage in the workforce, participation in the workforce is not freedom. As I discussed at length in my literature review, capitalism is oppressive, albeit unequally, to almost everyone. Thus, Firestone argues that women’s engagement in the labour force will not be enough to end women’s oppression. Gender roles within the home prevail even as women enter the workforce. Forgoing the role of stay-at-home mother does not free women from the expectation for them to be mothers or, generally, reduce the amount of household work and childrearing that is expected of them.

While participants were able to identify gender imbalances in their homes and recognize that they are more easily replicated than opposed, they typically did not outright identify these patterns as being related to gender. For example, when I asked Sally whether she attributed to gender the unequal distribution of labour she saw between her parents in her home, she said:

> I've never thought about that, which is strange. Yeah, I do actually! Looking back on it, I do. My mom's the woman, and even though the other two children weren't hers, well she's the woman, so she'll take care of them. I think that [gender] played a part.

The idea that participants did not outright name unequal household labour as a gender issue, which reflects gender norms within western society as a whole, again displays neoliberal thinking, as well as the public disappearing of decades of feminist work. Again, we seek individual solutions to systemic issues. I, too, did not see these connections when I began to challenge gender norms in the home and feel discomfort with the thought of being responsible of running a household. However, the fact is constructions of gender place expectations on both men and women which limit them to particular roles in society. These ideals are fabricated by and uphold gender norms beyond the home and what it means to be a man or a woman. Western definitions of womanhood are tied to the expectations of being a mother, which extends beyond simply having a baby. It also involves upholding the values and characteristics of a stay-at-home wife, who puts her children and husband above herself, even if she is liberated in ways she has not been historically, such as being able to participate in the workforce.

The Importance of Community, Support, and Validation

In this section, I depict participants' desire for childfree women to be as socially accepted as mothers. Discussions among childfree women often indicate that they desire a community of like-minded women. To explore whether this was something my participants hoped for and to address my research question of what an intentionally childfree life looks like for women, I asked participants whether they have women in their lives who have decided not to have children. I also asked whether it was important for them to have relationships with childfree women. My findings indicated that: (1) childfree women generally desire community, (2) childfree women benefit from spaces in which they can learn about and be validated for their

decisions, and (3) childfree women hope that open dialogue about being childfree will "normalize" this decision for women.

Childfree Women's Desire for Community

When I asked participants whether it was important for them to have relationships with other childfree women, the two most common responses were: (1) they were unsure or had not given this much thought, or (2) yes, it is important to them. Those who said they had not given it much thought typically asserted that having childfree friends may become a bigger concern as their friends began to have children:

> It might be easier for me to say [it's not important for me to have relationships with other childfree women] now, because very few of my current friends have children. But if in five to ten years every single one of my friends have children does that mean I'm going to be alone all the time? And outside of the social norm of my friend group? And is that going to change my relationships? It's more of worrying about the future that makes me think maybe I should kind of prioritize finding one or two childfree friends. (Sally)

The fear of present friendships changing as friends begin to have children was a very common discussion among participants. It is also a warranted one, as some participants had already seen these shifts:

> I'd say that I spend a lot more time with my friends that don't have kids [and] the environment that I'm spending my time with my friends that do have kids is always intertwined with them…We're always doing something that is kid friendly. (Lindsay)

> [Having children] affects your friendships [and] how much time you have to spend with and nourish those friendships…I really appreciate my friends who have kids who make a really concerted effort to meet with me one on one for coffee or for dinner or something, because then I get my friend. I get that quality attunement from them. And, at no fault of their own, if the kids are around, half of them is concerned about what's going on with their kid... That's normal, but it really takes away from that quality connection that I get when I go and visit. (Jessica)

Some participants were not concerned with these changes, such as Sol who while talking about friendships changing once friends have children said, "I don't necessarily think it's negative. But I do think it's definitely going to happen." Other participants, however, such as Dara, stated that as relationships change with their friends, they anticipate feeling lonely. Sylvie Carlos (2022), a producer for BBC Radio and a writer, wrote about her experiences with loneliness as a childfree woman when her friends began to have children. She pinned her feelings of isolation on the way society is set up to value nuclear families and motherhood over being childfree. In her article, Carlos also discusses the importance of creating a supportive network of childfree friends. Similarly, participants explained that by finding childfree friends or a community of childfree women, they anticipated being able to avoid feelings of loneliness or isolation:

> It's important for me to have women in my life who are choosing to be childfree. It helps with the isolation of feeling alone or not in that decision. It helps having people around who understand [your choice] on an emotional level … I would like to meet more childfree women so that I can have a little bit more of a friend base, because I would like to be able to have spontaneity in my life and be able to call the girlfriend and go to

> Mexico for a week or something. And typically, those people who are childfree can do that because they have more finances and spare time. (Jessica)

> I think it's really important for me to have other childfree girlfriends in my life, because it's a shared thing between us, you know? It's a commonality. And of course, I will still need to have friends into my late adulthood. (Wendy)

In forming these communities, participants also described finding people who understood their experiences with whom they could have candid conversations about being childfree. Research findings also back up the benefits of friendships among childfree women. For example, Stahnke et al. (2022) found that childfree women reported higher life satisfaction than the average American. Their findings indicated that participants' relationships with their friends and romantic partners flourished because of being childfree and that "these close relationships were a critical source of support to participants and a means of improving or sustaining life satisfaction" (p. 305). Notably, there are several organizations across the globe that have been formed with the goal of connecting childfree women to form communities and friendships. One example is *We Are Childfree*, "A storytelling project and community that celebrates and empowers childfree lives" which was started by photographer Zoë Noble (We Are Childfree, n.d.). The project began as a portrait series and grew to include photographs, stories, and podcasts which document the lives of childfree women with the goal of disrupting stereotypical depictions of childfree women as "cold, morally dubious kid-haters" (Tramontana, 2021, para. 16) by sharing stories of women who have found happiness by foregoing motherhood. In Australia, Kimberley Tassoude started *Perth Australia Childfree,* a community which began through social media and is a space for childfree women who feel isolated to facilitate meetups with each other (Bridges, 2023).

