

## Women Without Children: A Heuristic Exploration of Childless Female Identity and Pronatalism

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Heuristic methodology (Moustakas, 1990) was employed to explore the experiences and identities of women without children in relation to predominant discourses around womanhood and motherhood. Seven co-researchers participated in the study, a mix of intentionally and involuntarily childless women aged between 50 and 75. Individual depictions were created through a narrational technique of empathic explication, based on data produced from conversational interviews and historical material. A composite depiction was then created, illustrating an archetypal experiential journey unfolding from the position of being female and conveying key aspects of experience and processes of identity formation. Research findings reveal that embodied experiences of womanhood from the position of a woman without children demonstrate complex, diverse, and transpersonal experiences that challenge and surpass the boundaries of predominant conceptions of womanhood. The study's findings support the development of a feminist participatory perspective in working to destabilise and reconceptualise essentialist conceptions pertaining to womanhood, and effectively challenge the widespread conflation of 'woman' with 'mother' in predominant discourses.

**Keywords:** pronatalism, childlessness, transpersonal feminism, heuristic inquiry, empathy, empathic explication

Being a woman without children at the end of one's childbearing years means existing as part of a large minority within the female population. In many developed countries, around one fifth of women remain childless (Sobotka, 2021). Twenty years ago, Gillespie (2003) sought to explore whether motherhood and femininity as

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defined in cultural discourses had transformed in response to the existential changes in women's lives; she found that "pronatalist discourses and those that denigrate voluntary childlessness persist despite the considerable changes and increased autonomy experienced by women" (p. 1). Recent studies exploring Western perceptions of women in relation to their reproductive status suggest that women without children continue to be perceived more negatively than mothers (Bays, 2017; Iverson et al., 2020).

The predominance of pronatalism — the socio-cultural and political promotion of childbearing — is not simply about the promotion of a natural and wondrous biological or bio-spiritual process through which children are born into the world; nor is it synonymous with the full appreciation and support of reproductive experiences and rights of motherhood and childcare (Ballentine, 2021; Bohren et al., 2015; Crittenden, 2001; Giles, 2019; Sadler et al., 2016). The discursive power of pronatalism lies in its delineation of a normative and ideological version of 'woman' seen through the narrow lens of female procreative biology, and according to which, formal and informal socio-cultural and political sanctions take effect.

With pronatalism dominant throughout the world, studies exploring socio-cultural context offer insight into the differences between nations in terms of the strength and explicitness of pronatalist attitudes and the consequences for childless women (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2018; Dube, 2020; Greil et al., 2010; Mbiti, 1969; Turner, 2020). Such studies highlight the seriousness of the socio-political and human rights issues associated with childlessness.

Whilst motherhood can represent a powerful, liberating, and desired identity and role for many women, Warnes (2019) argues that the biases and bionormative imperative of pronatalist discourse undermines and complicates the autonomy of all women by "perpetuating harmful social norms about what it means to be a woman, and a mother" (p. 113). That pronatalist biases in Western culture might be considered aversive rather than overt is an indication of their systemic discursive power. As Brown (2018) argues, "studies of aversive bias would suggest that as patriarchies become more civilized and their dangers less overtly apparent, their potential to harm people increases, as conscious defenses against their damaging aspects are relaxed" (p. 144).

Brooks (2019) argues for the need to fully address the tendency to define women as a homogenous group. When all women are subjected to the conflation of woman with mother, women without children are necessarily defined in negative terms, childless or childfree, a discursive practice that will "continue to remind us all of what we, as women, are *not* doing" (p. 11). The stigma of not choosing motherhood means that for intentionally childless women "they are measured against the 'normative' model... and may be found to be 'deficient'" (Warnes, 2019, p. 108). As Casey (1998) describes, such women are seen to possess deep character flaws: "We are self-centered, immature, workaholic, unfeminine, materialistic, cold, neurotic, child-hating" (p. xiii). Exploring stigma, stereotyping, and

social exclusion, Graham et al. (2018) conclude that “women without children experience substantial dislocation driven by prevailing and pervasive pronatalist ideologies” (p. 139). Moreover, as Brooks (2019) argues, predominant pronatalist discourses renew the privileging of roles for women organised around childbearing and motherhood; it is the validation of a woman’s identification with motherhood over and above alternative possibilities that means “the position of non-mother is not simply the same as the position of ‘woman’ or ‘sexually active woman’ within such cultural context” (p. 2).

