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**Chosen Childlessness in Ireland:
A Qualitative Study of Women's
Decision Making, Biography Making
and Identity Management**

Thesis presented by

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for the degree of

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Table of Contents

Table of Figures.....	v
Declaration of Ownership.....	vi
Abstract	vii
Acknowledgements.....	viii
Chapter One:	1
Introduction.....	1
Introduction to the Study	1
Rationale.....	3
Research Questions.....	8
Terminology.....	8
Feminist Critiques of Pronatalism and the Social Construction of Motherhood	12
Thesis Structure	14
Chapter Two	18
Literature Review.....	18
Women’s Experiences of Voluntary Childlessness, and the Associated Stigma	18
Social Attitudes to Voluntary Childlessness and Related Stigma	20
Negative Social Appraisal of Chosen Childlessness	21
Women’s Experiences of, and Responses to Stigma.....	25
Public Representations of Women who are Childless by Choice.....	33
Ambivalence, Regret and Relief.....	38
Questioning of the Maternal Instinct.....	42
Voluntary Childlessness: Developing Typologies	45
Women Choosing to be Childless: Explanatory Factors	49
Making Contemporary Biographies.....	49
Freedom as a Motive for Voluntary Childlessness.....	49
Parental and Familial Influences: Childhood Abuse and Neglect	54
Positive Parental and Familial Influences	59
Other Explanatory Causes of Voluntary Childlessness: Satisfactory Relationships	62
Personal, Social or Global Concerns.....	64
Conclusion	66
Chapter Three:	70
Understanding Women’s Chosen Childlessness in Ireland	70
Exploring the Explanatory Value of Individualization, Reflexivity, Stigma and Stigma Management Strategies	70

Individualization and Reflexive Modernity	71
Potential and Limitations of Individualization and Reflexivity in the Context of Women's Lives	77
Individualization, Reflexivity and Voluntary Childlessness	81
The Stigma Associated with Women's Voluntary Childlessness, and Identity Management Techniques.....	85
Potential and Limitations of Stigma	87
Application of Stigma in the Context of Women's Voluntary Childlessness	88
Conclusion	93
Chapter Four:.....	96
Methodology and Research Methods	96
Ontological and Epistemological Considerations.....	98
Feminist Research Perspectives.....	101
Insider status and Reflexivity in Research	102
Advantages of an Insider Status.....	103
Challenges of an Insider Status	105
Managing my Insider Status.....	106
Identifying as Childless by Choice	107
Reflexivity	108
Ethical Considerations	109
Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies	111
The Biographical Approach.....	112
Recruitment Method.....	115
Recruitment of the Research Sample	115
Arrangements for the Interview Process.....	119
Interview Dynamics	121
Analysis of Findings	125
Geographical Location and Religious Background	132
Age Profile.....	133
Educational Background	133
Socio-Economic Background.....	133
Relationship Status.....	133
Religious Affiliation.....	134
Conclusion	134
Chapter Five:.....	136
Typology of Reasons for Women's Voluntary Childlessness	136

Childhood/ Caring Responsibilities and the Lack of a Relationship with a Parent.....	143
Women’s Experiences of Poverty and Financial Issues	154
The Perceived Demands of Motherhood and Women Managing their Risk Biographies	161
Considerations and Understandings of Maternal Instinct.....	165
Fear of Pregnancy: Managing Stigma and Risk.....	171
The Project of the Self; Risk and Well-Being.....	173
Conclusion	175
Chapter Six:.....	178
Conscious Reflexive Biography Making.....	178
Thinking Outside 'the box': Disembedding from Normative Expectations	180
The Pull of Childlessness and A Push Away from Motherhood: Women Negotiating Childfree Biographies	185
The Pull or Attraction of Childlessness: A Focus on Negotiating Biographies Informed by Career Ambitions	197
Conclusion	202
Chapter Seven:.....	204
Women’s Experiences of Stigma and Information Control	204
Women’s Identity Work: Managing Family Stigma.....	209
Women’s Identity Work: Managing Social Stigma.....	219
Women’s Perceptions of the Stigma Associated with their Voluntary Childlessness .	227
Conclusion	231
Chapter Eight:	233
Conclusion	233
The Factors and Social Contexts that Influence Women’s Childbearing Decision- Making	234
Typology of Reasons for Women’s Voluntary Childlessness	235
Dynamics of the Women’s Decision Making Processes and Future Aspirations about the Lifestyles the Women Wanted for Themselves	238
Stigma, Concern, and Contextualized Responses	239
My Reflective Journey	242
Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research.....	243
Bibliography.....	245
Appendices	276
Appendix 1.....	276
Trends in Childlessness.....	276
Appendix 2.....	277

Time Magazine.....	277
Appendix 3.....	278
Interview Guide.....	278
Appendix 4.....	280
Women Choosing to be Childless in Ireland	280

Table of Figures

Figure 1: Thematic Analysis: Braum and Clarke's Six-Step Guide:	129
Figure 2: Overview and Profile of Participants	132
Figure 2: Overview and Profile of Participants	136
Figure 2: Overview and Profile of Participants	178
Figure 2: Overview and Profile of Participants	204
Figure 3: Voluntary Childlessness: Developing Typologies.....	138
Figure 4: Categories of Childless Women.....	141
Figure 5: Typology of Reasons for Women's Voluntary Childlessness.....	143
Figure 6: Stigma Management Strategies Developed by Park (2002)	207
Figure 7: Voluntary Childlessness: Developing Typologies.....	237

Declaration of Ownership

This thesis, which I now submit for examination for the award of Doctor of Philosophy is a presentation of my original research and has not been taken from the work of others except that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my own work.

This thesis was prepared according to the regulations for postgraduate study by University College Cork and has not been submitted in whole or in part for an award in any other Institute or University.

The work reported on in this thesis conforms to the principles and requirements of the University's guidelines for ethics in research.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the experiences of women who are childless by choice in Ireland, to gain a greater understanding of the motives that influence the women's decision making, to examine how others react to that decision, and to consider the strategies the women engage in to manage the reactions of others. Original data was gathered from qualitative interviews with twelve women who identified as childless by choice, theories of individualization, reflexivity, stigma and stigma management are drawn upon to gain a deeper understanding of women's voluntary childlessness. Analysis of the data indicates that the women's decision making was shaped by a myriad of complex factors, including reflections on childhood relationships with parents, experiences of previous caring responsibilities, concerns about poverty and financial security, perceptions of the demands of motherhood, and the benefits of a childfree life, a lack of maternal instinct, fear of pregnancy, and health concerns. The women frequently expressed concerns about how motherhood would change their lives, suggesting an orientation towards individualization, and an awareness of the difficulties involved in combining motherhood with personal aspirations and the plotting of a self-determined life-course. A number of women made an early decision not to have children, while others postponed the decision, until such time as they no longer wanted children or they were unable to have them. Seven of the twelve women reported receiving negative reactions to their decisions to be childless. Some experienced negative appraisal of their decision not to have children, were questioned about it, or experienced social pressure to alter, defend, or justify it. To manage this negative appraisal the women used reactive, intermediate, or proactive strategies, depending on the extent to which they accepted or challenged pronatalist ideologies.

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Finally, I wish to dedicate this thesis to my mother, there really are no words to describe how wonderfully supportive you have been throughout my life, and for that I am extremely thankful.

Chapter One:

Introduction

Introduction to the Study

The phenomenon of women's voluntary childlessness in Ireland is largely unexamined, perhaps in part because of Ireland's strong association with pronatalism, the origins of which lie in the belief that motherhood is natural and that all women have an instinctive desire to procreate (Inglis, 1998). Historically in Ireland there was a limited range of roles available to women, with priority being given to marriage and motherhood. However, changes to the Irish landscape, the introduction of free secondary education in the 1960s (Considine and Dukelow, 2009) the lifting of the marriage bar in 1973 (Smyth, 2010); and the legalization of contraception in 1979 (Cook, 2004) created possibilities for lifestyles outside the realm of motherhood and family. Women today have significantly more choices and more autonomy over their lives (Considine and Dukelow, 2009). Yet, in spite of this, high costs of living and limited and expensive childcare options make it increasingly difficult for women to reconcile motherhood with paid employment (Department of Justice, 2017; Murphy-Lawless et al. 1994). As women reflect on the choices available to them, a growing number are consciously choosing to reject motherhood (Murphy-Lawless et al. 1994). It is estimated that twenty percent of women between the ages of twenty-five and forty-nine are childless in OECD¹ countries. Rates are particularly high in Austria, Finland, Germany and Greece, where in excess of forty percent of women aged between twenty-five and forty-nine are childless (OECD, 2011). Without children, women have greater opportunity to plan and negotiate their own childfree biographies.

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is an intergovernmental economic organization comprising thirty-six member countries.

However, research indicates that women who are childless by choice are viewed more negatively and experience social pressure to re-consider their decision (Park, 2002; Peterson, 2014). The reasons why women are choosing to be childless, the decision making process they engage in, and the reactions of others to same are largely unexamined in the Irish context. Using data collected from twelve semi-structured qualitative interviews with women who are childless by choice in Ireland, and informed by conceptual insights from theories of individualization, reflexivity, stigma and stigma management, this thesis explores and seeks to understand the factors that shaped the women's childbearing decisions, the nature of the decision making process, societal and family reactions to the decision and strategies for responding to same.

Rationale

My interest in this topic arose from my personal experiences of being a woman who is childless by choice in contemporary Irish society, and my wish to consider my experience in the context of wider explorations of the issue. Searches for literature revealed no Irish examinations of the topic, despite the growing number of women in Ireland choosing this life course. Although it is difficult to get an accurate figure due to difficulties in distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary childlessness, it is estimated that between fifteen and twenty-five percent of women between the ages of eighteen and fifty are childless in Western society (Blackstone and Stewart, 2012; Iwasawa, 2004; Merlo and Rowland, 2000). A European study by Tanturri et al. (2015) found that rates of voluntary childlessness have significantly increased, especially among women born around 1965 (Appendix 1). It is estimated that twenty-five percent of that particular generational cohort of women are childless in Italy, twenty percent in Germany and Finland, and approximately fifteen percent in Austria, Belgium, the UK and Wales, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden (Tanturri et al. 2015). It is further estimated that between twenty-three and twenty-eight percent of women from Austria, England and Wales, Finland, Germany, Italy, and Poland, from the generational cohort of those born in 1975 will remain childless (Tanturri et al. 2015). In a recent study on *Childlessness in Europe*, Kreyenfeld and Konietzka (2015) reported that in excess of twenty percent of women in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, who are nearing the end of their reproductive cycle will remain childless. These estimates suggest that childlessness may be an experience for approximately one in every four women across Europe at present and into the near future.

Given that there are no figures available in Ireland, which directly indicate rates of childlessness for women, (there are only figures for couples, which suggests a bias toward two-parent families in Ireland) it is not possible to determine if these are voluntarily or involuntarily childless. Nonetheless, the available figures clearly show an increase in the number of couples registered without children in Ireland, which had risen from 313.3 in 2011 to 323.1 in 2016 (CSO, 2016). Also, almost eighty percent of same sex couples (4,787) were cohabiting without children, while 656 of same sex couples – 10.9 percent were married without children (CSO, 2016). The other set of figures that would indicate growing levels of decision making around reproduction are the one that show decreases in birth rates. Again, it is not possible to determine the extent to which these decreases are accounted for by women having fewer children or increasing numbers of women having no children. Miettinen et al. (2014) reported that between 2000 - 2010, proportions of childless women in Ireland between the ages of thirty and thirty-four years was forty-three percent, that was higher than in any of the thirty-two other European countries included in the study. In 2015, there were 65,536 live births recorded in Ireland, this was six percent lower than the corresponding birth rate, which was 14.6 percent per 1,000 of the population in 2014. In 2016, there were 703 fewer births in Ireland compared to the same period in 2015, registering a drop of 0.7 percent (CSO, 2016). There were 62,053 births in Ireland in 2017, compared to 63,897 in 2016, registering a drop of 1,844. This corresponds to a birth rate of 12.9 percent per 1,000 population, a rate decrease of 0.6 from 2016 (CSO, 2016).

The Irish and European patterns of increasing numbers of households without children and reducing birth rates are mirrored in other Western countries. In the United States a similar situation prevails. A census report published in 2003 found

that nineteen percent of women between the ages of forty and forty-four years did not have children, compared with ten percent in 1976 (Cohen, 2010). More recently the National Health Statistics Report (2012) on behalf of the USA's Centre for Disease Control, found that nineteen percent of women between the ages of forty and forty-four were childless by choice. In Canada, birth rates have been decreasing since 2009, from 1.68 children per woman to 1.54 in 2016, the lowest rate recorded since 2003 (Census 2012 - 2016). According to a report by the Bureau of Statistics in Australia, family couples without children have increased from thirty-two percent in 1991 to thirty-eight percent in 2016. As Kreyenfeld and Konietzka (2017) suggest, it is likely that rates of childlessness will continue to increase, especially in countries where high levels have historically been recorded.

In terms of my own background, and my positioning as a childless woman, I have always known that I never wanted to be a mother and it is not something that I ever had to think about. I am what Veevers (1972) referred to as an early articulator. Furthermore, I was never enticed by babies or children in the way my friends were, and as an only child I rarely spent time in the company of younger children and never babysat. To me, being voluntarily childless is as natural as choosing motherhood is to other women. While some women talk about the maternal instinct and a longing or desire to have children of their own, I was never instinctively drawn to children in that way. However, I was becoming increasingly aware through media accounts that some women in Ireland did experience that sense of longing or desire for children of their own. This is something that I often thought about, and when the opportunity presented itself to carry out research while completing a Master's degree in University College Dublin in 2010, I opted to explore women's voluntary childlessness in more depth. However, that thesis only enabled me to scratch the surface of the phenomenon and

that is essentially what prompted me to pursue this particular piece of academic research. I was interested in knowing if my experiences of childlessness were shared by others, and I was curious to understand how other women shaped their childless lives and why they chose them. I was also interested in finding out if being an early articulator or postponer, terms I have found in the literature during my master's degree (Veevers, 1972) influenced the way women understood or negotiated their childlessness. Through qualitative interviews with the women I discovered the nuances and complexities that some women experience while trying to decide on whether or not to have children. This is especially true for the category of women that Veevers (1973) described as postponers, who remain ambivalent and continually postpone the decision until they reach a stage where they make a definite decision not to have children, or they are no longer able to have them. Another significant issue that stems from the women's accounts of their voluntary childlessness is the notion of stigma, and the negative pressures that some women experience to conform and procreate. In the literature it was also found that motherhood is perceived as natural, inevitable and essential to womanhood and indeed to adult feminine identity (Gillespie, 1999) and this is something I was particularly curious about because it did not resonate with my experience of childlessness.

I consider myself very fortunate that both my family and friends have always supported me in my decision to be childless, it has never been an issue, however, publicly I have been the subject of some criticism and interrogation. People's responses to my decision not to bear children vary. Most often, their reaction is one of shock and surprise. I have been told that I will regret the decision and that I am missing out by not having children. Others tell me that I would make a great mother. As far as I am concerned, I am being true to who I am, I have no calling for

motherhood, I live a happy and fulfilled life, in the company of my wonderful family and my Saint Bernard's and for the most part, I am not concerned about how others perceive me or respond to my decision to be childless. Furthermore, I am happy in my decision and I did not experience the questioning and the negative responses as stigmatizing or undermining. Although my experience was one of acceptance at the level of family and close acquaintances, publicly it was questioned, and I began to wonder if others experienced similar responses to their decisions. In Ireland there has been a strong history of pronatalism (Inglis, 1987) and I wanted to examine if, and to what extent women felt pressure to bear children. The combination of trying to better understand my own personal experience of chosen childlessness and to understand why it was a growing phenomenon in Ireland led me to formulate the questions which underpin this study.

Research Questions

The questions that guide the exploration in this study are:-

1. What key factors influenced the women's childbearing decisions?
2. What were the dynamics of the women's decision making processes?
3. How were decisions about childlessness related to aspirations about lifestyle and sense of self?
4. What reactions did the women encounter in relation to their decisions? If the women experienced some reactions as negative how did they respond to or manage them?

Terminology

It is important to give some insight into my decisions around the use of terminology in this thesis. The literature in this field reveals a diverse range of terms to describe women who choose not to have children, and these terms have changed over time. In the early research the term childless was used to describe people without children (Houseknecht, 1977, 1979a). However, as Doyle et al. (2012) pointed out, the term childless did not differentiate between people who desired children from those who had made a deliberate decision not to have them. In the 1980s the more popular terms used were voluntarily and intentionally childless (Bram, 1984; Callan, 1982, 1983, 1986; Feldman, 1981; Ramu, 1985). Morell, who was writing in the 1990s appeared to frame her terminology in relation to the identity of mother's, whereas, subsequent researchers shifted the focus to the presence or not of children. Over time, the term childfree became more popular (Gillespie, 2003) and more recently the terms childless by choice and childfree by choice have tended to dominate the literature (Campbell, 2003; Doyle et al. 2012; Gillespie, 2003; Koropecj-Cox et al. 2007). In some cases researchers have used more than one term. For instance, Tanturri et al. (2008) used

the terms childless and childfree deliberately to distinguish between two different categories of people without children. For them the term childless represents postponement whereas, childfree signifies a deliberate choice. Also, these terms are used to signify women who have arrived at being childless by different routes, or at different stages of decision making about it, as in some who are childless by choice might still decide to have children. A possible reason for the increase in the use of terms such as childless by choice and childfree when referring to people who choose not to have children could be that they are explicit and self-explanatory, they do not need further explanation or commentary. In the context of this study, for the most part I use the terms voluntary childlessness or childless by choice, mainly because they are accurate descriptions with no ambiguity. I chose not to use the term childfree as I do not perceive my life as being free of children. I interact with friends children on a regular basis, and enjoy being in their company. Furthermore, I chose to reject the other terms because they did not clarify the voluntary/ choice element.

In this study I raise the topics of pronatalism and the social construction of motherhood, primarily because of the challenges they present to women who are childless by choice, and decide to opt out of motherhood.

Pronatalism² is a belief system that encourages procreation and motherhood. It is a powerful ideology that arises from a set of socio-cultural belief systems 'so embedded that they have come to be seen as true' (Carroll, 2012, p. 5). It dictates that all adults are biologically programmed to want to have children. Women in particular are socially conditioned to believe that this desire is natural and instinctive (Carroll, 2012). Izzard, draws attention to the social imperatives to procreate and conform and argues that pronatalism 'is like a prejudice in that it operates at many levels from the

² Pronatalism is the philosophical term for the belief that all women should procreate.

personal to the cultural' (2001, p. 164). Although, cultural notions of motherhood differ in different countries and at different times, the central expectation that women should and do want to be mothers is universal. In what follows I document key elements and trends in the cultural construction of pronatalism in Ireland over the past five decades (Considine and Dukelow, 2009; Hill, 2003; Inglis, 1998).

Ireland has a long and well established history of promoting the values of parenthood (Inglis, 1998; Keane, 2015) and the Catholic Church, which was a significant shaper of cultural attitudes in Irish society for many generations, has always held strong views on marriage and motherhood (Horgan, 2001; Inglis, 1998). The use of artificial contraception is still prohibited by the Catholic Church and due to close Church/ State alliances in Irish political life in the past, artificial contraception was not freely available to all in Ireland until 1985 (The Health (Family Planning) (Amendment) Act), 1985, (Irish Family Planning Association). As a result, birth rates among married Irish Catholic women were very high up until the 1970s (Hill, 2003). Irish national ideology also celebrated motherhood, with Ireland being symbolically represented as a mother figure in the fight for independence from England, which lasted until 1921 (White, 2010). In post-independence Ireland, legislative, religious and social forces combined to promote an ideal of womanhood based on the role of obedient wife and fertile mother with sexual activity outside of marriage being morally, socially, and politically censured (Horgan, 2001; Inglis, 1998). The prescribed role of homemaker was strengthened in the new state by a series of legislative reforms, including the 1925 Civil Service Amendment Act³ which prevented women from taking certain civil service jobs, the introduction of the marriage bar in 1933, obliging women to give up public sector jobs when they married.

³The Civil Service Amendment Act 1925, gave the government power to bar women from certain civil service exams.

The 1935 Conditions of Employment Act⁴ prohibited employers from hiring more women than men and limited the industries women could work in and the number of hours they could work for (Crowley and Kitchin, 2008). Article 41.2 of the Irish Constitution introduced in 1937 very clearly articulated the primacy of the motherhood role for women noting that,

In particular the state recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The state shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

The prohibition of contraception and the societal sanctioning of marital fecundity hindered exploration of choices for married women up until the 1970s (Hill, 2003). According to Murphy-Lawless (2000) women in Ireland were essentially consigned to the role of wife, mother and homemaker. It was normal for women to bear large numbers of children (Murphy-Lawless and McCarthy, 1999; O'Connor, 1998) and the high fertility rates in Ireland were out of step with the rest of Europe, where the trend toward smaller families had become widely established by the mid twentieth century (Murphy-Lawless and McCarthy, 1999; O'Connor, 1998). However, many women did exercise agency over their fertility by practising the safe period method (natural contraception) that was allowed by the Church, and research shows that some women were quite resourceful in their efforts to access contraception (Kiely and Leane, 2012). Women's limited options in relation to the roles they could play continued up until the mid-1970s when changes such as the legalization of contraception,⁵ the lifting of the

⁴The Conditions of Employment Act 1935, extended the marriage bar of the Civil Service Amendment Act to the entire civil service (except for workers in the lower grades such as cleaners) and gave the government power to limit the number of women employed in any given industry.

⁵The Health (Family Planning) Act, 1979 legalized the sale of contraception in Ireland.

marriage bar in 1973 and the introduction of equal pay, saw an expansion in the lifestyles open to women (Considine and Dukelow, 2009).

From the perspective of women's voluntary childlessness, it is important to note that there have always been women in Irish society who have chosen not to have children, and this decision was made in certain marital, familial and career contexts, and was met with societal agreement. Such women included those who committed themselves to religious life, as well as women who remained single and pursued one of the few professions open to them. Being a maiden aunt who remained in the family home with ageing parents or with married siblings was another socially sanctioned childfree role. For these women, procreation was not a socially acceptable option and as such they cannot all be presumed to have been voluntarily childless (Lentin and Byrne, 2000; O'Connor, 1998). Thus for a long period both married and unmarried women had limited decision making power about whether or not to become mothers. In more recent decades, increased reproductive rights; including the right to abortion, greater access to further education and a significant decline in the influence of the Catholic Church over sexual and social mores have expanded choices for all areas of women's lives. Motherhood remains however an encouraged and valued social role.

[Feminist Critiques of Pronatalism and the Social Construction of Motherhood](#)

The valorisation of motherhood in Irish society, while being intensified by religious and post-colonial conditions, was reflective of wider societal practices, practices, which increasingly came under feminist scrutiny from the 1960s onwards. Feminist debates about motherhood have many diverse forms, which have evolved and changed over time. Much of the earliest feminist work on motherhood is found in the work of writers such as Chodorow (1999); Firestone (1970); Friedan (1963); Houseknecht (1977, 1979a, 1979b, 1987); Macintyre (1976); and Veevers (1972, 1973, 1980). All

of these works highlighted the pervasiveness of the ideology of pronatalism, questioned the centrality of motherhood in women's lives, and challenged the notion of motherhood as essential to normal adult feminine identity. By the late 1970s and early 1980s feminist writers including Oakley (1979) and Rich (1986) were breaking new ground in their conceptualizations of motherhood as an 'institutionalized' role. As mothers themselves, Oakley (1979); and Rich (1986) found that their own experiences of motherhood did not resonate with cultural notions of it. Critically reflective, narrative reports of mothers' experiences in more recent works by Gatrell (2005); Miller (2005); and Smyth (2012) continue to explore conflicts between social constructed assumptions about mothering and real life experiences of it. Since the 1990s, the right to choose whether or not to have children has been increasingly asserted in feminist work (Bartlett, 1994; Blackstone and Dyer Stewart, 2012; Carmichael and Whittaker, 2007; Daum, 2015; Doyle et al., 2012; Fine-Davis, 2011; Gillespie, 2003; Hayden, 2010; Ireland, 1993; Maher and Saugeres, 2007; Meyers, 2001; Mollen, 2006; Morell, 1994; Mueller and Yoder, 1997; Rich et al., 2011; Safer, 1996, 2013; Scott, 2009; Walker, 2011). In the limited but growing literature on voluntary childlessness the decision to remain childless has been described as 'an expression of a self-determined life' (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2017, p. 3). This resonates strongly with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) individualization thesis in the context of post-industrial societies, wherein, the self gradually disembeds from normative social practices associated with the past, and takes on a more individualized and reflexive role. Within this context it is to be expected that the phenomenon of voluntary childless will increase.

Thesis Structure

The main focus of chapter two is to offer a review of available literature on the topic of voluntary childlessness. As noted above, in the Irish context to date, there has been a distinct lack of research on voluntary childlessness, with the exception of a study by Jo Murphy-Lawless et al. (1994) which explored issues around sex, marriage and motherhood in Ireland and more recently, work by Valerie Heffernan and Julie Rodgers (2018) whose articles include brief discussions on women's voluntary childlessness. Aside from these, to the best of my knowledge, there has been no specific research study on voluntary childlessness in Ireland. As a result, I engage with research that has been carried out in other countries including; the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia and Europe where material has been developed on this issue over the past fifty years.

Chapter three looks at the theoretical framework underpinning this research. When I first conceived the idea of this research, I considered that the individualization thesis would be an appropriate theoretical framework to understand and explain the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness. I made that decision in part, because of my own motives for being childless by choice, much of which relate to my personal desire for freedom, autonomy, independence, and a desire to live my life on 'my terms'. I was also influenced because of its prominence as a theoretical framework for understanding women's voluntary childlessness in the research literature. For instance, both Gillespie (1999); and Peterson (2014) used Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) individualization thesis to explore how women's lives have gradually become more dependent on individual choice making, especially in relation to family life and motherhood. The concept of reflexivity, is closely connected to individualization, and I use it in this study to account for the conscious decisions that women make around

their fertility, and how they reflect upon themselves and their personal, social, financial, and cultural settings. Also, from a comprehensive review of the literature on voluntary childlessness, I found that women who are childless by choice are stigmatized, stereotyped, and negatively labelled (Carmichael and Whittaker, 2007; Doyle et al. 2012; Houseknecht, 1987; Morell, 1994; Park, 2002; Veevers, 1972). However, I found that individualization as an analytical tool did not capture the judgement that people face, therefore, I subsequently decided to use Goffman's theory of stigma and stigma management, as possible conceptual frameworks for explaining, and understanding the negativity that some women who are childless by choice experience and the strategies they engage to manage and overcome the stigma and preserve a positive sense of self. I also draw on strategies of information control for managing a stigmatized identity developed and expanded on by Park (2002); and Hayden (2010) in order to understand how other women respond to the negative judgement expressed toward them.

In chapter four I provide a detailed account of the methodological approach and the research methods used in this study. As I began my research, I proposed to adopt a feminist methodological position to capture the women's concerns and experiences. Like Gatrell (2006) I sought to embark on feminist research which was 'for, rather than about, women' (Olesen, 1994, p. 169). In adopting this perspective, I conceived women's voices as paramount to my research and I interpreted the women's accounts of their understandings and experiences of voluntary childlessness in their own words, as described by them. In this chapter, I also outline the epistemological and ontological perspectives which inform my research, and describe the reasons why I chose to pursue a qualitative approach to the study. I describe in detail the methods

used to recruit participants for the study, and the processes involved in the analysis of the research findings.

The issue of exploring and analysing women's motives for choosing to remain childless is the main focus of chapter five. I use Veevers (1973) categorizations of early articulators and postponers, which have been further developed by Gillespie (1999); Houseknecht (1987); Ireland (1993) and Scott (2009). These categorizations highlight the complexities behind women's decision making and determine if, when, and why they made an early decision not to have children, or if they postponed the decision indefinitely, and if so, why they postponed it? I also trace through other reasons for women's voluntary childlessness.

Chapter six, the second of the three findings chapters, looks at the type of lives/lifestyles the women wanted for themselves and the processes through which they articulated their reflections and actions about this. I also used the push and pull factors developed by Gillespie (1999) to make sense of the women's accounts of why some of them were pulled toward being childless as well as being pushed away from motherhood and the activities associated with it.

In chapter seven, the last of the three findings chapters Goffman's (1963) stigma theory was the main analytical framework used to examine women's experiences of stigma. The strategies of information control developed by Park (2002); and Hayden (2010) were used to determine how the women responded to or resisted the negative judgement expressed toward them, and how they established and maintained a positive and valuable sense of self.

In the concluding chapter, chapter eight, I consider the main findings from the thesis and interpret and summarize what the findings mean in the context of the questions I asked, in the context of existing literature, and in the context of the

theoretical frameworks I used to make sense of them. In terms of the motives that influenced the women's voluntary childlessness, the two main themes that dominated were childhood experiences including; childcare responsibilities, and the desire to be able to carve out childfree lives for themselves, free from what they perceived as the risks and responsibilities associated with raising children in contemporary society.

Chapter Two:

Literature Review

Women's Experiences of Voluntary Childlessness, and the Associated Stigma

This chapter provides a critical overview of the development of scholarship in the area of voluntary childlessness between the period 1970 and 2018. It tracks some of the more fundamental changes in research focus and research approach, and engages in a critical review of the research findings. What is evident across the literature is a move from therapeutically informed defensive explorations of voluntary childlessness (Safer, 1996; Veevers, 1972) to work which probed why women were choosing to remain childless (Gillespie, 1999, 2000, 2003; Peterson, 2014; Scott, 2009). More recently, the research on voluntary childlessness has moved from explanatory interrogations of women's childlessness to celebratory accounts of their choices (Daum, 2015). Much of the early research only investigated voluntary childlessness among married women, reflecting the expectations of the time that children should only be born within wedlock. Significantly there were enough married women choosing childlessness to bring the issue to the attention of researchers (Veevers, 1972). However, despite increased rates of voluntary childlessness and public representations of chosen childlessness as a positive life choice, negative public judgement of childless women prevails.

In terms of research approaches, much of the earlier work had a quantitative focus (Callan, 1983; Houseknecht, 1977, 1979) involving larger study numbers and survey methods. In more recent years, qualitative approaches have predominated, characterized by in-depth interviews with small numbers of voluntarily childless women and men (Doyle et al. 2012; Gillespie, 1999; Park, 2002; Rich et al. 2011). Only work published in English was consulted in this review, with the majority of this

work being carried out in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and Europe. Initially, the geographical scope of the research undertaken was very much confined to North America and Australia, with research from the UK only emerging in the 1990s. Research on voluntary childlessness in the Irish context is still limited. In 1994, Jo Murphy-Lawless et al. considered voluntary childlessness in the context of a study examining the changing roles of women in Irish society; and the choices that women were making in relation to their fertility. The only other research projects that I am aware of were carried out by Valerie Heffernan and Julie Rodgers of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. Heffernan and Wilgus (2018) edited a special issue of a journal that included an article on the topic of voluntary childlessness, *Introduction: Imagining Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century: Images, Representations, Constructions*, while Rodgers (2018) in an article entitled *On the Margins of Motherhood: Choosing to be Child-Free in Lucie Joubert's L'Envers du Landau*, challenged pronatalist beliefs about motherhood and drew attention to 'other trajectories of womanhood' (2018, p. 93). These articles fit in with the research trajectory that I have identified more generally as they additionally explore how the idealization of motherhood in society negatively stereotypes women who are childless by choice. That voluntary childlessness is only now receiving scholarly attention in Ireland is not surprising given the relatively late expansion of women's rights and opportunities in the Irish context. However, the material reviewed can usefully provide some insights into the Irish context given that it is based in Western democracies, which have all followed broadly similar trajectories in terms of the expansions of women's rights and women's choices around control of their bodies and their reproductive rights, and the increasing choices available to women in terms of access to education and employment opportunities.

This review is organized into four sections; (i) exploration of the social attitudes to voluntary childlessness and the related stigma (ii) examination of women's experiences of, and responses to stigma (iii) development and expansion of typologies that categorize and explain voluntary childlessness and (iv) examination of the predictors and explanations for voluntary childlessness. I decided on this structure based on the interviews with the women and also following a review of the literature, as these were the dominant stories that emerged from the review and the subsequent analysis.

[Social Attitudes to Voluntary Childlessness and Related Stigma](#)

A central theme in the literature is the consistency of stigma and the negative stereotyping of the voluntarily childless (Callan, 1985; Hayden, 2010; Heffernan and Wilgus, 2018; Houseknecht, 1977; Kelly, 2009; Koropeckyj-Cox et al. 2007; Morell, 1994; Park, 2002; Polit, 1978; Rich et al. 2011; Rodgers, 2018; Veevers, 1972, 1974, 1975). While earlier studies focused on both married men and married women who were voluntarily childless (Veevers, 1972, 1973) later studies tended to focus almost exclusively on women (Engwall and Peterson, 2013; Gillespie, 1999; Heffernan and Wilgus, 2018; Ireland, 1993; Manning-Kelly, 2007; Morell, 1994; Peterson, 2014; Rich et al. 2011; Safer, 1996). Consistent across all of these studies is the continuous negative societal portrayal of voluntarily childless women, who are considered abnormal, unfeminine, and selfish. These studies sought to challenge the negative portrayals of women who are childless by choice. The stigma experienced by those who chose childlessness and the strategies they adopt to deal with it, was the focus of an increasing number of studies from the 1980s onwards, in Australia and the US (Callan, 1983; Koropeckyj-Cox et al. 2007; Park, 2002). The literature also highlights from a very early stage, the resilience of women in developing positive self-identities

and the significance of social support in this regard. Each of these themes is considered in detail below.

Negative Social Appraisal of Chosen Childlessness

This review takes as its starting point the work of sociologist Jean Veevers who described voluntary childlessness as a neglected and misrepresented area of family study. Researching in the North American context, Veevers combined theoretical insights and empirical investigations to show how voluntarily childless couples had essentially been ignored in research on the family (Veevers, 1972, 1973) and highlighted what she described as the 'selective' inattention of the voluntary childless (1973, p. 204). She (1972) was one of the earliest theorists to identify the stigma and the attribution of a negative stereotype to married couples without children, noting that North American society endorsed a generally negative view of deliberate childlessness, and stigmatized the voluntary childless as a deviant group (Veevers, 1972, 1973). Drawing on previous research on the social deviance of voluntary childlessness from the North American context (Hollingsworth, 1916; Pohlman, 1970) she (1972) observed that the childless by choice were considered abnormal, immature, unnatural, emotionally unstable, lonely, sexually inadequate, unhappily married, and prone to divorce. Veevers (1972, 1973, 1974, 1975) research project which spanned the 1970s included the accounts of eighty-one predominantly white, middle-class, well-educated women who had been married for a minimum period of five years. One-third of the women decided before marriage that they did not want children, two-thirds had postponed the decision, one-quarter had chosen to be sterilized, and another quarter were contemplating sterilization. All of the married childless women in her research reported societal disapproval of their decision to remain childless (Veevers, 1975). From early on in their marriages the women reported varying degrees of

criticism, negative social judgement and disapproval through family pressure, pressure from in-laws, friends, work associates, medical professionals and others, who strongly supported pronatalist ideologies. Only the women's husbands were reported as being fully supportive of their decision to remain childless (Veevers, 1975). The pressure to procreate was more keenly felt by the younger couples, who were considered by others to be 'too young to know their own minds', and it was assumed they would change their minds about childlessness as they matured (Veevers, 1974, p. 404). Married women as distinct from married men without children, were considered especially deviant for what was perceived as their nonconformity in this regard (Veevers, 1975). In spite of this, the women reported that they were not significantly perturbed or distressed by the social disapproval they experienced.

Polit (1978) in a study of family size in the US also reported that the childless by choice were judged less favourably than parents. That study explored the prevalence of socially standardized stereotypes of people with different numbers of children, as well as social stereotypes of women who were childless. Data was obtained from a questionnaire sent to six-hundred residents, Catholic and non-Catholic in two separate localities in the greater Boston area, and there was a response rate of thirty-two percent. The results showed that the voluntarily childless were viewed more negatively overall. Families with one child were perceived only slightly better. Interestingly, families with eight children were labelled as the most socially undesirable, and respondents, especially Catholic respondents, expressed a desire to keep them at a social distance. That unexpected response from Catholics reflected a more fundamental rejection of the traditional large-family norm. As Blake (1966) suggested in an earlier study, Catholics were making fertility choices that reflected the American norm of two to four children per family unit.

Callan (1983) in his comparative investigations of society's perceptions of parenthood and voluntary childlessness in Australia, recruited fifty married women with children and fifty voluntarily childless married women. The average age of the women was thirty-two years. In the research the married women with children described the voluntarily childless married women as self-centred, individualistic, materialistic, and career-oriented. In contrast, the voluntarily childless married women assessed other voluntarily childless married women as intelligent, self-assured, determined, pragmatic and independent (Callan, 1983). In a subsequent Australian study, Callan (1985) investigated perceptions of parents and the voluntarily and involuntarily childless among twenty-four single, and twenty-one married male and female students. The students judged parents more positively than non-parents, judged the voluntarily childless least favourably, and viewed the involuntarily childless with more sympathy. Callan (1985) in his research found that voluntarily childless women and men, and parents of one child were similarly judged and negatively perceived. This contrasts with Houseknecht's (1987) review of existing literature on voluntary childlessness which found that voluntarily childless women were more negatively perceived than voluntarily childless men. That review shall be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Building on earlier socio-psychological research, Koropecj-Cox et al. (2007) examined students' perceptions of childless adults in the US, within the context of gendered expectations concerning employment, procreation, personal and social characteristics. Four-hundred and seventy-eight heterosexual, primarily non-married undergraduate college students, aged between eighteen and thirty-seven participated in the study. Three-hundred and fifty-seven students were women and one-hundred and twenty-one were men. From their research Koropecj-Cox et al. (2007) claimed

that couples who identified as temporarily childless were assessed more positively than those who identified as permanently childless. The negative personal characteristics attributed to the childless resembled those identified in previous studies (Callan, 1983; Houseknecht, 1977; Veevers, 1972, 1973) with the voluntarily childless deemed to be emotionally inadequate, immature, deviant, self-motivated, and neurotic (Koropecj-Cox et al. 2007).

Later, Kelly (2009) in a review of literature on women's voluntary childlessness found that childless women experienced much disapproval from family, friends and relatives, as well as from women who were mothers. However, the most negative responses were from other women who did not have children, and especially women who could not have them.

Hayden's (2010) research on voluntary childlessness in the US, with twenty-four Caucasian women aged between thirty-one and fifty-four years also found that women perceived that they were made to feel inadequate, abnormal, selfish, and deviant because of their non-traditional life-style choice. Reflecting the cultural norm that normal womanhood is categorized by motherhood, several of the women in her study recounted incidents wherein they were negatively judged by others because of their chosen childlessness. That view was reflected in a more recent article published in Ireland by Heffernan and Wilgus (2018) where it was found that motherhood is still idealized in mainstream society while women who are childless by choice are negatively portrayed.

Historically, childless women, especially married women have been subject to general negativity, stigmatization, and ongoing societal pressure to conform and procreate. The stigma associated with being voluntarily childless emanates from a culture of pronatalism, wherein, a woman's social worth is embedded in her ability to

procreate and mother (Park, 2002). Whilst, there is continuity of pronatalist judgement, as evidenced in the literature reviewed, what has changed over time is the way in which voluntarily childless women respond to it.

Women's Experiences of, and Responses to Stigma

Despite the negative public portrayal of the voluntary childless, the persistent finding in the literature is that women engage in resistance strategies to manage their stigmatized identities, and preserve a positive sense of self. For instance, Veevers (1975) observed that few of the women in her study were concerned by the negative stereotyping of them. She found that women deployed a range of strategies to deflect from the criticism and negative judgements, and actively engaged with people who supported them in their decision making (Veevers, 1975).

Houseknecht (1977) approached the phenomena of the stigmatization of the voluntarily childless from the perspective of conformity, and the measures that the childless by choice engaged in to manage and overcome the stigma. Fifty-four, Caucasian, single women participated in Houseknecht's (1977) research, twenty-seven desired children, and twenty-seven wanted to remain childless. All of the women acknowledged social pressure to procreate, but the majority of those who had chosen to remain childless reported that reference group support from other childless people was an influential factor in their decision making and lessened the effects of the socially sanctioned norms around procreation. Later, Houseknecht's (1987) review of existing literature on voluntary childlessness also indicated that women were not concerned by the stigma levelled against them, especially if they had supportive people or reference groups in their lives who understood and accepted their decision. However, research by Morell in 1994 provided a more negative assessment of voluntarily childless women's experiences of stigma. Morell's research in the US

provided insights into how negative social judgement was experienced by women. As a childless woman, a social worker, a feminist, and a political activist, Morell began researching the issue of voluntary childlessness to gain a better insight and understanding of the phenomenon overall, and to explore other women's experiences of stigma. She had personal experience of the assumptions that were made about those who are childless by choice, as colleagues, associates and medical personnel had perceived her decision not to mother as selfish, abnormal, and immature. Her interviews with thirty-four married, voluntarily childless women aged between forty and seventy-eight years revealed that women were negatively viewed, perceived as deviant, or psychologically maladjusted, and made to feel inadequate, different, or unfulfilled. The women explained that their decision to remain childless was generally neither fully understood nor accepted. Furthermore, they were frequently called upon to explain themselves, or to justify, or defend their decision. The more negative experiences of stigma found by Morell in the early 1990s raises some interesting questions and are a reflection of increasing hostility toward voluntarily childless women, and are a further reflection of the conservative right wing political regimes in power in Western democracies at the time.

In the research carried out by Murphy-Lawless et al. (1994) in Ireland, the women who had a preference to remain childless indicated that attitudes towards, and expectations around women's role as mothers was less of an issue than in the past. The women who ranged in age from nineteen to thirty-four years claimed that social stigma around voluntary childlessness was less pervasive, and as a result they were more likely to publicly acknowledge and admit to their lack of desire for motherhood.

As part of her research on voluntary childlessness in the UK, Gillespie (1999) recruited two hundred and sixty-six women from a family planning clinic. Each of

the women completed a questionnaire on their childbearing intentions. Thirty-three of the women who were aged between eighteen and fifty years identified themselves as voluntarily childless, and expressed a future desire to remain childless. Twenty-five of the thirty-three women agreed to participate in a follow up interview. Fifty-one percent of this cohort were married or living with partners, the remainder were single. The women reported that they were negatively stereotyped by their in-laws, friends, and work acquaintances. Lesley, for instance, described how her partner's family labelled her as 'strange' (Gillespie, 2000, p. 229) while Annette, another of the women experienced considerable pressure from her in-laws to have children. Yet, there was no great difference between the pressure exerted on them by family or by friends and acquaintances, and several accounts were provided by the women of ways in which they were made to feel selfish, unfeminine or out of place. For the women in Gillespie's (2000) research the pressure put on them to procreate was not restricted to any one group, and was received in equal measures from both family and social acquaintances, and from other men as well as from other women.

The issue of childless women's experiences of stigma was explored again in Park's (2002) research on voluntary childlessness in the US. She drew on Goffman's (1963) theory of information control to understand the ways in which childless women managed stigma. Park (2002) collected data from in-depth interviews with twenty-four voluntarily childless individuals, fifteen women and nine men, and a focus group that comprised seven of those interviewed, although she did not specify if those were women or men, or a combination of both. Participants were mainly heterosexual, married or partnered, in a relationship for five years or more, and ranged in age from twenty-one to fifty-six years. Park (2002) observed that the majority of the participants reported being stigmatized, negatively labelled or disapproved of.

Twenty-one of the participants felt that they were considered abnormal, selfish, or a failure in some way, and several indicated that they were required to engage in identity management techniques or strategies to deflect from the criticism and negative judgement expressed toward them. These observations are also reflective of Goffman's (1963) assessment that stigma is a public or a social issue that intersects with, and impacts on private lives. Elements of stigma and stigma management will be explored in more detail in chapter three, the theory chapter. Strategies adopted by Park's participants included; (i) passing (ii) identity substitution (iii) condemning the condemnors (iv) justifications – a right to self-fulfilment (v) justifications – claiming biological deficiency, and (vi) redefining the situation. The strategy of passing was used more among younger women who were perceived as still being able to conceive and procreate. In order to 'fit in' or be perceived as 'normal' the women engaged the strategy or the pretence of postponement, wherein, they insinuated that they planned to have children in the future or were physically unable to have them. Participants also used the strategy of identity substitution to justify and manage their stigmatized identities, and explained that they had no real interest in children, or were physically unable to have them. Some of the participants constructed justifications for their voluntary childlessness in order to shift attention away from themselves. Those who engaged this strategy overtly condemned parents who they claimed had children for the 'wrong' reasons, or who abused or neglected them. This served as further justification for their decision to remain childless. Others in the study cited a right to self-fulfilment or claimed a lack of maternal desire or maternal instinct and that technique deflected attention away from them and averted further questioning or interrogation. Others used the strategy of redefining their voluntarily childless status, by openly challenging what they perceived as the 'parenthood prescription' (Park,

2002, p. 36). In sanctioning their non-conformity, participants focused instead on the positive contributions they were able to make to society, with evidence of environmental responsibility, population concerns, career commitment and workplace productivity.