Tassoude described the mission of the organization as facilitating discussion online and in person in hopes that this will make the decision to be childfree more socially acceptable. One member of *Perth Australia Childfree,* Rochelle Steven, found it difficult to cultivate and maintain relationships with existing friends as they began to have children. She said that by joining the community, she found a "judgement-free zone" (para. 9) and a "lifeline" (para. 8). These examples suggest that childfree women seek relationships with one another. Since childfree women are often depicted negatively in the media and within general social discourse, they seek spaces where they can be accepted and find people with whom they can relate. While the prevalence of childfree women has been increasing in North America and other western countries, we are still not the norm. As such, it is common for us to feel as though we do not relate to the general population or are unsure how our views and decisions will be received in social settings. From my own experiences, I have found immense comfort and validation when I have been able to openly discuss being childfree with people who "get it." This is a common experience among childfree women, since our choices to be childfree are being made within a social context which still values the conventional nuclear family form.

The Impact of Spaces for Learning and Validation

In addition to seeing value in having communities of childfree women, participants also described the benefit of having spaces where they could engage with "like-minded" or supportive people in order to solidify their decision to be childfree. They described the importance of supportive friends and/or family, role models, and social media for feeling confident in their decisions. For example, Rebecca described a friend who had very different hopes for her own life, but has been supportive of her:

> When I told [my best friend growing up] that I wasn't really sure about having kids, she was really supportive of that. When I told her I wasn't even sure about monogamy, she was really supportive of that. She's a really great person to bounce ideas off of…She's always really reassured me that I know what's best for me and that I need to make that decision. And so that has been really helpful.

While Rebecca described her family's disbelief and disappointment with her decision to be childfree as adding confusion and complexity to her decision-making, here she shows the value of having even one relationship in her life with someone who listens to what she is saying and trusts her decision-making process. While conversations such as those Rebecca described helped participants gain confidence in their choices, having a childfree role model who led a comfortable, happy life was also described as something that made the decision to be childfree feel possible. For example, Sol stated, "[Having a childfree role model] showed it as a viable option and it helped me realize the possibility earlier on." Having examples of non-normative family structures in one's life, allows one to imagine possibilities for one's own life beyond a nuclear family form.

Not everyone has access to role models or supportive relationships. Thus, social media was commonly cited as a useful tool to connect with or learn from other childfree women. Participants described social media as being a resource for providing access to discourses that counter social norms:

> Thankfully, in this day and age, you don't need to have physical friends to [validate you]. You can be on the internet [and] someone's like, "I feel this way," and you're like, "Me, too! It's normal, it's okay, it's fine." I think having lots of those spaces has been really good for helping come to terms [with how I feel] …I don't actively participate in

> anything, but just seeing it exist online has made me feel validated…I think being able to have these spaces exist in a really public, accessible way has made [being childfree] a much easier decision. (Sol)

> When [being childfree] is not talked about and you don't feel like there's people around you who understand, that feels isolating. Who can I talk to about some of these feelings, perspectives, [and] values I have when they don't align with the vast majority of people around you? That just feels incredibly lonely. And so that's where I started looking at groups on social media to start seeing and hearing a different voice than the norm that was around me. And then that slowly built more confidence and assurance in my choice because I knew I wasn't alone... As scary as it can be to voice an opinion that's not [a] popular belief, the more that I've been vocal with [my decision to be childfree], the more that's attracted other people into my life who feel the same way. It's just been this snowball effect...That's how we're doing this [interview] right now, right? It's from me being vocal and people in my life knowing my choice, and then it guides you to other like-minded people who want to have the same conversations. (Jessica)

In addition to voicing the benefit of social media for making their own decision to be childfree, some of the participants, including Lindsay, Dara, and Jessica, wondered whether social media had increased the prevalence of childfree women:

> [Through] social media we have so much exposure to how other people live their lives. I think that has a lot to do with [my decision to be childfree] because I do have quite a few friends that feel the same way. They don't want to get married, [and] they don't want to

> have kids. And I don't think a lot of people had that exposure, like my parents' generation. (Lindsay)

> I wonder if because of social media and the wealth of knowledge that we're privy to now and connecting with people…Has helped people sink into that decision further than it did in previous generations. [For example,] my mom or my grandmas, if it was talked about more, if it was more widely accepted, would they have chosen otherwise? (Jessica)

Research on how social media influences social discourses has found that "the exchange and discourse between members of virtual communities can be seen as a constant construction process of meaning, of public discourses and therefore of social realities" (Gnach, 2017, p. 201). In a study on the use of social media to shift social norms, Lutkenhaus et al. (2023) also argued that "Peer influence, social interaction, and widening access to more available, shared and tailored information have been identified as the main advantages of using social media for social and behavioural change" (p. 131). Their work depicts the usefulness of social media for changing normative social discourses pertaining to the lives of childfree women. It also supports the idea that, as participants speculated, online communities of childfree women are making meaningful contributions to these changes.

