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Chapter 11 Non-Mothers: Identities, Ambiguity, Biography Making and Life Choices - Joan Cronin

In this chapter I chart my own life journey and consider the lived experiences of twelve Irish women who advertently or inadvertently decided not to have children. That decision is influenced by a complex range of interrelated factors relative to their childhoods and upbringing, their relationships, their careers and their personal ambitions. The research has an Irish focus, given the authors familiarity with the Irish landscape. However, the paper includes a review of international literature which can provide useful and valuable insights into the Irish context given that it is based in Western democracies, which have followed broadly similar trajectories in terms of the expansion of women's rights and women's choices around control of their bodies and their reproductive rights, access to gender equitable education and opportunities to sustainable employment. This paper also reflects some of the significant findings from my recently published PhD research which is duly referenced throughout.

Self-Reflection

My journey to non-motherhood has been straightforward and unencumbered, given that I never deliberated about whether or not I would have children, I always knew that it was not something I wanted to pursue. From as far back as I can remember children never featured in the life I imagined for myself and non-motherhood to me is as natural as motherhood is to other women. I have never experienced the maternal instinct that some women speak of, nor have I encountered any regrets. I am fulfilled in every aspect of life, through my relationship with my partner (who has four beautiful children, who range in age from twenty-eight to sixteen), the wonderful relationship I share with my parents, extended family and friends and through my work as an academic. I cherish the fact that my childfree identity has been fully embraced by the significant people in my life and I also acknowledge the role played by previous generations of women who strived to secure equal right, particularly sexual and reproductive rights for generations of women to come.

Methodology

The methodology and design for this research was informed by a feminist perspective, which focuses on the experiences of women, where the intention is to 'make women visible, raise

their consciousness and empower them'. (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013, pp 258) The paper draws on qualitative semi-structured interviews with twelve Irish women who provide reflective biographical accounts of their reasons for choosing to be childless, including the motives that influenced their decision and the challenges they encounter as consequence of pursuing the childfree identity

Insider Status

My insider status was particularly useful when recruiting women to partake in the research, and six of the women were identified through my own personal network of contacts. The remaining six women were recruited through digital and other media channels. From the beginning, I let each of the women know that I am childless by choice, and this helped me establish a positive and trusting relationship with them. (Ayers, 2012) If the women asked me personal questions I answered them truthfully, however, I was careful not to provide too much personal information as I did not want to influence them in any way. (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009) Instead, I focused on listening to their stories and interpreting their narrative accounts and subjective experiences. (Atkinson, 1998) I subscribed to a constructivist[19] paradigm, which facilitates the hearing of women's voices, in telling their stories, in their own words, as lived and experienced by them, and in the context of their subjective realities. (Ayers, 2012) This enabled me to explore with each of the women the motivating factors for their childfree positioning and the processes through which they articulated their reflections about this. The data was analysed using thematic[20] and conceptual[21] analysis. (Braum and Clarke, 2006, 2013; Larkin et al. 2006).

Analysis of the Interview Findings

While each of the women had different experiences and understandings of their childfree positioning, common themes emerged from the women's narrative accounts. These included; family backgrounds and childhood experiences, caring responsibilities, family abuse, poverty and neglect. Some of the women narrated about what they perceived as the ongoing demands

[19] Constructivist Paradigm: There is no single truth and there is no one external reality, instead, there are multiple subjectivities, truths, and realities, which has consistently been created and revised through the actions and social interactions of individuals (Bryman, 2008; David and Sutton, 2004).
[20] Thematic Analysis: Flexible method of analysis, comprising identifying, analyzing, and cataloguing patterns of themes within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013).
[21] Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Provides insights into how individuals make sense of and understand any given social phenomenon.

of motherhood, a lack of desire to have children, a focus on establishing a successful career, and a desire to pursue and fulfil other life ambitions. Some of the women talked about their experiences of personal and social stigma, the impact it had on them and ways in which they managed and controlled for it (Cronin, 2021). The women's responses to the (perceived) stigma and negative judgement were contingent on a number of factors, relative to their sense of self and their subjective experiences.