An important concomitant to understanding the complexity of women’s identification with ‘motherhood’ is expanding the scope of investigation to include women who become mothers and who report feelings of ambivalence and regret. In a study of maternal instinct and ambivalence, Henderson (2018) found “a lack of honesty by women surrounding the subject of motherhood, as ambivalence is rarely revealed by women in the public sphere for fear of retribution of being considered a bad or unnatural mother” (Abstract, para. 1). Whereas pronatalist discourse labels women who cannot or choose not to become mothers as abnormal or deviant, ultimately rendering their experiences invisible, the assumptions inherent to this limiting discursive framework also work to erase the possibility of women feeling regret around motherhood, again reducing such experiences to the realms of deviancy, rather than allowing for serious consideration of, for example, gender roles and related socio-cultural and economic issues. In a photographic study that challenges ‘the idealized picture of normative motherhood’, Karklin (2021) presents images of deeply regretful (but ‘excellent’) mothers, documenting their experiences of the oppressive nature of fixed roles and power structures. Donath (2017), in a study of the taboo issue of women regretting motherhood, describes what is perhaps at the heart of the pronatalist narrative, a desire for its “mythical image of ‘The Mother’ to remain intact, despite these experiences of flesh-and-blood women” (p. xiv).

Although freedom is commonly cited as a core motivation for choosing childlessness (Brooks, 2019; Peterson, 2015; Settle & Brumley, 2014), the conditions through which women negotiate their choices and experience a sense of freedom are often left unexplicated. Chrastil (2020) points to the importance of understanding the possibilities and constraints through which women navigate their ‘freedom’, “in reality, women operate under all kinds of constraints that are not of their choosing, and they narrate and interpret these constraints in a multitude of ways” (p. 14). While a growing body of research focusing exclusively on those who are intentionally childless is making a vital contribution to the explication of transformative subjective voices and processes of meaning-making (Basten, 2009; Brooks, 2019; Gillespie, 2003), deeper work from a feminist perspective is needed to further destabilise limiting conceptions of womanhood and to explore the ways in which such conceptions are internalised, re-created, and transformed. Ireland’s (1993) seminal work on women without children comprises a mixed sample of women who are childless by choice, delay, and infertility. This work demonstrates the value in recognising the differences in identity formation between these separate groups and offers a useful conceptual framework that situates each of

them in relation to predominant discourses around womanhood and motherhood. In addition to exploring different modes of identity formation in relation to collective conceptions, further exploration is warranted into how/whether women – mothers and women without children, whether intentionally, involuntarily, or regretfully so – identify with and express the assumptions of pronatalism in their relationships with others. For example, in a study of the lived experiences of black childfree women in South Africa, Marutlulle (2020) introduced an important insight into relationships between women, “a pointed experience of demonization by black mothers in particular was a key and unique discovery” (p. iv).

While the problematisation of the very category of ‘woman’ in relation to the constraints (and possibilities) of patriarchy has always been central to the feminist movement, addressing the conflation of woman with mother and its impact on women’s empowerment is an unsettled issue; as Brown and Ferree (2005) suggest, “feminism and pronatalism have a politically ambivalent relationship” (p. 5). Although anti-essentialism and the untying of sex from gender was crucial to second wave feminism, enabling a focus on the social construction of gender, feminist activism also utilised a form of essentialism to highlight the differences between women and men whereby pronatalist policy held currency as ‘pro-woman.’ However, as Brown and Ferree (2005) argue, “pronatalist projects offering concrete policy benefits to majority group women are not necessarily helpful for all women’s interests” (p. 21).