Childfree Women's Desire for Open Dialogue About Their Experiences

In addition to describing how social media was beneficial for validating and confirming their individual decisions to be childfree, many participants felt hopeful that positive discourses pertaining to childfree women would continue to spread. Sol and Jessica both said that while the increased prevalence of outspoken childfree women is commonly described as something that is

just “popping up now” (Sol), being childfree is not new. Jessica also described the usefulness and importance of the increased prevalence of childfree women’s perspectives, by stating that childfree women are commonly “demonized” in the media and “systemically excluded from conversations” pertaining to the decision to be childfree. An example of what Jessica is referring to is former *Fox News* television host and far-right political commentator Tucker Carlson’s response to comedian Chelsea Handler’s post on X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter, about being childfree. The post included a satirical video about “the day in the life of a childless woman” (Sharf, 2023, para. 1), where Handler dramatized being able to do whatever she wanted with her day, since she was not responsible for caring for children. On his show, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, Carlson referred to Handler as an “aging, deeply unlikable woman who never had kids” (as cited in Sharf, 2023, para. 1). Far-right radio host Jesse Kelly, a guest on Carlson’s show at the time, unleashed a misogynistic tangent when he stated that Handler’s “Valentine’s date for the 10th year in a row is a 10-year-old copy of ‘Magic Mike’ and a half-full bottle of Xanax, and you’re trying to pretend like you’re happy, but you’re not happy” (as cited in Sharf, 2023, para. 2). A recent study conducted by Hintz and Haywood (2021) analyzed news media from 1989 to 2018 “to critically examine the formation of discourses governing childfree families over time” (p. 747). The authors argued that negative media representation of childfree people shape social perceptions of them, stating that “media frames of [voluntarily childless people] communicatively constitute discourses governing what it means to be childfree and what it means to be or to have a ‘family’” (p. 749). As of 2020, *Tucker Carlson Tonight* was “the highest-rated program in cable news history, tallying an average of 4.33 million viewers” (Concha, 2020, para. 5). The show remained top-rated among cable-news networks until Carlson was fired in April 2023 for his right-wing extremist views, after which *Fox News* viewership

declined by 39% (Barr, 2023). The reach of Carlson's show and loyalty of his viewers allow him to shape social perceptions of childfree women, as supported by Hintz and Haywood (2021). Posts on X following the show depict solidarity with Carlson's remarks. For example, far-right political commentator Ben Shapiro responded to the video on X, calling Handler "really, really sad" (Shapiro, 2023). The replies to Shapiro's post are riddled with misogyny and animosity towards childfree women. Examples include: "A society that does not or is not capable of reproducing itself cannot exist" (Z, 2023), "My God this is a recipe for a VERY lonely and sad life. Am I supposed to be envious or take pity on her?" (Schaeffer, 2023), and "She will die cold and alone. Nothing of her will be remembered or matter after she is gone. Sad waste of a life" (MTL, 2023). Hintz and Haywood (2021) also highlighted that people who are childfree rely heavily on discourse to "defend and legitimize their choice," (p. 748) meaning that the way they are depicted in the media has a significant ability to enable or limit the extent to which childfree women are accepted as valuable members of society.

These examples depict extreme views. While Jessica described the demonization of childfree women in the media, participants' perspectives ranged, and others focused more on stereotyping. In a personal essay about representations of childfree women in the media, screenwriter Claire J. Harris (2020) wrote:

> Among the smattering of child-free women in popular TV shows and movies I grew up with, they tended to be presented as sexpots (Samantha from *Sex and The City*), fundamentally selfish people (Elaine from *Seinfeld),* or workaholics who've sacrificed family for a career. (para. 13)

Harris's comments support that harmful stereotypes of childfree women are depicted in popular media, such as in television and movies. Harris went on to write:

> Motherhood is viewed as a moral imperative — which means that women who are voluntarily child-free must be selfish, sad, or immature. I look around me and I see the child-free women I know living purposeful and rich lives. But I don't see them when I turn on my television. (Harris, 2020, para. 17)

This quote highlights that the real-life stories and experiences of childfree women are systematically excluded from conversations and depictions of childfree women. Social media is particularly useful here, as it allows users to create media content and publicize their experiences (Lutkenhaus et al., 2023). This ability for childfree women to create media which accurately represents their decisions and experiences has the potential to shift social discourses and, as participants discussed, allow childfree women to find spaces where they may be validated by seeing their own experiences represented, even if they cannot find this in mainstream media. Jessica said that by posting her "childfree journey" on Instagram, she has been met with responses such as "Thank you for positing these things, it's so normalizing." While posting to social media has contributed to an increased normalization of childfree women, participants voiced that there is still work to be done, outlining what they hope for in the future:

> It would be great if we can get to a place where we can speak about [being childless-by-choice] freely and not shame the person who's making that choice. And for it to not be seen as a judgment or an indictment of people who decide to have kids, but just another option…It doesn't impact your worth as a person or as a woman and your contributions to society. (Angie)

