

THE MEANING AND EXPERIENCE OF
VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS FOR MARRIED COUPLES

by

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ABSTRACT

This hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry investigated the meaning and lived experience of voluntary childlessness for married couples. The extant literature on childlessness is dated, and although popular and academic works offer more recent descriptions of this life choice among women, there remains a paucity of contemporary information regarding childfree couples and men. This study thus extends our understanding of how the childless by choice construct meaningful lives. The purpose of the study was to illuminate the underlying meaning of voluntary childlessness among married couples. The study also explored whether meaning-making differed between men and women, and how they created meanings of their voluntary childlessness as married couples.

Eight couples volunteered to describe their daily lives without children, in individual spousal and conjoint interviews. The findings of this study emerged from a guided existential reflection founded on four existentials of human experience: lived body, lived relation, lived space, and lived time. Descriptive themes that illuminated the daily lives of these childless couples are presented within each lived existential. Although the participants did not appear to directly value childlessness as a source of meaning in daily living, analysis of their accounts revealed two prominent meaning-themes that encompassed the materials contained within the four existentials. The first meta-theme of meaning was freedom, the expression of autonomy and choice in daily living. The second meta-theme complemented that of freedom, that is, the compelling drive to live a responsible life. In effect, the adults in the study described a balance between their commitments to autonomous strivings, and demonstration of accountability and contribution to society outside the parameters of parenthood.

Results are discussed as they relate to research and writing on intentional childlessness, and to established psychological theories of adult development. Overall, the findings suggest that the voluntarily childless adults in this study derived meaning from autonomous and generative

acts that are similar in purpose to the strivings for mastery, control, and generativity that have been traditionally associated with parents in mid-life.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Choosing to live without children is not a new topic of public or academic interest; there have always been non-parents who either by choice or chance construct their lives in quiet parallel to the dominant culture of parenthood. Demographers are currently reporting a new wave of fertility trends indicating that in the Western world this minority group of voluntarily childless adults is growing (Statistics Canada, 1999; Qu, Weston, & Kilmartin, 2000). Recent predictions suggest rates of intentional childlessness at 15 to 17%, or one out of every six women choosing childlessness at the millenium (Rovi, 1994). Some estimates suggest up to 22% of women born between 1956 and 1976 are unlikely to have any children; most of them will be childless by choice (Bartlett, 1994; Tyler-May, 1995).

This trend toward childlessness commenced in the 1960's but the historical stigma surrounding the voluntarily childless did not entirely disappear during the ensuing decades (Tyler-May, 1995). Rather, the social meaning of intentional childlessness has vacillated between polarities of acceptance and tolerance, and rejection and denigration. For the better part of this last century, our Western culture of religious, political, medical, and academic discourses has heralded parenthood as the central life purpose and source of meaning for healthy men and women (Ireland, 1993; LaFayette, 1995; Lisle, 1996). Psychological theories continue to reinforce and contribute to these social discourses; parenthood is the natural and critical developmental task marking adult maturity and identity (Gergen, 1990; Ireland; Lachman, 2004; Safer, 1996). Alternative life paths considered socially and culturally to be of equal status and value to parenthood have not yet emerged for women or men (Daniluk, 1999; Gerson, 1993). Indeed, the option in Western society to eschew parenthood-particularly motherhood-is unique among the majority of world cultures wherein family life is essential for the maintenance of cultural, religious, and social life.

Western beliefs about parenthood as natural and desirable are indeed widespread, but clearly they are not accepted or lived by everybody (Marshall, 1993). Couples making the childless choice comprise a small but increasingly visible minority (Morell, 1994). As they eschew traditional roles and identities of adulthood for themselves, these individuals must discover and create meaning in their lives deriving from their experience of difference. However, their lives are poorly understood and absent from psychological theorizing of adulthood (Gergen, 1990; Ireland, 1993). My study attempted to address our inadequate understanding of a reproductive choice and lifestyle that reflects the realities of a growing number of women and men. Through the qualitative method of hermeneutic phenomenology, I intended to present insights into the meaning and the experience of voluntary childlessness for couples and spouses.

Statement of the Problem

In our Western culture we live in an age-graded society with normative expectations for social behaviour, gender roles, and developmental tasks that together constitute markers of adult identity formation and maturation (Neugarten & Datan, 1996). Historically, marriage and family life remain important in the cultural ethos (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001) and parenthood in particular, is the hallmark of developmental maturity in our society (Neugarten & Datan). The "parenthood ideology" of Western societies (Marshall, 1993) is translated continually into social discourses that shape our adult lives and direct us to have children.

The last forty years, however, have seen expansion of life choices in the family domain, concomitant with significant shifts in Western values and attitudes about family life (Nichols & Pace-Nichols, 2000; Tyler-May, 1995; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Commencing in the 1960's, dramatic changes in women's roles, growing environmental concerns, and increased access to birth control heralded a new era of relationships and family structure (Bartlett, 1994; Gillespie, 2001; Tyler-May), and increased social tolerance for previously proscribed social behaviours. Rates of childlessness soared towards pre-World War I levels and were presumably

due to a rise in voluntary childlessness. Sociologists interpreted this period of increased social favour for childlessness as a backlash against the baby boom and the success of feminism in liberating women from the economic and social constraints of motherhood and domesticity (Bartlett; Burgwyn, 1981; Lisle, 1996). Academic interest in voluntary childlessness increased dramatically and produced a substantial body of literature that attempted to understand and describe this non-traditional cohort - their lifestyles, individual and relationship characteristics, and the motives for choosing childlessness (e.g., Burgwyn; Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1980).

However, in the 1980's and 1990's North American culture witnessed a resurgence of conservatism accompanied by traditional values emphasizing marriage, family, and conformity to earlier norms of parenthood (Daniluk, 1999; Gillespie, 2000; Tyler-May, 1995). After two decades of profound social change sustained by the feminist movement, women were again being encouraged to pursue motherhood, even if this meant balancing their maternal roles with career responsibilities. Men, on the other hand, moved through this period of social transition with a different experience of role options and reproductive responsibility. Changes in labour market, education, and family domains for women witnessed parallel changes in norms for men's development and identity (Gerson, 1993). Former role prescriptions of breadwinner and economic success dissipated into cultural ambiguity wherein men began searching for new meanings and definitions of family-related roles (Gerson; Levant, 1999). Active fatherhood became significantly more common and socially accepted for men, potentially making it even more difficult for men who were not invested in career roles to voluntarily reject fatherhood. These men were forced to negotiate their identities and sources of life meaning differently and with less social endorsement than fathers (Lunneborg, 1999).

The contemporary cohort of voluntarily childless adults appears to be caught in a curious paradox of sociocultural values and demographic shifts. Research confirms that the "oughtness" that has historically been associated with parenthood has diminished among North Americans

(Thornton & Young-Demarco, 2001), and that there is a gradual increase in the number of adults choosing childlessness (Rovi, 1994). Nonetheless, the vast majority of people still highly rate the role of parenthood and anticipate becoming parents (Jacobson, Heaton, & Taylor, 1988; Miall, 1994). Indeed, it appears that although we may have widened the cultural space of tolerance for the voluntarily childless in North American society, that space is small and remains at the margin of society (Daniluk, 1999; Tyler-May, 1995). Here, couples who eschew parenthood are challenged to negotiate and maintain a "personal culture" (Heidmets, cited in Brandstadter, 1999) of values, beliefs, and life goals that is embedded in the larger sociocultural context of pronatalism (Bram, 1989). One wonders how the childless by choice interpret and negotiate the demands and expectations of the dominant culture's prevailing discourse of parenthood (Marshall, 1993). Those expectations are expressed in stigma and stereotypes that continue to discredit nonparenthood (Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995) and subject voluntarily childless adults to experiences of "othering" (Daniluk; Morrel, 1994).

Some research efforts have been made to more clearly understand the social world in which childless adults live and negotiate the dominant ideology of pronatalism (e.g., Gillespie, 2000; Marshall, 1993). Studies of the social perceptions of voluntarily childless couples confirms that they are generally regarded as less warm and less agentic than parents, and judged to have more negative emotions (e.g., LaMastro, 2001). They are also viewed by many as lazy, less caring and less driven than parents, insensitive, and lonely (Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995). Childless marriages are often presumed to be less satisfactory and less stable than those of parents (LaMastro). Since they eschew the religious, social, and political norms of traditional family life, many consider intentionally childless adults to be deviant, selfish, career-focussed, and antinatalist in values and attitudes (Gillespie; Veevers, 1980).

Voluntarily childless women especially are frequently denigrated by criticism emanating from deeply-engrained cultural expectations that women's value and identity centres on their

reproductive cycle (Gergen, 1990; Ireland, 1993; Lisle, 1996; Lunneborg, 1999). Women's rejection of bearing and raising children is commonly construed as evidence of self-absorption, psychopathology, over-identification with masculine gender roles, and immaturity (Bartlett, 1994; Gergen; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Ireland; Lisle). Overall, research findings confirm that our pronatal culture harbours deep-seated social stigma about men and women who choose childlessness, despite measured trends of increased tolerance to variant family forms (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Veevers, 1980).

This bias continues in spite of the lack of research to substantiate these assumptions and claims, and in the face of contradictory evidence. Research on the psychosocial correlates of voluntary childlessness has failed to present any supporting evidence for the above-described negative social stereotypes (e.g., Houseknecht, 1987). So what, then, is known about the lives and motivations of the men and women who choose this variant life path? We know that intentionally childless women tend to have higher levels of education and are employed in professional occupations; they report less religiosity and have less traditional sex-role orientations (Bram, 1984; Jacobson & Heaton, 1991; Jacobson, Heaton & Taylor, 1988; Rovi, 1994). Childless married women and men report intimate and committed relationships with their partners, and shared valuing of creative and career pursuits (Safer, 1996; Veevers, 1980). Couples in childless marriages also appear to emphasize self-actualization in their lives and to work toward egalitarianism in their marriages (Bram, 1989; Jacobson & Heaton). Overall, they describe rich lives of spontaneity, freedom, opportunity, and community and environmental involvement (Bram, 1989; LaFayette, 1995; Lunneborg, 1999; Veevers).

Researchers have also attempted to understand the motives or rationale for choosing childlessness (e.g., Houseknecht, 1987; Weston & Qu, 2001). The most oft-cited reasons are personal freedom from routine and other obligations, and maintenance of an intimate spousal bond (Houseknecht; Safer, 1996; Veevers, 1980). More men than women express antinatal

sentiments (Lunneborg, 1999) as a key factor in rejecting parenthood, while more women cite family of origin experiences and a desire to make career commitments (Houseknecht; Veevers). Women appear to value the freedom *to* work whereas men apparently value the freedom *from* work: voluntarily childless men express appreciation for the reduced pressure to perform well in a career path and for the option to pursue less financially-rewarding work opportunities (Lunneborg).

Overall, the psychosocial correlates and prevailing social meanings and stereotypes of voluntary childlessness have been well-explored in the psychological and sociological literature (e.g., Houseknecht, 1987; Marshall, 1993; Rovi, 1994; Veevers, 1980). However, this body of work has several limitations. First, the majority of the research studies use data from older cohorts of intentionally childless adults in the 1970's and 1980's and that may not adequately reflect the lived experience of a contemporary cohort of non-parents (e.g., Burgwyn, 1981; Houseknecht; Nason & Paloma, 1976; Silka & Kiesler, 1977; Veevers). Indeed, the seminal work of Veevers and Houseknecht exploring and describing voluntary childlessness dates to the late 1970's and 1980's and was followed in the 1990's by a decrease in scholarly interest and inquiry. In the wake of dramatic shifts in the social construction of adults' lives and choices, clinicians currently working with intentionally childless individuals are informed by a body of literature that is out-dated and possibly of reduced relevance to contemporary clients.

A second shortcoming of the academic and popular literature concerned with voluntary childlessness is its almost exclusive focus on women's experiences (e.g., Bartlett, 1994; Ireland, 1993; Lisle, 1996; Safer, 1996). There is a dearth of information about men who make the childless choice (LaFayette, 1995; Lunneborg, 1999; Rovi, 1994). Instead, voluntarily childless men are indirectly described in women's accounts of their relationships (e.g., Bartlett; Safer). In those few studies where men have participated in research interviews their accounts are subsumed in broader descriptions of the general personality and demographic attributes of

voluntarily childless adults (e.g., Veevers, 1980). Similarly, there has been scant interest in the lives of intentionally childless couples (e.g., Veevers; Burgwyn, 1981). With few exceptions (e.g., Marshall, 1993) childless couples have been described almost exclusively through women's voices. Hence we have few insights into how these couples jointly construct their childfree lives or how husbands experience their childlessness.

A final shortcoming of the literature on intentional childlessness is that it focuses heavily on determining the personality and demographic correlates of voluntarily childless adults (e.g., Rovi, 1994; Jacobson & Heaton, 1991). Findings tend to diminish and distill the richness and complexity of childless adults' lives into typologies and categories of reproductive decision-making (e.g., Houseknecht, 1987; Ireland, 1993; Veevers, 1980), motives and rationales for choosing childlessness (e.g., Houseknecht; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Rovi; Veevers), and lifestyle characteristics (e.g., Bartlett, 1994; Burgwyn, 1981).

To summarize, the research literature on voluntary childlessness is dated, and has focused primarily on exploring the social meanings and the psychosocial correlates of childlessness. This work presents interesting and descriptive information about voluntarily childlessness, but it fails to illuminate the meaning and the lived experience of this life choice. We know little about how childless adults in contemporary times negotiate the dominant discourse of parenthood (e.g., Gillespie, 2000; Marshall, 1993) or how they create personal meaning of their childlessness in the course of daily living. We know only that despite a purported tolerance for variant life paths in adulthood, those who opt out of parenthood are still largely viewed as deviant (Gillespie; Veevers, 1980). The norm in North American society is still to have children (Jacobson & Heaton, 1991). Indeed, according to Mueller and Yoder (1997), being intentionally childless "remains a risky choice fraught with negative evaluations" (p. 218).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the meaning and the lived experience of voluntarily childlessness for spouses and couples in contemporary times. This phenomenological inquiry asked: **"What is the meaning and experience of voluntary childlessness, for married heterosexual adults, individually and as a couple?"** I applied a hermeneutic method to seek core meaning structures in interview texts from eight voluntarily childless married couples. My goal was to uncover the meaning of this life choice, as it was experienced in the ordinary lifeworld of spouses and couples. I was especially interested in exploring whether men and women's meaning-making differs, and how they create meanings of their voluntary childlessness as married couples. Hence I interviewed spouses separately, and then together.

Although findings from this study do not provide a comprehensive picture of the meaning of voluntary childlessness, they offer a fuller understanding of this reproductive choice. Such knowledge can help counsellors working with intentionally childless couples and spouses by informing a more empathic awareness of their lives. Counsellors might also apply this new awareness to guiding clients through reproductive decision-making, where they can share insights about daily living and meaning-making in marriages without children. I also believe that my findings contribute to psychological theories of adult development by providing insights into childlessness as an alternative path through adulthood. These insights challenge assumptions inherent in conventional psychology that the childless choice reflects immaturity, inadequacy, and unhappiness (Ireland, 1993).

Personal Context for Exploring Voluntary Childlessness

I entered this research assuming that I met van Manen's (1997) criteria for posing a phenomenological research question; "a phenomenological question must not only be made clear, understood, but also "lived" by the researcher" (p. 44). I am a voluntarily childless woman

in my forties in a committed relationship. Hence my intrigue with the research topic of childless couples derived directly from my own lived experience of intentional childlessness.

I embarked on this research journey at the threshold of my forties where I was confronted by the cycle of life. Here at an intersection of time and family, my father passed away and I moved into the final years of my own fertility. Prior to then I lived my childlessness as I always had; at ease with my chosen path and without concern about my reproductive difference from other women. I am probably an "early articulator" (Veevers, 1980) who never envisioned a future self as mother. I had no fantasies of having or raising babies, nor did I make efforts to seek out a mate best-suited for fathering my children. I never heard a ticking biological clock, or wondered whom else I might become if "other than mother" (Letherby, 1999, p. 359). Many of my friends were similarly childless, some by chance and others by choice. My reproductive status seemed unimportant to the world around me. Hence my lived experience of childlessness defied the dominant discourses of pronatalism and motherhood. Without children, I felt no absence or emptiness in my life. Instead, I continued through my twenties and thirties nurturing beautiful gardens, some musical abilities, friendships, a diverse career, and academic goals.

When my father died my awareness of being childless shifted in a reflective pause to the biological closure of my fertility. As Morell (2000) described, losses and significant life events triggered a melancholic revisitation of my childless state and a sudden sense of difference. I became aware of social discourses of motherhood in all aspects of my daily living - a barrage of messages declaring maternity the normal state of maturity for women. My lived experience of ease and comfort in my childlessness was suddenly disrupted as I awakened to a new self-consciousness of being a not-mother. The meaning of my childlessness slipped from quiet, simple preference to a place of noisy external commentary. I felt compelled to guard it, to justify it.

Commentaries about my childlessness began to emerge unsolicited in ordinary social exchanges. One psychiatrist acquaintance eagerly told me "You must be married soon, Diana. You're running out of time to have your family." When I casually informed her that I did not want children, her tone changed and she pursued the topic with escalating intensity. She insisted that I create a family life - "you must. You'd be a wonderful mother. You will want children when you are married." I was alarmed and upset by her disregard for my choice, yet I felt obliged to explain myself, to excuse myself. Days later, my male dentist reversed that exchange and lauded the value of this research project. "Thank God" he said. "Finally someone will look at us and not think we're evil and awful! I want to be in your research project! I'll tell them that we're normal!" Throughout my root canal he enthusiastically told me his story of voluntary childlessness.

After years of quietly living without children among a peer-culture of family life, this research provoked in me new awareness of the pronatal discourse around me in daily living - T.V. ads and shows, movies, political rhetoric, and medicine all conveying that parenthood is the social norm. I also became more attuned to the small chorus of adult voices speaking of their childless choice, in the academic and popular literature as well as in my daily social encounters. To the extent which my experiences might be others' experiences, I endeavoured to be reflectively aware of certain experiential meanings - I had "personal clues" to orient myself to my participants' lived experiences of voluntary childlessness (van Manen, 1997, p. 57). By exploring my own lived experience and the accounts of my co-researchers, I strived to reveal shared meanings of voluntary childlessness and to provide a deeper understanding of the significance of choosing to live without children.

Terms of Interpretation

The prevailing ideologies of a historical period and culture are translated into social discourses of language and institutions (Gillespie, 2000) that shape our identities and lived

experience. In my research I assumed that we are embedded in a strongly pronatal culture.

Pronatalism refers to the socially-constructed beliefs that adults and married couples should have children and should want them (Veevers, 1980). Parenthood is exalted as a natural and necessary achievement that marks the most mature of adult accomplishments (Letherby, 1999).

Pronatalism is conveyed through social discourse that pervades all aspects of Western living. I considered pronatalism a critical dimension of the sociocultural context in which we are embedded and that shapes the lived experience of individuals and couples who choose an alternative path through parenthood.

Scholars who have studied voluntary childlessness concur that research has suffered with the obscurities of language and its inexact applications to describe similar but distinct experiences of childlessness (Houseknecht, 1987; Ireland, 1993; Lisle, 1996; Veevers, 1980). Our vague understanding of voluntary childlessness is fraught with gaps and negativity in part because we lack adequate language in the pronatal dominant discourse to express adult identities and experiences independent of parenthood (Gillespie, 1999; Ireland). Indeed, options for adult living are emerging without language to describe them (Morrel, 1994). According to Ireland, "what has actually been culturally absent has been the naming and representation of nonmaternal female experience" (p. 140). Although there have always been childless women and reluctant parents, maternity is still the foundation for naming and evaluating women's adult experiences and identity (Gergen, 1990). Similarly, there is no language to denote men who opt out of parenthood. We are left only with language that establishes their identity as "not"-parents. Terms unrelated to parental status are unavailable and hence, we rely on words in a negative counterpoint to the traditional terms created and maintained in the dominant pronatal discourse: not-mother, not-father, non-mother/father, non-parents. In her seminal work on childless marriages Veevers attempted to denote intentionally childless couples in neutral terms, referring

to their "variant lifestyles" and acknowledging that couples who choose childlessness "...place themselves beyond the moral pall of conventional society" (p. ix).

The limitations of our language create terms of absence and emptiness to denote those who eschew parenthood. Child-"less" insinuates absence of what could or should be, and deviance in this chosen path (Gillespie, 1999, 2000; Ireland, 1993; Lafayette, 1995; Lisle, 1996). Child-"free" suggests that someone has avoided or escaped an unpleasant experience, or otherwise shirked their adult responsibilities. Neither term is a fair representation of this life choice; neither infers adequacy in the face of difference.

One of my goals for this research was to ensure that I did justice to describing the lived experience of childless spouses and couples without contributing to the culture's dominant discourse of negative views of my participants' life choice. All research eventually enters cultural life with the capacity to alter or reinforce existing belief and language systems (Gergen, 1990; Gergen, 2001). Hence I reluctantly and cautiously used terms well-known in the child-"less" literature. I hoped that readers would, in the spirit of interpretive phenomenology, note their pre-understandings and pre-suppositions about these terms and allow for more neutral and fair interpretations. I was optimistic that at the conclusion of the research my participants would have co-created with me different means of symbolizing their life choice of voluntary childlessness. I listened carefully to their stories for different ways they might name themselves, hopeful that I could contribute alternative positive descriptors of childlessness for use in future research.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

In the previous chapter I presented an overview of the sociocultural and theoretical contexts of voluntary childlessness, and my rationale and purpose for this study. In the following discussion I review the scant literature pertaining to the lived experience of childlessness for married couples and spouses. This review is drawn from academic and scholarly research, as well as popular holdings that are authored by journalists and other non-academic writers. Few of these pieces focus exclusively on eliciting descriptions of individuals' daily lives. Most offer general commentaries on lifestyles of childless adults, their self-reflections about their childlessness and decision-making processes, and their coping behaviours within our pronatal society. Therefore to expand my review I have culled from broad reviews of childlessness any discussions more germane to my research focus on the lived experiences of childlessness. I have also incorporated authors' speculations about personal meanings of childlessness, regardless of whether these were gleaned from childless persons' reflections or more general conceptual and theoretical premises. Finally, where possible I describe the theoretical underpinnings of the extant literature, and any methodological challenges that indicate new directions for research.

In this chapter I first present reviews and key findings from some of the seminal explorations and discussions of voluntarily childless marriages. Although this literature is dated, being limited to respondent samples from the 1970's and 1980's, themes of meaning and common experience are reported because they came to comprise the original conceptualizations of voluntarily childless couples and lifestyles. I have also included two more recent but non-academic works regarding childfree marriage because they provide contemporary accounts of childless couples' lives. I then review a selection of academic and popular contemporary work exploring childless women's lives. Finally, the meager number of studies of intentionally childless men is presented.

Research on Voluntarily Childless Couples

One of the earliest scholarly explorations of childless marriage was presented by Nason and Poloma (1976), whose work was based on Veever's (1972, 1973) initial research on voluntary childlessness. These investigators used data from interview discussions with a nonrandom sample of 30 voluntarily childless couples. Spouses were interviewed separately and together by the two researchers, and data were merged to present each couple's case for analysis. Nason and Poloma reported on the decision-making process, that is, motives and process, and the level of commitment of couples to their childfree status. In most cases, couples' decisions to remain childless evolved during the marriage as they became busy in their career and social lives, and came to appreciate a lifestyle without children. Perceptions of social pressure to have children varied between couples by degree of commitment to their decision, as well as between men and women. Overall, these authors reported that their sample experienced less social pressure to conform to pervasive pronatal norms than suggested by Veevers.

Nason and Poloma's (1976) work exemplifies early work on childlessness. They inquire into the decision-making process, perceived advantages and disadvantages, that is, motives for choosing childlessness, and lifestyles of childlessness. They report the reflections and opinions of respondents about their childless status and coping as a minority in a pronatal society. Their findings are affirmed in subsequent work by Veevers (1980) and others who make similar inquiries into reproductive decision-making, opinions of childless status, and lifestyles. As with other qualitative inquiries, their sample was nonrandom. Moreover, their participants represented a new wave of family life in an era when social changes were rapid and general tolerance for variant family structures was increasing. As such, these couples formed a distinct cohort of a unique historical period of social change. Inferences about their experiences of childlessness cannot be generalized to contemporary couples, particularly since a new generation of potential parents has since come of age in yet another era of social change. However, Nason and Poloma

make the valid and timeless recommendation that future research on childlessness must view couples as the unit of study to uphold childless marriage as a valid family structure, and to ensure mens' views and experiences are incorporated into understanding childlessness.

Possibly the most influential work cited in popular and academic works as an authority on voluntary childlessness is sociologist Veevers' (1980) in-depth exploration of multiple facets of childlessness. Veever's work was a seminal effort to address the paucity of popular and academic interest in the resurgence of childlessness as a lifestyle choice during the 1970's. She successfully unveiled and articulated the "parenthood prescription" of our pronatal society that lauds parenthood as the ultimate achievement of adult maturity, identity formation, and self-actualization. Using widespread media appeals in the Toronto area, Veevers conducted semi-structured interviews with 120 childless wives and 36 childless husbands; 26 couples were interviewed together. She applied rigorous criteria to her screening process to include only couples who: were legally married for a minimum of five years, self-reported fecundity/use of birth-control, had no history of child-rearing or parenting experience, and were committed to a childless future.

Veevers (1980) collated her participants' expansive accounts of their childless choice, careers, relationships, and lifestyles. Her findings reflected a heterogeneous group of individuals and couples who were successfully negotiating a developmental path through adulthood that society perceived as deviant. Participants confirmed that they felt they were stigmatized by negative stereotypes and perceived as psychologically maladjusted, emotionally immature, immoral, selfish, lonely, unfulfilled, and unhappy. Contrary to these perceptions they reported instead that their lives were fulfilling and rich, and that they enjoyed spontaneity in their lifestyle activities and intimacy in their relationships.

Veevers' (1980) findings included some specific descriptions of the lived experience of her participants' childlessness. In particular, she distinguished types of coping strategies used by

her respondents as they negotiated their childless identities within the cultural parameters of the "parenthood prescription." She found that vulnerability to stigma and sanctions for choosing childlessness varied according to participants' stage in the life cycle and the particular sanctions enacted in individuals' social context. Overall, though, they tended to apply two coping styles: avoidance of confrontations and, positioning themselves as part of a counter-culture that rejects the parenthood prescription and justifies the childless choice. Evasive actions included strategies like choosing residential/geographic locations that assure anonymity and privacy (eg., urban settings), implying infertility instead of openly declaring choice as the cause for their childlessness, and conveying a temporary status about their childlessness.

The childless individuals in Veever's (1980) research also described lifestyle themes that were reported in other exploratory studies of childless women and couples (e.g., Burgwyn, 1981; Houseknecht, 1987). Veevers' respondents emphasized their freedom from routine and obligations because they were unencumbered by children's needs. They enjoyed the spontaneity of choosing activities and valued opportunities to pursue new experiences and to learn new things. The notion of personal development and growth was important, as they described goals for self-actualization that made their lives interesting and vibrant. The importance of work and career was also ranked highly for meaning-making in the lives of Veevers' participants; in particular, women described pursuit of occupational roles in career domains often dominated by men. Childless men, on the other hand, lauded childlessness as a release from the socially-endorsed role of breadwinner. They celebrated the freedom *from* work because of the flexibility of their childless state, while childless women moved into careers with the freedom *to* work.

Veevers (1980) also used examples from accounts of their daily living to describe three primary features of her respondents' marriages: high levels of intensity and intimacy, a high level of marital morale, and egalitarian roles. Childless marriages afforded these spouses the unique opportunity to devote their affective and lifestyle commitments solely to one another. Veevers

referred to these relationships as a "reference group of one" in which spouses relied exclusively on one another for support and validation of their childless choice. Veevers concluded that childless couples enjoy positive marriages because they are childless, not in spite of being childless.

Veevers' (1980) work succeeded in explicating the phenomena of childlessness in the 1970's and early 1980's. Her exhaustive description of participants' decision-making processes, lifestyles, and coping provided an initial glimpse into the lived experience of childlessness. However, Veevers did not attempt to answer a specific research question, nor did she investigate how voluntarily childless adults lived with and made sense of their childlessness. Rather, she attempted the somewhat ambiguous task of seeking information that "allowed closer approximation of the version of reality constructed by the subjects themselves" (p. 178). She then categorized her participants' data and declared themes describing their lifestyles, relationships, coping, and reproductive decision-making. A second shortcoming of her work is the use of non-random sampling procedures that generated an unrepresentative sample of childless adults: they were predominantly urban, well-educated, upper-middle class, and not religious. They were also exclusively white and of long-term marriages in which almost all spouses were employed.