Investigations of voluntarily childless women's experiences of, and responses to stigma appear to indicate that while nearly all women report stigma and negative judgement, most indicate that it is not a major concern for them. The research has many examples of women describing the strategies they engage in to maintain and preserve a positive identity and positive sense of self in the light of negative appraisal (Callan, 1983, 1985; Houseknecht, 1977, 1982; Ireland, 1993; Rich et al. 2011; Veevers, 1975). Building supportive reference groups and engagement of tactics to deflect negative appraisals were common responses (Callan, 1983, 1985; Houseknecht, 1977; Rich et al. 2011; Veevers, 1975). According to Kelly (2009) the main sources of support are women's partners, families, and friends.

In Hayden's (2010) research, several of the women indicated that their position as voluntarily childless women made them feel different or 'out-of-place' (2010, p. 272). Some of the women recounted specific examples of being negatively judged, and referred to as odd or selfish, or they were made to feel inadequate because of their decision not to procreate. These women engaged in techniques to reverse the negative judgement expressed toward them, while others defended the decision, citing environmental, social, or economic reasons for their voluntary childlessness. Some of the women questioned their decision making, and tried to make amends for what they perceived as their selfish behaviour by taking on other caring roles, for example, by being a loving adult to step-children and engaging in activities with them which made them feel capable and good about themselves. The negative judgements these women

experienced did impact on them and made them feel bad about themselves. According to Hayden, such reactions reinforce gendered assumptions and stereotypes that labels good women as those 'whose behaviours are directed toward others' well-being' (2010, p. 274). In reference to biography making, some of the women considered their positioning as voluntarily childless women as the single most important decision they made in their lives, since it enabled them to put themselves first, and focus on personal, social, professional and other aspirations.

According to Walker (2011) the stigma surrounding voluntary childlessness is stronger in Catholic countries where state policies have been influenced by the dictates of the Catholic Church, which prescribed marriage and motherhood as the epitome of a woman's femininity and feminine identity. The pronatalist culture and policies which traditionally characterised Irish society have been identified by a range of commentators (Bacik, 2004; Inglis, 2005; O'Connor, 1998). On a wider scale Pope⁶ Francis, head of the Catholic Church, recently reproached couples for choosing to remain childless, describing it as a 'selfish act' (Kirchgaessner, 2015). He preached that,

A society with a greedy generation, that doesn't want to surround itself with children, that considers them above all worrisome, a weight, a risk, is a depressed society. The choice to not have children is selfish. Life rejuvenates and acquires energy when it multiplies. It is enriched, not impoverished (2015, np).

Public perceptions of voluntarily childless women was also the focus of research carried out by Rich et al. (2011) in Australia. Qualitative in-depth interviews with five women aged between thirty-four and forty-eight years from Anglo-European backgrounds, explored the women's experiences of stigma and negative stereotyping.

⁶ The Pope is the Bishop of Rome in Italy, worldwide leader of the Catholic Church, and head of the Vatican City.

The women reported that they were misunderstood, perceived as abnormal, unwomanly, and unnatural, and were assigned deeply discrediting negative attributes. In spite of this, the women framed their status as voluntarily childless women in a positive light, and considered their lives to be meaningful and fulfilling. Furthermore, they surrounded themselves with people who supported them in their decision to be childless, yet, the women reported 'feeling powerless' to challenge or change the negative stereotypes (Rich et al. 2011, p. 239).

In a more recent review, Shapiro explored the stigmatization of the voluntarily childless and similar to other reviews, (Houseknecht, 1987; Rich et al. 2011) she found that the childless by choice were generally perceived as a deviant group, whereas, parents were perceived as 'normal' (2014, p. 7). This review indicated prolonged and consistent negative stereotyping and judgement of voluntarily childless people and highlighted the extent to which traditional ideologies around pronatalism and motherhood are still embedded in society. In response to the negative stereotyping, Shapiro (2014) suggested that parents be questioned as to why they want children, rather than a research focus on why women choose not to have them.

Park (2002) reported that stigma and the negative appraisals of the voluntary childless was more of a social issue rather than a family issue, and that women were more likely to be stigmatized by colleagues, associates, or strangers than by family members. Several of those who participated in her research indicated that their being childless was not an issue of concern among family members, and very little accounting or justification was needed with them. Also, participants explained that they interpreted prolonged silences of family members, particularly of parents, in-laws, grandparents, and siblings as support or admiration, rather than disapproval.

The literature on voluntary childlessness indicates geographical, social, and cultural disparities in stigma across the different countries (Kelly, 2009; Koropeckyj-Cox et al. 2007; Murphy-Lawless et al. 1994; Rich et al. 2011; Scott, 2009). For instance, the findings from a recent study in Italy which examined the social acceptance of childlessness reported that attitudes across Europe vary (Tanturri et al. 2008). Using data from the European Social Survey in twenty different countries, Merz and Liefbroer (2012) as part of their research, found that voluntary childlessness was approved of in Denmark, was firmly disapproved of in Bulgaria, and was neither approved nor disapproved of in the UK. Also, rates of voluntary childlessness were higher in Northern Europe including; Italy, Ireland, Sweden, Belgium, and thus, more socially accepted, than in Denmark, Spain, Portugal and France, where rates were lower.

In the studies examined for this review, the prevalence and intensity of the social stigma exerted toward women who are voluntarily childless is evident in the public or social and private spheres (Koropeckyj-Cox et al. 2007). Women's responses to stigma vary, depending on who they are interacting with. Some women 'answer the call without contest' and accept the negative judgement (Hayden, 2010, p. 274). Others are more resilient and draw on reference group support or engage in stigma management techniques in order to craft positive childfree identities for themselves (Hayden, 2010; Park, 2002). Also, the stigmatization of the voluntarily childless was reported as being strongest amongst Catholic respondents who participated in Polit's research in the late 1970s. In a recent study by Walker (2011) it was found that negative views toward the voluntary childless are still more prevalent in Catholic countries. This highlights the cultural embeddedness of pronatalist ideologies across different cultures and time and draws attention to the complexities

and reality of the experiences and responses that women who are childless by choice encounter.

Public Representations of Women who are Childless by Choice

The media plays a key role in keeping the debate about women's voluntary childlessness alive by providing a space for views to be discussed and debated. While negative views and portrayals are aired and depicted through the media, it also provides an accessible forum where pronatalist views can and are being challenged. The manner in which women who are voluntarily childless are represented publically is worth consideration. This section examines their portrayal in the media, by the medical profession as well as the portrayal of women who are public figures, in order to illustrate the negative judgement and commentary attributed to their voluntary childlessness. This claim is supported by Gandolfo (2005) a feminist writer who argued that the media are also responsible for publicly stigmatizing the voluntary childless, portraying them more negatively than women who are mothers, and depicting them as naïve, unhappy, maladjusted, selfish, isolated and alone. She also labels the media as being responsible for drawing attention to alleged negative implications of non-motherhood on a woman's mental and physical well-being.

Ayers (2010) and Park (2002) argue that medical professionals play a key role in instigating negative discourses about women who deliberately delay or postpone motherhood, or decide against having children. They claim that manipulation of medical data on issues pertaining to increased risks of infertility are used as scaremongering tools to promote conformity and motherhood. According to Ayers (2010) the general adoration of motherhood in society has resulted in the relentless condemnation of the voluntarily childless, leaving them in what Manning-Kelly describes as a 'socio-cultural limbo' (2007, p. 1). This essentially means that the

fertility choices that women make are influenced by embedded cultural ideologies which promote motherhood as well as by socio economic factors relative to employment, career and so forth, and decisions about whether or not to procreate are not always easy to make.

Childless women in public life have also experienced disapproval and have been judged and negatively stereotyped, as the following examples clearly show. Someone who is no stranger to public ridicule because of her decision to remain childless is former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard. In the build up to the 2007 Australian federal elections, Gillard was publicly defamed by a male political opponent, Liberal Senator Bill Heffernan, who stated that she had consciously chosen not to have children in order to pursue a political career. This he constructed as negative, and used it as a criticism of her. Although Senator Heffernan was forced to apologise, a pattern of abuse was set in motion and since then, Gillard has been relentlessly condemned by political opponents, radio presenters, and writers in the public press for being voluntarily childless, or 'deliberately barren' as described by Senator Bill Heffernan (Day, 2012, np). Another political opponent Tony Abbot, described Gillard as lacking in the experience of raising children and thus, unfit for public office and certainly unfit to govern the country (BBC News⁷, 2012). Not being a mother indicated that she was not fit for high political office and very deliberately depicted an image of her as deviant, individualistic, selfish, and career-oriented. However, Gillard also made some very strong responses to the criticisms and in doing so drew out the criticisms to Australian women.

More recently, British Prime Minister, Theresa May who is childless by circumstance, was targeted by her political rival, Andrea Leadsom, in the lead up to

⁷ BBC: British Broadcasting Company is a public service broadcaster of the United Kingdom. The first official broadcast took place in 1922.

the election for Prime Minister of the UK. Leadsom, commented, 'genuinely I feel that being a mum means you have a real stake in the future of our country, a tangible stake' (Helm and Mason, 2016, np). Leadsom's quote heightens our awareness of the pervasive and deep rooted ideologies that powerfully re-inforce the significance of motherhood to a woman's life, and again here a deliberate and close connection with motherhood as a criteria for women to hold high political office is made. However, there was online public outrage following Leadsom's comments. For instance, Julian Smith MP, tweeted that Leadsom's comments were devastatingly disappointing for childless women and men. Others commented that her suggestions were 'vile', 'insulting', and 'wrong' (Cowburn, 2016, np). This indicates the emergence of more alternative and diverse views on womanhood.

Although British historian, Dr. Lucy Worsley and columnist Polly Vernon are not political figures, they are included because their work in the media brings them into the public eye. For Lucy Worsley, the decision not to have children has always been a positive one, yet in spite of this, she has often been the target of negative discourse and public scrutiny because of what she described as her 'barren tummy' as noted by Barbara Ellen, a reporter for *The Guardian Newspaper* (2012, np). For Worsley and others like her, there is the constant threat of being questioned, interrogated, or viewed suspiciously, because they have chosen a non-traditional life path (Davis, 2012). Polly Vernon, a columnist who wrote an article in *The Observer* in 2009, entitled 'It Takes Guts to Say You Don't Want Children', experienced intense public backlash. She received a torrent of negative reviews and responses from members of the public, and was referred to as 'bitter, selfish, un-sisterly, unnatural, evil, and a baby-hating journalist' (Walker, 2011, p. 46). Regrettably, all attempts to explain herself were dismissed by readers.

In 2015, twenty-nine year old blogger and journalist Holly Brockwell, wrote a column for the BBC, in which she expressed her desire for sterilization, on the basis that she did not want children. However, she stated that no doctor was willing to perform the surgery for her. Some said she was too young to know her own mind, they chose not to believe her, they said that she would change her mind as she got older and dismissed her concerns when she told them she wanted to be sterilized, so as to avoid getting pregnant. Deciding to raise this issue in the media, Brockwell was astonished not only by the speed with which people responded but by the extent of their abuse and negative comments. One man said 'he'd like to crowd fund a laryngectomy for me so I wouldn't be able to speak anymore', as noted by (Edwards, 2015, np) who wrote the article for *The Journal* online. Others said 'you're really naïve, you're ignorant, you're young, you're stupid, you don't know your own mind' (ibid). Similarly, when Austin based photographer, Randal Ford, featured a picture of a childless couple lazing on a beach on the cover of the *Time Magazine* in August 2013, he claimed that his intent was to portray an image of unity between two people, a man and a woman without children. Regrettably, in some ways, the picture and caption had the opposite effect (Appendix 2). One woman in New York commented that she was hurt, disappointed, and disgusted by the article because of the way in which it misrepresented those who are voluntarily childless, without knowing anything about them, or the factors that motivate them in their decision making. Even when journalists try to put forward a positive view of the childfree life or take an objective stance, they inadvertently intensify the stigma and negative stereotype associated with women's voluntary childlessness. There was further evidence of this in an article that appeared in the *New Statesmen*, a British political and cultural magazine, wherein deputy editor, Helen Lewis, endeavoured to defend the challenges women face when

trying to combine motherhood with paid employment. Regrettably, the article which was accompanied by a picture of four well-known female politicians peering into a crib containing a ballot box rather than a baby, had the opposite effect, suggesting instead that 'politics are a substitute for maternity' (Heffernan and Wilgus, 2018, p. 79) and that women who choose a career over motherhood are selfish and individualistic (Rodgers, 2018).

The negative press is not just perpetrated by the media more particularly it is the way in which the public respond to the media's representations of the voluntary childless. As evidenced above from the responses Holly Borough received from members of the public, it appears that women's voluntary childlessness continues to be part of an ongoing debate about womanhood and different and conflicting views are aired throughout the media. In its current form, where public responses are relatively easy to make, these views are being discussed and debated strongly. Pronatalism is still very much part of our society, women, and especially married ones are automatically expected to procreate and mother, refraining from which causes them to be harshly judged and publicly ridiculed.

The media's reinforcement of the significance of motherhood contributes to the stigmatization and negative portrayals of the voluntary childless (Hayden, 2010; Morell, 2000). The positive portrayal of pregnancy and children, and the glorification of motherhood consistently features in all forms of the media. Celebrity mothers are photographed in countless magazines and newspaper articles, and parenthood is also popularized on digital media (Carroll, 2012). Non-normative family types, including the voluntary childless are negatively depicted, or characterized reproachfully (Chancey and Dumais, 2009; Doyle et al. 2012; Gillespie, 2000; Kelly, 2009; Letherby, 2002; Mueller and Yoder, 1999; Shapiro, 2014). It is both evident in the

media and in public/ political life, that traditional ideologies, especially those which relate to women and motherhood are still deeply embedded in the public sphere.

The negative public images of women who are voluntarily childless has been powerfully represented in both the press and the media. Indeed, media strategies have played a key role in publicizing and overstating the maternal ideal that all women should be mothers. In some cases, women are publicly humiliated as a result of their decision to remain childless, as evidenced in more recent attempts by high profile public figures, who questioned both the integrity and professionalism of women who were seeking senior political positions, but who were also childless, either by choice or by circumstance. In brief, the media is used as a tool to exaggerate the myth that no woman is truly complete unless she conforms and procreates (Douglas and Michaels, 2004). What is becoming increasingly evident from these reports is the role the media plays in perpetuating the stigma and negative stereotyping of women who are childless by choice.

Ambivalence, Regret and Relief

Some women experience a certain amount of ambiguity regarding the decision about whether or not to procreate. Ambivalence around childbearing decisions can be influenced by partners, family, friends and indeed wider society, by religion and social class, ethnic traditions, gender and moral codes (Ayers, 2010; Letherby, 2002; Morell, 2000; Shaw, 2011). According to Tanturri and Mencarini (2008); and Tanturri et al. (2015) this accounts in part for the increasing numbers of women choosing to postpone motherhood. These factors shall be explored next, as will the notion of regret and the confusion of ambivalence with regret.

In the literature on women's voluntary childlessness several theorists expressed the view that ambivalence is an integral part of the decision making process,

and that the choice to remain childless can be complex, multi-faceted and ongoing (Ayers, 2010; Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 2002; Morell, 2000; Shaw, 2011; Veevers, 1973). In a review of previous literature on women's voluntary childlessness, Gillespie (2000) found that ambivalence constituted an integral part of the decision making process, and was often triggered by societal beliefs and attitudes, and the assumption that the longing for motherhood is universal and that all women have natural and instinctive desires to procreate and mother.

The notion of regret is well documented in the literature on voluntary childlessness, and there is an underlying assumption that women who choose not to procreate will ultimately regret the decision (Gillespie, 2000). However, there was only limited evidence of regret or future regret in the personal accounts provided by childless women (Morell, 2000; Park, 2002; Shapiro, 2014). Morell (1994) from her research on voluntary childlessness claimed that ambivalence is often confused with, or mistaken for regret, when really, women may only be experiencing passing thoughts or ideas about motherhood, or may question their decision in the face of criticism or adversity. In that review, claims of regret or possible future regret were largely unjustified. Instead, women expressed a deep sense of relief, and clearly articulated that the decision to remain childless was the correct choice for them. As one of the women who participated in Morell's research in the US, explained, 'it's like once I made it, [the decision to be childless] it was forever made. And it never came back to haunt me in any way' (1994, p. 98). Another participant explained that being voluntarily childless was 'one of the few things in my life where I absolutely have no regrets' (Morell, 1994, p. 99). This is significant given that she would have made the decision to remain childless in the 1940s when motherhood was eulogized and non-motherhood was considered unnatural and abnormal (Morell, 1994). While a minority

of women were ambiguous about their choice, and had brief moments of equivocation, the women, who were aged in their forties and fifties at the time the research was carried out, explained that they had made the decision to remain childless at a young age, and were satisfied with their decision overall (Morell, 1994).

Drawing on the accounts of fifty voluntarily childless, married and single women of all ages, and from various parts of the US, Safer (1996) found that the general societal assumptions about future regret were unjustified. The women who participated in her research were satisfied with their decisions, and some explained that there was 'a sense of peace and pride about the path they had chosen' (Safer, 1996, p. 154). Similarly, Jeffries and Konnert (2002) in a Canadian study on regret and the psychological well-being of a group of seventy-two participants aged forty-five and over, compared the accounts of women who are mothers, as well as voluntarily and involuntarily childless women. They found that women who had postponed having children experienced some regret, but, also an element of relief.

Similar accounts were provided by the twelve women who participated in Manning-Kelly's (2007) research, which was also carried out in the US. The findings from that research show that the only time the women who were aged thirty-five or older experienced any sort of regret was when their decision was challenged, or when they were confronted with questions or negative judgements. Aside, from this, the women were satisfied with their decision. The findings from that research also suggest that the timing of the decision is a fundamental factor with regard to regret. Women who made the decision early on experienced the least regret, and expressed more certainty, less ambivalence and less passivity (Manning-Kelly, 2007).

Positive accounts about decision making were also provided by the fifteen married or partnered voluntarily childless women who participated in DeLyser's

(2012) exploratory qualitative study in the US, on women's experiences of regret at midlife. Again, the majority of women who participated in the research did not experience regret. Only two of the fifteen women, who were aged between forty-two and sixty years, expressed regret at not having children, the remainder were satisfied with their decision. The two women who expressed regret feared for the future and had concerns about being lonely and alone, aside from which, they were contented with their decision. The other women experienced a range of emotions including relief.

Research in New Zealand by Allen and Wiles (2013) with thirty-eight voluntarily childless people, including twenty-nine women and nine men, aged between sixty-three and ninety-three years found little evidence of regret. Indeed the majority reported that being childless was of little relevance to them, and while some perceived it as an opportunity for more positive outcomes in later life, others argued that children did not ensure happiness or contentment in older life.

A number of the contributors to Daum's (2015) edited volume on voluntary childlessness cited ambivalence and ambiguity about motherhood as a fundamental factor in their decision making. One of the contributors, a woman named Anna Holmes, feared that she could not commit to the 'demands of modern American parenthood' (2015, p. 127). While she had several different reasons for thinking this way, some of which related to domestic responsibilities, being responsible for another human being and not being able to be free and autonomous, she explained that, 'in the end, maybe my ambivalence about motherhood comes down to the fact that I just don't trust myself enough' (2015, p. 128). She did not know if she could perform the motherly role in the way it is portrayed in contemporary society, Hays (1996) or fulfil what she perceived as the endless sacrifices entailed.

While there is some potential for regret, overall, it was found that most women are content with their decision to forego motherhood, mainly because they have deliberated about it, they have gone through stages of ambivalence and have ultimately decided that motherhood would not fit with the lives/ lifestyles they want for themselves.

Questioning of the Maternal Instinct

Feminist scholars have consistently challenged the powerful and socially pervasive concept of maternal instinct, in an effort to minimize society's idealization of motherhood as imperative to women's adult feminine identity (Ireland, 1993; Macintyre, 1976; Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1980; Walker, 2011). One of the strongest arguments of the normative patriarchal discourse with respect to motherhood, is that all women have natural and instinctive desires to procreate and mother. Instinct according to psychologist, William James is 'the faculty of acting in such a way as to produce certain ends, without foresight of the ends, and without previous education in the performance' (1890, p. 383). In principle, instinct is perceived as an inherent characteristic of behaving or acting in a particular way, without guidance or direction. The concept of maternal instinct is predicated on a belief that women are genetically predisposed to want, and to have the skills to nurture children. However, female experience does not always align with those preconceived assumptions. American anthropologist and primatologist, Sara Blaffer Hrdy (2010) who observed the behaviour of various primates over two decades, in order to learn more about human behaviour argued that motherhood is not natural or instinctive. Like Veevers (1972) Blaffer Hrdy (2010) claimed that maternal instinct is something that is learned from one's social or cultural environment. She claimed that the inference that all women have natural and instinctive desires to procreate is problematic, especially when

considered in the context of mothers who abuse, neglect, or abandon their children (Blaffer Hrdy, 2010). This could explain the variance in the ways mothers behave and act around children. Further, Blaffer Hrdy (2010) argued that fathers are equally adept at taking care of children, especially when mothers are absent, abusive, or emotionally unattached. Similarly, British psychology professor, Paula Nicolson (1999) argued the point that even if a woman wants to have a child, this does not necessarily mean that she will instantly bond with, or know how to care for it. Also, she argued that women who suffer from postnatal depression, who do not naturally respond to the maternal role, or connect emotionally with children, defy the expectancy of innate motherly instinct. These types of experiences subvert notions of maternal instinct, so women who experienced this kind of mothering would be less likely to buy into pressures relating to it. Of course this is not to take away from the personal experiences of women who gain emotional gratification from their motherly role, but, rather than being a biological determinant, Petrović-Trifunović et al. make the point that 'moulding into motherhood is a process that is built and happens in a period that is dependent of several emotional and social conditions' (2015, p. 128).

The comments of another woman who participated in Morell's research also affirms the idea that maternal instinct is a socially pervasive concept, 'I don't want children. Clearly there's this absence of instinct totally. I just don't have an iota of it' (1994, p. 67). The notion of maternal instinct consistently comes up in research accounts and this shows how prevalent and powerful it is as a social concept, and how extensively women draw on it when explaining their decisions and in justifying them. While the concept has a lot of traction, it is not without its challenges as described above.

Similar accounts about having a lack of maternal instinct were provided by some of the participants in Laura Scott's (2009) research. In fact, seventy-five percent of the women and sixty-four percent of the men categorically stated that they had neither the 'instinct' nor the 'desire' to become parents (2009, p. 82). Yet, they categorized themselves as the exception rather than the rule. Some believed in the notion of maternal instinct but explained that they had not experienced it themselves (Scott, 2009, p. 82). One of the women argued that the concept of instinct was nothing more than a form of 'sociocultural brainwashing' and suggested that 'if maternal behaviour were instinctual instead of learned, even those of us who didn't like or want children would be having them' (Scott, 2009, p. 82).

As part of their research, Engwall and Peterson (2013) analysed the findings from two previous research studies on women's voluntary childlessness undertaken in Sweden. In the first study, 2005-2009, nine heterosexual women were interviewed, aged between thirty-one and sixty-four years. Six of the women were single, one was married, and two were cohabiting. In the other study, 2008-2009, twenty-one voluntarily childless women aged between twenty-nine and fifty-four years were interviewed. Nine of the women were single, one was married, and seven were cohabiting, while the remaining four were in long-term relationships. Several of the women described their voluntary childlessness as 'obvious' and 'natural' (Engwall and Peterson, 2013, p. 380). One woman explained that being childless was 'almost self-evident' since she had never made an actual decision not to have children (2013, p. 381). Another woman explained that she lacked any type of gene for motherhood, hence, Engwall and Peterson's use of the metaphor of 'the silent bodies' that is, 'bodies without a biological urge to reproduce' (2013, p. 379) as a way in which to capture how the women sought to understand and make sense of their voluntary childlessness.

Voluntary Childlessness: Developing Typologies

The question of 'why' women choose to remain childless has been the focus of several studies (Allen and Wiles, 2013; Blackstone and Stewart, 2012; Callan, 1983; DeLyser, 2012; Doyle et al. 2012; Houseknecht, 1987; Manning-Kelly, 2007; Morell, 2000; Park, 2002; Safer, 1996; Shapiro, 2014). Houseknecht (1987) reviewed forty-seven studies, twenty-nine of which focused specifically on the explanatory factors for voluntary childlessness. Consistent motives included; women's desire for freedom, autonomy and independence, early socialization experiences, and women's personal concerns about wider social or global issues. A number of typologies have been developed to assist in better understanding these explanatory factors and which further deepen our knowledge of their relationship to women's decision making in the area. Therefore, each of these thematic areas and their connection to the development of such typologies is discussed below.

Veevers in her 1973 publication developed these typologies to distinguish between two different types of voluntarily childless women, namely; early articulators, who were mainly motivated by the disadvantages of parenthood, and postponers, who were influenced by the perceived advantages of being childfree. Veevers (1973) categorized the early articulators or rejectors, as those who knew from an early age, even before they were married, that they did not want children. The postponers or aficionados as they were also referred to by Veevers (1973) delayed having children until they were no longer expected to want them, or were no longer able to have them. The typologies of early articulators or rejectors and postponers or aficionados have been used from very early on in the research to refer to women who have decided against parenthood and these were deployed and developed by subsequent researchers including; Houseknecht (1977); Ireland (1993); Gillespie (1999); and Scott (2009) to

capture with more specificity and sensitivity, the greater complexity of choices being made by women.

As part of her primary research with twenty-seven single, voluntarily childless, undergraduate women and twenty-seven single women who desired children, Sharon Houseknecht (1977) used Veevers typologies to distinguish which of the women were early articulators and which were postponers. In this research she changed the research direction to include single women, whereas previous studies had only focused on married women (Veevers, 1973). She found that half of the young, single women who participated in the research identified as early articulators, who made the decision to remain childless before the age of thirty, whereas two-thirds of the married women in Veevers earlier (1973) research identified as postponers. It may be that the single women chose to remain that way so as to remain childless, knowing that if they married, they would automatically be expected to procreate. It may also be an indication of exercising choice, despite the strong pronatalist climate of the time.

As part of her research on voluntary childlessness in the US, Mardy Ireland (1993) expanded on Veevers (1973) earlier categorizations of the voluntary childless, adding the categories of traditional, transitional, and transformative women. Ireland's research included the accounts of one hundred and two women, aged between thirty-eight and fifty years. Forty-five of the women were married, fourteen were cohabiting, and forty-three were single. She drew attention to women with fertility issues and labelled them as the traditional type. She explained that 'the traditional woman has said yes to motherhood, but her body has said no' (Ireland, 1993, p. 17). Women who had postponed the decision to have children were referred to as transitional women, and those who actively decided not to have children were referred to as transformative women. These categories while relating to Veevers categorizations further elucidate

the process of decision making as well as its connection to more embedded and individualistic perspectives on reproduction. For instance, the traditional category might be viewed as not challenging traditional associations between married women and motherhood, whereas, the transformative category lies more within an individualized perspective of reflexivity and biography building.

Gillespie (1999) also deployed and developed Veevers (1973) typologies of voluntary childlessness, by examining and teasing out the more fundamental differences between the categories of early articulators and postponers. Gillespie (1999) introduced the categories of active and passive decision makers, as another way of describing those who made an early decision, and who were enticed or pulled toward childlessness, as opposed to women who were pushed away from motherhood and the activities associated with it. The category of active decision makers resembled what Veevers (1973) referred to as early articulators or rejectors, while the passive category mirrored the postponers or the aficionados. In attempting to understand their explanations, Gillespie (1999) distinguished between women who made an active decision early on in life not to have children, and those who were more passive about it, and continually postponed it. According to Gillespie the latter category were either 'swept along' or 'drifted' into childlessness (1999, p. 46) whereas, the former category made an early and definitive decision not to have children. These categories are useful in understanding the different ways women approach and engage with the decision making process.

More recently, writing about the US context, Scott (2009) expanded on the categorizations of the voluntary childless put forward by Veevers (1973) and subsequently expanded upon by (Houseknecht, 1977; Gillespie, 1999; and Ireland, 1993) and added two new categories to that list, namely; the acquiescers and the

undecided. She developed the category of acquiescers and described them as those whose decision was influenced by a partner's lack of desire for children, and the undecided as those who were still engaged in the decision making process. The undecided resembled what Veevers (1973) and others described as postponers, and they indicated the possibility that they could change their minds at some point in the future. A total of one hundred and seventy-one, single, partnered, and married women and men, aged between twenty-two and sixty-six years participated in Scott's research, seventy-one percent were female and twenty-nine percent were male. One hundred and thirteen of the participants identified as early articulators, thirty-seven as postponers, fifteen as acquiescers, and six as undecided. However, Scott (2009) did not gender disaggregate the data, therefore, it was not possible to distinguish the number of women from men. The two new categories that Scott (2009) introduced added a new layer of understanding to the decision making process and helped me better understand the influence of a partner or a woman's focus on a relationship and how this can guide her decision

The typologies of early articulators and postponers developed by Veevers (1973) still appear to have good explanatory value. The refinements and expansions introduced by subsequent researchers, in particular the typologies proposed by Ireland (1993) and Gillespie (1999) have been the most useful in terms of building on the original typologies developed by Veevers. The typology of transformative women introduced by Ireland (1993) is useful, and focuses on women exercising choice in relation to their fertility, while the transitional category extends on Veevers (1973) earlier categorization of postponers. The traditional category is somewhat exempt from this research given that it relates to infertile women. Thus, while there were slight developments and variations in the typologies used to explain and understand

women's voluntary childlessness by Scott for instance, overall, Veevers earlier typologies still have the most explanatory power and have been abundantly used by other theorists exploring the phenomenon.

Women Choosing to be Childless: Explanatory Factors

Making Contemporary Biographies

What is evident throughout the literature is that women are consciously electing to construct their own biographies and are claiming new social identities that are 'separate and uncoupled from the hegemonic ideal of motherhood', which essentially promoted motherhood as a basic assumption for all women (Gillespie, 2003, p. 134). This process of conscious identity making was eloquently captured by Giddens (1991) who explained that in contemporary society, individual identities are established through an ongoing and continuous process of self-reflection. In essence, this perspective makes the argument that we are the creators of our own identities and our own biographies, and our freedom enables us to consistently alter and re-construct those identities. Women's experiences of voluntary childlessness and the practices they engage in can be understood as ongoing practices of biography making and identity making.

Freedom as a Motive for Voluntary Childlessness

In the literature in general, freedom has been contextualized within the overall framework of individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Gillespie, 1999; Peterson, 2014, Tanturri et al. 2008). As will be discussed in chapter three, the theory chapter, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) individualization thesis speaks of a commitment to the self, to construct and self-manage one's own biography, and to have the freedom to decide how to live one's life. As far back as 1976, Margaret Movius claimed that the time had come for women to reclaim their own lives, and

advocated for the promotion of an alternative lifestyle for women, which included the 'unstigmatized' option of choosing to remain childless, in preference of a career and work outside the home (1976, p. 62). In much the same way as Beck (1992) she recognized that women's lives are increasingly categorized by choice, and that, freed from the obligations of mother work and housework, women, like men could prosper in the world of paid employment, and carve out a professional and successful career for themselves. Her writing is reflected in Beck's later categories and descriptions of standard and elective biographies. These explanations of the reasons for childlessness are steeped in socioeconomic understandings of the causes of women's limited choices, in which motherhood was seen as an outcome, and subsequently a cause of women's lack of opportunity in various areas of personal, economic and social life.

Veevers (1974) claimed that motherhood as manifested in Western society deprived women of power, authority or influence over their bodies and their reproductive choices, and prevented them from developing subjectivity. According to her, voluntary childlessness offers women the freedom and power to determine their own lives, make their own choices, and fulfil their own needs. She advocated for the acceptance of voluntary childlessness as a legitimate and respected life choice, and a valid alternative to traditional family life.

Writing in 1976, Margaret Movius, an American researcher on the topic of the family described 'the childfree alternative' as 'women's ultimate liberation' (1976, p. 61). According to her, being childfree would enable a woman to have 'enough time to have a life of her own, an equal sex role status to men and a more successful career life' (1976, p. 62). In this she reflected perspectives on feminist thought at the time that viewed the family and women's role within it as a key contributor to women's subordination in society. A life free from childcare responsibilities according to

Movius (1976) would enable married women to commit to, and pursue a professional career, in a similar way to men. She viewed the family as a key site of women's oppression and women's roles as child-bearers and child-minders as central to this oppression. The solution to such oppression was viewed as alleviating those obstacles so that women would be enabled to live in the world in much the same way as men, with fewer reproductive obligations. While Movius' work focused on the family and women's roles within it, in many ways, her claims are similar to those of Beck (1992) which came several years later, the main focus of which was the growing centrality on individual choice making.

Sharon Houseknecht (1987) in her review of literature on voluntary childlessness identified that women were rejecting motherhood in order to preserve their personal, social, and economic freedom. In that review, she also observed that having the freedom to pursue professional responsibilities and realize their full potential were key possibilities for women. These explanations are similar to the socio-economic arguments put forward by Movius in the 1970s with regard to women being able to pursue a similar life to men, and achieve in the world of paid employment without being restricted and constrained by the demands of motherhood.

The women who participated in the research carried out by Murphy-Lawless et al. (1994) in Ireland were also enticed by a desire for socio-economic freedom, and several of the women expressed concerns about the ways in which children would impact on their lifestyles and their careers. They feared being passed over for career opportunities, suffering the effects of time and money constraints, or not being able to balance work schedules with home commitments. They were also concerned about the costs of housing and childcare in Ireland, and the lack of familial support that would be available to them should they become mothers. The women were more

intent on preserving their socio-economic freedom rather than going down the path toward motherhood, with its associated risks and uncertainties (Murphy-Lawless et al. 1994).

Gillespie (1999, 2000, 2003) in her research on voluntary childlessness identified a different perspective on freedom. The women in Gillespie's (1999, 2000, 2003) research contextualized freedom in two ways; freedom from the responsibilities associated with children and childcare, and freedom referring to increased personal, social, and financial independence. These types of freedoms can be thought of in terms of 'freedom from' and 'freedom to', and they also resemble the push and pull factors that Gillespie (1999) talked about in her research. For some of the women who participated in the research motherhood 'represented a sacrifice, a duty and a burden' (Gillespie, 1999, p. 50). It was associated with a loss of time, loss of money, and loss of career opportunities. Also, the women feared that children would prevent them from doing what they wanted and deprive them of opportunities for autonomy and self-fulfilment. Others in the study emphasized the importance of having the freedom to engage in other life pursuits, such as travel, or focus on maintaining strong childless relationships with their partners and spouses.

These perspectives were raised again in Meghan Daum's (2015) more recent edited volume on voluntary childlessness. Several of the writers in this volume described their lifestyles as incompatible with having and raising children. One of the writers who was twenty-six years old at the time of writing believed that motherhood would inevitably interfere with her career ambitions, and her financial autonomy. She explained,

I can't imagine I will be able to give up the lifestyle I lead to become a parent. Financial independence is very important to me, as is retaining my own independence in any relationship. Something would have to give in order for me to properly care for a child (Shriver, 2015, p. 91).

As is evident from the extract above, this female contributor was unwilling to take on the motherhood role; she envisioned it in terms of restricting her freedom, especially her financial freedom and presenting obstacles in terms of equality in her relationship. Another contributor who was aged fifty-two, worked as a writer and teacher and travelled regularly. She commiserated with parents and believed that her life was far better and more enriched because she had chosen not to have children. For her, the most important aspect of being childfree was her 'personal freedom' (Houston, 2015, p. 171). She explained that she would rather 'go trekking for a month in the kingdom of Bhutan than spend that same month folding onesies' (2015, p. 170). She summed up her perspective by saying that, 'we are living the lives our mothers' generation couldn't even imagine, and we know it. We are architects of our own destiny. We are free' (2015, p. 169). This contributor focused more on the opportunities she had in being childfree and she was not prepared to make the sacrifices that she perceived motherhood entailed. In both of these accounts there is evidence of disembedding, individualization and reflexivity, as women set out to create their unique biographies. These concepts will be discussed further in chapter three.

As the individualization thesis suggests, women's lives are increasingly interacting with individual choice making, especially in relation to pregnancy and motherhood (Bauman, 2002; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1992; Gillespie, 1999; Peterson, 2014). According to Gillespie (1999) much of this can be attributed to the increasing range of choices and opportunities available to women to act on their wishes, desires, and ambitions (Gillespie, 1999). Furthermore, as Giddens (1991) pointed out, this may also be seen as a reflection of the contemporary processes of biography making and the making of an identity for oneself based on the choices and experiences individuals are faced with.

Parental and Familial Influences: Childhood Abuse and Neglect

In the research literature family background also emerged as an important aspect to explore in relation to women's voluntary childlessness (Daum, 2015; Doyle et al. 2012; Safer, 1996; Scott, 2009). In several studies, parents or extended family members were cited as having a major impact on women's childbearing decisions and participants expressed strong views about unhappy childhoods, wherein, they were physically and emotionally abused (Doyle et al. 2012). They were dissatisfied with their own childhoods and were keen to prevent potential children from suffering similar abuse.

Safer's (1996) claim about the centrality of a mother's influence on a daughter's decision about whether or not to procreate can be substantiated on some levels. While both parents served as an influence on a daughter's childbearing decisions, Safer (1996) claimed that mothers' were the dominant influence. According to Safer, 'mothers shaped their daughters' destinies and made a major contribution to their selecting a radically different way of living', in a more significant way than father's did (1996, p. 94). She argued that all women develop their ideas of what motherhood entails from their own mothers, and that by choosing to be childless, a woman deliberately 'severs a major, literal tie with her mother' (1996, p. 94). While this is a useful explanation for why some women choose childlessness, the motives behind women's decision making are far more complex and interwoven. Furthermore, not all women are influenced by their mothers. To highlight the extent of parental influence, it is worth recounting the accounts of some of the women who took part in Safer's research. One of the women in that study described her upbringing as traumatic. She was raised by an alcoholic mother, who frequently subjected herself and her father to a mixture of physical and emotional violence and abuse. Her mother

regularly told her that she had not wanted her, and that she had effectively ruined her mother's life. Although this woman eventually made her peace with her mother, she did not trust herself enough to have a child, for fear that she would replicate her mother's behaviour, and subject a child to similar abuse. Instead, she focused on her teaching career, and made a life for herself that differed significantly from that of her mother's. Another participant reflected that had it not been for her father's desire for children and his perseverance, she would never have been born, since her mother never wanted children, and only had a child to satisfy her husband. As a consequence, she had a turbulent relationship with her mother, and although she admitted that she was the object of her father's affection, she also felt that she was her mother's main rival. She described their relationship as a bitter one which was consumed by jealousy and resentment. For that reason, she was pushed away from mothering. She explained, 'I needed to make sure I didn't turn out like her intellectually or temperamentally, and not having children was part of that' (1996, p. 98). Another of the women described her mother as absent and neglectful. She explained that her mother's interest in politics and political activism always took priority over her relationship with her daughter. She was in full-time child care from the age of two onwards, which she described as 'a highly unusual step in 1952' (1996, p. 98). She described her childhood as 'miserable' and stated that she had no desire to take a chance and bring a child into the world who might suffer the same fate, since there were no guarantees that she would do a better job of mothering than her own mother had. According to Safer, a daughter's relationship with a mother who is 'masochistic, hostile, dependent, detached, or over-involved' can impact on the decisions she subsequently makes in relation to her fertility, and ultimately influence her to remain childless (1996, p. 115). She noted that women's 'traumatic experiences cause them to repudiate their

connection with their mothers on as many levels as possible, they have no dilemma and no wrenching decision to make' (1996, p. 98). She found evidence of personal and emotional distress among her participants, so much so that they became hesitant to re-create a similar type of situation again. However, it is not the case that all women are influenced by their mother's attitude or behaviour toward them. It is also not the case that all women choose to remain childless because of difficult formative experiences. The point that Safer (1996) is trying to make is that some women deliberately choose to remain childless, so as not to reproduce the complex type of relationship they had with their own mothers.

Similarly, forty-two percent of participants in Scott's (2009) research reported that they had strong negative feelings about parenthood, because they had seen or experienced the effects of poor parenting and did not want to put potential children at risk. However, she identified not just relationships with mothers, but the significance of relationships with fathers too. She suggested that her participants feared they would recreate a volatile and unstable family life for children, like the one their parents had created for them. Some described their parents as 'emotionally or temperamentally ill equipped to raise children' (Scott, 2009, p. 94). One woman explained that she had always had a difficult relationship with her parents and especially with her father. However, the relationship came to a climax on her twenty-fifth birthday, when her father told her, 'you can die, for all I care-you're not worth the air I breathe' (2009, p. 94). This woman commented that even more upsetting was the fact that 'my mother didn't do anything to stop or correct him' (2009, p. 94). Scott pointed out that women whose parents deprived them of love, affection, and support when they were children, felt that they lacked the appropriate qualities and skills which they considered necessary for good parenting and thus, made a conscious and deliberate decision not

to have children. Women were anxious to end what they perceived as endless cycles of family abuse, and the only way in which they could ensure that was to avoid having children. This was also evident in the comments of a childless woman who participated in a study by Doyle et al. (2012) in Australia. She said, she 'just didn't think it fair to bring a life, a whole fresh new life, into the world and beat the crap out of it emotionally and or physically' (2012, p. 401).

Eight of the sixteen contributors to Daum's (2015) edited volume claimed that they grew up in dysfunctional families, wherein, they were exposed or subjected to deplorable acts of physical and, or emotional abuse. For one woman, it was a combination of being abandoned, overlooked, and later substituted by other children, when her mother decided to leave herself and her brother in the care of their grandparents, while she met and married somebody else with whom she had other children. Although she and her brother had almost always felt they were invisible to their mother, they were completely forgotten about when she re-married. She explained that,

Through her [mother], I learned that motherhood has no guarantees, you didn't have to love your kids, and you didn't even have to stay with them and finish the job (Henderson, 2015, p. 155).

For as long as she could remember she had always been apprehensive about having children, not knowing if she would neglect or abandon them, in the same way her mother had abandoned her as a child. Another participant had been subjected to both physical and psychological abuse throughout her childhood. The abuse had been inflicted by both her parents, and she described her home life as chaotic, and her parents as unpredictable. Another participant grew up with the belief that 'all children were unwanted' (Nunez, 2015, p. 97). She explained that as a child she never felt safe or protected. 'Every single day of my entire childhood I lived in fear that something

bad was going to happen to me. I live like that still' (Nunez, 2015, p. 103). Another of the women explained that she grew up in a chaotic childhood environment, which was marred by loss, sorrow, pain, and suffering. When she reached adulthood she began to suffer the same mental health issues as her mother. She was not willing to compromise the health of potential children and thus, decided to refrain from ever becoming a mother (Daum, 2015). Allen's research on voluntary childlessness also identified experiences of childhood trauma and abuse as central to participant's decisions to be childfree. One of the older participants named Emma who was eighty-five years of age at the time the research was carried out, located her childlessness within the storyline of family abuse and trauma. She described the abuse perpetrated by her father against herself and her mother as pivotal in her decision making and stated that she vowed at a young age never to marry or have children. 'I said when I was twelve, I'd never marry, because nobody would ever treat me like he treated mum and I' (2013, p. 213).

From a review of the literature it is evident that childhood experiences can strongly impact on, and influence the decisions women make in later life, including their reproductive decisions. Safer (1996) claims that a woman's childbearing decisions are profoundly influenced by the relationship she had/ has with her mother on so many levels. According to Safer (1996) a daughter often considers herself responsible for the way in which her mother's life turned out, even if her mother never protests about it. From observing her mother's life, a daughter can interpret the personal, social, financial, and professional impact of children, and thus, may consciously choose to avoid repeating those experiences with children of her own. While not discounting a mother's strong influence on her daughter's fertility decisions, a father is also thought to powerfully influence his daughter. It was found that negative

or emotionally abusive relationship between a father and daughter can also result in a daughter choosing childlessness (Daum, 2015; Scott, 2009). The presence of children of her own may cause a daughter to identify more closely with a past she would rather forget. This is further evidence of reflexivity around women's interpersonal relationships it is about freeing themselves from an interpersonal relationship that could potentially have a negative impact on them. These women are taking control and making choices on an interpersonal level. However, it is not just women who experienced conflict or had negative parental experiences who decide to remain childless. In the research literature, there were several examples of women who had idyllic childhoods, with parents who loved and supported them, yet, their intuition was that their parents had sacrificed too much for them, and they feared they could not or would not live up to those standards if they had children of their own.

Positive Parental and Familial Influences

Accounts were also provided in the literature of positive parental and family influences, wherein participants described their parents as inspirational, loving, and supportive (Daum, 2015; Morell, 1994; Safer, 1996). Several of the women who participated in Morell's (1994) research idolized their mothers and cherished their shared relationship. Some were concerned that they would not be able to live up to the standards their own mothers had set, or would not be able to perform the motherly role as well as their own mothers' had. Others, believed that their parents, and especially their mothers had sacrificed too much for their children, and they were unwilling or felt they were ill-equipped to meet those same standards (Daum, 2015; Doyle et al. 2012; Scott, 2009). These women perceived motherhood as selfless, all-consuming and immersive, and they were reluctant to commit to this level of mothering and sacrifice.