Despite participants receiving negative responses about their decision to be childfree, I admire their hopefulness that things will get better. While discourses pertaining to childfree women in the media have remained minimal or harmful, progress has been made over time and I believe it

is still being made. However, while positive representations of childfree women on social media may help with changing social discourses about childfree women and family structures in general, there are also limitations to this. While participants did not define their engagement with social media content pertaining to childfree women as a form of activism, I would argue that engaging with and producing content with the goal of enacting social change is at least a precursor to social activism. Literature pertaining to social media activism has identified its usefulness for reaching masses of people, which is a vital component of activism (Yilmaz, 2017). However, media critics also recognize its limitations as being "inadequate in achieving political goals in comparison to traditional forms of activism" (Yilmaz, 2017, p. 157). It, therefore, should not be used in place of in-person action. Thus, more traditional forms of social mobilization are also needed to "normalize" childfree women and achieve the changes that some participants desire.

Conclusion

To add to my findings outlined in Chapter 4 pertaining to my research question, "How do women navigate and understand their choice to be childfree?" my analysis throughout this chapter displays that women consider both contextual and personal factors when deciding to be childfree. However, for most participants, the personal considerations typically grounded their decision, while contextual factors solidify their decision once it had been made. They also generally did not make connections to how personal or individual choices are embedded in and influenced by their social worlds. I argue that the social and political influences on these considerations cannot be removed from their decisions, as one's personal life and decisions are at least in part determined and limited by the social context in which they occur.

To address my final research questions, “What does an intentionally childfree life look like for women?” and “What are their hopes for a childfree life?” participants shared a range of answers. In order from the least common to most common answers, participants said they hoped for: success in their career; abundant leisure time; time to commit to hobbies, passions, new experiences, and being a life-long learner; frequent travel; financial “freedom” or “flexibility” that would allow them to spend money how they want to; the ability to offer financial and emotional support to people in their lives and to allow their relationships with their friends, families, and partners to flourish; and to be able to focus on taking care of their own wellbeing including their mental and physical health.

My findings indicate that participants encounter a mixture of social pressure to conform to social norms and pockets of supportive relationships. Participants expressed awareness of how they were opposing heteronormative family structures; they contest the social backlash they often face in response to their decision to be childfree. Participants also anticipated and sometimes experience isolation and loneliness. By being part of a social minority, whose life does not revolve around a nuclear family within a society that was built for and prioritizes heteronormative family structures, childfree women continue to be excluded from various aspects of mainstream society. In-person or online communities are thus sought to combat these feelings and foster relationships with “like-minded” childfree people. Social media is particularly useful for this, despite having its limitations.

To conclude, decentring the nuclear family and creating space for alternative or non-normative relationship and family structures would allow *all* adults to form and maintain meaningful relationships with other adults, benefiting everyone. It may also make parenting a viable option for people who do not like what it entails in the current North American context.

While participants are hopeful for social changes that will merit further inclusion of childfree women in North America and many are participating in actualizing these changes, we need to recognize that the social changes we seek will require us to address the structural and political ways childfree women are excluded from society through more traditional forms of social activism. This also includes recognizing and addressing the ways mothering in North America is organized to be unattractive for many of us.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

"When it comes to reproduction and the transition to motherhood, it is crucial to cast doubt on [the] rhetoric of all-embracing choice: how much room to maneuver do women actually have if we are free to choose only what society wants us to choose?" (Donath, 2017, p. 7)

In completing this research project, I have gained a deeper understanding of my experiences as a childfree woman, my privilege in making this choice, and the way the North American social and political context shapes all women's experiences in relation to motherhood, whether they choose to have children or not. I set out to understand my decision as it relates to other childfree women and to position all of us within a heteropatriarchal society. What I found is that there is overlap in women's decisions, but one's particular social location and the context in which one makes the decision to be childfree is of the utmost importance for understanding why individuals are met with their unique experiences. I also found that the repercussions of our "choices" are indicative of both social and political systems with extremely particular, often oppressive, values. However, there are people within these systems whose very lives challenge them. As childfree women, we may not see ourselves as political agents demanding a different world, but childfree women are, in fact, resisting the social and political systems around us.

In doing this project, I have shed light on childfree women's experiences in present-day North America. I have pieced together some of the history of what it means to be a woman in North America and the expectations that come with the identity of "woman," as well as how and why it remains a challenge to oppose these expectations. I connected the perspectives of feminist, intersectional thinkers of the past several decades to situate and make sense of present-day childfree women's experiences in the current context. I also identified specific social and

political structures (though there are many more I did not mention) that we ought to change to allow for the future that childfree women seek for ourselves.

I do not claim to have encapsulated the experiences of *every* childfree woman. Given the scope of my project I was also unable to discuss the experiences of childfree people who do not identify as heterosexual women, including those of childfree men, nonbinary people, and queer people. Focusing on childfree heterosexual women's experiences is important for understanding today's social context and the oppression of women, but so are the experiences of queer people and those who do not identify as women. I see the exploration of the experiences of older childfree women, men, nonbinary people, and queer people as particularly important avenues for future research pertaining to the decision to be childfree.