A third limitation to this expansive work was Veevers' failure to clearly distinguish findings as they were revealed by men, women, or couples who were interviewed together. Instead, she reports results in general terms for childless adults and concludes that they comprise a heterogeneous group about whom few generalizations can be made. In doing so she has possibly obscured differences in lived experience between spouses.

Following Veevers' (1980) landmark study on childless individuals and couples, Burgwyn (1981) published an extensive treatise on childless marriage for a nonacademic or popular readership. She interviewed "roughly one hundred" (p. xiv) childless individuals of

varied marital status who ranged in age from their mid-twenties to 90 years old. Burgwyn solicited her large purposive sample through personal friends, social networks, referrals from professionals, and members of organizations advocating the childless choice. An undisclosed number of interviews were conducted with married couples together, with spouses separately, or at times with only a husband or wife. Divorced adults were interviewed without collaborating interviews with former spouses. In some cases of voluntarily childless marriages, Burgwyn interviewed couples when one spouse had grown children from a former relationship.

Burgwyn (1981) used unstructured interviews to solicit stories of her respondents' lives without children. Her goal was to identify trends and patterns across stories, despite demographic differences among her respondents. She merged her respondents' reflections on childlessness with discussions about the dominant discourse of parenthood, gender role expectations, and social norms of adult development and identity formation. Unfortunately, data from conjoint interviews with married spouses is not distinguished from data collected during individual spousal interviews, nor are findings for married couples discussed separately from individuals with differing marital status (never-married, divorced, widowed). Nonetheless, Burgwyn reports motives for childlessness (e.g., diminished ideals of family life, freedom in lifestyle, expanded opportunities for women), decision-making patterns (e.g., early deciders, postponers), and perceptions of stigmatizing stereotypes of childlessness. Burgwyn also presented some ideas about the personal meaning of childlessness. She suggested that "childlessness is a complex and fluid state" that is experienced differently at different times across the lifespan with the childless choice being a dynamic meaning-making process in couples' lives. Unfortunately Burgwyn does not further develop this proposition about meaning.

Burgwyn's (1981) contribution to the childless literature is one of few that focuses on childless marriage. However, the variability in her sample (e.g., age, marital status, former step-parenting experience, etc.) obscures results that specifically reflect the experiences of intentional

childlessness for married couples. Further, like Veevers (1980) she used a purposive sample from which results cannot be generalized to the larger population of childless couples. Nonetheless, Burgwyn's findings were important because they largely affirmed findings from Veevers (1980) and Nason and Paloma's (1976) exploratory work on childlessness. In terms of methodology, Burgwyn did not aspire to produce a scholarly piece of research that is underpinned by a particular research paradigm. Instead, this work provided a readable and positive description of voluntary childless couples' lives that was relevant to its historical period. However, the cohort effects of Burgwyn's sample renders her work dated and possibly less relevant to a contemporary understanding of childless couples.

During this early phase of burgeoning research on childlessness, Bram (1989) condensed her findings from her previous research on voluntary childlessness (1984, 1985) into a brief commentary on the lives of four American couples who chose childlessness. She presented her findings according to the prevalent themes around which these couples organized their lives. Themes included religious ideals, love of nature and active lifestyles, career, and adventure/exploration of life opportunities. Bram described how voluntarily childless couples actively pursue meaning in their lives by creating unique lifestyles unlike those depicted by social stereotypes of childless adults. She claimed that the couples in her sample were actively pursuing some form of self-actualization, they valued creativity and achievement, they sought egalitarianism in their relationships, and they embraced nontraditional sex roles in their lifestyles. In particular, Bram concluded that childless couples sought a transcendent purpose in their lives - a sense of immortality or continuity of self over time and space. She compared their pursuit to parents who achieve this end by bearing and raising children.

Although Bram's (1989) conclusions about meaning-making are intriguing they may reflect more Bram's perspective and interpretive processes than those of her respondents. Also, she does not indicate whether she presented her speculation about transcendent purpose to her

participants for confirmation of accuracy or fit with their actual lived experience or meanings of childlessness. Furthermore, Bram did not explain how or why she selected the four couples from her prior longitudinal research project of a larger sample of voluntarily childless couples (1985). As a result, it is unclear how representative these couples are of Bram's original sample, particularly in terms of the prevalence of the four themes discerned by Bram. Nonetheless, Bram's brief description of intentionally childless couples' lives provides some unique observations about the lifestyles and sense of purpose in these couples' lives. Although the sample and research findings date to the 1970's and 1980's, the notion of immortality as defined by Bram is a universal and timeless construct that may be of ongoing relevance to childless couples in our current era.

In contrast to Bram's (1989) focus on the lifestyles and quest for immortality of voluntarily childless couples, Marshall (1993) embarked on an exploration of voluntarily childless couples' lives from a sociological perspective. Her work presents an extensive theoretical treatise on ideology - the ideology of parenthood in particular, along with reports of couples' perceptions of childlessness. Her approach differed substantially from the descriptive work of other writers intrigued with such couples. First, she invited her voluntarily childless participants to describe and explore their experience of a prevailing ideology of parenthood. She then invited them to describe how they "confront and negotiate ideology" in their daily lives.

Marshall's (1993) inquiry applied a combined quantitative and qualitative method. Using word-of-mouth through social networks she commenced her study by soliciting intentionally childless couples to participate in interviews. Although her interview data comprise the basis of her study, she incorporated questionnaire data from 97 voluntarily childless couples who responded to media coverage of her study. Descriptive statistics were applied to present an overview of demographic characteristics of this sample, as well as their perceptions and attitudes towards childlessness and marriage, and motives for choosing childlessness. Marshall presented

these descriptive statistics as a portrait of this self-selected sample of voluntarily childless adults, but did not incorporate them into further analyses. Just over half of the survey respondents were comprised of professional/managerial workers, 25% were in clerical and sales positions, and 10% were in skilled and semiskilled occupations. Almost half had postgraduate educations, 37% had diplomas, 7% worked in the trades, and 21% had completed high school. Over 90% of respondents indicated high job satisfaction, and 96% confirmed that they invested moderate or significant energy into their jobs. Overall, 82% confirmed that their jobs were important. With respect to quality of marriage, 73% of respondents stated that there was equal power in their marriages and a high degree of marital satisfaction.

In the qualitative portion of her study, Marshall (1993) applied a longitudinal design during which she interviewed voluntarily childless couples up to four times across a span of five years. She solicited her sample of eleven couples through a network of friends and word-of-mouth. The interviews followed a schedule with structured questions and probes. Marshall indicates that she attempted to accommodate topics that arose in the interview discussions that were not included in her schedule and to follow themes that her participants raised. Although the interviews were structured, there was also some flexibility in the order of questions and emphases placed on different topics.

For the first interview Marshall (1993) met separately with each partner but asked the same interview questions. After one year, she conducted a second, conjoint interview with each couple. By then, her sample size had decreased from eleven to seven intact couples; one couple had had children, one wife had decided she wanted children, and three couples had separated. Between 18 and 24 months later she again met with couples for a conjoint interview. At that time, one couple was disputing their childless choice, and Marshall added to her study two formerly married childless women. In this final interview Marshall asked her participants to make lists of their social networks, to diagram those networks, and to describe the characteristics

of people in their networks. She also invited them to draw their views of the world and their views of how people decide upon parenthood or childlessness. Finally, she recorded their comments about cartoons on the subject.

Marshall's (1993) data analysis was centred on interview texts from which she attempted to discern categories of themes, as well as to separate out answers to particular questions. She created category headings under which she assigned and reassigned illustrative examples of interview text. Marshall characterizes her approach to data analysis as a modification of grounded theory. Since her goal was to monitor how couples negotiate with the culturally prevalent parenthood ideology over time, she used her longitudinal design to take insights from analysis of interview texts, and to apply them as conceptual frameworks for understanding material arising in subsequent interviews.

Marshall's (1993) respondents described their daily interactions within their pronatal social milieu. Findings reflected individual differences in how childless couples responded to pressure to become parents. There was consensus that sources of pressure include families, friends, peers, and work peers, as well as media and socialization experiences from childhood. Couples reflected on their daily awareness of being different from parenting peers, of some "tormenting" and friction in friendships resulting from their nonparenthood decisions, and occasional ridicule from strangers. However, the felt experience of pressure was highly variable, ranging from mild irritation to hurt from stigma and derogatory assumptions about childless persons' characters.

Couples in Marshall's (1993) study also reported that over time (e.g., the length of marriage, age) they encountered fewer inquiries and comments about their childless state. Social location of career and residence also accounted for differences in felt pressure; persons pursuing fairly conformist employment in suburbia appeared to be more affected by concomitant pressure to "fit in" with their social and physical surrounds by having families. Marshall reported that her

childless couples coped with their difference by establishing networks of nonoppositional acquaintances and those who supported their decisions. They also described a litany of interpersonal and linguistic coping skills, and attitudinal or ideological perspectives that helped to offset social stigma.

Contrary to Veevers' (1980) descriptions of the social isolation of childless couples, Marshall's (1993) respondents did not perceive themselves as lonely dyads. Spouses were not each other's only source of support in their respective childlessness. On the basis of these findings Marshall concluded that childless couples "cannot be seen as beleaguered couples, desperately resisting social pressure towards parenthood" (p. 135). She presumed that voluntarily childless couples avoid a generally oppositional stance against the dominant discourse by choosing the elements of that discourse as rationale to support their choice to forgo parenthood. In this way, they acknowledge and live their lives within the parameters of the discourse, without fully rejecting it and standing outside of it.

In her research Marshall (1993) did not elicit or describe the personal meaning of childlessness as it is experienced in ordinary living. Instead, Marshall inferred from her findings that childlessness is "as much a state of becoming as a state of being" (p.138), but she did not explore the meaning inherent in this presumed state. Her conclusions emphasize that the meaning of parenthood and childlessness is socially constructed, and that a psychological understanding of childlessness is inadequate. She maintains that childless couples are embedded in, and therefore contribute to, the cultural meaning of childlessness. She thus equates social meaning to personal meaning.

A basic critical consideration of Marshall's research derives from her own contentions about the historical location of discourse. Since her research was conducted between 1979 and 1984 there is a specific cohort effect of her data that limits generalization of her findings to contemporary times. Another weakness of her research derives from her method. The ongoing

evolution of research design during Marshall's study, her inconsistent treatment of interview texts, and her changing sample size across the longitudinal design, all weaken claims of rigour for her analysis and findings. Also, although Marshall's data were rich and included an array of intriguing information, Marshall does not indicate her rationale for soliciting non-interview data (e.g., drawings, diagrams, lists of names in social networks). Finally, Marshall's presentation of qualitative and quantitative findings do not fully complement each other, and she relies almost exclusively on her analysis of interview texts from a very small sample to present her interpretations of how voluntarily childless couples appear to negotiate a parenthood ideology.

Although Marshall's (1993) work features a complex and varied method, her findings still make a significant contribution to the childless literature. Possibly her most important observation is that couples "do not stand outside the ideology of parenthood...they are located within it" (p. 138). Their motives for remaining childless derive from their appreciation of the social expectations of parenthood, that is, sacrifices of time, energy, pleasure, and identity. In other words, her couples demonstrated a "reverse discourse" similar to that described by Morrell (1994) in which childless adults describe their experiences and decisions as a counterpoint to the dominant discourse. Based on her findings, Marshall also suggests that childfree couples may experience the dominant ideology of parenthood differently across time. They apply a range of coping techniques to deflect negative attention away from their choice. Overall, Marshall stresses that childfree adults live their lives with "individual agency" in the context of "structural constraint" (p. 141). She concludes that adults choosing childlessness engage in continual creation and negotiation of "personal cultures" (Heidmets, cited in Brandtstadter) within the dominant culture of pronatalism.

Leslie Lafayette (1995) offers a popular commentary on intentional childlessness in the 1990's that also critiques the prevailing ideology of parenthood identified by Marshall (1993). Lafayette is the founder of the American Childfree Network, and a popular figure advocating the

childless choice. In her book she extols the potential for nonparents to explore, grow, produce, and contribute to society in ways other than responsible parenthood. The data base from which she draws examples of childfree living are survey results provided by members of her childfree organization. She merges accounts of childfree living as described in her organization's membership survey results, with her own positive views of intentional childlessness and anecdotes of childless living from her own and others' lives. She focuses much of her discussion on childfree lifestyles, which she describes in terms of activities and interests ranging from individual creative or career-oriented pursuits, to others in the domains of community, religion, politics, environment, and social relations. Lafayette infers from her survey data and anecdotal accounts that voluntarily childless adults actively pursue more opportunities than parents to better themselves through education, and that they have more freedom to take career risks. Lafayette also contends that childfree couples enjoy relationships of enhanced intimacy and commitment. She thus presents the lives of childfree individuals as colourful, varied, rich, and rewarding with ample opportunity for spontaneous change and/or long-term commitments to one's chosen interests.

Despite the positive lifestyle features of childless couples, Lafayette affirms that couples must take the initiative to forge relationships with similar childless others. She maintains that the minority status of these couples in our pronatal society places them at risk of social isolation and loss of former friends. She also challenges the social discourses of parenthood that she maintains privilege parents with taxation benefits and provide them with flexible and ostensibly reduced workplace responsibilities. Unlike Marshall's (1993) work on ideology, however, Lafayette applies her own observations and interpretations of social discourses of parenthood without reference to research findings that explore the meanings and manifestations of a parenthood ideology.

Lafayette clearly declares in her book that she assumes a political and social position from which she actively defends and promotes intentional childlessness as a desirable and socially acceptable life choice. Hence she presents an exclusively positive depiction of childless persons' lives which may not represent the lived experience of the larger population of intentionally childless adults. Nonetheless, Lafayette's summaries of lifestyle themes is not inconsistent with those reported in other research describing voluntary childlessness (Burgwyn, 1981; Bartlett, 1994). She does not, however, present insights into the actual daily lives of her members, nor into the meaning they ascribe to their childless choice.

In another recent account of childfree marriage, Carroll (2000) presents a positive overview of lifestyle attributes and relationship characteristics of fifteen childless married couples. Carroll's book was the outcome of her own investigations into the childless choice, and her efforts to "learn about road maps for lifelong marriage without children." Her search for "road maps" revealed little information about contemporary childfree marriages and her social circle contained no childless couples with whom she could feel connected to by virtue of her reproductive choice. Carroll's work attempted to address the dearth of information in the popular literature about childfree marriage. She placed newspaper advertisements in several American cities where she travelled to conduct interviews. She sought couples who had no children from their current or previous relationships, and had chosen not to have children. She also attempted to recruit prospective interviewees through word-of-mouth contacts. She received over 100 telephone calls from interested respondents. Despite efforts to recruit respondents from different ethnic backgrounds, she received very little response to newspaper ads with ethnic readerships.

Carroll met with thirty married couples in California, New York, and Connecticut where most of her respondents resided. She conducted all thirty interviews using "most of the same questions" in all interviews. From those thirty interviews she selected fifteen which she believed were most representative of what was said by the other respondents. Although she states that all

couples interviewed for the project were from a "wide range of backgrounds," she does not specify the demographics of her sample.

Carroll briefly summarized her impressions of her participants' marriages with descriptions of their married lives and the quality of their marital bonds. She noted that her sample was a diverse group who nonetheless featured several similarities with regard to their childless choice. Contrary to social stereotypes that childless adults are irresponsible, she noted that the couples in her sample very carefully reflected on their reproductive decision-making. She also noted that these adults were leading mature and responsible lives in mainstream society. Carroll reported that almost all of her participants sought ways to influence the next generation of children through either work or extended family relationships. She found no evidence that these couples rejected children. Rather, they indicated that they simply did not want childbearing and childrearing to be the main themes of their lives. They confirmed that their marriages were the central priorities in their lives.

The couples in Carroll's project expressed their valuing of freedom and independence and believed that parenthood would have curtailed these aspects of their daily living. Instead, they asserted their need to live their lives as they wanted, and voiced their disinterest in social opinions about their childless choice and their lifestyles. They also explained their desire to make a difference in the lives of others and to the environment. Overall, Carroll concluded that the couples in her study were committed to self-awareness, self-development, and living a meaningful life. The childless choice was reportedly an important means of furthering these goals.

Carroll's book provides insights into the lives of several childless couples, using photos and detailed quotations of her participants' answers to interview questions. The purpose of the project was not, however, to distill statements of meaning or to explore in-depth how couples experience their childless choice in a pronatal culture. Similar to LaFayette's (1999) work,

Carroll has presented a very positive account of childless marriage which was not intended to explore the psychological aspects of childless from any methodological or theoretical positions. The absence of any negative accounts or descriptions of the challenges unique to the childless choice, limits the degree to which her participants' experiences may represent those of other voluntarily childless adults. Importantly, however, Carroll has reported lifestyle themes and values that are featured consistently in other research on childless couples and women: valuing of freedom and independence, expression of a social conscience, disregard for social opinions of the childless choice, involvement in children's lives, and a variety of friendship patterns (Burgwyn, 1981; Bartlett, 1994; Ireland, 1993; Lafayette, 1995; Lisle, 1996).

Research on Voluntarily Childless Women

The substantial majority of academic and popular literature describing childlessness focuses on women. This material initially emerged in the 1970's and 1980's as commentary on changes in family structure and gender role expectations that were galvanized in part by the feminist movement. This era hosted a second wave of feminism that championed women's rights to seek out alternative identities beyond motherhood in the public and cultural spheres. Feminist activists and scholars rigorously challenged the cultural myth of maternal instinct in efforts to reduce idealization of motherhood as critical to women's selfhood (Daniluk, 1999; Gergen, 1990; Ireland, 1993; Lisle, 1996; Morrell, 1994; Veevers, 1980). Reproductive freedom from widely available birth control further supported the feminist cause of releasing women from the traditional definitions of "woman equals maternity" (Ireland). Popular concern about increasing world population also contributed to making intentional childlessness a socially acceptable variant form of family and adult life (Veevers).

Media and journalists' interest in the increasing numbers of childfree women and couples has reflected the public's growing interest in the childless choice since the 1970's. Several of these non-academic publications have elaborated on women's lived experience of childlessness

in an anecdotal and descriptive tradition that presents women's lives in work, relationships, culture, and community (e.g., Casey, 1998; Reti, 1992). A parallel but less intense momentum of academic interest in the topic also appeared in the 1970's in the disciplines of sociology and social psychology. However, with few exceptions (e.g., Bram, 1984; Gillespie, 2000, 1999; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994) there has been little formal scholarly or scientific exploration of the lived experience of childless women that might illuminate the meanings of this life path. A large body of scholarly research has instead identified trends in childlessness (e.g., Abma & Pederson, 1995), and explored the psychosocial variables predicting, motivating and maintaining women's decisions to choose childlessness (e.g., Houseknecht, 1987; Rovi, 1994). Hence the popular literature provides the richest insights into the lives of childless women and is most relevant to the present study. Following reviews of some popular works I discuss the scant body of academically-oriented research that provides some glimpses into the meaning of childlessness for women.

One prominent work in the popular literature about non-mothers is Bartlett's (1994) exploration of "what it is like to not become a mother" (p. x) . Bartlett reports the results of 50 interviews with childless women ages 22 to 75, across different socioeconomic classes, and of different sexual orientation and marital status. She solicited her sample through media appeals and first distributed a questionnaire to participants, followed by unstructured interviews in which she attempted to "uncover a broader understanding of what it means to be child-free" (p. xiii) . She locates her inquiry in a contextual discussion of pronatal cultural and Judeo-Christian values, the socialization of women, stereotypes of mothering and non-mothering, and attitudes towards childlessness. Bartlett reiterates the culturally entrenched binary view of the lived experience of childless women: the "sad spinster" and the "neurotic career bitch" (p. 14), both of whom suffer relentless social pressure to marry and reproduce. Despite the emergence of childlessness as a viable life choice, Bartlett asserts that established psychological and sociological interpretations

of womanhood are still manifest in social discourse; mature female adult identity is equated almost exclusively with maternity (e.g., Erikson, 1997).

Bartlett's (1994) interviewees revealed many meaning-themes related to their voluntary childlessness. Most confirmed that their social experience of the childless choice frequently meant isolation, in part due to separation from mothering peers and loss of former friendship bonds when most of the women in their lives pursued childbearing and childrearing. Nonetheless, many of her respondents challenged the "maternal myth" (Veevers, 1980). They discounted the veracity of a mothering instinct and expressed ambivalence towards pregnancy and childbirth as a naturally desirable experience. Some respondents saw their childlessness as success in achieving an identity that distinguished them clearly from their mothers; childless meant being unlike mother. Others professed their unsuitability for parenting. Childlessness afforded them relief that they would not regret having children or have to live out worries of being inadequate parents. For these women, not having children meant being free to realize their potential and to form their identity in other domains of personal and public life. Many of Bartlett's participants sought contact with children for enjoyment in non-maternal capacities, thus allowing for a different form of contribution to another generation. Some women searched for alternative means of creating a legacy of meaning after death. For others, leaving an enduring contribution to the next generation was insignificant. Instead, they focused on personal growth and living their daily lives.

Based on her findings, Bartlett (1994) concurs with other writers (e.g., Lisle, 1996; Morell, 1994) that the personal meaning of childlessness changes across the lifespan, and is especially profound at menopause. At this time many childless women appear to conduct melancholic stock-taking of their lives, consider time remaining and old age, and query the wisdom of their childless decision. However, most of Bartlett's participants discounted social stereotypes of the meanings of childlessness in old age. Few anticipated inevitable loneliness and

regret, and almost all anticipated building networks of close relationships for future years of comfort and enjoyment. Regret was reframed by her women respondents as occasional wistfulness. The childless choice was viewed as just one from among many of life's possibilities.

Bartlett (1994) also reveals insights into childless women's relationships, and the lifestyles, meaning, and gender roles among these couples. She echoes other writers (e.g., Lisle, 1996) who affirm that childless women inhabit both the "margins" and mainstream of marital relationships. By declining parenthood, women are free to enter a range of relationships that meet diverse needs, and which may or may not include marriage. Her married respondents highly valued their relationships and described them in terms of intimacy, harmony, spontaneity, egalitarian gender roles, and interdependence. They also reported a theme of mutual commitment with their spouses to the childless decision. Bartlett's respondents confirmed that their marriages were the most important context for affirming and respecting personal meanings of childlessness (e.g., opportunities for personal growth, desire for intimacy). Finally, Bartlett explored the meaning of work and career among her childless participants. Consistent with other studies of childless women (e.g., Veevers, 1980), women in her sample described vibrant vocational pursuits that fulfilled creative interests and realized their talents. Similarly, they found meaning in a wide range of leisure activities and public service roles.

Bartlett's (1994) work is a rich composite of childless women's stories that reveals insights into many aspects of their lives, and some meaning-themes about childlessness. However, the work has some shortcomings that reflect her non-scholarly approach to the topic. In particular, Bartlett was committed to presenting a favourable view of childlessness so she does not report the diversity of lived experience that might characterize other childless women's accounts. Also, Bartlett's respondents were all apparently well-adjusted and successful women who likely were not representative of all childless women. Finally, Bartlett did not expressly seek out meaning in terms of women's ordinary daily living. Her book is focussed on celebrating

the childless life choice, and so presents positive self-reflections and experiences without delving into underlying processes of meaning-making, both positive and negative.

Laurie Lisle (1996) made a unique contribution to the popular literature on childless women. In her thoroughly researched work, Lisle provides a lengthy defense of women who by choice or chance, are not mothers. The emphasis of this work is on seeking and defining ways in which childlessness can enhance women's lives, their families, and the communities in which they live. Lisle draws on history, literature, religion, sociology, and psychology to weave a rich and positive account of childlessness through the ages in Western culture. Throughout the book she presents her own life story and details of her journey towards the childless choice. She thus offers a thoughtful and provocative challenge to the stigma that denigrates childless women, a challenge comprised of a positive and multi-faceted account of non-motherhood.

Lisle (1996) traces the venerable history of childless women in our culture and notes that there are few remaining images of enriched and satisfied women outside of motherhood in contemporary times. Like Bartlett (1994) she notes the lack of language to name or describe childlessness, and the negative expressions that apply more often to childless women than childless men. Regardless of the feminist movement and expanded views of what constitutes "family" life, Lisle joins other feminist writers and scholars (e.g., Bartlett; Gillespie, 1999) who emphasize that the pronatal ideology of our culture remains a powerful determinant of how society views childless women.

Lisle (1996) explores several dimensions of women's lives without children, commencing with a discussion of the social expectations and psychological dynamics of reproductive choice. She elaborates on the factors that complicate women's decisions to pursue motherhood: career, pursuit of creative endeavours, individuation, and desire for freedom. Lisle retains in this discussion of the dynamics of reproductive choice an astute awareness that whatever path women choose, social space opens between mothers and non-mothers-space that reflects the

ambivalence with which these women regard each other. Lisle also delves into the social meanings of motherhood and women's experiences of daughterhood in relation to the childless choice. To Lisle's credit, at no point does she idealize or denigrate either reproductive choice. Her accounts of mothering experiences are presented as a thoughtful counterpoint to the experiences of childless women. She thus successfully presents both motherhood and non-motherhood as valid and fulfilling life choices.

Lisle (1996) also attempts to present a sense of heritage and historical perspective with which women can contextualize and appreciate the childless choice. She expounds on historical female figures in literature and life who together constitute a veritable kaleidoscope of images and portraits of childlessness. Lisle presents these figures as models of strength and diversity from which contemporary childless women can draw assurance about their childless choice. She also expounds on social change and pronatal discourse as it has waxed and waned throughout the 20th century, and its pressures on the "either/or" choice of motherhood. In her discussion of pronatal discourse, she cites research that helps to debunk the myth of a maternal instinct and concludes that "maternity appears to be more a social than a biological construct" (p. 100). Lisle searches for ways in which femininity or womanliness can be defined outside of motherhood. She explores the culturally-defined links between sexuality and procreativity, and the cultural teachings that disparage nonmaternal eroticism. Lisle encourages childless women to utilize their physical energy, sexuality, and endurance in any manner that expresses their strength, sensuality, and energy. Childless women's relationships with friends and with the natural world are also means by which they can discover and express different facets of their femininity.

The unlived life of motherhood and fantasies of unborn children are commonly-expressed facets of childlessness that Lisle (1996) explores in her work. She gives voice to these quiet fantasies by describing the "idealized rapport" (p. 117) with an imagined child expressed by mothers in literature and by herself and her female friends. However, Lisle also celebrates

women's capacity to actively enter into children's worlds through relationships or through creative endeavours like writing and visual art. Imagined relationships with children can thus be transformed into realistic fulfilling contacts and contributions to the next generation. In her discussion of the role of work in childless women's lives, Lisle describes the demands of creative and academic work that women may view as incompatible with the demands of motherhood. The choice of nonmotherhood places these women at risk of accusations that they are self-centred. Lisle argues that childless women ought not to feel obligated to assume social mothering roles to compensate for their non-motherhood status. They should feel free through work and other life projects "to pursue activities for the sake of satisfaction, gain, influence or altruism" (p. 214) outside of motherhood.

Relationships between childless women and their male partners comprise a significant topic of discussion in Lisle's (1996) work, as she notes men's challenges to define their childlessness within the context of changing social expectations of fatherhood and marriage. This discussion is intended to cast non-fatherhood in a positive light and to encourage more inquiry into men's experiences of childlessness. Finally, Lisle devotes a portion of her discussion to childless women's apprehension about the future and their desire to create a meaningful legacy. She comments on common fears of loneliness and vulnerability in old age, and cites research indicating that childlessness is not directly related to well-being among the childless elderly. Rather than focussing on the unknowable future, Lisle celebrates the opportunities of childless women to relish the rewards of careers and happy relationships. She concludes that women's reproductive choice does not determine the potential for fulfillment and satisfaction in living. Rather, she suggests that "life-generating and life-enhancing forces are morally equivalent" (p. 245).

Lisle's (1996) work is a rich composite of materials that illuminates the many dimensions of childlessness that are highlighted in feminist writings on childlessness (e.g., Bartlett, 1994;

Gillespie, 1999; Ireland, 1993; Safer, 1996). Although this is not an academic presentation of childlessness that derives from formal research, Lisle's meticulous research and incorporation of materials from a wide range of resources renders her work a very readable yet scholarly exploration of childlessness. However, this account of childlessness does not include the voices of childless women, and Lisle relies almost exclusively on her own lived experience as a foundation upon which to structure her discussion. She also makes indirect references to women's voices as they have been recorded in academic research. However, at times Lisle's discussions of academic research findings (e.g., reproductive decision-making, motherhood) are obscured by material derived from women's literature and letters, and from descriptions of myths and archetypes. As a result, the work is not a particularly concise or reliable representation of the research literature or findings from studies of childlessness. Lisle also does not pose or answer a particular research question. On the other hand, her general approach to illuminating the many facets of childlessness provides an exceptional overview of the historical and contemporary cultural meanings of childlessness.