Three of the sixteen writers who contributed to Daum's (2015) edited volume, indicated that despite growing up in happy households, they consciously decided not to have children. One of the women in that volume explained that her mother imparted upon her, 'the ability to give and express love, the indulgence of curiosity, and the prioritizing of imagination, education, and personal integrity' (2015, p. 124). However, she was concerned that her mother had sacrificed too much of herself for her children, whom she raised almost single-handedly, as her father was absent for much of her childhood. These women decided to avoid such intense emotional relationships, which they perceived would be all consuming of the mother, and thought that this model of motherhood would not be manageable for them. Thus, although greatly inspired by their mothers, they did not think that they could sacrifice themselves for a child or another human being in the way their mothers had. Concerns about not being able to live up to the standards their own mothers had set were also identified elsewhere in the literature (Morell, 1994). These are highly individualized reasons for rejecting motherhood based on individualized experiences of either too little, or bad mothering, or too intense, and all-consuming motherhood. These are examples of personal, emotional, affective, and individual reasons for voluntary childlessness, as distinct from structural, social, or economic ones, and can be contextualized within the individualization thesis and the reflexive practices of constructing one's own biography. More recently, other women who are childless by choice have taken to social media to express their lack of interest in childrearing, much of which can be attributed to the high standards of parenting set by their own parents. In a recent online article, Lilit Marcus, a New York based writer, who is childless by choice, described her traditional stay-at-home mother as inspirational. Lilit's admiration for her mother and the high standards of affection and selflessness she

displayed to her children is what effectively led her to believe that she would make an inadequate mother, if she ever had children of her own. She explained, 'every child in the world deserves the amount of love I got growing up. There's only one of my mom, and I'm not her' (2014, np).

As well as being influenced by parents, exposure to positive role models who demonstrated the possibility of desirable childfree lifestyles proved significant for some women. This is evidence of the pull or the attraction of childlessness described by Gillespie (1999). In some studies, women identified other family members or figures such as a teacher, or an unmarried or childless aunt, who influenced and inspired them to pursue a childless life (Safer, 1996). For instance, one of the women in Safer's (1996) research lived with her unmarried childless aunt from the age of seventeen and gained a real insight into what life without children was like. From there she went to nursing college, an environment where several of the women were unmarried and, or childless, and that lifestyle became very real and normal to her. Therefore, having children was not something to which she ever gave much thought. Exposure to positive role models who demonstrated the possibility of desirable childfree lifestyles proved significant in women's decision making. The women were exposed to alternative ways of living, in which there was more potential for autonomy and self-development. These women interpreted motherhood as a sacrifice and all-consuming.

While some women consciously choose to avoid becoming mothers for fear they would replicate or re-create negative formative experiences they had with their own mothers, others, opt out of motherhood, because of the personal, social, financial, and professional sacrifices their parents had made for them. These women considered that they would not be able to make the same sacrifices, or devote themselves to their

children in the way their own parents had. Others were inspired by a single aunt, or other childless women. Having observed their lifestyles, some of the women aspired to create similar life paths for themselves, free from the commitment of children. Women's motives for choosing to remain childless are varied and diverse, and while some women's decision are profoundly impacted by their interaction/ relations with parents or family members, others are enticed more by the push and pull factors described by Gillespie (1999) that is, the push away from motherhood and the activities associated with it, and the pull toward childlessness with its perceived benefits and enticements.

Other Explanatory Causes of Voluntary Childlessness: Satisfactory Relationships

The role played by romantic relationship dynamics in shaping women's childbearing decisions was another recurring theme in the contemporary literature on voluntary childlessness (Carmichael and Whittaker, 2007; Gillespie, 2003; Graham et al. 2011; Ireland, 1993; Scott, 2009) where children can be seen as a threat to relationships. Carmichael and Whittaker (2007) found that this motive was high on the agenda, even among men, and that there was an overall awareness that children would not enhance partner relationships, if anything, they could take something away from them. As Carmichael and Whittaker (2007) pointed out, stability of a relationship was considered crucial among those who participated in their research, because the most common consequence of relationship breakdown if children were involved was lone motherhood. As one of the participants in the study explained,

Children add a lot of pressure to the relationship...So I think...couples think, Oh forget it. I'm not having kids, cause- I've seen what happens when you do have children; that the relationship between the couple can disintegrate...there's also...a fear of having a child without a father or mother...If there's that fear there, or you're uncertain about your relationship, why have them? (Joanne, 2007, p. 130).

In this context, the decision to be childless was rationalized as essential to negotiating adult relationships. Houseknecht (1979) as part of her research on voluntary childlessness in the US, examined the relationship between voluntary childlessness and marital adjustment, and used a comparative analysis between married women who did not want children and married women who were mothers. Fifty of the women were voluntarily childless and fifty were mothers, and all were aged between twenty-five and forty years. The study found that the women who were voluntarily childless reported slightly higher levels of marital satisfaction than their married counterparts who had children. This supported similar findings from earlier studies (Bram, 1984; Feldman, 1971). However, the work also revealed that education levels, employment status and religion had a more significant impact on women's marital satisfaction and the levels of marital adjustment required, than the presence or absence of children (Houseknecht, 1979).

Also, in Laura Scott's (2009) research, maintaining partner relationships emerged as a central motive for voluntary childlessness, and on a scale of one to five, eighty-five percent of participants rated it as a four or five, where five indicated strong agreement with the motive. In the interviews, all of the couples expressed satisfaction with their childfree relationships. They considered that all the emotional needs are fulfilled within this relationship and an additional emotional entanglement with a child might destabilise this. This is evidence of the emotional aspect of the decision making process as distinct from structural or economic ones. It also resonates with Beck's (1992) theory of individualization and the notion of active choice making. In terms of biography making, this suggests that women are prioritizing their relationships over having children.

Personal, Social or Global Concerns

Women who choose to remain childless are influenced by a range of personal, social and global concerns. From a personal perspective there is some evidence to suggest that women are reluctant to have children because of the perceived hardships of pregnancy and childbirth; the pain, anxiety, physical exertion and distress, as well as the potential loss of their personal dignity and self-control (Bartlett, 1994; Campbell, 1985, Houseknecht, 1987; Park, 2002; Veevers, 1980). However, in Scott's (2009) research, this was the least expressed motive, with only twenty-four percent of women and twelve percent of men rating it as significant. Participants who did identify with it feared that the risk of pregnancy and childbirth would compromise their health, or impact on their mental well-being, especially if there had been a history of depression within the family or other mental health issues. Such sentiments were also raised by one of the women who contributed to Daum's (2015) edited volume. She had suffered from psychiatric issues and debilitating depression for much of her life, and she explained that she had 'long been crippled by dark moods, paralyzed by existential dread', and had 'suffered several major depressive episodes' (Holt, 2015, p. 246). She avoided having children because she feared the mental trauma or the consequences of pregnancy on her own mental health. Others who contributed to Daum's (2015) volume were concerned about weight gain, or the physical act of giving birth, breastfeeding and hormonal imbalance. Still others took a more radical viewpoint. For instance, one of the early radical feminists in the US, and a key figure in the second-wave feminism⁸, Shulamith Firestone, described pregnancy as 'barbaric' and 'natural childbirth...at best necessary and tolerable and at worst like shitting a pumpkin' (1970, p.p. 198-199). She argued that motherhood as prescribed by

⁸ Second wave feminism started in the United States in the late 1950s and persisted through to the 1980s, and focused on issues related to the workplace, sexuality, family, and reproductive rights.

patriarchy was the main source of women's oppression and she challenged the long-standing ideology that a woman's biology was her ultimate destiny.

It would seem that the fear of pregnancy and childbirth is less of an issue for women in contemporary society (Scott, 2009). Perhaps this is due in part to improved maternity services and childbirth delivery practices more generally, a reduction in the number of maternal deaths in the western world, coupled with expectations of access to maternity healthcare. In (2016) the World Health Organization reported that between the period 1990 and 2015, maternal mortality rates decreased by forty-four percent worldwide.

Some women are motivated to remain childless for global and humanitarian reasons; an issue that is raised in the research since Houseknecht's review in 1987, (Kelly, 2009; Park, 2002; Rich et al. 2011; Scott, 2009; Shapiro, 2014). In these studies, participants expressed an interest in conserving the environment for future generations and they were concerned about the effects of population growth, global warming and climate change. Others referred to increasing rates of poverty and hunger, human rights abuses, or the activities of extremists. How these concerns have been identified and expressed are discussed below. For instance, one of the women who participated in Scott's research worked as an environmentalist, she explained that she 'would feel guilty bringing another person into this world knowing they would have to clean up what the rest of us have left behind' (2009, p. 90). Another believed that 'remaining childfree is the single largest environmental contribution anyone can make' (2009, p. 91) given the environmental problems caused by overpopulation. This motive was more strongly expressed among the twenty to twenty-nine year age group in Scott's research. This suggests that some younger women are making the decision to remain childless for less personal and more general global and worldwide concerns,

and concerns for future generations, particularly in relation to population growth and the inevitable links to poverty, starvation, infant mortality and the expanse of infectious diseases. These justifications serve to contradict the deviant and discrediting stereotype, and the negative sanctions frequently imposed on women who are childless by choice (Park, 2002).

Conclusion

Research literature on voluntary childlessness has expanded over time, particularly in Australia, the US, the UK and some parts of Europe (Callan, 1983; Carmichael and Whittaker, 2007; Gillespie, 1999; Houseknecht, 1987; Park, 2002; and Peterson, 2014). In Ireland however, there are significant gaps in the literature, and what little research has been carried out on voluntary childlessness has been incorporated into extended debates around motherhood and fertility (Heffernan and Wilgus, 2018; Murphy-Lawless, 1994; Rodgers, 2018. More recently, Heffernan and Wilgus (2018) explored how the idealization of motherhood in conventional society portrays women without children more negatively, while Rodgers (2018) challenged traditional societal beliefs that depict womanhood and motherhood as inevitable and necessary.

From a review of the literature, it is evident that this synopsis does not consider the complexities and nuances that some women experience in deciding on whether or not to have children. This simplistic view also extends on the selfish and individualistic label attributed to women's voluntary childlessness (Park, 2002).

From a research perspective, this study seeks to expand on omitted elements of information in the existing literature, to privilege women's voices and consider the lived experiences of women who are childless by choice in Ireland. It also seeks to explore the factors that influence women in their childbearing decision making, as well as the processes of biography making and identity making that women engage in.

Throughout the review the persistence and prevalence of the stigmatization of the voluntary childless has been evident. While some researchers suggest that the social pressure placed on women to procreate has reduced (Murphy-Lawless et al. 1994) others claim that it has become more intense, especially with the advent of social media (Gandolfo, 2005). Nonetheless, increasing numbers of women are choosing to remain childless, both in Ireland and elsewhere, reflecting women's resistance toward traditional assumptions about the role of women in society. Women who are childless by choice challenge pronatalist ideologies, which dictate that motherhood is normal, natural, inevitable, and that all women have instinctive desires to procreate and mother (Daum, 2015; Engwall and Peterson, 2013; Park, 2002; Veevers, 1980). In this, there is evidence of individualization, which essentially means that women are disembedding from many of the traditional, social, cultural, religious, and gendered constraints associated with the past, specifically those that relate to the role of women in society. Women are consciously choosing to construct their biographies, and craft out their individual identities in the face of an ever expanding range of choices, risks, and uncertainties. These conceptual ideas shall be discussed in greater detail in chapter three.

In order to manage and cope with the negative sentiment expressed toward them, women who are childless by choice develop what Park (2002) refers to as 'resistance strategies'. These strategies are used to deflect from the stigma and negative criticism, to avoid interrogation, or to maintain a positive sense of self-identity. Women who have reference group support in place from family, friends, associates or other women who are voluntarily childless, who understand and accept their decision are better able to manage the stigma (Houseknecht, 1977, 1987). Also, contrary to popular discourse, which assumes that women who make the decision to remain

childless will experience regret or future regret, especially as they approach mid-life, the findings from the research literature did not substantiate these views (Allen and Wiles, 2013; DeLyser, 2012; Gillespie, 2000; Jeffries and Konnert, 2002; Manning-Kelly, 2007; Morell, 2000; Safer, 1996). Indeed, some of the women expressed a deep sense of relief when they reached mid-life and were no longer able to conceive or bear children. This re-affirms the ideal that gender roles are socially constructed, and that assumptions around maternal instinct are shaped on pronatalist social practices.

In the research literature the typologies of early articulators and postponers developed by Veevers in the 1970 to describe women who were childless by choice are still relevant today. Although others have introduced new categorizations, Gillespie (1999); Houseknecht, 1987; Ireland (1993); and Scott (2009) the earlier categorization proposed by Veevers (1973) still have the most explanatory value and have been used extensively by the subsequent theorists outlined here.

Exploring the question of 'why' women choose to remain childless has been a central theme in the research literature (Safer, 1996; Shapiro, 2014; Tanturri and Mencarini, 2008; Veevers, 1973). In the literature, it is generally assumed that women who are childless by choice are selfish, individualistic, deviant, unnatural or self-centred, career-oriented, focused on money and material assets, or dislike children (Houseknecht, 1987; Shapiro, 2014). However, the women's accounts of their motives for choosing childlessness contest those claims. In describing the factors that influenced their decision making, the women made specific references to their childhoods and upbringings, their lack of maternal instinct, their ambivalence toward ever having children, and their concerns for the environment, climate change, overpopulation, and world hunger. As a result, they rendered their decision as 'essential and inevitable' (Peterson, 2014, p. 6). While some of the women drew on

the risks and uncertainties associated with children, others expressed clear views about their desires for a life of their own, free and uncoupled from the commitment of raising children and the responsibilities that motherhood entails (Movius, 1976; Peterson, 2014). The women were also aware of the gendered consequences of mothering, and the potential impact it would have on their everyday freedom and future aspirations. They had particular views on mothering that reflected the traditional gendered division of labour and ideas about intensive mothering. This was an expression of their individuality, and an example of responsible decision making, having considered the possible consequences that having children would have on them (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). However, drawing on the framework of the individualization thesis as the basis for women's decision making can be challenging, and can further advance on the stigmatization of the voluntary childless, given that womanhood and motherhood are still inextricably linked. The pivotal role of motherhood assigned to women is a social construct that is deeply influenced by pronatalism and gender beliefs, and has consequences for all women. What needs to change is the way we think about childlessness, choice making around women's voluntary childlessness, and how society continues to glorify the motherhood role.

In the context of this research, an interesting aspect of the work is that the individualization thesis has been used as a theoretical framework to tease out the more interpersonal factors that influence women in their decision to remain childless. In other studies on voluntary childlessness the concept of individualization has focused more on the structural and economic factors that motivate women in their decision making. The concepts of individualization and reflexive biography offer new ways of exploring the complexities behind women's decision making.

Chapter Three:

Understanding Women's Chosen Childlessness in Ireland

Exploring the Explanatory Value of Individualization, Reflexivity, Stigma and Stigma Management Strategies

This chapter explores the concepts of individualization, reflexivity, stigma and the strategies used to manage stigmatized identities and preserve a positive self, each of which has been drawn upon to explain why women are choosing childlessness. These concepts emerged early on in the research, following a review of the literature and have proved useful in making sense of various aspects of women's decision making around chosen childlessness including; dimensions of their experiences of it, and the strategies they employ to manage other people's reactions to it. Individualization made sense to me as an explanatory framework for exploring the choices women make in the context of the declining social, traditional, and cultural constraints that characterize contemporary Ireland. The concept of reflexivity, which is closely connected with individualization is useful for understanding the processes of biography making and identity making that women engage in when choosing to be childless. Despite the evidence that women have more choices available to them than in the past, women who choose to construct an identity separate and distinct from the identity assigned to them under patriarchy (motherhood) may still be identified as deviant, and subjected to varying degrees of stigmatization. Thus, I apply Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma as an explanatory framework to explore how women who are childless by choice deal with the fall-out from their non-conformity and the strategies and identity work they engage in to manage their discreditable identities. I make brief reference to Tyler's (2018) reference to stigma theory in the contemporary context, and I also draw on the work of Park (2002); and Hayden (2010) who developed a

further schema of strategies for controlling information relative to women's voluntary childlessness. Together the concepts of individualization, reflexivity, stigma and stigma management form the theoretical framework I use for understanding women's accounts of their voluntary childlessness. In this chapter, each concept is discussed separately, to determine what it can offer to my understanding of the women's narratives. Thereafter, the manner in which they combine to form my theoretical framework is detailed. Throughout, I draw on the work of researchers who have used these concepts in coming to an understanding of the various aspects of voluntary childlessness to see what useful insights they can offer to my research.

Individualization and Reflexive Modernity

In this section I outline the conceptual framework that I am using to theorize the relationship between individualization and reflexivity on the basis of the choices available to women, and the processes of biography making, in which they engage.

In the early 1990s a number of theorists began looking at, and trying to explain some of the fundamental changes they saw happening, in what Bauman (2000) subsequently referred to as liquid modernity, Beck (1992) described as reflexive modernity and Giddens (1991) defined as late modernity. Modernity is characterized by processes of social, economic, political, and cultural transformations, and is intrinsically associated with industrialization, and the emergence of a more secularized, urbanized, and bureaucratic society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). Modernity is also linked to the decline or the disintegration of traditional, communal, cultural, and social bonds and support systems. Inherent in the idea of modernity is a commitment to the self, with an emphasis on individual subjectivity, personal identity, and the making of an individualized biography. These developments are intrinsically associated with expansions in globalization, which

according to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) result in detraditionalization and an undermining of traditional sureties associated with the family, ethnic identity, class, religion and so forth. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) when analysed collectively, globalization, detraditionalization, and individualization point to the making of a reflexive life of one's own in an age of increasing uncertainties and risks. In a globalized society, the individual can no longer rely on the securities of the past instead they are compelled to think about who they are, what they are, and how they want to be in the world. While this offers the individual more in the way of choice, and the potential to minimize risk by engaging in reflexivity, in ways, it leads to further oppression, as people become re-embedded in new contexts and new values relative to modern institutions, including the labour and welfare markets (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991).

Individualization then, is a product of modernity, and is used to explain the structural transformation of society's institutions, and the changing nature of the relationship between the individual and society. In this regard, individualization describes the demise in the power of tradition to regulate and control human behaviour. Instead, human behaviour becomes increasingly reflexive, meaning that it is more the result of conscious and considered actions and choices than being entirely regulated or controlled. The implicit assumption is that the underlying conditions of society are influencing social norms, and are changing cultural values, and the responsibility is placed on the individual to actively shape their own lives. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 'individualization is a social condition which is not arrived at by a free decision of individuals, people are compelled to individualization' (2002, p. 4). Bauman argues that 'individualization is a fate, not a choice' (2002, p. xvi) while Giddens states that 'we have no choice but to choose' (1991, p. 81). Bauman

(2000); Beck (1992); Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002); and Giddens (1991) emphasize that individualization is a social phenomenon imposed on the individual by institutions associated with modernity, including; the welfare state, the labour market, bureaucracy and the legal and education systems. This process leads to a decline in historical continuity, undermines class structures, and frees people from traditional sureties associated with the family, society, religion, gender and so forth (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991).

For Giddens (1991, 1994) individualization is a positive development, as it empowers individuals to actively create their identities and determine their biographical life paths, to adjust to shifting institutional demands of modernity, and manage the associated tensions, risks and uncertainties. Although Giddens (1991) recognizes the complexities involved in setting out a coherent self-identity within this process, he is optimistic that it can be achieved at some level. According to Giddens (1991),

Individuals can achieve a measure of continuity by engaging in reflexive life planning whereby they reflect upon their own history, feelings, aspirations, and potentials, and consider alternative lifestyle choices that may be more or less consistent with their own ambitions and goals (cited in Howard, 2007, p. 30).

For Giddens (1991) self-identity reflects the expansion of individual reflexivity, it is based on one's own personal perception of themselves, and the source of meaning and fulfilment they gain from within themselves. In other words, the continuity of self-identity largely depends on the 'person's reflexive beliefs about their own biography' (1991, p. 53) and whether or not they wish to extend those cultural values and norms into their future life paths. Individual reflexivity then is the process wherein, individuals contemplate, deliberate about, and decide what it is they want out of life,

who they want to be, what they want to be, and how they want to be in the world. It is the figuring out part of the self, the identity making part, the part wherein they establish their individual biographies. It is also based on the relationship between the individual and society. Giddens (1991) account of self-identity stresses the need to uphold a biographical connection to the past, and the sureties of traditional modes and norms, to deal with the insecurities imposed by modern social institutions. As Giddens points out, the contemporary 'self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences' (1991, p. 2) self-identity is established through an ongoing reflexive process of self-organization and individual choice making, in what he describes as a culture increasingly characterized by risks and uncertainties.

For Beck (1992) individualization is characterized by three distinct perspectives; freedom from social and institutional structures, destabilization and the demise of traditional sureties, and the reintegration or the re-embedding of the individual in new forms of social control relative to; the labour market, welfare state, legal and education systems. According to Beck (1992) individualization signifies a transformation of social institutions and the relationship between the individual and society it does not suggest that individuals are liberated from social processes (Beck and Willms, 2004). What it does mean is that in contemporary society, increased reflexivity at the individual and institutional levels makes it possible for the contemporary individual to negotiate their biographies and identities. As noted by Beck, individuals are compelled 'for the sake of their own material survival-to make themselves the centre of their own planning and conduct of life' (Beck, 2000, p. 32). Also, while Beck (1992) acknowledged the unprecedented levels of freedom and the promotion of free choice imposed on the individual, like (Giddens, 1991) he expressed concerns about the collapse or breakdown of traditional family sureties, and the

expanding responsibilities the individual is required to take on. Also, Beck's (1992) views on biographical continuity differ slightly from Giddens's (1991) in the sense that he emphasizes the need for biographical experimentation, and suggests that it is necessary for the individual to reflect on the past with a view to making informed choices about the future. In this sense, individualization is two-fold, not only does the individual have to develop his or her own biography, but that biography must be reflexively planned out within the context of contemporary structural constraints and commitments, relative to employment, career, education and family life (Beck, 1992). According to Beck (1992) while the contemporary individual has the potential to live and lead a potentially fulfilling life based on their own individual preferences, they must take account of the risks involved and act reflexively in an effort to minimize or reduce them.

Bauman (2004) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) offer different perspectives on self-identity from those proposed by Giddens (1991). For Bauman (2004) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) self-identity is an elusive ambition, a pointless search for stability and cohesiveness in a world wherein traditional sureties have been replaced by unpredictable, uncontrollable, and unknown forms of risks and uncertainties. According to Bauman (2004) given the rapid pace and expanding scope of cultural, economic, political and social developments, one is continually compelled to dispose of their existing identities and replace them with newer ones. Thus, the search for self-identity is an ambivalent and precarious project which can never be fully achieved. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, (2002) offer a similar perspective, and question the extent to which lives are individualized and life paths freely chosen. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, in the context of modernity, 'how one lives becomes a biographical solution to systemic contradictions' (2002, p. xvi). One's self-

identity then is not freely chosen, instead, it is created in response to the expanding range of risks and uncertainties that are continually produced in society. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) individualization also eliminates the prospect of relying on the family, the community, or the state for guidance and security. Instead, individuals are required to make their own way in the world, and make choices and decisions from a diverse range of competing yet equally contradictory options, relative to contemporary institutions. While this suggests more in the way of choice, flexibility, and freedom, especially with regard to how individuals actively shape and define their individual biographies, the result according to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, p. 1-2) is 'precarious freedoms'. This essentially means that choices and decisions are made with a great deal of uncertainty, not knowing if those choices will produce the desired biographical effects. This signifies a further shift in responsibility from the collective; the family, and from social institutions to the individual, and this contributes toward the intensification of risk and uncertainty, or the expansion of the risk society (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim observe,

The main difference is that today people are not discharged from corporate religious-cosmological certainties into the world of industrial society, but are transplanted from the national industrial societies of the first modernity ⁹ into the transnational turmoil of world risk society (2002, p. 13).

According to the individualization theorists, individualization is a contradictory process in which older forms of constraint are being replaced by newer ones. Also, the growing gap between the likelihood of self-assertion and the ability to regulate one's social setting, are just some of the main contradictions relating to individualization. Giddens (1991) optimism about individualization and self-identity

⁹ Modernity or first modernity generally refers to the period between 1650 and 1950. Some of the defining characteristics of modernity included; increased emphasis on individual subjectivity, scientific explanation, rationalization, secularization, alienation, bureaucracy, urbanization, the expansion of nation-states, rapid financial exchange and communication.

is not shared by Bauman (2004); Beck (1992); or Beck-Gernsheim (2002) who view it more as a contradictory process, comprised of precarious freedoms, expanding opportunities, as well as growing risks and uncertainties. Hence, the contemporary individual must evaluate those risks with a view to safeguarding his or her own future.

Potential and Limitations of Individualization and Reflexivity in the Context of Women's Lives

Female individualization has been identified as a core feature of modernity (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). It is perceived as liberating women from traditional allegiances, roles, and responsibilities associated with the family, relationships, gender, tradition, and culture (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). It is generally considered as positive, as opposed to the less positive perspectives on individualization more generally. Considering the experiences of women, some commentators, while recognizing the increase in opportunities that have become available to women through the process of modernity, and in particular through education, and women's participation in the labour market, also recognize the challenges and conflicting demands imposed on women. In this sense, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) point to the complexities associated with modernity, the increased emphasis on individual decision making, and the impact those choices have on one's identity and biographical life paths. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim point out,

Now women have to learn how, in a market economy, motherhood limits their chances on the labour market...it is becoming clear that to have children is an occupational, financial and existential risk. The new message communicated to women is that the main priority is to make sure of your own way in life (2002, p. 124).

Added to this is the fact that women, like men, are now held accountable for the consequences of the choices they make, thus; the desire to have a child is situated more in the risk category, and requires 'careful individual consideration and planning' (2002,

p. 124). Giddens (1994) points to the contradiction between reflexive life planning and one's level of interaction with, or dependency on social institutions, including; the welfare state, and welfare bureaucracies. According to Giddens (1994) these factors make it increasingly difficult for women to reconcile personal ambitions, and a desire for a life of their own with motherhood, and paid employment. This draws attention to the risks and contradictions inherent in modernity, particularly in relation to women's reproductive roles and the changing structures of society.

Arguably, the emergence of female individualization is paralleled by a reaffirmation of gender roles and gender norms (Adkins, 1999; McDowell, 1999). While there is an implicit assumption of gender equality between the sexes, in reality, women are still impacted by unfavourable work structures, and a lack of educational and other institutional support structures, as outlined above (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Also, the reality of class and socio-economic factors need to be taken into account, when examining the degree to which women can consciously plan out and deliberate about their self-identities and personal biographies. For Bauman, individualization is unequally distributed amongst society where 'the volume of freedom depends solely on the ability to pay' (Bauman, 2000, p. 218). In this sense, not everyone has the opportunity to exercise individual choice.

Hey (2005) foregrounds gender and class in her critique of the individualization thesis, and argues that women from different socio-economic backgrounds, particularly working-class women, do not have the same capacity to develop individualized, or self-selected life paths. Klett-Davies supports Hey's argument, and makes the point that it is not sufficient to assume that all women benefit from 'modern social advantages' (2016, p. 27) associated with individualization. Individualization impacts on people differently, and social categories of class, gender, and ethnicity can have a

strong effect on people's experiences (Middlemiss, 2014). For instance, women who seek to combine mother work and paid work, especially single mothers and those with limited social support, lower earning capacities and restrictions on mobility can suffer particular disadvantage, and this can limit the notion of choice. More traditional gendered ideologies related to role expectations, also continue to present structural and cultural barriers to the process and the reality of individualization for women (Nitsche et al. 2016; Peterson, 2014). Charles et al. make the point that,

For women, individualization is a contradictory process which conflicts with embodied aspects of female identity such as being there for others and their responsibility for care work and emotion work within families and intimate relationships (2008, p. 7).

Indeed, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that these inequalities are further exacerbated by society's failure to provide women with adequate support, in terms of supported childcare and greater financial support for women who are mothers, especially single mothers. Giddens (1991) also observes that although class identification is less of an issue for individuals in contemporary society, some women still find themselves on the margins of society, and this makes it increasingly difficult for them to shape and construct their individual biographies.

A study on gender equality by Närvi (2012) in Finland, highlighted the challenges faced by women as a result of gendered parenting and employment practices. According to Närvi (2012) women who are mothers are disadvantaged due to structural factors and social expectations associated with motherhood. She found that women's ability to exercise free choice was hampered as a result of the traditional demands of parenting, as well as the structural demands that arise in the workplace.

A report in Ireland in 2015 indicated that gender inequality remains an unresolved feature of women's positioning in contemporary Irish society. Women

continue to have primary responsibility for housework, care work, shopping and cooking, and thus, have considerably less free time than men (Bord Bia, 2017). Also, women's employment rates are still considerably lower (Eurostat: Gender Statistics, 2018) and the gender pay gap for women in the EU (twenty-eight countries) was identified as 16.2 percent in 2016. This varied in different countries, ranging from 25.3 percent in Estonia to 5.2 percent in Romania. The gender pay gap in Ireland was 14.8 percent (Eurostat: Gender pay gap statistics, 2016) while the employment gap between women and men differed significantly across all Member States. The lowest employment gaps between men and women were recorded in Lithuania: 1.9 percent, Latvia: 2.9 percent, Finland: 3.3 percent and Sweden: 3.8 percent. The highest rates were reported in the following four countries; the Czech Republic: 16 percent, Romania: 17.6 percent, Greece: 19 percent and Italy: 20.1 percent (Eurostat: Gender Statistics, 2018). In Ireland the figure was recorded at approximately 13.85 percent (Eurostat, Employment Rate and Gender Employment Gap, 2016). Limited childcare options, childcare costs, and high costs of living in Ireland, also make it increasingly difficult for women to successfully reconcile work life and family life (Department of Justice, 2017; Murphy-Lawless et al. 1994). Women also remain highly under-represented in senior, political, and economic decision making positions in Ireland, a fact attributed in large part to inflexible work practices and leave entitlements (Barry, 2015). Such data would indicate that in the Irish context, full gender equality is not a reality (O'Connor, 2008; Reddan, 2014). Also, for many years there was restrictions on women's reproductive rights, however, that has recently changed, and the changes in the legislative framework will be reflected in the choices than women can make.

In certain respects, reflexivity brings more attention to the limitations of the individualization process, as it highlights the 'identity struggle' that women continue

to experience. While Giddens (1991) makes the point that women have the capacity to make active and decisive decisions, it is important to realize that not all women have those options available to them, or they may not be able to actualize them. As evidenced above, class still has a bearing on women's experiences of individualization, and while most women can engage in reflexive decision making, not all of them will achieve the ideal option that is best for them as individuals.

Individualization, Reflexivity and Voluntary Childlessness

Traditionally women did not consider the option of a bit of a life of their own, in contemporary society they have the option of considering that, and the previously unconsidered move to have a child has become a question or a decision. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim point out,

A kind of dramatic social experiment is being conducted before our eyes, whereby a previously straightforward wish to have children suddenly becomes 'the question of children' requiring careful individual consideration and planning...It is to be expected that for some women a child will remain a 'risk factor' that no longer has a place in their life project (2002, p. 125).

This was evident in the research carried out by Gillespie (1999) in the UK. Gillespie (1999) drew on the work of Giddens (1991) to explore women's voluntary childlessness in the context of constructing 'normal' feminine identities, separate and distinct from women's identities as mothers. Gillespie (1999) argued that identities are constructed through active and reflexive choice making and individual life experiences. She claimed that for some women the choice to remain childless is characterized by a continuous process of reflection and contemplation relative to wider factors in their lives, some of which can be linked to social changes associated with modernity; such as access to education, employment and contraception. Incorporated into this is the idea of push and pull factors, which according to Gillespie (1999) often

exist simultaneously. For instance, some of the women in Gillespie's (1999) research were enticed or pulled toward the perceived advantages of the childfree life, which included; having more freedom, autonomy, and independence to live the lives they wanted to. Others were pushed away from, or rejected the motherhood role and its associated activities, which they perceived as oppressive and undesirable.

In the Irish context, Murphy-Lawless et al. (1994) writing on issues concerning women's fertility, employed the theoretical framework of individualization and the growing emphasis on women's capacity to make personal choices, especially in relation to their fertility. That study, which included the accounts of sixty-six women, aged between nineteen and thirty-four years, highlighted the disembedding process, which saw a decline in the influence of the powerful institutions in Irish society, including; the Catholic Church and the State. While some women described and discussed the increasing opportunities available to them to exercise personal choice, especially in relation to their fertility, they also indicated that the choices they made were not necessarily the choices they wanted to make instead, they were influenced by social categories of class, gender and geography. Women from poorer economic backgrounds, and those living in rural or remote parts of Ireland experienced more limitations on their choices. This coincides with Bauman's (2000) theory which I discussed previously, which suggests that one's ability to exercise freedom and choice largely depends on their economic resources. As such, the women's narratives while evidencing the opportunities increasing levels of individualization presented to them, also showed the reality of its limitations, and the considerations they were taking into account in making their decisions and assessing the consequences of them. Murphy-Lawless et al. (1994) also found that some women made the decision to remain childless because of what they perceived as the risks associated with motherhood, in

particular the personal, social, financial, and employment risks involved. For others, choices around fertility were influenced by the lack of support available to them. This was especially evident in the case of single mothers, or women who lived in urban areas without the support of a strong family network. These women had no choice but to rely on crèches and other fee paying childcare facilities. This work suggests that women were engaging in a process of financial contemplation, where financial costs are a key consideration for them. It also shows that responsibility is changing from the collective; from family, community, and institutions to individual women. Increasingly, women are still largely expected to bear the personal, social, and economic consequences of having children. The study by Murphy-Lawless et al. (1994) also found that women deliberated about contraception, reproductive rights, and the costs of motherhood to women, especially women from disadvantaged backgrounds or those struggling to survive on a limited income. Women observed and reflected on the constraints that motherhood imposed on family members and friends, and then consciously decided that they did not want to take on the motherhood role or the associated responsibilities. The women chose an identity for themselves that did not include motherhood. Furthermore, they made plans for their futures which revolved around education, employment, relationships and balancing those with other life commitments. Such findings are reflected elsewhere in the literature. For instance, in reaching the decision to remain childless the women who participated in the research carried out by Doyle et al (2012); and Kelly (2009) considered and deliberated about a wide range of potential factors. Some of the women identified defining childhood experiences as the catalyst for their decision making. They considered the possible risks of exposing children to the childhood abuse they had experienced as children themselves, and considered it a necessity to avoid having

children for that reason. Others weighed up the potential impact of children on their lifestyles, and considered that they were either emotionally, financially, or physically unequipped to raise children on their own. Some considered motherhood as a burden and a sacrifice, while others treasured the spontaneity that a childless life afforded them, and made specific reference to the associated freedom.

As Giddens (1994) points out, on the one side, we can easily discern new opportunities that potentially free us from the limitations of the past. On the other, 'almost everywhere, we see the possibility of catastrophe' (Giddens, 1994, p. 184). In this sense, Giddens draws attention to the increasing freedoms associated with modernity, but also, to the potential risks and uncertainties. In the context of women's voluntary childlessness, one can discern that some women feel a sense of uncertainty and insecurity regarding their future life paths, and thus, consciously deliberate on the broader range of choices available to them. Their identity then becomes more personalized, their life paths self-chosen. Unlike in the past, children are now the result of conscious decision making, and are considered in the context of a range of competing choices and expanding risk factors.

More recently, Peterson (2014) used Beck's individualization thesis as an explanatory framework for examining women's voluntary childlessness in Sweden. Following Beck, Peterson (2014) considered individualization in the context of changing demographic trends in recent decades. The process of individualization in Sweden, according to Peterson (2014) has meant that motherhood is no longer necessarily a woman's supreme life goal instead motherhood is now looked upon as a decision to be made in the context of a broader range of personal, social, and financial factors. Several of the women in Peterson's research expressed concerns about the potential risks associated with motherhood, again, alerting us to the realities of

personal responsibility for life paths that women considered throughout this process. What is evident is that the conditions we are living in are changing, in contemporary society we do not have a choice about individualization, however there are different considerations in the different countries, much of which depends on the welfare and state policies available to women. For instance, conditions for parenthood are better in Finland than in the UK, yet, some women are still choosing childlessness, considering that they are still gender burdened with childcare and caring responsibilities.

As self-focused individuals, women are tasked with the responsibility of negotiating their biographies and constructing their self-identities through conscious and reflexive decision making with an increasing focus on the possible consequences of the choices they make (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Gillespie, 1999; Peterson, 2014). As Peterson (2014) pointed out in her research, motherhood can present obstacles in women's lives and prevent them from doing what they want. It can also restrict their capacity for self-actualization, and these are factors that women consider when deliberating about motherhood and raising children in contemporary society.

The Stigma Associated with Women's Voluntary Childlessness, and Identity Management Techniques

Although I am applying Goffman's (1963) theories of stigma to this research, it is worth noting that not all women who are childless by choice are stigmatized. However, for those who are, or who consider themselves to be stigmatized or assigned a negative or discrediting identity, Goffman's theory is considered most useful, since it also lines out the strategies or techniques that individuals engage in, to manage their stigmatized identities and preserve a positive sense of self. I also draw on the work of

Tyler et al. (2018) and their re-conceptualization of stigma as a social form of power and discrimination, which functions at the structural level and filters down to the individual. In terms of the strategies that women engage to manage their stigmatized identities, I draw on the work of Park (2002); and Hayden (2010).

This thesis resituates Goffman's (1963) conceptualization of stigma and spoiled identity within the context of women and voluntary childlessness. Goffman (1963) identifies three different types of stigma, physical abnormalities, character imperfections, and the stigma attributed to race, creed and religion. If the stigma is visible, the individual is ascribed a discredited identity. If it is not immediately visible, is unknown, or can be concealed, the individual is referred to as discreditable, and they engage in identity management techniques to reveal or conceal the information from others. Goffman (1963) also explored the social function of stigma and made a number of key claims; that stigma theory is socially constructed and that people use a range of strategies to cope with or manage the potentially distressing aspects of stigma, these include; the techniques of passing or concealment, that stigma operates as a form of social control, wherein, certain individuals are excluded from full social acceptance because of what society perceives as their abnormalities (Goffman, 1963). Hence, their identity becomes socially devalued or spoiled, and they may be segregated from society in various ways. These claims influence and underpin this research.

In order to conceptualize stigma in the contemporary context, Tyler et al. suggest that we must move beyond Goffman's earlier conceptualization, which is 'decidedly ahistorical and apolitical' (2018, p. np). Tyler et al. seek to augment the existing sociology of stigma, by focusing more on the 'forces which shape the emergence of stigma in everyday contexts (2018, np). Taking inspiration from Parker and Aggleton, who suggest that,

In order to move beyond the limitations of current thinking about stigma...we need to reframe our understandings of stigmatization and discrimination to conceptualize them as social processes that can only be understood in relation to broader notions of power and domination (2003, p. 16).

Tyler et al. seek to reconceptualise stigma as a 'form of power' (2018, np) operated through neoliberal forms of capitalism, with social implications.

In the context of this research, the aim is to draw on the sociological understandings of stigma as outlined above, to determine if those theories are relevant, or can be applied to research on women who are childless by choice.

Potential and Limitations of Stigma

Goffman's (1963) theories of stigma and spoiled identity have been used by several theorists in their assessments of women's voluntary childlessness, in part, to explain the stigma associated with their lifestyle, and in part to explore the strategies they engage in to cope with and manage discreditable identities (Ayers, 2010; Hayden, 2010; Park, 2002). One of the central limitations of those theories is that neither Goffman (1963) nor Tyler et al. (2018) speak directly to the notion of women's voluntary childlessness. While Goffman (1963) explored the concept of stigma and spoiled identity from a generalized perspective, and theorized it in the context of visible and invisible body blemishes and blemishes of character, Tyler et al. (2018) set out to reconceptualise stigma in the context of contemporary class structures in society, and the role of the state and other institutions in intensifying social inequalities and social injustice. Despite this, I draw on the work of others who have applied Goffman's (1963) theories of stigma and spoiled identities, to explore and understand women's voluntary childlessness. The work by Tyler et al. (2018) has only recently been published, and to the best of my knowledge has not been theorized in the context

of women's voluntary childlessness. I welcome the opportunity to explore Tyler's reconceptualization of stigma which she claims functions as a form of power and control, to determine if indeed, contemporary structural institutions influence the fertility choices that women make.

In a small number of studies, it has been claimed that the stigma associated with women's voluntary childlessness has decreased, and that it is now a more socially acceptable life choice (Koropecj-Cox et al. 2007; 2015; Murphy-Lawless et al. 1994). In spite of this, there are still women who find themselves stigmatized, negatively judged, questioned, or pressurized into re-thinking their decision. These women must then develop strategies or ways in which to manage and account for information relating to their non-conformity. These strategies shall be discussed in more depth in the next section.

[Application of Stigma in the Context of Women's Voluntary Childlessness](#)

Evidence suggests that some women who are childless by choice are stigmatized or assigned a negative, deviant, discreditable or spoiled identity, because of what is perceived as their failure to comply with social role expectations based on culturally shared gender stereotypes (Ayers, 2010; Hayden, 2010; Park, 2002). To overcome the consequences of stigma and in particular the negative judgement, women who are childless by choice are required to develop identity management techniques, to conceal or reveal discreditable information about themselves and their voluntary childlessness.

As part of her research on stigma management among the voluntary childlessness, Park (2002) developed a schema of strategies, as an explanation for understanding how women who are childless by choice respond to the deviant identity and selfish label attributed to their voluntary childlessness. These strategies are also

referred to as information control techniques, and I am using these to structure this section.

Additionally I draw on the work of Hayden (2010) who, like Park (2002); looked at the strategies that childless women engaged in when challenged or confronted about their voluntary childlessness. Hayden (2010) also described a schema of strategies of information control, and these shall be discussed in more depth in the next section.

Ayers (2010) also used Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma to frame her research, and argued that a negative stereotype can be deeply discrediting and can exclude and ostracize people from society in several ways. Ayers applied these theories to her research on women's childbearing choices, and drew attention to ways in which women who opt out of motherhood are negatively viewed, socially excluded, and stigmatized for what is perceived as their 'non-normality or non-conformity' (2010, p. 29). The findings from Ayers research tie in with research that emphasizes the role of proactive coping strategies in neutralizing and contesting stereotypes and views about stigmatized individuals (Park, 2002).

The findings from Park's (2002) research contribute to additional insights into the strategies that women use to negotiate stigmatized identities. These have been categorized as proactive, intermediate and reactive, depending on the degree to which participants challenged or accepted them. Proactive strategies were used to challenge the negative discourse associated with women's voluntary childlessness, and were used to situate childlessness as a socially respectable lifestyle. Intermediate strategies challenge conservative pronatalist ideologies, while reactive strategies generally accept pronatalist norms associated with fertility. Park (2002) subsequently developed

a schema of six additional strategies of information control, these included; passing, identity substitution, condemning the condemnors, asserting a right to self-fulfilment, claiming biological deficiency, and redefining the situation. Since these strategies have already been discussed in depth in chapter two, the literature chapter, they shall only be described in brief herein. Passing is a reactive strategy that the childless by choice used to appear 'normal' and limit the implications of stigma. In Park's research it was used by younger women, who were still perceived as being able to conceive. Another strategy used was identity substitution, wherein, participants feigned infertility, and this was seen as a less stigmatizing option and deflected from some of the negative criticism. Like passing, identity substitution is a reactive strategy used to minimize stigma without directly confronting dominant social norms relative to fertility and reproduction. The intermediate strategy of condemning the condemnors was used as a justification for voluntary childlessness, wherein participants acknowledged their actions and accepted responsibility for them, but denied the negative failing attributed to their decision making. Instead, they argued that parenting was something that was done unreflectively and without adequate regard for potential children, and they justified their decision to be childless on that basis. The next strategy, and one that is commonly used in contemporary society as a justification for voluntary childlessness is a right to self-fulfilment. It primarily refers to the perceived enticements of the childfree life, in particular the enhanced personal, social, and financial freedom. It resonates with the individualization thesis developed by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) which suggests that individuals are consciously deciding about themselves and the nature of their identities. The final strategy in managing social responses and asserting a positive childfree identity was through redefining the situation. This is a proactive strategy used to challenge the motherhood mandate,

wherein people claim positive alternative contributions to society and the world through their work, their concerns for the environment, global warming and so forth.

Research indicates that there are other forms of identity management strategies that those with stigmatized identities can adopt. Among her sample of childless women, Hayden (2010) found two primary stigma management strategies that women engaged in to deflect from the criticism and negative stereotyping associated with their voluntary childlessness. The women either confronted the negative evaluations, they reversed the dominant ideology of motherhood as imperative to adult feminine identity, or they accepted it. Like the participant's in Park's (2002) research, the women Hayden interviewed indicated that their decisions not to have children was frowned upon and they were made to feel 'different from other women – often out-of-place, abnormal, and deficient' (2010, p. 272). In response, some of the women reversed the selfish charge onto others, particularly parents who succumb to societal pressure and have children because it is expected of them, and this strategy worked to moderate the guilt and discomfort the women felt when exposed to negative judgement. Others challenged the negative or selfish label attributed to their voluntary childlessness and justified their decision to be childless on the basis of environmental or financial concerns. Some of the women accepted the negative judgement expressed toward them, and tried to make amends for what they perceived as their failure in other ways. These shall be discussed in more depth in chapter seven.