Third wave feminism of the late 20th and early 21st century offered a response (albeit, incomplete) to earlier essentialist perspectives, embracing “the contradictions of identity and the subjective voices of a variety of perspectives to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of women’s experience” (Brooks, 2010, p. 38). However, there has been a recent renewal and escalation of the epistemological and ontological tensions within feminism and politics regarding essentialism and the category of ‘woman’ in relation to transgender people (Vincent et al., 2020). Having recognised sex and gender as conceptual categories that are “subject to contestation and renegotiation” (Hines, 2020, p. 25), the question of how to understand the sexed body in relation to gender identity without resorting to reductive essentialism or disembodied ideology remains a central challenge for feminist thinking which now holds renewed socio-cultural and political significance. A transpersonal feminist perspective (Brooks, 2010; Brooks et al., 2013) recognises that the way forward lies with a participatory perspective (Ferrer, 2000, 2017) that conceives of human experience as pluralistic, fully contextualised, and embodied. A feminist participatory exploration of the lived experiences of women without children in relation to the woman/mother conflation might offer fertile ground from which to further understand the complex relationship between predominant discourses and embodied identity formation; and, importantly, to re-instantiate the liberatory impulse at the heart of the feminist movement, driven by the unanimous goals of recognising women’s experiences of dissonance, resistance, and transformation.

## Method

Heuristic inquiry, as developed by Moustakas (1990), provided the methodological direction for this research. Further inspiration was found in Sultan's (2019) development of heuristic research and Sela-Smith's (2002) critique of Moustakas's method. In contrast with more traditional phenomenological research, heuristic inquiry is a process of exploring and examining a phenomenon that has autobiographical and transpersonal resonance for the researcher. The heuristic researcher seeks to enter into the experience of understanding the nature and meaning of the phenomenon in a participatory manner; attention shifts from the search for a universal essence as an end-product, to participation in the processes of understanding. So rather than set out to explore the phenomenon of being a woman without children with the aim of discovering some definable universal 'essence', the focus here is on those systems of meaning and processes of understanding through which the phenomenon of being a woman without children is experienced. In rejecting the reification of an experiential essence, the emphasis is on the very conditions of possibility through which experiences are conceived, embodied and enacted.

This research study was conducted in two phases. The first phase was devoted to a process of self-search, and this exploration of the interiority of the researcher's experience constitutes the ground from which the research question – *what is the lived and living experience of women without children?* – was refined and represents the basis from which the inquiry could then proceed to the next, more collaborative, phase of the research process. The shift from the initial phase of a solely inner focus to including others' voices engenders a participatory bridge between the personal and the collective. It is in this "knowing through participation" (Hiles, 2002, p. 2) that "an unshakable connection exists between what is out there... and what is within me in reflective thought, feeling, and awareness" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 12). In line with Ferrer's (2002, 2017) elucidation of the transpersonal participatory perspective, heuristic inquiry's default position is that individual experience is always in co-creative relationship with collective meaning and experience. This paper will focus on the results of the second phase of the research process, involving collaborative work with seven co-researchers and allowing for the exploration of individual experiences in relation to those collective conceptions underlying predominant narratives.

### Co-researchers

The co-researchers were seven cisgender heterosexual white women, representing a mix of 'intentional' and 'unintentional' childlessness (see Table 1). In order to allow for the possibility of reflection on different reproductive phases, the women were peri-/postmenopausal, aged between 50 and 75. With the intention of setting a broadly homogenous ground of exploration, all women were residing in the Western world and English speaking, and none had experience of being adoptive mothers or the primary carer for another's child(ren).



**Table 1**  
*Overview of Co-researchers*

Pseudonym	Age	Partnership status	Reproductive experience	Self-defined childless status	Country of birth	Country of residence	Occupation
Sophy	68	Married	2 unplanned pregnancies, 2 miscarriages	Unintentional	Italy	United Kingdom	Movement therapist
Tania	75	Partnered	2 unplanned pregnancies, 1 abortion, 1 ectopic pregnancy	Unintentional	United Kingdom	Married	School teacher
Emma	50	Married	Never pregnant, 1 year of trying to conceive	Intentional	Austria	United Kingdom	Yoga teacher, counsellor
Susie	66	Solo	Never pregnant	Intentional	America	America	Journalist, teacher
Marilyn	72	Married	Never pregnant	Intentional	America	America	Poet, teacher
Lou	61	Solo	3 unplanned pregnancies, 3 abortions	Intentional	Australia	Portugal	Writer
Elizabeth	67	Married	1 unplanned pregnancy, 1 abortion	Intentional	America	America	Artist, yoga teacher, energy worker