Factors and Experiences that Influenced the Women Away from Motherhood

Childhood/ Caring Responsibilities and the Lack of a Relationship with a Parent

Three of the women explained that they had experienced the responsibilities of parenthood related to childcare and household tasks while still only children themselves and they did not want to replicate those responsibilities and experiences. These women situated their childlessness within the storyline of family and childhood abuse, including; unintentional or neglectful parenting, unsupportive family structures and narcissistic or selfish parents. They expressed strong opinions about how disappointed, saddened and angry they were with their parents and the upbringings they had, and they did not know if they would be capable of providing for and nurturing a child, nor did they want to inflict those types of experiences on any potential children. (Cronin, 2021)

Ellen, aged thirty-nine had a preference to remain childless because of the emotionally abusive relationship she had with her alcoholic father. She explained; 'I would definitely say my family had an influence [on her decision to remain childless]. My siblings would have been affected by physical abuse, I didn't, but I was the youngest and I was the pet so that's why I got away. I suppose, I was suffering more from mental abuse'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 71) Ellen draws on her early experiences of housework and household responsibilities, an abusive and alcoholic father, and a mother who worked endlessly to support the family financially and considers these as significant factors in her childbearing decision making. She explained that she; 'did a lot of housework when I was young and I think it turned me off…I just didn't want that responsibility'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 72) As an adult, Ellen very consciously decided not to take on the motherhood role or the associated responsibilities.

Liz had similar negative childhood experiences to Ellen and these remained with her throughout the life course. She explained that she had a turbulent relationship with her mother who was often abusive toward her, and this had a negative impact on their relationship. Liz

explained that; 'my mother had three children, which are all younger than me and I ended up rearing them…I think my mother should never have had children in the first place. From when I was very little my mother used to want to kill me, she'd slap me or give out to me and she's still doing it today and I'm forty-eight'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 73) As Safer (1996, pp 93) points out, 'every woman gets her notion of what a mother is from her experience with her own'. As an adult child, Liz is reflecting on a traumatic past with an abusive mother and is setting firm boundaries about how she wants to live and how she wants her life to be.

Susan's reasons for choosing not to have children related to the absence of her father who left the family while she was still only a little girl and she had no further contact with him. She expressed strong views about the emotional impact her father's leaving had on herself and her mother. She experienced a deep sense of loss and abandonment and she explained that she felt utterly powerlessness when he left. As an adult, Susan is making reflexive choices and is consciously choosing a very different life-path with a supportive husband, with whom she enjoys a 'wonderful relationship'. This reflects the practice of biography making and identity making that Giddens (1991) refers to. These women are reflexively drawing on past experiences and making conscious and informed choices.

Women's Experiences of Poverty and Financial Issues

Past experiences of poverty and financial struggles left a lasting impact on some of the women and was the motivating factor for their decision to remain childfree.

Josephine, who is aged fifty-six constructs her decision to be childless as a reflection of managing the financial risks she associates with motherhood and a past wherein she suffered financial hardship. Josephine, the oldest of the participants, grew up in rural Ireland in the 1960s, a time when poverty was widespread and the economy was ˈin a state of near economic collapseˈ. (Horgan, 2001, np) At that time, large families constituted the norm in Ireland, and Josephine, who has seven siblings, recalled cramped living conditions. While Josephine's father worked to support the family financially, her mother's role was firmly confined to the family home;

> 'Mom never worked outside the home, because at home, you know, up early in the morning, school, housework, outdoor work. Dad worked long hours, home very late in the evening trying to keep the financial show on the road. So, I do feel that I would definitely say that with regard to my own situation and having, and the decision not to have children, would definitely have been influenced from the point of view of how many children I would have, if I had any children at all'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 80)

Josephine's references to experiences of childhood poverty, her awareness of the costs associated with raising children in contemporary society, and her desire for financial stability all featured in her decision to be childfree. This motive commonly emerged as a finding in the research literature and is situated within the context of conscious and responsible decision making, disembedding from past experiences and managing risk biographies. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002)

Considerations and Understandings of Maternal Instinct

In the literature there has been considerable debate about the concept of maternal instinct. (Ireland, 1993; Walker, 2011) Some claim that it is innate, instinctive and distinctly female. (Carroll, 2012; Inglis, 1998 and Oakley, 1979) argue that is a culturally induced social construct, designed to perpetuate gender roles and sustain patriarchal family structures.