The women involved in Ayers (2010) research also developed methods or ways in which to conceal information pertaining to their childbearing decision making. Women used the technique of passing, described earlier, to appear normal and avoid being stigmatized. Alongside passing, Ayers (2010) described the process of outing, wherein, the discrediting information about the childless individual is disclosed and

subsequent efforts are made to control for unpleasant or awkward situations. Using methods of information control, the childless individual seeks help from family, and friends, keeps a distance from others and engages in cautious behaviour, in an attempt to prevent others from finding out about their situation. Others in the research used a technique referred to as dis-identification, whereby they consciously challenged the motherhood mandate and rejected the negative labels attributed to their voluntary childlessness. Participants also used tools of resistance to offset the stigma and negative judgement. Strategies included; humour, answering-back and distancing themselves from potentially challenging encounters.

Kelly (2009) in a review of women's voluntary childlessness noted that women encountered some disapproval, but positively challenged negative responses, which they encountered from family, friends, relatives, associates and others. Strategies used were similar to those described by Park (2002) they included; justifying their position by focusing on the positive aspects of childlessness and the undesirable responsibilities motherhood entailed. Some revealed a lack of maternal desire for children, or used a sense of humour to detract from the negativity and the condescending stereotype.

As part of their research on voluntary childlessness in Australia, Turnbull et al. (2016) explored women's experiences of social exclusion, and the associated stigmatization. While some women challenged the centrality of motherhood to adult feminine identity, others felt they were being true to themselves by creating an identity that coincided with the development of a life trajectory based on their own personal desires and ambitions. These women did not feel the need to justify or defend their voluntary childlessness.

However, stigma is not exclusively managed by stigmatized individuals and research on stigma management among women who are childless by choice suggests that social networks; family and friends support stigmatized people to manage the pressures and demands of their discreditable social identities. This raises an interesting aspect of enquiry relating to the role of social networks in helping the stigmatized individual cope with and manage stigma.

Conclusion

The analysis of the theoretical frameworks of individualization and reflexivity facilitates theorizing and analysing the multiplicity of choices available to women in contemporary Irish society. However, it also brings into focus the social, cultural and relational constraints that conflict with the processes of reflexive biography making and the production of self-biographies. Although optimistic about the prospects of individualization and reflexive biography making, like Bauman (2000); Giddens (1991) draws attention to the contemporary structural constraints associated with modernity, including people's dependency on the labour market, the welfare state, the legal and education systems, and state bureaucracy. In the context of women's lives, time and again it has been found that women are compelled to make choices in relation to how they want their lives to be, and that oftentimes these choices are made in the context of the structural constraints outlined above. Nowhere is this more evident than in the context of women's voluntary childlessness, wherein, choices around motherhood are being made in relation to work, lifestyles and in particular the desire for a life of one's own (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). On the plus side, individualization has facilitated women in their efforts to create a life of their own choosing, free from the demands of children and childcare, and the childfree lifestyle enables them to give priority to themselves (Ireland, 1993; Peterson, 2014). On the

reverse, individualization ensues that women must negotiate their biographies and make their own way in the world, without the sureties of traditional modes and norms. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) point out, lives become risk projects, and individuals must construct risk biographies to manage and cope with the consequences and uncertainties of the choices they make.

The individualization thesis and the concept of reflexivity have been used in several studies to contextualize women's voluntary childlessness (Gillespie, 1999; Murphy et al. 1994; Peterson, 2014). In this study, I explore the usefulness of the theoretical frameworks of individualization and reflexive biography as explanatory mechanisms for women's voluntary childlessness. The individualization thesis stood out to me as an explanatory framework because it suggests that our lives are much more dependent on individual choice making, especially with regard to family formation (Bauman, 2002; Peterson, 2014). Closely incorporated with individualization is the notion of the making of risk biographies, as a way of managing and coping with the consequences and uncertainties of the individualized society.

In this study, I am also trying to theorize how women who are childless by choice manage negative reactions to their decisions, and how they deal with assuming an identity which is not always highly valued. I apply Goffman's theories of stigma and managing spoiled identities to help me understand the nature of stigma and the ways in which the women deal with it. I supplement this, by engaging with the more contemporary conceptualizations of stigma offered by Tyler et al. (2018) who claim that stigma functions at the structural level, with consequences at the social and individual levels, as I am interested in finding out if women's fertility choices are influenced by structural practices and policies prevalent in contemporary society. I engage with the work of Park (2002); Hayden (2010); and Ayers (2010) in terms of

the strategies they that women who are childless by choice engage in to manage their stigmatized identities and preserve a positive sense of self.

Chapter Four:

Methodology and Research Methods

This chapter outlines the methodological approach and data gathering tools, used in this study and critically examines their usefulness in terms of answering the research questions in hand. My research methodology and design was informed by a feminist research perspective, which focuses on the experiences of women in their natural social environments, where the intention is to 'make women visible, raise their consciousness and empower them' (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013, p. 258). In this regard, I used qualitative semi-structured interviews as a medium to gain rich, in-depth knowledge of the women's experiences from their own perspectives (Gray et al. 2015).

During the analysis of the research findings, I thoroughly examined the narrative accounts of the twelve women who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. I explored factors such as the decision making process that each of the women experienced, with a view to identifying what lifestyles the women wanted for themselves, and how they articulated their reflections about this. I explored the notion of stigma with the women, to determine if they had been negatively judged or pressurized into re-thinking their decision to be childless and the strategies they engaged in to manage their stigmatized or spoiled identities (Ayers, 2010; Hayden, 2010; Park, 2002).

Richards (2003) argues that social scientists work on the premise of their ontological and epistemological positions. The ontological and epistemological orientations underpinning this methodological approach are constructivism and interpretivism. Constructivism is a research paradigm which asserts that reality is a subjective product of the individual mind, which is consistently being re-created by

individuals through their interaction with others (Guba and Lincoln, 1998). Interpretivism has as its starting point the belief that people interpret, understand, and make sense of their environment in ways that are influenced by their cultural backgrounds, philosophical beliefs, shared meanings, and social settings (Best, 2012; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Plummer, 2008). From a research perspective, interpretivism is focused on understanding meanings and motives in human behaviour, as well as other subjective experiences (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Semi-structured interviews are typically used by interpretivists, as a means of generating large volumes of high quality, in-depth data. Interpretivist-constructivist led research provides for a flexible research design, that promotes the engagement of and central positioning of the person experiencing the phenomenon being researched (Gray et al. 2015).

The methodologies and research methods described above formed the basis for this study. The subsequent data that was generated from the women's narrative accounts, which focused on the women's motives for choosing to remain childless, and the processes of biography making and identity making the women engaged in, were analyzed using thematic and conceptual analysis (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). From a constructivist perspective, thematic analysis works to understand, interpret and make sense of the socio-cultural contexts within which participants narrative accounts are embedded. It is a flexible method that consists of identifying, analysing, and cataloguing patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013).

I also used the method of interpretative phenomenological analysis, which offers insights into how individuals make sense of and understand a given social phenomenon. Interpretative phenomenological analysis provides a detailed account of experiences of the life-world and personal experiences of those being researched

(Smith et al. 2015). My approach and research methods are described in more detail in the remainder of this chapter.

Ontological and Epistemological Considerations

Ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of reality, or the nature of social entities in the social world (Bryman, 2001, 2008; Flick, 2009). More broadly, it looks at the notion of whether or not social entities should be considered as real entities, that exist independent of social actors, or whether they are created by the actions of social actors (Bryman, 2008; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Guba and Lincoln, 1985). For Ormston et al. the point of orientation is,

Whether or not there is a social reality that exists independently from human conceptions and interpretations and, closely related to this, whether there is a shared social reality or only multiple, context-specific ones? (2014, p. 4).

In brief, ontology is concerned with (i) the philosophical nature of reality, (ii) and whether or not human entities are responsible for, or what role they play in creating this reality (Furlong and Marsh, 2002). These contrasting ontological positions are respectively referred to as constructivism and objectivism¹⁰ (Bryman, 2001, 2008). My view is that a subjective reality exists, that is, an external reality, constructed by individuals through their social interaction with each other, and this reality is continually being revised and reinvented (Bryman, 2008; David and Sutton, 2004) through their socio-cultural contexts. This resembles the constructivists take on ontology, which suggests that social actors create and produce social phenomenon.

¹⁰ Objectivism is an ontological position that implies that social phenomenon and their meaning have an existence that is independent of social actors.

In qualitative research, constructivism holds that knowing is a process of actively interpreting and constructing individual knowledge representations. Constructivist theorists argue that one's perceptions and interpretations of the world are essentially what constitutes true knowledge (Dickerson and Zimmerman, 1996; Guba and Lincoln, 1998; Rapmund, 2000). According to constructivist perspective there is no single truth, and there is no one external reality; instead, there are multiple subjectivities, truths, and realities, which are continually being created and revised through the actions and social interaction of individuals (Bryman, 2008; David and Sutton, 2004) and through the opportunities and constraints of their environments. In the context of gender specific research, the constructivist approach to research facilitates the hearing of women's voices, in telling their stories, in their own words, as lived and experienced by them, in the context of their subjective realities. I subscribed to a constructivist paradigm, which advocates that 'women's perspectives matter', and that 'each woman has a truth that is true for them' (Ayers, 2010, p. 37). In the context of this research, that approach enabled me to explore with each of the women the main factors and experiences that influenced them in their childbearing decision making, the lifestyles they wanted for themselves and the processes through which they articulated their reflections about this. I then explored with the women their experiences of stigma and whether they were assigned a stigmatized or spoiled identity, and the processes through which they navigated the negative judgements and maintained a positive sense of self/ self-worth. After that process had been completed, the women's accounts were then grouped together and were analyzed for overarching themes.

Epistemology, according to Guba and Lincoln (1998); and Hesse-Biber (2007) is a philosophy which is concerned with the nature, sources, limitations, and validity

of knowledge. While Harding describes it as a 'theory of knowledge' (1987, p. 3), Richards refers to it as the 'view of what we can know about the world and how we can know it' (2003, p. 2). Bryman states that 'an epistemological issue concerns the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline' (2008, p. 13). The principle debate is whether or not the social world should be considered in the same context as the natural sciences. The natural science is a branch of science which deals with the study of the physical world, chemistry, geology, biology (Bryman, 2008; Flick, 2002, 2009). According to Richards (2003) the principle differences between the social sciences and the natural sciences is; whether or not it is achievable to obtain knowledge about the world without influence or intervention, or is it such that observation can never be entirely objective, since it is always influenced by how others construct their social realities.

As a qualitative feminist researcher, I commit to the constructivist and interpretivist paradigms, proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1998). Interpretivism is closely connected to constructivism. Interpretivism is about interpreting, understanding and making sense of the world, of people's stories, their behaviour, their experiences, and events which occurred in their lives (Bryman, 2008; Edirisingha, 2014; Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; May, 1997; Neuman, 2000; Ormston et al, 2014). According to Willis, 'interpretivists believe an understanding of the context in which any form of research is conducted is critical to the interpretation of data gathered' (2007, p. 4). Interpretivism essentially seeks to understand a particular context, and the fundamental essence of the interpretative paradigm is that one's reality is socially constructed (Willis, 2007). In the context of this research, an interpretative methodology enables me to examine what the women are saying about their experiences of voluntary childlessness in contemporary Irish

society. As Willis points out, interpretivism is subjective, and interpretivist researchers 'eschew the idea that objective research on human behaviour is possible' (2007, p. 110). Instead, they take the view that reality can only be explored from the perspective of lived experiences and that 'different people and different groups have different perceptions of the world' (Willis, 2007, p. 194). Interpretivism then, adopts multiple perspectives, to gain a broader and more comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the diverse experiences of those being researched (Morehouse, 2011).

Feminist Research Perspectives

There has always been active debate among feminists about what constitutes a feminist research project because feminist research is wide-ranging in content and methodological and epistemological positioning (Maynard and Purvis, 1994). However, theorists point out certain key elements that distinguish feminist research from other more traditional methods. Specifically, feminist research is for and about women, and is primarily concerned with understanding women's experiences, promoting their voices, and improving their lives overall (Beckman, 2014; Gray et al. 2015). Feminist research also requires that issues around gender relations, gender inequality, diversity, social change and the empowerment of women are recognized and addressed (Beetham, 2007; Fonow and Cook, 2005; Ralph, 1988; Weston, 1988). From the perspective of the researcher/ respondent relationship, the underlying objective of feminist research is to minimize power relations, honour reflexivity, and limit the influence of the researcher on the research process overall. Guided by the feminist perspectives described above, in this study, I seek to interpret the subjective narrative accounts of the women, with a view to understanding the background factors that motivated them in their decision making, identifying what type of lifestyles they

want for themselves and the processes through which they articulate their reflections about this. I also focus on understanding the identity work they engage in to manage the social pressures and negative judgement exerted on them as a result of their voluntary childlessness.

Insider status and Reflexivity in Research

Since, I have already discussed my insider status as a woman who is voluntarily childless in the overall introduction to this thesis, in this section I only make brief references to it. The term insider status has several different connotations and categorizations. Jenkins (2000) defines an insider as a group member, whose experiences are similar to those being researched. According to Griffith (1998) an insider is someone who shares a sense of sameness or has shared characteristics to those being researched, such as, gender, identity, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, language, or occupation. There are arguments both for and against insider research (Serrant-Green, 2002). For instance, Kanuha, suggests that,

For each of the ways that being an insider researcher enhances the depth and breadth of understanding a population that may not be accessible to a non-native scientist, questions about objectivity, reflexivity, and authenticity of a research project are raised because perhaps one knows too much or is too close to the project and may be too similar to those being studied (2000, p. 444).

From my own perspective as a voluntarily childless woman, I bring attention to the insights and the knowledge that can be achieved from engaging in the reflexive practice of insider research, and elaborate on ways in which to navigate and control for the complexities involved in data gathering and analysis.

Advantages of an Insider Status

There is considerable evidence which suggests that an insider position, that is, being part of the world of the population being researched, can result in the collection of a more balanced and collaborative set of research findings (Haraway, 1991; Hesse-Biber et al. 2007; Hume, 2007; Lentin and Byrne, 2000). As Dwyer and Buckle point out,

The benefit of being a member of the group one is studying is acceptance. One's membership automatically provides a level of trust and openness in your participants that would likely not have been present otherwise. One has a starting point (the commonality) that affords access into groups that might otherwise be closed to 'outsiders'. Participants might be more willing to share their experiences because there is an assumption of understanding and an assumption of shared distinctiveness; it is as if they feel, 'you are one of us and it is us versus them, those on the outside who don't understand' (2009, p. 58).

Hartsock (1987) and Hume (2007) contend that an insider position is one of the key ways in which to gather rich and insightful data, and gain a more nuanced understanding of the research topic and indeed the research subjects. Also, as Bell (2005) points out, communication between the researcher and those being researched is more open and natural, and participants are generally happy to share their experiences with someone who shares their position, since they are less likely to be judged or negatively perceived.

A number of leading researchers have used their insider position to add credibility to their research. For instance, Hume (2007) who grew up in Northern Ireland during the 'troubles'¹¹, and who subsequently carried out research on women's experiences of violence in El Salvador, felt that her personal experience helped her gain a much better insight into and understanding of these women's experiences.

¹¹ The Troubles is a name commonly used to describe the ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland during the late twentieth century. It is also referred to as the Northern Ireland conflict, which persisted for a period of thirty years, from 1968-1998.

Specifically, she noted the commonalities between herself and the women she studied, in particular, how they almost normalized the everyday threat of violence, and how they created ways to cope with the constant fear and danger to life. The point Hume (2007) makes is that rather than trying to conceal personal emotion and avoid bias in the research, that emotion should be used to make sense of and gain a more nuanced understanding of whatever is being studied.

Similarly, Oakley, in her study of *Motherhood* (1981) claimed that the success of her study was due in part, to the open relationship she established and maintained with participants. She purposely let each of the women guide the interview, and encouraged them to ask her personal questions, which she claimed successfully set the foundation for a friendly and non-hierarchical rapport. According to Oakley, results are 'best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationships' (1981, p. 41).

Similarly, while researching the issue of voluntary childlessness in the US, Carolyn Morell, author of *Beyond Motherhood* (1994) claimed that her insider status as a voluntarily childless woman enriched the quality of her research and the research analysis, since she shared 'the same history and set of allegiances', as the women she was interviewing for the study (1994, p. xvii).

In another study on voluntary childlessness in Canada, Gillian Ayers (2010) wrote that her insider status as a voluntarily childless woman helped her to gain the 'trust and solidarity' of the childless women who participated in her research, and added to the 'overall richness of the interview data' (2010 p. 201). Furthermore, since she shared 'personal qualities, as well as experiences with the women', (2010, p. 201)

she found that the women's responses were more intimate, open and honest. The similarities which included the women's non-maternal status, their desire to pursue alternative life goals and experiences, and their acceptance of the decision making process as 'fluid and continuous', helped them feel more reassured (2010, p. 201). Also, to protect participants and control for power dynamics in her research, she invited the women 'to be co-creators of knowledge' (2010, p. 43). She assured participants of their right to refuse to answer questions, and encouraged them to put forward questions or themes that she had omitted to include. Overall, she aspired to remain attentive to her moral obligations as a feminist/ social researcher, ensuring that the women were protected, and that their privacy was foremost.

Challenges of an Insider Status

Despite their privileged position, insider researchers must contend with a wide range of potential complexities, which can occur throughout the research process and can effectively impede its progress (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). First, there is the issue of the exceedingly common characteristics that researchers may share with participants (DeLyser, 2001; Kim, 2011; Takeda, 2012) which according to Gelling (2013) can result in the oversight or omission of vital data, if the participant feels that the researcher is already aware of, and understands the experiences being discussed. It is possible that the participant may abstain from telling all of the story or explaining their experiences in-depth. Also, despite the researcher's positioning, it can be difficult to understand and make sense of the 'lived reality' of others, thus, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011, p. 193) cautions against assuming that shared positions lead to greater insights into the phenomenon being researched. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) also caution against over-rapport, which they claim has the potential to hinder the research process as it progresses. Glesne, also takes up the issue of over-rapport or over-

identification and highlights the need to 'honour the consequences of acting with genuineness' (1999, p. 105) by actively engaging in the ongoing process of detailed reflection, to account for one's own personal biases and perspectives.

Managing my Insider Status

Following these broad interpretations, I describe herein some of the experiences I encountered during the research process, and outline how I endeavoured to overcome the challenges and issues that emerged as a result of my insider position. As an insider, I had the benefit of knowing and understanding a certain amount about the women who participated in the research. This included having some knowledge of the range of factors that might have influenced them in their decision making, the societal reactions I would expect they had to contend with, and some understanding of the internal fears and complexities that emerge as a result of their voluntary childlessness. I also had a certain level of familiarity with the strategies or techniques they might use when disclosing or discussing their voluntary childlessness with others. I was most interested in finding out how others managed the stigma or the pressure they faced, since I myself had only very rare experiences of it. From my own perspective, when questioned about my voluntary childlessness, I tend to conclude each conversation with the line, 'I am childless by choice, but I really like children'. Subconsciously, it is as if I feel I have to justify my decision, to make it known to others that I am not a 'child-hater'. While I am very comfortable with my choice and speak openly about it, perhaps, there is an underlying issue which continuously causes me to justify my choice to others, and re-affirm that it is not the case that I do not like children, it simply is that I do not want children of my own.

Identifying as Childless by Choice

Following Oakley's (1981) recommendations, from the outset, I identified myself to prospective participants as a woman who is childless by choice. According to Ayers (2010); and Oakley (1981) this sets out a more neutral platform from which to proceed with the research. Further, as Ayers (2010) suggests, by providing a certain amount of personal information, the researcher is likely to gain the trust of participants and gain a valuable insight into the factors that influence and continue to impact on their lifestyles. Thus, if the women asked me any personal questions I answered them truthfully and honestly. I did not refrain from answering any of their questions; however, I was careful not to provide an overload of information on my own status, as I did not want to influence the women or their accounts in any way. DeLyser (2001) cautions that sometimes there can be an over-eagerness on the part of participants, making it difficult for the researcher to elicit the expected responses, since they engage in conversations about other issues that are not necessarily related to the research topic. Although I experienced this with two of the participants, I felt it was important not to interrupt the women when they were speaking, particularly since they had voluntarily given up their time to participate in the study. However, after I had transcribed each of those interviews, I quickly realized that the onus was on me to try to keep the participants on track where possible otherwise, huge amounts of non-relevant data would have been generated. If there was something I did not understand during the interview, I took note of it, and referred back to it after the interview, or made subsequent contact with the women at a later stage. For instance, Rachel used the term 'PDA's', during the course of the interview, to describe the lack of physical contact she had/ has with her parents, however, it was only during the reading of the interview

material that I realised I did not understand what she meant, thus, I referred back to her and she explained it more thoroughly.

Reflexivity

On a practical level, insiders continually advocate for attentive critical reflection on the complications and implications of insiderness (Chavez, 2008). Richards (1997) advises that the researcher should know and understand himself or herself before attempting to make sense of the actions of others. Chavez (2008); and Miller and Glassner (1997) contend that the researcher should reflect on why exactly they are carrying out the research, and be conscious of their impact on the field research and the production of the overall research project. This view recommends that the researcher reflects on, acknowledges, and confirms their social positioning and the role they play in the creation/ construction of knowledge (Harding, 1993; Hesse-Biber et al. 2012). As well as engaging in the process of personal reflection, that is, understanding oneself and the reasons why the research is being conducted, it is imperative that the researcher reflects on issues and experiences that occur during the course of their research journey. This helps to limit personal biases, establish a sense of trust with participants, and a more neutral rapport with them (Glesne, 2011; Minichiello and Kottler, 2010). To achieve these aims, I established and maintained a strong dialogue with my academic supervisors in the form of supervisory sessions. I found this method of reflexive subjectivity more effective than recording my emotions, concerns, or confused feelings in a reflexive journal. I always felt more reassured after sharing my concerns with my supervisors, as this gave me time to reflect on their responses, and put into practice any recommendations they made in relation to subsequent interviews with the women. I also used the thinking aloud approach proposed by daSilva (2000). That reflective approach enabled me to talk about and

listen to my own thoughts both during and after the interview process, and I shared my observations/ reflections with some of my doctoral colleagues and my academic supervisors and this improved my interview technique. These practices were critical to my research, and enabled me to become more attentive to my inner thoughts on the insider/ outsider divide, and helped me to overcome the influence of my own subjectivity on the research. Coghlan and Brannick (2005) make the point that this is a way to balance insider/ outsider knowledge in doctoral research, and amalgamate the two perspectives together. The transcription process also acted as an ongoing reflection on the interview process and facilitated me in improving my interview technique overall.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics are a code of moral principles intended to guide a social researcher in the method of how best to conduct himself or herself during the research process, and ensure that the highest standards of professional conduct are maintained. The guidelines comprise a set of shared values; including professionalism, integrity, respect, confidentiality, anonymity and equality (Blaxter et al. 1997). Before commencing this research, I obtained written ethical consent from the Social Research Ethics Committee of University College Cork.

Doucet and Mauthner caution of the need for 'greater integration between feminist research that reflects on issues of ethics and methodology and feminist scholarship on epistemology and ethics' (2002, p. 1). In this study, my aim overall, has been to add to ethical feminist research in a way that advocates for the emancipation of voluntarily childless women. Kaiser (2009) is unequivocal as regards issues of preserving confidentiality and anonymity in research. Feminist research methodologies are equally committed to ensuring that no harm is caused to

participants, and that anonymity and confidentiality are maintained. One of the overarching principles of feminist research is a commitment to privileging women and deconstructing power relations (Lentin and Byrne, 2000, p. 4). In fact, Lentin and Byrne argue the point that all research should be practised and undertaken with feminist principles in mind, which they claim would inevitably lead to more nuanced and balanced research overall. To assist me in my efforts to remain impartial, to strengthen the reliability and validity of my research, and present the women's accounts in a way that was real to them, after each interview I engaged in the process of self-reflection, mainly to track my involvement or my contribution to the interview overall, and find out if there were areas I could improve upon. That reflection process helped me to continually strive to contain my own personal biases, and ensure that I did not influence the women's accounts in any way. Also, I endeavoured to present the women's account in a way that was true to them, in an open, honest and transparent manner. In other words, I wanted them to tell their stories in their own words, with time spent on issues they felt were important.

In the context of this study, I was committed to good ethical practice throughout, and thus, continually endeavoured to facilitate and privilege the women in every possible way. I informed each of the women in advance of my insider status, which was helpful when recruiting and forming a relationship with them. To protect their identity, each of the women was assigned a pseudonym, and their occupations and geographical locations are generically described to avoid identifying them in any way. Their ages are displayed to determine the era in which they were born and emphasize the time period in which each of the women made the decision to be childless. Otherwise, all identifying data is omitted from the text.

Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies

There are two main approaches to carrying out research, namely qualitative¹² research and quantitative¹³ research. My work has a qualitative orientation, since I am interested in exploring the subjective experiences of women who are voluntarily childless. The purpose of this is to determine the factors that influenced the women's childbearing decisions, to establish the type of lives and lifestyles the women wanted for themselves, and the processes through which they achieved them. Finally, I consider the consequences of those choices, from a personal and societal perspective.

This research is influenced by the work of others who have successfully used this method to account for the lived and subjective accounts and experiences of childless women elsewhere, namely, Ayers (2010); Miller (2005); Morell (1994); Park (2002); Rich (1986); Safer (1996). Qualitative methods are fundamental to feminist research as they situate women's stories at the heart of the inquiry, providing for rich analysis of their stories within their gendered social perspective (Reinharz, 1992; Stoppard, 2000). Qualitative research is also renowned for its attention to detail, and for gaining in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon being researched. Also, data gained from human experiences can be more powerful and compelling than positivistic¹⁴ methods. Stoppard (2000) claims that these approaches enable us to contemplate the socio-cultural conditions shaping women's experiences. In this regard, I lay emphasis on how stories about one's experiences are socially constructed and organized (Smith, 1999).

Critics of the qualitative approach argue that it procures very large amounts of in depth data about a very limited number of settings, that it is merely a collection of

¹²Qualitative research is used to gain an understanding of human behaviour and the reasons behind such behaviour.

¹³ Quantitative research is concerned with measurable facts, statistical, mathematical or numerical analysis.

¹⁴ Positivism requires the use of scientific methods to gather data about social behaviour.

narrative and personal accounts, which are likely to be impacted on by researcher bias. It is also suggested that qualitative research lacks generalizability and reproducibility, and that because the research is so close to the researcher there is no assurance that another researcher would not produce fundamentally different conclusions (Grix, 2004; May, 1997). Bryman (2008) makes the argument that qualitative research is not intended to generalize instead, it is concerned with producing rich, deep, and meaningful data, which can subsequently be generalized to theory rather than to populations. To quote Mitchell, what is important in research is 'the cogency of the theoretical reasoning', as opposed to statistical reasoning (1983, p. 207) that is, the 'quality of the theoretical inferences', that emerge from the qualitative data (Bryman, 2012, p. 392). Having comprehensively reviewed literature in the area of voluntary childlessness, I opted to apply the theoretical concepts of individualization, reflexivity, stigma and the management strategies that the childless by choice engage to help them cope with the negative judgement and preserve a positive sense of self. These are explored in greater depth in chapter three.

The Biographical Approach

According to Best (2012) at the core of the biographical method is the life story of the research participant. This approach works on the basis that people are natural storytellers, and by listening to their stories, researchers can interpret and make sense of them (Best, 2012). This usually occurs in the form of semi-structured interviewing, whereby the participant presents a biographical account of their life history, including past experiences, historical events, or social connections (Miller and Brewer, 2003). This method is mainly concerned with how an individual interprets and makes sense of the world, and what they perceive as reality. This effectively enables them to construct their biographies, and compose an account of who they are, and the events

and experiences that influenced their make-up and their being. Denzin provides a detailed account of the biographical approach,

A family of terms combines to shape the biographical method, life, self, experience, epiphany, case, autobiography, ethnography, auto-ethnography, biography, ethnography story, discourse, narrative, narrator, fiction, history, personal history, oral history, case history, case study, writing presence, difference, life history, life story, self-story, and personal experience story (1989, p. 27).

According to Atkinson, life history,

Is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another (1998, p. 8).

In the context of this study, I am interested in hearing about the women's personal experiences, especially events or circumstances which influenced them in their childbearing decision making. To really understand the context of how they made the decision, I needed to contextualize their life stories, life histories, and biographical accounts as told by them, thus, I used the semi-structured interview method, which is commonly favoured by feminist researchers, as it is primarily concerned with subjective meanings (Best, 2012; Bryman, 2008; Finch, 1984; Hartsock, 1987; Matthews and Ross, 2010; Oakley, 1981). This type of interview is useful as it allows the researcher to probe responses to questions, or seek clarification. In effect, it acts as a mechanism for collecting details of the life stories of others. Also, the semi-structured interview facilitates women in their discussions about sensitive or personal issues. According to Berkowitz and Marsiglio; as a method of qualitative enquiry, the interview 'accentuates the subjective quality of different life experiences, the contextual nature of knowledge, the production of social meanings and the interactive

character of human action' (2007, p. 36). Seen in this way, the interview method is a way of gaining insightful data from the subjective view of the research subject, as understood and told by them. The role of the interviewer then is to interpret and make sense of that data, and present it in a way that is real to the research participants.

Before the interviews took place, I prepared a set of interview questions, though, I considered them as more of a guide, rather than a formal set of questions (Appendix 3). These questions came about as a result of an extensive review of the literature on the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness, the purpose of which was to try and keep the interviews entirely focused on the research topic. On reflection, I think some of the questions overlapped, especially those asked under the heading Early Influences. For instance, in question number two, I asked participants to tell me about their childhoods, and what it was like growing up in Ireland? In question four, I asked a similar question, but phrased it differently; what were your early influences? Also, the wording in some of the questions was not suitable, for instance, question nine asked; does being childless open up more opportunities? In response, one of the women said that opportunities, was not the word she would use. Another said that she did not understand the question and asked me to clarify what exactly I meant by opportunities? She felt it was suggesting that she was making the decision for selfish, self-centred or individualistic reasons, when in fact decisions around their fertility were influenced by a myriad of factors; which included, altruistic motives, humanitarian concerns or the fear that they would not make good parents, or would not be able to protect their children from harm or abuse. Although I piloted the interview schedule with two women before commencing the research process, the issues described above did not arise. In fact, both of those women indicated that the set of questions posed were appropriate, straightforward and easy to understand.

Hence, the data from the piloted interviews was subsequently used in the research. From an Irish perspective, I asked the women about their religious background, given that the Catholic Church in Ireland had profoundly influenced the population right through to the 1970s. I had expected that the women would have a lot to discuss on the matter; however, I was surprised to find that religion did not feature significantly in the women's responses, not even among the older women. I further contended that the notion of maternal instinct or the lack of instinct in this case, would emerge in the women's responses; however, the women only made very brief references to it. Instead, they focused on issues related to their early childhoods and their experiences of caring and household responsibilities, their family backgrounds, including the lack of a relationship with a parent, early experiences of poverty, the perceived demands of motherhood, fear of pregnancy, and health related concerns.

Recruitment Method

Direct Social Contact	Referred by Social Contact	Solicited for Interview	Self- Selected after Radio Programme	Self- Selected after Social Media Call
4	2	2	1	3

Recruitment of the Research Sample

Before commencing the research process, I had concerns as to how I would successfully locate what some would describe as a marginalized or hard to reach target group. As a social researcher, I was already aware that certain 'hidden' populations, or socially stigmatized groups such as women who are childless by choice, could be difficult to locate (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). To overcome this, I employed a number of different recruitment techniques and succeeded with some effort to generate a sample of twelve women. I used non-probability purposive

sampling and snowball sampling techniques, to recruit the women (Esterberg, 2002). In non-probability purposive sampling, participants are randomly selected based on the selective judgement of the researcher (Henry, 1990; Latham, 2007; Moule and Goodman, 2009). Similarly, snowball sampling is used where the sample population cannot be identified, is hidden or hard to reach, or where existing subjects are used to recruit other subjects who meet the required characteristics to participate in the research (Esterberg, 2002; Latham, 2007; MacNealy, 1999).

My insider status was particularly useful when sourcing women to partake in the research, and six of the women were identified through my own personal network of contacts. I knew four of the women personally, and two other women were referred to me by mutual acquaintance. This is similar to the methods used by Scott (2009) in her recruitment of voluntarily childless women and men as participants in her research, although she also placed an advertisement in a local newspaper, which rendered further participants. The remaining six women who participated in this research were recruited through digital and other media channels. I placed an online advertisement on the websites of The National Women's Council (www.nwci.ie)¹⁵ and The Irish Family Planning Association (www.ifpa.ie)¹⁶. I chose to advertise on these websites as I expected that women who are childless by choice would be users of contraception, and both of these organizations have a national remit. I also placed an advert on Twitter, inviting women who were childless by choice, aged eighteen years or over, and of Irish origin to participate in the research. Five women responded to the advertisements, and three participated in the actual research. Although I made follow-up contact with the two remaining women, those enquiries did not lead to interviews,

¹⁵ The National Women's Council of Ireland is the leading National Women's Organization, which advocates for gender equality between women and men.

¹⁶ The Irish Family Planning Association is an organization that promotes the right of all people to access information on sexual and reproductive health.

and they did not provide any further information on why they decided not to participate in the study. Even though women responded quickly to the social media advertisements, after two days the responses dried up, again highlighting the challenge in recruiting from a largely hidden or hard to reach target group. Another woman made contact with me as a result of a radio broadcast which featured on the John Murray Radio Show (RTE Radio One¹⁷). On a previous occasion I had listened to a discussion on voluntary childlessness on the show, and subsequently made contact with the radio station. The researcher for the show was interested in my research and invited me to discuss it live on air. One woman made unsolicited contact with me after hearing the interview, and voluntarily agreed to participate in the research, as she was eager to tell her story. I contacted two further women with public profiles, who had publicly spoken about being childless by choice on national radio and in the *Sunday Independent*¹⁸ newspaper, and both agreed to participate in the research. Two others were referred to me through my social contacts in University College Cork. I met with one of the women and we had a lengthy discussion on the topic of voluntary childlessness. The other woman was referred by my academic supervisor, and I spoke with her on the telephone. However, these women declined to be involved in the research, without providing reasons. In retrospect, I am pleased that I did not focus entirely on social media as a way of recruiting participants, as I feel that I would have omitted some women from partaking in the research, especially those who are not familiar with social media methods.

My selection criteria for the research, was determined by a number of factors. I intentionally left the age profile of the women very open, from eighteen years

¹⁷ RTE Radio 1 is Ireland's most listened to radio station. It broadcasts a range of music, news, and interviews, and features a large range of broadcasting hosts.

¹⁸ The Sunday Independent is a sister of the Irish Independent newspaper, which is Ireland's largest selling daily newspaper. The Independent newspaper has been operating in Ireland since 1905.

upwards, because I was interested in exploring if older and young women proffered different reasons for their decision making. I limited the participant criteria to include what I referred to as Irish women¹⁹ only, (women born or raised in Ireland) since I am well acquainted with the Irish context, religiously, socially, politically, and economically. I was anxious to find out what in the Irish context was significant in influencing women in their childbearing decision making. It was not until the time of the interview that I discovered that two of the women were born outside of Ireland, but their families relocated to Ireland when they were aged two and four respectively, therefore, they were considered eligible for inclusion in the research. I was interested in having a mix of women from both urban and rural areas, as it is noted in the research literature that location can have an impact on the choices that women make about their fertility (Murphy-Lawless et al. 1994). For instance, some of the women who participated in the research carried out by Murphy-Lawless et al. (1994) and who lived in urban centres, explained that they paid high rent or mortgages and could not financially afford to have a child. Others, who had relocated from rural to urban areas explained that they had no family close-by to help with childcare, and could not afford to pay for it. These were significant factors in their deciding not to have children (Murphy-Lawless et al. 1994).

At first I elected to seek out women from the Munster region only, mainly for practical reasons of it being more accessible for me to travel to meet them. However, upon reflection, since Munster is a relatively small region, I opted to advertise nationwide, primarily because this would increase my prospects of recruiting a hard to reach group. Advertising on the national forum proved successful, as the three women I did

¹⁹ Irish citizens are formal members of the Irish community living in Ireland or abroad (Citizens Information Website). Being born in Ireland does not necessarily mean that one is entitled to Irish citizenship. Citizenship can be claimed through parents/grandparents.

locate were recruited from the Leinster region. My desire for a diverse sample and my supposition that voluntarily childless women would be a hard to reach group influenced the recruitment techniques I adopted.

Arrangements for the Interview Process

Each of the participants was presented with a hard or electronic copy of the interview schedule in advance, to familiarize themselves with the list of interview questions. Given that voluntary childlessness is a somewhat sensitive subject matter, and since I would be asking personal questions of the women, I did not want any of them to feel uncomfortable or to be compromised in any way during the actual interview. By having the schedule in advance, the women had time to process the type of questions I would be asking. An information sheet was also provided in advance of the interviews, which clearly outlined the purpose of the research, how the data collected would be used, provisions for the storage of the data, and the expected duration and nature of their involvement (Appendix 4). Like Ayers (2010); and Thorne (2004) I was aware from the start of the different positions that I as the researcher and the women as the research participants held. To contain power imbalances, I assured participants from the beginning of their entitlement to withdraw from the research at any time before the interview commenced, to discontinue after data collection had commenced, or to withdraw within two weeks of participation. Since my sample was limited to twelve women, I was concerned that some women could withdraw from the study, which would jeopardise the continuation of the work. Therefore, I was anxious to know early on in the study if any of the women decided to withdraw, as I would need to replace them and this could prove difficult. Each of the women was given a consent form to read and sign, and all twelve interviews were recorded using a dictaphone, with the prior consent of participants (Appendix 4). According to Kvale,

'explaining the role of the interviewer, the purpose of the interview, establishing the rules regarding confidentiality and clarifying the nature, form and duration of the process are seen as crucial' (1996, p. 57). Before each of the interviews I provided a brief verbal overview of the research, and reminded the women of their entitlement to withdraw from the research or refrain from answering questions. I also, explained how and why I became interested in the topic of voluntary childlessness and outlined my insider status. I offered the women a copy of the transcripts to check for accuracy and to ensure that there was nothing they had regretted saying; however, they all declined the offer. I informed each of the women that I would provide them with a copy of the research when the examination process was completed, and that offer was warmly welcomed.

I arranged to meet with each of the women at a time and location of their own choosing. One of the women came to my home and over several cups of tea, the interview process commenced. I interviewed two of the women in their offices at their places of work, and met five others in hotels, restaurants and cafes in counties Cork, Kerry, and Dublin. I went to the home of another, and since she lives alone the setting was quiet and convenient. Another interview was conducted in a public area at Heuston Railway Station, Dublin. The remaining two interviews were conducted using Skype²⁰, as travel difficulties made face to face interviews difficult to arrange. One participant travels extensively, and could not commit to meeting with me in person. The other resides in the North of Ireland, and she suggested that Skype would be a useful way of conducting the interview. It is regrettable that the Skype connections for both of those interviews was inconsistent and kept cutting out, and while it was frustrating at the time, it did not impact on the rapport with the women,

²⁰ Skype is an internet facility that provides video and voice call services.

or on the flow of the interview. To account for the poor Skype connections, the interviews were completed using the facetime²¹ facility on our iPhones, and that method of interaction was very successful. The only disadvantage as a result of not meeting the women face to face was that one of the interviews was completed in twenty minutes. The participant explained in advance that she had other work related commitments to attend to later that evening, and she was anxious that the interview would be completed within a twenty minute time frame. Also, because of a busy work schedule she could not commit to another date. Although the interview was relatively short, all of the questions were covered. The total duration of the interviews was 380.53 minutes, equivalent to six hours and thirty-four minutes. The average interview time per participant was 52.85 minutes.

Interview Dynamics

In the context of this study, I presented myself as voluntarily childless, as someone who had known from a young age that being childless was the right path for me. Also, I acknowledged that it is a choice I am very comfortable with, that I have never regretted my choice, nor have I changed my mind about it with the passing of time. Other than this, I tried to keep personal information to a minimum, fearing that I would influence the women in some way. I had my reasons for remaining childless, and I was concerned that if I spoke too much about myself, participants may feel judged, or undermined, if their answers or their reasons differed from mine. In keeping with the principles expressed by Oakley (1981) if the women asked me personal questions I answered truthfully and honestly; however, I did not volunteer more personal information than was necessary. Although four of the participants in my research

²¹ Facetime is Apple's video calling service. It enables anyone with an iPhone to make free calls to other Apple users over a Wi-Fi or cellular connection.

sample were known to be prior to the interviews, and were aware of my childless background, they were not familiar with the motives that influenced me in my childbearing decision making, and my personal journey toward being voluntarily childless was not something that was discussed during the course of the interviews. In fact, only one of the women, Bridget, the youngest of the participants asked if I had always known that I did not want children, to which I replied 'yes'. She said that she felt reassured by that response, because she is always being told that because she is only twenty-five she will change her mind, come to her senses, and have children. Knowing that I was several years older than her, and that I had never given any additional thought to having children, made her feel like less of an outsider, and she did not feel like she was doing something wrong. Also, she had always been concerned by the comments expressed by others, who refused to believe her, or who told her that she would regret her decision in later years. Again, she felt more at ease knowing that I had never given the decision any further thought, and that I had never considered the fact that I might regret it in later years. I did consider the effect it would have on Bridget if I had given her a different answer; for instance, if I had told her that I did regret the decision, however, I would have clearly outlined my reasons and would have assured her that just because I had regrets did not mean that she would experience them. The other women did not question my childless positioning; however, two of the women made references to similarities in our reasoning for being childless, and this worked to strengthen my rapport with them. For instance, Moira emphasized early on that she was not in the habit of discussing her voluntarily childless status; however, given the fact that I too am childless by choice, she said that she felt more comfortable speaking with me and sharing her story with me, as she felt that I would not pass judgement, or comment on her decision. Also, Jane said that like me, she had

always known, or known from a very young age that she had never wanted children, and was glad of the opportunity to speak out about the pressures and negative stereotyping that voluntarily childless women are exposed to.

Sharing my insider status with the women created a shared sense of connectedness, and had a positive influence on the study, and I firmly believe that I could not have accessed my research sample had I not shared or disclosed my insider status with participants. Furthermore, from my viewpoint, this was an opportunity for the women to speak openly about the rationale behind their decision making. I knew the motives that influenced me in my decision making, I had my own experiences of the consequences of it; but, as I mentioned previously, I did not want to discuss these in any great detail as I did not want to influence the women's accounts in any way. However, if there were subtle intersections in our stories, I made a brief reference to them after the interviews had been completed.

Pillow (2003) talks of the need for uncomfortable reflexive practices when carrying out qualitative research, which often involves an uncomfortable realization that certain aspects of the interview process may not have proceeded as one would have wanted. On reflection, and particularly while transcribing the interview transcripts, I came to realize that some of the interviews I conducted were more successful than others. In some cases, I found that I did not keep the women focused and some digressed considerably from the topic of voluntary childlessness. This was particularly evident in the interviews with Sarah and Liz, and subsequently resulted in data which was in no way related to the research topic, and which added considerably to the time and effort required to complete the transcription process. On occasion, I found it challenging to create an enabling interview environment, while at the same

time maintaining a focus on the topic of research. Also, during the transcription of the first three interviews, with Ellen, Rachel, and Bridget I realized that I had continuously interrupted the women as they were telling their stories, after which, I decided it was best to allow them to finish answering each question before I sought clarification, asked additional questions, or interrupted them with phrases such as 'um', 'ah', 'uh hu', or 'yeah'. I did not include those phrases in the text.

Transcription according to Ayers (2010) is a key element of the process of analysis, and also to the overall research project. Also, the writing up of the interviews can, and does impact on the analysis (Bird, 2005; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Kvale, 2005). Thus, it is necessary for the interviewer to immerse himself or herself in the interview, and make every effort to understand, interpret, and make sense of the women's stories from their perspective (Anderson and Jack, 1991). As acknowledged by other researchers, I realized that complete objectivity was not possible to achieve, thus, I endeavoured to remain authentic, accurate and truthful to the women who entrusted me with their stories (Ayers, 2010).

For this research each interview was individually transcribed, making it a slow and time consuming process. On average the transcription time for each interview was three hours; therefore, the total transcription time was thirty-six hours. I listened to the recorded interviews several times to deepen my understanding of the women's narratives, to ensure accuracy of words and phrases, and to ensure that I did not miss any critical information. In all but two of the interviews I found the transcription process relatively straightforward. However, I found it somewhat difficult to transcribe the interviews with Sarah and Jane, since both of those took place at public locations, one in a restaurant, the other in a café, where there was a lot of background

noise from a radio. As a result it was necessary for me to listen to the recordings several times over to ensure accuracy in the transcription, and enhance my understanding of their narratives. Also, if I was unsure of something the women said, I referred back to them for further clarification, and this benefitted me in my efforts to ensure that the data was accurately transcribed. At the early stages of the transcription process I employed someone to do some of the transcribing, however, this did not work out well. The woman I employed found it difficult to understand the recordings, and there were several gaps in the two transcriptions she completed. Thereafter, I re-transcribed those two recordings and transcribed the other ten interviews myself.