In another popular work exploring women's voluntary childlessness, psychoanalyst Jean Safer (1996) interviewed 50 women ranging in age from 22 to 72. She solicited her participants in part by public response to an article she published in 1989 in a widely-read New York publication, as well as through social and professional networks. The majority of women in her sample had made a conscious decision not to have a family; a small group of younger women were still ambivalent but indicated an increasing likelihood of remaining childless. All sample members had men in their lives and none had known medical conditions that would preclude pregnancy; hence, all appeared to have been able to become mothers if they desired. Most of the women were white but an undisclosed number were Asian, Hispanic, and black. The majority of her research respondents were middle-class professionals; many had careers in the arts while others were also secretaries, lawyers, and nurses. Most participants were from urban centres,

with some living in suburbs or small towns. A small sub-group of her respondents were the only childless women in their communities. Safer reports that some of the women had been in psychotherapy, in part to discuss their thoughts and feelings about having children. The age at which most of the women in her study decided to remain childfree ranged from four to 45-plus. Safer claims that her sample of professional, well-educated, and middle-class women from predominantly urban areas closely represents the demographic characteristics associated with the larger population of childless women in America.

Similar to Bartlett's (1994) investigation, the underlying premise of Safer's (1999) work is that "motherhood is no longer a necessary nor a sufficient condition for maturity or fulfillment" (p. 3). She maintains that childless women want a respectful audience for stories of their alternate life paths. In their lifestyle descriptions her participants spoke of the peace and quiet, the spontaneity and control they enjoyed in their daily living. Rejecting parenthood allowed these women to view life as a plethora of opportunities for self-development and achievement of important personal goals; to these women childlessness meant freedom and independence. These non-mothers reinforced their self-concepts as responsible and thoughtful adults who took seriously the implications of parenthood, as well as those associated with coping in a strongly pronatal society. Some participants described their naturally defensive postures in response to the socially imposed meanings of childlessness. Willingness to justify their choice and to remain unperturbed in their decision was key to coping in the dominant culture of parenthood. Based on the stories of the women she interviewed, Safer indicates that stalwart commitment to childlessness is a source of pride and personal integrity for many non-mothers.

With respect to relationships, Safer's (1996) women declared marital happiness underpinned by shared commitment to both mutuality and independence. Choosing childlessness assured these women of uninterrupted intimacy with their partners. Safer's work illustrates how these childless couples forged shared identities through mutual projects or by supporting each

others' individual pursuits. On the other hand, her women respondents claimed that forging individual identities as not-mothers was often more difficult. All women were challenged to construct identities by distinguishing maternity from womanhood, and maternity from sexuality. These women resisted denigrating social meanings of intentional childlessness conveyed by family, friends, and even strangers who implied they were selfish, characterologically flawed, and child-haters. Safer clearly illustrates how the meaning of childlessness for these women was inevitably cast from a place of contrariness, defensiveness, and resistance to a derogatory discourse of childlessness. Some women more than others were able over time to transcend negative social stereotypes and refused to internalize or engage in rebutting them. Consistent with the work of Gillespie (2000) these women perceived themselves not as "childless" but as "other than mother" (p. 359).

In terms of aging and potential regrets about their childlessness, Safer's (1996) respondents generally denied such stereotyped concerns. Instead, these not-mothers described limitations across their lifespans because of their choice to be different. They recognized that because their needs and priorities were contrary to those of most women, their freedom exacted certain costs. Safer suggests that childless women appear to negotiate their reproductive difference at all stages in their lives. She maintains that old age is no more or less challenging to the self-concept and life purpose of childless women. Coming to terms with the choice to remain childfree appears to involve a meaning-making process that provides not-mothers a depth of perspective on themselves, their relationships, and the constraints and opportunities afforded by their choice - regardless of their age.

Safer's (1996) presentation of women's reflections on their voluntary childlessness is somewhat limited in scope, however. For example, she emphasizes the decision-making process of choosing childlessness but limits the discussion of motives or rationales for this choice to personality factors and family of origin dynamics. She also extrapolates from her participants'

reflections on their intimate relationships to create some general descriptions of childless couples' relationships without consideration of gender differences in perspective or lived experiences. Moreover, as did Bartlett (1994) in her discussion of voluntarily childless women, Safer limited her presentation to positive accounts of successful adjustment to living within the constraints of the cultural pronatal discourse. An additional shortcoming of Safer's work is that she did not indicate how she analyzed her participants' interview texts. Rather than the product of extensive analysis, this work impresses as a compilation of anecdotes from the author's life and those of her participants. Therefore Safer's findings do not reveal insights into voluntary childlessness that expand or elaborate upon prior research findings, in part because she did not attempt to discern the meaning of choosing childlessness for her sample of women. Nonetheless, since Safer approached the subject of voluntary childlessness without intentions of conducting a scholarly piece of research, she created instead an enthusiastic and readable account of intentional childlessness as a viable alternative to maternity. Her work makes an important contribution to the popular literature on intentional childlessness because it is accessible to a general readership who may be seeking insights into intentional childlessness that derive from voices of women who have made that choice.

In addition to the popular work on the topic of intentionally childless women, there is a small body of literature that is grounded in scholarly discussions of psychological and feminist theories of women's development and social discourses of motherhood. Ireland (1993) and Morell (1994) assert that there are no normative female identities for women who choose childlessness. Both writers attempt to construct alternate theories or conceptualizations of womanhood, exclusive of maternity. Gillespie (2000) explores how childless women experience and negotiate the dominant discourse of pronatalism. Their work will be reviewed in detail below.

Ireland (1993) interviewed 102 childless women from a pool of over 300 childless women who responded to a media call in 1988 to participate in her research study. These women completed a screening survey to identify membership in three groups: childless by choice (39 transformative women), childless by delay (32 transitional women), and childless by infertility or health problems (31 traditional women). On the screening questionnaire, transformative women highly ranked items indicating they made a deliberate choice to remain childless. Transitional women were those who gave high rankings to items indicating that circumstances had created delays in reproductive decision-making. Women who endorsed items pertaining to physical or medical conditions that precluded pregnancy were assigned to the traditional group. The total sample included 64 women from primarily professional occupations, as well as 32 nonprofessionals, nine unemployed, and seven students. Among the transformative and transitional childless women, there were 40 professionals, 20 nonprofessionals, five students, and six unemployed. Only 16 of the 71 voluntarily childless women were non-Caucasian. Twenty-four were married, 11 were cohabiting, and 36 were single. Ireland noted that all of her respondents were members of the baby boom generation, ranging in age from 38 to 50.

Prior to commencing the research interview, each of Ireland's (1993) respondents completed the Bem Sex Role Inventory as well as a questionnaire requesting demographic information. Data from the Bem instrument were submitted to chi-square analysis to determine whether women in the different groups exhibited differing sex-role orientation. Results indicated that transformative women more often demonstrated a masculine or undifferentiated sex role. Transitional women, or those who delayed their parenthood decision-making, exhibited an androgynous orientation. Finally, women who wanted but were unable to have children, displayed a feminine sex role orientation more often than did all the voluntarily childless women.

Transcribed interview texts were the principal data source in Ireland's (1993) research. All respondents participated in an in-depth, focused interview with the principal researcher. The

interview structure was maintained across all interviews by consistency of questions that allowed exploration of the same topic areas. Ireland (1993) analyzed interview data by separating interview texts for women into her three designated groups. Her goal was to describe her respondents' experiences of the three "pathways to an adult identity" (p. 14), their primary relationships (family, spouses, friends), and their creative labours (the qualities and meaning of work).

Although much of her discussion is concerned with psychological theorizing of women's identity development, Ireland (1993) reported on some lived experiences and meaning-making processes of her research participants. She explored the social meanings of absence, inadequacy, and emptiness often ascribed to childlessness, and emphasized the myriad ways in which her participants' lives debunked these disparaging assumptions about childless women. On the basis of her findings, she also rebuts assumptions that not-mothers are incapable of sustaining deep relationships and that they devote their complete selves to work. She argues that women's creative capacities need not be limited to conception and childbearing/raising; her women participants reported a plethora of creative endeavours in which they manifest their talents and psychic energy. In effect, she contends that childless women convert the metaphorical "absence" of not-mothering, into one of "potential space" for creativity. According to Ireland, childless women can embrace creative potential that is imbued with as much meaning and value as mothering.

Ireland (1993) reflected on the deeply felt intimacy and commitment in all of her participants' romantic relationships. Moreover, she discerned some differences between the romantic relationships of "transformative" and "transitional" women. Women of the former group seemed to approach their relationships with expectations of gender role flexibility and egalitarianism. Ireland claimed that transformative women willingly tolerated the ambiguity of relationship bonds not otherwise experienced by parents whose relationships she suggests are

underpinned by mutual responsibilities of childrearing. On the other hand, transitional women's ambivalence towards the mothering role was reflected in their patterns of shorter-term serial relationships, and fewer transitional women were married than their transformative peers. Overall, based on her findings Ireland maintained that although childless women may structure their relationships somewhat differently they all appear to highly value their spousal relations.

In summary, Ireland's (1993) work is a compilation of psychological theories of women's development, interspersed with her interpretations of childless women's histories, decisions to remain childless, relationships, and work. She confronts conventional psychological views that equate maternity with femininity and offers an alternate psychoanalytic conceptualization of childless women's lives and identities. She thus attempts to respond to calls for a theory of women's development that is unshackled from their marital-reproductive cycle (e.g., Gergen, 1990; Lisle, 1996) and that allows for acknowledgement of other aspects of women's lived experiences across the lifespan. Ireland's efforts to revision ways in which childless women can create meaning and purpose in their lives make this a valuable piece of conceptual work supported by women's stories.

One shortcoming of Ireland's (1993) work, however, is the ambiguity of her interpretive processes applied to her respondents' interview data. Also, she did not reflect on how the biases she observes in theory and social meaning-making processes may have manifested in her analyses. Furthermore, the study's use of structured interviews with specific topic coverage and sub-groupings of her sample appears to reflect her personal frame of reference juxtaposed on her participants' lived experience. Clearly Ireland entered into her research with an interpretive scheme. Her presuppositions may well have inhibited spontaneous discovery by her participants and herself of other unexpected and deeper meanings. Finally, Ireland did not seek out and identify themes of meaning among her women respondents about their childlessness, nor did she solicit information describing their daily living

Nonetheless, Ireland's (1993) research provides valuable insights into the decision-making processes, relationships, and working lives of the 100 childless women in her sample. Her findings suggest that voluntarily childless women have distinct experiences of their non-motherhood, according to how they decide to remain childless (by deliberate decisions or by delay). Differences in sex role orientation as reported from the Bem Sex Role Inventory further underscored differences between the three groups of women in Ireland's sample. Hence Ireland's findings concur with prior research results indicating that voluntarily childless women comprise a heterogeneous group (e.g., Bram, 1984; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Veevers, 1980) with nontraditional views of gender roles. Also, Ireland's findings strongly suggest that voluntarily childless women can find meaning and fulfillment, comparable to that achieved in motherhood.

Morell's (1994, 2000) empirical and conceptual work on women's experiences of voluntary childlessness provides a sociological perspective on women's voluntary childlessness that compliments the psychological perspective presented by Ireland (1993). Morell's scholarly work differs from more descriptive (e.g., Bartlett, 1994; Lisle, 1996) and theoretical (e.g., Ireland, 1996) pieces in the literature because she aspired to presenting childlessness as a "social practice taking place in a highly politicized context, a practice which creates personal challenges for not-mothering women, and creates analytical challenges to existing theories about women" (p. 141). Morell undertook a thorough examination of the dominant social discourses - medical, academic, and feminist - that shape and define the lives and identities of childless women. Her goal was to explicate the tensions and freedoms experienced by voluntarily childless women who live their lives contrary to the dominant cultural values of pronatalism.

Using a post-structural and feminist paradigm, Morell (1994) interviewed 34 childless married women in the late 1980's and early 1990's. All women completed a pre-interview autobiographical written exercise in which they were invited to reflect upon and write about eight to ten periods or "chapters" in their lives. The women's written work yielded categories or

themes around which the interview was organized (e.g., decision-making processes, pressures to mother and not to mother, changing views of childlessness over time). Morell maintained a personal research journal, and wrote post-interview summaries followed by imaginary dialogues with each participant. She thus maintained a strongly reflexive quality in her interpretive process. Her analysis of transcribed interviews focussed on discerning categories of recurring materials across all interviews, and clustering pieces of interview texts by headings that denoted particular themes. Throughout her study she engaged in both analytic/interpretive work on her research texts while also exploring scholarly work pertaining to her feminist, post-structural paradigm. Eventually Morell's analysis was organized by contents of her research journal and interview texts, into the chapters of her dissertation project.

Based on her analysis of interview data, Morell (1994) concluded that childless women live adversarial lives. They continually endure and negotiate the pressures and prejudices of social institutions and dominant discourses that proclaim motherhood as the natural and inevitable state of womanhood. She found that her childfree participants successfully resisted the flawed and inadequate identities proffered by the dominant discourse of motherhood. Her findings affirm that these women created a "personal culture" (Heidmets, cited in Brandstadter, 1999) of values, beliefs, and lifestyles that is embedded within the broader culture of pronatalism and patriarchal systems of power.

Morell (1994) also discovered that her respondents created a reverse inner discourse about their childlessness. This discourse revealed the tension in the dialectic between social and personal meanings of childlessness. In effect, these childless women defined themselves in terms opposite to the negative social constructions of character and womanhood ascribed to childlessness. A reverse discourse allowed for identity construction for these participants as not-mothers with positive esteem, desirable character, good relationships, and fulfilling life purpose. Most importantly, these women thus offset negative social projections about their childlessness.

Nonetheless, Morell's participants acknowledged that they revisited their decision to remain childless during transient moments of melancholy and wistfulness. The women considered these episodes natural reactions when reflecting on their childless choice as unrealized life potential. However, they consistently denied feeling regret about their decisions any more than if they had declined particular careers, relationship choices, or other life options. Instead, these women expressed sadness that their choice of nontraditional womanhood had created social distance between themselves and their mothering peers.

Based on the experiences of the childless women in her studies, Morrel (1994) reflects that the daily lives of childless women are continually in flux against a backdrop of negative cultural views of their childlessness. She contends that her women respondents actively constructed their lives without support or models to guide formation of identity, relationships, work, and daily living in a pronatal cultural context. Her conclusions concur with those of Ireland (1993) and others (e.g., Safer, 1996), that guiding life scripts are inherent in the traditional choices of marriage and motherhood. The social roles and obligations of wife and mother are clearly defined across the lifespan, until they culminate in old age with widowhood and grandmotherhood (Gergen, 1990; Neugarten, 1996).

Morrel's (1994) work is an important contribution to the literature on voluntary childlessness because it illustrates how nonmothers are challenged to construct positive meaning, purpose, and sense of self through active negotiation and rebuttal of the social meanings of childlessness. The women in her study were engaged in a continual dialogue that weathered derogation by the dominant discourse of parenthood, and helped them to establish a contrary sense of self. This study suggests that the meaning of childlessness in our Western culture emerges in the dialectic between personal experiences of contrariness, and social constructions of childlessness. Morell's work thus emphasizes the embeddedness of personal meaning-making in the broader context of cultural values and traditions associated with femininity.

Morell (1994) also locates her discussion of discourse and her participants' stories in the context of patriarchal systems of power. She argues that the dominant cultural group issues and maintains pronatal discourses to ensure that women are pushed towards motherhood. This same constellation of discourses also denigrates non-mothers, and thus disempowers both groups of women. This feminist discussion of motherhood and non-motherhood in the context of power systems comprises another unique contribution to the childless literature. As part of this contribution, Morell calls for a reconceptualization of womanhood by severing the false polarity between non-mothers and mothers. She maintains that women are forced by the dominant pronatal ideology into hierarchies of opposition, according to their reproductive choice.

One shortcoming of Morell's (1994) work, however, is that her analysis did not focus on determining meanings associated with voluntary childlessness among her respondents. She identified only the notion of freedom as one element of meaning that recurred throughout her respondents' stories. Also, Morell's method and analysis evolved over the course of her study, commencing with a particular interview style in which she purposely introjected herself and her lived experience and then shifting to one in which she attempted to follow a more focused and distanced role as interviewer. Her accompanying reflexive work and analysis of texts also changed substantially. It is possible that Morell's fluid approach to collecting and analyzing her data may have precluded discovery of other material or themes. In addition, her intense reading of feminist scholarship during the initial phases of her interviews and data analysis may have predisposed her to pursue particular questions and conceptualizations of her respondents' issues. Nonetheless, Morell transparently presented her interpretive method and thus met several criteria for rigour of analysis and trustworthiness of findings that is uncommon in research inquiries of voluntary childlessness. These qualities of robust scholarly qualitative research render Morell's study a significant contribution to the psychological, feminist, and sociological research on

voluntary childlessness. Certainly her systemic perspective on this reproductive choice has broadened the potential scope of inquiry for future investigations.

Gillespie (2000) offers a vantage point similar to Morell's (1994) for viewing women's experiences of voluntary childlessness. Her work is also a sociological exploration of how intentionally childless women negotiate the dominant cultural discourses of motherhood and childlessness. She reviews the entrenched discourses equating adult female identity with maternity, and childlessness with characterologic inadequacy and deviance. Gillespie optimistically hypothesized that traditional discourse may be diminishing and possibly changing because of the past three decades of social change and women's increased autonomy and opportunities. She explored her hypothesis in interviews with 25 childless women. All but one of her participants were white, two were not heterosexual, and the majority had higher-level educations. All participants were solicited from a family planning clinic in an urban center where they were invited to complete a survey form if they were interested in participating in a research project. Women who met research criteria and were available for interviews were screened into Gillespie's study.

Gillespie's (2000) findings failed to reflect any substantial or positive changes to traditional motherhood discourses that derogate childlessness. Rather, her analysis of interview data revealed three themes characteristic of her participants' lived experience of childlessness, as conveyed during social interactions and relationships: disbelief that childlessness was a choice, disregard of childlessness as a valid or desirable choice, and assumption that childlessness was a deviant choice. Gillespie concluded that her participants' intentional childlessness was interpreted by others according to a prevailing and persistent pronatalist discourse. Based on these findings, she suggests that the dominant discourse has changed only in terms of its capacity to accommodate social changes for mothers. Her respondents' accounts did not indicate any

similar receptivity or increased flexibility and tolerance in traditional discourses towards women who choose childlessness.

Gillespie's (2000) work is limited by some methodological problems similar to those encountered by Morell (1994) and Ireland (1993). In particular, Gillespie's findings were possibly influenced by the small sample size and lack of diversity reflecting race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Also, since the women were solicited from a family planning clinic in an urban center, they likely represented only a particular subgroup within the broader population of childless women. In addition, Gillespie's insights into her respondents' meanings of childlessness are somewhat limited because her analysis focussed on how individual women perceived the social meanings of childlessness. She did not investigate how they constructed their own meanings of childlessness, or how personal meanings of childlessness might evolve in relation to cultural meanings. Also, Gillespie does not describe her analysis of her respondents' data that resulted in identification of the three forms of negative discourse. Nonetheless, this study is a valuable commentary on prominent themes arising in childless women's daily social interactions. According to Gillespie's findings, social discourse continues to view these women as deviant, to disregard or discount the childless choice as one of incompetence and shortsightedness, and to disbelieve that voluntary childlessness is a valid choice unless legitimized by further explanation.

Research on Voluntarily Childless Men

There are no scholarly published studies of men's childbearing patterns. Researchers instead presume that most non-mothers marry and hence share a childless relationship with a man who is also uninterested in having children. Estimates suggest that since as many as one in five women may currently opt for nonparenthood, it would follow that as many if not more men are similarly inclined (Bartlett, 1994; Gillespie, 2000; Lunneborg, 1999). Unlike women, however, little academic or public interest has been expressed in the decision-making, motives, and lived experience of men who choose not to be fathers (Lafayette, 1995; Lunneborg).

Possibly the dearth of interest in these men reflects the assumption that men's adult identity formation has never derived purely from the role of father (Gergen, 1990; Ireland, 1993; Lafayette, 1995). Socially speaking, fertility and the ability to reproduce is a woman's issue and a woman's mandate (Daniluk, 1999; Gergen). Certainly there is no "paternal myth" to be debunked, since men have largely acquired and maintained role identities as competent adults in the public spheres of cultural life (Gergen). They have pursued clearly delineated developmental tasks in terms of financial success, career pursuits, public service, as well as marriage and family life. Moreover, unlike women, men have not generally perceived their careers or other non-family demands to be in competition with family life. Instead, economic success and upholding the family breadwinner role has been the cornerstone of male identity (Gerson, 1993).

Rare accounts of men's intentional childlessness do not elicit social consternation or discomfort (Ireland, 1993), and the few childless men who have been included in research typically report that others' responses to them most often refer to their virility and self-centred lifestyles but rarely imply deviance or incompleteness of identity. There is general consensus deriving from psychological theories of men's development, as well as anecdotal accounts of childless men, that men's decisions and lived experience of childlessness differ substantially from those of childless women. Most discussions of childlessness concur that discourses of manhood and fatherhood harbour less compelling and evaluative mandates to parent than the merged discourse of womanhood equals motherhood (e.g., Ireland; Lafayette, 1995; Marshall, 1993).

During the last four decades, however, the women's movement, changes in the global economy and labour markets, and reproductive choice have combined to loosen the constraints of historical norms for men's development and achievement of maturity (Gerson, 1993; Levant, 1999; Lunneborg, 1999). Some writers (e.g., Levant) suggest that these social and economic changes have contributed to the demise of cultural consensus on the purpose and meaning of

manhood. As have women, men are reconstructing their gender role identities in search of new meanings, purpose, and definitions of maturity (Gerson; Levant). Now more than ever it is less clear which goals a man should pursue, much less how he should pursue them. Alternative life paths to economic success, fatherhood, and family life have not yet clearly emerged. We do not know how men who reject fatherhood as one of the traditional male roles negotiate their identities in either their personal lives of spousal and social relationships, or in their career and public lives.

Lunneborg (1999) attempted to address the dearth of research on childless men by interviewing thirty men, of whom 16 were American and 14 were from the United Kingdom. Her purposive sample included 22 married or co-habiting men and eight single men, some of whom were referred to the study through the author's personal networks. The majority of sample members responded to appeals through three organizations that advocate voluntary childlessness as a positive life choice. Twenty-eight of the men were white, one was from Japan and one from Iran. The 30 men ranged in age from 27 to 55. Most were from middle-class and working-class backgrounds, and most were highly-educated. One-third of the sample had vasectomies, and 19 of the 22 married men indicated that their spouses were equally committed to the childless choice.

Prior to meeting with her research participants, Lunneborg (1999) forwarded to them a written exercise concerning the reasons for choosing childlessness. In her one-hour semi-structured interviews with the participants, the responses to the exercise were the topic of discussion. Lunneborg transcribed all interviews and sought themes to distinguish rationales and motives for choosing childless. However, she changed the direction of her analysis when her search for categories of motives proved unproductive. Instead, she delineated nine groups of men into which her sample could be divided according to the major themes expressed about their lifestyles and experiences of childlessness. For each group she described the respondents'

decision-making, marital relationships, family histories, career/work lives, and experience of others' responses to their childless status. She also attempted to distinguish the prevalent values and core issues around which they constructed their adult identities and lifestyles.

One group of intentionally childless men in Lunneborg's (1999) study emphasized the value of relationships with their spouses; they described the spontaneity, intimacy, and companionship of their marriages. In particular, these men described highly egalitarian relationships in which they clarified and respected their own and their partners' preferences and limits for domestic chores and other contributions to homelife. A second group professed to a lifelong pursuit of personal growth and development through either work, education, or self-reflection in which they strived to realize their potential in life. Lunneborg identified another group among her childfree respondents in which men expressed contentment with their freedom to work, or their freedom from work. All these men appreciated the flexibility in their childfree lives that allowed them to pursue work that was personally meaningful. Work without assuming the family breadwinner role appeared to ensure high levels of job satisfaction. A group of "homebodies" also emerged from Lunneborg's analysis of lifestyle themes. These childless men indulged their creative and leisure interests around the home, and valued their homes as a refuge from their work lives.

Other childfree men were distinguished in Lunneborg's (1999) sample by their desire to avoid making mistakes as parents, possibly like those made by previous generations of fathers in their families. Choosing childlessness was their means of avoiding the potential for lifelong regrets about choosing parenthood. Some men identified themselves by their prevalent dislike of, or ambivalence towards children. Yet another group indicated that they wished to keep stress at a minimum in their lives, and they viewed children and parenting as a likely source of demands and strain. Finally, a cluster of Lunneborg's childfree men indicated that they were resistant to changing their interpersonal styles and personalities to meet the demands of parenting.

Lunneborg suggested that these men were content with their identities and by choosing childlessness, they did not have to become more patient, child-centered, and conservative about their career paths.

Several common themes emerged across the nine categories or types of childless men identified in Lunneborg's (1999) sample. The majority of these childless men expressed respect for their spouses' attitudes and limits with regard to potential parenting. Most of the single participants indicated difficulty finding like-minded partners in Western pronatal society, particularly among women in their thirties or forties. Lunneborg also suggested that some childless men may opt for less demanding and less status-oriented careers than men who pursue more traditional roles of fatherhood and public personas. Moreover, she observed that by rejecting fatherhood, several men in her sample gained opportunities to fully devote themselves to career as a means of developing their identity. Alternatively, men who opted to remain childless enjoyed freedom from the pressures to pursue and maintain job security or a set career path. In most cases, however, the theme of self-development arose frequently, as did these childless men's enjoyment of their privacy and time for themselves. Some men adopted more active and public roles of advocacy or philanthropy in their communities, and spoke of working on projects to better the environment. These men appeared to enact the notion that "generativity" or contribution to the next generation can be realized through more means than reproduction alone.

Contrary to women's experiences of social stigma around childlessness and consistent with Lafayette's (1995) reports about the men in the Childfree Network, the men in Lunneborg's study did not express concern about social responses to their childless state. All but the two men of non-European descent agreed that women are subject to more social pressure to parent than men. Some married participants expressed empathy for their spouses whom they perceived as pressured to become mothers since childhood. In their American and British workplaces, all

thirty men denied being discriminated against because of their childfree choice, and they claimed that male friends were generally supportive or nonjudgemental of their decision. Similarly, few expressed regret about remaining childless although some were keenly aware of a "loss of normalcy" as they rejected social expectations and therefore experienced some degree of social isolation from parenting peers.

In summary, Lunneborg's (1999) findings suggest that unlike non-mothers, childless men do not appear to face the challenges of forging an alternative path to adult identity (Ireland, 1993; Morrel, 1994). The men in Lunneborg's sample appeared to be content with their sense of self and appreciative that they experienced no pressure to alter their personalities and lifestyles to accommodate children. Their self-development continued across the lifespan according to personal goals and desires unrelated to parenthood.

Lunneborg's (1999) contribution to the literature on voluntary childlessness is an invitation to further explore childless men's lives by illuminating their relationships and by exploring how they construct meaning and identity for themselves. Unfortunately, Lunneborg's research is not a scholarly approach to the subject and is therefore limited in how it can inform our understanding of childless men's lives. One shortcoming of this study is its use of a nonrandom sampling technique. Also, the sample was small and the men tended to report almost exclusively positive experiences of their childless choice. Their favourable accounts may not fully reflect the experiences of other intentionally childless men who are less well-situated in terms of education and vocation (Marshall, 1993). Further, in her analysis Lunneborg identified nine small groups that were distinguishable from each other according to unique themes. However, a closer examination of the men's stories revealed commonalities that suggested uniformity, rather than disparity, in the men's experiences of childlessness. Hence it appears that the categories are somewhat arbitrary and perhaps artificial. Also, membership in these small groups appears to in part reflect the men's marital status. For example, Lunneborg observed that

in one group all four men were single, but she did not reflect on whether single and married men experience voluntary childlessness differently.

Finally, Lunneborg's (1999) findings rely on the purely descriptive nature of her inquiry. Her interest in her respondents' lifestyles, career and community life, and goals for self-development provide glimpses into their lived experience of voluntary childlessness. However, she did not attempt to explore in interview discussions or in data analysis the meaning of intentional childlessness for these men. Despite these shortcomings, Lunneborg's brief foray into exploring childless men's lives demonstrates initiative to ask research questions about this population that have not yet been pursued in the literature on voluntary childlessness.

The descriptive reports of childless men's lives presented by Lunneborg (1999) appear to elaborate the findings of a quantitative study that compared a matched sample of 44 vasectomized childless men with 51 vasectomized fathers (Magarick & Brown, 1981). These researchers attempted to identify the personality and social variables associated with childlessness, to identify background or historical variables predictive of childlessness, and to determine whether voluntarily childless men feel negatively stereotyped. Scores on the California Psychological Inventory were entered into a factor analysis that yielded three factors reflecting personal adjustment: stability/dependability, capacity for independent thought and action, and assertive self-assurance. The childless and parenting men did not differ on scores for stability/dependability or assertive self-assurance. However, the childless men had significantly higher factor scores on capacity for independent thought and action. These results indicated that the childless men tended to reject conventional solutions to problems, pursued independent achievements and interests, took risks, did not value tradition for the sake of it, were more flexible and inclined to experiment, and more idiosyncratic. However, on a measure of social perceptions of childlessness, this sample of childless men reported that they felt negatively

stereotyped and believed that others saw them as more selfish, deviant, immature, and unnatural than parents.