Josephine was in her twenties when she realized that she was in no way maternal, and she never developed any sense of desire or longing to have children. She commented; 'just wasn't for me. Was never maternal, never had any maternal instincts'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 94) Rachel on the other hand never made an actual decision not to have children, instead her journey toward being voluntarily childless can be loosely termed as a progressive process (Ayers, 2012). 'Always been waiting for the moment to hit me that I would develop that maternal instinct, and it has never come'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 94) She elaborated on this, 'I suppose as I'm heading toward forty years of age, I feel that, I really would have to make this decision in the next year maximum'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 95-96) In this, Rachel is searching internally for an explanation about why she does not want children, and draws on the biological argument, that women are instinctively drawn to wanting and having children. (Gillespie, 2000; Park, 2002; Scott, 2009).

Fear of Pregnancy: Managing Stigma and Risk

Only one of the women, Niamh, expressed negative feelings and strong view about getting pregnant, however, this is an issue that is worth consideration as it is a deciding factor for some women (Cronin, 2021). In Niamh's household, pregnancy, especially outside of marriage was constructed as potentially dangerous and negative, and perceived as having detrimental familial and social consequences. Niamh's mother instilled an intense fear in her daughter. 'My mother was always the one to talk about pregnancy' and she [her mother] instilled a lifelong fear of it in Niamh. (Cronin, 2021, pp 98) She described her mother's concerns as generational and deeply influenced by the strict teachings and religious doctrine imposed on the people of

Ireland by the Catholic church, which situates sex outside of marriage as immoral. (Horgan, 2001) In traditional Ireland, the stigma and social deviance associated with 'fallen women' (women who became pregnant outside of marriage) was widespread and many of these young vulnerable women were shunned by their families and forcibly incarcerated in one of the many mother and baby homes spread through Ireland. Within the confines of these harsh and barbaric institutions, the women were expected to 'suffer' and repent for their sins. (Finnegan, 2004) Niamh explained that; her mother conceived her brother while still single, but quickly married Niamh's father so as to avoid the 'shame' of lone parenthood. 'I think it was such an issue for her, it's sad you know, but there was a shame in it and I think with my mum like she was always just afraid you know, it would happen to me, you know, especially when I was the oldest'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 99) Her mother's experience and how she imparted this to her children filled them with fear and trepidation. As Niamh explained; 'getting pregnant was almost a fear…if you got pregnant, it was the end of your life…and I know that has been carried through'. (Cronin, 20212, pp 99). Pregnancy is something Niamh has incessantly sought to avoid, even while she was in committed relationships. Niamh has always been mindful of getting pregnant and not being married and this has informed her views about avoiding motherhood.

The Project of the Self; Risk and Well-Being

The management of risk biographies and the making of self-reflexive life choices emerged through the work of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) and is used in this research to account for the conscious fertility choices that women make. Moira who is forty, explained that serious family mental health issues were a key factor in her decision to be childless. She recounted the sudden and untimely death of her sister when she [Moira] was fifteen and the negative impact it had on Moira and and family. She talked about her own struggles with anxiety and depression and the fact that other family members suffered similar experiences. 'In my grandad's generation, there was somebody with mental illness, my aunt suffered from depression, my sister was unwell, I've also got a bit of social anxiety as well, I'm always so conscious of mental illness being hereditary'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 101). Moira's priority is to protect and safeguard her own mental health and well-being. Also, she is apprehensive that potential children could inherit similar mental health issues and this is something she is consciously deliberating about and thusfar choosing to avoid.

Janes is also motivated by a need to protect her health and well-being, and has suffered with her mental health since she was a young girl. She explained that she developed asthma at an early age, subsequently acquired a destructive eating disorder and was more recently was

diagnosed with 'OCD [obsessive compulsive disorder]. She explained that her 'quality of life' suffered 'for maybe ten or so years' as a result of her health challenges, and she was concerned that the perceived demands of pregnancy and motherhood could potentially threaten her health and well-being, and this is not something she wants to experience again. (Cronin, 2021, pp 102)

It is evident that the women's very deliberate assessment of their capacity for caring for a child while also meeting their own health needs heavily influenced their decision to avoid motherhood. This ties in closely with the project of the self that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) referred to. Also, as women have more choices available to them than in the past, it follows that motherhood is no longer their only viable life choice. Nowadays, children are considered in the context of a range of competing factors, growing uncertainties and personal preferences and priorities.