Analysis of Findings

One of the main challenges associated with qualitative research is the quantity and depth of data generated (Spencer et al. 2003). In this study, the primary data yielded a total of 66,744 words. The average amount of words per individual transcript was 5,562 words (66,744/ 12). In total 217 pages of material was transcribed. Also, it is mentioned that the transcription process can be a deeply emotional and moving process for the interviewer, most especially if the research is of a sensitive nature (Ayers, 2010; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007). The interviews did not have any such effect on me, or on the women, mainly because they had self-selected and voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. While I was taken aback by some of the personal information the women provided, particularly in relation to family backgrounds, I was not emotionally charged or overwhelmed in any way. If anything, I was both humbled and privileged that the women had chosen to tell their stories. Nonetheless, it was difficult to imagine the trauma and emotional distress that some of the women suffered, while still only children themselves. For instance, Ellen's description of growing up in an abusive household with an alcoholic father; or Liz's description of

the night she accidentally burned her brother and was punished by her parents for it. Also, Moira explained about her sister's mental health, in particular the effect it had on the family, while Jane described the negative verbal abuse she endured for much of her childhood, which was inflicted by her grandmother.

Before beginning the process of data coding, consideration was given to using a qualitative data analysis software package, suited to the management of large volumes of qualitative data. However, I decided against the use of a software package, due to my concerns about the amount of time it would take me to become skilled with a package. I had no prior experience with such packages, and felt I did not have sufficient time to adequately commit to a training course. Instead, the data was organized for manual analysis. I initially decided on the methods of thematic analysis of the interview data, also known as conceptual analysis, but later decided to supplement that method with the method of phenomenological enquiry.

According to Seale,

A phenomenological enquiry places peoples' lived experience as the starting point for investigation and meaning-making. The researcher using this approach attempts to enter the individual's life-world, which is the place where people are directly involved with the world and from which position their experience originates, in order to understand what being-in-the-world is like (1998, p. 448).

Specifically, phenomenological enquiry is designed to explore the subjective nature of experiences, as experienced by individuals. Interpretative phenomenological analysis then can be understood as the exploration of specific individual stories, which are then the product of interpretation. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is often used when researching on marginalized or stigmatized groups, since it involves careful consideration of their experiences, and gives voice to people whose voices may

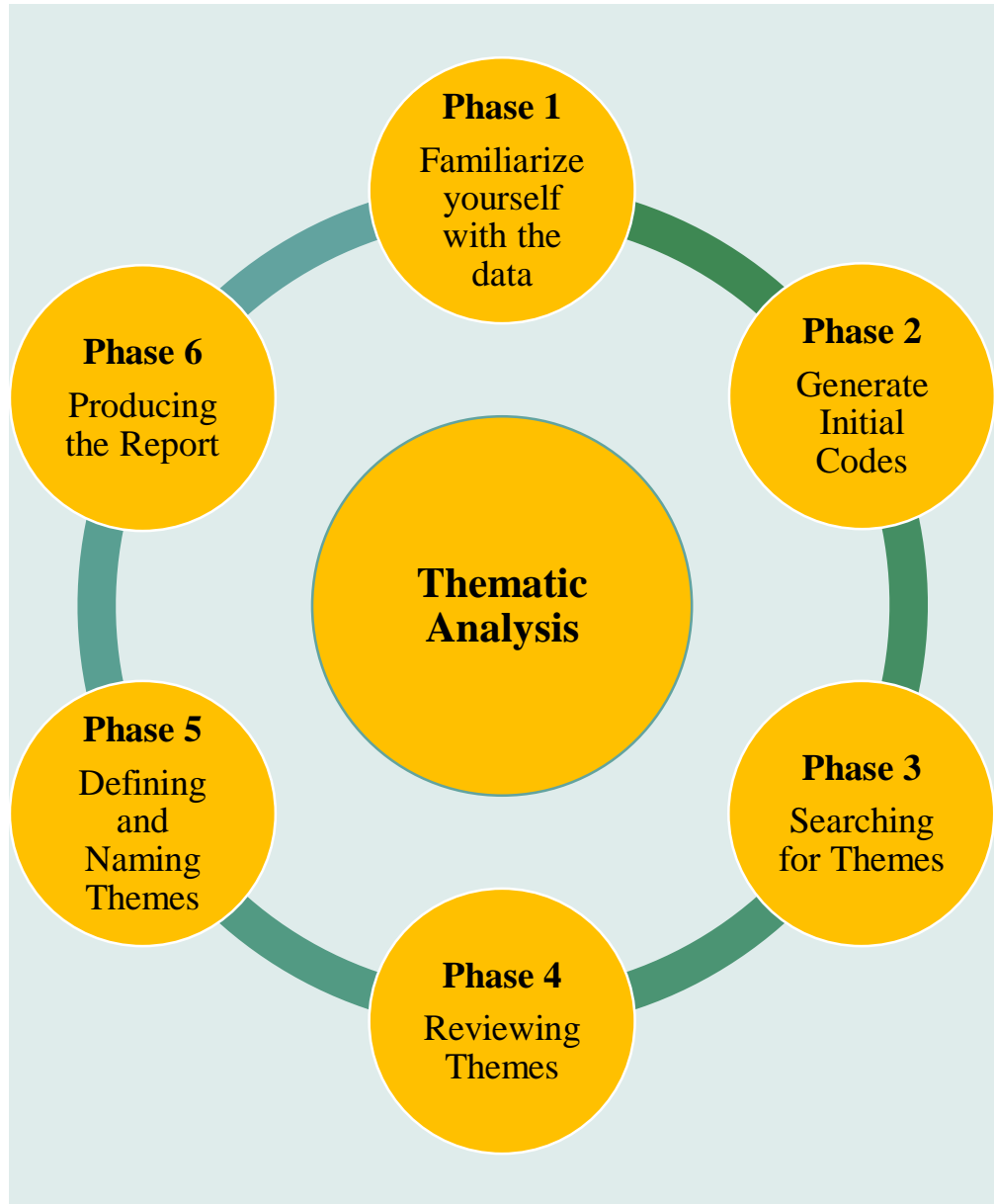
otherwise go unheard (Seale, 1998). In the context of this research, I listened intently to each woman's individual story, as told by them, about their journey toward being voluntarily childless; including the experiences and events that influenced them in their decision making, their desires to pursue different and alternate life paths, the stigma they faced, and the mechanisms they used to manage, control, and overcome it. From there, I set out to interpret and make sense of their accounts of those experiences. Also, as Larkin et al. point out, interpretative phenomenological analysis provides for an 'insider's perspective' (2006, p. 103) since it enables the researcher to identify with participants, to understand their stories from their perspectives. Further, one of the distinct advantages of interpretative phenomenological analysis is that it considers the significance of the personal, social, and cultural environment of those being researched, as well as that of the researcher, and acknowledges that no research can be absolutely objective. Instead, it considers the significance of how individuals construct meanings and make sense of their personal and social worlds. It is a fitting tool to explore the themes that emerge in the women's accounts of their experiences of voluntary childlessness.

Larkin et al. (2006) caution that the researcher should approach the data with two main objectives in mind; they should endeavour to understand and make sense of the participant's life world, and explain it in such a way that it connects to the wider socio-cultural context of their lives. The latter order aims to provide a more critical and conceptual explanation of the ways in which the participant makes sense of their own personal stories (Larkin et al. 2006; Smith and Osborn, 2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis aims to facilitate the participant in every possible way, when telling and describing their own stories in their own words (Smith and Osborn, 2008). The standard method used to gather the data is the method of semi-structured

interviews, which facilitates the formation of a relationship between the researcher and those being researched. Interpretative phenomenological analysis also involves the continuous revision and questioning of the data until such time as one can 'do justice to the fullness and the ambiguity of the life-world' (van Manen, 1990, p. 131). In order to fully understand the meanings associated with the data, it is necessary for the researcher to immerse themselves in it. This is a step by step process that consists of reading, describing, interpreting and making sense of the data. Taken together, the methods of thematic analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis enabled me to unpack, contextualize, interpret and make sense of the women's stories, as described in their own words. In preparation for the analysis of the interview transcripts, I found it useful to carry out several readings, each with a specific purpose, an approach initiated by Mauthner and Doucet (1998). More specifically, I followed the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) who offer a six-step guide for doing thematic analysis. Thematic analysis emphasizes and examines themes within the data and allows for a rich, detailed and elaborate description of it. I initially read the data with a view to familiarizing myself with it, and subsequently re-read it without any note taking. During the third read of the data I began developing themes which I subsequently reviewed in the fourth read. In read five I identified and named the themes and in read six I re-read the data to ensure that all the relevant themes were marked and named. I found this step-by-step guide very useful at first, however, I found myself referring back to or re-reading the interview transcripts several times over in order to familiarize myself more with the data, and to ensure that I did not omit any critical facts or findings. There was much depth to be found in the interview transcripts, and each read added a further layer to my overall understanding of how,

and why the women decided to remain childless, the stigma they encountered, and ways in which they responded to it.

Figure 1: Thematic Analysis: Braum and Clarke's Six-Step Guide:



While each of the women had different experiences and understandings of their positions as voluntarily childless women, common themes in the women's narratives emerged. The women's experiences of family life had an impact on their childbearing decisions. The first interview I conducted was with Ellen, who consistently referred to the difficulties she encountered during her childhood, growing up in a household

where alcohol and violence were commonplace. Ellen and three other women described how as children they had been overlooked, neglected, abandoned, or abused by parents. Their sense of trust had been betrayed, and they did not trust themselves enough to have children of their own, in case they would subject them to the same trauma that they had experienced as children. Others, especially those who had taken on caring responsibilities as children, for instance, helping to raise younger siblings, did not want to repeat the process; and thus, consciously decided to remain childless. Five of women cited poverty and financial concerns as influencing factors in their childbearing decision making. The perceived demands of motherhood and the responsibilities entailed were mentioned as another influencing factor by three of the women. The lack of maternal instinct was cited by four of the women as influencing their decision making. One of the women explained that she had a profound fear of getting pregnant, two others expressed concerns about the impact that pregnancy and motherhood would have on their health, particularly their mental health and well-being. A number of the women explained that they consciously decided not to have children in order to concentrate on prioritizing themselves and their own lives. All twelve of the women were involved in crafting positive childfree identities for themselves, and for some, this involved managing and coping with stigma.

The next dominant theme to emerge had to do with the women's biography making and the type of lives and lifestyles the women wanted for themselves, and how they articulated their choices around this. In this, there was evidence of early disembedding, of breaking away from tradition and normal modes of social conduct, in favour of a more individualized lifestyle. The women made several references to what they perceived as the unending demands and responsibilities associated with motherhood, and they were essentially pushed away from those commitments. Others

were enticed by what they perceived as the advantages of the childless life, and having more time, energy, and resources to focus on themselves, or on their careers. The next dominant theme to emerge was stigma and the women's experiences of it, and the ways in which they managed and coped with it. More specifically, the notion of stigma that had originally dominated chapter seven, the last of the three findings chapters was re-interpreted and re-analyzed based on the women's accounts. For instance, in some cases the women did not necessarily experience stigma, instead, they were pressurized into re-considering their decision or they were questioned about it. The women used strategies to cope with the stigma. These strategies were developed by Park (2002); and subsequently expanded on by Ayers (2010); Hayden (2010) to illustrate the mechanisms that women engage in to preserve a positive sense of self.

Figure 2: Overview and Profile of Participants

Name	Age	Place in the Family	No of Children in Family of Origin	Partner Status	Education Level	Occupation	Socio-Economic Backgrounds ²²	Geographical Location	Sampling Type
Bridget	25	Youngest	3	In a relationship	3 rd Level	Scientific Profession	Middle Class	Urban	Purposive
Jane	30	Not Specified	8	In a relationship	3 rd Level	Teacher	Middle Class	Urban	Purposive
Niamh	36	Second Eldest	4	Single	3 rd Level	Caring Profession	Middle Class	Urban	Snowball
Sarah	36	Not Specified	Not Specified	In a relationship	2 nd Level	Creative Industry	Working Class	Urban	Purposive
Ellen	39	Youngest	4	Single	2 nd Level	Call Centre	Working Class	Rural	Snowball
Rachel	39	Eldest	4	Married	3 rd Level	Professional Local Government	Middle Class	Rural	Snowball
Moir	40	Not Specified	Not Specified	Single	3 rd Level	Multinational Company	Middle Class	Urban	Purposive
Susan	43	Middle	3	Married	2 nd Level	Food Industry	Working Class	Rural	Purposive
Keelin	46	Not Specified	Not Specified	Divorced	3 rd Level	Academia	Middle Class	Rural	Snowball
Liz	48	Eldest	4	In a relationship	3 rd Level	Teacher/ Care Assistant	Middle Class	Urban	Snowball
Josephine	56	Not Specified	8	Single	2 nd Level	Local Government	Working Class	Rural	Snowball
Linda	57	Eldest	3	Married	2 nd Level	Writer	Working Class	Urban	Purposive

Geographical Location and Religious Background

Twelve women were interviewed for this research. Ten were born in Ireland, and two were born in the UK, but relocated to Ireland with their families at the ages of two and four, respectively. Nine of the women are originally from rural parts of Ireland, including counties Kerry, Mayo, Fermanagh, Cork, Limerick, Kildare, and Tipperary. The remaining three women grew up in Dublin. The women I interviewed were mainly from middle or working-class backgrounds.

²² Social class refers to divisions in society on the basis of economics and social status. The middle class are generally engaged in non-manual work and have higher education levels. The working class are those engaged in manual labour, including factory based jobs and have lower levels of educational achievement (Thompson, 2016).

Age Profile

To gain a greater understanding of the women's experiences, and the reasons why they decided to remain childless, I intentionally left the age profile relatively open, and women aged eighteen and over were eligible to partake in the research.

Educational Background

Seven of the women have high level qualifications, and are reflective of what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim refer to as 'generations of women in change' (2002, p. 55). By this, we mean that education can enable women to engage in paid employment, to free themselves from the constraints of traditional family life, and carve out an individualized life of their own. Eleven of the women are employed, while one, who has a scientific qualification, was seeking employment. Their occupations vary, one is employed in a call centre, two are local government officials, two others are employed in caring professions, one in the creative sector, one in the food industry, and another in a multi-national company. Two are in the teaching profession, and one is a writer.

Socio-Economic Background

One's social status is generally derived from the level of wealth, income or position one holds. According to Joseph Chris, of *Driving Business Connections*, people who are classified as working class are not college educated, are employed in manual or physical labour, and have limited assets. In comparison, people who belong to the middle class are college educated, professionally qualified, and more economically secure.

Relationship Status

Of the seven women who are in heterosexual relationships, three are married. The partners of two of the women have children from previous relationships, and the

husband of another was previously married and has children. Four of the women are single one strategically avoids relationships and commitment. Five of the women are what Gillespie (1999); and Veevers (1973) describe as early articulators, since they have always known, or have known from a young age, that they did not want to become mothers. Seven fit the category of Postponers (Veevers, 1973; Houseknecht, 1977; Gillespie, 1999; Scott, 2009).

Religious Affiliation

All twelve women were raised in Catholic households, attended Catholic schools, and were influenced in many ways by the teachings of the Catholic Church. Six of the women were raised in strict Catholic households, attended weekly Mass²³, and said the Rosary²⁴ daily. For the remaining six women, the extent to which their parents practised Catholicism varied. Of these six, two made only brief references to their Catholic upbringing. One mentioned that her parents believed in something, but were somewhat critical of the Catholic Church. Two of the women said that their parents were 'standard Catholics', who went to Mass regularly. The parents of another were religious, but did not force their religious beliefs on their children. Although parents did bring their children up as Catholics and the women underwent all associated rituals, there was room for the women to decide their own relationship with the Catholic Church.

Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological approaches and the research methods applied, and clearly outlined their suitability for the tasks at hand in this study context. I applied a feminist research method, which is intended to foreground

²³ Mass is a chief act of divine worship in the Catholic Church. Catholics in Ireland attend weekly Mass on Sundays.

²⁴ The Rosary is a prayer of devotion in honour of Our Lady, The Blessed Virgin Mary (Roman Catholic), and mother of Jesus Christ. It is emblematic of the Catholic Church.

women's voices and generate awareness of the significance of women's experiences, as experienced by them. As Stanley and Wise point out, 'feeling and experience' are the single-most significant aspects of feminist research (1983, p. 178).

In this study I sought to elicit the accounts of women who choose to be childless, to determine the factors influencing their childbearing decision making, explore the type of lives they wanted for themselves, and the level of stigma they experienced, as a result of their voluntary childlessness. To acquire that data, and gain as much knowledge as possible about that particular phenomenon, the ontological and epistemological orientations which fit most appropriately were constructivism and interpretivism. By engaging with the women and their personal accounts, in the form of a semi-structured interviews I was able to immerse myself in the contents of their stories, and present what they said in ways that were meaningful and accurate.

Like all research there are certain limitations to the study. Only women born or raised in Ireland aged eighteen and over, who had consciously decided not to have children were invited to participate in the research. As a result, the sample of women that volunteered to participate was mainly middle class, and several had made an active decision not to have children. The sample of women is not representative of the overall population, nor is it intended to be, and so the findings cannot be generalized or replicated. Nonetheless, the women's narratives provide context and understanding of the factors that motivated them in their decision making and reflects, the dominant gendered discourses of motherhood that are still entrenched and embedded in society. It also reveals the efforts women make to manage, overcome, or control for the stigma they experience. In the next chapter I discuss the women's narrative accounts, and set out the analysis of the findings that emerged from this process.

Chapter Five:

Figure 2: Overview and Profile of Participants

Name	Age	Place in the Family	No of Children in Family of Origin	Partner Status	Education Level	Occupation	Socio-Economic Backgrounds ²⁵	Geographical Location	Sampling Type
Bridget	25	Youngest	3	In a relationship	3 rd Level	Scientific Profession	Middle Class	Urban	Purposive
Jane	30	Not Specified	8	In a relationship	3 rd Level	Teacher	Middle Class	Urban	Purposive
Niamh	36	Second Eldest	4	Single	3 rd Level	Caring Profession	Middle Class	Urban	Snowball
Sarah	36	Not Specified	Not Specified	In a relationship	2 nd Level	Creative Industry	Working Class	Urban	Purposive
Ellen	39	Youngest	4	Single	2 nd Level	Call Centre	Working Class	Rural	Snowball
Rachel	39	Eldest	4	Married	3 rd Level	Professional Local Government	Middle Class	Rural	Snowball
Moir	40	Not Specified	Not Specified	Single	3 rd Level	Multinational Company	Middle Class	Urban	Purposive
Susan	43	Middle	3	Married	2 nd Level	Food Industry	Working Class	Rural	Purposive
Keelin	46	Not Specified	Not Specified	Divorced	3 rd Level	Academia	Middle Class	Rural	Snowball
Liz	48	Eldest	4	In a relationship	3 rd Level	Teacher/ Care Assistant	Middle Class	Urban	Snowball
Josephine	56	Not Specified	8	Single	2 nd Level	Local Government	Working Class	Rural	Snowball
Linda	57	Eldest	3	Married	2 nd Level	Writer	Working Class	Urban	Purposive

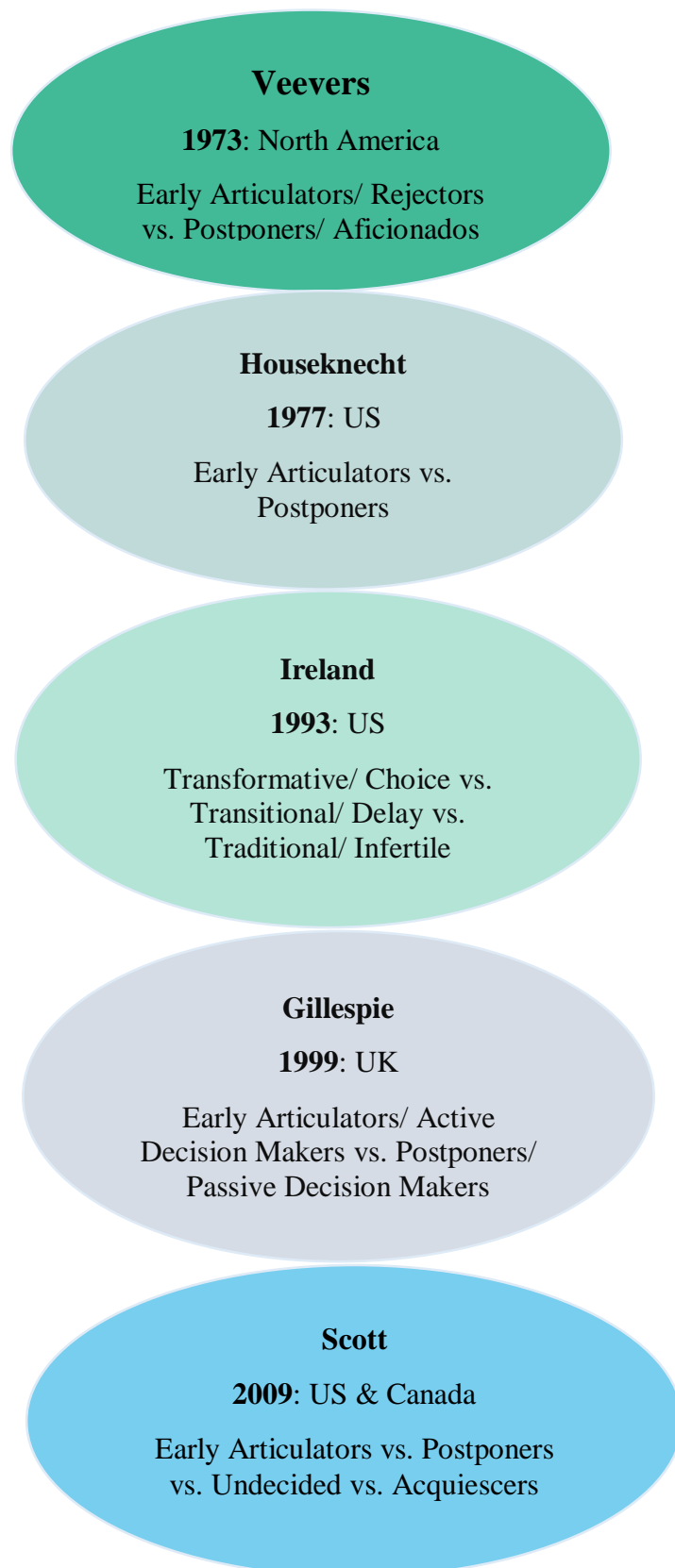
Typology of Reasons for Women's Voluntary Childlessness

As discussed in chapter three, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002); and Giddens (1991) emphasize that individualization is a social phenomenon imposed on the individual by institutions associated with modernity, including; the welfare state, the labour market, bureaucracy, the legal and education systems. It is argued by them and others that this process leads to a decline in historical continuity, undermines class structures, and frees people from traditional sureties associated with the family, society, religion, gender and so forth (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991).

²⁵ Social class refers to divisions in society on the basis of economics and social status. The middle class are generally engaged in non-manual work and have higher education levels. The working class are those engaged in manual labour, including factory based jobs and have lower levels of educational achievement (Thompson, 2016).

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which my research data shows how women negotiate their childbearing decision making. I tease out the explanations for choosing childlessness put forward by them, paying particular attention to what they identify as defining factors or experiences influencing these decisions. In analysing the influencing factors identified by the women, I draw on the typologies of decision making developed by Veevers (1973) and subsequently by Houseknecht (1977); Ireland (1993); Gillespie (1999); and Scott (2009) and interrogate how useful these typologies are in providing an explanatory framework or a descriptive schema for making sense of the factors influencing the women's childbearing decision making.

Figure 3: Voluntary Childlessness: Developing Typologies



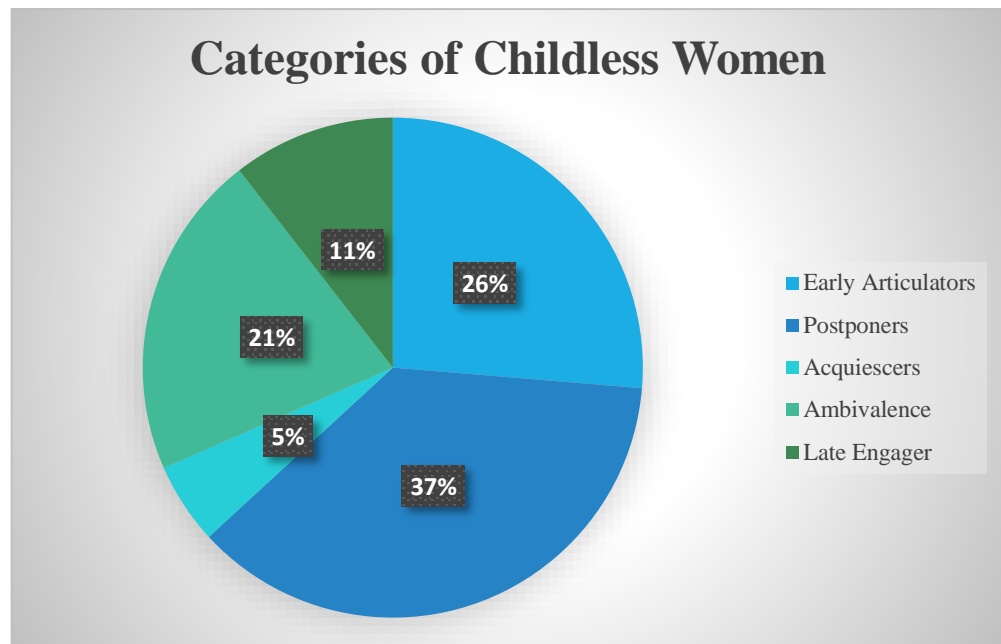
In cases where there is more than one influencing factor, these are discussed in detail in the relevant section, but they are noted in this thesis when the women first mention them. For instance if the women mentioned issues of childhood poverty while describing caring responsibilities or the lack of a relationship with a parent, I shall make brief reference to the poverty issue in that section but shall discuss it in more depth in the section wherein poverty is specifically talked about and described. I then consider how, and at what stage in their lives the women decided to be childless, to determine if they made the decision early in their lives, or if they made a decision to repeatedly postpone it. Thereafter, I consider whether or not all of the women made what they feel to be a definitive decision on the matter, and consider the degree of decision making consistency or change exhibited in the women's narratives to determine if they fit into any of the typologies that have been developed.

The reasons identified as the most important factors that influenced the women's decision making include; childhood and caring responsibilities and the lack of a relationship with a parent, concerns about poverty and financial security, the perceived demands of motherhood, lack of maternal instinct; a fear of pregnancy, and health concerns. For some of the women the influencing factors changed over time, for others there were unchanging factors that held constant in shaping their decision about becoming mothers. In all cases, women identified more than one influencing factor but for some women there were particular factors that were the most dominant in shaping their decision making. Four of the women cited childhood/ caring responsibilities or the lack of a relationship with a parent as defining factors in their childbearing decision making. Five indicated that early experiences of poverty was a defining factor for them. Three of the women decided against having children because of their interpretations of the demands of motherhood. Four expressed a distinct lack

of maternal desire for children. One of the women had a lifelong fear of getting pregnant, and two others had experienced health issues and this factored into their decision making.

As discussed in chapter two, the literature chapter, Veevers (1973) was the first to codify women who are childless by choice. To recap, her original classification grouped women into two categories, early articulators/ rejectors and postponers/ aficionados. Other theorists have since drawn on the work of Veevers, and expanded on the earlier typologies. Mardy Ireland (1993) introduced the categories of traditional, transitional, and transformative women. The traditional category refers to infertile women, the transitional category resembles the postponers identified by Veevers (1973) and the transformative category refers to women who exercise choice in relation to their fertility. Gillespie introduced the concepts of active and passive decision makers which resemble Veevers (1973) earlier categorization of early articulators and postponers. Laura Scott (2009) further expanded on the earlier categories and introduced the concepts of acquiescers and the undecided. As discussed in chapter two, the literature chapter, the acquiescers are those who concede to a partner's wish to remain childless, and the undecided are those who have not made a definitive fertility choice, and are ambivalent about parenthood.

Figure 4: Categories of Childless Women

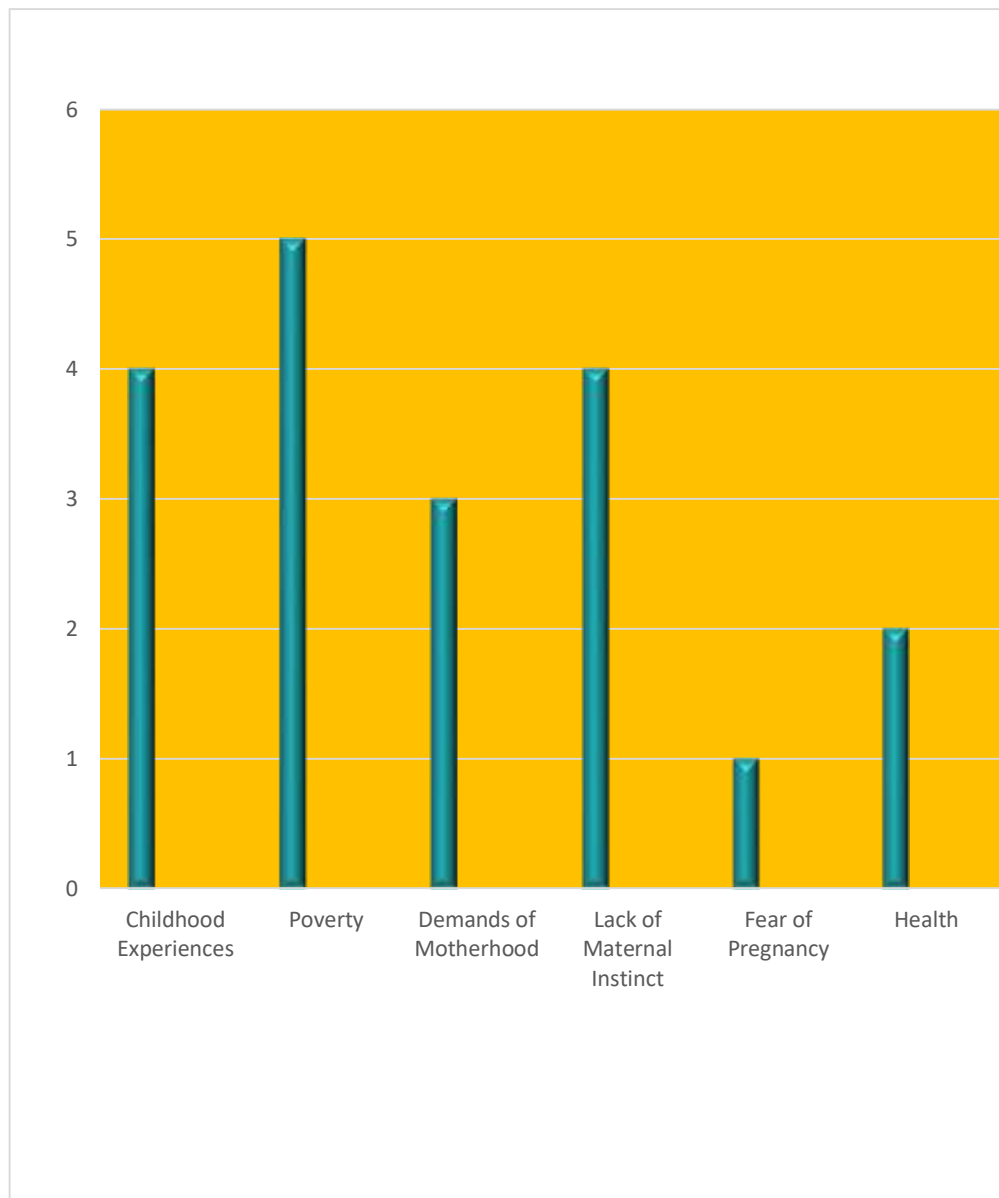


In this study five of the women resemble the category of early articulators developed by Veevers (1973) as they either knew, or decided early on in life, that they did not want to be mothers. Seven of the women can be categorized as postponers, Veevers (1973) or undecided, Scott (2009), for them, the decision making process was complex and ongoing. Two of the seven women insisted that they did not want children, however, because of their ages, twenty-five and thirty respectively, they are not believed when they declare their intention to be childless and are often told that they will either change their minds or come to their senses, and re-consider their decision. These two women's accounts suggest that there is still some evidence of ambivalence in the responses they get from people around their childbearing decision making, but not in their resistance to it. Woman number three is influenced by her husband's lack of desire for children, and as well as being situated in the category of postponer/undecided, she also fits the category of acquiescer, described by Scott (2009). The fourth woman fears pregnancy, but her accounts indicate that she has never made a definitive decision to have or not to have children. Another woman is focused on her

career and cannot foresee how she could combine that with having children. The sixth woman stated that she would have to be in a stable relationship before she would contemplate having children. Woman number seven is nearing the end of her reproductive years and is almost forcing herself to make a definitive choice while she still can. For these women the decision about whether or not to have children is an ongoing reflexive process, it is something they consciously negotiate and re-consider as their life circumstances change. These motives for women's voluntary childlessness resemble the level of active planning and negotiation that Giddens (1994) talked about in his analysis of reflexivity and reflexive decision making, as discussed in chapter three. As Giddens (1994) pointed out, in contemporary society, decisions are being made with the concept of the self in mind, and in the context of an increasing range of choices, as regards how people want to live and how they want their lives to be. This recognizes the growing importance of individualization in women's lives but also points to the limitations of the process, as women still struggle to craft an identity and a life for themselves against the backdrop of pronatalist ideologies and contemporary structural institutions, as described in chapter three. These include; employment, career, education, and family life (Beck, 1992).

Along with the typologies described above, the reasons identified from the interviews with the women offer further insight into the complexity of women's childbearing decision making, and outline some of the key influencing factors pertaining to them. As mentioned above, the key reasons identified by the research participants will be examined next, and each of these shall be discussed in turn.

Figure 5: Typology of Reasons for Women's Voluntary Childlessness



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

Some of the women in this study had experienced first-hand the responsibilities of parenthood related to childcare or household tasks, and did not want to replicate those experiences again. Others situated their childlessness within the storyline of family abuse, and they explained that they had suffered the effects of bad or unintentional neglectful parenting and they did not want to risk the chance that they could re-create that type of situation again.

Four of the women; Ellen, Liz, Susan and Rachel, reflected on their own childhoods and described how their decision was influenced by difficult childhood experiences, such as being a victim of abuse, being neglected by a parent, or taking on adult caring or household responsibilities. These women are going back to the past, they reflected on what happened to them as children, and consciously decided that they did not want to be complicit in allowing their childhood experiences to be repeated. They expressed strong opinions about how dissatisfied they were with their childhoods, and did not think it fair to subject potential children to the type of upbringing they had experienced as children, since for them there was no guarantee that they would do a better job of parenting than their parents had. As adults, the women were able to decide for themselves, and consciously rejected the motherhood role. These findings are replicated in the literature on voluntary childlessness by several authors, where negative or adverse childhood experiences were identified as influencing women's childbearing decision making (Allen, 2013; Ayers, 2010; Carmichael and Whittaker, 2007; Doyle et al. 2012; Kelly, 2009). In the literature, women gave similar accounts of the motives that influenced them in their decision making; they were dissatisfied with their childhoods, they expressed strong views about not wanting to re-enact similar situations in their adult lives and wanted to stop or put an end to cycles of generational family abuse. Next, I examine the accounts of the four women identified above in more detail, to gain a better understanding of how or why their early childhood experiences influenced their reproductive choices, specifically their decision to be childless.

Ellen who is thirty-nine years of age, explained that she had a preference to remain childless because of the abusive emotional relationship she had with her alcoholic father. As a child, Ellen tried to protect her siblings from their father's

abusive behaviour and was obliged by her parents to take on onerous household responsibilities. These childhood experiences were major influencing factors in her decision to be childless. She recounted, growing up in a household marred by alcohol and violence and described her childhood as being consumed with trepidation and fear. While her siblings experienced the physical effects of their father's anger, Ellen considered that she suffered more from mental trauma and psychological abuse. 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.

Ellen explained that because her father favoured her the most, her siblings expected her to be able to reason with him, and to stop the abuse;

They'd [her siblings] know he'd be coming home, and they'd be like saying to me, 'don't let him hit us tonight', or whatever would go on, so, I kind of had that pressure on from them, which was nearly worse than from him [their father] because they were at home more than he was.

Given that Ellen spent more time in the company of her siblings than her father, she was exposed to the reality of their suffering, and felt somewhat obliged to protect them against their father's anger. As the youngest of four children, this was a huge asking of Ellen, but because she was the youngest child and the favourite as noted above, her siblings relied on her to try and reason with their father, and perhaps lessen the effects of the abuse. Although Ellen was not subjected to the same level of physical abuse as her older siblings, she endured the emotional and psychological implications and the ensuing guilt at not being able to protect them. Ellen was also conflicted in assuming caring and household responsibilities, and although she did not choose to do the work,

she felt an emotional and moral obligation to do it, to make amends to her siblings, and as a way of helping her mother, who worked outside the home to support the family financially.

Did a lot of housework when I was young and I think it turned me off full-time, I didn't want, I suppose, I just didn't want that responsibility. I think I got it when I never wanted it, and then I didn't take my own choice on it, that was just the way it was.

Ellen draws on her early experiences of housework, and the 'awful responsibility' of raising children, as significant factors in her childbearing decision making. She explained that she made an early and definitive decision that she did not want to be a mother and she has never given the decision any further thought or consideration. 'No...don't even think of it [having children]'. Ellen fits the category of early articulator described by Veevers (1973) and motherhood and the responsibilities associated with it have never held any appeal for her.

Liz who is aged forty-eight had similar childhood experiences to Ellen. Both considered that they had a distant or emotionally unsupportive parent, both lived in fear of parental violence, and both had care related work imposed on them as children. Liz identified the following factors as key to her childbearing decision making; strict parenting, her mother disliking her, and the lack of any kind of emotional cohesion with her mother, her father disregarding her when her brothers were born, caring responsibilities, and a specific event wherein, her younger brother suffered serious injuries as a result of a household accident while Liz was looking after him. Liz elaborated on her situation.

My mother had three children, which are all younger than me...and I ended up rearing them...Just thinking back...I remember doing the washing in a pan and my answer was 'Jesus they go away and they have a baby and I'm seven years old and I'm doing the washing' and this

went on and on...I was doing all the housework chores, I was getting my brothers out to school, I was doing all the jobs for my brothers...I suppose long ago...I suppose long ago that was the way it went, the eldest children reared the next children, but I couldn't see the answer to it, my answer to it was, if you had the child it's your problem to look after it, but, that was the way it was.

As Liz points out, at that time (mid 1970s) in Irish society, older children were sometimes involved in helping to raise their younger siblings, so although raising children was not something that Liz wanted to do, she felt she had no choice in the matter. She explained that her mother was 'very strict, extremely strict' and Liz knew that if she did not do as she was told she would get a 'slap' from her mother, or be 'given out to', so, in some ways, it was just easier to do as she was told. She reflected that, 'I was just there to do the work and do the jobs'. In terms of her relationship with her mother, Liz described her mother as someone who was 'not maternal', and resented having children. She elaborated on this.

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... and if she didn't kill me she'd make sure he'd [her father] kill me for the least thing.

Liz used very powerful, and in ways almost pitiful words to describe the relationship she had with her mother, and the description outlined above paints a very negative picture of a childhood marred by physical and emotional hardship. Liz also commented that 'she [her mother]...put me off children for life' and she described her mother as a 'mé féin[er]²⁶;

There's no good in my mother, that's the best way of putting it to you, she's selfish, as long as herself is good that's all she cares about, that's a terrible thing to say about my mother but it is...I give my mother the world...she wants for nothing but it will never be good.

²⁶ Mé féin(er) is an Irish word to describe a person who lives for himself/ herself, a selfish/ self-centred person.

Resentment and sorrow echoed in Liz's voice when she described her mother. In her analysis Liz explained that she would give her mother whatever she wanted in life, but it was her view that no matter what she gives her mother, it will never be enough. While Liz described herself as a caring and giving person, she painted a very different picture of her mother, and clearly their relationship is suffering as a result. Liz's opinion of her mother and the complex relationship they have with one another is impacting on her childbearing decision making and she is consciously choosing the non-maternal role. Liz identified the lack of maternal affection she experienced as a significant factor in her decision to be childless. Liz also made it clear that physical affection was not something that the family were accustomed to, stating that in their household, 'there's no such thing as a hug...she's [her mother] not a touchy feely person'. Reflecting on her own mother's upbringing, Liz is of the opinion that,

She [her mother] was also deprived of any kind of love or affection in childhood...I think it's in the family, her [mother's] sister is cold too and I think her mother [Liz's maternal grandmother] was extremely cold.

Liz identified oppressive emotional habits and established patterns of negative behaviour in the mother-daughter relationship as key factors in her childbearing decision making. These were also cited as influencing factors in the literature on voluntary childlessness (Safer, 1996). As discussed in chapter two, Safer argued that,

Every woman gets her notion of what a mother is from her experience with her own...and how she lives her life becomes the basis for the daughter of what it means to be a woman, on an unconscious as well as a conscious level' (1996, p. 93).

According to Safer (1996) whether the mother-daughter relationship was frightful or formidable, and oftentimes it was a combination of both, mothers actively shaped their daughters' decision making and made a significant contribution to their choosing to

pursue a different life path. In choosing to be childless, she argues that a daughter separates herself from her mother, and the life her mother lived, in the most radical of ways. This is further evidence of ways in which women reflect on negative or difficult events and experiences that happened to them in their childhoods, and subsequently influenced them in their decision to be childless. However, Safer's argument is one in a number of opinions that is up for discussion, and in the research literature and from the analysis of the women's accounts, it was found that women's childbearing negotiations are complex and multi-faceted, often consisting of several influences, experiences, and events, sometimes over prolonged periods of time (Ayers, 2010; Hays, 1996; Ireland, 1993; Kelly, 2009; Morell, 1994; Park 2002; Shaw, 2011).

Although Liz has a relatively good relationship with her father, that bond was weakened somewhat when her brothers were born, when she was seven years old. She explained that she went from having a very close relationship with her father, to one wherein she was overlooked, and she was deeply saddened by this change. Resentment echoed in Liz's voice when she described that period in her life.

You know the way a man always wants a son, well I got put in a back corner then, and I got forgotten about, cause- my father used take me everywhere, put me on his shoulder at matches and then all of a sudden, I became...I was just there to do the work and do the jobs.

Another factor that contributed to Liz's decision making related to a very specific childhood event wherein, she was cooking dinner, and looking after her brothers, when she accidentally 'scalded' her baby brother, who was in his cot on the ground. She explained,

I was moving some boiling corned beef, from (a) to (b). You must remember I was nine years old...and I was doing all the housework chores...doing all the jobs for my brothers.

Liz's brother spent several weeks in hospital undergoing treatment for his burns and 'getting skin grafts'. In the aftermath of her brother's accident, Liz explained that she endured the full force of her parents' anger, and was physically punished for what happened to him. Additionally, the long-term effects of that incident are still very real to her, and every time she sees 'the scars on his [her brother's] body', she says that she knows that she 'put them there'. As a result, she says that she is 'totally allergic' to babies, and tries to avoid interacting with them in any way. In fact, when she was asked to be Godparent²⁷ to her niece last year, she explained that it was very difficult for her to agree to it;

I have no interest. I stood for my niece last year and it was a big hard job for them to get me to put the baby on my lap for a photograph. I don't do babies, they irritate me, they annoy me, just take the little fat blob out of my way...I don't...do the baby scene. I see a baby, I have a heart attack, I go mad, and I give out.

The significant point here is that Liz didn't just decide not to have children as Ellen did, she actually describes disliking children in a very visceral way. Motherhood has never held any appeal for her, Liz has never felt any desire or longing to have children or be in the company of children. She can be described as an early articulator (Veevers, 1973) and although she did not indicate when, or if she made an actual decision not to have children, from the narrative above, it is evident that it is something that has been with her for a very long time. Liz is an example of someone who is not upholding any great biographical connection to the past, she is consciously choosing to break away from it. She is reviewing the past and is consciously reflecting on specific events and experiences that happened during her upbringing, and she is deciding that having children is not something she wants for herself. This is an

²⁷ In the Catholic faith a godparent is a person chosen by the parents of a child to take care of the child should anything happen to them [the parents]. A godparent also takes responsibility for the child's religious upbringing.

example of what Giddens (1991) described as the process of biographical experimentation.

Susan, who is forty-three years of age had a different upbringing to Ellen and Liz, yet, like them, she too expressed dissatisfaction with her childhood. For her, this is due to the absence of a parent or the lack of any kind of emotional cohesion with a parent, and these were contributing factors in her childbearing decision making. Susan explained that her father 'left when I was about three, I think it was about three, maybe less', and she had no further contact with him. She expressed strong views about the emotional impact her father's leaving had on her, and she feared that if she had a child of her own it could evoke emotions and experiences of a past she would rather leave behind. Also, for her, she felt that she couldn't guarantee that she wouldn't leave a child in the same way her father did, and that was a risk she was not willing to take. This ties in with the notion of risk biographies described by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and like Ellen and Liz, there is also evidence of reflexive decision making. Here we can see that Susan is reflecting on her childhood, in particular on the impact her father's leaving had on her, and her account shows how she is consciously choosing to construct a different life for herself, where she is not responsible for the care and well-being of another human being, or more specifically a child.