Magarick and Brown (1981) offer the only quantitative inquiry into the psychosocial correlates of men who choose childlessness. However, the study is limited in application to current understandings of men's voluntary childlessness because it presents findings from a dated cohort of men who underwent their vasectomies between 1971 and 1976. Also, this cohort represents a sub-group of voluntarily childless men who sought out surgical means to assure their childlessness. Results may not reflect the experiences and personalities of men who chose alternative means of remaining childless. Also, Magarick and Brown limit their inquiry to determining particular correlates and personality factors associated with choosing childlessness. Their investigation did not explore or reveal the lived experience of voluntary childlessness. Instead, the significance of this study lies in the researchers' conclusion that childlessness is not determined by or associated with, social or personal pathology. Magarick and Brown suggest instead that the childless choice among men in the late 1970's reflected a viable and healthy lifestyle.

It is notable that the childless men in Magarick's and Brown's (1981) study reported feeling stereotyped for the childlessness. This finding is consistent with Veevers' (1980) and Burgwyn's (1981) findings among their research participants who also reported experiencing derogatory social views of childlessness in that era. On the other hand, findings from Lunneborg's (1999) more recent research indicated that her male respondents did not feel they were subjected to negative social perceptions of their childless choice. These differing results between studies spanning almost twenty years may reflect a trend towards increased social tolerance of the childless choice for some groups of men.

The voluntarily childless men who described their lives to Lunneborg (1999) appeared to report numerous examples of how they valued and enacted dimensions of the "capacity for

independent thought and action" factor discerned by Magarick and Brown (1981). Lunneborg's childless men thoughtfully examined and reconsidered traditional values and gender roles (often in terms of household work and spousal income expectations), sought flexibility in their personal and work lives (identified frequently as freedom and spontaneity), and were generally indifferent to social stigma or queries about their childlessness. This similarity in results between the two studies suggest that childless men construct and live their daily lives in ways that are often similar, but also distinct from fathers. Perhaps some of the differences in thinking and being in the world derive from personality attributes as suggested by Magarick and Brown.

Overall, the paucity of literature concerning voluntarily childless men offers only fragments of insight into the lived experience and meaning of childlessness for these men. The two reported studies of voluntarily childless men (Lunneborg, 1999; Magarick & Brown, 1981) suggest that they may have less traditional belief systems than fathers, value intimate and egalitarian relationships with their spouses, and retain flexibility in their daily lives of work and other life pursuits. In addition, findings from the above two studies, as well from the general descriptions provided through women's accounts of relationships (e.g., Ireland, 1993; Bartlett, 1994) concur that voluntarily childless men report satisfaction with their choice to decline fatherhood. However, the limited scope of inquiry into intentionally childless men's lives has failed to illuminate their experience of daily living without children, and the personal meanings they attribute to their reproductive choice. Instead, there are mixed reports on how they experience social discourses of voluntary childlessness.

Critique of the Literature

Research into voluntary childlessness first emerged in the 1970's and has taken a rather poorly charted and erratic path through the academic domains of psychology, feminist/gender studies, sociology, and social psychology. Interest in the topic has waxed and waned over time but there exists an accumulated large body of work that explores multiple aspects of

childlessness. However, the works focussing explicitly on the lived experience and meaning of intentional childlessness comprise only a very small portion of the broader literature base. Although these studies provide valuable glimpses into the meaning of childlessness as it is experienced in ordinary living, they have some recurring limitations in their conceptual underpinnings and methodologies.

Possibly the most substantial weakness of investigations into the lives of non-parents is the general failure to clearly situate research rationale and questions within specific theoretical orientations or research paradigms. Several inquiries present overviews of the dominant psychological theories that uphold or challenge pronatal belief systems (e.g., Burgwyn, 1981; Ireland, 1993), but few (e.g., Gillespie, 2000; Marshall, 1993; Morell, 1994) fully elaborate the philosophical or theoretical underpinnings of their own research. Hence the literature reflects disparate and equivocal approaches to childlessness that have not yielded a coherent conceptualization of the lived experience of childlessness. Moreover, the bulk of literature concerned with the lived experience of childlessness is non-scholarly or non-scientific work presented for public or general readership. Carefully constructed investigations of childlessness are rare.

With respect to research paradigms and methodologies, studies of childlessness are compromised by insufficient descriptions of their qualitative approaches to soliciting and analyzing data. Most studies (e.g., Bartlett, 1994; Burgwyn, 1981) only refer to use of unstructured or semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Another common methodological weakness concerns these studies' ambiguity and variability of data analyses and interpretation. Only Marshall's (1993) and Morrell's (1994) work declare and demonstrate standards of academic rigour that assure their findings and interpretations are credible responses to clearly articulated research questions.

A common shortcoming of several more prominent studies is their use of non-random samples (e.g., Lunneborg, 1999; Veevers, 1980). Veevers defended her use of a purposive sample by citing difficulty "stalking the silent minority" of childless adults for invitation to participate in research. To-date there are no studies that employ a random sample of voluntary childless persons, but all investigators acknowledge the resulting limitations for generalizing findings to the larger population of childless couples and adults. None has followed Veever's recommendation that future investigations might apply a longitudinal and cross-sectional design with a random sample. Instead, most research has relied upon small samples canvassed directly from organizations advocating for the childless choice (e.g., Lunneborg), through family planning clinics (e.g., Marshall, 1993), through media solicitations (e.g., Ireland, 1993), and through researchers' personal networks (e.g., Safer, 1996). Results of these studies are insightful and relevant, but we cannot be assured that they adequately inform our clinical understanding of voluntary childlessness in the larger population of nonparents.

An additional difficulty arises from the distinct cohort effects of several of these studies, particularly since they present conclusions from data collected in the 1970's and 1980's (e.g., Burgwyn, 1981; Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1980). These decades saw dramatic social changes that in turn recast gender roles expectations, and marital and reproductive options. All of these sociocultural factors created a distinct historical context that shaped the social and personal meanings of childlessness. A new generation of adults has since come of age in an era of further social change. Their experience of childlessness presumably will differ from those of the previous generation.

The majority of inquiry has focussed on women and nonmotherhood resulting in a paucity of work exploring meaning-making in the lives of childless men. Most researchers assume that men partake of reproductive decision-making with their spouses and that they construct their lives differently than parenting husbands (e.g., Lunneborg, 1999). Some

researchers (e.g., Marshall, 1993) suggest that women's process of becoming childless is more salient for women than men because of the strong cultural discourse equating maternity with womanhood. Men's experience of childlessness is thought to be less salient and less deterministic of adult identity and lived experience in life roles (Gergen, 1990; Lisle, 1996; Lunneborg). Yet with the exception of Lunneborg's exploratory study, the extant literature presents theoretical conceptualizations of childless men's lives or describes their lives at the periphery of childless women's stories. Lisle emphasizes the need to explore both men's and women's experiences of childlessness as a means of achieving liberation from gender roles and oppressive social discourses of parenthood. She also appreciates the interdependence of spouses' lives and meaning-making processes when she states that "understanding the nature of nonfatherhood, in fact, sheds light on nonmotherhood" (p. 154).

All of the reviewed literature includes commentaries on the social meaning of childlessness as it is created and maintained through prevailing cultural discourses of gender, adulthood, and reproduction. Some writers provide insights into the lived experience and meaning of childlessness by describing the coping strategies used for living in a pronatal society (e.g., Marshall, 1993; Veevers, 1980). However, to-date there has been no specific effort to solicit descriptions of the lives of childless adults, and the personal meanings ascribed to their childlessness. Instead, theorists and investigators have extrapolated from social meanings of childlessness to construct presumed personal meaning-themes such as freedom and spontaneity of lifestyle. Also, accounts of childlessness have been analyzed for lifestyle themes, decision-making processes, and personality attributes of childless persons. These categories of data are also used to infer personal meanings of childlessness.

To summarize, there is a dearth of research inquiry examining the lived experience and meaning of voluntary childlessness, particularly for couples and men. Research interest has focussed almost exclusively on childless women (e.g., Bartlett, 1994; Ireland, 1996; Morrel,

1994) with some dated interest in childless marriages (e.g., Burgwyn, 1981; Veevers, 1980).

Men's experiences of intentional childlessness are virtually unknown. Moreover, we do not know how nonparenting couples together negotiate the dominant pronatal discourse or whether spouses share similar meanings of their childless choice. This study will attempt to make a unique contribution to the literature on voluntary childlessness that will enhance theoretical and clinical understanding of adults who decline parenthood. I will invite adult men and women individually and as couples, to describe their lived experience of voluntary childlessness. From their accounts I will attempt to identify common themes from both the individual and couple data, that reflect their individual and shared meanings and experiences of choosing and living what is still considered by many to be a socially deviant lifestyle.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Introduction

The goal of this qualitative study was to illuminate the meaning and the lived experience of voluntary childlessness for eight married couples. Hermeneutic phenomenology is the interpretive method of inquiry I used to uncover common meaning-themes of voluntary childlessness that emerged in participants' accounts of daily living without children. In the spirit of interpretive methodology, I expect that those who read my description of the meaning of voluntary childlessness will enter into and continue my study by questioning and reflecting upon my final interpretation of voluntary childlessness. My findings were initially co-constituted by me and my participants, and they await the interpretation of all readers of this text. In this unfolding process of reading and reflecting my inquiry is unending and there is no final analysis or absolute, full understanding of the meaning of voluntary childlessness (Hein & Austin, 2001). Instead, I offer readers my personal perspective on the meaning of voluntary childlessness as but one of innumerable perspectives. My goal as a phenomenological researcher was to generate a description of the meaning of voluntary childlessness that will contribute to achieving a deeper, richer understanding of this important human experience.

Method

The present study is an interpretive inquiry that sought to answer the question: **What is the meaning and the lived experience of voluntary childlessness for married heterosexual adults, individually and as a couple?**

The present research is concerned with married couples who share the lived experience of voluntary childlessness and create meaning of this experience in their daily practices of living. Qualitative research methodology allowed me to explore spouses' and couples' experiences of childlessness without theoretical assumptions to constrain my questions or understanding of their

descriptions (Leonard, 1989). Also, this study was based upon a "what is..." question that cannot be answered by traditional psychological methods of inquiry (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989). Traditional methods are empirically-based and seek causal relations of linearity between particular variables that I could not presume to identify accurately. Instead, I utilized the more holistic approach of qualitative inquiry to understand couples' lives. Moreover, qualitative research supported my interest in exploring my participants' subjective and inter-subjective worlds as they create meaning of their experiences (Thorne, 1991; van Manen, 1997). Finally, qualitative research situated me as the researcher in a dialogic encounter of exploration and interpretation with my participants. This atmosphere of mutual inquiry and thoughtful reflection in qualitative methodology closely parallels the counsellor-client relationship wherein findings of this study may eventually be applied (Thorne).

Research Design

In the present study I used the qualitative method of phenomenology to achieve understanding of the meaning of voluntary childlessness. Phenomenology was introduced by Husserl as a philosophy for human science (Ferraris, 1996) that views investigation of the human inner world as legitimate subject matter for human psychology (Osborne, 1994). It emphasizes discovery, description, subjectivity, and meaning of human experience rather than the empirical and positivist values of traditional psychological inquiry, that is, prediction, control, and measurement of human behaviour. As such, phenomenology is a descriptive science and not an explanatory science (Georgi, 1985). Further, phenomenology regards humans and the world as co-constituted; humans are of the world rather than in it (Osborne, 1990).

Hermeneutic phenomenology. The philosophy of phenomenology has evolved into two dominant streams of psychological inquiry, each of which reflects the foundational philosophical premises espoused first by Husserl and then by his student Heidegger (Ferraris, 1996). Husserl's phenomenology was largely concerned with epistemological questions; he emphasized human

consciousness as the means by which humans apprehend and make meaning of their world. Researchers in this stream of phenomenological philosophy and method emphasize description and extraction of universal structures of meaning that underpin experiences of particular phenomenon. The goal of Husserlian inquiry is to transcend the "natural attitude" of preconceived or theoretical knowledge about human experience, in order to attain a description of pure experiencing of conscious awareness. Husserlian phenomenology also emphasizes the precept of returning to the things themselves (van Manen, 1997) that reflects the valuing of ordinary, lived experience as the site of all knowledge.

Heidegger transformed traditional phenomenology by turning away from Husserl's epistemological concerns with consciousness to existential-ontological concerns of being human (Ferraris, 1986). Heidegger dismissed Husserl's pursuit of presuppositionless knowing (Osborne, 1994). Instead, he determined that descriptions of experience always comprise attempts to interpret and communicate awareness and understanding between humans (Geanellos, 1998a). He also insisted that presuppositions or preunderstandings naturally and necessarily frame our interpretations. With his emphasis on interpretation and understanding, and on language as our means of co-creating meaning, Heidegger evolved hermeneutic phenomenology.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned not only with what is known of the experience of being, but with how it is known and how it is expressed in language and action (Thorne, 1991). Although this is interpretive phenomenology it retains a positivist bent with its realist assumption that there are existential experiences, that is, phenomena, whose nature and meaning we interpret in the course of our daily living. Some of those phenomena may be obscured or unknown to our ordinary awareness and understanding (van Manen, 1997). Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to uncover and interpret these phenomena, in order to achieve a deeper understanding of their meaning.

The present study applied the hermeneutic-existential phenomenology of Heidegger. Gadamer's (1988) elaboration on Heidegger's work was also incorporated, particularly with respect to application of the hermeneutic circle as method and to the written text as the object of study and the ground from which meaning emerges. The following discussion presents the rationale for choosing hermeneutic phenomenology to explore my research question. Specifically, I review the key tenets of Heidegger's phenomenology to illustrate their congruence with my ontological view of the person, with the research question and purpose of this study, and with the research design and method.

Philosophical tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the question of "what is the meaning of Being?". Implicit in this question is the assumption that humans are meaning-makers whose mode of being in the world is understanding (Chessick, 1990; Geanellos, 1998b). We are self-interpreting, and thus constitute ourselves and our world through interpretation and understanding; interpretation is the ontological core of human existence (Chessick; Leonard, 1989; Walters, 1995). This premise of the person as self-interpreting implies that all knowledge is perspectival (Leonard; Walters). Our interpretations and understandings can never convey an absolute truth; there is a multiplicity of interpretations available for any particular phenomenon and lived experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology thus freed me, the researcher, to explore all perspectives of the lived experience of childlessness. I could investigate individual spouses' interpretations, as well as couples' interpretations. Varied perspectives reflect varied interpretations, all of which I attempted to incorporate into my interpretive process. Moreover, I was able to explore descriptions that seemed inconsistent or contrary as exceptions that could illuminate obscure meanings rather than dismissing them as less valid. Finally, I was free to abandon artificial efforts to constrain my interpretations of the data (e.g., Husserlian epoche). Since hermeneutic phenomenology presumes that there is no

objective position of knowing I could self-consciously use myself as an interpretive instrument to understand others' experiences (Rew, Bechtel, & Sapp, 1993).

A second critical principle of Heideggerian phenomenology is that human existence and the world constitute a unity (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1994). Neither can exist independent of the other, and neither is causal in the constitution of the other because "the two co-exist by reciprocal implication" (Colaizzi, p. 54). This principle of co-constitution implies the quality of embeddedness of human existence in the social and natural world. All aspects of human existence are inextricably connected with the world and "it is through the world that the very meaning of the person's existence emerges both for himself or herself and for others" (Valle et al., 1989, p. 6). The contextualization of human life is reflected in Heidegger's reference to *Dasein*, or being-in-the-world (Ferraris, 1996). In the realm of psychological inquiry, Heideggerian phenomenology directs us to intersubjective experiences, or shared experiences and interpretations of *Dasein* (Geanellos, 1998a; Walters, 1995).

The construct of embeddedness supported my inquiry into the marital relationship; spouses are embedded in the relationship as it is embedded in turn, in the larger social context. Spouses co-constitute their marital experiences and they co-create meanings of those experiences. Separating out their respective interpretations of a shared experience decontextualizes the phenomenon of inquiry. Simply put, it cannot be described separately as it is experienced together. The second level of embeddedness is of the couple in the social world. All interpretations of experience, and all conditions and parameters of experience are co-constituted by the world in which a couple lives. The principle of embeddedness presumed that my inquiry into couples' lived experience of voluntary childlessness would be attuned to cultural discourses and social norms about gender roles, marriage, and family life as they may emerge in couples' descriptions.

Hermeneutic phenomenology also relies on the foundational tenet of historicity, that is, we are bounded in our Being by what came before us (Bauman, 1978; Chessick, 1990; Koch, 1995). According to Heidegger, our background is the culture and history that pre-exists us; we are born into ways of being and understanding, and swept up into them (Geanellos, 1998a). Gadamer (1988) refers to this notion of historicity as tradition. Background and tradition provide us the biases, priorities, prejudices, beliefs, and sensibilities that guide our apprehension and interpretation of the world. They constitute our respective spheres of understanding and knowledge which we cannot transcend. They also situate us in a particular historical period of culture and knowledge.

With respect to the current study, persons living in North American Western culture are influenced by a tradition of strongly pronatal values (LaFayette, 1995; Tyler-May, 1995) and assumptions that maternity is a central task of adulthood for women (Ireland, 1993; Lisle, 1996). Hermeneutic phenomenology invites consideration of such prejudices even as they are deeply rooted in our social traditions and histories. It allows for examination of how couples and individual spouses have gleaned personal meanings of their choice to remain childless, from the broader social and cultural traditions that bound their possibilities in meaning-making.

The constructs of embeddedness and tradition imply another key concept, that is, humans are "condemned to choice" (Valle et al., 1989, p.8). Heidegger refers to the "thrownness" of humans into the world, and our resulting "situatedness" in history, time, and culture (Chesla, 1995; Leonard, 1989). In the ordinary dailiness of living in a world of givens that we may or may not have wanted, humans make choices within a constrained range of options for living. The assumption that humans are always making choices about their existence echoes the topic of the present research because it presupposes that couples have made the significant life choice to remain childless. As are all choices, this choice is influenced and reinforced by the social and cultural context in which we live (Chesla). In my study individual spouses and couples described

their lived experiences of choosing childlessness within the pronatal context of our Western culture.

A further premise underpinning hermeneutic phenomenology is that daily living, or the lifeworld of taken-for-granted practices is the concern of human science (Bauman, 1978; Walters, 1995). Humans' pragmatic, involved activity is our way of knowing and being. Moreover, through our engagement in the world we come to value things and have concerns that guide our daily living (Chesla, 1995). We are purposeful and intentional beings and we attribute significance and relevance to particular things in the lifeworld (Leonard, 1989). My research sought to reveal the underlying meaning of the experience of childlessness as it manifests in daily living and shapes people's lives and interactions with the world. I also offered my presupposition that couples with children construct much of their daily living around their children's interests and needs. Hence, I anticipated that childless couples construct a lifestyle distinct from parents and that reflects their particular needs, interests, and concerns. Also, I hoped that discussion of the "dailiness" or "everydayness" (Darbyshire, Diekelmann, & Diekelmann, 1999) of participants' lives would provide me with rich and relevant descriptions of the experience of childlessness that avoided statements of opinions or theories (Osborne, 1994). With an invitation to describe their ordinary daily lives, I hoped my participants felt free to reveal the issues that were significant to them, within the constraints of social desirability that contextualize my study.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the role of language is stressed as "the meaningful articulation of the understandable structure of being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, in Allen & Jensen, 1990). Language conveys the background or tradition of history and culture into which we are born, and it circumscribes our worldview (Bubner, 1988; Gadamer, 1988). It is also through dialogue that total interdependency is maintained between humans, and between humans and the world (Valle et al., 1989). According to van Manen (1997), "by learning a language we

learn to live in collective realms of meanings" (p. xiii). Hence, all meaning is created in and emerges from language and dialogue (Gadamer; Thompson, 1990). Moreover, in the tradition of Gadamer the researcher attempted to understand the content of the text rather than participants' meanings. The researcher "becomes a mediator between the text and all the text implies but not the interpreter of what the author (the research participant) meant" (Geanellos, 1998b, p. 157).

According to Gadamer (1988), understanding of the text occurs at the fusion of horizons between the text and the researcher/reader. Our horizon encompasses our sphere of understanding and knowledge that is given us by tradition. In other words, our horizon circumscribes our vantage point or perspective for interpreting the world. In order to transcend it and to understand the text's depictions of others' lived experience, we must query and challenge our pre-understandings. In the fusion of horizons lies the potential for shift in vantage point, for synthesis of knowledge, and for new understanding. Fusion thus implies a merging of different vantage points that ensures a new interpretation of text and self (Thompson, 1990).

The current research placed the site of knowledge in the transcribed dialogue, because language is the means by which I co-constructed with my participants the meaning of childlessness. My interpretations of the multiple interview texts allowed me to grasp and convey the core meaning structures of living without children. I also maintained my personal writings in a personal research journal as a record of my experiences of the interviews and research process. By writing about my reflections and their influence on my interpretive processes I demonstrated the interdependency between myself and my participants as we co-created meanings in our interview dialogues (Chessick, 1990; Geanellos, 1998b; Koch, 1995). I also used my personal writings to remain open to fusion of horizons between the texts and my own lived experiences and meaning-making of intentional childlessness.

Finally, Heideggerian phenomenology presumes that the Self is embodied; mind and body co-constitute each other (Chessick, 1990; Leonard, 1989; van Manen, 1997). This holistic

view of the person allowed my study to acknowledge the personal and social connotations of fertility, control of fertility, and termination of fertility by either artificial or biological means that my participants described. Further, the choice of childlessness means forgoing biological changes and visible transformations of the body - conception, pregnancy and childbirth - that became grounds for exploration in this study. Similarly, the physiology of aging and the interdependence between these changes and our inner emotional lives emerged as related topics for exploration. Heideggerian phenomenology allowed me to embrace all of these physical dimensions of lived experience, many of which proved salient in understanding the lived experience of voluntary childlessness for couples in the current cohort.

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Method

Just as there is no one prominent philosophy of phenomenology, there is no singular or predominant phenomenological method of hermeneutic inquiry (Thompson, 1990; van Manen, 1997). The processes of writing, rewriting, interpretation, and understanding characterize the method. Because of methodological ambiguity, hermeneutic work relies especially on the researcher's qualities of reflectiveness, insightfulness, sensitivity to language, and openness to experience and change (van Manen). In general, the hermeneutic phenomenological method provides an interpretive model in which the researcher is concerned with intersubjective experiences, or the shared experiences and interpretations of Dasein (Walters, 1995). It also asserts that we can best understand humans from the experiential reality of their everyday lived experiences, or their lifeworld (van Manen).

The hermeneutic circle. Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation and understanding to achieve shared meaning (Chesler, 1995; Chessick, 1990; Thompson, 1990). According to Gadamer (1988), "it is the task of hermeneutics to illuminate this miracle of understanding, which is...a participation in shared meaning" (p. 69) that emerges from the reader's interpretation of the text. The method of interpretation occurs within the hermeneutic

circle which is a metaphor for achieving understanding; "it is a process of moving dialectically between a background of shared meaning and a more finite, focused experience within it" (Thompson, p. 243). In the present study I applied the hermeneutic circle as one method to explore and interpret the descriptions of participants' lived experiences of voluntary childlessness.

I entered the interpretive process of reading the transcribed interview texts with my own anticipations of the overall meaning of the texts. These anticipations derived from my tradition and background and were reflected in my presuppositions or preunderstandings about the meaning of voluntary childlessness. From this broader view of the text, I attributed more particular meanings to separate parts of the text. Through intense meditative reflection and writing on the language, stories, motifs, and other elements of my participants' descriptions, the meanings of separate parts shifted and induced changes in my original expectations of global meaning. This revised meaning of the whole in turn demanded a reconsideration and revisioning of meaning for the separate parts. Hence at each step of interpretation, I was engaged in continuous effort to harmonize meaning across the particulars of the text, so they were consonant with the whole. Concordance between all parts and the whole is the criterion for understanding at each step in the process (Gadamer, 1988). I made many revisitations to the texts until gestalts or patterns of meaning cohered in a sensible fashion, thus revealing how they constituted the meaning of the whole (Kvale, 1983). This interpretive process occurred for each individual's interview text, and for each couples' conjoint interview text.

The backwards and forwards movement between parts, and from parts to whole, is the hallmark of the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1988; Geanellos, 1998b; Ferraris, 1996). My task was "to expand in concentric circles the unity of the understood meaning" (Ferraris, p. 68) that resembles a spiralling down motion of encompassing, deepening, and focussing. There is no final interpretation at which the reader eventually arrives (Connolly & Keutner, 1988). Rather, the

hermeneutic circle provided me the dynamic means of exploring and interpreting the meaning-structures of the lived experience of voluntary childlessness.

I expected that consciously entering into a hermeneutic circle of interpretation of interview texts would naturally support my movement between individual spousal texts as respective "parts", to the "whole" texts of each spousal group. I thus sought similarities and differences between themes arising among the husbands, the wives, and the couples. I then compiled primary descriptions and identified themes that were common within each group. This multiple layering of texts (individuals to spousal groups, separate couples to a group of couples) and their meanings add to the depth and inclusivity of the hermeneutic circle in this study (Gadamer, 1988; Thompson, 1990).

Pre-understandings. According to Heidegger (in Geanellos, 1998b), the hermeneutic researcher's task is not to exit the hermeneutic circle, but to enter into it correctly. I entered into the hermeneutic circle by commencing a self-conscious effort to expose my pre-understandings of voluntary childlessness (Koch, 1995; Kvale, 1983; Walters, 1995). Gadamer (1988) states that "it makes good sense for the interpreter, animated by his ready pre-opinion, not to tackle the 'text' straight off, but rather to test the living pre-opinion in himself for its legitimacy, i.e., for its provenance and validity" (p. 72). If my predispositions towards particular meanings were not clarified, I risked finding in the interview texts merely confirmations of my personal truths. I also risked inadvertently guiding participants to opinions and ideas that reflected other influences, including mine. My task, therefore, was to be aware of my presuppositions and projections onto my participants' lived experiences, and to demonstrate how I took them into account in my interpretation of the text (Geanellos, 1998b). This creates for the reader a transparent presentation of interpretive efforts that lends credibility to my final argument of meaning associated with the lived experience (Osborne, 1994).

I attempted to expose some of my pre-understandings of voluntary childlessness by writing about my lived experiences of voluntary childlessness, and my childhood and parenting. These entries were made before and during the investigation in a personal journal. I also pursued personal discussions with close friends about my childless choice. Eventually I sought out friends who are voluntarily childless and solicited their thoughts and feelings about their experiences and their opinions of my research. Throughout all these discussions I wrote extensively about my impressions, feelings, and reactions to the dialogues and to my written stories. From all this material I began to identify implicit and explicit meanings I held about childlessness and how I have constructed and live out those meanings in my ordinary routines of living. Finally, I immersed myself in the literature concerning voluntary childlessness, and reflected extensively on published work exploring the dominant cultural discourse of pronatalism, as I experience it. Hermeneutic phenomenology presumes that such unravelling and exposure of presuppositions is endless and therefore I cannot attain a presuppositionless view of voluntary childlessness. Nonetheless, exploration of my beliefs and pre-understandings served to increase my awareness of their influence on my interpretations of participants' descriptions and ultimately, on my declaration of meaning themes (Austin & Hein, 2001).

My pre-understandings about voluntary childlessness among married couples fall into four categories. One assumption is that these couples experience social stigma because they have made choices contrary to social norms and expectations of adulthood. I presume that they are viewed as selfish, exclusive, and in some way flawed in their overt choice to reject the dominant role of "parent." Consequently, I envisioned that participants in this study would describe the conflicts and difficulties that arise in their lives and relationships because of negative social beliefs about their childless choice.

My second presupposition derives from my lifestyle experiences that reflect my interests and those of my partner. I presume that other childless couples enjoy "the good life" because of

freedom to make a broad range of choices in daily living. I assume that, like myself, my participants would express their appreciation of the flexibility, spontaneity, and independence from the demands of raising children. I presumed that they experience this autonomy as rewarding and enjoyable.

A third set of pre-suppositions concerns my views about the quality of the marital relationship when a couple has chosen nonparenthood. My beliefs are predominantly positive, as I envision spouses in these relationships enjoying a level of intimacy or communion that deepens over time and that is the primary love bond in their lives. I presume that their intimacy is exclusive and intense.

A fourth category of my pre-conceptions reflects Heidegger's emphasis on history. I believe that personal histories of family life are influential in shaping people's desires to have or not to have children, and in determining the ways in which they live their lives after choosing childlessness.