To review my project's findings, I will summarize the answers to my research questions. To answer my first research question, "How do women navigate and understand their choice to be childfree?" and specifically, "Do women see their choice as individual and personal? What connections do they see between their experiences and the social context in which they make these choices?" I argued that women understand their decisions as predominantly personal. With regards to the process of making the decision to be childfree, many participants considered social and political factors that would contribute to their experiences throughout pregnancy and parenthood. However, they often described factors that they understood to be personal, such as pregnancy, financial circumstances, or free time, as their primary motivators for deciding to be childfree. In discussing the impact their decisions to be childfree have taken on their relationships, participants also spoke about how their decisions are taken up by other people and how reactions, both positive and unsupportive, had an impact on them. Most participants described their families' opinions as the most significant or impactful. They recognized that a

decision to be childfree placed them outside of the social norm of what is expected for women's lives. But they turned to individual solutions rather than challenging the social structures which create these ideals. To combat social isolation and loneliness participants felt, or anticipated feeling, they described the value of having a network of childfree women with whom they could engage in discussions, either in person or online, to feel validated and supported.

In my literature review, I contextualized today's nuclear family by depicting how social norms pertaining to the family evolved historically in North America. This history helps us to understand why childfree women feel pressure from all angles and why this norm is so difficult to shake, despite feminism having made some progress in expanding women's options over the past few decades. I showed that heteronormativity is central to this family form, and that it includes "three interrelated and analytically inseparable binaries: the gender binary, the sexuality binary, and the family binary" (Allen & Mendez, 2018, p. 70). I also identified the nuclear family as a site of oppression for women. Firestone (1970) argued that biology, particularly procreation, is the origin of this dichotomy, and stated that "…men and women were created different, and not equally privileged" (p. 8). Thus, she continued, the nuclear family is "an inherently unequal power distribution" (p. 9). The contemporary nuclear family is also directly related to and dependant on neoliberal capitalism (O'Brien 2022). With the end of feudalism and turn to capitalism in the 14th century, the nuclear family began to form among the bourgeoise. From then on, families were defined by land ownership and single-family dwellings comprised of a man who is the breadwinner and a woman who stays home to tend to the household and rear children (O'Brien, 2022; Firestone, 1970). While this family structure has been challenged and transformed in innumerable ways, such as with the legalization and enforcement of marriage for

Black and Indigenous peoples and the legalization of same-sex marriage, the nuclear family as an ideal prevails (O'Brien, 2022).

As my analysis shows, despite this history and the present-day political context in North America that demonstrates a strong structural foundation to how we organize our families, many of us tend to think (mostly) about our own experiences. Our frustrations and confusions as childfree women typically feel like they are located within ourselves or those around us. Participants described interactions that they avoid or dislike and see the solution to the exclusions they feel as "normalizing" childfree women. I am guilty of this myself. I have hoped that, with time, and as childfree women become more common in North America, we would be accepted and welcomed into society as much as women who are mothers. In doing this project, I have realized that this is how neoliberalism functions – by convincing individuals that they are solely responsible for their circumstances and that they, alone, can make the differences they wish to see in their lives. However, as we can see with examples, such as the overturning of Roe v. Wade after 50 years and the worsening climate crisis despite decades of warning signs, this is not how wide-spread, lasting social change happens. This "trope of generational change" (Gill et al., 2017, p. 236) is commonly suggested to argue that gender inequalities are a social issue of the past and will continue to improve as older generations dwindle. As my analysis has shown, and the daily news confirms, this is not the case. Until childfree women have the same access to resources and social support as those who form nuclear families, we will not see a "normalization" of childfree women.

To answer my second research question, "What does an intentionally childfree life look like for women?", and "What are their hopes for a childfree life?", my analysis displays that while childfree women continue to face social exclusion, progress has been made. While

participants described feelings or fear of isolation, they also described places they can go to have productive discussions and find validation and like-minded women. Making the decision to be childfree remains on the fringes of society and opposes norms to the family. However, it is much more possible for women to make this decision than it has been in the past. Writer and historian Stephanie Coontz (2004) pointed out that while the family as we know it today was born out of a history of the nuclear family and its various forms, alternative family structures including same-sex couples, cohabitation among non-family members, and divorced couples have historically also been present within various cultures, globally. However, she argued that family structures today are "qualitatively different from anything to be found in the past" (p. 974), and that while various forms of family organization have been available to varying extents, we are presently at a unique point of time when so many alternative family structures have never been available within a single society. She draws a connection between this mosaic of family structures and increased economic independence for women. Coontz also argued that political gains for unmarried heterosexual and same-sex couples challenge the binaries of sex and gender within relationships. Notably, she stated that this progress has shaped marriage for all who marry, and traditional marriage and family life has been altered for everyone, regardless of whether these changes are something they desire. These advances were clear in my participants' identifications of older women with children who, the participants believe, may have been childfree if they had been making the decision to have children today. Participants also described the usefulness of social media in learning about other women's experiences and finding validation for their feelings that was not accessible to them within many of the relationships in their lives. This again shows that some change has happened with regards to women deciding to be childfree, as it is

now easier than it has been in the past to not only make this perspective known but also to find like-minded women and act on these desires.

