

## ***What to expect when you're not expecting: Child-freedom, social stigma, and online identities***

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### ***Introduction & context***

[Greeting] Today I am going to talk about one of the projects I am involved in as part of the critical studies in sexualities and reproduction research group based at RU. The project is focused on people who do not have children, and who deliberately remain childfree.

**Why study voluntary childlessness?** When we study non-reproduction in general—including people who have adopted, or who can't or won't have children—we are essentially looking at those who have moved away from the usual, expected life course. This allows us to explore the powerful socio-cultural pressures that are placed on people to procreate, including social stigma directed at childless people. The fact that there is this stigma, and that it is most strongly directed to those who are voluntarily childless, shows that even though procreation is often spoken about in terms of choice (family planning, reproductive decisions), in practice, not having children isn't a real possibility in most societies. People may choose *when* to have children or under what conditions, but not really *whether or not* to have children. Having children is an expectation, an imperative even.

Studies of voluntary childlessness *specifically* are useful because they highlight this 'procreation imperative'. Even though voluntary childlessness occurs among a minority of people, and mainly, but not exclusively, in affluent and Western contexts,<sup>1</sup> studying this phenomenon and the experiences of childfree people sheds light on an issue that affects us all in some way. The procreation imperative, on one hand, shapes the range of possibilities that are available to people reproductively-speaking, and, raises questions about reproductive freedom and justice. On the other hand, it impacts on the ways that people experience their lives.

In this presentation I want to look at how the procreation imperative operates in a bit more detail as the background for our own research, and then discuss our study and some of our findings. The focus of the discussion will be on the ways that childfree people manage the potential stigma that emerges as a result of voluntarily not having children and how their resistance might challenge the procreation imperative and extend the range possibilities for people or not.

**Exploring the procreation imperative:** Much pressure to procreate comes from the fact that having children is seen as a defining feature of normal adulthood. Very rarely, if ever, does one hear people being asked "Do you want to have children?" or "why do you want to have children?" Not even by researchers. These questions seem redundant and their answers self-evident. The only people who really are asked these questions are those who fall outside of the norm in some way: they are ill, young, unmarried, or gay, for example. We can conclude then that older, married heterosexuals are the people who face the greatest pressure to reproduce, to have their 'own' biological children.

The procreation imperative works through pronatalist ideology and is also often reinforced by nationalistic and religious rhetoric that constructs childbearing as an obligation or duty. (e.g. Afrikaner volksmoeder). Research suggests that pronatalism has 2 dimensions. I will explain these dimensions in some detail because it is important for the findings I present later.

- (1) The first dimension of pronatalism, is the glorification of parenthood. This involves highlighting the attractions of having children, who are portrayed as bringing *only* joy, happiness and meaning to life. While in contrast, any costs of parenting are denied or down-played as being outweighed by rewards.
- (2) The second dimension of pronatalism is the denigration of non-reproduction. Part of this involves stigma being attached to people who don't have children. They are seen as sad, mad, or bad. Sad: for missing out on having children, with a life of loneliness, lack of meaning, regret, and difficulties in old-age. Mad: because they lack the normal desires or are emotionally immature or unstable. Bad: because they are focusing on their own needs and desires. On the whole, the negatives of being childless are emphasised. Any positives are denied or rejected as being related to 'selfishness' and what we find is that parenthood choices are often motivated as much by fears of the consequences of not having children, as by any perceived benefits.

These positive and negative constructions are really two sides of the same pronatalist coin that work together to dismiss not having children as a truly viable possibility.<sup>i</sup> As a result, parenthood becomes, in effect, a non-choice and an expectation for all married heterosexuals who can have children.