Entry into the hermeneutic circle occurred when I began clarifying and reflecting upon my pre-understandings about the lived experience of voluntarily childlessness. Throughout this research project I was engaged in the interpretive circle by continually revisiting those assumptions and biases as they emerged during my dialogues with participants, and my interpretations of their transcribed interviews. It was incumbent on me to remain open to the emergence of pre-suppositions of which I was not yet fully aware, and to any new perspectives that were inconsistent with my beliefs. I wrote all such insights into my personal journal (Drew, 1989) in order to help render more transparent my interpretive processes and co-constitution of meaning for the interview texts (Geanellos, 1998b).

Role of participants. I expected that the couples who agreed to participate in my study would be self-aware and comfortable discussing their experiences of intentional childlessness. I anticipated that they would be verbal and willing to become engaged in a dialogue with each

other and with me about those experiences. In the spirit of respect for their lived experiences, and since we had in common the choice to remain childless, I viewed the participants in this study as adult peers of equal power and extensive expertise in the research topic. I assumed that their intimate knowledge of the phenomenon would help to balance the power difference in our relationships attributable to my academic standing (doctoral student), my professional identity (counsellor), my role as researcher, and my theoretical knowledge of the topic. To further offset the power imbalance inherent in the research process, I invited participants to describe their lived experiences as they wished to do so. I provided only an orienting statement to the research topic with some supporting questions that I used to explore any areas that had not spontaneously arisen in our conversations. My goal was to refrain from imposing on the interview any structured questions or opinions that may have led my participants to confirm theoretical or social views of the phenomenon, or to affirm my experiences of the phenomenon.

Role of researcher. The phenomenon of voluntary childlessness is the lived experience of the researcher. The likelihood of physical (e.g., age cohort) and psychological closeness (e.g., relevance of the topic, familiarity of emotional responses) to my participants required me to make decisions about how I would situate myself in my research, and how I would monitor my level of participation, my role in the research, and the intensity of my responsiveness to my participants' stories. My challenge, in sum, was to reconcile my simultaneous roles as researcher and voluntarily childless woman as I explored and interpreted my participants' descriptions (Powell, 1999). I wanted to draw concurrently upon my lived experiences as a childless woman and researcher to guide my work. Rather than attempting to suspend myself from involvement in the study as practiced in empirical phenomenological methods (e.g., Georgi, 1985), I deliberately and self-consciously inserted myself into this project by writing in two journals: a research journal and a personal journal. In the former I recorded my reflections and reactions to participants' dialogues, sketched out my fledgling ideas, elaborated on common themes, drew

pictures and diagrams to look for linkages between ideas, and jotted notes on gender differences. This journal helped me to maintain a written stream of conscious reflection that accompanied and supported all my interpretive work. I used my personal journal for more private exploration of feelings and encounters in my own life that paralleled the discussions and materials in the research interviews. In this personal dialogue I also wrote out my answers to the same questions I posed to my participants and used my responses to further reflect on my role in this research project. On two occasions, I was compelled to put aside my analysis of texts to absorb the impact of two friends' announcements that they had altered their childless choice and were pursuing parenthood. My journal pages absorbed the confusion and sense of loss during those times. On another occasion, I was forced to reflect on the experience of death and childlessness. In the midst of writing chapter three, I lost a dear family member who left behind an ill spouse. They too, were childless. As I visited my ailing and aged widowed relative, I stepped away from analyzing interview texts and instead wrote in my personal journal about my own fears and anxieties of the unknowable future. These and other personal writings and reflections comprised the reflexivity inherent in this research inquiry. My goal at all times was to maintain conscious awareness of my pre-understandings, my background, and my reactions to my participants' stories and to corresponding experiences in my own life.

In keeping with the phenomenological assumption that humans are embedded in and co-constitute the world, I was aware that the triad formed by myself and each couple was in part constituted by larger systemic dynamics. I anticipated that to some degree, these dynamics could impact on participants' willingness to fully participate in the dialogue. Research on voluntary childlessness confirms there is a dominant and intense pronatal discourse in our Western culture that regards as abnormal those couples who choose childlessness (Marshall, 1993). I was concerned that my interest in "studying" voluntary childlessness could be perceived by my participants as a form of stigmatization and rendering of their lived experience as abnormal (and

hence worthy of study). My task was to study this group of individuals without further extending their sense of marginalization (Morell, 1994).

I attempted to address this tension between research interest and negative social meanings of childlessness by presenting myself transparently as a woman who is also childless by choice. I explained to my participants that I was incorporating myself into the study by writing my own responses to the same interview questions I posed during our meetings, and by reflecting fully on them as I would those of a participant. In this way I hoped to avoid a researcher/subject split that mirrors the sociocultural "splitting-off" of childless couples from mainstream or traditional views of mid-life and maturity (Gillespie, 2000).

Finally, the hermeneutic method followed in this study emphasizes the unified process of writing and research (van Manen, 1997), and the assumption that all meaning resides in the text (Gadamer, 1988). Thus my research demanded that I assume the additional role of writer. Crafting the research text in a series of interpretations and expanded understandings and ultimately in the unveiling of meaning, I was charged with writing texts of depth, reflection, sensitivity, and integrity to the spoken words (van Manen). I was also obliged to dwell in the text and to rewrite as meaning continued to emerge, form, and reform (Moustakas, 1994). I strived to be continually present to the text; remaining open to it and aware of my projections of meaning onto it. The quality of my writing will determine the extent to which I have achieved a fusion of horizons between the text and myself, and between my interpretations of my participants' stories and my readers.

Research Procedure

Participant criteria. Participants were volunteers with personal experience of, and interest in, articulating and understanding the phenomenon in question (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1994). They brought to the present study descriptions of their daily lives and reflections on their childless choice.

The volunteer participants in this study were eight heterosexual married couples who are voluntarily childless. My choice of heterosexual married couples is congruent with Western cultural depictions of relationships most sanctioned for family life and therefore, that are most likely to reveal the meaning of intentional childlessness within a pronatalistic culture. Since these couples had rejected the pervasive "parenthood prescription" (Veevers, 1980) of the dominant culture, I expected that their experience of the childless choice would reveal a discourse of lifestyle and meaning as quiet counterpoint to pronatal cultural norms. Other relationship configurations in which individuals live without children were beyond the scope of this study.

A second criteria for participation in the study was that couples had been married for a minimum of five years. This criteria followed from Veevers (1980) application of the same criterion, with the assumption that couples who are still childless after five years of marriage have demonstrated their commitment to the childless choice in the context of their relationship, and are likely to remain non-parents. Moreover, it was important for purposes of investigating shared meanings of voluntary childlessness, that the participants had adequate shared lived experience of their childlessness from which they could derive rich descriptions of events and meanings.

A third criteria for participation in the study was that couples had actively committed themselves to their childless choice by controlling or terminating their fertility through medical means, or were of the age when biological factors limit or preclude fertility. Hence the age of 40 was designated as the minimum criteria for entry into the study. Presumably, by the age of forty most women have engaged in serious consideration of reproductive choices and are unlikely to revert from their childless choice to pursuit of motherhood in their few remaining years of fecundity. Neither spouse had children from former relationships. This fourth criteria was imposed to exclude individuals with parenting experience. Former exposure to parenting in a family context was considered a likely confound for exploring couples' childless choice and their

daily relationships with parents and children. Also, the study excluded couples with fertility difficulties who had opted not to adopt or have children via reproductive technologies or surrogate parenting. These delimitations ensured that this study overcame a common weakness in prior research wherein voluntary and involuntary childlessness was ambiguously and variably defined (Marshall, 1993). Moreover, these criteria ensured that my study and interpretations avoided confounding a history of failed medical treatment for infertility with issues more specific to choosing and living a childfree life.

Finding couples. The research was subject to the University's ethical review process. After receiving ethical approval, potential participants were recruited through advertisements in two community newspapers (see Appendix A). The advertisements were published once in each paper. Couples who were interested in participating in the research project were invited to telephone the researcher. Informal telephone interviews were conducted with the spouse who made this initial contact with me. Interested parties were provided more information during this telephone call about my status and the purpose of the study, as well as the requirements for participation, including the time commitment and type of interviews involved (see Appendix B). As well, I asked them a series of screening questions to insure that they met criteria for entry into the study (see Appendix C). I invited and answered their questions about the study, and informed them of their right to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time. I offered during this telephone call to present the same information to the other spouse if they were available. I then offered to call back in a few days to allow each couple additional time to consider their participation. However, almost all the initial interviews with at least one of the two spouses were scheduled at the end of this first contact. All other spousal interviews were arranged during subsequent telephone calls.

I also informed many colleagues, friends, and family members about this study, inviting them to spread news of the research and to encourage potential participants to telephone me if

interested in obtaining further information. In two cases where acquaintances knew of prospective participants, I provided a copy of the newspaper advertisement to pass on to their friends and colleagues. In another case, I provided my email address to a relative, to forward to an acquaintance. These three couples contacted me by telephone, and I responded to their interest in the manner described above.

Eight couples were recruited over a period of ten days, six through the newspaper advertisements and two through word-of-mouth. A total of 20 couples telephoned me to inquire about the research study, as well as one recently widowed woman of a childless marriage. After screening in six couples, I continued to receive telephone inquiries about the study. The next two couples who called after I had met my recruitment goal were asked if they would be available for future contact if their participation was required. They confirmed their willingness to join the study at a later date if it was convenient for them. The founder of No Kidding, a prominent international social organization for the childless, also contacted me for information on the study. He offered contacts with his members if I required participants for the study.

The surprising numbers and enthusiasm of the respondents to the two recruitment advertisements merit comment. In her research on childless adults, Veevers (1980) described her difficulties locating childless adults as "stalking the silent minority" (p.171). She presumed that childless adults constituted an invisible minority who were reluctant to come forward and give voice to their childless choice. The response rate in the current study suggests that at least in this geographic area, there are many childless individuals who are keen to tell their stories of childlessness. Possibly the steady growth in numbers of this minority group has rendered them more visible and vocal. Overall, it appears that there are ample opportunities to make ready contact with this population for research purposes, a positive development that marks the two decades since Veevers conducted her seminal work in this field of inquiry.

Data Collection

Phenomenological research attempts to gather elaborate descriptions of the experience of a phenomenon under study. Data sources are usually spoken or written accounts of participants' experiences (Osborne, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989), or anecdotes derived from close observation of participants (van Manen, 1997). The current study used the more common and convenient approach of conversational interviewing to gather descriptions of the lived experience of childlessness (van Manen). The goal of the interviews was to elicit rich descriptions of the lived experience of intentional childlessness; transcribed interview texts were the contexts within which I attempted to uncover and interpret meaning.

Assumptions of the interview . The present study applied principles of qualitative interviewing as presented by Kvale (1983, 1996). The goal of the qualitative phenomenological interview is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the participant, with special attention to the interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena. Also, since hermeneutic inquiry seeks meaning in dialogue and subsequently in transcribed text, the interview is theme-oriented and not person-oriented. Hence I did not attempt to ascertain whether descriptions, interpretations, or ascribed meanings corresponded to my participants' personalities or worldviews (Polkinghorne, 1989).

A third principle of phenomenological interviewing is that of viewing a participant as more than a source of data (Kvale, 1996). It was incumbent upon me to attend to the complete person of the participant - verbal, nonverbal, and other expressions of being and to note these unobtrusively in writing during the interview. My holistic attunement to the participant enacted the phenomenological appreciation of embodiment of the self; our bodies move us into the world for perception of and interaction with others (Leonard, 1989).

Kvale (1983) further notes that the phenomenological interview is necessarily open and unstructured in order to accommodate changes in pace, direction, and content, and to invite and

tolerate ambiguities that may not resolve in the immediacy of the interview. The interview is guided less by fixed questions than by a shared focus and purpose to understand a particular experience. Consequently, at the beginning of the interviews I read aloud a prepared orienting statement to help my participants commence description of their lived experiences of intentional childlessness (see Appendix D). The balance of the interview was comprised of open-ended questions, clarifying statements, and probes that were intended to facilitate participants' descriptions of their childlessness in as detailed a manner as possible. All my comments were made judiciously and not for purposes of guiding my participants towards particular opinions about particular themes (Kvale). Ideally, the interview atmosphere is one of shared intellectual curiosity and mutual respect. I attempted to demonstrate my regard for my participants' experiences by consciously suspending expression of my judgements about participants' stories, and by providing them ample time to choose and reflect upon their experiences.

The interview questions were created using van Manen's (1990, 1997) lifeworld existentials of corporeality, relationality, spatiality, and temporality. He proposed that these four existentials can guide inquiries and reveal the "fundamental thematic structure" (1990, p.100) of human experience. These existentials are also cornerstones of Heideggerian existential-phenomenology and therefore appropriately reflected the philosophy and method of this project (e.g., persons as embodied, persons as embedded in a social context, background and tradition).

One set of questions was prepared for the spousal interviews (see Appendix E), and a second set for the conjoint interviews (see Appendix F). Not all questions were asked of participants. Rather, questions were posed to help explore areas which had not emerged in spontaneous conversation, or when participants appeared to be describing lived experiences that related to a particular existential.

In summary, the phenomenological interview focuses on the lifeworld with openness to the lived experiences of participants (Kvale, 1996). It elicits rich and deep description as it seeks

to unveil obscured meaning structures of a phenomenon (van Manen, 1997). The researcher is fully engaged in the encounter and participates in the co-creation and co-interpretation of meaning as it arises in the dialogue (Geanellos, 1998b).

Interview process. In the present study I, the researcher, conducted and audio-taped all interviews. Since the process of collecting data places the phenomenological researcher immediately into the hermeneutic circle (Polkinghorne, 1989), it was imperative that I was directly involved in the data gathering from the outset of this study. I conducted four of the spousal interviews in participants' workplaces; the remaining 20 were conducted in participants' homes. The choices made by participants of the interview environment was significant because the interview is a context-bound and a context-defined experience (Kvale, 1996). I was fortunate to be invited into the environments that contained the participants' activities and practices of daily living. My research thus became another event in the ordinary spaces of their lifeworlds, and in turn was imbued with the meanings inherent in those spaces. I sat on a tiny chair in a kindergarten classroom while interviewing the teacher at the 'snack table', and in a plain interview room at a police headquarters while speaking with a peace officer. Perched on a work bench in a high school woodworking shop, a participant displayed for me the projects of grade eight students whilst P.A. announcements punctuated our conversation. In participants' homes I petted cats and talked to dogs, and was invited to sip tea and enjoy snacks. I was extremely flattered by participants' keen invitations to view projects and spaces in their homes that truly reflected their interests and the dailiness of their lives. I was shown a drumset in a home studio, an extraordinary aviary filled with exotic birds, an ongoing kitchen renovation, and artistic projects of great talent and beauty. These glimpses into participants' lives provided the interviews unspoken richness and authenticity.

Individual spouses were interviewed first about their lived experiences of voluntary childlessness. Research and anecdotal reports suggest that men and women experience voluntary

childlessness differently, both intra- and interpersonally (Gergen, 1990; Ireland, 1993; Lunneborg, 1999). Moreover, spouses may have refrained from fully disclosing their personal descriptions while in each other's presence, particularly in an initial research interview. Hence spouses were interviewed separately first, in order to elicit elaborate, personalized accounts of their childlessness with the opportunity to speak freely of their unique histories, feelings, and experiences that might not emerge in accounts of their shared lived experiences. These interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours and 15 minutes.

At the beginning of each individual spousal interview I presented two copies of the consent form for participants' signatures. I briefly described ethical considerations of confidentiality, use of the research findings, and freedom to terminate their participation at any time during the study (see Appendix G). This consent included participation in the conjoint marital interview. All participants were also asked to choose a pseudonym, known only to the participant and myself, for the purpose of ensuring participants' anonymity.

Within two weeks of completing both individual interviews I met with each couple for a conjoint interview. Those interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. The focus of this interview was explicitly on the shared experiences and meanings that each couple attributed to their intentionally childless status as it manifests in their daily living. Couples were also invited to elaborate on their marriages, in relation to their childlessness. These interviews were intended to address the portion of this study's research question concerning couples' co-creation of meaning around their childless choice. Since I wished to maximize opportunities for them to describe their marital experiences of childlessness, I refrained from making references to lived experiences described by spouses during their individual interviews. Also, I was bound by ethical requirements to protect the confidentiality of disclosures made by spouses in the privacy of their individual interviews.

The purpose of the conjoint or "marital" interview was two-fold. First, the couples' interview reflected the Heideggerian notion that individuals co-constitute and co-interpret lived experiences (Koch, 1994; Leonard, 1989; Walters, 1995). "Understanding the relational and configurational context allows for an appropriate interpretation of the significance that things have for a person" (Leonard, p.46). This study presumed that both the individual and the shared lived experiences and meaning-making of intentional childlessness that occur in the context of marriage can be further elaborated through co-presentation of descriptions, that is, through conjoint interviews. According to Moustakas (1994), "in the back and forth of social interaction the challenge is to discover what is really true of the phenomena of interpersonal knowledge and experience" (p. 57). Finally, the two-tiered approach to interviewing in my study was methodologically consistent with the movement between parts (individual spouses), and between parts and the whole (spouses and the couple) inherent in the interpretive process of the hermeneutic circle.

The two-week break between completion of individual interviews and conjoint interviews provided me time to listen to each spouse's taped interview and to orient myself more thoroughly to their respective stories. I wrote extensively in my research journal during this two week period on my early impressions of the interviews and the participants. As the interviews accumulated over time, I relied heavily on my writing to keep my impressions organized and to insure that the sixteen spousal accounts remained separate and distinct from one another. I also hoped that by writing and re-listening to audio-tapes I would become more attuned to the explicit and implicit dynamics of the participants' childfree lives, and thus enter the conjoint interviews with greater sensitivity and focus. This time period also provided the opportunity for me to listen for any emergent expressions of difference between spouses as they described their lives without children. Indeed, the sociocultural discourse of parenthood and childlessness implies significant

gender and role differences in the evaluation and attribution of meaning to the childless choice (Ireland, 1993; Lisle, 1996).

The validation interviews were conducted after data collection and analysis was completed for all interviews, that is, approximately ten months after the original interviews. The validation interviews were conducted with 12 spouses from seven couples. One man declined to participate in the validation interview, citing time constraints and his difficulty reading lengthy documents. His wife read and provided feedback on the women's material. Another man could not be reached for discussion of the men's material, but his wife participated in a validation interview. One couple had relocated from the Lower Mainland and could not be reached. Prior to the validation interviews, I telephoned each couple and advised one of the spouses that the analysis was complete and the findings were ready for their feedback. I offered to schedule either telephone or in-person interviews to hear their feedback, after a minimum two week period in which they could read and reflect on my findings. One day after this telephone contact, each participant was provided a copy of the results of the study that pertained to his or her gender. Each couple also received a biographical description of their married lives. A cover letter invited each participant to review the written material, and included the principal question with which to guide their reading: "Do these findings resonate generally with your experiences as a childless man/woman?" Each couple was also asked to review their biosynopsis to ensure accuracy of information.

The participants were telephoned for their feedback within three weeks of receiving their reading material. Those who could be reached expressed a preference to discuss their impressions during a telephone conversation rather than an in-person interview. These telephone consultations varied in length from ten to 20 minutes, and one interview lasted for two hours. The primary purpose of these validation interviews was to achieve consensual validity of my findings. I first ensured that I correctly recorded information in each couple's biographical

review. Three participants requested small corrections such as time dating prior to marriage, and number of siblings. I then discussed with each participant whether and in what ways the themes I uncovered in my analysis fit with their lived experiences of intentional childlessness. I made notes during these conversations, and in one case I used a telephone answering machine to audiotape our conversation.

All five of the men participating in the validation interviews confirmed that the findings of the study resonated with their personal experiences of voluntary childlessness. Comments ranged from "I really felt it did fit", "it rang quite true", "I enjoyed the read-I could generally relate to most of it", and "it fits excellent-I really enjoyed it". Six of the seven women participants similarly validated the descriptive themes and meaning themes as apt reflections of their childfree lives. One woman commented that the findings "jived very much with me and my life", and another commented that she saw "a lot of common connections. It felt really familiar and I saw I'm not alone out there." A third woman reflected on her reading that the findings were "very interesting-I recall feeling in sync with it all. I totally related to it." One woman lauded the document as "...very positive. If I was younger and childless and trying to make a decision, it would maybe influence me to decide not to have children, as a positive choice." This same participant requested some editorial changes to text comments to insure anonymity and more accurately depict her work and relationships. She also requested changes to quotations derived from her interview, as she felt her initial dialogue was awkward and imprecise. For example, she requested that the word "reverent" be replaced with "highly respected" in her descriptions of the maternal body, and that her nieces viewed her life as "interesting" rather than "exciting." We agreed that these revisions did not alter the content and intended meaning of her original statements. Hence I was not compelled to revisit my interpretations of her comments, or their contribution to the descriptive themes that emerged across all the women participants.

Another woman participant expressed concern about her excerpts in the document,

stating that "I sounded superficial and glib, but that's not how I really feel. I take my life seriously. It's how my words came across... ." Despite her concerns about her use of language, this woman denied that I had construed or presented her comments in a manner she had not intended. Upon re-reading segments of the document that included her quotes, I did not make any changes to my text or to her quoted material. As per my initial impressions of this participant, I viewed her input as highly relevant to my overall interpretations. Indeed, she made several comments that succinctly reflected common ideas and themes that arose among the other women's material. She also confirmed that she felt strongly connected to the themes and experiences reported by the other women. Finally, one of the women requested that I delete one of her self-descriptions as a "rescuer and saviour." Although she was uncomfortable with her choice of words she could not think of any alternative phrases that she felt better-captured her orientation to work. Hence I did not delete these terms.

Only one of the seven women contacted for validation interviews stated that she "could not relate to the other women" whose lives were portrayed in the findings. She stated that her "gut feeling" upon reading the document was that "we were all a bunch of sadsacks." With respect to the descriptive themes across the four existentials, she emphasized that the themes also characterize the lives and aspirations of parents. In her view, the document incorrectly presented childless women as unique. We discussed her ideas via email and on the telephone, and she expressed her relief and satisfaction that my overall research findings concurred with her belief that although childless adults are in the minority, they are not particularly unusual or unique in their daily living, among the larger collective of adults in society. She did not identify specific instances in which my descriptions or interpretations imbued the text with a sadness or negativity (as per her comment of "sadsacks"). I therefore did not attempt to rework the text to integrate this feedback.

Data Analysis

Interview transcription. The object of study in this research project was text, a written transcription of any discourse (conversation or speech) (van Manen, 1997). Data in the present study were the written transcriptions of audio-taped interviews. Each interview was transcribed verbatim. After they were returned from the transcriber, I listened to each tape and read along with the transcription, adding notes about vocal pace, tone, inflections, and other nuances of the dialogue. After making very few corrections to the transcribed documents, I added observations from my interview notes about physical or nonverbal gestures. My attention to physical and vocal expression thus reflected the Heideggerian holistic view of persons as embodied (Leonard, 1989).

I transcribed the first two spousal interviews, a critical means of immersing myself in the interview data. This exercise was also a point of entry into the hermeneutic circle with my initial global expectations of meaning, and my subsequent reactions to the interview. As I listened to my participants' voices and recorded their words in written form, I recalled additional details of those interviews and noted them in my research journal. Professional transcription services were utilized for the remaining 22 audio-taped interviews.

Thematic analysis. The goal of data analysis in this hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry was to determine the underlying structures of meaning that constitute the lived experience of voluntary childlessness, for spouses and for couples. According to van Manen (1997), we discern meaning in texts by uncovering themes in experiential accounts. Themes comprise the sense we make of our lived experience.

In this study my initial attempt at data analysis followed the protocol suggested by Smith and Osborn (2003), who emphasize that "meanings are not transparently available-they must be obtained through a sustained engagement with the text and a process of interpretation" (p. 64). My exploration of interview texts for underlying meaning themes commenced with

approximately two general readings of the entire account or story provided by each man. In this initial stage of analysis I worked in detail with one account at a time, and moved forward case by case among the men's transcripts. After the preliminary readings I began to make notes in the left margin of the transcript that referred to ideas or comments of interest to me. At times I jotted brief summaries or paraphrased a participant's comment, or made associations or comparisons to other comments elsewhere in the text. On a few occasions I re-listened to the audio-tape of the interview to clarify phrases or comments that were confusing in written form. I then noted my revised understanding of such material in the left-hand margin of the transcripts. According to Smith and Osborn, this process of reading, listening, and note-making invites free reflection on the text and is unconstrained by categories or units of analysis.

After completing this thorough review of a transcript, I undertook the second stage of analysis, the task of distilling emerging themes from the notes in the left margin. These themes were intended to raise the interpretive process to a slightly higher level of abstraction, from which commonalities could be identified and merged across different texts (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The themes were also expected to relate more clearly to theoretical principles and to invoke more psychological terminology. All of these themes were then noted on a separate page where I sought connections between them. This first list was ordered chronologically, according to the sequence in which material emerged in the interview. I then attempted to re-order them by examining commonalities between themes, and clustering them according to similarities in content. Throughout this portion of the analysis, I revisited the transcript to ensure that the theme or group of themes was clearly connected to the actual material in the text from which it was first derived. I isolated pieces of transcript that best illuminated those theme-clusters to insert later into the text of findings. Finally, I attempted to name the theme-clusters and identify any constructs that appeared to represent groups of theme-clusters.

I pursued this protocol for analysis on each of the eight men's transcripts. Unfortunately, the analysis produced an unwieldy volume of material across all transcripts, and a long list of thematic ideas and theme-clusters impressed me as repetitive and inadequate for discerning any robust or substantial meaning-themes. Although there were some notions in several transcripts that seemed promising for future development, I remained skeptical that continuing a similar process for the women's and couples' transcripts would be the best means for determining underlying meaning-structures. I became particularly frustrated by the realization that I was spending more effort containing and seeking ways to organize my ideas from the margin notes, than I was thinking and writing about the more salient points among those notes. I was thus motivated to abandon this analytic process and seek out an alternative protocol that would allow me to spend more effort exploring ideas than listing and organizing them.

I subsequently turned to van Manen's (1990, 1997) heuristic of the lived existentials with which to guide the analysis, interpretation, and writing for all the transcribed interviews. This approach allowed me to frame my exploration of the interview texts using the same existential constructs that guided construction of my interview questions. In effect, the four existentials became the scaffolding around which I slowly began to construct descriptions of the lives of these men. By this time I was well-acquainted with their accounts, and before returning to the transcripts I sketched out some of the dimensions within each existential that I recalled from the men's stories. Encouraged by the fluidity of this process, I immersed myself once again in the first of the men's transcripts and began looking for experiences denoting the four existentials, working on one transcript at a time. The left margin notes were left untouched, and I turned my attention to the clusters of meaning-themes I had generated in the previous analysis. Here I began to identify descriptions, insights, and comments that suggested different existentials. I coded these according to each existential, and transferred those coded notes into their respective existential categories. I followed this procedure for each transcript. After reviewing and coding

all thematic materials within each transcript, I transferred the contents for each existential in each transcript, to 'grand' files for the four existentials. Within these final 'grand' files, I sought sub-themes or facets of the existentials for which participants had provided rich descriptions. For example, the notion of unknowable time emerged from repeated expressions of concern by participants about the future. And descriptions of relationships easily clustered into those with children and friends.

At several junctures I was stymied by the large number of vivid descriptions that the participants provided of their daily lives. At risk of incorporating too much thematic material into the existentials, I followed van Manen's (1990) advice to continually re-orient myself to my research question and to the phenomenon of inquiry. I also struggled at times to discern important descriptive material and thematic ideas from less compelling but equally interesting notions. On these occasions I put the materials in question onto a short list entitled 'maybe'. I returned to these ideas at the end of a full analysis of each transcript, and often discovered that they elaborated on a particular existential. Some threads of thematic material remained too specific to a participant's account or were applicable to the participant's lived experiences beyond the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness. These "incidental" themes (van Manen) were not essential to constructing a description of the meaning of voluntary childlessness. They remained on the diminished 'maybe' list of less relevant material and were not further incorporated into the analysis and writing processes.

After all the men's accounts were analysed, the thematic material and accompanying quotes and descriptions for each transcript were merged into one file for each existential. These compilations of excerpts and ideas from all the transcripts comprised the foundations for writing about the sub-themes within each lived existential. Development of the sub-themes required constant revisitation to the texts to insure commonalities across the men's stories, and to find citations that clearly illustrated these emergent ideas. Since these sub-themes were derived

specifically from participants' descriptions of their lived experiences, they were designated as the "descriptive themes" among findings of this study. I followed the same process of analysis and writing for the women's and couples' transcripts.

My principal challenge in moving from the men's to the women's transcripts was to establish an open and receptive stance to the women's stories and ideas, attuned to expressions of any subtle differences from the men's transcripts. However, I also sought to retain awareness of my findings from the men's transcripts as clues to seeking out any similarities in the women's transcripts. Not surprisingly, I relied more on my personal journal writings as I worked with the women's transcripts. I found myself reflecting on and comparing my lived experiences with those of the women participants, thereby consciously using myself as an interpretive instrument and guide to deepen my exploration of their accounts. I was keenly aware that in this portion of the analysis I had become fully ensconced in the hermeneutic circle.