With regards to the hopes childfree women have for their lives, participants shared that in being childfree, they hope for financial independence, freedom, and flexibility; copious amounts of travel and leisure time; the ability to frequently pursue new experiences and hobbies; time to dedicate to their relationships with themselves, friends, romantic partners, and families in meaningful ways; feelings of fulfillment in all aspects of their lives; finding happiness, joy, and good health; and managing a satisfying work-life balance. Central to these desires is the notion that childfree women should become as unremarkable within North American society as women who are mothers. While my analysis addressed the difficulties and nuances of this desire, literature pertaining to childfree women argues that they tend to have fulfilling lives. As mentioned in Chapter 5, childfree women have been found to have a higher life satisfaction than the average American (Stahnke et al, 2022). To me, this stresses the need for societal change pertaining to our acceptance. While research describing satisfied women who typically do not regret their decision to be childfree is optimistic, it also highlights that having children, while culturally privileged and considered normal, also brings challenges to women's lives. While motherhood looks different for all women, regretful mothers do exist and among them are women who did not want children but felt they had no choice. There are also mothers who have always wanted children but are frustrated by the lack of support for people raising children and the high expectations put on mothers. Thus, while progress has been made and childfree women have indeed been proven to be happy and fulfilled, there is work to be done to benefit all women.

To answer my third research question, "Do different women experience the pressures to have children differently? How?" my analysis indicates that, yes, women's experiences vary.

Specifically, I examined religion, race, ethnicity, and class as they pertain to women's decision to be childfree. In my analysis, I indicated that religion has immense influence on social norms and thus the politics of a given nation. In North America, the influence of Christianity continues to organize family life. In my literature review, I described how the nuclear family, brought to North American from Europe, is central to colonialism. I also addressed transatlantic slavery and the systemic anti-Black racism that persists in North America. Today, those racialized as non-white in North America, including but not limited to East Asian, South Asian, Latinx, Indigenous peoples, and Black people, continue to face systemic racism. Thus, in my analysis I argue that while all women's decisions to be childfree are complex and multifaceted, race contributes to unequal opportunity, where some women are able to have children safely and with adequate support and others are not. It also contributes to unequal access to a safe, hospitable environment for children to be raised in. While no two women have the same experience of deciding whether to have children, some women's choices are uniquely complicated if they do not align with dominant social binaries including being white, straight, cis-gender, middle or upper-class, able-bodied, and acting in accordance with dominant gender norms, which are typically influenced by religious values assumed to bring morality and social order to a society.

In addressing these research questions, my project illustrates that women's choices to be childfree is not solely individual, stemming from each woman's independent desires for her life, but are influenced and limited by the social context in which women make that choice and the social and political structures which uphold norms within this context. However, women generally frame their decisions as personal, identifying aspects of their social lives which they need to overcome or would like to change to act on their choices. I argue that these social pressures form, uphold, and produce social norms that stem from racial heteronormativity and

neoliberal capitalism. North American social life promotes individual success through the guise of meritocracy, where the achievements and productivity of one's life are assumed to be entirely related to making the "right" decisions. An immoral, unproductive, or unsuccessful life is understood as the fault of an individual actor straying from these norms and failing to put in the effort required to succeed. This belief system is so engrained in our social world that our knee-jerk reaction is to look inward when we experience discomfort in our lives. Meritocracy distracts us from the social and political infrastructure which enables particular groups to succeed in attaining economic success, and thus freedom under capitalism. It simultaneously restricts this opportunity for people who do not conform to white supremist, heteropatriarchal standards of who counts as the ideal citizen.

While this structure grants access to success and support for some groups and restricts it for others, families also play a role. The privileged few pass down their intergenerational wealth, typically in the form of private property, which aids in reifying this class structure. Families also offer economic support to their members, so that children depend on their nuclear families to support them. This reliance on a family structure for economic stability can restrain some people's access to alternative household and family structures. Thus, to liberate women and grant them true autonomy, we must address the entanglement of the white heteronormative family *and* capitalism (Firestone, 1970; O'Brien, 2022). Most importantly, we must not find comfort in postfeminist notions that gender inequities are a social issue of the past or significant only in countries outside of the North American context (Gill at el., 2017). This postfeminist approach contributes to "a wider neoliberalization of contemporary culture—explicitly extending the notion of neoliberalism to culture and subjectivity, not merely political and economic domains," as I have demonstrated throughout my analysis (Gill et al., 2017, p. 227). To summarize, "To lose

sight of gender as a key hierarchical system, particularly in conceptions of family internationally, is to obscure the impact of organized oppression on real people's lives" (Allen, 2016, p. 217).

However, feminists have varying approaches for how to approach women's liberation from oppressive family and economic structures. Firestone (1970) argued that "throughout history, in all stages and types of culture, women have been oppressed due to their biological functions" (p. 66-67). She also described the characteristics of the "biological family," one of which is that "the natural reproductive difference between the sexes led directly to the first division of labor at the origins of class, as well as furnishing the paradigm of caste (discrimination based on biological characteristics)" (p. 9). She concludes that to liberate women from the oppression caused by their biology, we should turn to technology to both eliminate "genital difference between human begins" (p. 11) and labour altogether through what she calls "cybernation" (p. 176), or the reliance on technology to take over reproduction and labour. While many other feminists agree that women are oppressed by their biology, they typically take less radical approaches to addressing women's oppression. The goals of feminism remain to overcome patriarchy, yet feminists have also argued for the complexity of this goal, since families may be a source of intimacy, care, cooperation, and stability (see: Baber & Allen, 1992; Walker, 1999; Allen, 2016; Collins, 1998). Patricia Hill Collins (1998) argued that while various political activist groups seek to dissolve social hierarchies, they do so without addressing the family as a site of oppression. She drew attention to this trend among feminists who are critical of the family yet are commonly drawn to a "sisterhood among women" (p. 77). Thus, given the occasional usefulness of family ideals, she argued: "Instead of engaging in endless criticism [of the family], reclaiming the language of family for democratic ends and transforming the very conception of family itself might provide a more useful approach" (Collins, 1998, p. 77).