### **Data collection and analytic process**

The core data for this study came from interviews conducted with all seven co-researchers. For four co-researchers there was supplementary data in the form of their contributions to a 1998 book about women choosing to be without children. A mostly unstructured conversational interview style was employed to explore experiences, allowing co-researchers freedom to fully contextualise their experiences and self-identify significant turning points and events. In this way, it was possible to witness the emergence of guiding biographical themes, or a ‘leitmotif’, in their narratives. This more unstructured approach to interviews is also supported by other qualitative studies on childlessness that seek to situate their participants’ experiences within the context of an overarching biographical picture (e.g., Campbell, 1983; Veevers, 1980).

In this study, the dialogic process of the interviews became a central focus of the analytic and explicatory phase. The process of engaging deeply with my co-researchers’ experiences began with interview transcription, leading to the explication of individual depictions, described by Sultan (2019) as “a holistic, detailed illustration of a co-researcher’s personal living experience of the topic of inquiry” (p. 151). The cyclical

experience of immersion, incubation, and illumination — the three concepts that refer to the core phases of the heuristic process — intensified during the process of explicating the individual depictions. Through creating inner space for contemplation and becoming attuned to my co-researchers' narratives, I found 'focusing' and 'indwelling' to be, as Moustakas (1990) suggests, "perhaps the most significant concepts in explicating a phenomenon" (p. 31), facilitating the process of "thinking and feeling into deeper and deeper levels of a person's experiences and behaviours" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 110). In the heuristic research process, the dialogic relationship between researcher and co-researcher resonates with the "mutuality of identities, compassion, and empathy [that] facilitates the heuristic process of psychotherapy" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 106); a process through which "I steep myself into his or her words, silence, actions, and creations, and understand his or her meanings" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 107). In allowing my style of explication to evolve organically, it was through this experience of mutuality that I began writing the depictions in a blend of first and third person, a narrational technique I am naming *empathic explication* (Hovsepian, 2022), which reflects the relational dynamic of the conversational narrative and the dialogic nature of meaning-making. I found the technique engendered a deeper connection with my co-researchers and facilitated more powerful experiences of immersion-incubation-illumination. The following example is from co-researcher Tania's individual depiction, with her words in italic:

Imagination, *I feel it's all imagination isn't it, the thought that a different life would be a better life, because you always look elsewhere don't you and you think if only I had children then...*

Through this participative attitude I experienced the heuristic process as a shared journey of expansion, undertaken with a mood of attunement to the ethical dynamic between lead researcher and research participant. Mindful of the transformative potential in heuristic research, obtaining ethical consent for this study included inviting my co-researchers to consider the potential for our discussions to trigger emotional responses that may require further processing and support. Feedback from my co-researchers revealed that our conversations and their reading of their individual depictions were experienced as positively transformative, echoing Moustakas's (1990) sentiments regarding the heuristic process: "What is more satisfying than knowing that one's own understanding and knowledge of one's self, in the most intimate and profound meanings, is also now in the awareness of another human being?" (p. 111). Through demonstrating a depth of understanding of my co-researchers' stories, I experienced empathic explication and co-researcher feedback as a vital exercise in ethical validation.