The reading and analysis of the 24 transcripts was a lengthy process. As van Manen (1997) emphasizes, lengthy periods of writing and re-writing followed the reading of transcripts. Writing became the critical means of exploring the participants' accounts and elaborating my descriptions of the existential categories. After I had completed writing those descriptions, I undertook to transform them to a higher level of abstraction. At this stage of writing and analysis, I sought underlying meaning themes within and across the four existentials. I hoped to find themes that both unified the descriptive themes, while deepening our understanding of the meaning of voluntary childlessness. These meaning-themes emerged through a lengthy writing process in which I explored in my research journal the critical or most impactful dimensions of the stories told by the participants. In my emotional and intellectual reactions to the participants' stories, in the texts and in the existential descriptions of participants' lives, I eventually discerned two underlying constructs that were separate yet related. I wrote about one until the other took form as its mirror reflection.

Data presentation. I have presented the descriptive themes of participants' lived experiences of childlessness using van Manen's (1997) four lived existentials of body, relation, space, and time. Hence the findings are organized in a manner that reflects my original conceptualizations of the lived experience of voluntary childlessness, the questions that were utilized in the interviews, and the interpretation and analysis of the data. The existentials thus provided a unifying and consistent structure around which to cohere the different stages and processes of this study. The meaning-themes were distilled from the participants' descriptions of the lived existentials and are presented as meta-themes or meta-constructs of meaning, separate from the descriptive themes.

Criteria for Evaluating Trustworthiness of the Study

Hermeneutic phenomenological research strives to illuminate meaning of particular lived experiences; the focus of all research is on Dasein, or human-being-in-the-world where all knowledge and understanding is interpreted within a given context. This study sought to reveal spouses' and couples' experiences of voluntary childlessness, and the meaning inherent in those experiences. As with all phenomenological inquiry, this study was tasked with maintaining maximum rigour of method and presentation of interpretations. However, traditional criteria of validity and reliability associated with rigour in empirically-based psychological inquiry are incongruent with the paradigmatic assumptions of qualitative methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Osborne, 1990; Stiles, 1993; Walters, 1995). For example, in qualitative inquiry, objectivity is replaced with the notion of fidelity to the phenomenon as it is described in the researcher's text (Colaizzi, 1976). Moreover, respectful listening replaces observation, description replaces measurement, openness to self and text replaces theory, and compelling statements of interpretation replace truth-value (Osborne, 1994).

Rather than construing and applying conventional notions of rigour to qualitative methods, qualitative researchers should be focused on "...creating the evocative, true-to-life, and

meaningful portraits, stories, and landscapes of human experience that constitute the best test of rigor in qualitative work" (Sandelowski, 1993, p. 1). The caliber of phenomenological research therefore becomes defined in terms of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Mishler, 1990). This construct implies qualities of persuasiveness (Sandelowski), credibility (Beck, 1993), auditability (Koch, 1994; Lincoln & Guba), fidelity of the text to participants' stories (Colaizzi, 1976; Kvale, 1996; Stiles, 1993), and coherence (Stiles).

This study featured four means of determining the trustworthiness of method and results. First, I sought a straightforward evaluation of the accuracy of my interpretations by asking my participants during validation interviews to review my findings and assess them for congruence between my interpretations and their accounts of childlessness (Koch, 1994; Kvale, 1996; Stiles, 1993). I thus obtained estimates of the consensual or testimonial validity (Stiles) of the findings. The goal was to hear participants accept the written accounts as consistent with what they had revealed (Polkinghorne, 1989). Moreover, the participants verified that the overall written descriptions and meaning structures of the lived experience of intentional childlessness resonated with familiarity and relevance. According to Sandelowski (1993), the researcher's responsibility is to "strive to represent multiple realities in a way that still remains faithful to each member's reality" (p. 5).

To further support my pursuit of testimonial validity, I forwarded the findings of the study to a voluntarily childless couple who did not participate in my study (Shapiro, cited in Osborne, 1990). This couple was located through word-of-mouth referral. They were unavailable to participate in the research study but agreed to read and comment on my findings. Both spouses confirmed that the findings achieved a degree of "fittingness" between my interpretations and their lived experience of voluntary childlessness (Koch, 1994). The wife confirmed that "it all made sense to me, and I could relate to most of it," and her husband stated "I understood your entire chapter and resonated with most of it." This feedback from my external readers indicated

that my descriptions of the lived experience and meaning of intentional childlessness demonstrate an empathic generalizability to others' grasp of the phenomena (Osborne, 1994).

A third means of enhancing trustworthiness of my findings was achieved through demonstration of good scientific practice (Sandelowski, 1993). I made visible to the reader all steps of my research method and protocol for data analysis; in effect, I provided sufficient descriptions in the text to comprise an audit or decision trail (Koch, 1994; Sandelowski, 1986). This trail demonstrates how my procedure, exploration of text, and interpretations are interrelated, congruent, and consistent with the philosophical underpinnings of the study. The trail includes full disclosure of my pre-understandings and how I incorporated them into the hermeneutic circle of interpretation and understanding (Gadamer, 1988; Stiles, 1993). I developed and maintained this audit trail in both my personal and research journals. In my personal journal I wrote about my process of exploring voluntary childlessness as I read my participants' accounts, and the events in my personal life that seemed germane to my research as they unfolded during this one year period. In my research journal I noted all my observations and ideas about the interviews and transcripts, and sketched out my ideas as they took shape during the analysis. Finally, I kept all my notes and feedback during conversations with my committee members in a "consultation file." This accounting of the interdependence of my personal and research processes demonstrates how I situated myself in this research project and co-constituted the descriptions and meanings of voluntary childlessness with my participants (Mishler, 1990; Sandelowski, 1986). I believe that this portion of the audit trail enables readers to evaluate my research in terms of its integrity and quality of method rather than in terms of the replicability of my findings (Sandelowski, 1986).

Finally, this study incorporated the notion of "gestalt validity" to reflect the coherence and cohesiveness of my interpretations of meaning structures of the lived experience of voluntary childlessness (Packer & Addison, 1989). According to Stiles (1993), "coherence

includes... comprehensiveness of the elements to be interpreted and the relations between elements, and usefulness in encompassing new elements as they come into view" (p. 608). Gestalt validity echoes the formative processes at work in the hermeneutic circle whereby understanding occurs by linking together the constituent elements of meaning structures (Moustakas, 1994). I achieved this coherence by carefully selecting "parts" of the text in words, phrases, and stories and illustrating their relevance to the larger meaning themes or "wholes" uncovered in the text. The reader may thus see how constituent pieces form units and patterns of meaning and how they derive from my intuitive and/or logical interpretive processes. Conversely, the reader can work backwards from the description of the common meaning themes, to supporting content from the text (Polkinghorne, 1989).

A second approach to achieving coherence was to critique my interpretation of meaning by seeking disconfirming examples in the text (Packer & Addison, 1989). At times I reflected on the questions: "in what way is this material different?", "what is not being said?" and "why is this not said by others?" Discovering contrary or disconfirming evidence of themes invited me to look more deeply into participants' accounts. At times these forays into exceptional material provided me with examples that resonated with findings in the literature. Most importantly, these questions prevented me from lapsing into organization of text into gestalts that merely confirmed my own experiences and those reported by the other participants.

According to Kvale (1996), persistent attention to validity can erode the relevance and worth of a study. In efforts to offset a process of defensive legitimization of my research findings, I chose to incorporate the above principles of trustworthiness because they are philosophically and methodologically congruent and relevant to hermeneutic phenomenology. My task was to present for the reader an interpretation of my participants' lived experience and its meaning, in a powerful and convincing manner that upholds the above criteria. In effect, I was challenged to reflect and write in a manner that is strong and oriented to the lived experience

under investigation (van Manen, 1997). Accordingly, "achieving an understanding of the investigated phenomenon qualifies exquisitely as a criterion for research knowledge" (Colaizzi, 1976, p. 56).

Summary

The final product of this study is my interpretation of voluntary childlessness, a product of co-construction with my pre-understandings, my participants, and my encounters with the text. Other researchers of different backgrounds and traditions may have elicited different descriptions from which they could construe different interpretations and meanings. However, in the spirit of hermeneutic inquiry, I assume that a full understanding of the phenomenon under study is not achievable because a final analysis is never attained (Hein & Austin, 2001). Instead, readers of the text will continue in a circular process of inquiry, thus adding and deepening perspectives on voluntary childlessness.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

This chapter opens with a brief biography of each of the eight couples in this study. I next present the descriptive themes that arose from participants' accounts of their voluntary childlessness, across the four existentials of lived experience. The descriptive themes are discussed separately for the women and men, then compared in light of their similarities and differences. The next section provides an overview of findings from the conjoint interviews, in which couples described their shared experiences of voluntary childlessness. In the final portion of the chapter I present two meta-themes of meaning that encompass and augment the descriptive themes across the four existentials, and that deepen our understanding of the lived experience of voluntary childlessness.

Participants' Biographies

Six of the couples in this study were recruited through a newspaper advertisement in a large city of the Lower Mainland. Two couples were recruited through word-of-mouth contacts. All participants selected a pseudonym to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The following profiles of couples highlight their family background, the route they took to arrive at their childless choice, and some attributes of their lifestyles.

Mynh and Angel. Mynh, age 43, and Angel, age 46, have been married for 12 years. Each comes from a small family; Angel has one sister who is single and childless, and Mynh has a sister whose two boys he and Angel indulge with gifts and holidays. The pair met when he was doing business as a bailiff with her law firm and they married eight months later. They live in a beautifully restored heritage home in a historical neighbourhood in a suburb near Vancouver. They share the home with a menagerie of animals that are the objects of Angel's passionate devotion to animal welfare. This is Angel's third marriage and Mynh's second. Both are committed to their careers: Angel has built a successful practice in matrimonial law and Mynh is

a peace officer. Mynh intends to return to school in the near future to pursue graduate training in the helping professions. Angel's career takes up much of her time, and the couple spends their precious time together at home with occasional dinners out. Travelling provides welcome opportunities for them to spend extended time together. Both try to find time to sit on community volunteer boards, and Angel is heavily involved with the local Humane Society.

Mynh was sure from a young age that he did not wish to become a father. During our interview he explained his reluctance to assume the burdens and responsibilities of parenthood. He candidly described the limits of his capacity to love and care for anyone other than his wife. He also expressed his unwillingness to bring a child into the world "to suffer the slings and arrows" of life. Mynh had entered his first marriage with the shared understanding that both he and his wife did not want to have children. Much to his surprise, a few years into the marriage his wife announced a change of heart and asked him to reconsider his childless choice. Mynh could not muster the desire or will to change his life course, so both departed the marriage on good terms. When Mynh met Angel, he counted himself lucky to have met a woman who was similarly convinced that she did not wish to pursue having children. Instead, she expressed her desire to devote herself to her career and to her interests in animal welfare. Eight years into the marriage, Angel broached the subject of revisiting their childless choice. Again Mynh declined to reconsider his childless choice, and the couple has moved on from that somewhat difficult period with the renewed agreement that children will not be a part of their lives. Mynh expressed his devotion to Angel, an appreciation of her integrity and respect for their initial childless choice and of her acceptance of his limits to "love her and only her."

Angel could not ever recall being attracted to babies or imagining herself a mother. She described how the option of motherhood always seemed ill-suited to her future aspirations of establishing a career and achieving financial security and independence. Although Angel finds most children delightful, she questions her capacity to tolerate misbehaving and difficult

behaviour on a continual basis. She has enjoyed children's company on a short-term basis of brief visits, but has few children in her daily life.

Despite her long-held assumption that motherhood would never be part of her future, Angel recalled a period of emerging dissonance around her childlessness when she was approximately forty two years old. At that time she was seeing a psychologist to address some dissatisfactions in life. As Angel reflected in our interview on this time period, she wondered if the psychologist had "planted the seed in my mind that maybe that was what was missing in my life." Angel felt compelled to reexamine her childless choice, and she embarked on an uncomfortable and confusing time of inner dialogue to determine what she truly wanted. She added that her physician agreed that she ought to become a mother, causing her to further question her life-long conviction that motherhood was not right for her. Angel explained that looking back at this unsettling time of conflicted values and viewpoints, she now considers it to have been an important exercise in self-exploration. She emerged from this difficult episode with renewed conviction that her childlessness is indeed a natural choice, a choice consonant with her self-concept as a career-focused individual with a wide array of interests awaiting her pursuit. She also reaffirmed her dedication to animals as a critical life purpose, one that she was loath to compromise by undertaking life with children.

Brett and Roberta. Brett and Roberta have been married for 13 years. They met through a mutual friend in the public library system where they both worked in the children's departments at separate libraries. Brett is 50 years old and this is his second marriage; Roberta is 40 years old and this is her first marriage. Brett has no children from his first marriage. Roberta has one sister with children, and Brett has three siblings, two of which have children. Each has undertaken numerous career changes. Most recently they sold a restaurant that they operated for five years. Their work histories included working in the public library system, and Brett's twenty year history as an itinerant school teacher. Both have undergraduate degrees.

At the time of our interviews, Brett and Roberta were taking a career break and contemplating options for their next vocation, their upcoming tour of Canada, and their subsequent geographic relocation from the Vancouver area to Vancouver Island. The pair expressed an optimistic and open attitude towards the unknowns of their future. They have undertaken a lifestyle that features a minimalist approach to meeting their needs in part by eschewing the hectic lifestyle and materialism of urban culture. In recent years, the couple have been caretakers to Brett's parents. Their other activities include watching educational television, outdoor exercise, reading and volunteer work. Brett and Roberta place high value on being socially and politically aware, and they enjoy the intellectual stimulation of one another's critical thinking. Three cats live and travel with them.

Roberta was keenly aware from her teen years that society expected women to marry and have children. She rejected the social norm that marriage and motherhood were synonymous, and was careful to express her childless choice to Brett while they were dating. Brett entered the marriage open to either reproductive choice. He explained a lifelong propensity to resist pressure to conform to common social norms, and he readily dismissed such norms as relevant guiding principles for living his life. He accepted Roberta's preference for childlessness without hesitation, a gesture of respect and support for her need to explore life without the constraints and obligations of motherhood. Neither Roberta or Brett have revisited their childless choice. They did not report any instances of wondering about the path of parenthood they did not take in their married life. Rather, they focus their energies and attention on their next travel and vocational adventures. Brett and Roberta appear to move through life as a tightly knit team, setting joint goals to pursue life projects that provide them with new challenges and opportunities to grow. They live with an easy spontaneity and confidence in their decisions, willing to live without conventional assurances of steady employment or long-term residency in any one home or community.

Ernst and Doll. Ernst, age 50, and Doll, age 44, have enjoyed their childless marriage for 23 years. Five years ago the pair had the frightening experience of Ernst's heart attack, an event which was not unexpected in light of his family history of coronary problems. He has since made a strong recovery and has resumed full involvement in work and leisure activities. Ernst is a heavy duty mechanic in the aviation industry, and Doll has worked for over 20 years as a nurse's aide in the same continuing care facility. Ernst departed early from an undergraduate program in political science to pursue a trade in which he had natural skills, and Doll is currently upgrading her education in order to pursue post-secondary training in another career outside of health care. Ernst has also been active in the union at his workplace and previously enjoyed a position in which he helped to identify problems and resolve conflicts. He and Doll also expressed a "social conscience" that directs their attention to environmental issues, health care issues, and other matters of broad social impact. Both Ernst and Doll described their marriage as a companionship and ongoing dialogue in which they actively share and explore ideas. Pursuing matters of intellectual interest and stimulation is a fundamental value in their marriage. They have maintained contact with nieces and nephews and Doll in particular expressed much delight in her relationship with these children. The pair are long-term residents of a seaside community south of Vancouver.

Ernst entered his marriage with the assumption that he would likely have children, an assumption consistent with his experience of a large nuclear and extended family. From his parents' union Ernst has five siblings, all of whom have children and from his mother's second marriage, he has two half-siblings. Doll was ambivalent about motherhood in her early twenties when she married Ernst. She admitted that she had never felt "broody" and was not particularly drawn to children. She is from a medium-size family of three siblings, only one of whom has children. Doll grew up with virtually no experience of an extended family. Ernst and Doll's childless choice evolved over several years during which they occasionally visited the subject of

parenthood and each time postponed a final decision. Doll also harboured concerns about Ernst's probable short lifespan because of his family history of heart problems. She was reluctant to undertake the commitment to parenthood only to find herself a widow raising children on her own.

At the age of 40 Ernst finalized the childless choice on behalf of the marriage. He feared that a change of heart to pursue parenthood by either himself or Doll would constitute too great a burden for his future. He thus announced his intention to follow through on his previous suggestions that he would have a vasectomy. Doll did not resist his decision. Ernst admitted that he occasionally reflects on the forgone possibility of raising children and wonders how fatherhood would have shaped his life. Nonetheless, he denied any tendency to dwell on this life choice and to second guess whether it was the best one for him. Doll also firmly believed that the childless choice has best met her needs for a quiet and predictable lifestyle. Both Doll and Ernst are content to enjoy the close companionship of their marriage, and to pursue their intellectual and political interests. Neither of them expressed regrets for their childless choice.

Gord and Buffy. Gord, age 40, and Buffy, age 43, were the youngest couple in this study. They have been married for eleven years and live in a comfortable subdivision in a desirable residential community thirty minutes from Vancouver. They share their home with a Great Dane that enjoys their loving attention and that Buffy considers their child. Buffy has pursued a dual career in health care administration and counselling and has graduate degrees in both fields. Gord has made a few career transitions in his life, and currently owns a practice as a denturist. This is Gord's first marriage and Buffy's second marriage. Her first marriage was a brief childless union while she was a student in her early twenties. Gord and Buffy are devoted to their nieces and nephews with whom they have ongoing contact that includes visits to their home as well as attending the children's events and activities. Rather than undertaking the continuous commitment of parenthood, this couple enjoys the benefits of being aunt and uncle: they have

meaningful relationships with children but still have the time and energy to spend on a range of adult interests and activities. Gord and Buffy admitted that they do not share many pastimes. Rather, they pursue their respective interests on their own time. Buffy has continued with graduate school and other professional development, and is very involved in equestrian sports. Gord is a sports enthusiast and musician. Such diversity of pursuits helps each to maintain a valued sense of independence within the marriage.

Gord described his childlessness as the natural outcome of never having felt a desire or need to have children. He has four siblings of whom three have children. He does not envy them for all the accommodations and sacrifices they make in order to meet their children's needs. Gord also conceded that he lacks the energy to parent small children, and that he may have become resentful of the demands placed on him by children. In short, he more readily saw parenthood as a series of personal sacrifices and losses that could not be outweighed by the rewards of parenthood. Gord emphasized his personal commitment to live his life to the fullest, a commitment that includes involvement with his nieces and nephews and maintaining a healthy relationship with his wife. Gord perceives that the childless choice is the primary means of preserving his freedom to be and do as he wishes in the present. He is delighted that he need not wait for children to grow up until he can experience the freedom he now enjoys every day.

Buffy's childless choice reflects her lifelong disinterest in children and absence of any self-image as a potential mother. Her childless choice contrasts with her sister's enjoyment of motherhood. Buffy noted that even as her girlfriends were having children she remained uninterested in their experiences of pregnancy and childbearing. Rather, she finds herself consistently drawn to animals as objects for her affection and caretaking. Buffy reported a brief shift in her conviction to remain childless after attending a friend's labour and delivery. The birth elicited some mixed feelings about her own rejection of motherhood. However, these feelings dissipated quickly without causing any dissonance about her childless choice. Buffy also

explained how her emotional reaction to a pregnancy scare further confirmed that she did not want to pursue motherhood, either by accident or intention. Buffy views her pets and horses as her children and indulges them with the same care and adoration she believes that a mother would offer her children. She also believes that her nurturing tendencies are fulfilled as a devoted aunt to her nieces and nephews.

Josh and Anna. Josh, age 56, and Anna, age 53, have been married for 19 of the 22 years they have been together as a couple. This is the first marriage for each of them, and both expressed their appreciation that the marriage allows them ample independence and time to pursue their respective interests and pastimes. They tend not to spend a lot of time together in their daily lives. As a result, their annual summer travels have become an important means of compensating for their independent lifestyles throughout the balance of the year.

Both Josh and Anna are of Jewish heritage. Although Josh is not a practicing Jew, Anna has maintained a stronger orientation to her faith and culture through ongoing contact with her family. Josh has two brothers, one of whom is childless and unmarried and one who co-parents a son with whom he does not live. Anna has three siblings, all of whom have children. Maintaining relationships with her nieces is a source of great pleasure in Anna's life. Josh and Anna are both long-term educators; Anna is a high school itinerant teacher, and Josh is a university instructor with a lengthy history of teaching high school. Both have graduate degrees in their fields.

Anna denied ever having been interested in becoming a mother and suggested that motherhood "was never even part of my constitution." She could not recall having discussed the childless choice with Josh when they married. Rather, she assumed that because he failed to raise the issue he was similarly not predisposed to have children. Anna admitted that her childless choice was significantly influenced by her intense desire to avoid the responsibility and accountability to children's well-being. Through teaching and counselling teens in the school

system, she has found an enjoyable and rewarding alternate means of establishing relationships with children and of contributing to their development.

Josh could not remember ever wanting or thinking about having children. He explained that the topic of parenthood never came up during their marriage, and he thus assumed that it was unimportant to them both. Josh suggested that if he had married a woman who insisted on pursuing family life with children he may have conceded to her wishes. However, he is still unsure whether he could have overridden his preferred choice that he credits with having provided him many rich opportunities to travel, to learn, and to enjoy time alone with himself and his interests. Josh also admitted that he had always feared having a seriously ill or disabled child, a situation that he believes would have rendered his life very difficult and unhappy. He also expressed his relief that his childless choice has spared him the trials and turmoil associated with parenthood. Nonetheless, Josh acknowledged that "it would be nice" to now have an adult child in his life with whom he could share interests and a friendly companionship. He and Anna both affirmed, however, that the childless choice has afforded them a life of freedom and opportunities that would have been significantly curtailed if they had opted to have children.

Phil and Sharlene. Phil, age 62, and Sharlene, age 54, have been married for 32 years. Phil was a visitor to Canada from Australia when he first met Sharlene through a mutual acquaintance. Their relationship started without regard for tradition or social convention; Phil proposed to Sharlene during intermission at a movie on their first date. The two weathered a brief and secretive courtship during which Sharlene risked detection by her strict and very religious family. Her religious background prohibited her marriage to a non-church member, so she and Phil eloped to the U.S. after three months of clandestine dating. Phil had similarly abandoned his religious background a few years earlier, and he endeavoured to support Sharlene as she struggled to re-negotiate relationships with her mother and siblings. Sharlene comes from a family of several brothers and sisters, of whom only one sister did not have children for

unknown reasons. The family's religious faith compelled them all to have children with the belief that "children are a gift from God." Phil has a large family of siblings and half-siblings, all of whom have children. The couple have close relationships with Phil's brother's children who reside in their neighbourhood. Phil has spent his career as an aircraft instrument technician, and Sharlene is a long-term office employee at a local university.

Sharlene reported that aside from baking, she does not have many hobbies. Rather, she spent many years typing theses for graduate students during her non-work hours, and volunteered with the cancer society for 13 years after she lost her sister to cancer. She explained that she has always supported Phil's hobbies and activities and is now helping him rebuild their kitchen. In contrast, Phil listed a plethora of activities, interests, and hobbies that he actively pursues (e.g., photography, sailing, model-railroading, and building projects around the house). Phil reported that he likes to be busy and that he "always has something on the go".

Both Sharlene and Phil entered adulthood with the assumption that they would marry and become parents. This assumption was derived from their religious backgrounds and family expectations, as well as the prevalent pronatal discourse of the early seventies when they started their married life. Despite the strong social norm of parenthood at that time, Sharlene initiated their joint re-examination of the assumption that they ought to have children. Although Phil had not considered the alternative of childlessness, their discussions eventually distinguished their personal desires to eschew parenthood, from the pronatal expectations of society. After considerable effort to find a cooperative physician, Sharlene had a tubal ligation. Within a few years she also underwent a hysterectomy for health-related reasons. Sharlene reflected on the male domination of women's medicine at the time of her surgeries. She explained that she needed Phil's written consent not only to receive her sterilization procedure, but also for her hysterectomy.

Sharlene has chosen not to openly share with others that she is voluntarily childless. She exercises careful discretion when telling others of her childless choice because of her mother-in-law's hurtful comments following Sharlene's hysterectomy. Rather than expressing concern about Sharlene's health, Phil's mother declared her disappointment that Sharlene would not present her with grandchildren. More recently, Sharlene's aged mother made similarly hurtful comments about her daughter's childlessness despite her assumptions that health issues resulted in her daughter's infertility.

Phil has never received particularly critical or judgmental comments about his childlessness. Rather, he is a vocal proponent of the childless choice, urging co-workers and his niece and nephews to carefully examine their life options without acquiescing to prenatal social and family expectations. Neither he or Sharlene regret their childless choice. They expressed relief that they preserved their quiet lifestyle by not having children. Instead, they have worked hard as a team to set and achieve mutual goals that have brought them much pleasure in life.

Fred and Marceline. Fred and Marceline live in their custom-built home in a large city in the Lower Mainland. They have been married for 18 years and this is the first marriage for both of them. Marceline met Fred at a recreation centre when she was 19 years old. They married three years later after living together for one month. Marceline, age 40, comes from a Catholic family that frowned upon any pre-marital cohabitation. She has two siblings, both of whom have children. Fred, age 46, has four siblings; his two married siblings both have children while the other two are still unmarried. Marceline and Brad have each made a significant career change during their marriage, with Marceline leaving a government clerical job to attend university and become a kindergarten teacher. After she completed her teacher training, Fred left his career in construction and pursued a second degree to qualify as a high school teacher. The pair enjoy a "good life," in which they attend performances in the arts, go to the gym, care for their home, visit with friends, read, and travel during summer months. When time is available, they also do

volunteer work as drivers for Meals on Wheels. Fred introduced Marceline to hiking which has now become another favorite shared pastime. Both spouses enjoy children, but Marceline jokes that "we like the kind that go home." Their contact with children is limited to the classroom where they believe they each make meaningful contributions to children's lives without having to undertake the full-time commitment to their own children.

Fred always anticipated that he would marry and have children, traditional life choices he expected would yield a rewarding adulthood. When he married Marceline, he supported her return to university while expecting that upon her graduation they would start a family. Approximately thirteen years into the marriage and after Marceline had begun teaching, she approached Fred and informed him that she no longer wished to have a family. Her days filled with children had convinced her that she did not want or need further involvement with children in her homelife. Fred was taken aback by her change of heart, and by Marceline's conviction that a childless future was much preferred over motherhood. Fred undertook a period of re-examination of his life priorities and values, and he challenged his long-held assumption that parenthood was a natural part of marriage. After some reflection he began to enumerate the benefits of the childless choice and could see a positive future as a childless married man. Although Fred occasionally wonders what his life with children may have been like, he has committed himself to being a significant adult presence in his students' lives and derives a strong sense of parental satisfaction from those relationships.

Marceline described how her orientation shifted away from motherhood during the six years she spent at university. She became aware that having children was less her personal ideal than it was the general social expectation that women should marry and have children. While in university she was also conscious of delaying motherhood by setting career goals that extended into her late thirties. She finally admitted to herself that these goals were excuses to avoid motherhood, "little hints" that motherhood was not in her heart. When she announced her

childless preference to Fred, she was confident that he would stay in the marriage. Marceline has felt no regrets about declining parenthood. Kindergarten teaching has become her great passion, and it is well-balanced by her satisfying lifestyle of adult interests and activities that she shares with Fred and her friends.

Shadow and Elsie. Shadow and Elsie have been married for 26 years. Elsie, age 57, is an only child who was born and raised in England. Shadow, age 51, is from the Maritimes and is of Aboriginal and African-American heritage. He is the third eldest of eight siblings in a traditional family that upholds hard work and family life as core values of adulthood. Shadow was raised on a military base for most of his childhood and adolescence and he spoke fondly of this community of loving adults and families. He lived for a brief period of time with another family on the base while in his mid-teens. This is Elsie's second marriage and Shadow's first. The couple met at the outset of graduate school and married eight months later. Both Shadow and Elsie are highly trained and experienced social workers who have dedicated their professional lives to supporting children and families. They have relocated several times across Canada to accommodate one another's career needs. Currently they live in a family-oriented neighbourhood in a desirable community thirty minutes from Vancouver.