Rachel also looks to her upbringing as an explanation for her lack of desire to be a mother. She believes that something in her childhood influenced her decision to remain childless and she recounted several experiences, which may have contributed to it. As she reflects on her childhood she recounts several different scenarios which may have impacted on her childbearing decision making. She explained that from as far back as she can remember, she has never had a strong relationship with her father, and she described him as rather cold and unemotional. Rachel always felt that she and

her siblings were a burden to him, and that if he had been allowed to have his own way, he would never have had children. 'My dad, I think, would be childless by choice. I think it was all influenced by my mother, he went along with it [having children]'. Rachel explained that she has never had a strong relationship with her father, and that she never really got to know him;

He [her father] would have had very little to do with our rearing. He worked like 8-6 in my early childhood, came home, had the dinner and went back out to work again, so we didn't see him. So, to this day I would say that I actually don't really know him that well.

As well as this, she states that she has no recollection of having ever experienced either physical or emotional tenderness from either of her parents. She explained that, 'there's no PDAs [public displays of affection]... between my parents, even in front of us, never seen it, and very little to us'. Describing her father as somewhat 'old fashioned', she recalled that he, 'wouldn't show emotion much, there would be no hugs, or 'I love you' stated in our house'. Although her childhood memories are vague, Rachel mentioned that it is something she would love to explore, that is, to look at herself as a child and see if she was happy. She explained that, 'I don't have many happy memories, I don't have unhappy memories either, but I don't have many happy. So, I'm wondering, is that influencing me?' Some comments indicate that Rachel is searching for an explanation rather than having one, but considers that factors in her childhood may have contributed to her childbearing decision making, especially her belief that her father never actually wanted children, and only had them for his wife's sake. Since Rachel never experienced that emotional connection with her own father, perhaps, she fears that if she and her husband had a child together, the same thing could happen. Rachel also mentioned that both her younger sisters are uncertain as to whether they will ever have children either,

I don't think I have influenced them [her sisters], so, I am just wondering if there was something in our early childhood that has influenced us, or else maybe like that it's not a nurture thing, it's a nature thing, that we all have something already within our makeup that has made us like this.

On further contemplation, Rachel referred back to her upbringing once more, and said that the absence of any kind of physical or emotional interaction with their parents must have had an impact on herself and her two sisters, especially since they are also planning on remaining childless. There is some ambiguity in Rachel's response, and she is still deliberating about whether or not her childbearing decision making and that of her siblings is influenced by their upbringings and the relationship with their parents, or whether it is something that is inherent in them. However, she subsequently explained that,

Yeah, the more, like, just thinking about it here and yeah, from what I've said and saying it out loud, I would say that nurture, if I had to...I would put a bet on it that it's possibly that...

Rachel is upholding a biographical connection to the past, in the sense that her present is very much informed by what happened to her in the past. In another way, it could also be argued that she is consciously severing her ties with the past, she is disembedding, and this is further evidence of the process of biographical experimentation that Giddens (1991) described.

Similar reflections were made in the literature, Scott (2009) reported that women who were abused by their parents, or were deprived of love, affection, and support when they were children, felt that they lacked the appropriate qualities and skills which they considered necessary for good parenting. Hence, they made a conscious and deliberate decision not to have children. In Daum's (2015) edited volume, contributors raised concerns about dysfunctional childhoods, wherein, they

were overlooked, neglected, physically or emotionally abused by a parent(s). As one of the contributors; Danielle Henderson pointed out;

Through my mom's parenting I learned that there was more pain and hurt than there was joy and happiness in the world, and it scared me to death to think of bringing a brand-new person [child] into that heady mix. How could I ever be sure that I would do a better job? What if her failure was genetic, and I was worse?

Like some of the women in this study, Danielle explained that she spent several years trying to recover from events that took place in her childhood, she was fearful that she would not do a better job of parenting than her own mother had, and for that reason she decided to abstain from mothering altogether. This is Danielle's way of consciously reflecting on the past, and making life-centred choices about how she wants her adult life to be. This is a further reflection of Giddens's theory that;

The self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future. The individual appropriates his past by sifting through it in the light of what is anticipated for an organized future.

The women reflected on past events in the lives, particularly on their childhoods, and consciously planned for a future wherein, they would not become mothers and would not be responsible for the care and well-being of children.

[Women's Experiences of Poverty and Financial Issues](#)

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) in their conceptual analysis of individualization, refer to the financial implications of raising children in contemporary society and the risks and restrictions women encounter while trying to parent. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) formulate parenthood as a risk, predominantly on the grounds of managing financial security in the context of employment and welfare and responsibility on the individual. This issue was also taken up in the literature on voluntary childlessness, and Peterson (2014) noted that in contemporary society,

children are the object of conscious planning and considerations around motherhood are made in the context of financial security. Five of the women in this research cited poverty and financial issues as motivating factors in their childbearing decision making.

Josephine, who is aged fifty-six constructs her decision to be childless as a reflection of managing the financial risks she associates with motherhood, but she also constructs it as a reflection of her true self, since she states that she is not (maternal). As noted above, the notion of maternal instinct is covered later in this chapter. Josephine, the oldest of the participants, grew up in rural Ireland of the mid 1960s, a time when poverty was widespread and the economy was 'in a state of near economic collapse' (Horgan, 2001, np) and large families constituted the norm in Ireland at that time. To put this in perspective, in Ireland in 1962, in excess of two thousand births were recorded to mothers who already had ten or more children (CSO, 1949-1999). Josephine, who has seven siblings, recalled cramped living conditions. Up to the 1970s, most Irish families lived in what would now be perceived as overcrowded conditions, regardless of the number of children they had (Horgan, 2001). While Josephine's father worked to support the family financially, her mother's role was to run the family home and take care of the children, again, as was the norm for married women in Ireland at this time. Josephine explained,

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.

Josephine noted that there was always a scarcity of money throughout her childhood, and every penny had to be carefully accounted for. Influenced by the sacrifices her

parents made, the scarcity of money, and her experiences of poverty, she made a conscious decision in her twenties, not to have children. As evidenced in the research literature, some women consciously consider the risks associated with raising children in contemporary society, particularly the financial risks and this influences the decisions they make about whether or not to have children, how many to have and so forth (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Peterson, 2004). This also resonates with the idea that our lives are now essentially characterized by high levels of risk and uncertainties, thus, the message of contemporary societal structures and practices is to make one's self a priority, and make responsible choices, with an awareness of the potential consequences (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002)..

Jane, who is aged thirty, had a similar type of upbringing to Josephine, as she was raised in a household with eight children and a limited income. She grew up in Ireland in the 1990s, a period in which there was substantial economic development (CSO, 1938-2015). Indeed, in the mid-1990s, the term 'Celtic Tiger' was coined to describe the extent of economic growth being experienced in Ireland, in terms of employment and standards of living. However, not everyone experienced the positive effects of the growing economy, as evidenced in the conversation I had with Jane. She explained,

Definitely we had money worries, you know, even back in those days, trying to feed a family of eight was expensive, nowadays, it would be almost impossible, you'd have to be a millionaire.

Like Josephine, Jane was of the view that women should think carefully before bringing children into the world. She commented,

Are you in a financial position that you can take care of them?...Are the conditions right?...I know people always say there's never a right time, but like you see the effects, even in a few years, you know, children who maybe were not particularly wanted, or their parents had difficult times, and it does affect you for years.

Jane's conceptualization of the risks associated with parenting in contemporary society reflect Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's understanding of the decision to have children as a professional, economic and existential risk. Also, in her previous career, Jane worked in a professional caring capacity and was exposed to conditions of poverty through her employment. Having observed the suffering that some children endured, Jane decided that she could no longer commit to that profession, and considered that she was better equipped to respond to children's learning needs, hence she re-trained as a teacher. This was also evidenced in the literature, and several examples were given of women who engaged in caring roles or teaching roles wherein, they were able to contribute to the caregiving of a child in ways other than motherhood (Daum, 2015).

Linda, who is aged fifty-seven, is the eldest of three daughters; her father died when she was nineteen, and she finished her education at that point. Although Linda's mother still worked in the family shop, Linda then got a job 'working in the bank, even though, that wasn't what I wanted to do', however, she did it to financially support her mother and her younger siblings. Linda was in her early twenties when she decided that she did not want to be a mother. She reflected on the financial pressures the family faced when her father died, and when she had the chance, and no longer felt a financial obligation to support her mother and her siblings she began her writing career, which is what she always wanted to do. Nowadays, Linda pursues a career which she is passionate about and which opens up 'different opportunities' for her and 'takes...her...life on a different path'. She explained that she has 'done things clearly that I wouldn't have done if I'd had children'. As an adult, Linda was able to give priority to herself and put her own needs first. For a certain amount of time, Linda

sacrificed herself for her family, and thus, maintained the biographical continuity to the past. She was encouraged to take responsibility for her family, in the absence of her father, and she took on the responsibilities that were traditionally expected of her. When she felt that she had honoured those responsibilities, she decided to pursue the life she wanted for herself and she consciously decided that she would no longer sacrifice her own needs for her family. For a time, Linda had great difficulty in disembedding from her ties to her family, and she experienced a strong pull to stay within the expected role of supporting her mother and her younger siblings. There are very particular points in Linda's life stage where she consciously set aside looking after others and put her own needs first, and this draws our attention to the complexities involved in the making of choices at different points in one's life, and this is further evidence of the 'precarious freedoms' that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim talked about (2002, p. 1-2).

Niamh's childbearing decision making was also influenced by her experiences of childhood poverty;

I suppose it's probably because of where I grew up, you know. I grew up in a very, one of the poorest areas in Ireland, on the border region of Ireland in [County in Northern Ireland] where there's no factories. No, it's a very, very poor...it's like one of the poorest areas, and I just knew I had to, I was influenced kind of, working hard, getting good grades, getting out of the town I was in, getting to university, then leaving university, travelling a bit, seeing the world, really kind of just, pushing myself, you know.

Niamh did not want to put herself in a position of poverty as an adult. Rather than becoming a mother, Niamh prioritized herself, put her own needs first and focused on getting a good education, with a view to creating a better and more financially secure life for herself, acting out the elements of individualization, as highlighted by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002). Through Niamh's comments, her motivation was to

place herself in a position of choice. She envisaged achievement in education as reducing her risk of living in poverty as an adult. For her, the rewards for such efforts are visualized in then being able to travel and expand her experiences.

Moira highlights a slightly different focus to this theme. Her account relates to her ideas about what raising a child in a good, stable home environment involves, part of which includes having a stable partner, as identified below, but also having a stable income. Since she does not have a stable partner, she has resigned herself to the fact that she may never have children. Moira, was particularly anxious about,

Bringing a child into a world where capitalism²⁸, you know, you have to, you're tied into this rat race, you have to earn, you know, you have to work sixty hours a week or whatever, you know...and that's where the world is you know, kids that go to good schools and go to Trinity²⁹and stuff like that and have the opportunities...I would want to be earning one hundred and fifty thousand a year, and I'm just not there.

It is evident that Moira has a high expectation around what finances would be needed to provide the type of childhood experiences she had, and this is factored into her childbearing decision making. Yet, she explained that she is not fully resigned to not having children and if she were 'in a long term relationship' that could change the 'whole paradigm', and if she had the support of a partner, the financial and other risks associated with parenting would be shared. Moira has a subjective understanding of what motherhood entails, and she would only consider it in the context of a stable relationship, among other things, including financial security as discussed above. She is concerned about the commitment of time and work involved, and feels that it is not something she could manage on her own;

²⁸ Capitalism: An economic and political system wherein a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by a state.

²⁹ Founded in 1592, and located in Dublin city, Trinity College is recognized for academic excellence. It is ranked 1st in Ireland and 104th in the world. Trinity College Dublin is recognized internationally as Ireland's leading university.

Yeah, well it [having children] has crossed my mind in years gone by, that, if I was in a relationship, I would be open minded about it but having said that, I have not settled...I lived together with somebody about ten years ago. I thought it was it and then, I, you know...it [the relationship] got boring, and it didn't work out...It was important that there was a good family structure with me, like, raising a child on my own was never an option.

Moira has happy memories of her own childhood, having grown up in the traditional family unit, with her siblings and both her parents. She indicated that if she were to have a child she would want to give them 'the same kind of thing', but explained that she would 'want to be earning 150,000 euro a year, and I'm just not there'. As a college graduate herself, Moira explained that if she had children she would want them to go to 'good schools and go to Trinity' and financially she perceives that she could not support them in this. Also, for Moira, motherhood without a permanent partner does not seem to be a viable option. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) point out, Moira is consciously looking to the future and is deliberating about the choices she makes, with an overall awareness of the potential consequences and outcome of those choices. Moira has an awareness of the financial insecurities associated with modern living, and has consciously decided to postpone having children, as she fears that she would not be financially secure as a lone parent.

The women's references to experiences of childhood poverty, their awareness of the costs associated with raising children in contemporary society, and their desire to be able to provide financial stability for potential children, all featured in their childbearing decision making. These factors also reflect the ideas described by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) that in contemporary society, children are the object of conscious planning, and women's decisions are being influenced by a whole range of competing factors relative to the type of lives and lifestyles they want for themselves, and in the context of past and current financial considerations. From their accounts

and deliberations we see further evidence of women consciously negotiating their biographies, managing risks, and accepting responsibility for the choices they make (Bauman, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Beck, Giddens, and Lash, 1994; Giddens, 1991; 1994). Rather than contributing or adding something to their lives, the accounts provided by the women above suggest that children could take something away from them, and deprive them of financial autonomy and independence. In the research literature, Scott (2009) found that fifty-eight percent of the women and forty-eight percent of the men who participated in her research, framed their decision to be childless in terms of the financial costs involved. Some stated that they could not afford to have children, some weighed the costs against the benefits and decided that they would rather focus on their own lives and have the freedom to work and travel as desired, without being financially responsible for another human being. Others considered the risks of parenthood and how it would impact on their lifestyles, and found that they cherished their childfree lives more. From the women's accounts, it is evident that different decisions are made at different times in their lives, and women's childbearing decisions are no different. Choosing to or not to have children is not a decision that is made once and never re-visited, and can change throughout the life course.

The Perceived Demands of Motherhood and Women Managing their Risk Biographies

Three of the women, Susan, Sarah and Moira had an opinion on the perceived demands of motherhood, the responsibilities entailed, and the impact it would have on them, on their careers, and their lifestyles, and these were key factors in their childbearing decision making.

While Susan was not directly involved in childcare, she was personally exposed to the demands of parenting when her younger sister was born, and she identified this as an influencing factor in the subsequent fertility choices she made. When Susan was nine or ten, her mother had another child with Susan's step-father, and Susan became emotionally attached to her baby sister. However, through her experience of watching her parents care for her younger sister, Susan developed a high level of awareness of the volume of work, commitment and responsibility involved in childrearing, and decided that it was not something she wanted for herself. She explained,

I saw the whole nappy changing, bottle feeding, up in the middle of the night thing, and I, you know, I think I saw more than – other people can't remember their siblings as children, but I can...you know, it just didn't invite me in.

Having watched her mother raise her younger sister, Susan was alerted to the demands and responsibilities involved in parenting and while she does not specifically say when or at what age she was when she made the decision not to have children, it is clear that the factors influencing her childbearing decision making go back to her early and mid-childhood. It would seem that it is a decision she has made for quite a long time, and one which has been consistent throughout her life course. Also, there is no evidence of ambiguity in her narrative, she does not want to give priority to someone else, nor does she want to take on the responsibility of, or commit to having children. Her interpretation of motherhood is one of self-sacrifice, one that is consistent with findings from research carried out by Douglas and Michaels (2004); and Hays (1996) who skilfully drew attention to the idealized notion of intensive mothering, where mothers are expected to expertly perform the motherhood role, and dedicate themselves entirely to the care and well-being of children (Hayden and O'Brien Hallstein, 2010).

Sarah who is thirty-six years of age also explained that she was concerned about the demands of motherhood and in her case she was concerned about the impact it would have on her personal life, and on her career. Sarah's narrative indicates that she constructs good mothering as intensive, self-sacrificing and child centred, and she feels that it could constrain her. She made the following observation, 'if you can't give it your all, you shouldn't be a parent'. Sarah has a career in the creative sector, to which she is entirely devoted. During the course of her interview her views indicated that she considered that children would be a potential threat to her career, in that she would not be able to commit to it in the way that she can at the moment. Rather than adding something to her life, Sarah feared that motherhood would take something away from it. Sarah's career is central to her life, however, it is a career with few boundaries and some irregularities, it is not predictable and she considers that it would be difficult to combine children with the lifestyle she currently enjoys. Sarah's decision not to have children was made after careful contemplation of the occupational, financial, social and personal risks associated with parenting in contemporary society.

As discussed above, Moira's perception of motherhood is also very demanding and she believed that she would not be in a stable position to mother without the support of a suitable partner. Moira has a realistic view of the way in which a child would impact on her life and she has considered her employment and the costs associated with childcare in Ireland as fundamental factors influencing her decision. Childlessness is a position she has taken on at present as she feels children are incompatible with the life she wants for herself. From Moira's perspective, it is a realistic understanding of the demands, commitments and responsibilities entailed in mothering in contemporary society. This also ties in with Gillespie's (1999) notion of

the push and pull factors associated with women's voluntary childlessness. Moira is being pushed away from motherhood and the demands and activities associated with it, and is being pulled toward the childfree lifestyle.

As well as understanding the demands of motherhood as intensive, this view is also grounded in the risk discourse, and the considerations that women made which related to having a stable partner, their understanding of the costs of childcare, and an understanding of the demands of motherhood reflects the view that mother work is still primarily a woman's responsibility rather than something that can be shared. This view was also expressed in the literature and even in the Nordic³⁰ countries, wherein, welfare policies are supportive of equal gender parenting, both parents are entitled to parental leave, and there is highly subsidised childcare facilities, significant numbers of women are still choosing to be childless (Peterson, 2014). These women frame motherhood as a risk venture, based on high levels of commitment and responsibility. In the research carried out by Peterson (2014) women indicated that despite the ample welfare policies set in place in Sweden, they still feared that they would be responsible for the majority of childcare and would be burdened in more ways than men. As Peterson (2014) pointed out, the sacrifices, demands, and responsibilities the women associated with the motherhood role were considered too great in relation to what they perceived as the enticements of the childfree lifestyles, which included; increased autonomy, independence, and opportunities for self-fulfilment. In the context of this study, although neither Susan, Sarah, nor Moira had direct experiences of parenting, Susan's ideas about intensive mothering or the demands of parenthood emerged from her own mother's commitment to her younger sister and the responsibilities it entailed. Sarah had her own ideas about the motherhood role and felt that she could not commit

³⁰ The Nordic countries generally refer to Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

to it in a way that was necessary since she was already entirely focused on her career. Susan and Sarah both experienced a direct push away from motherhood and fundamentally rejected the responsibilities involved and the commitment it entailed. Also, Sarah wanted to stay committed to her work and this also pulled her toward the childfree lifestyle. Moira would only consider motherhood if she had a stable partner, and it was her view that she could not commit to the perceived demands of mothering on her own.

Considerations and Understandings of Maternal Instinct

From a pronatalist perspective there is a common view that women are born with natural and instinctive desires to procreate and mother (Gillespie, 2000; Park, 2002; Scott, 2009). Elsewhere, it is suggested that the notion of maternal instinct is a social construct, derived through the powers of patriarchy (Ireland, 1993; Macintyre, 1976; Morell, 1994; Scott, 2009; Shapiro, 2014; Veevers, 1980). Maternal instinct is explained in several ways, one of which relates to the so-called 'biological clock', which suggests that the desire to bare children will generally awaken when women are in their thirties (Ayers, 2010). Women who do not experience the intricate desire or longing for children as outlined above, and who purposely choose not to procreate, are essentially prescribed a stigmatized or spoiled identity, which they are subsequently required to manage. The notion of managing stigmatized identities associated with women's voluntary childlessness shall be discussed in more depth in the findings chapter, chapter seven.

Of the twelve women who participated in this research, four women identified that they never experienced any sort of desire or longing to have children, and cited the lack of maternal instinct as influencing their childbearing decision making. Although

one of the women waited in anticipation for the instinct to 'kick-in', especially when she reached her thirties, that did not happen for her. Laura Scott in her research on voluntary childless made a similar comment;

I imagined a ticking time bomb set for some random day in my 35th year...an incendiary mix of hormones and longing that would explode my being and rewire my brain...That day never came (Friedman, 2010, np).

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;

There was no defining factor or anything like that like, it was just something that developed, just something, no, never for me, just something, just wasn't for me. Was never maternal, never had any maternal instincts... Never, ever, ever, ever, ever, never...just don't think that was in my make up or in my DNA³¹.

There is real surety in Josephine's choice of words above, and she was very definitive in stating that she was never maternal.

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, 2010) and she remains somewhat ambivalent as to whether or not she will ever have children. She assumed that she would experience the innate biological instinct that women are allegedly born with (Macintyre, 1976; Miller, 2005; Rich, 1986), however, this did not happen. She explained that she had,

Always been waiting for the moment to hit me that I would develop that maternal instinct, and it has never come. I just assumed it possibly would I'd say, so, I just thought that maybe, kind of, yeah, in my thirties, all of a sudden that maybe I'd want it [a child] even though, as I say, I didn't really think about it prior to that too much, but, that never happened, never got that longing, that desire. So, again it was just that whole ticking clock that made me think about it and forced me to think

³¹ Deoxyribonucleic acid, a self-replicating material present in almost all living organisms, it carries genetic information.

about it, and I'm still I suppose, slightly thinking about it....Yeah, I mean just in terms of percentage wise, I am ninety percent convinced that I don't want kids in my life, and my partner is actually, I would say, possibly one-hundred percent, that possibly factors into it as well.

As evidenced in the quote above, Rachel never felt the need to have children, she lived in the moment and still does to some extent. She is prioritizing the lifestyle she wants for herself and her relationship with her husband, over having children. Also, Rachel is involving herself in a reflective dialogue wherein, she is identifying her own influencing factors and this ties in very much with the project of the self that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) talked about. In terms of the categories of childless women described by Veevers (1973) and subsequently expanded on by Scott (2009) and others, Rachel resembles the categories of the undecided and the acquiescers, as she is not fully certain that she does not want children, and her decision is also being influenced by her husband's lack of desire for them. As discussed above, in an earlier narrative Rachel suggested that her decision not to have children was more closely associated with nurture rather than nature, that is, by the lack of physical and emotional affection between Rachel and her parents, rather than the absence of a biological desire to have children. However, it would seem that Rachel's childbearing decision making is a combination of both, that is, the lack of an intimate relationship with her parents, as well as the lack of maternal instinct for parenthood. Rachel is upholding a biographical connection to the past and the choices she now makes are very much informed by her early experiences. On the other side, she is reviewing what happened to her and because of those experiences she is consciously choosing not to have children. This is an example of what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) described as disembedding. This highlights the complexities behind women's childbearing decision making, which can change over time (Ayers, 2010; Hays, 1996; Ireland,

1993; Kelly, 2009; Morell, 1994; Park, 2002; Rich et al. 2011). Rachel is still somewhat ambivalent about finalizing her decision. She elaborated on this,

As I say, there's a very small percentage of me that just thinks about it [motherhood] but mainly as a kind of a, you know, if I have regrets in twenty years' time, you know, and nobody can tell how you're going to feel in the future...Like it's always there, it kind of flutters in and out of my mind every so often, and so yeah, and 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, so, and maybe that's forcing me to, I suppose, I think about it more at the moment, as opposed to maybe five years ago or ten years.

In this, Rachel is searching internally for an explanation about why she does not want children, and draws on the biological argument, which suggests that women are instinctively drawn to having them (Gillespie, 2000; Park, 2002; Scott, 2009). Rachel gives a further explanation as to why she is now giving the decision about whether or not to bare children much more thought and consideration;

I'm, I suppose getting to an age, and I suppose, have for the last maybe ten years, five to ten years, been thinking about it, as just the natural kind of ticking clock comes into my mind.

Rachel's reference to the 'ticking clock' is similar to that of the biological clock, which means that as she approaches the age of forty she feels compelled to re-consider her decision before she reaches an age where she will no longer be able to conceive or have children. She is owning the choice before it is taken away from her. This suggests that for Rachel, there is an element of ambiguity as she is influenced by the maternal argument and considers that she should be more inclined toward the idea of having children. However, the fact that she has not experienced any sort of desire or longing causes her to question and re-consider her decision, part of which hinges on the potential for future regret.

Another of the women, Keelin explained that while she 'never had a maternal instinct to fight off', she briefly considered motherhood while married,

But it's more for, in my case anyway, it's more for my partner that I was thinking of it, cause- I wanted him to...I wanted us to have that thing that we kind of shared, you know, so, it wasn't that I wanted my genes to be out there or anything like that, it wasn't any maternal instinct in me, it was more a feeling of love for somebody else...I'm not married anymore, then I went back to accepting that of course, I never really wanted to have children either...

This contrasts with Rachel's situation, whose husband has no desire to have children, whereas, in Keelin's case, she is the one who had no major desire but contemplated having children for her husband's sake. Also, the idea of children within marriage is emphasized here, as something that is natural and expected (Macintyre, 1976). Although Keelin did not experience any desire to have children, she felt somewhat obliged to give the decision consideration while married. This highlights the continuous social pressure exerted on couples, especially married couples to have children, which continues in some form in Ireland. In terms of the categories of childless women outlined earlier in this study, Keelin resembles the category of postponers that Veevers (1972) referred to, the transitional category that Ireland (1993) described, or the passive decision makers that Gillespie (1999) talked about. For Keelin, the decision about whether or not to have children is ongoing, there is ambiguity there, and it is something she regularly reflects on. It is not a decision that was made once and never re-visited, it is an ongoing and continuous reflective process (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991).

Jane was still in secondary school when she realized that she was in no way maternal and had no desire to have children;

Yeah, and you know, even at that age, when people talked about getting married and having children, I always said, I would like to get married, maybe, but, I don't know if I want children, and they'd say, oh, you'll

change your mind, that will be something that will come to you later on in life, but even at that age, I didn't really have any instinct, and I know a lot of children don't, but I kind of had a sense of no, this isn't something I'll ever want...

Although it is evident that Jane was confident in her views as a teenager, and knew that she did not want to be a mother, she still wasn't believed when she tried to tell people this, and this is still the case. This highlights the embedded assumption that persists in Irish society, that the desire to procreate will emerge when the timing is right (Inglis, 1998, 2008). At the same time, for Jane, this suggests evidence of individualization, of taking charge of one's life and making choices with the benefit of the self in mind. Even at a young age Jane began expressing her individuality, which can be understood by her views and her ability to follow them in practice. These views which seem to have taken shape when she was a teenager have persisted through to adulthood.

Josephine and Jane are typical examples of the category of early articulators described by Veevers (1973) they never experienced any desire to have children and that has been consistent throughout the life course. Despite this, Jane is still not believed when she acknowledges this, and this shows how prevalent the maternal argument still is and the pressures that women experience to re-consider their decision. This is an example of what Goffman (1963) described as stigma theory, which essentially 'normalizes' in this case motherhood and stigmatizes those who choose not to mother.

For Rachel and Keelin the decision about whether or not to have children was more complex and reflects what Giddens (1994) referred to as the process of biographical experimentation, comprising elements of self-reflection, dis-embedding from the past and planning for the future. This highlights the persistence of the

pronatalist belief that motherhood is natural and that all women should not only have children, but should want to have them (Macintyre, 1976).

[Fear of Pregnancy: Managing Stigma and Risk](#)

In this study, only one of the women expressed negative feelings about getting pregnant, however, this is an issue that is worth consideration because it is a motive that also emerged in the research literature, and clearly is a deciding factor for some women. In Niamh's household, pregnancy, especially outside of marriage was constructed as potentially dangerous and negative, and was set up as something which could have devastating long-term consequences for one's social standing and opportunities. So the idea of pregnancy and motherhood as potentially stigmatizing and limiting her family is a potent one for Niamh. 'My mother was always the one to talk about pregnancy' and she [her mother] instilled a lifelong fear of it in Niamh. She described her mother's concerns as 'that generation' style of thinking. What Niamh refers to here is the type of ideals that the Irish Catholics were brought up with, specifically, an idea that sex outside of marriage was immoral (Horgan, 2001). Even in the late 1960s, and early 1970s, the time period in which Niamh was conceived, women who became pregnant outside of marriage were met with social disapproval (O'Morain, 2014). They were seen to bring disgrace and shame onto themselves and indeed their families, and often they were sent away to mother-and-baby homes, in an effort to conceal their pregnancies and limit the prospect of further embarrassment and family shame (O'Morain, 2014). Niamh explained that,

She [mum] got pregnant with my brother and her and my dad then got married straight away... I think it was such an issue for her, it's sad you know, but...there was a shame in it because she, she left, she left where she lived and moved away...just the shame...I think it's that generation you know, that you know, 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, so, there was always like that...I just

think there was a fear I would just come home pregnant, a fear you know, because I suppose as I got older I realized what happened to her.

Her mother's experience and how she imparted this to her children and especially to Niamh who was the oldest girl, led Niamh to associate shame with pregnancy outside of marriage. She explained that,

Yeah, it was almost like a fear, yeah, getting pregnant was almost a fear, it was like, yeah, I feel like I would be the child again...It was almost like the fear if you, if you get pregnant you will get out of this house, you know, and it was like, it was only said now in the heat of the moment, but, then again, you know, but I remembered it, because... it's like don't dare, you know, and it was almost like, if you got pregnant, it was the end of your life, yeah, it was the end of your life, if you got pregnant, that was it, and I know that, that has been carried through.

Niamh's mother instilled such fear in Niamh that she has never had any desire or longing for children of her own, in fact, it is something she has always sought to avoid, even while she was in committed relationships. Niamh's fear related to the social stigma attached to pregnancy outside of marriage, and this resonated closely with her, given that her own mother experienced it while still single. What is significant here, is the fear of social stigma that Niamh has, which shows the strength of socialization and internalization of shame around being the 'wrong' type of mother, which continues in some form in Ireland, and we can see this through Niamh's experiences and views. Goffman's (1963) stigma theory is useful in this case and is particularly relevant to the Catholic Irish context, given that pregnancy outside of marriage was something that was deeply frowned upon. It was associated with a profound sense of shame, and not only did the women themselves suffer, their families were often made to suffer because of it. The stigma that Niamh's mother experienced is something that has stayed with both Niamh and her mother throughout the life course. It is something

that Niamh has always been mindful of and continually reflects on, and this has informed her views about avoiding getting pregnant.

[The Project of the Self; Risk and Well-Being](#)

Two of the women, Moira and Jane referenced health concerns, in particular mental health issues as key factors in their childbearing decision making. The health concerns that Moira and Jane described were essentially about avoiding the risk to their health, and they are managing the potential risk that pregnancy would create for them. Moira who is aged forty cited family health issues, including; depression and anxiety as a motivating factor in her childbearing decision making. She recounted the very serious mental health issues which her sister had experienced and which led to her untimely death, when [Moira] was fifteen. This combined with a history of other mental health issues in the family and Moira's own experience of minor mental health challenges, have made her anxious about having children.

She explained,

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, in the genes...yeah, so, I'm kind of institutionalized by my, well, I kind of, really, I live alone and I am very content living alone. I'm not happy to share my space with other people and my mental health is so much better when I'm, I need that space, yeah, I do need that space...That was one of the big factors as well, like, maintaining my own good mental health.

Moira's priority is to herself, part of which includes; safeguarding her mental health and wellbeing. She has clear memories of her sister's mental health issues, and the family history of mental health issues. She fears that if she had children of her own they too could potentially inherit those issues. She had concerns that her own mental health could suffer if she got pregnant and this was a major factor in her childbearing decision making.

Similar to Moira, Jane explained that she suffered with asthma from a young age, subsequently developed eating disorders and was diagnosed with 'OCD [obsessive compulsive disorder³²] about two years ago. Jane 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 demands of pregnancy and motherhood could potentially threaten her health and emotional well-being, and this is something she chooses to avoid.

It is evident that these women's very deliberate assessment of their own capacity for caring for a child while also meeting their own health needs heavily influenced their child bearing decision making. Both women had a family history of mental health issues, and had directly experienced it themselves. Also, Moira witnessed the devastating impact her sister's death had on the family, following her sister's long battle with mental health issues. Those experiences were still very raw to the women, and had deeply affected them. As self-focused individuals, Jane and Moira are managing their risk biographies through careful decision making and calculations of the possible outcomes (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

In the literature the theme of health was also discussed, and references were made to women's own struggles with mental health issues (Ayers, 2010; Daum, 2015). Some feared that pregnancy would aggravate pre-existing health conditions, others were concerned that potential children would inherit genetic disorders and these were significant factors in their childbearing decision making. This is an example of what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) described as biographical experimentation, the women are reflecting on their pasts, and their concerns about health, and in particular mental health issues are informing the choices they make, especially their fertility choices.

³² OCD is a disorder of the brain and behaviour, which results in severe anxiety. It involves obsessions and compulsions that take up much of the person's time, and interferes with other aspects of their lives.

Conclusion

From the accounts provided by the women, and from the women's own assessment of motherhood, it seems that for them, certain factors such as finances, health, and stability in relationships need to be in place before they would consider having children. Others are influenced by adverse childhood experiences and rejected motherhood and the activities associated with it (Gillespie, 1999) because of these experiences. Analysis of their accounts draws our attention to what some of the women perceived as the intense demands of motherhood, the commitment of time, work and energy, and not getting to do what they wanted, and having to give priority to somebody else. This resonates with the ideology of intensive mothering developed by Hays (1996); and Michaels and Douglas (2010). We see that this idea is one that also connects closely with considering risks associated with motherhood and children, and in particular, financial risks. Views put forward by the research participants about intensive motherhood also places it in a contradictory position to career development, and general opportunities for broadening life experiences. These views accept the connection between motherhood and sacrifice; the solution being to remain childless. Also, contrary to the cultural discourse which frames procreation as normal, and motherhood as natural, innate, instinctive, four of the women in this study explained that they never felt any desire or longing to have children. Others were committed to maintaining their personal health and well-being. This ties in closely with the individualization thesis, which suggests that 'the most widespread desire in the West today' is 'a life of one's own' (2002, p. 22). As women have more choices available to them than in the past, it follows that motherhood is no longer their only desire/ their only option. Instead, it is considered in the context of a wide range of competing

options, and is heavily weighed against the backdrop of potential risks and uncertainties about how children would impact on the women's lives and life choices.

In this study the typologies developed by Veevers (1973) and expanded on by others are interconnected with the reasons for women's voluntary childlessness, to draw out further aspects of the decision making process, in terms of when and why the women made the decision to be childless, and whether or not the decision changed over time. While the typologies were useful and showed the complexities and the process of decision making, the reasons for women's voluntary childlessness as described above showed the process more fully and further highlighted the importance of early influences with current contexts of women's lives.

As evidenced in the research literature, the notion of maternal instinct continues to arouse a storm of controversy and is widely disputed (Ireland, 1993; Macintyre, 1976; Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1980; Walker, 2011). Some commentators widely challenge it, suggesting instead that it is a patriarchal construct. In this study, four of the women substantiated those claims, and explained that they had never experienced any sort of desire or longing for motherhood. For those four women being childless was as natural to them as motherhood is to other women. Rachel raised the issue of the nature/ nurture debate, and whether her lack of desire for motherhood was influenced by her upbringing and her own experiences of being mothered, or whether it is an inherent factor. Although this study provided some answers to those questions, the concept of maternal instinct is something that warrants further research and exploration.

From the women's narrative accounts of how and why they made the decision to be childless, it became clear that for some women the decision making process is complex and multi-faceted, and can change over time. It is rarely a decision that is

made once and never re-visited. Often women's motives for voluntary childlessness are influenced by the push and pull factors that Gillespie (1999) talked about in her research. As well as being enticed by the childfree lifestyle, women are also pushed away from having children because of the demands and perceived responsibilities entailed. This identifies closely with the project of the self that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) described, and the idea of prioritizing oneself and one's own life, and accepting responsibility for the consequences of the choices one makes. It also ties in with the notion of reflexive biography making which will be explored in more depth in the next findings chapter, chapter six.

Chapter Six:

Figure 2: Overview and Profile of Participants

Name	Age	Place in the Family	No of Children in Family of Origin	Partner Status	Education Level	Occupation	Socio-Economic Backgrounds ³³	Geographical Location	Sampling Type
Bridget	25	Youngest	3	In a relationship	3 rd Level	Scientific Profession	Middle Class	Urban	Purposive
Jane	30	Not Specified	8	In a relationship	3 rd Level	Teacher	Middle Class	Urban	Purposive
Niamh	36	Second Eldest	4	Single	3 rd Level	Caring Profession	Middle Class	Urban	Snowball
Sarah	36	Not Specified	Not Specified	In a relationship	2 nd Level	Creative Industry	Working Class	Urban	Purposive
Ellen	39	Youngest	4	Single	2 nd Level	Call Centre	Working Class	Rural	Snowball
Rachel	39	Eldest	4	Married	3 rd Level	Professional Local Government	Middle Class	Rural	Snowball
Maira	40	Not Specified	Not Specified	Single	3 rd Level	Multinational Company	Middle Class	Urban	Purposive
Susan	43	Middle	3	Married	2 nd Level	Food Industry	Working Class	Rural	Purposive
Keelin	46	Not Specified	Not Specified	Divorced	3 rd Level	Academia	Middle Class	Rural	Snowball
Liz	48	Eldest	4	In a relationship	3 rd Level	Teacher/ Care Assistant	Middle Class	Urban	Snowball
Josephine	56	Not Specified	8	Single	2 nd Level	Local Government	Working Class	Rural	Snowball
Linda	57	Eldest	3	Married	2 nd Level	Writer	Working Class	Urban	Purposive

Conscious Reflexive Biography Making

In this chapter the women's accounts are analysed to identify what lifestyles they want for themselves, and explore the processes through which they articulate their reflections about this. The writing around biographies suggests that women are now consciously making decisions about who they want to be, or how they want their lives to be (Giddens, 1991, 1994). Part of this can be attributed to structural changes which have taken place in society, in terms of access to education, employment, and changes to the cycle of family life, which have played a role in restructuring the basic conditions of the female biography (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). While family

³³ Social class refers to divisions in society on the basis of economics and social status. The middle class are generally engaged in non-manual work and have higher education levels. The working class are those engaged in manual labour, including factory based jobs and have lower levels of educational achievement (Thompson, 2016).

still plays an important role in women's lives, women are disembedding from normative practices. Motherhood is no longer the only option available to them.

Interestingly, six of the women began disembedding from normative practices associated with religion and family life from a young age, and this is something that has always stayed with them. Others experienced what Gillespie (1999) described as a push away from motherhood and the associated activities. Instead, these women were enticed by the perceived benefits of the childfree life. For six of the twelve women who participated in the research, their reproductive choices were informed by events or experiences that happened in the past, especially in their formative years, which left a lasting impact on them. Seven of the women were concerned that they would not be able to successfully combine motherhood with paid work and decided to focus on building their careers or pursuing an education. These women consciously decided to negotiate a very different biographical life path for themselves, based on their own desires and personal preferences. This aligns with the work of Giddens (1991) who strongly suggested that in order to survive in a society that is increasingly categorized by the demise of tradition and the expansion of risk, it is necessary for individuals to engage in the process of reflexive life planning.

This chapter begins by exploring the process of disembedding in the context of women choosing to be childless, some of which can be attributed to the women's formative years, and growing up with families who challenged the norm and encouraged their children to do the same. I then explore, the push and pull factors that Gillespie (1999, 2000, 2003) described in her research. The women's decisions comprise competing influences, including a rejection of motherhood and the associated activities and the desire for personal freedom and autonomy and a life of

their own (Gillespie, 2003). Finally, I explore how and why a preference for a career took precedence over having children for some of the women.

Thinking Outside 'the box': Disembedding from Normative Expectations

In this study six of the women were influenced and inspired to be themselves, and live the lives they wanted for themselves from a young age, and they were facilitated in this by their parents. They were encouraged and allowed since childhood to question the expected life paths for young girls/ women as they were growing up, reject things they did not agree with, and significantly, they all rejected traditional religion. They engaged in the process of reflecting on and questioning the formerly fixed roles set out for women, and consciously decided not to pursue that particular life path. These women's stories could be perceived as reflecting the strand of thinking which suggests that our choices have become more personalized, our lives more individualized, and less constrained by the 'shackles of tradition' (Giddens, 1991, p. 82).

Bridget came from a non-traditional family background, in that, her parent's separated and subsequently divorced when she was aged eight, yet, she described this as a positive outcome for the family, especially for her mother. Bridget felt that her mother had been constrained by the expectations of traditional family life within marriage, but all that changed when she separated. She explained; that 'she [her mother] stayed at home while my father worked and she didn't do anything, and she didn't get her education and stuff, so it held her back a lot'. Following the separation, her mother pursued her lifelong dream, 'got her degree', qualified as a teacher, and became 'more of her own person'. In fact, for much of Bridget's 'formative years' she 'saw her mother studying and achieving'. For Bridget this was a positive and inspiring experience. 'Like I said, my mother is an inspiration'. Also, having witnessed and reflected on the sacrifices her mother made while trying to complete her education and

raise three children, Bridget felt that she could not commit to motherhood in the same way her mother had. This coincides with Safer's (1996) suggestion that a woman's childbearing decision making is influenced by her own experiences of being mothered. Bridget gave the following account of her perception 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.

This is a very conscious rejection of the motherhood imperative and not one that is informed by having caring responsibilities as a child. 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. This is a further example of the push and pull factor described by Gillespie (1999). Bridget made the following observation;

It's [deciding about whether or not to have a child(ren)] a very big decision and so, that's like, that's why I haven't just gone out and got a sterilization, because I could change, but, I mean like, then, like, you know, I felt this way when I was you know, eight, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, and it still hasn't changed.

Bridget is engaged in a process of ongoing reflection, and tries to envisage the type of life she would have with and without children, and in this regard, she is consciously negotiating her own reflexive biography, and has been for a very long time. Bridget identified herself as an independent thinker from early on and noted that her parents supported her in this.

Like Bridget, Keelin explained that her parents were liberal and open minded and encouraged her to be herself and express her individuality from a young age. She described her parents as 'quite diverse' and 'creative'.

I was luckier, in that I grew up with parents who had lived in Manchester in London for thirty years, so they were that bit more aware of not constraining people you know, they've grown up, they lived in cities, so, we came to [rural town in County Cork] and they saw the constraints and they didn't want to push their children into it. Having said that, I had lots of uncles, and aunts, and first cousins all over [rural town in County Cork] and all around and they used to think we were a bit unusual, in that you know, we weren't particularly religious.

Keelin's family relocated to Ireland in the mid nineteen seventies, at a time when society was deeply embedded in Catholic ideologies (Inglis, 1998) yet, Keelin's parents did not force their children into organized religion, despite it being the norm of the time. This was unusual, given that most Irish people willingly embraced Catholicism, and were deeply influenced by the teachings of the Catholic Church. Even when Keelin decided that she no longer wanted to attend Sunday Mass, and the headmistress, who was a nun, approached her mother about it, Keelin explained that her mother's response to the headmistress was;

Well, you know, have you ever tried to make her [Keelin] do something she doesn't want to do, you know, so, there was this kind of thing of, how are you going to force a child to go to Mass when she doesn't want to go to Mass.

Keelin notes that she almost always makes choices and decisions that challenge the norm; 'I mean, I never wanted to be married, and I never wanted to have children...I didn't really see either of them as part of who I was'. This expression of her individuality and autonomy stems from her parents, and their style of parenting, and this is something that Keelin has always tried to follow through on. This is also an example of choice making, Keelin is consciously choosing not to have children. This

reflects the individualization thesis, which suggests that our lives and life choices have progressively become more dependent on individual decision making (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). As Peterson (2014) pointed out in her research on women's voluntary childlessness, this is especially true in relation to family formation.

Linda also started disembedding from what was expected of her at a young age, and especially from organized religion, and this is something that has stayed with her throughout her adult life. Like Bridget and Keelin, Linda's parents never pressurized their children to conform to societal norms, instead, they were encouraged to be themselves and do their own thing. Linda explained that she began to question the beliefs associated with Catholicism while still in primary school;

When I went to Confession for the first time, and we were told you'd come out and you'd feel completely different and it was great and everything, and I just thought it was the creepiest thing I ever did and I didn't feel any different, and I also told a lie in Confession, and they didn't notice, and I thought right that's that...

Linda was in her twenties when she made the decision that she did not want children, and this is something her family were receptive to, she explained; 'nobody has ever pressured me, or, or suggested that my life is in any way bereft without them'. The only comment Linda's mother ever made about her childbearing decision making was, 'oh, I'm sorry you don't have the enjoyment that you get out of children'. Also, she explained that she already had two maiden aunts and a non-traditional mother who worked outside the home, thus, being childless or unmarried was not perceived as highly unusual. She was inspired by the non traditional women in her family, who opted to pursue a less mainstream option;

Well, insofar as I had two aunts that were unmarried and didn't have children...you know, it's not something strange...and my mum wasn't the traditional stay at home mum because she was out working in the

shop...So, I mean, as far as I was concerned, there were options, and whatever you choose, was whatever you choose, so, I was ok with that, and I didn't, yeah, I didn't feel that it was the only thing I had to do.