Importantly, for people in groups not supported well by the state, the family is a defence against oppression. It is often privileged white members of society who have been able to reject family structures because of easier access to other ways of supporting oneself, such as access to higher education and well-paying jobs (Attewell et al., 2010; Wilson & Macdonald, 2010; Block et al., 2019; Simone & Walks, 2019; Sweetman & Warman, 2010; O'Brien, 2022; Dabrowski, 2021, p. 94).

Throughout this project, my own thinking surrounding my decision to be childfree has expanded far beyond what I thought it would. I related to much of what my participants shared and in making my decision to be childfree often found myself thinking along individual, neoliberal lines. It took me looking beyond myself to see the full picture of the current state of women's reproductive autonomy in North America and how it limits our choices. What I have concluded amid the aforementioned feminist debates pertaining to women's oppression, is two consistent truths: (1) we cannot dismiss women's oppression as a thing of the past and (2) to liberate women and grant them access to autonomy, particularly reproductive autonomy, both economic and family structures need to be addressed. These are overwhelming goals, and in reading family abolitionist literature I often find myself overcome with feelings of excitement and possibility, which often fade to a directionless sense of defeat. The liberation I wish to see for women sometimes feels so impossible and far away that I often find myself caught between hopefulness and fear for the future. However, I have realized that there is comfort in that distance, too. Women's liberation will not come overnight, regardless of the approach taken it will take years and likely small, persistent steps. The question I continue to consider, and what I think feminists today should consider is what can we be doing *right now* to get us there? My hopes for the future include more social organizing around women's reproductive autonomy,

which could include direct challenges to the nuclear family structure and capitalism. In seeking communities of childfree women, I hope that we will step outside of our individual experiences and demand the social and political changes which would allow our "choices" to be easily actualized without disadvantaging childfree women. I hope that in drawing attention to the ways our decisions to be childfree are inevitability intertwined with our social and political contexts, my project with encourage childfree women to contribute to these changes in meaningful ways.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

Appendix B: Interview Guide

1. Tell me about yourself.
    - What do you do for work and/or school?
    - How old are you?
    - Where are you located?
2. Tell me about your family background.
    - Prompts: Where did you grow up?
        i. What are your parents' occupations?
        ii. How many siblings do you have?
        iii. Where are you in the birth order?
        iv. Did you grow up in a religious household?
3. Tell me about your decision not to have children.
    - Prompts: Do you remember the process of coming to that decision?
        i. What things did you consider?
        ii. What factors have influenced your decision?
        iii. How old were you when you started to think about not having children?
        iv. Did the climate crisis impact your decision?
        v. The cost of raising children?
4. How did your parents and/or caretakers talk to you about your future while you were growing up? What did they say about having children?
    - Is there anyone else who influenced your decision?
    - Is there anything that stands out about your home or your upbringing that may have influenced your decision to be childfree?

5. Tell me about [if and] how your decision affected your close relationships.
    - Prompts: Are you "out" to your family about your decision?
        i. How have they reacted?
        ii. Do you experience pressures from family, friends, acquaintances about your decision?
        iii. Do you have any stories about people's reactions (positive or negative)?
6. In general, how do you feel about answering the question of whether you want to have children?
    - How do you feel about being asked about *why* you decided not to have children?
7. If you have a partner, how has your relationship influenced your decision to be childfree?
    - If not, how has not having a partner influenced your decision to be childfree?
        i. Do you eventually *want* a long-term partner? If so, do you think your decision to be childfree will play a role in finding a partner?
8. Are there any aspects of your identity that I have not mentioned that influenced your decision to be childfree?
    - Maybe think back to your demographics survey? Does anything specific come up for you?
9. Do you have other women in your life you are close with who have decided not to have children?
    - Is it important to you to have relationships with other childfree women?
    - Do you think your friends having children will change your relationship(s) with them?

10. Are there children in your life who you are close with? If so, what is your relationship like with them?
    - How do people generally perceive your relationship with kids?
    - Is it important for you to have children in your life to some capacity?
11. What are your hopes for a childfree life?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix C: Demographic Survey, Letter of Information (LOI), and Consent Form (CF)

Survey Description **Project:** "Bad for society"?: An exploratory study of the influence of heteronormative social expectations on women's decision to remain childfree

Name of Principal Investigator: Jamie Luchenski (jamie.luchenski@queensu.ca),
School of Kinesiology and Health Studies, Queen's University

Name of Supervisor: Dr. Mary Louise Adams (mla1@queensu.ca)

LOI-CF **What is this project about?**
I am inviting you to take part in a research study titled "Bad for society"?: An exploratory study of the influence of heteronormative social expectations on women's decision to remain childfree. My project is focused on exploring the experiences of childfree women, specifically how they navigate the choice not to have children, how their choice has been received by their friends and family, and how they understand their decision in light of western societal norms and cultural expectations.