During her first marriage Elsie encountered some fertility problems. As that relationship neared its end she terminated early efforts to conceive using medical support. She was single for three years before meeting and marrying Shadow. After they married, she and Shadow undertook fertility consultations with tests revealing that Elsie had fertility problems that were fully treatable. Rather than immediately proceeding with any medical intervention, Elsie and Shadow took the opportunity to step back and examine their desires to have children. Shadow had already commenced this process in his late teens when he became cognizant that his options for adult living need not include the traditional choices of marriage and family. Elsie had never before fully explored her desire to become a mother. As a couple and as individuals, they embarked on

an intense period of reflection to determine a reproductive choice with which both could live comfortably.

Shadow explained that he had never felt a yearning to have his own children. He recalled how his early experiences of caretaking his younger siblings had provided him a first-hand preview of the responsibilities and obligations of parenthood. The caring adults outside of his family had also modeled different ways of being in children's lives that he believed were equal to, if not more significant than what could be achieved through parenthood. Shadow was deeply influenced by these adults and he ultimately made the childless choice. By forgoing fatherhood, he has embraced a myriad of alternate roles which situate him continuously in children's and parents' lives.

Elsie finalized her childless choice in consultation with Shadow, as well as through an inner dialogue during which she questioned what constituted a "natural process" of her becoming a mother. She also reminded herself that although she thoroughly enjoys children, she has never felt compelled to become a mother. Elsie asked herself questions about her felt sense of purpose in life and whether motherhood was part of, or contrary to that purpose. She factored into her decision some candid assessments of her own energy limitations and her resistance to the dependency needs of young children. Eventually Elsie acknowledged that any interest in having children was outweighed by her sense that motherhood was not the role in which she could make the most significant contribution to the world around her. Her intense work with children and families in distress has since confirmed that motherhood would have limited her ability to most fully realize her potential in both work and mothering. The childless choice has freed her up to allocate her energy to the difficult work that infuses her life with passion and purpose.

The Lived Experience of Voluntary Childlessness for Women and Men

The participants' stories were explored in an existential reflection guided by four fundamental life world existentials: lived body, lived relation, lived space, and lived time (van

Manen, 1990, 1997). These existentials encompass all dimensions of human experience in the life world. Regardless of individual differences in how human beings make meaning of their lives, they will always exist in embodied form, in time, in space, and in relationships with others. Hence these four existentials help to illuminate the breadth and depth with which humans experience themselves and the world around them.

The four existentials cannot be construed as distinct aspects of human experience. Rather, they "form an intricate unity" (van Manen, p.105, 1990), that is, they cohere into a gestalt of meaning that comprises the life world. Taken separately during the research process, they help to reveal the nature of human experience in each realm of existence. The existentials thus provided the framework for questioning, reflecting, writing, and guiding my interpretive processes of the participants' stories. Analysis of the participants' accounts of daily living yielded descriptive themes across the existentials (see Table 1).

From the rich array of participants' lived experiences across all existentials, I also derived two meta-themes or constructs that are interwoven throughout the participants' accounts of their life world. These constructs appear to comprise the meaning-structures that underpin the participants' lived experience of voluntary childlessness.

Lived Body: Women

The existential of lived body refers to the fact that humans are always bodily in the world. In our physical selves we both greet and interact with the world and experience it through all our sensory capacities. Hence the body informs us of the world as it carries us through time and space.

The descriptive themes emerging in this existential for the women were those of maternal body and embodied time.

Table 1

Summary of Descriptive Themes of Four Lived Existentials

Existential	Themes
Lived Body	Maternal body: women's awareness & appreciation of biological potential, defining 'natural' Embodied time: women's fertility & aging, reflections on changes over lifespan
Lived Relation	Animals: nurturance, source of pleasure Children: social parenthood, enjoying children, control over contact Friendships: variety, flexibility, challenges for women with mothering peers Missing Collective: indifference to difference, no social identity conferred, no marginalization, rare 'othering'
Lived Space	
Physical	Home: refuge, projects & learning Worldly: travel, humanity, culture, relationship Natural: men & the environment
Psychological	Inner: reserve of energy, passion for learning, realization of self Self-conscious: social contact with parents, heightened awareness of difference
Lived Time	Time is now: living fully in moment Spontaneous time: pursue desires/goals on personal agenda My time: imperative of privacy, opportunities for non-spousal relationships & independent interests Unknowable time: unlived life of parenthood, future

Maternal body: The descriptive theme of maternal body highlights the women's lifelong awareness and appreciation of their bodies' reproductive potential. However, all of them confirmed that declining pregnancy and childbirth was a "natural" choice.

The childless choice engaged many of these women in reflections of whether and how pregnancy and a lifetime of motherhood might "fit" with their self concept, their life goals, and their relationship. Simply put, they wondered if utilizing their "natural" biological potential to create life was indeed a "natural" inclination upon which they should act. Angel struggled to discern whether she felt a true biological urge to mother, or if she was passing through a "phase" of self-doubt precipitated by some other life dissatisfaction. For a period of time she lost track of her intuitive inner voice that had initially guided her to the childless choice. Marceline described a similar period during which she felt burdened and obligated to reproduce – to use her body in the manner nature may have intended. Declining to fulfill her reproductive potential elicited feelings of guilt and self-consciousness despite her growing awareness that motherhood was not right for her. In Marceline's words, she felt:

...guilty in the sense of, there are people, like I have worked with people that say they tried umpteen times to have a baby...miscarriage, miscarriage, doesn't work. I am thinking I could possibly have these ovaries that are working and I should be using them to have a baby.

Perhaps Elsie's story best exemplifies the search for what felt right and natural as a reproductive choice. When she was informed of the medical measures required to conceive, she carefully re-examined her desire to become a mother. A "natural" reproductive choice implied alignment of her bodily self with her psychological self:

... so having labeled what was wrong and so forth there were answers to the medical situation, but the process that we had to go through in terms of becoming pregnant really caused us to stop and take stock. Is this something we really want? And it came more from an orientation of "this doesn't feel natural". This doesn't feel the right way to do things because it was -- to me it felt so very artificial. And when it raised issues like that for me, it then caused me on another level to -- probably more on a spiritual level to think, okay, is this what is meant to be for me as a person, as a woman, as an individual in my lifetime?

Most of these women have engaged in heartfelt struggles to attend to and understand the incongruence between the potential of their maternal bodies and their felt psychological resistance to motherhood. All have sought consonance between body, mind, and soul; all expressed satisfaction and contentment with their choice. Ultimately, the childless choice meant respectfully declining their bodily potential and trusting the inner voice that had quietly urged them to forgo motherhood.

Having declared the limits of their maternal bodies several of the women explained how they subsequently needed to reinforce those limits. Buffy was challenged to reconsider her definition of maternity and to elaborate further on the boundaries of her maternal body. While seriously ill a friend made a surprising request of her:

...they asked me if I would donate eggs so that they could have a child. And I was very flattered by that and I thought about it a long time, but I declined. And I said, you know, if I wanted a child of mine to be out there, I would have it myself. But I think I would feel too uncomfortable with somebody else raising a child maybe differently from the way I would want to.

Boundaries for these women have also been tested when their bodily selves have overridden intellectual decisions to remain non-mothers. For Angel, an unplanned pregnancy with her now-husband Mynh was terminated as the logical means of preserving the integrity of her original childless choice. For Buffy, a pregnancy scare affirmed her absolute rejection of maternity:

...maybe about three years ago at one point I thought I was pregnant and I was hysterically upset because it totally reinforced for me it is nothing I ever want. I was really upset and it turned out I wasn't, so great, we were so happy. But we also sat down and talked, and agreed "that really confirms we really don't want it." It wouldn't be anything I would choose to do.

Elsie, Sharlene, and Roberta sought input from medical sources to help clarify their maternal options and to impose permanent physical limitations on their fertility. Elsie talked extensively with fertility experts to learn the limits and possibilities of her maternal body.

Eventually she chose to abstain from all fertility interventions and made her childless choice.

Sharlene declared her absolute rejection of motherhood and in so doing defied the conventional medical discourse for women in the seventies. Despite the resistive patriarchy of obstetrical care she demanded and obtained a tubal ligation, although "it was something I did keep quiet."

Roberta sought a hysterectomy to finalize her childless choice:

...this (having children) just wasn't something we were going to do regardless of whether I had the surgery or not.

To varying degrees most of these women have envisioned their mothering selves during pregnancy and childbirth. What would her transformed body look and feel like? How would she deal with childbirth? What of her bodily self after birth - what changes might she expect?

Answers to these questions helped each woman to better discern what was a "natural" way of being in her body and why she might wish to reject her maternal potential.

Anna was highly respectful of her body's potential to create life. She, like Buffy, spoke of the emotional and miraculous experience of actual childbirth, the astonishing power of women's bodies to bear children. Both women were quick to yield the fantasy of pregnancy and childbirth, however, to the reality of parenthood. Anna commented on the temporary nature of "this miracle, to have a baby inside you" and the ultimate meaning of this bodily experience. She explained how in recent years she has envisioned herself as a mother. However, she has repeatedly reminded herself that the miracle of pregnancy is short-term only and that the obligations or responsibilities of motherhood last for a lifetime:

...you are with that child for the rest of your life and you have to be responsible for that child. And I have never wanted to be responsible for other people's idiosyncrasies.

Buffy also reflected on the seductive appeal of pregnancy and childbirth but quickly reminded herself of the reality of parenthood. She recalled her experience of attending her girlfriend's labour and delivery:

I just thought it was an emotional experience being at the hospital when the baby was born. It is a really powerful thing to be there when the baby actually comes out and you

experience just that miraculous kind of bonding between the parents. And I thought that was really exciting, but that faded very quickly. Because the reality of children being a lot of work...

Other women were relieved to avoid the potential physical costs of pregnancy. Angel envisioned the depression, stretch marks, and other negative changes to her bodily self. Even as she reflected on her body's potential for pregnancy, Anna again reminded herself of unwanted physical transformations experienced with pregnancy. Indeed, the beauty of creating life was countered by images of unattractive physical changes that she assumed would occur:

I think, "oh, wow." I do think, "wow, what an experience that must be and to be able to give birth to this sort of miracle." I mean, this miracle about having a child. So that lasts for about two seconds (laughing). And then I think "oh, just think. My mother gained about a million pounds. After she had her first child she became very big." And that's not where I wanted to go... I miss the fact that, gee, it would be interesting to have that experience, but I don't think it is worth having a child to have that experience.

Roberta wryly explained how the physical changes of pregnancy were also sufficiently off-putting to affirm her long-standing psychological rejection of motherhood. Before her hysterectomy she imagined herself pregnant and realized that:

...it wasn't something I wanted to do, I'd imagine it, I'd think about it and then I decided "No, I didn't want to be big as a house and I didn't want to wear that kind of clothing" (laughter) and ... the changes that they go through".

Roberta also alluded to how her pregnant body could alter how she occupied social space in the world. She recalled being offended by her coworkers' public discussions of the intimate details of their pregnancies and related physical problems. She was loathe to think that if pregnant she might impose such details on others.

For other women in the study, images of pregnancy and childbirth felt foreign and invoked some distress. Marceline admitted that she could not "imagine something growing inside of me like that." Sharlene also struggled to envision childbirth and felt only anxiety. She recalled the counselling sessions she attended in her early twenties when, among other issues of concern, she expressed doubts about becoming a mother:

I think that was one of the things I thought about when I was talking to the psychiatrist about it (choosing childlessness), because I was concerned about some of those things...I kind of wondered how I would deal with the actual child birth. I couldn't imagine myself going through it.

The women of this study all chose to decline the life-giving potential offered by their maternal bodies. They carefully defined what maternity meant to them, and set boundaries on their fertility that was consistent with a felt sense of what was "natural" or right for them. All were keenly aware that options existed for them outside the culturally sanctioned view that maternity equals womanhood. Each listened carefully to an inner voice that encouraged nonmotherhood yet maintained respect and awe for the biological potential to mother. By making the childless choice, each woman conscientiously defined her physical self to exclude motherhood and was rewarded with the sense of personal power that emanates from choice. Buffy celebrated her capacity to exercise choice and to thus control options for her bodily self. Her words resonate with the gratitude for choice expressed by all of the other women participants.

I am lucky I made that choice, and I think not everybody is fortunate enough to make that...And I understand that not everybody has a choice to get birth control pills, or maybe not everybody has the choice to have an abortion, or have the choice at all and how lucky I am that I am educated and living in a situation that I have that choice.

In summary, the women in this study reported that determining what felt "natural" as a reproductive choice was a critical component of their childless choice. Some described a tacit knowing that they would never utilize their body's reproductive potential. Other women in the study described their conscious and careful decision-making process that sought congruence between physical and psychological reactions to thoughts of pregnancy and motherhood. Having made the childless choice, some of the women participants were challenged to further define the limits of their maternal body. Medical intervention was one option, as was simply declining all alternate means of becoming a mother--surrogate, foster, or adoptive. Almost all of the women

had envisioned themselves as pregnant and retained a keen awareness of their unused biological potential to reproduce.

Embodied time. The descriptive theme of embodied time reflected the women's awareness of changes in their fertility and reproductive cycles across the lifespan.

Several of the women participants reflected on the intimate relationship between time and body, the inseparable duo typically referred to as aging. For years the changes rendered by time on fertility and potential motherhood went unnoticed and seemed inconsequential to these women. Having made the childless choice, their reproductive capacity became a moot point to which these women paid little attention. After 40, though, some women experienced a renewed awareness of their bodily selves, a sense that they were undergoing change according to a discrete timetable of biological deadlines. Elsie explained how she was cued by age to revisit her childless choice:

...when I started getting like into my mid 40s, I got to a time where I thought, "okay, it is now or never (laughing) biologically", right, and I just kind of kept going, "well, no"... (This decision has been through the mill a few times). Oh, it has. It has. I may not have verbalized it to Shadow each time, but internally I would review, "does it still feel right?"

The now-or-never question also arose for Angel, 46, who in her early forties experienced a "dramatic change of heart" when she suddenly felt compelled to re-examine her childless choice. By then she had achieved many career and financial goals. She found herself contemplating her age and responded to the "seed planted" by her psychologist that she ought to reconsider her childless choice:

It does seem to have been – I don't know if it is fair to say a fleeting, or a passing short period of time where I was reconsidering matters. I suspect it was prompted by the fact that I realized that at the age that I was, it was now or never, and I just wanted to make sure that I wasn't making a decision that I was going to regret down the road.

As I listened to the women's stories I heard many of them describe how passing time urged them to review the childless choice. However, I heard no words that reflected a biological

urge to mother, a compulsion that emanated from a deeply visceral place of need and desire to bear children. Although some of the women in the study supposed that a biological "urge" might motivate other women to become mothers, not one of them confirmed personal experience with such a yearning to bear children. Rather, these women seemed to be aware of the connection between time and their bodily selves – a connection that was motivated by cognitive concerns. The biological clock was clearly distinguishable from a biological urge. Doll mused that although she has never "felt broody," there may be a biological underpinning for motherhood that has affected other women. She referred in particular to her co-workers, all of whom are mothers and who have frequently encouraged her to start a family:

I think perhaps there might be some physiological impulse nature gives females, I don't know, I am supposing there might be, to reproduce, I don't know... well, that's my opinion, I think there is, but I have never really had it.

Doll also reflected on changes to her body over time. Looking back she commented on the inconvenience and discomfort of a lifetime of periods that will end within a few years. Nonetheless, she anticipated a sense of loss when menopause finally arrives. After years of choice, her body will take control and make the final decision of non-motherhood for her. Doll described some subtle physical changes associated with her declining fertility and speculated on her reactions to future changes:

...being 44 I notice there is a change in my cycle, for example, and I think that it is funny, you know, your period every month is like a curse, it is called a curse, right. (Yes) Well, there is reasons for that obviously, and it is funny, I think -- I was talking to my mom about it, I think that when my period does cease, when it completely stops, I think in some ways I might feel a loss of not being able to have the option of reproducing, but then maybe that's just a loss of power or something, I don't know.

Anna, also reflected on her maturing body, noting that the physical and temporal dimensions of her existence have always been steps ahead of her psychological self. She has never felt herself to be of the emotional maturity expected for her age; her felt potential to mother has thus always lagged behind her body's ideal years for conception and childrearing.

Having felt "out-of-sync" between body and mind for many years, Anna reflected aloud on whether or not she had reached a point when she wanted or felt ready for motherhood:

Well, maybe around this time, you know. Now that I can't. Or not that I can't, I still can, but probably -- I don't know what those eggs are like now. Not that I would want to. I think "oh, God, 53 and having a teenager at the age of 70, I don't think so!"

Despite the loss of reproductive potential conferred upon the women by aging, the women relished the preservation of their youthful bodily selves. Most of the women in this study continue to enjoy a physically active lifestyle of fitness activity and conscientious self-care. Buffy noticed that mothering women younger than her look older. Marceline observed how time has been kinder to both her and her husband as her parenting peers age with the added stresses and fatigue of parenthood. She is delighted with her physical fitness and attractiveness as she compares her appearance to others who are parents. At a party she noticed her mothering peers:

I haven't seen these girls in a long time. I said to Fred, this might sound horrible, but I leaned over to Fred and said, "we look good". Like these people are a bit older, like we look good for 40 and 46 -- I swear dumpy, you know, let themselves go and ... we look good, I think.

Both Buffy and Marceline feel spared the additional costs of motherhood over time – the physical wearing symbolic of motherhood worry and fatigue.

In conclusion, several women in this study reported that the passage of time has often elicited thoughts about their reproductive ability. Around the age of forty these women revisited their childless choice, realizing that time alone would soon usurp any desire to naturally bear children. The now-or-never question also reflected these women's concerns that they might have future regrets for their childless choice. None of the women participants disclosed any semblance of an emotional or physical urge to bear a child.

Lived Body: Men

The men's stories and reflections revealed some thoughts and feelings about their bodily experiences of life without children. Their insights and comments did not, however, seem to

cohere into identifiable themes of physical experiences of childlessness. Rather, most of the men alluded to a unique bodily aspect of their childlessness, each of which contributed to a broad but somewhat indistinct picture of how these men are embodied by their childless choice. There was only one common thread connected to a physical dimension of childlessness that ran through the stories of these eight men - their unanimous dismissal of the significance of leaving a genetic legacy through children. In other words, not one of these men believed that carrying on the family line was a meaningful life quest. All of the men shrugged off this physical implication of childlessness by referring to their parenting siblings who had met this familial obligation. Many of them also reflected on the absolute finiteness of human life and the futility of trying to preserve either a living memory of themselves, or a genetic heritage for the family.

Mynh, Ernst, and Phil reflected that they had never felt a physical compulsion to become fathers, thus refuting the pronatal cultural assumption that having children followed from a natural or instinctual drive to reproduce. Mynh explained that he had "...never felt a biological need" to have children. Ernst similarly reflected that he "...didn't feel driven to reproduce" and that contrary to social expectations of normal and natural adult life choices, "childlessness is natural, it's the way I've always been." On the other hand, Phil reflected on his childless choice in light of his belief that there is indeed a human instinct to parent. He conveyed the strain of overriding two sources of powerful pressure to become a father: the pronatal expectations of his church and family history, and his own assumption that instinct ought to override personal choice. Phil reflected that the latter belief "... was a tough one to go against, too." His words suggested a niggling and disquieting tension between the contentment of living his "natural" choice to remain childless, while being at odds with his personal and cultural belief systems.

Several of the men in this study made passing comments about their belief that their fatigue and energy levels would have been heavily taxed by parenthood. Gord frankly admitted his limitations for expending energy beyond his current lifestyle demands: "I don't have the

energy for little kids, it would be just going, going, going, going, I'd be far too burned out."

Mynh and Gord expressed their appreciation that dispensing or utilizing their energy was always at their discretion rather than in continuous response to the demands of parenthood. Mynh reported that he is doubtless less fatigued than parents, and that as a childless man "...you get way more sleep" with the added lifestyle luxury that "...when I'm tired I can just go to sleep." Ernst also explained that he sleeps as necessary to account for his health-related needs, an option that he could not exercise as freely if there were children in his home: "...if I'm tired when I wake up in the morning I can roll over and just go back to sleep and a lot of times I have time to take a walk before work or whatever.

The interaction between time and the human body, that is, aging, was raised by a couple of the men in this study. Mynh, 43, explained that his childlessness has allowed him to retain a degree of youthfulness and vitality with which he feels himself to be perpetually only 21 years old. Josh, 56, elaborated on the interplay between his age and his awareness of being childless. He reflected on a period when, at approximately fifty he realized that: "I'm definitely not going to have kids you know, maybe when I was 30 or 35 or even 40 maybe there was the possibility that I might have." Josh further described how this realization seemed to elicit a heightened self-consciousness about his childlessness that lasted for a year or two and then dissipated over time:

I mean I don't think it was something I consciously thought about a lot, but ya, occasionally when someone would ask me or I would see - ya actually you know when I used to go for walks maybe 5 or 6 years ago and I'd see a lot of couples with kids I think I was much, I think it was a little bit, it affected me a little bit more than now. I don't think about it as much anymore.

There were just two men among the eight who touched briefly on their experience of controlling their fertility. Shadow recalled how as a young man, he was aware that parenthood ought to be a conscious choice and he thus always took precautions to guard against a pregnancy:

...it was very much a conscious decision in terms of any sexual activity, be very careful not to have kids you know and then there's very much a conscious decision. And it

wasn't a decision for my partner, it was my decision, and so it wasn't you know "it's your responsibility", no - it's my responsibility.

Ernst described how he decided to get a vasectomy as a definitive means of finalizing his childless choice. Although he and Doll had often discussed and each time reaffirmed their preference for childlessness, he found himself in his forties increasingly uncomfortable that their decision was not yet unequivocal. He described his growing apprehension and quick decision for final physical intervention that would assure him peace of mind for the future:

I think I was about 45 and I almost did that unilaterally because she had started to talk a little bit more about maybe having them, I was already 45 and Doll started kicking the idea around about maybe having them, and I just sort of said no way I'm not ready for this and I went and got a vasectomy, I told you know she knew I was going and she didn't fight me on it or anything like that.

To summarize, the men in this study offered glimpses into their physical or bodily experiences of the childless choice. Some of the men described how childlessness is a "natural" way of being, while a few others reported divergent experiences of aging and childlessness. There was also mention of how, as childless men, they could control energy expenditure and time for sleep. In some cases, the men also referred to measures of fertility control. Across these infrequent and disparate references to their bodily selves as childless men, I was unable to discern any prevalent themes or any emphasis on particular aspects of their physical experience of being childless. Perhaps the men in this study did not regard any such experiences in daily living as important and thus did not report them. Regardless, the men's accounts of their childlessness did not invoke the lived body existential as a prominent dimension of their daily lived experience.

Comparisons of Lived Body: Women and Men

The men and women in this study presented very different perceptions of their bodily selves in relation to their childless choice. The men offered few reflections within the domain of this existential, suggesting that they do not harbour a strong physical awareness of their

childlessness. In contrast, the women's lived experiences of their bodily selves as non-mothers were clearly represented in the prevalent themes of Maternal Body and Embodied Time. Their stories suggested that the natural rhythms of their fertility cycles provide them a lifetime of reminders that they did not utilize their biological capacity for childbearing. Many of the women also reflected on the aging process, with some commenting that they enjoy a continued sense of youthfulness attributable to their non-mothering status.

The women's greater awareness of their bodily selves as non-mothers appears to be an extension of the cultural discourse which equates a woman's worth and maturity with fulfillment of her biological "destiny" to mother (Daniluk, 1999; Gergen, 1990). The pronatal discourse of our culture does not impose similar expectations of men to use their physical capacity to procreate. Hence, it is perhaps not surprising that the men in this study did not spontaneously elaborate on any physical sensibilities deriving from their lived experience of non-fatherhood.

Lived Relation: Women

The existential of lived relation reflects the fundamental attribute of humans, that is, we are relational beings. In relationships we enter into dialogues that allow us to move beyond ourselves into communion with others. That is, through relationships we become part of the greater collective of humanity. According to van Manen (1990), such connections may also imply a spiritual dimension, where we seek to find purpose and meaning in ways that transcend the immediacy of our individual lived experiences.

The women's accounts of their daily lives without children yielded descriptive themes of relationships with animals, children, friends, as well as their felt sense of belonging in the minority collective of non-parents in our pronatalist society.

Animals. This relational theme depicts the women's love and appreciation of the joy and pleasure animals provided them in the course of daily living.

Almost all the women in this study described the special places they have created in their daily life worlds for animals. Some - like Buffy, Doll, and Elsie - had only one pet at the time of our interviews but have a long history of pet ownership from which they have always derived great satisfaction and joy. Angel epitomized the passion these women have for their animals; she has opened her home to a veritable menagerie of animals - an aviary filled with birds, and a lone dog among a dozen cats. She reflected aloud that "I cannot imagine living in a home without a lot of animals around." Doll said that she grew up with animals "...so it is just second nature to have a cat around." Elsie and her husband have had dogs for at least half of their married life, and she described their integral role in her daily life:

We had two Wheatons before, and the last one we put down a year ago Christmas. And then we were without one until August. And the first three months were really hard, because I was so used to having a dog around as companionship.

Some of the women in this study talked about how caring for their animals and spending time with them is a profoundly important part of daily living. Both Buffy and Angel described their devotion to animals and the intense commitment they feel towards their animals. Angel explained her caretaking of animals as a labour of love and admitted that "I do spend a great deal of time tending after the animals. It is not a chore - it is a hobby or a love."

Several of the women acknowledged that they feel a maternal bond of love and responsibility for their animals. Buffy admitted how naturally she nurtures her animals in comparison to her lack of potential to nurture children:

...and it is not that I don't like to look after things because I have always had lots of pets growing up...our pets are our family and we treat them like that. We put them almost first and we are very conscious about that. But it is just kids themselves that don't interest me.

Angel admitted a similar connection to her animal "babies" that was in direct contrast to her lack of attraction to infants. Doll also referred to her animals as her "pseudo-children" whom she loves and whose lives are inextricably intertwined with her own. She reflected on her sadness

after losing her cats to accidents and raccoons over the years and added that "we have one left. And a lot of angst that we will lose her too. She's our child." Perhaps Buffy's description of how she provides for her Great Dane is the best example of how animals have become like child-substitutes to some of these women. She described the pleasure she takes in providing for her dog by sending him to daycare:

Our doggy daycare is like sending him to nursery school because our doggie day care lady, who is wonderful and a friend of ours, she leaves us pictures of him playing, or she leaves a little report on what he did and it is cute. So you feel in a sense that that's like your kid... And you take them to obedience and you get a certificate of completion. And sometimes I say there is his little kindergarten certificate. And it is cute.

The same care taken by parents to anticipate and meet a child's needs also appears to be reflected in the attitudes and actions of these women towards their pets. Buffy and Elsie describe how they consciously schedule their time away from home to avoid leaving their animals alone for lengthy periods. Buffy gave the example of how she and her husband take 'shifts' for caretaking their dog:

We have made this plan so one of us will be home at night, not both of us out so that we don't leave him alone if he has been in the house all day and not again at night.

Elsie admitted that pet ownership entails a significant commitment that at times approaches infringement on her freedom. Although she observed that "I don't personify dogs as you sometimes see others do," Elsie described her felt obligations to meet her dog's needs in a manner resembling a mother's mindfulness of her child's needs and the responsibility to meet those needs:

I went through a time – do I really want a dog again? Because dogs tie you down too, in that we will be careful. Like on the days I work full time we are careful not to go out that evening and leave her by herself. Even though I have a dog walker coming in to take her out because she's still a puppy. But we are also conscious of timing. When we go out to diner, we make sure about the hours and so forth. Or if we go out shopping during the day, we don't leave her too long, kind of thing. So that ties you down.

Roberta echoed Elsie's reflections on the obligations of pet ownership, and expressed appreciation for her cats because their needs do not demand the same level of ongoing

commitment of her time and energy. During our interview three cats meandered through the living room as Roberta wondered if "... that's one of the reasons why we have cats is because they are so independent." Marceline expressed her satisfaction with goldfish, but glibly admitted that even they require too much care for her liking. Marceline emphasized throughout her interview the imperative of retaining her freedom to come and go at whim, and to spontaneously respond to opportunities in the moment. She feels that even pets would impose too many limitations on her freedom.

Aside from Marceline and Anna, however, the majority of women in this study described their loving, attentive, and committed relationships with their animals. For a few of the women, pet ownership was described as especially significant for very personal reasons. These women described extraordinary relationships with animals, profound connections that bring them meaning and fulfillment in daily life. Buffy reflected on her discovery that being around horses was an essential and unique means of experiencing a precious part of her self. She told the story of how she finished graduate school only to feel an emerging dissatisfaction with her life, a nagging sense that she was missing something. She found that missing piece of herself in equestrian sports. Without her horses, she confessed a possible desire for children to fill that empty inner space:

I went to Maryland to graduate school and lived there for six years. I was married and came back, and I always felt like there was something missing in my life and I just didn't know what it was. But I always felt like there was something missing. And one year he got me riding lessons because I had had horse in Nova Scotia, and the moment I got back to riding that's what connected for me. That's what I think completed everything that I was feeling that was missing; it was riding and horses and the connection with them. So for me if I didn't have that, maybe I would feel a need to have children. Because I would feel like there was that empty part. But that's what riding is for me, I think.