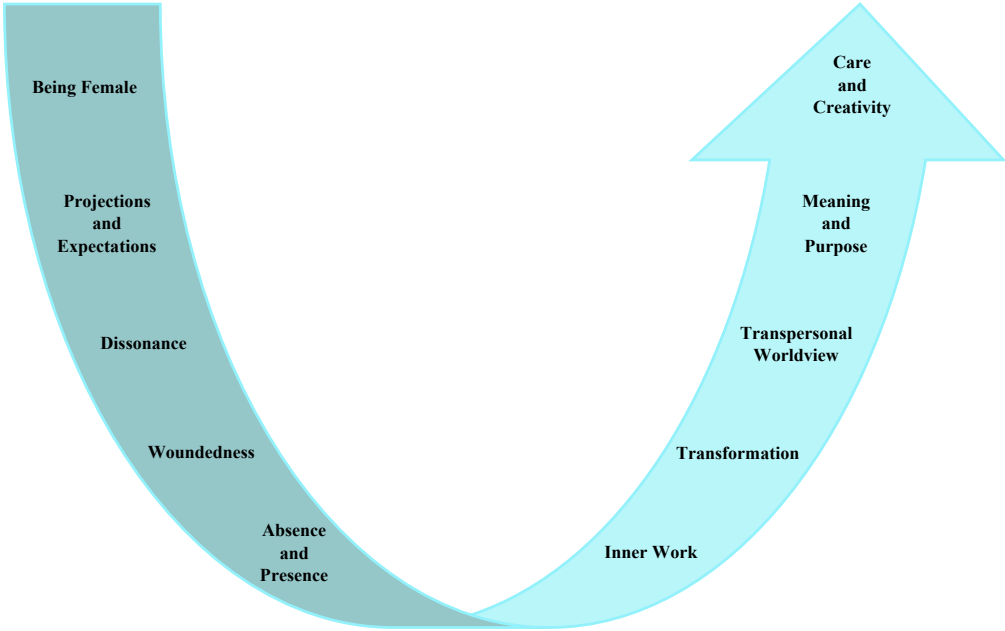
Once all seven of the completed individual depictions had been validated by my co-researchers, and after further cycles of reflexive immersion-incubation-illumination, it was then possible to develop and explicate the 'composite depiction', representing the

core themes to have emerged, a pulling together of the individual points of illumination to create a comprehensive, more collective, sense of illumination. Elements of this composite depiction will be presented in this paper.

### Results

Immersion in the unique individual stories of my co-researchers gave rise to the sense of a unifying and archetypal narrative of meaning and experience (Figure 1), explicated in the following composite depiction. This narrative integrates extracts from co-researchers' individual depictions and represents a composite picture of the complex relationship between sexed corporeality and predominant narratives pertaining to womanhood.

**Figure 1**  
*Composite Thematic Journey*



### Composite depiction

My co-researchers' stories demonstrate how the reproductive aspects of embodied female experience such as menstruation, conception, pregnancy, miscarriage, and menopause unfold in a diversity of ways that highlight the complex and evolving relationship between *being female*, what it means to identify as a 'woman', and an evolving sense of meaning and purpose. In becoming women without children, experiences relating to functional reproductive physiology have occurred in relation to wanted and unwanted outcomes, including pregnancy and miscarriage, and also in relation to processes guided by conscious intent, such as trying to conceive, contraceptive choices, and abortion. While the processes



unique to female physiology were clearly central to becoming women without children, such embodied experiences were not simply understood in relation to procreative function, or even to a sense of what it means to be a woman. For example, the hormonal fluctuations of the menstrual cycle were spoken of in terms of a continual “contraction and expansion in our lives” (Sophy), a cyclical experience of letting go and regeneration. Menstruation was seen as a signal of health, and menopause did not bring about a time “where I grieved not having that message monthly anymore... it didn’t make me feel like a woman when I had it, and it didn’t make me feel less than when I didn’t” (Susie).

For those who had wanted to become mothers there was a felt sense of incompleteness. To be in a female body with its reproductive capacity but to not have experienced giving birth, opened up the question of “have I fulfilled my destiny as a woman?” (Sophy). Emma felt that by not conceiving she was going against the course of nature, that there was a kind of rejection coming into play, “a carnal, being rejected kind of thing”. For the one co-researcher who identified most strongly with a sense of incompleteness, there was a long-lasting sense of loss which she felt in relation to the ‘failure’ of her body and the concomitant perception of ‘lack’ in comparison with women who had become mothers: “There’s something about seeing a mother with a newborn child which I still don’t want to go to, I don’t want to go there... such bitterness, such jealousy, such almost hatred for her being able to and me not” (Tania).

For all other co-researchers, their experiences of becoming women without children engendered expansive explorations of their identities and consciousness in relation to reproductive status. Some expressed ambivalence about the concept of fertility, “that seems like a weird word to me” (Susie). Others felt a preoccupation with reproductive fertility gave rise to a more physically oriented, perhaps animalistic, state of being from which they would eventually emerge, “like I was waking up” (Emma). Reflecting on the evolutionary possibility that being a woman without children might enable the development of a different way of being in the world, perhaps a different relationship with our physical bodies, Emma suggests that the proaction involved in choosing a path without children means that “it’s very much more consciously led”, it involves a different level of consciousness to that which drives the natural urge to procreate: “You’re stepping out of the bloodlines... If you make your family out of people you choose, there’s a lot of consciousness that penetrates your environment and you’re stepping on a level that feels very very different from the blood level.”