Conscious Reflexive Biography Making: Women Negotiating Childfree Biographies

Writings around biography making suggest that in contemporary society people are consciously reflecting on and negotiating their biographies with the concept of the self and self-satisfaction in mind. (Giddens, 1991, 1994) This can be seen in the expanding range of choices available to people. Part of this can be attributed to structural changes which have taken place in society including, the process of disembedding from former restrictive and oppressive religious practices, more equal access to education, expanding opportunities for employment and changes to the cycle of family life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). While family still plays an important role in women's lives, motherhood is no longer the only option available to them, they are as Gillespie (1999) pointed out being pushed away from what some conceive as the restrictive processes of family life, in favour of more individualized and self-selected lifestyles. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) This is a process referred to as disembedding. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and is evidenced in the accounts provided by the women.

Bridget gave the following account of her perceptions of motherhood and the associated responsibilities; 'I just see them [children] as a waste of time…all I think about when I think of children is, I think of not getting to do what I want, having like to do like the school run, and then being stuck at home having to clean up, and clean up breakfast, and clean the house, and do that, and like I want my own freedom to do what I want'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 121) This is a very conscious rejection of the motherhood imperative, Bridget is making a clear choice

between committing to what she perceives as the responsibilities and demands associated with motherhood, and living the type of life she wants for herself.

Keelin who is in her middle forties explained that her parents were liberal and open minded and encouraged their children to embrace their individuality and make choices that suited their own desires and ambitions. This was unusual, particularly in the Irish context, given the nations strict adherence to Catholicism and the oppressive practices of conformity imposed by the Catholic Church. (Inglis, 1998) Keelin however, grew up with the knowledge that she had a right to make her own choices, and her parents fully supported her in this.

Negotiating Childfree Relationships

Gillespie (1999) notes that some women can experience a pull towards childlessness together with a push away from motherhood. These women find no appeal in mothering, and make a very clear and definite decision not to have children. This was reflected in some of the accounts provided by the women. For instance, Liz explained that she always wanted to meet someone for companionship, partnership, and long-term commitment. Meeting her partner in recent years, Liz was relieved to discover that he already had children from a previous marriage, and was not interested in having more. While Liz is happy in her relationship, she holds some resentment toward her partners now adult sons and is not comfortable in their company. Liz and her partner have different view on parenting styles and this leads to conflict in their relationship. They disagree on the extent to which her partner should be involved in his sons' lives, given that they are all adult men. This shows the complexities and nuances involved in trying to negotiate adult relationships, wherein, one partner has children or wants to have children and the other does not.

Bridget regularly reflects on her decision not to have children and while it is a decision that she herself is happy with, the comments of others, particularly Bridget's family cause her to re-consider her decision. She explained that 'everybody has told me you will change your mind, everybody, and like even my partner has kind of only started to accept how I feel in the past year maybe'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 118) Bridget's partner has also raised his concerns about Bridget's lack of desire for children but this is a pathway they are negotiating together as is evident in the following account. 'He [her partner] has a son of his own so it's not so bad, you know…I don't know, I mean like, it's just kind of, I feel like there is not an agreement between us but, lately I've started to say, 'would you ever get married?' and he's like 'no, no I wouldn't get married' but, I always say 'no, I don't want children', so, there's kind of an agreement. That sounds kind of wrong, but it feels fine'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 119) Bridget and her partner accept

that if they stay together they will neither marry nor have children. This is a sacrifice they are both willing to make, to safeguard their relationship and satisfy their personal preferences.

Stigma and Negative Judgement Surrounding Women's Voluntary Childlessness

Stigma is defined as a negative attribute or distinguishing characteristic ascribed to a person, with discrediting or discriminatory consequences. (Goffman, 1963) In this study it is used to highlight the social pressures women experience to procreate, the negative stereotypes associated with women's voluntary childlessness and women's perceptions of and responses to the social deviance associated with their decision to forego motherhood. (Gillespie, 2000) In this study, some of the women felt unsupported in their decision, they experienced family pressure to re-consider their decision, or were led to believe their decision was temporary and they would eventually change their minds. The women's interpretations and experiences of stigma varied. Some felt they were being morally discredited and negatively judged, which caused them to re-consider their childfree positioning. Others challenged the negative commentary and some accepted it and tried to remain positive, despite the intrusion.

