

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

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Introduction

Today I'm presenting some of the preliminary findings of a study about voluntary childlessness conducted with Indian, Polish, and fellow South African collaborators. Voluntary childlessness is also frequently referred to as being childless by choice or childfree. The term *childfree* (as opposed to 'child/less') is intended to show that not having children "can be an active and fulfilling choice"ⁱ, and to indicate agency and freedom from social obligation. The distinguishing feature of voluntary childlessness is the deliberate avoidance of parenthood, and this is precisely what opens up childfree people, especially married heterosexuals, to greater stigma than the temporarily or involuntarily childless, since it is seen as willing and deliberate deviation from the normⁱⁱ.

Having children is seen as a natural consequence of being a "normal" heterosexual woman or man, as well as an expected outcome of marriageⁱⁱⁱ. Parenthood is therefore normalised by regulative discourses around sexuality and gender. This process of normalisation is reinforced by pronatalist discourse. According to Meyers^{iv}, pronatalism rests upon twin strategies: The first is the valorisation or glorification of parenthood, which supports the belief that having children is the only true path to fulfilment. The second strategy is the denigration of non-reproduction in which childlessness is cast as horrific. The result of these dual strategies is to eliminate deliberate childlessness as a possibility. Parenthood, as the only truly viable option for a fulfilling life, is therefore a non-choice. This is compounded by nationalistic and religious rhetoric that constructs childbearing as an obligation or duty. Consequently, as my previous research showed, people often do not reflect on whether to have children or not, but see it more as a matter of timing. So, even

though parenthood is often surrounded by voluntaristic rhetoric, in practice procreation becomes more of an imperative for married heterosexuals. Those who diverge from this expected life course show up the constructed nature of this imperative, which

results in a host of informal pressures to procreate. Not the least of these is the stigmatization of childlessness as a deviant state, and the attribution of a negative stereotype to voluntarily childless [heterosexual] couples. Childlessness is perceived to be associated with irresponsibility, unnaturalness, immaturity, emotional instability, [and a range of negative potential outcomes].^v

Choice

It is the voluntary character of chosen childlessness that is troublesome, therefore. Yet, of course, the issue of ‘choice’ is complicated when it comes to both reproduction and non-reproduction. We can understand choice in a narrow sense: as individuals rationally making conscious decisions in their own self-interest. It can also be understood in a broader sense: as active or passive. For instance, as research has shown, non-parenthood can be the result of an active choice, or a passive process of *not* choosing.

My interest today, however, is on choice as a discursive action, rather than an internal process or “a recollection of one unchanging moment of past choice”.^{vi} I am concerned with **choice as a discursive resource** that can be mobilised in talk toward various political ends. We see this, e.g., in public debates around abortion. Similarly, Taylor has shown how^{vii} CF people construct both parenthood and non-parenthood as personal choices to argue for equal treatment in the workplace. Our participants also, unsurprisingly, spoke about CF as a decision (e.g., referring to the right to reproductive choice). However, they most often argued that their reproductive status was not related to an active and conscious decision.

The focus of this paper then is on the rhetoric of choice in the discussions on childfree-specific websites^{viii} which occurred during an online ethnography^{ix}. Our aim was to explore how online spaces provided an avenue of resistance and a public space for subjectivity construction, where identities are co-constructed, negotiated and contested.

Data collection & analysis:

The data were generated in discussion threads, started by the researchers, on these websites. There were 3 country-specific discussion groups for India, Poland, and South Africa and a general discussion thread started during a pilot phase. We analysed the data using discursive methodology within a feminist post-structuralist framework. Broadly speaking, the analysis concentrates on identifying the rhetorical organisation of talk, the discursive purpose of particular rhetorical strategies, and how these are connected to relations of power.^x

The disavowal of choice:

In this presentation I concentrate on a particular rhetorical strategy (or discursive tactic), namely: the disavowal of choice. This tactic was resourced by 2 main scripts: (1) **Naturally Childfree** and (2) **CF as a non-choice**.^{xi}

Naturally childfree:

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

- (1) *I've **always** been childfree. I have **never** liked children [...] I have the right to have children or not, but I do not consider my child-freedom to be a choice. Not liking kids is just the way I am. If I did have children, I'd just be going against my **nature**. I would say it affects every aspect of my life because it's not simply something I identify with. It's a core aspect of **who I am**. (Destiny, General CF site)*
- (2) *From the statements here it seems that very different people, brought up in various conditions, with different views on a number of matters, have however, some IDENTICAL construction concerning children and reproduction. Since there are identical ways to reach an awareness of your childlessness, [...] it starts to look as though we are not childfree "by choice" but naturally childfree.... (Woman11, Polish)*

These quotations show the recurring tendency to describe oneself as **always** having been CF and as **never** having desired or felt the urge to have children. They illustrate how choice was overtly denied in relation to respondents' childfree status by locating it within the realm of nature and describing it as inherent. As we see in the first extract, being CF was described as being part of one's nature or identity, and thus as a natural state. Many participants linked their childfree state to their “temperament”, “personality”,

“disposition” or “inner being”, as well as to biological factors, such as the lack of a “maternal instinct”, the correct “hormones” or “parental disposition”. Some participants even described themselves as having been born that way.

Claims to being naturally childfree or “born like this” resonate with the naturalising arguments used to counter the view of homosexuality as a lifestyle choice. “Discourses that construct aspects of human life as ‘natural’ render them outside of human choice and control”.^{xii} This is reinforced by the idea that CF is something pre-existing within the individual that is discovered or realised. As we see in extract 2 the respondent speaks about becoming aware of one’s voluntary childlessness. This was another common pattern across the entire data set, as many participants spoke about coming to a realisation of themselves as, first of all, different to others and, secondly, of this difference being CF. In these narratives of “finding out that I was childfree” (Woman1, India) respondents position themselves passively, with their childfree status as something beyond their control. Interestingly, these narratives resonate with coming out stories told by members of the LGBTI community and many respondents did describe themselves as “a closet CF” or as coming out about their CF status.

By constructing child-freedom as fixed at birth, immutable and biologically determined, it follows that a childfree person cannot be held accountable for their divergence from the norm, or required to change it. Many respondents, especially those who are young and/or unmarried, described dismissive and disbelieving responses to their claims of not wanting children, often being told that they will inevitably change their minds about having children, which other researchers have also reported on^{xiii}. By describing the lack of desire for parenthood, and motherhood specifically, as a natural state beyond personal control, respondents were able to refute the idea that they would change their minds. Some even described themselves as supporting parenthood in principle—for example of “wanting to want it” (Woman 2, UK, research blog)—but explaining that the urge to procreate never materialised.

To self-position as naturally childfree, is to claim not to have a choice in the matter of remaining childless. Stigma is managed through the process of naturalisation. Of course, these accounts are not only

part of a political strategy to vie for power, but how the participants actually experience their lives, yet the process of naturalisation is never innocent. There is always a structuring of power behind it, because to claim that something is natural rules out any questioning of that thing's status^{xiv}. This script therefore works to grant the same status to voluntary child-freedom as to reproduction. It allows for positive self-positioning as 'normal'.

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

CF as a non-choice:

The central feature of this script is its subversion of pronatalist arguments that construe parenthood as a non-choice. In order to accomplish this other options must be disavowed by being cast as extremely unattractive or irrational and so not actually feasible. The next extract illustrates how the script of CF as a non-choice works.

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

The respondent draws a parallel between choosing life (child-freedom) or death (parenthood). This really is no choice at all, at least for a rational, normal person. This script works to disavow choice by discrediting the alternative. As the quotation shows, it focused on denigrating parenthood. This was not surprising since online CF groups allow members to voice contradictory views to the 'child-centric' worldview and to talk against pronatalist discourse.

The twin strategies of pronatalism, which I described earlier, were inverted by the respondents in order to construct non-parenthood as a non-choice instead. Respondents questioned the attractions of

parenthood, highlighting its drawbacks, while often at the same time contrasting these with the positives of a childfree life.