Voluntary childlessness is problematic, especially for married heterosexual people, not only because this expectation is not met, but because it is seen as the willing and deliberate deviation<sup>ii</sup>.<sup>iii</sup> The stigma that accrues as a result of *choosing* not to have children regulates deviation from the norm and so protects the status quo. Today I will show how some childfree people manage this stigma by focusing on the notion of choice in their talk. Choice as an idea, as other scholars have shown, can be mobilised in talk about reproduction for various political purposes. We see this, e.g., in the public pro-choice versus pro-life debates about abortion. So, in addition to understanding choice as an internal process, we can also consider how the *idea* can be used as a rhetorical or argumentative device toward particular ends, in our case, dealing with the stigma associated with not having children.<sup>iv</sup>

**Data collection & analysis:** The focus of this paper then is on the rhetoric of choice in discussions on childfree-specific websites<sup>v</sup> which occurred during an online ethnography. Our rationale for collecting data online was threefold: (1) the Internet is an important contemporary mode of resistance to various dominant discourses, especially wide-spread pronatalist discourse; (2) the Internet allows for the creation of safe spaces based on shared attitudes and interests that often cannot exist otherwise, especially for marginalised groups; and (3) based on the demographics of childfree people it is highly likely that many will have internet access and there is a large and diverse online community of CF people.

We focused on online communities with discussion spaces and chatted with existing members and also invited people via non-CF sites like Facebook, twitter, and our own research blog, since the groups that we chose allowed guests. Of course, we were aware that we would only be accessing those CF people who felt a need to join or participate in an online group, but our concern wasn't in forming a generalizable portrait of the childfree. Rather we wanted to explore how online spaces provided an avenue of resistance and a public space for identity construction, where identities are co-constructed, negotiated and contested.

The data were generated in discussion threads, started by the researchers, on these websites. There were 3 country-specific discussion groups for India, Poland, and South Africa and a general discussion thread started during a pilot phase. We analysed the data using discursive methodology. Broadly speaking, the analysis

concentrates on identifying the rhetorical organisation of talk, the discursive purpose of particular rhetorical strategies, and how these are connected to relations of power.<sup>vi</sup>

**The disavowal of choice:** As I said, in this presentation I concentrate on the use of choice rhetoric to manage stigma. While participants did talk about childfreedom as a choice, more often they argued that their reproductive status was *not* related to an active and conscious decision. In this presentation I focus on the rhetorical strategy of denying choice, which took 2 main forms/scripts: (1) **Naturally Childfree** and (2) **CF as a non-choice**.<sup>vii</sup>

**Naturally childfree:** When participants spoke about themselves as being ‘naturally childfree’, they actively talked against choice. For example:

(1) *I've **always** been childfree. I have **never** liked children [...] I have the right to have children or not, but I do not consider my child-freedom to be a choice. Not liking kids is just the way I am. If I did have children, I'd just be going against my **nature**. I would say it affects every aspect of my life because it's not simply something I identify with. It's a core aspect of **who I am**. (Destiny, General CF site)*

(2) *From the statements here it seems that very different people, brought up in various conditions, with different views on a number of matters, have however, some **IDENTICAL** construction concerning children and reproduction. Since there are identical ways to reach an awareness of your childlessness, [...] it starts to look as though we are not childfree "by choice" but naturally childfree... (Woman11, Polish)*

These quotations show the common trend in which childfreedom was constructed as natural, rather than a choice. They also demonstrate the recurring tendency to describe oneself as **always** having been CF and as **never** having desired or felt the urge to have children. Some participants even described themselves as having been born that way. By describing their CF status as inherent and ‘natural’ it is rendered ‘outside of human choice and control’<sup>viii</sup> and it follows then, that a childfree person cannot be held accountable for their divergence from the norm, or be required to change it.

The next script also denounces choice, but the argument shifts somewhat. In this instance, the claim is not: ‘My reproductive status was not a choice’, as with the former script; rather it is: ‘There was no (real) choice’. This is achieved by constructing a CF status as a non-choice. In this way, this script also manages the trouble associated with choosing to deviate from the norm.

**CF as a non-choice:** In order to construct something as a non-choice, as I explained earlier when discussing pronatalism, any other options must be disavowed by being depicted as extremely unattractive or irrational and so not actually feasible. The next extract illustrates how the rhetoric of CF as a non-choice works.