Women's Identity Work: Managing Family Stigma

Rachel gave the following account of the pressures she experiences from her mother to procreate;

> 'My mother would have a direct, I suppose, influence on my life, is always questioning it and would have her thoughts on it [having children] and tries to more or less, I suppose, influence me… She can't understand my thoughts. Obviously, she thought differently when she had four of us. My mother is the only person that has saithat 'you will regret it'…she is giving me a negative response she is being completely honest with me. She [her mother] has pressurized me in a loving way'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 135-136)

Ellen decision to forego motherhood and her reluctance to marry have evoked negative family responses and Ellen's older aunts have been vocal about their aversion to her decision. Fortunately, Ellen is not concerned by their reaction. She explained;

> I would have aunts that would be very old fashioned, and they think women are born for one thing in life, and that is, get married, and have children. Like, that is your success, that's how your success is measured. You could be the prime minister of England, you could be the president of Ireland, they'd never see that…The first thing like when you meet them anywhere, 'oh any man?' Do you know like, as if you were defined by that? They just presume, they presume when you're single that…'she'd

> probably like to meet someone, she'd probably love to have a child'. (Cronin, 2021, p 136)

This illustrates the extent to which women are expected to conform to culturally acceptable behavioural norms, in particular fertility norms. As Ellen mentioned earlier, regardless of what she achieves in life, it will never make up for the fact that she is both single and childless and intends to remain that way. When she talked this through with her aunts she said; 'it was like I was after saying I was going to cut one of my legs off'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 137) This anecdote highlights the indelible power of pronatalism and moral identity forms.

Bridget explained that her childfree identity is consistently being questioned and she is not believed when she tells people that she is childless by choice. Part of this can be attributed to her age, at twenty-five, Bridget is the youngest of the research participants, and is always being told that she will change her mind, and this causes her to question her decision;

> 'I only question it a lot of the time when other people ask, especially my father. Lately, we were driving and he said, you know, I kind of said to him, oh, I never want kids, and he was really shocked, like he said 'you know, you were the best thing that ever happened to me', and I know he was saying its fundamental to nature, you know, you know, he said, 'you can run away from your instincts for so long, but, you know, you, you should have children, that's how everybody is', and I said, 'yeah, but, if I just don't get pregnant', then, 'I'm never going to feel that' and he said, 'oh, well, you'll be missing out on a great opportunity', and it did make me kind of wonder, just because he's my father, but he's not me, and the more I think about it, still like, I'm still holding fast'. (Cronin, 2021, 137)

This is a clear, conscious and reflective assertion of her identity. Bridget is owning her decision and is wilfully disembedding from an expected and encouraged identity. Though she acknowledges her father's concern, she is trying not to let it influence her decision. She is also firm in the view that women 'shouldn't have to make excuses like you should be able to just say I don't want them [children]'. (Cronin, 2021, pp138) This suggests that resistance to motherhood as an expected identity is not straightforward and requires some resolve;

> 'I don't like people telling me what to do, and I go against the grain if it's functional for me and I've done that a lot throughout my life, so, I don't, you know, I don't see why I should stop…I do think that in some ways that I'm inherently selfish, but I think that I'm selfish like, I think I'm selfish in a way as long as it doesn't hurt other people, I like to think so anyway, but I also think that you know, a lot of time, like, I do kind of do what I want to do…and you need to make yourself happy' (Cronin, 2021, pp 138)

Bridget constructs herself as someone who challenges gender stereotypes and social norms and is confident in her ability to make self-gratifying choices. ‘I think it’s [choosing to be childless] a very personal decision and it depends on what, you want, I mean, some people would say, well your closing your opportunities for other life experiences, and that is true, like you know, I’m never going to have a kid, so I’m not going to know what it’s like to have that, but, you know, there are other things that I want, you know’. (Cronin, 2021, pp138) Having the choice to decide how she wants to life and how she wants her life to be is extremely important to her. This resonates with Beck’s (1992) theory of individualization and the concept of active choice makinghave children, focusing instead on her aspects of life that interest her.