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

The first two extracts question the “commonly held beliefs” and “myths” that reinforce the valorisation of parenthood and the particular view of the child as emotionally priceless. As we see, participants called into question the common assertion, which I often heard in my previous research^{xv}, that the emotional benefits children bring outweigh the costs and sacrifices of parenthood. Instead, they discredit the alternative by arguing that parenthood does not necessarily equate to happiness; that its supposed emotional rewards are overestimated or romanticised; and that it is often motivated by selfish desire. In the third extract we can see how negative portrayals of parenthood (horrific or banal) were also juxtaposed with positive renditions of non-parenthood. Constructions of ‘breeders’ as unreflexive, self-absorbed, ignorant, dupes and small-minded “bumpkins” were also contrasted with renditions of the CF as enlightened, selfless, open-minded, and evolved.

Conclusions:

It is possible to see how respondents used choice rhetoric to counter stigmatised positions associated with child-freedom and construct alternative, positive subjectivities. The discursive tactic of disavowing choice helps to manage stigma because it deals with the core issue from which that stigma originates: choice. By adopting passive positions, in which they are either compelled by innate forces or do not really

have a choice, respondents refuse the position of the autonomous subject who actively decides in her/his own self-interest. Instead they naturalise their reproductive status and/or construe it as reasonable and understandable. The trouble posed by choice is explained away.

This discursive tactic is subversive to some extent. As I showed, pronatalist constructions that usually remove parenthood from the realm of choice are appropriated and turned on their heads. Childfree respondents used choice rhetoric to construe non-parenthood as just as natural as parenthood. They also construed child-freedom as a non-choice in the same way in which pronatalist renditions of parenthood by inverting the twin strategies of pronatalism. In this way, childfree respondents challenge the procreation imperative, and resist deficit positioning. The appropriation of the self-same pronatalist arguments potentially creates space for alternative possibilities, but there are also potential disadvantages or limitations to this strategy. Disavowing choice and agency might mean that rather than being seen as social miscreants, CF people could be positioned as objects of pity (in much the same way as the involuntarily childless) or as inherently deviant, and even pathologised. They therefore remain deviant Others in the eyes of many in society. There is no real challenge to the supposed naturalness of parenthood or the powerful socio-cultural expectations placed on heterosexual people to procreate. The wish to parent or not is located within the individual's nature or ability to see through the powerful social myths about parenthood. This rhetorical strategy does not consider what is so threatening about deliberately remaining childfree, namely the refusal of the procreation imperative and deviation from the heteronorm. Any trouble posed to constructions of procreative heterosexuality is kept in check^{xvi} through the disavowal of choice.

Notes & References

ⁱ Gillespie, 2003, p. 123, emphasis added

ⁱⁱ Moore, 2013

ⁱⁱⁱ Meyers, 2001

^{iv} 2001: 762

^v Veevers, 1974: 308 – 9

^{vi} Reynolds *et al.*, 2007: 334

^{vii} Taylor 2002

^{viii} These sites and the actual online names of the participants are not named in this paper for ethical reasons.

^{ix} Our rationale for collecting data online was threefold: (1) the Internet is an important contemporary mode of resistance to various dominant discourses (like pronatalist discourse); (2) it allows for the creation of safe spaces based on shared attitudes and interests that often cannot exist otherwise; and (3) it is a site for people's identity construction. There is a large and diverse online community of CF people and we focused on online communities with discussion fora. We chatted with existing members and also invited people via non-CF sites like FB, twitter, and our own research blog since the groups that we chose allowed guests and 'lurkers'. Of course, we were aware that we would only be accessing those CF people who felt a need to join or participate in an online group^{ix}, but our concern wasn't in forming a generalizable portrait of the childfree.

^x Bamberg, 2004 (d)

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

^{xii} Sullivan-Blum, 2006: 203

^{xiii} Gillespie, 2003

^{xiv} See Derrida on 'naturalisation'

^{xv} Morison, 2011

^{xvi} Butler, 1993a