Negotiating with predominant discourses and others’ *projections and expectations* about what it means to be a woman was a highly conscious ongoing process for each co-researcher; they all experienced *dissonance* between their lived experience and the prevailing dominant discourses, whether this was a sense of *woundedness* in their ‘failure’ to conform, or whether it was experienced through their recognition of being different and positively challenging the wounding power of limiting conceptions. There was a universal experience of two waves of dissonance in connection with their contemporaries: firstly, with mothers of children, and then again during the grandparenting years. There was a strong

feminist recognition of cultural tendencies to reduce women to preconceived notions about what a female body should do and be: “I always felt very rebellious against being defined by my sexuality”, and the feeling that society was not allowing full expression “to just be a human being...gave me acid reflux of the soul” (Emma). Elizabeth also felt strongly about the imposition of limiting expectations “if you happen to come in a female body... I’m not even sure now, with all the permission to identify in different ways... I don’t even know if I identify as ‘woman’” [smiling].

For both the women who are intentionally and involuntarily without children, menopause and the mid-life phase is understood to mark the beginning of an empowering phase in a woman’s life, “when a vessel is no longer capable of bearing a child, that’s another profound shift and chapter in our experience as females...moving into our power” (Elizabeth). Echoing this experience of empowerment, connected with the metaphorical and biological release of ‘womanhood’ from ‘motherhood’, Sophy describes turning 50 as a key moment when she was able to meet her question about whether she had fulfilled her destiny as a woman from a new perspective: “That was such a great moment...because I really felt that I’d become a woman...Because I could let go of all this stuff of having children, not having children...and all these emotions about men”. To feel “I am a woman even if I haven’t had children”, meant recognising that there is “a strength in me that I think a lot of men would never have, just a strength for life and a fullness, this feeling of fullness, which maybe someone else might call motherly, I just felt so good” (Sophy). This experience of ‘motherly’ fullness and strength that came to her at the end of her physically reproductive years gave Sophy a powerful feeling of liberation, and the understanding that “for me now it’s absolutely clear, to be a woman is an individual happening”. The conception of ‘woman’ as ‘an individual happening’ reaches beyond definitions based on reproductive function and particular ideas about motherhood and reflects the experiences of all co-researchers; “This is for me the question, what do we mean with motherly?...I think we almost redefine the word motherly” (Sophy).

For all co-researchers, the disconnect between expectations and lived reality created a liminal space for sensing into both *absence and presence*. Contemplative practices allowed for the exploration of the qualities of loss, disconnection, and liberation, and engendered a state of presence with its sense of openness and receptivity to the unknown: “When we have enough quiet in our hearts, there’s no end to the gift of information, of insight, of grace and love that can come through that” (Elizabeth). A commitment to personal growth and *inner work*, “work to make conscious so many issues that needed healing” (Lou), was evident in all co-researchers, with their processes of deep personal reflexivity and “internal exploration” (Emma) leading to experiences of *transformation*. In connection with this focus on their interiority was a *transpersonal worldview*, “having a sense of the bigger picture” (Lou) and the recognition that their transformative experiences had *meaning and purpose* beyond the merely personal, “I feel like somehow or other there’s a legacy” (Marilyn); and for all co-researchers this wider perspective held a spiritual dimension, “the sacred guidance within that says you’ve got other work to do”

(Elizabeth). Alongside self-exploration, practices of self-care are central to the lives of all my co-researchers, playing a vital role in their personal development and increasing their nurturing capacity to be of service to others. Enactions of *care and creativity* were core aspects of my co-researchers' identities as women, demonstrating that whilst they both participate in and resist predominant expressions of womanhood, they simultaneously surpass conceptual boundaries, co-creating the conditions for the reconceptualisation of womanhood. Emma was sure that she wanted to make a contribution and participate in the creative endeavour in a different way, "I want to live my life to create something valuable and positive for society and to input myself into this creation." For Elizabeth, becoming a woman without children came through a deep knowing that parenthood might not be the right choice for everyone:

We're not all supposed to have children...I feel more than ever that there are some of us that are intended to emanate a certain kind of nurturing quality that has a very different kind of strength that's part of it, that's because it is really different to be a woman in the world without children.