What is involved?
The study will involve the completion of a pre-study demographic questionnaire (including questions about age, gender, sexuality, relationship status, racial/ethnic identity, dis/ability, citizenship status, economic status, and religious beliefs) and participation in one 60 minute semi-structed interview. You will complete the demographic questionnaire online through Qualtrics. Providing responses to the questions is optional, and responses will be used to contextualize each participant's experiences.

Interviews will be conducted either in-person (Queen's campus) or over Zoom depending on the participants preference. Your questionnaire response and interview transcript will be confidential with only myself and my supervisor having access to them.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can decline to participate in the research without penalty. You may decline to answer any question during the interview. You may withdraw at any time during the study or up until the completion of the final manuscript by contacting me (Jamie Luchenski, jamie.luchenski@queensu.ca), or my supervisor (Dr. Mary Louise Adams, mla1@queensu.ca).

Withdrawal from the study has no penalty. If you do choose to withdraw, your interview data will be destroyed.

What are the benefits?
There are no direct benefits to you as a participant. Your participation will help to create new knowledge in the field that explores childfree women's experiences within the western social context.

What are the risks?
This project will involve the discussion of childfree women's experiences with making the

decision to be childfree, as well as how this decision has been taken up by their friends and family in the form of interviews, all of which may not have positive connotations for participants. As this study will involve the discussion of personal experiences with making the decision to be childfree, there is a chance that interviews may lead to psychological or emotional distress. Participation is voluntary and you can decline to participate in the research or any aspect of the research at any time without penalty.

The following are resources that can be accessed if you experience psychological or emotional distress during the interview: Distress and Crisis Ontario website at dcontario.org for resources and information, and Telephone Aid Line Kingston (TALK) at 613-544-1771.

How will your confidentiality be protected?
Your confidentiality will be protected to the extent permitted by applicable laws. I will do this by replacing your name with a pseudonym in all publications and a study ID number in all study records. Interviews will be audio and/or video recorded using the Zoom recording function. The recorded files will immediately be transferred to OneDrive and deleted from my computer following the interviews. You will receive a copy of your transcribed interview for review, which will be shared via email using a secure OneDrive link. Identifiable personal information will be stored on a password protected OneDrive until the completion of the study. De-identified data will be stored in a secure folder on OneDrive for a minimum of 5 years. My supervisor, Dr. Mary Louise Adams, will be responsible for the study data should I no longer be affiliated with Queen's during the 5-year period, after which study data will be permanently erased.

Access to identifiable study data is limited to the Principal Investigator. The Queen's General Research Ethics Board (GREB) may request access to study data to ensure that the researcher(s) have or are meeting their ethical obligations in conducting this research. GREB is bound by confidentiality and will not disclose any personal information.

Funding and conflicts of interest
This research is funded by the Queen's University School of Kinesiology and Health Studies. There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

What will be done with the data?
I plan to publish the results of this study in academic journals and present them at conferences. The results of this study will also be a part of my master's thesis. I will include quotes but will not use any personally identifying information from the interviews when presenting my findings. I will never include any real names with quotes. I will do my best to make sure quotes do not identify participants. During the interview, please let me know if you say anything you do not want me to quote.

Concerns?
If you have any ethics concerns, please contact the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca. Use 1-613-533-2988 if outside North America. Please note that GREB communicates in English only.

This study has been reviewed for ethical compliance by the Queen's University General

Research Ethics Board.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact me, Jamie Luchenski, at jamie.luchenski@queensu.ca, or my supervisor, Dr. Mary Louise Adams, at mla1@queensu.ca.

This Letter of Information and Consent Form provides you with the details to help you make an informed choice. All your questions should be answered to your satisfaction before you decide whether or not to participate in this research study.

You have not waived any legal rights by consenting to participate in this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary and requires your active, full consent. Completion of this survey represents active consent. Consent will also be obtained verbally before the interview begins.

Q14 Providing responses to the following questions is **optional.**

Q1 What is your name?

_____

Q2 What is your age?

_____

Q3 What is your gender identity, gender expression?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q4 How do you describe your sexual orientation?

_____

_____

Q5 What is your relationship or marital status?

Q6 Do you identify as a person with a disability? Please describe below.

Q7 How would you define your racial/ethnic identity?

Q8 What is your citizenship status?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q9 What is your economic status?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q10 What belief system(s)/religious belief(s) do you identify with?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix D: Research Ethics Approval

March 31, 2023

Ms. Jamie Luchenski
Queen's University

Title: "GSKHS-436-23: "Bad for society"?: An exploratory study of the influence of heteronormative social expectations on women's decision to remain childfree;" TRAQ # 6038442

Dear Ms. Luchenski:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled **"GSKHS-436-23: "Bad for society"?: An exploratory study of the influence of heteronormative social expectations on women's decision to remain childfree"** for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405), your project has been cleared for one year.

You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html/; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies"). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/traq indicating that the project is 'completed' so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one-year period (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html/; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form"). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application by at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies." Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, GREB, at University Research Services for further review and clearance by GREB or the Chair, GREB.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Sincerely,

Chair, General Research Ethics Board (GREB)
Associate Professor and Distinguished Faculty Fellow of Marketing,
Academic Co-Director (Business), Master of Digital Product Management
Smith School of Business
Queen's University
chair.GREB@queensu.ca