Linda explained that she knew herself and knew her own mind, and motherhood was something that she never wanted. As such, Linda is principally guided by the model of being true to oneself, taking charge of one's own life, making oneself a priority and making choices that reflect that (Giddens, 1991). It was Linda's view that;

Everybody has to live the life that works for them, and you know, if you know deep down that a particular lifestyle is never going to work for you, then it's foolish to think for some reason of wanting to fit in or whatever, then it's foolish to go down that path. So, I think everybody has to, you know, you do have to make your own life and you do have to make your own choices...

This is also an example of disembedding from traditional ways of life without re-embedding (Beck, 1992). Linda is no longer obliged by the commitments and constraints of family life, as discussed in the previous findings chapter, chapter five. She is essentially free to choose how she wants to be in the world, part of which includes foregoing motherhood and living the life she always imagined for herself.

In a similar way, Sarah, Susan and Jane also started disembedding from traditional, social, cultural, and religious norms at an early age and began to action the choices they wanted for themselves. For these women, individualization became part of a lifestyle structure they wanted to follow and they perceived it as a way to potentially transforming their future life paths, even their identities. For Sarah, this consisted of a questioning of religious norms and disembedding from the teachings of Catholicism, while still only a child. Susan moved out of home at the age of sixteen and subsequently stopped participating in organized religion, while Jane explained that she; 'wouldn't have ever had strong ties to faith...wouldn't have ever had a strong

inclination, I didn't take the pledge³⁴, I was the only one, you know, those kind of things'. These women began expressing their individuality at an early age, for them, there were always choices to be made, and they chose not to conform to the traditional ways of life that were socially expected of them. The accounts analysed herein, suggest that some of the women were encouraged to 'think outside the box' from an early age, that is, to think for themselves, and make choices with the benefit of the self in mind. In essence, this brings to the fore the positive aspects of disembedding and individualization, and exemplifies the ways in which women endeavour to create a life for themselves, free from the constraints of the past.

The Pull of Childlessness and A Push Away from Motherhood: Women Negotiating Childfree Biographies

Gillespie (1999) argued that the pull of childlessness can co-exist with a push away from motherhood and the activities associated with it. She also made the point that motherhood does not come naturally to all women and that some never experience any desire or longing to have children, motherhood holds no appeal for them. Often, these women described motherhood in terms of a sacrifice and a loss, comprising responsibilities and demands they were simply unwilling to take on. Instead, the women were pulled toward the childfree lifestyle and the perceived freedom it affords (Gillespie, 1999; Houseknecht, 1987; Peterson, 2014).

One of the women who participated in this research considers that marriage and motherhood are inextricably linked and as a result she strategically avoids relationships. Another has a dislike of children and negotiated her relationship with a man whose children are all adults. The third woman is married and together she and

³⁴ The pledge is enacted during the sacrament of Confirmation. Adolescents pledge to abstain from alcohol until they reach adulthood.

her husband have consciously decided not to have children. She is not in any way enticed by the motherhood role and has no desire to have children. Another woman is in a relationship and her partner has a five year old son. The fifth woman is divorced, is not in a relationship, and does not have children and is conflicted about whether or not she really wants to have them. Woman number six is currently single, having come out of a long-term relationship and would only consider having children in the context of a stable relationship.

Ellen's childbearing decision making was informed by events in her past, in particular by negative childhood experiences, as outlined in chapter five, and especially by her father's alcoholism, and the associated verbal, physical, and emotional aggression she and her siblings were subjected to. As a consequence of this, Ellen explained that she has 'trust issues' and as an adult this has been an ongoing issue for her, and she also described herself as a 'commitment phobic';

I suppose that when you do come out of a house like that you are always going to have trust issues, because my thing was, I was never going to marry my father and people don't go around with stamps on their forehead saying 'I'm an alcoholic', so then, I just kind of didn't willingly get into, get into relationships and that kind of, I didn't feel comfortable in them. I just couldn't feel myself in them at all and I suppose...I didn't really want to have children. I think I made the decision I didn't want to get married, and I suppose in one way, it just kind of came second thing to it.

Ellen is reflecting on the life she had as a child, and is consciously negotiating a radically different life path for herself (Giddens, 1991). This also suggests that for Ellen, the biographical decision was not to marry and for her that also meant not having children, but that was the secondary decision. This shows that the decision to be childless can be a consequence of another decision rather than the primary decision in itself;

I suppose, maybe underlying when I made the decision that I didn't want to get married, I then had made the decision without realizing that I didn't want to have children, I suppose, because, when I really examined about not wanting to get married, that was my reason, I didn't want to have children, an automatic progression, if you go into a relationship when you're at such an age, the next step for them, the other person, I would presume, probably, would want to have children and like it's not going to be the thing the first day, sorry, do you want children cause- I don't, do you know, that's not the question you're going to ask them on the first date and someone might say oh yeah, no they don't, but you don't know how a person is going to change their mind down the line, and I just, I didn't want that, I didn't want, not that I didn't want it, I didn't want to be a mother. I just was happy to come and go, and I made those two decisions.

Ellen's use of the words 'I just was happy to come and go' suggests a desire not to be responsible for anyone else or to have relationships which obliged her to be present. In consciously choosing to avoid relationships Ellen is seeking to safeguard herself from the hurt she experienced in the past, as a result of her father's issues with alcohol and the subsequent abuse he inflicted on Ellen and her siblings. This ties in with the notion of biographical experimentation described by (Giddens, 1991). Ellen is upholding a biographical connection to the past in terms of reflecting on the difficult childhood she experienced, and she is also seeking to sever that association by choosing a radically different life for herself, where children are not included. Interestingly, Ellen mentioned that she would consider the possibility of establishing a more intimate relationship with somebody when she knows that it is biologically impossible for her to have children. 'I have no problem with meeting someone when I'll be forty-five or fifty because they will know that at that stage, well, she's not going to be having children'. Even then, she stated that she is not interested in forming a traditional relationship, and what she wants is company for holidays, trips away, outings, and so forth. This is synonymous with the findings from Gillespie's (1999) research wherein she argued that in contemporary Western society a lot of partner/

couple relationships are built on choice and companionship rather than the traditional nuclear family unit, comprising mother, father, and children. It is evident that Ellen is consciously articulating a desire to retain power and control over her own life, and she considers that one of the only ways to ensure this is by avoiding close relationships. She is not willing to sacrifice her freedom or her independence and the power to make her own decisions without reference to the needs of others. Ellen's motives for voluntary childlessness are influenced by a strong emotionally and relationally informed sense of who she wants to be, and how she wants to lead her life. She diligently builds and protects an independent lifestyle, unfettered from the demands of physical and emotional caregiving, this is diametrically different from the life she was obliged to live as a child. For Ellen, the desire or pull toward voluntary childlessness co-existed with a push away from motherhood and the associated demands. This conscious choosing of a particular way of life is demonstrated by her use of words such as 'choice' and 'decision making' when explaining her voluntarily childlessness. Ellen's narrative would seem to align very directly with Giddens's (1991) perspective on the making of one's own biography through conscious and reflexive decision making. Ellen is actively engaging in a process of individualization where the desire for 'a life of one's own' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 22) which is personally curated and managed is paramount.

Liz on the other hand, 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 he was not interested in having more children. While Liz is happy in her relationship, and describes her partner as a 'very, very fine gentleman', she feels that his sons, although all adults, are constraining and interfering in their relationship.

Although two of her partner's sons live away, one has recently moved back into the family home with his father, while another visits regularly, particularly at the weekends. When Liz visits her partner, also at the weekends, she finds it difficult to cope with his sons' presence, as she feels they are taking advantage of their father, and encroaching on the time that he and Liz spend together. This could also relate back to her relationship with her own father who became more interested in Liz's brothers when they were born. The key point here is that Liz very consciously wants a lifestyle free of children whether they are young or adult children, and she is pushing very strongly against a lifestyle with children as distinct from being pulled toward some other lifestyle. Liz and her partner have different perspectives 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. She reflected on her own childhood vis-à-vis that of her partner's sons and made the following observation;

Number one is they're not children...they're grown men...I have been brought up the hard way. I've had to get up and get the cows in, in the morning at half past four...we [herself and her siblings] know hard work.

This also 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. Also, this is a clear illustration of Liz's rejection of the motherhood role, particularly the activities and responsibilities associated with it, which held no appeal for her.

Susan is an early articulator (Gillespie, 1999; Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1973) and consciously made an early decision not to have children yet, she always feared that she would not meet someone who shared her desires. Ironically, Susan

explained that when she initially met her current husband, who is ten years her junior, she was amazed to discover that he had never wanted children either. She explained that, 'he thought he would never be able to meet a woman who felt the same way as him about not wanting children'. As noted earlier in this research, Susan had previously sacrificed a relationship that she really valued because she felt so strongly about not becoming a mother. More recently, to prevent an unplanned pregnancy, her husband decided to have a vasectomy. She reflected,

I did say to my husband before the vasectomy, I said 'Oh, my God, are you sure?' Because I knew I was sure, and I said, you know, because you're ten years younger. I was just so afraid for him, that he would just turn around in five years, and really regret it, and, or God forbid, if I died, and he met someone else who did want children, that he might change his mind, but we talked about it...he just said, 'no'...I was very relieved.

This example illustrates the tensions involved in biography making. For some women it is a contentious process of negotiating the decision with a partner. Fortunately, Susan and her husband shared the same ideas about not wanting to parent. Susan's final word was particularly indicative of how reassured she felt when he went ahead with the vasectomy as planned, as she had so many concerns about the ways in which children would impact on the 'wonderful relationship' she has with her husband. She explained,

We have so much fun, you know, we work hard, sometimes we may not see each other for a week because we are working different hours, but when we see each other we have all that time together, you know, we can chat to each other...without interruption.

This is a clear illustration of the pull factors that Gillespie (1999) talked about in her research, that is, the pull of being able to have a career and yet have a relationship because time away from work is not spent on children. Also, the importance of

freedom in negotiating adult relationships is evident here. As a result, Susan and her husband were able to develop their lives in other ways. Susan was pulled toward being childfree and explained that her priorities are 'my family, my friends, my husband, my bike that is my world', as well as looking after her 'three large dogs'. In terms of biography making Susan wants to be able to concentrate on these aspects of her life rather than having to focus on looking after children. In conclusion, Susan made the point that herself and her husband, 'have a huge sense of adventure as well, and I think if you have kids people say ah, life doesn't have to stop, but life really does change'. Susan's narrative draws attention to the notion of children as a potential risk to relationships. For Susan, the decision has been even more re-affirmed of late, as she has watched close friends struggle with mortgages and children, while trying unsuccessfully to juggle both. Susan explained,

A lot of our friends who have children at the moment are...we watch them struggle, you know, not all of them but most of them and it's heart-breaking to watch, and we wonder whose marriages or partnerships are going to last.

Susan did not want to risk or jeopardize the good relationship she has with her husband, and she feared that if they did have children, it could potentially impact on their current lifestyle. Also, she did not want the added responsibilities associated with childrearing, including the pressure of time and financial constraints. For Susan, there is an overlap between the push and pull factors as outlined by Gillespie (1999).

In this study, Ellen, Liz, and Susan, have made active and clear decisions with which they seem to be very happy. They have consciously chosen not to have children, one lost a relationship to this, another avoids intimate relationships, and a third has difficulties in her relationship because of it. In her research Gillespie (1999) illustrated that some women can experience both a push away from motherhood and the activities

associated with her and a pull toward the advantages of a childfree life. This was evident in both Ellen's and Susan's narratives, while Liz was fundamentally pulled away from the motherhood role. For these three women, the decision not to bear children was a very clear and definitive one. Yet, there are differences in how women manage the making of the self, and in the examples described hereunder, the decision not to have children is part of an ongoing reflexive process.

Bridget' regularly reflects on her decision to be childless, and although she is happy with her decision at the moment, it is time limited, in that she has not closed off the potential for change, either by sterilization, or in her mind. Bridget has been articulating her choice to remain childless for several years, yet, it is something she renegotiates from time to time, mainly because, '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'. In the context of her relationship with her partner, Bridget reflected that they both want different things from life, but have reached a consensus in terms of marriage and motherhood;

He 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.

There are no expectations on either partner to change their minds, and both accept that they will neither marry nor have children if they stay together. However, there is evidence that Bridget is having to 'trade off' her desire to marry with her partner's wish to have a child, and she has to negotiate her biography and her relationship because of choosing to be child-free. This further portrays the persistence of socially prescribed gender roles, which promote marital fecundity as a socially pervasive concept. The

fact that Bridget's partner has a five year old son does not restrict her freedom in any way, and she is still able to live life as she pleases, pursue her desire for a career in the scientific sector, and fulfil her love of travel. Instead of choosing motherhood, Bridget is prioritizing her personal freedom, and the lifestyle she shares with her partner enables her to do that. Bridget and her partner have negotiated an arrangement which they can both live with because it allows them to focus on their individual interests. Bridget is pulled or attracted toward the enticements of the childfree lifestyle, and in her current relationship she is in a position to enjoy those advantages. Also, when Bridget reflects on the motherhood role and the associated responsibilities, she considers that it would restrict her from living the type of life she wants for herself;

I mean some people would say, well, you're 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, like...I'm not planning to have children, I'm not being cemented by the time I'm thirty-five, I need to have ...Yeah, yeah, and I don't like the way women are constrained by this thing, that you have to get married and have kids before a certain age...

For Bridget the pull toward the childfree lifestyle coincided with a push away from the motherhood role. Bridget is challenging the traditional biographical life path set out for women under patriarchy. She interprets the motherhood role and the associated activities as limiting or closing down other life prospects and opportunities. She frames motherhood as a risk venture, something that would curtail her freedom and independence, and prevent her from living the life she wants for herself. Instead she wants,

To have, I don't know, extra money to go on holidays, and to have my weekends off, and to be able to do what I want, to be able to go off somewhere without having to worry about, you know, your children...I don't like the control it puts me under, I like being by myself, but, then, you've got this obligation if you got a kid like.

Bridget is engaging in biography making and is reflexively drawing on this with regard to the choices she makes in life, not just in relation to not having children, but relative to career opportunities and her relationship with her partner. Also, with reference to the above quote, Bridget used very powerful language in terms of the making of an identity/ biography, which indicates a very strong and positive sense of herself outside of motherhood, and there was real emotion in her voice when she talked about 'the control' that children would put on her. Aside from the practical factors behind her childbearing decision making as identified above, Bridget also indicated that she has no interest in children and considers them 'a waste of time'. She explained that,

All I think about when I think of children is, I think, of not getting to do what I want, having like to do the school run and then being stuck at home having to clean up and clean up breakfast and clean the house and do this, and do that, and like I want my own freedom to do what I want...

Bridget's description of motherhood and the activities associated with it project an image of a predictable and mundane routine, and this holds no appeal for her. Like some of the women in Gillespie's research, for Bridget, motherhood represented 'a sacrifice, a duty and a burden' (1999, p. 49) comprising demands and loss. As Peterson (2014) indicated in her research, new elements of biography making are emerging for women, making it possible for them to create biographical life paths that are reflective of the type of lifestyles they want for themselves and not the lifestyles that were formerly laid out for them under patriarchy.

Like the other women referenced above, motherhood never held any appeal for Keelin and from a young age she was enticed by the perceived advantages of being

childfree. Career orientation was a prominent factor in Keelin's childbearing decision making, and she had long established that she wanted a career as opposed to having children. 'No, I imagined writing plays and hoping to do it still and I never imagined having children'. Keelin is at a place in her life whereby she is 'happy if I'm left to do my own thing, like, my own choices'. She has always had a focus on the future, part of which included a commitment to her career as a potential play-write.

Another woman, Niamh expressed a strong desire to carve out an autonomous and independent life for herself, free from the responsibility of childcare. For Niamh, the pull or attraction of being childfree involved advantages such as having the time and resources to focus on maintaining her health and well-being. Thus, being childless by choice is a positive reflection of the type of lifestyle she wants for herself, in terms of being able to give priority to herself;

I see what it takes to really look after myself, I mean really look after myself, as in, to really cook good food, to spend time like doing a bit of meditation, some exercise, like that takes a lot of, lot of self-care, even working part-time on top of that, you know, the days off are you know, you're trying to...like trying to put a family into that too its...you just couldn't, you would suffer like, I would suffer, that's the thing.

Niamh's perception of the motherhood role is one that could potentially threaten her health and well-being, and lead to negative health issues. She has an expectation of the risks involved in parenting and feels that she could not successfully balance that with a career, while trying to look after herself. Also, Niamh explained that she wanted to,

Discover more about myself and I want to be able to just be the best version I can be of me you know, and yeah... there's so much to me - there's so much more to discover, there's so much more to do, to be, that children you know, doesn't depend on whether I have a child you know or not.

Niamh explained,

That [the motherhood role] was a certain type of life that I didn't really want cause-I wanted more for me...was always influenced just by the world, you know, I just had all these huge dreams, you know, yeah, and I still do you know...

Like the other women in the research, Niamh did not want to be restricted by the responsibilities and demands of the motherhood role, it did not hold any appeal for her in fact she considered that it would prevent her from doing what she wanted with her life. This discourse portrays the motherhood role as controlling and oppressive, and at odds with Niamh's desire for a life of her own. This is a strong example of biography making and a very conscious rejection of the motherhood role, and one that is informed by personal rather than structural or economic factors. Also, it is clear evidence of what Gillespie (1999) described as the pull or attraction of being childfree as it enabled her to focus on herself. Gillespie (2003) argued that modernity has created opportunities for women to make choices about how they want their lives to be and more significantly who they want to be. This resembles the theory of reflexivity that Giddens (1991) talked about. In the context of modernity and particularly in relation to women's voluntary childlessness, it means that women have greater scope and potential to shape their lives. As a consequence, motherhood is no longer perceived as the only option available to women. Instead, motherhood is considered or framed in the context of a whole range of other factors relative to their desire for personal freedom, autonomy, independence and a desire for a life of their own, part of which includes their rejection or push away from motherhood and the activities associated with it. This discussion (the push and pull factors) shall be explored further in the next section.

The Pull or Attraction of Childlessness: A Focus on Negotiating Biographies Informed by Career Ambitions

As evidenced throughout this chapter, women are increasingly disembedding and making choices for themselves wherein, they can be independent and in control and have financial security, free time and increased opportunities. Added to this is a desire for a career/ career ambitions and a realization of the complexities and risks involved in reconciling motherhood and employment (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Gillespie, 1999, 2000, 2003; Peterson, 2014). These are some of the competing factors shaping women's childbearing decisions, specifically their decision to be childless.

In this study seven of the women expressed a desire to focus on establishing or expanding their careers as opposed to having children. For instance, Sarah who works in the creative industry drew on the individualization thesis to explain her commitment to her profession and expressed real concerns about the impact that children would have on her career. She explained, 'if I did become a mother I would probably end up putting all my energy into that kid', and it would be difficult to successfully combine both. Sarah, outlined that her main priorities are to herself and her career.

What's most important in my life is, I've got to be ready for this show, I've got to be on form. Imagine if a child was sick, in hospital the night before and you can't think about the show, I can't think like that, I can't think...that there's another person that is more important than this job, cause- yeah, I don't think I would be giving the job one hundred percent then.

Clearly in Sarah's opinion and in the manner in which she considers her engagement with work, there is no scope for risks or inferences, other than those she already contends with. Her comments show us how she associates the role of mothers within prioritizing the care of children and interprets this as adding risks to her engagement

with her career and its development. In this, Sarah draws on the discourse of children as risk, motherhood as all-consuming, and limiting her personal and occupational freedom. Her sentiments are reflected in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's ideas, where they state that childrearing 'nearly always means a considerable restriction of everyday movement and future possibilities', especially for women (2002, p. 70);

I just feel, like, I'm living a happier life without kids because my baby is my career, it's what I love to do, and...I love to work on new projects and become a different person and learn all about these people and bring them to life, and I think that you need to put a lot of energy and time into those things, and if you've got a kid I think that they're being neglected, and I really feel that you shouldn't have them unless you really can give them all the time in the world, and that maybe if I did become a mother I would probably end up putting all my energy into that...

Sarah's use of language around motherhood suggests that good mothering is constructed as intensive, self-sacrificing and child centred, and thus, constraining her agency both in the public and private spectrums (Hays, 1996). Sarah's rejection of motherhood (Gillespie, 2003) exemplifies how the individualization process prevalent in Western society has created new opportunities for women to actively plan, shape, and reflect on their biographies throughout the life course (Giddens, 1991). Sarah sees motherhood and work as conflicting with one another, and considers the complexities involved in trying to combine motherhood with a demanding career. This is an example of the 'precarious freedoms' described by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, p. 1-2). In this discourse, children are also framed as an occupational risk, and Sarah is calculating the possible consequences that children would have on her life and particularly on her career. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) point out, Sarah is safeguarding her own risk biography through conscious and responsible decision making and calculations of the potential consequences.

Similar concerns were expressed by other women in the research. Rachel explained that she is 'a professional, full-time, I work nine to five Monday to Friday...in a somewhat stressful position' and she fears that if she had children it could negatively impact on her lifestyle, especially her work life.

Like something very, I suppose simple in one sense....you know, just time in the morning to get prepared to go to work, number of hours that your asleep at night, having to wake up earlier, getting ready for work, putting on make-up...cause- obviously you would have to get a kid prepared to go to crèche or whatever, so yeah, and then you know, just in terms of the amount of hours that you can now at the moment put into work, it would possibly be restricted, in that you would have to come home from work to take them [children] home from the child-minder...you wouldn't be able to spend as much time in work as you would like.

Rachel had an awareness of how children would impact on her everyday life and how her priorities would have to change. She described what she perceived as the rigid structures of parenting and caring for a child as restricting her capacity to focus on herself and her professional career. Also, Rachel's description of parenting suggests that there are gendered consequences and from the analysis outlined above, it would appear that parenting would have a greater impact on her life than it would on her husbands. At present Rachel has control over her life and she rationalized her decision to be childless on that basis. The notion of having to make choices, to put oneself first and plan the 'conduct of life' (Beck, 2000, p. 32) is also evident here.

Bridget's narrative concerned issues around motherhood and how it would impact on her career in the scientific section, which she described as a 'predominantly male dominated' environment. Bridget explained that as part of her job she has already spent several weeks on a boat at sea and she 'was the only woman there' and had 'to really struggle for my place'. Bridget's priority is to 'work on my career' and have 'my own freedom to do what I want'. Like Rachel, Bridget considers that her priorities

would have to change if she had a child and this would leave her with less time to herself. Instead she wants to retain as much freedom as possible over her life, part of which includes enjoying a successful career which clearly demands a great deal of commitment and flexibility. This is an example of reflexive life planning as described by Giddens and Bridget feels that she has 'no choice but to choose' (Giddens, 1991, p. 81) between having a career and having children. This is further evidence of the 'precarious freedoms' that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, p. 1-2) talked about. It also highlights the complexities that some women experience when trying to negotiate having a career with having children and a life of their own.

Niamh explained that she was 'always influenced...by strong women...particularly singers...and a lot of them didn't have children'. Niamh is also a singer, and it was her view that to be successful in the music industry she needed to be able to focus on herself and her career and children did not feature as a viable option. Similarly, Susan, and Moira explained that they have demanding careers, one works in the food industry, the other in the business sector, where she sometimes works up to sixty hours per week. For these women, 'being childfree meant being free from responsibilities and demands of time and energy which they felt would detract from their career' (Veevers, 1980, p. 80). As Ayers (2010) pointed out, being childless also leaves women at an advantage by way of mitigating against gender inequalities and traditional parenting expectations. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) work aligns with these perspectives, insofar as they consider that the responsibility of child rearing has a considerable impact on a woman's everyday life and her future prospects, more so than men. Women are seeing that to be successful, they need to prioritize themselves, put their own needs first, and focus on achieving their full potential. This was evidenced in the comments expressed by the women in this study, who articulated

concerns about how children would impact on their everyday lives, their potential careers and their future life paths.

As noted, earlier in this thesis, Linda had sacrificed much of her early ambitions so that she could find work locally and financially support her siblings and her mother, after her father died. However, when the opportunity arose, Liz quit her job and focused on her love of literature and nowadays she writes for a living. Liz's career is very important to her and it is not something she ever considered giving up again.

From the perspective of educational success, Liz was the only participant in the research who was not allowed to complete her education, and this was a major disappointment for her, because it was something she always wanted to pursue.

I finished school after my junior cert [intermediate cert] because I was kept at home to do the jobs, and rear the children, cause- my mother got a job, and I always felt I was better than that, so, when I went, when I had time, I went back to school and did my leaving cert³⁵ at twenty-six...I went back and I graduated for my fortieth, I got a masters today and I was forty tomorrow and that didn't stop me, I went back and did a diploma in Irish after that which I paid for out of my own pocket, and then I went off and I did a care assistants course, and then I did train the trainer...couldn't do all that if I had a child to be minding...

Rather than a focus on marriage or a career as her parents would have wanted for her, Liz was more interested in pursuing her education, getting qualifications, and then finding suitable employment.

In this section, the women sensed that it would not be feasible for them to give priority to themselves and focus on demanding careers while trying to raise children. This was also reflected in the literature, as Murphy-Lawless et al. pointed out, 'women must plan, and decide on their biographies, while taking account of the risks' (1994, p.

³⁵ The Leaving Certificate Examination is the university matriculation examination in the Republic of Ireland and the final exam of the Irish secondary school system.

23). For the women in this study choosing childlessness was an important way of reducing these risks, safeguarding their careers and their futures and protecting what they perceived as the positive rewards of the childfree life.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed the women's accounts of how they wanted their lives to be, and how they wanted their life paths to grow and develop. Overwhelmingly, children did not feature as a viable option for the women, and while some procrastinated about it as part of an ongoing process of conscious and reflexive decision making, others made an early and firm decision not to have children. As discussed in chapter five, these women are respectively referred to as postponers and early articulators (Gillespie, 1999; Scott, 2009; Veevers, 1973). Instead of adding something to their lives, the women considered that parenthood would actually take something away from them and limit or deprive them of opportunities to action the choices they wanted. The women also drew on what they perceived as the rigid and restrictive aspects of motherhood, and how it would impact on their everyday lives. As Hays (1996) pointed out, this reflects the contemporary processes of individual biography making, wherein, priority is given to the self above others. We see that this idea is one that also connects closely with considering risks associated with motherhood and children. Analysis of the women's accounts draws our attention to specific factors that influenced them in their decision not to have children. Some of the women reflected on positive childhood experiences and cited their liberal upbringings or referred to significant people in their lives, for instance, maiden aunts without children who lived rich and fulfilled lives and inspired them in their decision to forego motherhood. Others had less positive experiences and witnessed episodes

of family violence, these women consciously deliberated about parenthood and made what they perceived as a responsible decision not to have children.

What became evident from the study findings is that women have developed more positive rights of autonomy over their bodies, their lives, and their life paths (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Peterson, 2014). For some of the women expressions of their individuality began to emerge at an early age, wherein, they began disembedding from organized religion, they challenged the norm, and made self-focused choices, and significantly, they were supported in this by their parents. These women expressed a desire to be free and autonomous, they did not want to be tied down. Instead, they were pulled or enticed by the perceived attraction of the childfree lifestyle. Thus, for some of the women the push away from motherhood co-existed along with a pull toward being childfree. This is consistent with the findings from Gillespie's (1999) research. This was also reflected in the findings from Peterson's research, and several of the participants expressed 'negative opinions about children as risk, motherhood as time-consuming and parents as trapped' (2014, p. 1).

Using the individualization thesis and the theoretical framework of reflexive biography making to analyse the women's accounts proved useful. It highlighted that women's fertility choices are being made in the context of a wide range of competing options relative to employment, health, relationships, financial considerations and women's personal well-being. This reflects the 'precarious freedoms' described by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, p.p. 1-121) which consist of opportunities, risks, flexibility and biographical uncertainties.

Chapter Seven:

Figure 2: Overview and Profile of Participants

Name	Age	Place in the Family	No of Children in Family of Origin	Partner Status	Education Level	Occupation	Socio-Economic Backgrounds ³⁶	Geographical Location	Sampling Type
Bridget	25	Youngest	3	In a relationship	3 rd Level	Scientific Profession	Middle Class	Urban	Purposive
Jane	30	Not Specified	8	In a relationship	3 rd Level	Teacher	Middle Class	Urban	Purposive
Niamh	36	Second Eldest	4	Single	3 rd Level	Caring Profession	Middle Class	Urban	Snowball
Sarah	36	Not Specified	Not Specified	In a relationship	2 nd Level	Creative Industry	Working Class	Urban	Purposive
Ellen	39	Youngest	4	Single	2 nd Level	Call Centre	Working Class	Rural	Snowball
Rachel	39	Eldest	4	Married	3 rd Level	Professional Local Government	Middle Class	Rural	Snowball
Moir	40	Not Specified	Not Specified	Single	3 rd Level	Multinational Company	Middle Class	Urban	Purposive
Susan	43	Middle	3	Married	2 nd Level	Food Industry	Working Class	Rural	Purposive
Keelin	46	Not Specified	Not Specified	Divorced	3 rd Level	Academia	Middle Class	Rural	Snowball
Liz	48	Eldest	4	In a relationship	3 rd Level	Teacher/ Care Assistant	Middle Class	Urban	Snowball
Josephine	56	Not Specified	8	Single	2 nd Level	Local Government	Working Class	Rural	Snowball
Linda	57	Eldest	3	Married	2 nd Level	Writer	Working Class	Urban	Purposive

Women's Experiences of Stigma and Information Control

In the previous two findings chapters, I focused on analysing the typology of reasons for women's voluntary childlessness and the reflexive processes through which they articulated their childfree biographies. The issues I explore in this chapter relate to social reactions to the women's decisions to be childless and their reactions to same. This exploration is structured around three key areas of enquiry. Firstly, I am interested in exploring if and in what ways, the women experienced pressure or social expectations to mother, and if they were asked to explain or justify their decision to be childless. Secondly, I question whether and how the women experience these

³⁶ Social class refers to divisions in society on the basis of economics and social status. The middle class are generally engaged in non-manual work and have higher education levels. The working class are those engaged in manual labour, including factory based jobs and have lower levels of educational achievement (Thompson, 2016).

pressures or expectations as stigmatizing and what strategies they use to manage any perceived stigma. Thirdly, I tease out the steps the women take to reframe their decisions as positive and morally based rather than discredited ones.

I begin this chapter by considering the notion of stigma, as defined by Goffman (1963) and then consider how Park (2002) and Hayden (2010) have sought to understand experiences of stigma among voluntarily childless women. The chapter then moves on to consider the experiences of stigma found among the women interviewed for this study. In this study just over half of the women Rachel, Ellen, Bridget, Susan, Linda, Moira and Jane felt that they had been stigmatized, stereotyped or negatively judged because of their voluntary childlessness. Some of them felt that they were unsupported in their childfree decision making, some were pressurized into re-considering their decision, and others were led to believe that they would change their minds with the passing of time. Also, there were differences in the types of encounters the women identified as stigmatizing. Some were very much trying to discredit the moral character of the person, describing them as selfish, whereas, others were more around concern for what the women would apparently miss out on. This ties in with the privileging of pronatalism and the illusion that motherhood is the ultimate fulfilment for a woman.

The negative judgement that the women experienced was not reserved to any one category of society, it emerged as an issue among family, friends, work colleagues, medical professionals, and sometimes complete strangers, felt justified to express their negative opinions about the women's decision not to have children. Two of these seven women received some social support, one from family and from an online childless forum that supports women who are childless by choice. The five remaining women explained that they had not been stigmatized, however, four of those women

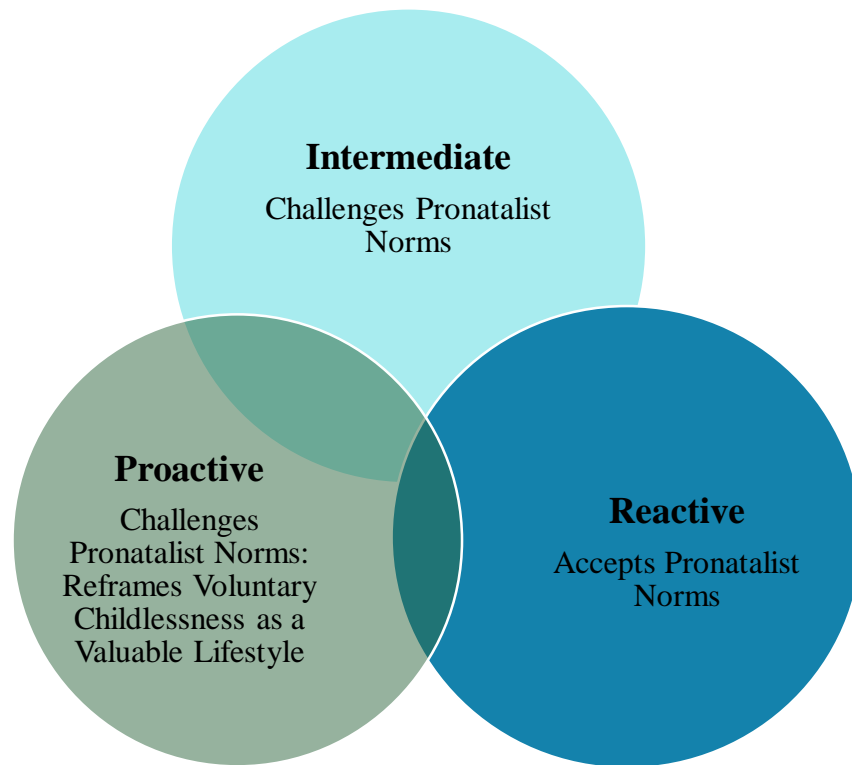
said that they were aware of the stigma associated with women's voluntary childlessness. The actions taken by the women to manage and cope with their perceived experiences of stigma are systematically examined as the chapter proceeds.

Even though Goffman's (1963) stigma theory was published more than five decades ago, and does not speak directly to women's voluntary childlessness, it is still one of the most influential and established considerations of stigma, and one that is commonly used in research (Ayers, 2010; Park, 2002). Goffman's theory has been discussed in depth in both the literature and the conceptual chapters and here I draw on it in the context of discussions of the information management techniques that stigmatized people employ to manage their stigma.

As noted in chapter three, Goffman (1963) described three distinct types of stigma; physical abnormalities, character imperfections, and the stigma attributed to race, religion, or nationality. If the stigma is visible, Goffman argued that the individual is already discredited from society, and is degraded from being a 'whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one' (1963, p. 37). In contrast, if the stigma is not immediately apparent, (women who are childless by choice) the individual is said to possess a discreditable identity, and they must find ways in which to manage information relating to their tainted character. While some women who are childless by choice are vulnerable to perceiving themselves as having a stigmatized identity, others are not aware of it or do not perceive it as stigma. Those who perceive themselves as stigmatized use strategies as part of their identity work to reject the negative label or conceal information relating to their perceived failing (Goffman, 1963). Following the work of Goffman (1963); and Park (2002) in this study stigma theory is conceptualized as an ideology that normalizes women who are or who intend to be mothers and stigmatizes women who are childless by choice.

Since these strategies have already been discussed in depth in chapter two, they shall only be described in brief herein. Park (2002) explored the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness from the perspective of the strategies the childless by choice engage in to reject discreditable identities associated with their voluntary childlessness. Park (2002) drew on the work of Goffman (1963) and developed a schema of six strategies of information control that women used to reject, defend, or justify the discreditable identity attributed to their voluntary childlessness. Park (2002) identified three main techniques that the childless by choice use to manage stigmatized identities. These strategies can be categorized as proactive, intermediate, or reactive, depending on the extent to which the women accepted or challenged pronatalist norms. Proactive strategies are defensive and are used to contest pronatalist ideologies. Intermediate strategies are not fully defensive nor do they represent a complete attack on dominant pronatalist norms. Reactive strategies primarily accept pronatalist norms (Park, 2002).

Figure 6: Stigma Management Strategies Developed by Park (2002)



Like Park (2002), Hayden (2010) also described a schema of strategies that the childless by choice engaged in when challenged about their non-conformity. Since these have been discussed in depth in chapter two, I will only briefly discuss them. Some of the women accepted the negative charge and the discrediting judgement expressed toward them. Others challenged the undesirable assumptions made about them, and re-framed their identities as 'good women' (2010, p. 274) by challenging or questioning the behaviour of others, especially those who have children for social purposes, or because it's expected of them.

The negative judgements reserved for the voluntarily childless stems from a pronatalist context wherein motherhood is perceived as natural, normal, inevitable and fundamental to adult feminine identity (Gillespie, 2000; Ireland, 1993; Macintyre, 1976; Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1980; Turnbull et al. 2016; Walker, 2011). Thus, the associated deviance of the voluntarily childless lies not in the fact that they do not

have children, but, that they do not want to have them. Some researchers argue that the stigma attributed to women's voluntarily childlessness has lessened with the passing of time, Murphy-Lawless (1994) others refute this claim, arguing instead, that stigma is still a prevalent issue, and manifests in others areas of life, for instance, through social media (Edwards, 2015; Hayden, 2010; Park, 2012).

Women's Identity Work: Managing Family Stigma

In this study, stigma is interpreted as a negative judgement imposed on women as a result of their voluntary childlessness. Stigma included social pressure to change or justify their situation (Mueller and Yoder, 1999; Park, 2002). As noted in the previous section, there are variances in the types of stigma the women encountered, and much of the pressure and concern expressed by family members stemmed from a positive perspective, wherein, parents were anxious that their daughters would miss out on something, or would regret their decision, especially as they got older. These parents eulogized parenthood, and they imagined that their daughters should feel the same way. Their views on parenthood were informed by pronatalism and the notion that having a child was the ultimate fulfilment for any human being. The social reaction from others had more of a discrediting element to it, it was a direct attack on the women's personality/ character and resembled the stigma that Goffman (1963) talked about.

As noted above, in this study five of the women felt that they were stigmatized, negatively judged by family members or were pressurized into re-considering their decision to be childless. Rachel explained that her mother has set expectations on her, and continually pressurizes her to change her mind about having children. Ellen's aunts also pressurize her into re-considering marriage and motherhood. Bridget's father suggests that she will inevitably develop a sense of maternal instinct, he finds it

difficult to comprehend that Bridget does not want children, Moira's siblings have difficulty understanding her voluntary childlessness, while Jane's siblings think that she will change her mind when she reaches her mid-thirties, because they were that age when they had their children.

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

Well, my mother would have a direct, I suppose, influence on my life, is always questioning it, and has I suppose... 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.

For Rachel's mother, the social identity of women is clearly embedded in motherhood, and the practice of bearing and raising children, and because she wanted children she assumes that Rachel should feel the same way; 'My mother is the only person that has said that, that 'you will regret it'...she is giving me a negative response, she is being completely honest with me...'. Although Rachel does not challenge her mother's interference, clearly, it is an issue for her and it was something that she discussed in-depth during the course of the interview. Rachel's mother is questioning her daughter's decision making, not from a discrediting perspective, but more out of concern for what she think's Rachel will miss out on. As Rachel pointed out, 'she [her mother] has pressurized me in a loving way'. Rachel explained that she rarely engages in a conversation with her mother about her voluntary childlessness, instead, she more or less goes along with her mother's opinion and puts up with whatever comments her mother makes about it. This resembles the reactive strategy of accepting the negative judgement developed by Park (2002) and subsequently expanded on by Hayden

(2010) which merely serves to cement the undesirable judgement and the negative comments reserved for women who are childless by choice even more.

At the family level Ellen has also experienced pressure to procreate. Her fertility choices and her reluctance to marry have been a regular topic of conversation amongst extended family members, particularly her aunts, and although intrusive, Ellen explained that she is not too concerned by the questions and assumptions they make about her;

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'.

Clearly, Ellen's aunts are still embedded in traditional patriarchal beliefs, and are firmly committed to the ideal family scenario; of father, mother and child(ren). No matter what, or how much Ellen achieves in life, she explained that in her aunts' opinions the only legitimate choice a woman can make is to marry and procreate. Ellen's aunts always assumed that she would eventually meet someone, marry and have children, and when Ellen recently told her aunts that it was not something she intended to pursue, they were shocked and taken aback; 'It was like I was after saying I was going to cut one of my legs off'. This anecdote highlights the power of patriarchy and emphasizes the extent to which particular identity forms and roles were and still are, though to a lesser extent ascribed to women (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Ellen used a technique that Hayden (2010) referred to as challenging the negative

charge associated with women's voluntary childlessness and explained to her aunts that she just 'didn't want to be a mother'.

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 ponder on and re-think 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 with.

This is a very clear assertion of identity and is a conscious and reflective consideration of who she is, as opposed to who her father wants her to be. It is further evidence of disembedding from a role model, or an encouraged and expected identity. Although her father's comments did make Bridget re-think her decision for a while, she explained that she is 'still holding fast' because, I feel like you shouldn't have to make excuses like you should be able to just say I don't want them [children]'. The term 'holding fast' is very significant here as it conveys clearly the sense that Bridget has a holding position which is contrary to what is expected and strongly suggested by others, it suggests that resistance to motherhood as an expected identity is not always easy but takes 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.

In terms of her self-identity, Bridget clearly constructs herself as someone who is frequently outside the norm and is challenging any suggestions that she should be otherwise. She is redefining the choice to be childless as a valid and legitimate option;

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...

Bridget used the strategy of justifications of self-fulfilment devised by Park (2002) to rationalize her voluntary childlessness. She explained that it is her life and that she is free to choose how to act and how to be in the world. Giddens makes a similar point, and explains that in conditions of modernity, lifestyles are much more dependent on individual choice making and that traditional cultures and modes of acting formerly practised and adhered to are 'reflexively open to change' (1994, p. 75-76). As explained by Giddens (1991) one's identity then is constructed on the basis of the daily choices they make. In this, Bridget is clearly choosing an identity for herself that does not conform to conventional pronatalist norms, instead, she is pursuing a self-selected life path, based on her individual needs and life preferences. The fertility choices that Bridget has made align with her sense of identity, and she recognized that if she were to pursue the life that other people assumed for her she would limit herself in so many

other ways. When I asked Bridget if she thought she may regret her decision in the future she gave the following response,

I hope not, I mean, like, I feel like, I have a lot of time if I want to change my mind, but, like, it's not as if I go, cause- essentially when I'm with my partner and all, oh, you know, it would be so nice, but, then I think about the reality and I just go, oh, you know, like, especially pregnancy creeps me out, I don't like it at all like. I had vaguely entertained the idea of adopting but I just like, I'm only doing this cause- people are telling me to, you know, like, if none of them ever put any pressure on me, yeah, I wouldn't think twice about it, that's what annoys me most.

Bridget's narrative clearly shows how the comments of others are making her revisit her choice, and she does not believe that she would be doing this if people were not questioning it. Also, she is annoyed by their comments and inferences, for what she considers as a personal lifestyle choice.

The notion of regret is one that is often associated with women's voluntary childlessness, specifically the prospect of future regret, which essentially draws on the pronatalist discourse which suggests that the only way a woman can be truly fulfilled is through her rite of passage to motherhood. The view that a woman will change her mind and eventually have children is one of the most widespread forms of stigma (Gillespie, 2000; Kelly, 2009). Not only does it show a disregard of childlessness as a valid/ legitimate choice, but it also undermines a woman's worth as a childless woman (Gillespie, 2000). However, Bridget gets reassurance from her mother and her mother's partner regarding her decision to be childless. Her mother encouraged Bridget from a young age to be herself, to be counted, to make her own decisions, and be her own person, and this has stayed with Bridget throughout her adult life. In terms of her decision to be childless, Bridget explained that she is pressurized into re-considering her decision through the comments of others, and actively seeks support

to validate her decision. Some of this support comes from her mother and her mother's partner and she also draws support from an online community that says it is perfectly 'normal' to be voluntarily childless;

I kind of joined a forum online called Childfree...like it's an American forum, but it's kind of for everybody, and people on it are actually like putting up posts saying, 'hi, I got my vasectomy today, I got my sterilization today' and they're all talking about it in a group and there must be, I think, there's at least a thousand subscribers.

Bridget's use of the word normal is very powerful, and suggests that she may feel abnormal in her childlessness in her everyday life, and needs this online forum to reassure her in her childless identity. She also seems to find a sense of belonging on this forum. Similarly, Bridget is being proactive and is seeking out support against the backdrop of constant interrogation about her voluntary childlessness which serves to reframe her voluntary childlessness as a positive lifestyle choice;

It's like people are always asking something like, when are you going to get a boyfriend? When are you going to get married? When are you going to have a kid? When are you going to have another kid...it's like this constant barrage of people...and that annoys me?...I feel the more people keep saying, 'oh you'll change your mind about having children', I nearly think kind of, it makes me think about it more, and then makes me go kind of more, no, I don't want them.

This suggests that Bridget's voluntary childlessness is an ongoing concern amongst others as suggested by the narrative above 'people are always asking'. Aside from referring to her father, Bridget did not identify the other people who challenge her about her decision, but clearly, it upsets her, 'it's like this constant barrage of people you know being noisy under the guise of worrying about you, and that annoys me as well'. This suggests that Bridget is adamant about her decision because she feels she is continuously asserting it. In Bridget's case it also shows the complexities of the

decision making process and draws attention to the day-to-day negotiation of an identity that defies the norm and the impact it can have on the childless person.