## Discussion

In revealing the complexity and diversity of their relationships with their bodies and identities as women, my co-researchers demonstrate how their embodied experiences of womanhood are not inextricably tied to 'motherhood.' Moreover, the reflective vantage point that their chronological maturity affords shows that the relationship between sexed corporeality (as a childless female) and those systems of thought that bestow conceptual definition and meaning upon it is subject to continual inner work and negotiation with others, even after the reproductively fertile years have passed.

### Complexifying 'choice'

Whilst differentiating between intentionally and unintentionally childless women is crucial to the project of revising limiting conceptions of womanhood, 'choice' is rarely a simple binary matter. As Davies (2014) suggests in a phenomenological exploration into the lived experience of childfree women, "people do not separate themselves into neat points but are complex and moving bundles of paradoxes, overlaps and contradictions" (p. 109). Desiring and choosing 'childfreedom', Davies argues, "is experienced along a spectrum from unchanging certainty to continuous ebb and flow" (p. 109). Mine and my co-researchers' experiences demonstrate that although a woman might position herself as 'intentionally' or 'unintentionally' childless, there is nuance in that position. For example, Emma clearly identifies as childless by choice, but spent one year trying to conceive. Marilyn described herself as intentionally childless, but had she become pregnant, she would have continued with the pregnancy; and Lou felt certain that she did not want to become a mother, but became pregnant three times and had three abortions.

### Discursive positioning

In terms of the ways in which women orient themselves in relation to predominant discourses around womanhood, my co-researchers' experiences show clear resonance with Ireland's (1993) grouping of women without children as 'traditional,' 'transitional,' or 'transformative'. While Ireland (1993) acknowledges how the fluidity of identity formation resists strict definition and that these three pathways "more truly represent interwoven threads of the fabric of a particular kind of female identity" (p. 14), such categories are helpful in thinking about how women's experiences align with prevailing conceptions of womanhood. The 'traditional' woman would see herself in terms of being childless; the 'transitional' woman moves from a traditional view to a more transformative atypical female identity; the 'transformative' woman is depicted as radically challenging traditional conceptions of womanhood. For example, of all my co-researchers Tania perhaps has the strongest identification with 'traditional' conceptions of womanhood, illustrated by her tendency to perceive herself negatively. When feeling low she has described herself as "a complete and utter dud as a woman...I'll go 'I can't even have children, I'm just a dud, dud woman'". Tania's experience of childlessness is centred on loss, absence, and a feeling of emptiness. She imagines that women who intentionally choose to be without children have a strength of purpose that is missing in her own life, that perhaps such women "already knew that they were going to be a scientist or a doctor and didn't feel there was room in their lives [for a baby]".

The woman/mother archetypal image is pervasive and manifest for the woman who has positively chosen childlessness, perceiving herself to be childfree, and for the woman who grieves for the mother she will never be. Perhaps the unintentionally childless woman, such as Tania, might hold her projection of this 'mother archetype' more tightly through her sense of loss wherein "the lost object continues to haunt and inhabit the ego as one of its constitutive identifications" (Butler, 1997, p. 134). Those women who hold this 'melancholic identification' are in contrast to those who positively identify as 'childfree'; neither represent homogenous groups, but in the intentionally childless, there is a loosening and creative scrambling of the mother archetype that helps us to see beyond conceiving of women simply through the lens of procreation. Ireland (1993) calls for a more imaginative reading of women's capacity to create: "Our theories concretize female destiny rather than seeing a woman's reproductive capacity as an organic basis for developing many feminine symbols or metaphors" (p. 111).

More research is needed to explore how women without children co-create these 'other' representations of the feminine. Maschka (2011) found that despite limited positive cultural representation, "many volitionally childless women are still able to create a positive and strong sense of self for themselves" (p. 206), curating their own forms of representation using symbols suited to their unique individual qualities. Furthermore, the creative potential and acts of service expressed by my co-researchers are echoed in a study of intentionally childless women by Brooks (2019) who found "whether utilising the metaphoric language of maternal behaviour or not, the drive to be in connection with others, cultivate strong relationships, and be of service was expressed across the pool of participants" (p. 7).