Women’s Identity Work: Managing Social Stigma

Goffman (1963) conceptualizes that stigma management is a public rather than a private issue, and that women who are childless by choice are more likely to be stigmatized or negatively judged by social acquaintances rather than intimate family members. Women who choose to defy the motherhood mandate are thus, ascribed a 'socially ambiguous status' (2002, p. 31). They become subjects of public scrutiny and experience social pressure. The ways in which women react to the negative responses of others is contingent on a number of complex ad inter-related factors. (Cronin, 2021)

Bridget encounters social stigma, and although she does not distinctly say who it is perpetrated by, her comments suggest that it is something she is regularly exposed to. She explained that; ‘society that makes you feel that way [stigmatized] you know, because, you think because that’s what you’re taught isn’t it, that the woman, you know, doesn’t have any children, she’s getting older, how terrible that her time is running out’. (Cronin, 2021, pp 144). However, Bridget has crafted a positive childfree identity and is not concerned by how others judge or perceive her.

While Moira is aware that some family members find her decision difficult to comprehend, she explained that she still feels deeply valued and respected by them. Publicly though, Bridget’s decision not to have children has been unwelcomingly received and she explained that was very hurt by the comments and assumptions her friend made about her. She gave the following account;

> ‘I’ve been offended by a friend of mine, she said to me, “oh, you can’t not have children”, and I just kind of went, well, you’re making so many assumptions on so many levels, like, first off, I mightn’t be able to have children, and you’re making the assumption that I have a life partner, and I would never be able to have children if I

> didn't have a life partner either, and I just, and I just felt it was really kind of, you know, you have to have children, you can't not or you just can't let this opportunity pass you by, and I just thought that's not nice, made me feel, but, but, my parents are very supportive'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 145)

This shows just how fragile one's identity can be and how easily it can be challenged and disrupted. Taken in context, Moira is choosing not to be publicly identified as childless by choice, it is not something she wishes to openly discuss or admit to. Moira has strong emotions about being different, she is concealing information about herself in order to appear normal and 'fit in'. In this, there is an element of internalized stigma, Moira is questioning her identity, she is not fully accepting of it and thus, does not want to acknowledge it or discuss it with others. (Goffman, 1963)

Linda's childbearing decision making has also been a topic of discussion, particularly amongst work colleagues and she is not believed when she tells them that her to decision to be childless is intentional;

> 'There was a guy that I worked with once, who said that it was very selfish not to have children and I said "well it certainly wasn't a selfish choice for me not to, it would have been selfish of me to have children and not to be a good mother to them that would have been selfish. So, I think like, if you decide to have children that are a choice, that's a choice that you make for yourself, so it's no more selfish not to have children, do you know. So that was the only time that somebody got negative to me and I just made my point and just left it at that'. (Cronin, 20212, pp 146)

Linda is comfortable with her choice and this aids her confidence to challenge those who confront her. She claimed that it; 'never upsets me, never bothers me, none of it, you know, never gets to me in any way, so, I mean people can say what they want but that's an opinion, is it any more or less valid than anybody else's opinion, I don't care'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 146)".

Being childless is an identity that Susan also publicly embraces. 'I say it…I'm actually childless by choice so, I really don't mind saying it but you get that sort of shocked look. Some people they just don't get it, but, I think most people think you're lying'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 147). Although Susan is happy to be identified as childless by choice, she is not supported in her decision, and it is not something Susan's mother-in-law is not happy with. Susan recalled a past incident between herself, her mother-in-law and a local acquaintance;

> 'People know you're just married, and questions are constantly being asked, ˈlike, oh, so when's the baby due? Or, are you having a family?' The first question, and we were only a few months married, and I met my mother-in-law in town, and she bumped into

> someone else, and the lady asked, 'well any children?' and I was just about to say 'no', like, you know, say, I'm not having any, we're not having any, and my husband's mum got so, she knew what I was going to say, and she was so kind of embarrassed, she just said, 'oh, no, they just, they just haven't discussed it yet, or they're not ready yet', or something, but she made some hilarious excuse like, and I just thought, I'll let her away with it because, you know, I didn't want to publicly humiliate her' (Cronin, 2021, pp 147-148)