While Moira's family are relatively supportive of the fact that she is childless and unmarried, on occasion they have expressed their lack of understanding about this. She explained that they, [her family]

Do kind of wonder 'what's wrong with you', and find it difficult to understand why she does not want children...once or twice my siblings have kind of like, one sibling would kind of ask me you know, every now and then [why she does not have children].

Aside from this, Moira explained that her family also think that she is, 'great, you know intelligent, bright, all those kind of things, because they know me'. She emphasizes that she is an individual with many attributes which challenge any negative identity bestowed on the basis of childlessness. Moira is asserting a positive identity for herself, notwithstanding the fact that she is childless, she is consciously and reflectively doing identity work by naming her own positive identity, and she highlights that others see and acknowledge this. She also suggests that this acts as a shield against, or a counterbalance to the negative appraisal of her character and her identity that comes with being childless. 'I think I'm brilliant you know, that kind of way, emotionally, mentally'. This reflects the reactive strategy described by Park (2002) wherein, women substitute an alternate and less stigmatized identity for themselves in order to limit the stigma, without directly challenging the cultural norms that support and sustain it.

Jane has also experienced unwanted negative attention from her siblings, and they do not believe that her decision to be childless is a stable and sustainable one. They believe that it is an unstable and possibly immature decision that will evolve and

change over time. They do not see it as a permanent identity, and they are unable to understand or make sense of it because their orientations were different;

I think it's more like, 'oh you'll realize eventually', because both of my sisters, my brother had his children youngish, in his mid-twenties with his wife and my sisters were a bit older, maybe thirty-two/ thirty-three. Yeah, they think I'll arrive there you know, but, I think it was, and like, fine but I think when I get past the age where they had their first children, then there'll be a 'oh, you're still not', you know, so, I think they think, 'oh you know, there's still time, she'll change her mind'...I don't think they believe me because of their own experience...

Jane believes that the assumption that you can't not have children is everywhere, and 'you know, you can't avoid it'. In order to manage the assumptions her siblings made about her voluntary childlessness Jane used a reactive strategy referred to as passing. As Park (2002) outlined in her research, passing is a technique frequently used by younger women, who are still perceived as being able to conceive. Rather than challenge those who confront her or engage in a debate about her voluntary childlessness, Jane simply lets them believe that she will eventually have children. Although Jane felt pressurized by her siblings' views on her childbearing decision making, she did not interpret it as stigma. For Jane, it felt more like a questioning, an undermining, or a non-acceptance of her decision that emerged from a place of concern that was informed by the view that parenting is the most fulfilling job in the world and will be universally enjoyed by everyone.

The questioning of the women's childbearing decision making, specifically their decision not to have children was a prominent one for the five women described above. The sense of disbelief expressed by family members was something that caused them to give the decision further thought and consideration, and though it may not always be an easy choice, the women remained firm in the belief that they had made the right choice for themselves. Also, in an effort to lessen the impact of the

negative judgement and the continuous pressure they receive because of their decision not to have children the women drew support from elsewhere. For Bridget the support came from her mother and her mother's partner and from an online support group. Interestingly, Bridget was the only woman who sought online support from an online childless forum.

In the literature on voluntary childlessness (Callan, 1983; Houseknecht, 1977; Morell, 1994; Park, 2002; Rich et al. 2011; Veevers, 1975) it was found that reference group support from other childless women, family, and friends enables women to become more accepting of their decision, and their childfree identities. Women who are childless by choice experience varying degrees of pressure, stigma and support from numerous acquaintances in their lives. The ways in which they respond to and manage the stigma varies, depending on who they are interacting with, whether it is family, acquaintances, friends or others. In terms of interacting with their families, five of the women explained that they felt pressurized into re-thinking their decision to be childless. The women responded in different ways; Rachel accepted the negative charge, Ellen challenged it, Bridget justified her decision by stating that she wanted to live the life she wanted for herself and not one that others wanted for her. Moira used a reactive strategy to justify her decision making, and Jane used a technique referred to as passing and left her siblings believe what they wanted to believe. What some of the women interpreted as stigma was often more of a questioning, an undermining, or a non-acceptance of their decision and it was informed by the view that they would regret it in the future. In particular, family members, fathers, mothers, siblings, feared that the women would miss out on something. Some of the other strategies of resistance described by Hayden (2010); and Park (2002) emerged later on in the

analysis when the women described their social interaction with others, particularly those outside of the family.

[Women's Identity Work: Managing Social Stigma](#)

Goffman (1963) conceptualizes that stigma management is more of a public rather than a private issue, and that the individual is more likely to be stigmatized, negatively judged or questioned by acquaintances through their social interactions as opposed to their encounters with intimate family members. Park's research substantiated those claims, and she found that stigma management was more of an issue for women in public rather than private encounters, given that childlessness is a 'socially ambiguous status' (2002, p. 31). In other words, it is the not knowing that causes people the greatest concerns, that is, not knowing whether being childless is a deliberate choice or as result of infertility. In this study six of the seven women gave accounts of experiencing social stigma; Ellen, Bridget, Susan, Linda, Moria, and Jane.

Aside from the family pressure that Ellen experiences from her aunts she also explained that her friends have started to question her about her why she does not have children, and their comments suggest that they are surprised by her revelation, and also that they have difficulty in understanding it. 'We [Ellen and her friends] were talking about it out one night like, and they were a bit taken aback like...' But as Ellen explained, 'that's my choice...I don't react negatively to them because they have children. I don't say 'you were a clown to have that many children', do you know...' Also, Ellen made the point that she is actively 'involved' in her friend's children lives and she feels that she 'never missed out on anything' because of it. Ellen used a proactive strategy to justify her decision and redefined her childlessness as a 'socially valuable lifestyle' (Park, 2002, p. 21). She explained that just because she has no desire to have children of her own, does not mean that she can't play a role in her

friend's children's lives and be a good role model for them (Park, 2002). She went on to suggest that in a way she has the best of both worlds,

I have friends that have children...I can go away with them on holidays,
I can go away on weekends...but, yet, I can walk away when I want, if
I don't want to see them for a week, I don't have to see them...and
that's just the way it is.

Ellen concluded by saying that she made a choice that she is happy with and she is not in any way concerned about what her friends think of her decision. As she said, she does not make negative comments toward them because of the life paths they have chosen, and she expects the same positive reaction from them.

Like Ellen, Bridget has also encountered 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.

However, Bridget explained that she defends her decision and challenges those who confront or question her, by engaging a strategy wherein she crafts a positive childfree identity for herself. This resembles the proactive strategy defined by Park (2002) or the resistance technique described by Hayden (2010).

While Moira is not perturbed by her family's reaction to her decision making, mainly, because it is balanced out by her other positive attributes, she was deeply hurt and disappointed by the assumptions a friend made about her, without any consideration for the circumstances behind her decision making;

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.

This shows just how fragile the positive identity can be and how easily it can be challenged on the grounds of chosen childlessness. Clearly, Moira's friend's reaction to her decision not to bear children was informed by pronatalism and the view that having a child is the most gratifying and fulfilling role a woman can take on in life. Toward the latter part of the interview, Moira mentioned that she had looked at my online profile on LinkedIn³⁷ but, 'didn't send you a friend request cause- I didn't really want people to know what you know, I'm associating myself with childless by choice...I don't want people to know'. Taken in context, Moira is choosing not to be publicly defined by her voluntary childlessness, instead, she is taking it on as a private identity. Moira has strong emotions about being different and used the strategy of information control among discreditable individuals that Goffman (1963) talked about. This is done by concealing information about her perceived failure, in order to appear normal and avoid further stigmatization. During the interview, Moira also used a strategy referred to as redefining the situation to challenge the reproductive mandate, arguing that her decision to be childless helps alleviate climate change and save resources such as water;

You know, you're bringing a child into...you know, being aware that resources such as water or whatever might be a really big issue in times to come, and climate change is very serious.

³⁷ LinkedIn is a professional network with followers worldwide.

This proactive strategy challenges the social value attached to childbearing with evidence of environmental consideration. Rather than accepting the negative label attached to women's voluntary childlessness, Moira is reversing the charge, and justified her decision on the basis of the concerns she had for the safety and well-being of potential children and for the environment.

Linda's childbearing decision making has also been a topic of concern amongst some work colleagues, who fail to believe that she is childless by choice.

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's 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.

Linda was considered ineligible for full social acceptance because of what her colleague perceived as her social failing. This resembles what Goffman (1963) emphatically referred to as someone who possesses a stigmatized or spoiled identity. In defence of her decision Linda used an intermediate technique that Park (2002) referred to as justifications for childlessness, whereby she affirmed that it would be more selfish of her to have children and not be able to provide for them in a way that she would want to. The fact that Linda challenges the motherhood mandate suggests that her decision to be childless is central to her identity;

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.

She adds further justification to her decision by stating that,

If you're not going to have children, you do have to think about it, and you have to think about both sides of it, so, you usually put a lot of thought into that, you know, and possibly more thought into that than people who have children, and have just sort of gone along with the flow...it, it is a decision that you should be making very, very thoughtfully, and I do think a lot of people don't think about that...

In her rejection of the social identity of motherhood, Linda is arguing that her choice to be childless is more consciously made than that of some women who have children. This was also reflected in the findings from Park's (2002) research and several of the participants condemned parents who had children without careful thought and consideration. The strategy of condemning the condemnors is an intermediate strategy used to attach a negative label to parents who have children in order to be socially accepted.

Like Linda, being childless is an identity that Susan openly embraces and she engages in a variety of information control strategies if or when she is publicly, challenged or confronted by others. Susan's childfree identity is central to her being,

Yeah, 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... A guy I work with said to me recently... 'yeah people who can't have babies say that', and I said 'how can you be so small minded?'...He says, 'well my brother and his girlfriend can't have a child and that's what they tell people', and I said 'yeah, but don't assume it's the same for everybody.

In this, Susan engaged a proactive strategy to challenge the views expressed by a work colleague, and she presented her childfree positioning as a positive life choice. Despite being comfortable about having her childless identity in the public sphere, Susan's mother-in-law is uncomfortable with such openness. Susan recounted one particular

experience, when she and her mother-in-law were out shopping together, when they met a local woman. Susan recollected,

People know you're just married, and questions are constantly being asked, 'like, 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...

The fact that Susan finds it humorous suggests that she is so secure in her identity that it doesn't bother her, and that is why she is considerate about preserving her mother-in-law's identity and her community status over her own desire to proactively identify as voluntarily childless. Susan's mother-in-law fears that her social identity may be discredited by the tainted identity of her son and daughter-in-law, and this is more keenly felt by her because she has bought into the patriarchal value ascribed to motherhood. This draws our attention to the micro-aggressions or the lack of social acceptance that is sometimes exerted toward those who choose an alternate or different life-path to what is socially expected of them.

Another time, Susan mentioned that a total stranger who happened to hear her say that she was childless by choice, challenged her about it;

I remember one lady said to me when I said I didn't want children, she said, 'oh, you must be selfish, a selfish person', and I said 'well actually, I said, I think it's more selfish just to have them [children] because you think you should', and she didn't know what to say to me.

In this, Susan used a strategy referred to as reversing the selfish charge (Hayden, 2010) wherein she argued that mothers who have children because it is expected of them or

who fail to give adequate consideration to the act of parenting are the ones who should be ascribed the selfish label. This technique also resembles the strategy of justifying one's childbearing decision making by condemning the condemnors (Park, 2002). This condemnation consisted of ascribing the selfish label to parents who succumb to social pressure and have children without adequately reflecting on the responsibilities involved in the role. In response to the common question that women who are childless by choice are asked, that is, 'who's going to look after you when you're older?' Susan made the following observations;

That's not why you have children...my parents didn't bring me into this world so I could nurse them when they're older, you know what I mean? So I think it's a disgusting attitude...I think it's people's fear of being alone to be honest you know, and they say well who will you leave this to, who will you leave that to?

Although these comments are an unwelcome part of Susan's experiences, even an intrusion, it does not impact on her. 'It doesn't bother me at all, if people think I'm the weirdest person on this earth, that's entirely up to them, it just doesn't bother me'. This suggests that Susan did not perceive her decision to be childless as abnormal, selfish, or unnatural. For Susan, her identity and her self-perception are clearly intertwined with her sense of individuality and her right to exercise free choice. Voluntary childlessness can thus be interpreted as an expression of women's capacity to challenge and resist oppressive feminine ideologies and negotiate positive self-identities separate and independent of motherhood.

Jane was the only participant who was openly challenged by a medical professional about her voluntary childlessness. A nurse who was administering a contraceptive injection said to Jane, 'well you know you would really want to get on because fertility declines after thirty-three'. Although Jane sometimes finds the

comments she receives from others annoying, intrusive, and somewhat surprising, especially the nurse's recent reaction, she has learned to cope by letting people think or believe what they want, that way, she strives to avoid discussion or confrontation on the subject. It is not so much that people find women's voluntary childlessness unacceptable or discreditable, it seems to be more that they find it difficult to accept or make sense of, given their own attachment to the idea of having children as such a positive thing. Rather than discuss her childless status with others, Jane explained that she lets people assume or think what they want about her. This is similar to the method of passing described by Park (2002) where one controls information about oneself by passing, which is often a more desirable strategy as the individual is perceived as being normal;

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...

Jane draws support for her identity from her partner, who shares her views on parenthood, and also draws on her professional experience in affirming her identity. In a previous work position, Jane witnessed the suffering that some children endure at the hands of their parents, and this was further justification for her decision to be childless.

In the context of this research, there were variances in the levels of stigma the women experienced. Although Rachel, Ellen, and Bridget experienced pressure to procreate, mainly from family members, they interpreted those reactions as emerging from a place of concern for what they would miss out on. In contrast, Susan, Linda, Moira, and Jane experienced the type of stigma that Goffman (1963) described. They were described as selfish, their personal characteristics were questioned and they were

assigned a stigmatizing or negative identity, which they were subsequently required to manage or account for. While Susan and Linda were vocal in their responses and refused to accept the negative label, Moira and Jane were less assertive. Although Moira challenged her friend when she questioned her about not becoming a mother, for the most part, Moira is not comfortable talking about her voluntary childlessness, instead, she tries to conceal it. Similarly, rather than engage in a debate about her decision not to have children, Jane lets others believe or think what they want about her. As Goffman (1963) pointed out, information control and privacy are major concerns among those who are ascribed a discreditable identity.

Women's Perceptions of the Stigma Associated with their Voluntary Childlessness

As noted heretofore, not all of the women in this study were stigmatized, or assigned a negative or spoiled identity. Five of the women talked about the stigma associated with women's voluntary childlessness but explained that they had not directly experienced it themselves.

Although Niamh has had no direct experience of being stigmatized, or has never actually heard anyone ever discuss being voluntarily childless, she considers that there is a stigma attached to it;

I think people are afraid to even talk about it, I think people wouldn't even say I'm childless by choice. I don't think it would even, I've never, ever heard anyone ever say that you know, it's not something people talk about...There is a stigma because people almost say, you just, I don't know, people would sort of say that if, I think people take it as an insult, even the people that have children if you said 'I'm childless by choice'.

Niamh does not perceive her childfree identity as discreditable, instead, she sees it as a creative, credible and positive identity. In response to the selfish label that is

sometimes associated with women's voluntary childlessness, Niamh made the following observation;

Like, that's the thing, people, there is a thing about being selfish, which is crazy, cause- people, I think people have children for the wrong reasons, they do like, and I've seen it because like it's a shame, I think a lot of people just feel the pressure of where they live, you know, their friends, their family, there's pressure to have a child like, but, you know, I think they might not have been happy, then they have a child and they maybe realize that they're still not happy, the child doesn't fill that hole like, and I've seen it, and you know, it's mad when they think your selfish by not having a child, because it's like, it's not selfish at all, and it's not that your thinking of yourself, it's actually, well, you know, to bring, to take responsibility for another person in the world, not just financially, but, just like that's a huge, huge responsibility and shouldn't be taken lightly, you know.

Niamh contested the selfish identity attributed to women's voluntarily childless and used the techniques of condemning the condemnors (Park, 2002) or reversing the charge (Hayden, 2010) and condemned parents who have children because it's expected of them, or because they want to feel normal and fit in. In this, Niamh constructed parenting as something that is done unreflectively and without careful consideration to the commitment of time, energy, and finances involved. Constructing parents' behaviour as thoughtless and inconsiderate is also a way of deflecting from the criticism and negative judgement ascribed to women's voluntary childlessness.

Josephine who is fifty-six years of age, single, and has a physical disability was never questioned about her decision to be childless, however, it was her subjective view that people assumed she was not able to have children, or didn't want to have them due to her ill health. She gave the following account,

I would experience pressure I would think but, because of my disability it would be more understandable and acceptable that I wouldn't have children... 'Oh, Josephine can't have children, no, Josephine obviously won't be having children...because of her, of, of her disability,

Josephine can't have children, and then, it's you know...O God, no, Josephine has a disability so she doesn't have children.

This reflects Goffman's (1963) distinction of stigma arising from physical difference. Since Josephine's stigma is immediately visible, her character is already discredited, and she is disqualified from being a 'whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one' (Goffman, 1963, p. 37). In this instance, Josephine's physical disability has masked her reflexive choosing to be childless. This echoes some of the comments put forward by Park, who claimed that, As Park pointed out in her research, in contemporary society 'generalized pronatalism exists alongside selective antinatalism' (2002, p. 23). Antinatalism essentially means that certain groups within society are discouraged from having children, specifically, young, unmarried women, people on low incomes, lesbians and gay men, and people with a physical or mental disability (Park, 2002).

Although Rachel has not been publicly stigmatized or has not encountered social pressure to procreate, aside from her mother, she expects she would react defensively if she were challenged.

I would probably, I would probably be angry with them, yeah, I probably, even though they're being brutally honest, I suppose that's the first thought that would come to my head, angry... I don't know would I put it out there kind of, [being childless by choice] just in general conversation, I do feel that, yeah, people would possibly judge you for thinking like this, so, it's kind of better say nothing unless somebody asked it.

Being childless by choice is not something that Rachel would raise in a general conversation with just anyone, especially with people who wouldn't know her very well. Rachel has a fear of being negatively judged and thus does not publicly disclose or discuss her voluntary childlessness. She is not ready to own up to being voluntarily

childless and controls information by passing. Rachel's reaction suggests that the childfree identity is not something that she is completely comfortable with, or wishes to be defined by, given that she does not discuss it in public, or in the company of others. Her mother is one of the few people she has spoken to about her decision to be childless, and both women have conflicting opinions about it.

When Liz discussed why she did not want children a number of factors were mentioned, but she especially drew on the fact that she has a lifelong disinterest in children, and has no maternal desires to have them. This account is similar to the strategy of excuses - appeal to biological drives identified by Park (2002) wherein childfree individuals explain that they have no desire to have children.

Although Keelin never experienced any direct criticism of her voluntary childlessness, she explained that she became aware of it through media channels, and one of the main reasons why she voluntarily agreed to participate in the research was to make the point that 'people should be allowed to choose'. It was Keelin's view that everyone in the world has a right to live the life they want for themselves, without having to justify their decision or make excuses about whether they do or do not want children.

As Goffman (1963) observed anyone who is assigned a stigmatized identity is challenged in two ways, first they must deal with it themselves, and second they must negotiate it through their social interactions with others. The extent to which it becomes an issue for individuals largely depends on whether or not they accept it themselves. In the analysis outlined above, it became clear that for some women it is an easier option to conceal their childfree identities or use excuses or justifications rather than engage in a debate or a discussion about it. For some of the women,

concealing their identities was a way of ensuring that they did not have to negotiate it with others. Also, for women like Moira who felt stigmatized and unsure about the negative identity attributed to women's voluntary childlessness, concealment meant that they did not have to acknowledge their voluntary childlessness or engage in a questions and answers debate about it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analyzed the accounts of seven women who have experienced and responded to the challenge of negotiating positive childfree identities. There are two main strategies that women are required to engage in. One, is having to deal with the stigmatized identity attributed to women's voluntary childlessness, and two, is how they negotiate their identities with others and the strategies they engage in to manage information about it.

In this study, seven of the women talked about the stigma they encountered as a result of being childless by choice, and five of the women made little or no reference to it. Four of the women who felt stigmatized; Ellen, Bridget, Susan, and Linda explained that were comfortable with being publicly identified as childless by choice and had no difficulty in talking about it with others or defending their choice. The remaining three women Rachel, Moira, and Jane tried to conceal their childfree from others in order to avoid being questioned about it or avoid further stigma. Among the five women who did not experience stigma, Niamh and Sarah indicated that if it became publicly known to others that they were childless by choice, they would justify or defend their decision. However, for some of the women the choice about whether or not to conceal their childless was not always within their control, and in some cases the women had no choice but to reveal their voluntary childlessness. Moira

experienced this when confronted by a friend about not having children, and it was something that she was deeply offended by.

In terms of managing or responding to the reactions of others, the women engaged a variety of techniques in defence of their decisions to be childless. From a family perspective, some of the women explained that they felt pressurized into re-thinking or re-considering their decision to be childless and the women's reactions to family pressure varied. For instance, Rachel tolerated the pressure exerted on her by her mother, while Ellen and Bridget challenged it. Although Moira and Jane used the reactive strategies of identity substitution and passing as a way of controlling information about their voluntary childlessness, they were less vocal about their decision overall. In terms of responding to the negative stereotypes imposed on them by the public, the women either challenged the judgement and reframed their decision to be childless as a positive life choice or they justified or they reversed the charge and condemned people who have children for social purposes, or because it is expected of them. Rather than engage in a debate about their voluntary childlessness or exacerbate the stigma further, some of the women accepted the negative charge and the social judgement imposed on them. In some cases women used a range of different strategies depending on whom they were interacting with, whether it was family, friends, acquaintances or others.

Chapter Eight:

Conclusion

As outlined in the introduction, this study aimed to explore and analyse the experiences of women who are childless by choice in contemporary Irish society. To achieve this, I consulted international literature on voluntary childlessness and conducted twelve qualitative semi-structured interviews with women who identified as childless by choice. I drew upon the theories of individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and reflexive biography making (Giddens, 1991) which are intrinsically connected, in order to understand the factors that shaped the women's childbearing decision making, and the processes through which they articulated their reflections and actions about this. In the literature, it was strongly suggested that women who are childless by choice are stigmatized and assigned a negative identity. For this reason, I also drew upon Goffman's (1963) stigma theory, theories of identity management developed by Park (2002); and expanded on by Hayden (2010); and Ayers (2010) in further developing a theoretical framework. This facilitated analysis that also sought to understand the experiences of those women who believed themselves to have been stigmatized and to tease out the strategies they identified as useful in managing their spoiled or deviant identities.

There are five main conclusions that I have drawn from this research, each is discussed in detail below. They relate to;

- i. The factors and social contexts that influenced and shaped the women's childbearing decision making,
- ii. The typology of reasons for women's voluntary childlessness,

- iii. The dynamics of the women's decision making processes and future aspirations about lifestyles to which they aspired,
- iv. Stigma, concern and contextualized responses,
- v. My reflective journey.

In considering these findings it must be acknowledged that the sample from which they are drawn is small, and while they give some useful insights they cannot be read as definitive or generalizable.

The Factors and Social Contexts that Influence Women's Childbearing Decision-Making

What I found to be key influencing factors in the women's childbearing decision making were similar to those already identified in the research literature, which indicates that in terms of Western societies more generally, the experiences and expectations of women in Ireland are influenced by similar motives. The data reveals how women are negotiating their choices in the context of the expectations of partners, parents, colleagues, the medical community, and media portrayals of childlessness. It also draws our attention to the decisions that women make in the context of balancing personal and work commitments in a modern capitalist society and in the context of the inadequate provision of, and the costs of childcare in Ireland. The data also highlights that women are consciously reflecting on their own lives and are making choices with regard to how they want to live and how they want their lives to be. Some are influenced by early childhood experiences, others by the perceived demands of motherhood, career orientation, or personal health and well-being. Others cited social and global concerns, such as the environment, capitalism, poverty and hunger as key influencing factors in their decision making.

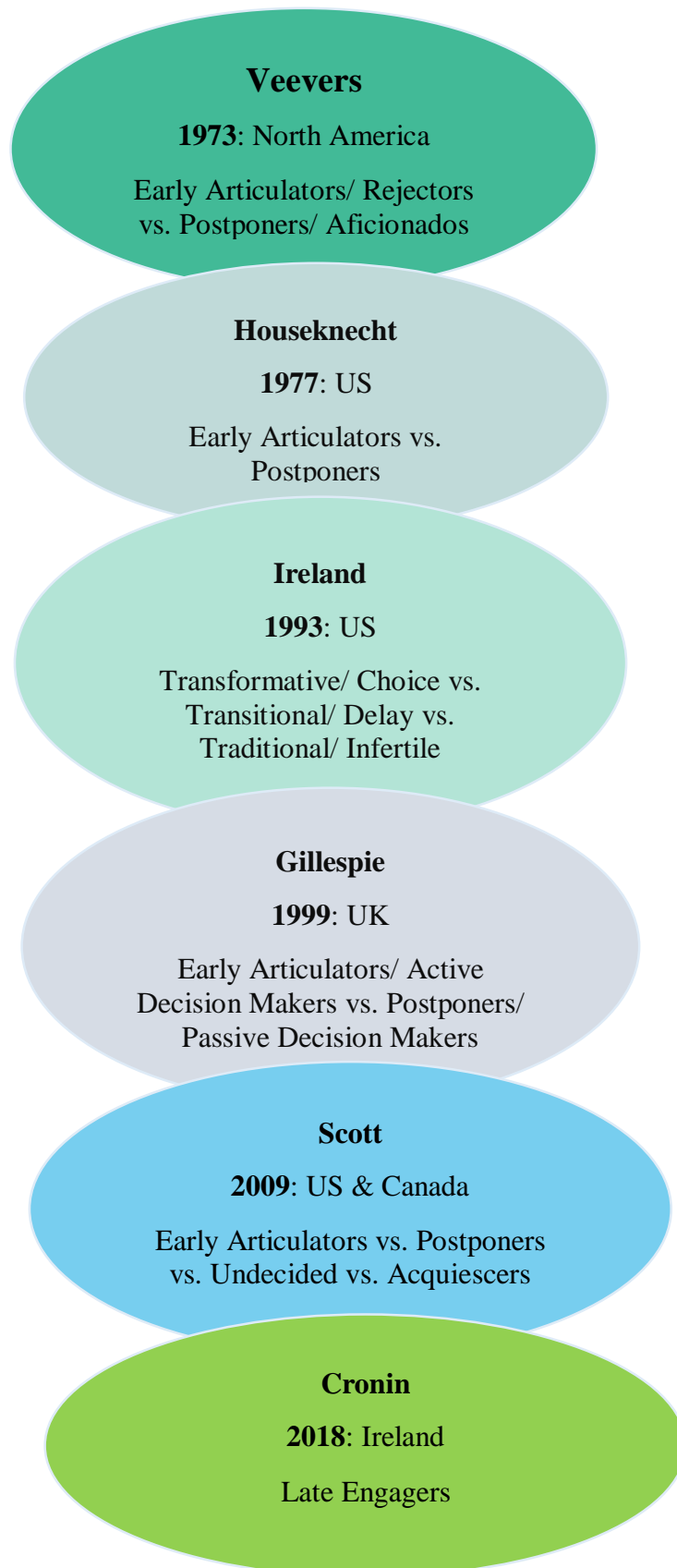
An unexpected finding from this research was the lack of discussion on Catholic teaching and ideas around pronatalism. This is significant given the historical/traditional influence of the Catholic Church on women's experiences of reproduction in Ireland.

Typology of Reasons for Women's Voluntary Childlessness

In this study I used the original typologies of early articulators and postponers developed by Veevers (1972) and extended by, Houseknecht (1987); Ireland (1993); Gillespie (1999); and Scott (2009). These typologies were useful in helping me to understand the time-frames within which the women made their decisions to be childless. However, I found that the typology of early articulators did not quite fully capture the processes of ongoing decision making engaged in by some of the participants in this research. For instance, while some of the women first considered childlessness at an early stage in their lives, they returned to their decisions at different points in their lives, particularly if they were questioned or challenged about it. The research alerts us to both the usefulness of typologies in understanding women's decision making and, importantly, their limitations. It points to the importance of analysis that utilizes decision making typologies in conjunction with more process oriented analysis. In this study, some of the research participants straddle several of the different typologies described in chapter two. Rachel for instance could be described as a transformative woman (Ireland, 1993) an acquiescer (Scott, 2009) or a passive decision maker (Gillespie, 1999). The transformative typology suggests that Rachel is exercising choice in relation to her fertility. The subsequent typology of acquiescer also applies to Rachel, given that her childbearing decision making is influenced by her husband. Yet, she also resembles the passive typology of women described by Gillespie (1999) as she had never given the decision about whether or

not to have children much thought or consideration, until she approached the age of forty. Like Rachel, for Keelin, the decision about whether or not to have children became a heightened concern as she approached the age of forty. Rachel and Keelin wanted to make the actual decision themselves, before the decision was no longer theirs to make. What is significant here is that their ages intersected with the decision making process, so that the typology that might have seemed to fit their experiences up to then, no longer fully represented their decision making process. Their focus and late active decision making further extends our understanding of the processes of decision making. This research, thus, builds on those existing typologies to capture with more specificity the thought and decision making processes in which women like Rachel and Keelin engaged. In order to capture their experiences more succinctly, I developed a new typology, 'late engager' to more comprehensively speak to this late active engagement with decision making, choice and control. This category is represented in the revised typology map depicted below in figure eight with decision making, choice and control.

Figure 7: Voluntary Childlessness: Developing Typologies



Dynamics of the Women's Decision Making Processes and Future Aspirations about the Lifestyles the Women Wanted for Themselves

In terms of the dynamics or the nature of the women's decision making processes, the data revealed that the women had a deep sense of who they were and how they wanted their lives to be. Common among them was a more general process of thinking 'outside the box' from an early age in terms of their place in their families, communities and visions for their lives. Through such processes, they began generally disembedding from traditional norms from an early age. They did this through challenging norms and practices around religion, active reflection on their family norms and practices and the roles in which they had been placed, as well as using education to alter the life course direction that would have been expected of them. In such ways, they constructed a sense of self that was coherent and made sense to them in the context of choosing not to have children. This was often different from the women in their families who would have been expected to be role models for them. Importantly, they identified familial and external role models to whom they could look to for inspiration and to support their vision of themselves. The lifestyles they were generally aspiring to revolved around the push and pull factors relative to work and career ambitions. They were pulled towards voluntary childlessness through a prioritization of adult relationships and a desire to protect and prioritize their own physical and mental wellbeing. Such pull factors are exemplified by Niamh's experience where she prioritized her own personal health and well-being over the option of having children. On the other hand, others were pushed away from becoming mothers through concerns about over-population, the tensions brought about by late capitalist structures and norms, as well as environmental concerns. What is important to recognize is that the decision making around voluntary childlessness

was incorporated into these more general disembedding processes as well as the more specific push and pull factors related to voluntary childlessness.

Stigma, Concern, and Contextualized Responses

As stated, the theoretical framing that underpins the analysis of this research brings together theories of individualization, reflexive biography making, stigma and stigma management as a way for understanding women's experiences of being voluntarily childless in contemporary Irish society. Briefly, individualization creates opportunities for people to prioritize themselves, take greater control of their lives and act in their own best interests (Beck and Beck Gernsheim 2002). At the same time, however, individualization draws attention to new forms of social control which are emerging relative to the labour market, welfare state, legal and education systems, and to the imperative embedded in late capitalist societies regarding individual responsibility. Reflexive biography making shows how people are engaging with the process of individualization, they are being autonomous and are consciously choosing an independent lifestyle, free from the responsibility of children and childcare. Stigma and stigma management examines the ways in which women who are childless by choice are stigmatized and how they respond or react to it. In considering the processes of individualization and reflexive biography making, the analysis I conducted offered insights into how these women were constructing their identities and reflecting on the decisions they make around being childless by choice. Furthermore, a focus on their experiences of stigma and its management offered insights into the ways they experienced stigma, levels of stigma they experienced and their responses to it. Together, these concepts shed light on different aspects of women's voluntary childlessness more than has been done before in individual studies, and they provide a more holistic in-depth understanding of not just (i) why women are

childless, but (ii) how they make their decisions, and (iii) how they respond to critiques or judgements about their decisions.

Given that Ireland has one of the highest fertility rates in Europe (European Commission, 2016) and that it remains a largely Catholic country, I expected that the women I interviewed would have recounted many stories of stigma. However, it is interesting, that only seven of the twelve women who participated in this research felt stigmatized or raised concerns about the negative attitudes that others expressed toward them, as a result of their voluntary childlessness. Also, the nature of the stigma differed from that discussed in the literature which was very often discrediting and an attack on the women's character (Gillespie, 2000; Morell, 1994; Park, 2002). The women in this research were generally not made to feel unfeminine or unnatural because of their decision to be childless. Instead, they experienced the emotion expressed by others toward them, especially by family members as an extension of concern, as distinct from a more general negative judgement. This concern revolved around the potential regret they might subsequently experience should they remain childless. For instance, Bridget's father feared that she would regret her decision, while Rachel's mother was concerned that Rachel would miss out on what her mother perceived as the rewards of motherhood. Jane on the other hand, experienced a certain amount of pressure from her siblings, all of whom were older than her, some who were married with children of their own. They simply assumed that Jane would eventually change her mind and would want to have children, indicating a level of dis-belief towards her as well as an element of concern for her.

These accounts alert us to a subtle difference in attitude towards them and in external judgement of them, and one that cannot be understood as stigmatizing. As distinct from judging them, it is clear that the women's family members; fathers,

mothers, siblings, were concerned that they would somehow miss out by not having children or that they would regret their decision in the future. While it indicates the continuation of a pronatalist ideology, it is very different from the responses the women received from others, (colleagues, strangers, the medical community) who sought to influence their decisions. Some of the women were negatively judged and experienced social pressure to conform and procreate. In managing social reactions the women used different strategies in the different contexts.

As well as the subtle differences in the concern/ attitudes of family/ external influencers, the women's perceptions of stigma, and the different elements of it they encountered varied. While the responses from family members were concern-based as noted above, and were not necessarily stigmatizing, two of the women, Rachel and Bridget did find them unsettling, and on occasion this caused them to review their decision.

Analysis of the women's experiences of stigma highlights the nature of judgement/ stigma and indicates that there are clear differences that need to be taken into account in understanding these interactions. One is more informed by pronatalism, and the idea that having a child is the best thing that can happen to a woman. In this research, this form originated mainly from family members and was expressed in terms of concern for the woman. The other is a more direct attack on a woman's character and is more about discrediting the individual as outlined by Goffman (1963) in his discussion of stigma. The women responded to negative judgements and expressions of concerns in different ways. Some of the women accepted the negative charge, others challenged or resisted it. For instance, when Susan was socially stigmatized and referred to as selfish by a stranger whom she

encountered, she actively challenged the negative judgement expressed toward her and reframed her decision to be childless as positive and socially valuable.

Clearly there are differences in women's experiences of stigma and not all women who are childless by choice feel stigmatized. What became apparent from the findings of this research is that the women's responses to the perceived stigma were contingent on the contexts they found themselves in. Hence, I developed the term 'contingency management' to capture the nature of the strategies used by the women to respond to the reactions they experienced from people.

My Reflective Journey

In chapter three, I made reference to the importance of engaging in qualitative reflexive research, and I have also gone through a reflexive reconsideration of my own decision making about remaining childless in the course of this research. I now know more about myself and the factors that shaped my decision 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 of this research I have come to a better understanding of 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 my own personal desire for a life free from the responsibility of children and childcare that has motivated and influenced me in my decision to be childless. More specifically, my decision making relates to what I perceive as the risks associated with raising children, the personal commitment of time, resources, and energy and the stringent control I consider it

would put me under and this is not the type of life/ lifestyle I have ever envisaged for myself.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

My research contributes to, and extends on existing research in the arena of women's voluntary childlessness. The reasons women decided to remain childless reflect those already identified in the literature, indicating similarities with Western societies more generally. Through the analysis undertaken, I have developed a further typology to capture with more specificity the diverse range of reasons for, and consequences of women's voluntary childlessness, in light of the pronatalist climate which still dominates our society.

Despite its contributions to original knowledge, this study is not without its limitations. It is a small-scale qualitative study with a sample of relatively homogenous women. The women interviewed were white, Irish (born or raised) women, of Catholic origin, and were mainly middle class. Consequently, the sample is not representative, and the findings cannot be generalized or replicated. Nonetheless, the analysis undertaken offers insight into the issue of women's voluntary childlessness in Ireland, and offers further conceptual tools to understand women's decision making, the reactions of others and the women's responses to these reactions. It also points to possible further research directions in the area.

In light of these findings, I suggest that further research be carried out on analysing the nature of reactions experienced by women who are childless by choice. Ideally, this research would also examine women's internalization of these judgements in order to gain a greater understanding of why some women perceive the reactions/ comments of others as stigmatizing, and why some do not. Such research would add

to our knowledge of how we can better understand the reactions of others and women's experiences and reactions to them.

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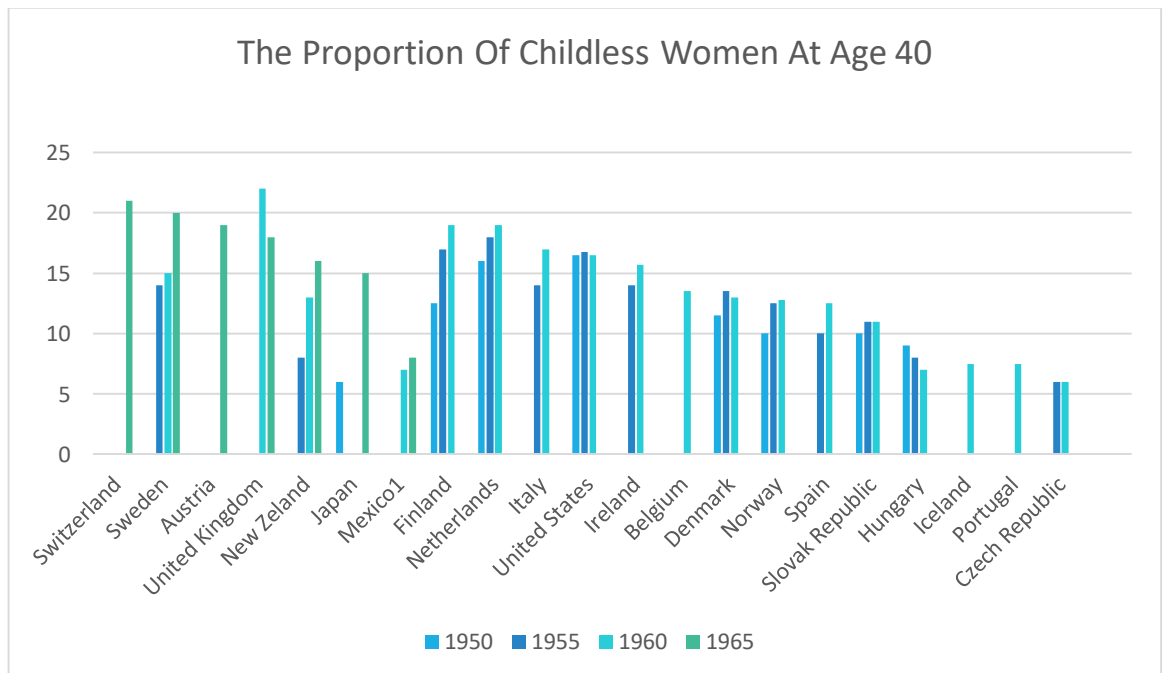
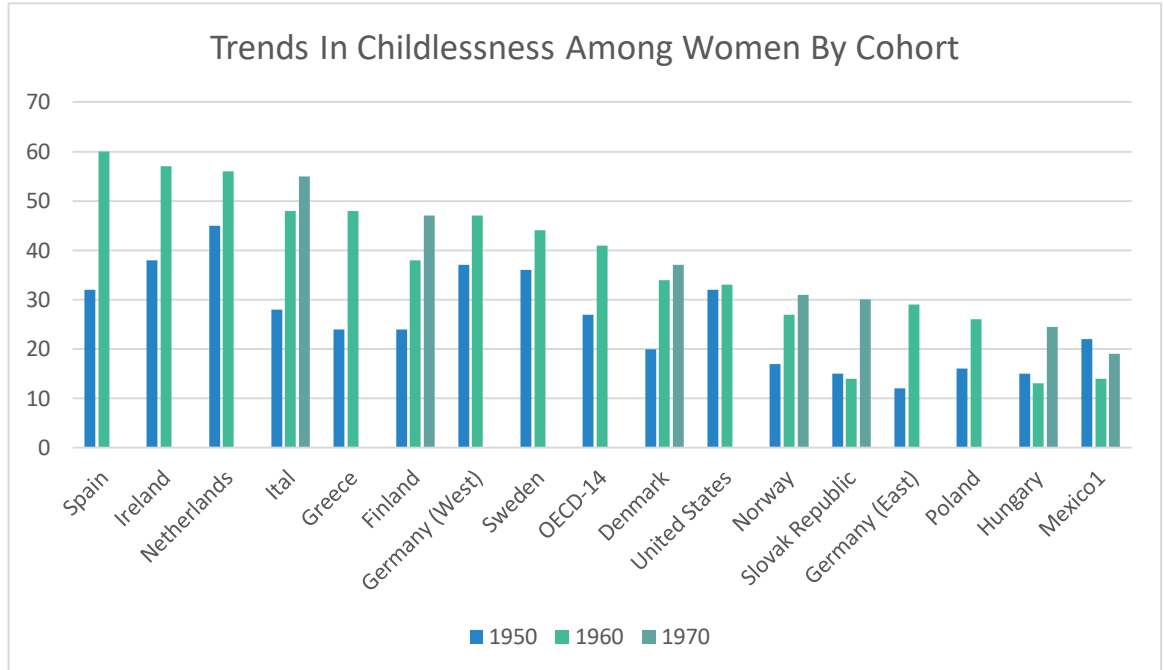
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Appendices

Appendix 1

Trends in Childlessness



Appendix 2

Time Magazine



Appendix 3

Interview Guide

These questions have been developed as guides to the narrative interviews with the participants. While they provide a general structure than can be followed, interviews, will be guided by the priorities participants give to their experiences. It is envisaged that the questions detailed below will be followed by probing, as indicated by the individual context.

Early influences

- Tell me a little about yourself first, your age, where you live, working status, religious status, relationship status, sexual orientation
- Tell me about your childhood, what was it like growing up in Ireland?
- Tell me about your relationship with your family
- What were your earlier influences?

Imaging adulthood

- What did you think your future would be as you were growing up?
- When did you begin to think about your future identity/ adulthood?

Coming to a decision not to have children

- When and how did you decide that you did not want children?
- How easy was it to make this decision?

Expansion on this decision

- Why did you make it/ choose this option?
- Have you ever questioned that decision?

Emotions surrounding this decision

- Are you happy to talk about your decision?
- What emotions surround your decision?

- Have you felt differently about it at different times?

Opportunities

- Does being childless open up more opportunities for you?
- Does it give you more control to shape your life?

Reactions of others

- Have others questioned your decision?
- How do people react/ respond to it in general?
- Do people say that you might regret the decision?

Dealing with negative reactions

- Have you ever had negative responses/ reactions and if so how do you deal with these responses, how do they make you feel?

Appendix 4

Women Choosing to be Childless in Ireland

Dear Participant,

This study is a fulfilment of the requirements for a PhD at UCC. The study looks at chosen childlessness among women in Ireland, in particular, what factors/circumstances influence women's decision and reactions to it. I ask your permission to participate in this study and to share your experiences with me, by taking part in a one-to-one interview, which should last approximately one hour, at a convenient location of your choosing. With your permission the interview shall be recorded and subsequently transcribed into written text. You shall be provided with a copy of your interview transcript, in case you wish to amend any of the data.

To respect your confidentiality, and preserve your anonymity, all identifying data shall be omitted from the text, instead you shall be assigned a pseudonym. The thesis will be read by my two academic supervisors and an external examiner, and may be used for subsequent publications. It will be available through the UCC library, and available to be read by future students, researchers, those interested in the subject. Transcripts and recordings shall be kept confidential for the duration of the study, and for a period of three years thereafter, and will only be seen by my two supervisors and an external examiner. However, extracts from the study may be used in subsequent journal articles, books, or in popular media, or may be read by future students on this course.

You are not in any way obliged to participate in this study, and can choose to withdraw at any time, either before, during, or up to a two week period after the interview has been completed.

Once again, thank you for your interest and involvement in this study. If I can be of any assistance, or if you require any further information on this study, please feel free to contact me on my mobile phone: 087-0572974, or my home phone: 064-7750689, by email: omahonyjoanm@eircom.net, or at my home address: Amber Rose, Tureenamult, Gneeveguilla, Rathmore, Co. Kerry.

Many thanks,

Best wishes,

Joan Cronin

PhD Student.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign the accompanying consent form.

Consent Form

I.....agree to participate in Joan Cronin's research study, *Women Choosing to be Childless in Ireland*.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing

I am participating voluntarily

I give permission for my interview with Joan Cronin to be recorded

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the recorded data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted

I understand that the researcher will make every effort to uphold anonymity

I understand that extracts from our agreed interview transcript may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box:)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

Signed.....

Date.....