## **Rethinking fertility and nurturance**

To further challenge the notion of homogenous female experience, it is vital to recognise that although for some ‘infertile’ women the inability to procreate leads to great unhappiness and a deep identification with loss, for others the sense of loss becomes part of a differently expansive picture. For example, co-researcher Sophy spoke of experiencing transformation through her loss, honouring the significance of her pain as part of the fullness of her life’s story. As Ireland (1993) emphasises, the absence experienced by the childless woman need not imply emptiness: “When there is a shift to childlessness as generative space the childless woman is on the threshold of expanding her experience of female subjectivity” (p. 125). Describing infertility as a socially constructed process, Greil et al. (2010) point out that “the presence of infertility is signalled, not by the presence of pathological symptoms, but by the absence of a desired state...other possibilities exist rather than pursuing a ‘cure’” (p. 2). Within the context of the constraints of pronatalist bias, Warnes (2019) argues that “the liberating possibilities of IVF as a ‘cure’ for infertility are questionable” (p. 114).

The predominant narrative of what it means to be a fruitful and ‘natural woman’ was questioned by co-researchers. Other expressions of creativity and care were frequently tied to a strong sense of purpose and deep reflection on how creative energy and focus might be channelled and utilised. Each of my co-researchers’ narratives revealed the ways in which they expand predominant conceptions of nurturance, demonstrating through their unique experiences a common cause of making a meaningful contribution to the world, and highlighting the widespread under-recognition and under-valuing of nurturing and creative roles. A mix of therapists, teachers, artists and writers, they demonstrated a clear early inclination and commitment to inner work, the self-recognition of a deep need for solitude as well as community, and the active questioning of cultural norms; characteristics that have engendered a highly reflexive stance regarding their personal development and transformative experiences.

## **Transpersonal feminism**

While this study addressed a lack of research into older women’s experiences, the co-researchers were a small homogenous group of white, cisgendered, and heterosexual women. Further research with a more diverse profile of participants, including other sexual orientations and gender identities, is needed to engage with the intersectional and multi-dimensional nature of female identity and development. In terms of the transformative potential of research, mine and my co-researchers’ experiences in this heuristic inquiry strongly support the belief that validation and transformation can be facilitated through transpersonal methodologies (Anderson & Braud, 2011; Moustakas, 1990).

In relation to the feminist task of clearing up the distortions and objectifications of dominant narratives, Holiday (2010) argues that “it is the continual, determined resistance to being silenced that leads to freedom and wholeness” (p. 116). It is this movement towards wholeness that constitutes the liberatory impulse of transpersonal feminism. In their exploration of female spirituality, Rayburn and Comas-Diaz (2008) suggest that it is in response to



historically contingent subordinating conditions that “female development engages the spirit into reparative, redemptive, and liberating elements” (p. 261).

This heuristic exploration concludes with an emphasis on the vital role of the feminine in ethical social renewal, and points to the potential for a transpersonal feminist perspective to play a leading part in reconceiving the normative boundaries for womanhood. For some women, the movement towards wholeness will entail experiencing the transpersonal and transformative significance of childbearing and mothering children. For others, there is transpersonal and transformative power in being women without children. Experiencing dissonance, wounding, otherness, and freedom from a wider transpersonal and spiritual perspective was evident in all my co-researchers’ narratives. In empowering women through validating a plurality of experiences and identities, ‘mothering’ might then be liberated from limiting social norms. As Warnes (2019) argues, “normalising women who do not have biological children is important for all groups of women” (p. 112). Morrell (1994) proposes that the values associated with mothering, “protection, compassion, supportive warmth, and reliable care – are not the problem...We need to affirm the virtues that are associated with motherhood as we sever them from their long-time confinement to the feminine gender role” (p. 150-151). In stepping out of the bloodlines, perhaps the lives of women without children offer a transpersonal metaphor for evolving a different way of being a mother in the world, one that ties ‘maternal instinct’ to ethics and ecology rather than sex or gender.

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