The fact that Susan finds it humorous suggests that she is very secure in her identity, yet she is also respectful and considerate about preserving her mother-in-law's social identity and her community status. It is evident that Susan's mother-in-law subscribes to the dominant pronatalist ideology by 'conceiving the old regime', that frames motherhood as the pinnacle of femininity and a woman's feminine identity. (Tuttle, 2010; np) This draws attention to the micro-aggressions or the lack of social acceptance that is sometimes exerted toward those who make alternate life choices, particularly those that conflict with social norms and prescribed social standards.

Similarly, Jane is not comfortable to publicly acknowledge or speak about her decision to be childless, and found herself in a compromising situation when confronted by a medical professional while receiving her contraceptive injection. The nurse said, 'well you know you would really want to get on because fertility declines after thirty-three'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 149) Jane chose not to respond to the nurse's comments because it was not a discussion she was willing to publicly engage in. Although Jane is sometimes hurt and disappointed by the comments she receives, she strives to stay positive. She explained that she lets people assume or think what they want about her; 'it's easier than entering into a discussion and people never really believe you unless they are somebody who is in the same frame of mind as you. They think oh, you will eventually, or you will when it'll be too late, or you just don't know it yet, or the clock will start ticking. They try to change your mind or they try and persuade you, or like question you, make the assumption that eventually I'll want children'. (Cronin, 2021, pp 151) Jane has the full support of her partner, who shares her views on parenthood, and also draws on her professional background in sustaining a positive identity and a positive sense of self. In a previous profession, Jane's worked directly with children and families who had experienced abuse and neglect and witnessed the life-long repercussions it had on them. This added further justification to her decision to be childless.

Conclusion

The research findings examine the reasons and motives for women's voluntary childlessness, as well as the justifications and defence strategies women are commonly compelled to engage in, in an effort to defend or justify their decision. It also considers the associated stigma and negative judgement that continuously surrounds that decision, which has implications for the women and indeed their families. Information control and privacy are important to these women, and they value having the power to decide what aspects of their lives they share with others. (Goffman, 1963).

From the research findings it is evident that the motherhood mandate is central to a woman's identity, and it remains morally, socially, politically, culturally and religious prescribed and endorsed. The choice to forego that prescription has enduring personal and social consequences, and women are compelled to find ways of dealing with it themselves and communicating this information with others. While some of the women experienced more direct stigma and negative commentary, others interpreted the perceived negative reactions of others, particularly of family as expressions of concern. As Goffman (1963) prescribes, if the individual experiences self-stigma, they are more likely to interpret the comments from others more negatively. The women who exhibited a positive self-identity described how they were able to constructively acknowledge, defend and re-situate their childfree positioning and were almost impervious to the opinions expressed by others. This ties in with the concept of 'contingency management' which suggests that women's responses are contingent on themselves, their internalization of their positioning as women who are childfree by choice and this influences how they respond/ react to commentary from others. (Cronin, 2021)

In considering these findings, it must be acknowledged that the sample from which they are drawn is relatively small, and while they give some useful insights into the concept of women's voluntary childlessness, they should not be interpreted as definitive, nor are they transferable or generalizable. Instead, they are intended to shed light on a highly emotive and contested identity, one that is consistently being challenged by dominant patriarchal forces, intended to oppress and exploit women and control their right to fertility and reproductive freedom.

My Reflective Journey

On reflection, I now know more about myself and the factors that shaped my childfree positioning, and my research journey has altered some of my initial views on why I personally came to identity as childless by choice. While I have always thought that I lacked maternal

desire, and still do, I now understand to a greater degree that my decision making has been influenced, in part, by my family circumstances. From my analysis of the literature, the theories, and more particularly, the findings from this research I have come to better understand the particular processes that influenced me in my decision making. I have started to realize that it is a broad combination of my early childhood experiences, observing the sacrifices my parents made, and a desire to live my life on my terms, without being encumbered by caring responsibilities.

It is imperative that we support women in whatever fertility choices they make. This is a basic human right and is central to the concept of respect for the life and dignity of each and every human being. (IHREC)

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