(1) *Having a child with my approach [to life] would be like death during life. And that's how I define this choice. It is like a choice between a beautiful life, full of warmth, love and colours and a cold, foul-smelling, dark tomb... (Woman12, Polish)*

In this quote deciding whether to have children or not is like deciding whether to live or die. For any rational, normal person, this really is no choice at all. Likewise with child-freedom: it is a non-choice. This rhetorical strategy works by inverting the core arguments of pronatalism: juxtaposing the positives of a childfree life with the negatives of parenthood. (1) The respondents highlighted the drawbacks of having children, while often at the same time contrasting these with the advantages of a childfree life. (2) They also

juxtaposed negative constructions of parents—as unreflexive, self-absorbed, ignorant, ‘breeders’—with positive renditions of childfree people—as enlightened, selfless, open-minded, and evolved. This can be seen in the following extracts:

- (2) ... *[Not having children] really has made my life beautiful too. I am free to be me, to do exactly what I want without having to worry about how it will impact spawn. I can spend my time doing things I think will help people and the world instead of wiping poopy butts and snotty noses all day. (Woman 1, General CF forum)*
- (3) *Another myth that annoys me is the one that states children are kind/loving/innocent. ... Children are MEAN [...] I would resent having to give up my life for one full of responsibilities and trials I DO NOT WANT. To me, the “reward” does not at all make up for the sacrifices. (Bryony, USA, Research blog)*
- (4) *I began to “call bullshit” on commonly held beliefs of my society, after seeing my siblings, one after the next, breed unchecked and have train-wreck lives, leaving a small army of unhappy, wounded little children in their wake. [...] Having children is the pinnacle of achievement, whether the child is happy or not. (self-servingwoman, General CF forum)*

These quotations show how participants turned pronatalist arguments around to challenge the attractions of parenthood and counter the usual positioning of the childfree as sad, mad, or bad. Parenthood is thus discredited as a truly attractive or viable option and voluntary childlessness becomes a non-choice.

**Conclusions:** I’ve shown how Respondents used choice rhetoric to counter stigmatised positions associated with child-freedom and construct alternative, positive identities. The denial of choice helps to manage stigma because it deals with the core issue from which that stigma originates. By adopting passive positions, in which they are either compelled by innate forces or do not really have a choice, respondents naturalise their reproductive status and/or construe it as reasonable and understandable. The denial of choice is an effective rhetorical strategy in some ways because it challenges the procreation imperative, and allows childless people to resist deficit positioning. This resistance, as I showed, occurs as people re-appropriate and re-work the self-same pronatalist arguments that usually serve to position a childfree life in negative ways, as sad, mad, or bad.

This rhetorical strategy therefore potentially creates space for alternative possibilities, but it has some limitations too. Firstly, it positions parenthood and voluntary childlessness in an oppositional way, rather than as equally legitimate possibilities. Secondly, the denial of choice and agency may still result in deficit positioning – childfree people might not be held accountable for their reproductive status, but they could instead be positioned as objects of pity or as inherently deviant or defective.

Denying choice may address the stigma that emanates from *choosing* not to have children, but it does not deal with the larger procreation imperative. This can only be addressed by questioning the normative status given to parenthood and reproduction in order to allow for non-parenthood to be constructed as an equally legitimate possibility. Instead of highlighting the lack of agency in voluntary childlessness, attention should be drawn to the ways that pronatalist ideology limits the agency and autonomy of all reproductive choices. Finally, counter-arguments should move away from individualistic renditions to highlight the contexts of people’s lives: that having children may not be possible or supportable for everyone: financially, emotionally, or otherwise.

## Notes & References

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<sup>i</sup> Meyers 2001: 762

<sup>ii</sup> Moore, 2013

<sup>iii</sup> Veevers, 1974: 308 – 9

<sup>iv</sup> Reynolds *et al.*, 2007: 334

<sup>v</sup> These sites and the actual online names of the participants are not named in this paper for ethical reasons.

<sup>vi</sup> Bamberg, 2004 (d)

<sup>vii</sup> The first script tended to be used more in the Polish and general discussion threads, while the second one was drawn on across the board. This pattern could be explained by the fact that the researcher who facilitated this discussion, based upon the tack taken in the discussion, overtly asked respondents whether they had chosen to be childless or 'discovered' that they were childfree. [Of course, both of these groups consist of people from wealthier, westernized countries where this way of speaking could hold some particular salience that it did not in the 'developing' contexts of SA and India. (Can't think what though?)]

<sup>viii</sup> Sullivan-Blum, 2006: 203