Angel described how her passion for animals also gifts her with a clear sense of purpose and meaning in life. Her dedication to animal welfare constitutes her life project, which she fulfills in daily living by opening her home to stray and sickly animals and in more formal

contributions of her time and money to the Humane Society. Angel said her long-term goal is to purchase a property where an animal shelter can be located to serve her community. She also intends to leave substantial proceeds of her estate to animal welfare agencies. In her words, Angel explained:

I take great comfort and pride in knowing that I've saved X number of animals' lives, which is what the humane society does. So that is the most important thing to me in this world.

In summary, the relationships between these women and their animals bespeak more than a casual appreciation of the bond between humans and their pets. The women revealed relationships with their animals in which nurturing feelings were solicited and enacted across many facets of animal care. For some of the women, their intense devotion to animals enriches their lives with comfort, pleasure, and meaning. Not unlike the many ways in which motherhood can endow a woman with identity and life purpose, these women related a comparable sense of profound valuing and meaning inherent in their relationships with animals.

Children. This descriptive theme emerged from the women's stories of the myriad ways in which children have entered into and enrich their daily lives. The women confirmed that they enacted "maternal urges" through their relationships with children, but insisted on controlling their contact with children in order to enjoy their time together.

Contrary to the popular social assumption that childfree women do not like children, the women in this study expressed great compassion, interest, delight, and gratitude for their relationships with the children in their lives. Most have embraced opportunities for contact with children and have conscientiously contributed to children's lives. Some of the women have enjoyed children and teens through their work, while others have lovingly incorporated extended family members-nieces and nephews-into their lives and homes.

As I listened to the women reflect on the significance of the children in their life worlds, I became keenly aware that although they rejected motherhood as a viable role for themselves in

adulthood, they have most certainly not rejected children. Instead, it appears that they have created a rich array of alternate roles through which they express their caring and commitment to children. Doll was among several of the women who declared that she "loves being an Aunt." She told the story of how she arranged to take her nephew on a trip to Australia when he was eighteen. Although this gesture was at face value a marvelous gift to him, Doll's story revealed another role that emerged for her in this particular experience of being an Aunt. She became his teacher and guide, inviting him to join her in an adult adventure of discovery and worldliness. Doll was rewarded with feelings of empowerment, the reward of opening up opportunities and perspectives on the world he would otherwise not have been exposed to:

We took Danny, my 19 year old nephew to Australia last year. I just wanted to because financially they are not doing that well and I think at that age a kid needs to know there is a world out there. Horizons have to be broadened. So as an aunt it was a wonderful feeling to do this. And, you know, to see the world through his eyes, right, where it is somewhere I have gone since I was a baby. But to him it was all brand new, all the big beaches and the weird accents and the funny money, right. So, yeah, so I love being an aunt. And again that's power, you know, I was able to do that. I guess it is power, yeah. You are able to bestow this gift, this trip, if you want to look at it that way.

Sharlene similarly described how she developed a close relationship with her niece. She spoke of her niece with sensitivity and empathy, and explained how this girl had struggled in adolescence to bridge differences between her mother's Asian culture and the Western culture in which the family lived. Sharlene responded to her niece's difficulties by providing the girl a safe place for personal conversations and emotional support. Sharlene described herself in terms resembling a surrogate parent and older sister. In this capacity she was able to quietly offer her niece advice, comfort, and guidance:

Well, another thing is that Phil's brother's kids – I think we are closer to them than their parents are. The oldest girl in particular, she's 29, and she came here from Thailand when she was two years old. And regardless of what Rob's brother said, and we have talked to him about this, he treats her differently than the other two. He says he doesn't, but he does. And so we - I think more so me - I am particularly close to her. I am like her older sister - her mom never went to school in Canada, never dated. There are a lot of things she doesn't really understand to this day, even though she has been here a longtime, and so she tends to talk to me more about some things.

Sharlene confirmed that she is likely a role model of childlessness for her niece and nephews. She referred to her own experience of religious and family pressures to become a mother, and how she would assuredly offer her niece and nephews support if they chose to decline parenthood-a gift of support that no one offered her when she made the childless choice:

And I think this role model thing, for both Phil and I, if the kids ever said something to us about having children we are so close to them that we would say "Are you sure that's what you want to do? You know, don't have them because you think it is expected of you. Don't have them because his mom is after you, or your mom is after you." So we would do that with them.

On the other hand, Anna expected that her nieces will all become mothers and that her childlessness will not be especially relevant to them. Nonetheless she expressed delight that her nieces see her as an interesting and vital woman whose life path is markedly different than what they anticipate their own to be. Anna has nurtured her relationships with her nieces and nephews who regard her as a unique and interesting woman:

My niece, who comes from a very religious family, says "I don't know anybody like you." And she's always asking me about my travels and doing different things: "what are you doing?" and "Isn't that cool?!"

Like Doll, Anna, and Sharlene, Buffy also reported being a dedicated aunt. She described the joy her nieces and nephews bring her and her commitment to actively participate in their lives:

I mean, we love our nieces and nephews, we really do. And it is great that we can share that with them. And I have always gone to like their dance recitals and cello concerts and hockey games and talent shows. We do tons of stuff like that and we enjoy being the aunt and uncle, that's it.

Not all of the women in this study reported having the option to access children through family. Some, like Elsie, have enjoyed children through their work. As a clinical social worker and family therapist for families in distress, Elsie has dedicated herself to the welfare of children. As she described her extraordinary work with parents of terminally ill children, Elsie concurred that she has often functioned in the capacity of "co-parent." As we talked, she added two roles

that seemed to more fully reveal the intensity with which she has always devoted herself to helping families and children: "...there is a bit of a saviour in me there, and a bit of a rescuer."

Anna is another woman in this study whose work has assured her of contact with children, in addition to her close relationships with nieces and nephews. Her career as an itinerant high school teacher has elicited in her an outpouring of dedication to children similar to that expressed by Elsie. Anna explained that her position allows her to remain in her students' lives throughout adolescence and beyond. She informed me that "... alot of the students that I saw twenty, thirty years ago are still in contact with me." Her long-term involvement as their teacher, and her mandate to address her students' unique learning and social needs also assures her of ongoing contact with parents. Hence the roles of mentor, counselor, and educator seemed to emerge in Anna's descriptions of her teaching.

As I came to appreciate these women's relationships with children in work and home life, my list of roles depicting their commitments to children grew steadily: model, mentor, guide, counselor, teacher, confidante, and rescuer – the roles or functions so readily associated with mothering in our culture. Indeed, several of the women in this study spontaneously described how their roles in children's lives satisfied what might be described as their maternal urges to nurture children. Elsie was one of the women who expressed the conviction that her work has utilized her capacity to nurture and allowed her to express her mothering self:

I explored this, doing this work, what was it giving me? What needs was it meeting in me that I was finding so gratifying? And part of it was the mothering piece, and having those needs met. I think I talked to Shadow about that at one point in time, just in terms of my observations that that's probably what kept me at it for such a long period of time, in what could be perceived from the outside as being just totally overwhelming work. But my experience of it was the complete opposite - it was very energizing for me. But I am sure it is all those mothering kinds of things because many of the emotions I am sure, are parallel in terms of what I experienced.

Anna similarly confirmed that from the onset of her teaching career she realized how much she enjoyed teens. Paradoxically, she reflected that the genuine pleasure she felt while working with

students "...made me more convinced that I didn't want to have children" because of the ongoing commitment and obligations of parenthood. Nonetheless, she is convinced that one of the inherent rewards of teaching has been the ease with which it has satisfied her "maternal urges." Anna even suggested that an alternate career in which she had no contact with children may have compelled her to reconsider her childless choice, despite her long-held indifference to motherhood. She reflected on her history of teaching in relation to her childless choice:

And so I ended up having whatever nurturing part of me being met there, being with kids. And I really liked teenagers, and I liked being with them. And they were fun. And that part of me, that need was met...But probably if I didn't work in education I may have thought about it (motherhood). There may have been some other decision or debate around it, I don't know what would have resulted.

Angel does not have opportunities through her work or family to be with children. She explained how instead she has created a special place in her heart for her neighbors' children whom she described as "little angels." She explained how contact with them satisfies her occasional maternal desires:

...what the nice thing is, Suzy is always next door if I feel like I need a dose of having the companionship of a lovely little girl, then she's always willing to go with me to do whatever. She took a shining to me when we moved in.

The women participants described many contacts with children through which they have continuously derived much personal gratification and joy. These women also emphasized, however, the caveat or condition that underpins their loving commitment to children. They alluded to the imperative of choice, or control over the terms and conditions of contact with children. This element of choice assured them the pleasure of being with children. Doll summarized her delight in being an aunt largely because "...you can spoil them and give them back. They come into your life when you want them." Buffy elaborated on her willingness to indulge her nieces and nephews knowing that her devotion to their pleasure was short-term only. She need not concern herself with the everyday obligations of parenthood. Just as Anna spoke of

her teaching role, Buffy's words captured how her role of aunt is not just fulfilling and fun, but is also a means of affirming her childless choice:

Well, I don't have my own children, so I am childless. But I think we have a family of children there when we want them, you know, which is however much we want them...since they were little we have had sleepovers with them where they come for weekends by themselves. This is the fun part of being an aunt, we take them to the grocery store even from when they were two or three and we buy them any treats they wanted. And then we get whatever movies they wanted, as long as they were good, but they were little, and we all get in the bed and order pizza and pop and a million treats until they couldn't eat anymore and watch movies. And in the morning we take them out to lunch to McDonald's and they go home. And then we turn to each other and say, "we are never having kids, never." But it is fun. And we enjoy them that way.

Angel was also forthright in her admission that she has personal limits of tolerance for engaging with children. Being free to disengage from contact with them when she reaches those limits is the condition that allows her to appreciate their time together: "I enjoy for a limited period of time, being around children, but only for a limited period of time. I couldn't stand working in a day care or something like that".

Angel went on to describe the satisfying balance she has struck between having enjoyable contact with children without undertaking the lifelong commitment of parenthood. She was especially aware of the sacrifices she would have had to make if she were a mother – scaling back her professional life, withdrawing money and time commitments to the humane society, restricting travel, and living in a more modest home. Angel expressed in the following words her belief that she has found this ideal balance: "...it seems to me that we are in the right place by having casual contact with the neighbour's children, and then not having the full-time commitment ourselves".

For some of the women in this study, their desire to control their contact with children seemed to reflect their reluctance to assume the burdens of worry inherent in parenthood. For example, Doll spoke of the emotional fatigue of parenthood:

I don't have the worry that would come with children...the dreadful maternal worry which apparently lasts throughout the child's life even though the kid is 50, the 90 year old still worries, I know that. So I don't have that worry, which is real, very real.

Anna expressed similar relief from the trials and tribulations of parenthood. In her role as an itinerant teacher she makes a significant contribution to children's lives but she is free to withdraw from her role at the end of her workday. Unlike mothers, she need not carry a fear of failure or anxiety that she has contributed to her students' problems or "idiosyncrasies." Anna jokingly explained how she thinks mothers are often seen as liable for their children's problems:

... and I have never wanted to be responsible for other people's idiosyncrasies. I thought to myself, when we all grow up to be about 30, and whose fault is it for some of these things, our idiosyncrasies? It is our mother!

Through teaching, Anna can "keep things at a distance" and thus avoid the "... responsibilities or... the expectations that you have to perform a certain way" as a mother. Anna stays close to children in her roles of aunt and teacher, but retains the control to negotiate the terms of her commitment to children: "children are not part of my whole being, I mean, they are still at a distance. I can walk away you know." These women thus revealed their resistance to fully devoting their lives to children, an option that is obviously unavailable to mothers. Indeed, the women's stories of time with children illuminated their core ideal of personal freedom - in this case the freedom to choose when, under what terms, and how much time they shared their daily lives with children.

In summary, the women of this study described the numerous ways in which they have created space in their lives for children. Their stories of caring and compassion for children clearly indicates that although they have rejected parenthood, they have not rejected children. Most of the women shared how their relationships with children provide them great pleasure and fulfillment. For some, their connections to children are an essential means of creating meaning and purpose in life. Anna's reflections on her teaching highlights how these women's lives are enhanced by their relationships to children:

That's (teaching) the meaningful part. Because when people say, "well, my life wouldn't be meaningful without children." My life has been meaningful and has been with children, but it just wasn't me giving birth to them or bringing them up, but I feel I had a lot of influence on them.

The women in this study have however, declared a common need to control the terms and conditions of their contact with children. This is the caveat that protects their sense of personal freedom, while allowing them to fully enjoy their relationships with children.

Friendships. The women in this study described an array of friendships with childless adults and parents, outside their primary bond of love and companionship with their husbands. This descriptive theme also reflects some of the women's experiences of losing intimacy and shared interests in their relationships with mothering peers.

The women participants unanimously proclaimed their husbands as their best friends. Outside of their marital bond of companionship, half of the women explained that they had very few friends whom they saw consistently. For the women who said they actively pursue friendships, they denied that their childlessness influences them to seek out similarly childless women or couples for socializing. However, these women did spend time in our interviews reflecting on the challenges inherent in relationships with mothering peers. Marceline expressed her frustration about girlfriends who impose their children on limited socializing time with her. She gave the scenario of visiting a friend after her workday as a kindergarten teacher, and her unspoken retort to her friend's invitation to engage with her son:

God, I come from a classroom, "okay, put the kids to bed. I came to visit you, not your children." And especially being a teacher, "...show Marceline what you can do." "I don't care if he can do his bloody ABC's, I am here as your friend not his teacher," you know what I mean? Yeah, I think it always boils down to the fact that I don't have anything in common with those people.

Buffy provided a similar example of how two different friends managed the impact of their motherhood on their friendships with her:

...they are different because one of my other best friends had a child a year and a half ago and I do lots of stuff with her. But the thing is she knows me so well that when we are

going to do things, she doesn't ever bring her kid with her. Or she will say, okay, if we do that on that day, Jacob has to come, is that okay? And I say, yeah. But she knows that's not what I enjoy doing. And she has other friends that are new mothers and they do a lot of kid things together. And then with me, she just doesn't ever ask, she just assumes I am not going to want to and we do things together that aren't related to kids. And maybe that's her away time from him too...Whereas my other friend is always saying, I am not trying to make you feel guilty, but you haven't seen my kids in a long time.

Anna also reflected on the challenge of acquiring the rare commodity of private time in friendships with mothers who are "always busy doing stuff" with their children. She presumed that if she had her own children she would spend much more time with mothering peers because they would share interests, time, and activities through their children. Although she said she has not actively sought out friends who are childless, her small circle of friends has evolved to include only minimal contact with parents:

... a lot of the times our friends with children, everything is centred around the child, and so it is really difficult to really get together with friends because they have got to drive their kids here, they have to do this. If we had children, then we share it, you know, we will have them come over and share this. You do things more in common.

Several of the women described the diversity of friendships they have cultivated as a way of compensating for the limitations of friendships with mothers. Anna mentioned that she and her husband have retained friendships with other couples who "...are different in their own way" and are less likely to focus on child-related priorities. Buffy thrives on friendships in her circle of equestrian friends where the shared passion for horses overrides any other differences in maternal status. Similarly, Marceline's friendships are predominantly with others who do not have children, not because she has abandoned mothering peers but simply because they are rarely available and she feels she has little in common with them:

...our friends tend to be older, their kids are grown or they don't have kids. Or they are starting to get their grandkids. And I have --I have friends that are younger and who just got married and I know as soon as they have a baby it all changes.

Despite their flexibility in creating and maintaining a variety of friendships, I sensed from some of the women's stories their feelings of disappointment and resignation that for very

practical reasons, their friendships with mothers were unable to meet their emotional needs and to support their interests. Indeed, several of the women implied that the emotional tone and quality of their friendships changed significantly when friends became mothers. Marceline's comments above conveyed her assumption that friendships change when family life begins. Roberta elaborated on such changes when she discussed the subtle loss of intimacy she feels in friendships with mothers. She described the disconnection and space that opens between them as their daily lives diverge in terms of priorities and interests, and there are fewer opportunities to reconnect with shared experiences:

I can think of a couple of friends that I think it would, we would be closer if we had the same life, more similar life experiences, more similar life style. I think it would be, and it's probably on my side that the thinking is - I can't connect because there's this kid running around or that they're so focused on this person I can't have a discussion with them. We can't have a chat because this is going on at the same time so in a way it's isolating...you have a different life experience from theirs and you connect with them on some level but not the whole picture. I don't ever think you can get the whole picture because you're slightly different.

In efforts to preserve the friendship bond with mothering friends, some of the participants reflected on how they assert boundaries on "mother talk." For example, Marceline explained how she politely tries to change the subject when caught-up in such exchanges with her few mothering peers. However, she admitted that her unspoken experience of these conversations was less gracious:

If you have a baby and you phone me, I will listen about your baby for five minutes, I will give you ten, but I don't want to hear about your baby, how he poohed and what he did for an hour. That doesn't interest me, that's so far removed, like that doesn't interest me.

Buffy talked about being similarly assertive with mothering friends. She explained that she has made it very clear to them that she wishes to spend time with them, and that they ought not to expect her keen interest in their children. She described her forthright response to a mothering friend who was pressuring Buffy to visit her child: "... I said '...do you know what, if I want to see them I will be over there' (laughing)."

Two of the women in this study reflected on the importance of friends for their capacity to partly fulfill a missing sense of family. Elsie highly values all her friends regardless of their parenthood status. She explained how their bonds of friendship are flexible enough to welcome children:

It (parenthood status) is just not a part of the friendship, or if we do things together, they will bring their kids along, or we will go to their place and do things with them as a family. It just doesn't make any difference for spending time with friends because our families are both distant.

Sharlene also described a sense of family that she and Phil cultivated for a lengthy time in their friendships with his co-workers. She offered to Phil's work-mates the warmth and acceptance of a mothering figure. In the following description of that pseudo-family, Sharlene explained how her childless choice gave her the opportunity to offer herself to friends in a unique way:

There was a time with Rob's company where we were more of a family than we are now. There were some social occasions and people really cared about other people. More recently there haven't been many social functions so there hasn't really been a chance to be close. But one of the guys said to me "I am glad that you didn't have any children because we are benefiting -- like we have sort of become your children and you are so good to us and you care about us." And I know Phil is sort of a father figure at work, although he probably wouldn't say that, but they do, they go to him for advice and things like that. And so -- but this one person in particular said "we benefit from you not having children."

In summary, the women in this study described a variety of friendship patterns, ranging from very few close friends to an array of connections distributed across activities and groups. Some of the women described the challenges inherent in bridging fundamental differences of lifestyle and interests with their mothering friends. Those friendships were vulnerable to loss of intimacy and reciprocal interest, and they required careful maintenance of boundaries. In some cases, friendships also provided the women with a sense of family not otherwise available to them.

The missing collective. This descriptive theme explores the women's experiences of living in a minority group without strong relationships with other similarly childless adults.

Occasional experiences of "othering" augment this theme, but are diminished by the women's strong expressions of belonging in mainstream culture.

What is it like for the childless women in this study to be living as a minority among the majority of adults in our culture who have chosen to become parents? The women participants shared an array of stories that depicted their varied experiences and different levels of awareness of their minority status as voluntarily childless women in our pronatal culture. At the level of day-to-day living all of the women confirmed that they are generally unaware of their childless state. Without a direct inquiry or particularly salient reminder, these women do not reflect on their childlessness as it might affect how they 'fit' into mainstream society. Indeed, all the women said they live conventional lifestyles with jobs and relationships that are entirely within the mainstream of our culture. And most have had extensive contact with children through either work or family. Elsie confirmed in a lighthearted way that: "I never thought of it (childlessness) as being in the minority. Only when someone says it to me, then "Oh, yes, it is, isn't it? Yeah." Doll concurred with Elsie in her statement that: "I don't really think about it. It is just a lifestyle, isn't it? I mean, it is just life." Marceline credits her work as a kindergarten teacher for offsetting any conscious awareness of being among a minority group of women. When I asked her if she felt her childlessness relegated her to the margins of mainstream adult living, she answered:

No. I would say no, because I have contact with children. I often wonder but I would never know - if I wasn't a teacher would I feel differently? But I honestly don't think I would.

The majority of these women thus affirmed that they feel very much part of mainstream adult living as they go about their daily routines. Nonetheless, I heard in their stories a quiet awareness that they do not belong to a recognizable, larger collective of childless women. Unlike mothers, whose role identity and social place are readily conferred in our pronatal society, the women participants did not refer to any such group to which they had a subjective sense of

belonging by virtue of their maternal status. Anna commented on the visibility of non-parents in society. She admitted that she quickly notices other childless adults as separate and distinct from the larger collective of parents: "...when I see people that don't have children -- I mean, I think it is unusual, you know."

Doll's comments extended Anna's observations on the rarity of encountering other childless women in the course of her daily life. When I shared with Doll some of the comments made by other women in the study that echoed her lived experiences, she told me that hearing affirmations of her own experience was "...unusual. It's unusual for me. Because I don't know many people with no children." Sharlene reflected on her minority status of childlessness and expressed her wish "...that a lot of other people would choose the same." Marceline joked about the difference between referring to her non-motherhood as 'childless' versus 'childfree' and decided that: "...'childfree' sounds even better. That sounds like a good life. That one sounds more like we get more people on our team if you use 'childfree'". Marceline spoke again in jest about how her childlessness renders her unique in mainstream culture. She used her participation in this study to highlight how she is generally unaware of her childlessness but at times becomes more conscious that her childless choice affords her no sense of group affiliation:

...when I read the advertisement, "oh, I can finally do one of these research things" and I just squeaked in by a month! "Oh, I can do it, Fred, because it is all me!" Oh, do you have erection problems? Do you have psoriasis? Do you get up to pee at night? "I can do this one Fred. Oh, I guess I am childless," like I have never said I'm childless.

Some of the participants were able to describe their social position as childless women in relation to the majority of parenting adults. Marceline spontaneously offered the metaphor of a continuum of groups to which adults belong in our society:

Sometimes I think I am sort of in that "in-between" category. I am in-between. I am not in the marriage with the kid and I am not the single person. We are sort of the in-between ones. I don't want to call it for lack of a better word "the odd ball" who is the one that is single that could snatch the husband or the wife! -- as society sees somebody. Whereas I am in-between. At the high end of it is the people with the kids.

Roberta suggested that society still fails to understand the childless choice as a viable life choice. As a result, she believes there are no "pigeon holes" in which to insert childless adults, no labels to explain their difference even as they live in mainstream society. She also emphasized that there are no public models of non-motherhood that would help assure all childfree women the esteem afforded mothers:

They don't have an image of a woman, there isn't a woman out there who is childless that's big. There isn't a Margaret Thatcher, there isn't a princess or a queen.

Roberta was the only woman in this study who firmly believed that she and other childless women are marginalized by our pronatal society. She spoke with intense and moving conviction about the tension and isolation she has experienced in the workplace and in some friendships because of the pervasive pronatal belief system in our culture. Roberta could not envision a solution to the social conundrum of being childless by choice. On the one hand she acknowledged that she is a member of a small but noncohesive group of childless individuals who are active, contributing members in adult mainstream society. On the other hand, she feels the absence of a collective that might unify all childless adults. Without a sense of group identity conferred by their reproductive status, Roberta believes that childless women are displaced to the periphery of adult living:

...they don't have a pigeon hole for us yet, there's not enough of us out there so we're not visible enough or we keep to ourselves too much. I know there's a group that's called No Kidding in the area and it's a social group for people who are childless. It's good to have the support but perhaps it's also not the right thing. You need to be amongst others to say this is a lifestyle choice as well.

Doll reflected on her occasional sense of isolation that arises by virtue of her childless state, particularly among her mothering peers. She told me how she considered joining the No Kidding group as a means of socializing with other childfree adults. Her words conveyed unmet needs for belonging to some collective, in which she might share non-mothering interests. She has not yet found an easy way to connect with other non-parents:

I am probably a very uninteresting person to a lot of other women. Because there are a lot of other women who have children, and you go out with them and nine times out of ten they want to talk about their kids, right. So I don't go into those circles. I had thought of joining No Kidding but Ernst was dead set against it because he doesn't like organized groups...I talked to Gerry Steinberg on the phone. He was quite a neat guy, but Ernst didn't want to do it so I thought "Fine."

Sharlene has found a way to create a 'mini-collective' of childless women through her relationship with a workplace supervisor. She explained how she and her supervisor are well aware that their maternal status can "isolate" and "exclude" them from the preponderance of mothers in their office. The shared experience of this isolation has assured them a bond of good humour and healthy perspective when they cannot relate to mothering peers. Sharlene expressed her delight and appreciation of the camaraderie she has cultivated with this woman:

...there is one woman at work who is single, but she has chosen to remain childless. And we don't do this very often but every once in a while we chuckle, "did you hear that?" And it is really nice because we kind of have this kinship the two of us. I understand her. She understands me. And I think in a way it is harder for her because she is a supervisor, so she has one employee who tends to take a lot of time off because she has a young child and he is always sick and everything, and it must be incredibly frustrating for her. She doesn't talk about it, but occasionally there will be a comment with a bunch of women and she will be there and later I say, "what did you think about that"? And we have a good laugh about it.

Some of the women in the study offered quite different perspectives on being in the minority of childless adults. They shrugged off their maternal status as inconsequential in determining how they situate themselves in the world of adult living. Buffy contended that the childless choice is becoming more common and she does not feel self-conscious of her non-mothering status:

I have had a couple of good friends growing up that never want to have kids. And there is somebody I work with that you might want to get into your study that's a little older than me and same thing, they never want to have kids. And I am meeting more people that have chosen never to have kids. And then you meet people who say, you are smart, you know, that's a good thing to choose to not have kids.

Other women in the study also said they do not view their childless status as a significant attribute. They reported merging easily into social groups in mainstream culture according to an

array of interests and other personal attributes. Buffy spoke of having a "huge social connection" through her equestrian sports, and her regular contact with the "dog people" in her neighborhood. Angel described how her time commitment to the humane society assured her of a social group. Anna mentioned that she was seeking volunteer work with a group that would welcome her artistic and counselling skills.

Buffy and Elsie extended their reflections on "fitting in" to society by describing the personal values that diminish the relevance of their maternal status as a source of personal and group identity. Buffy emphasized the higher purpose of contribution and caring that she enacts in roles other than motherhood:

Personally I think if you have something or somebody to love and look after, it is the same thing as having a child. I think I fit in differently than people who have nobody or nothing, and are alone and not contributing in a positive way. Because contributing in a positive way doesn't have to be to a human being.

Elsie similarly said she views her life roles and connections to others in a way that allows her to transcend the immediacy of her childless choice and parenthood in general. She tends to see herself foremost as a human being among the grand collective of all persons in this world: "I perceive myself as being part of humanity as opposed to part of a family line."

In summary, the childless women in this study reported actively participating in mainstream culture as members of a small and disparate group among the large majority of parenting adults. Most of them expressed awareness that there is no substantial collective of childless adults that could confer a strong sense of social identity, unlike the social collective comprised of parents. The women described their efforts, and in some cases the ease with which they negotiate their roles and places in our pronatal society in part by joining groups in which their non-parent status is irrelevant. The childless choice appears to vary in its power to influence each woman's sense of social position during the course of daily living in our pronatal culture.

Lived Relation: Men

The men's accounts of daily living without children generated four descriptive relationship themes that echoed those discerned from the women's accounts: animals, children, friends, and the missing collective.

Animals. This descriptive theme captured some of the men's sentiments for their animals and the inherent responsibilities of pet ownership.

Few men in this study reported any special bond or sense of connection to animals in their daily lives. The men who mentioned their appreciation of pets did so only briefly without elaborating on the meaning or nature of their relationships with their animal(s). Mynh's poignant description of his deceased dog was the only detailed commentary reflecting a significant bond between these men and their pets. As he reflected on the personal imperative of avoiding the responsibilities incumbent in parenthood, Mynh made a comparison to his former experience of fulfilling the obligations of pet ownership. Despite the pain he felt when he lost his dog, Mynh admitted that he also welcomed the relief from those caretaking responsibilities:

I loved that dog, I'll have tears in my eyes because I really, he was like my little kid and losing him, as painful as it was, was an enormous relief because I often thought when he was alive how can I bear to be without him? And when he died it was the freedom. It's terrible but the freedom of not having to care about him...

Among the other pet owners in the study, Brett expressed his love for his cats and Shadow emphasized that "my dogs are my passion." Gord indicated that he thoroughly enjoyed their Great Dane, but did not provide a rich narrative comparable to his wife's stories about the parent-like bond she felt with their dog. With the exception of Mynh, the men who no longer have pets in their lives did not spontaneously refer to past experiences of pet ownership.

In summary, the men pet owners in this study-Mynh, Brett, Ernst, Gord, and Shadow- did not elaborate on their emotional bonds to their animals, or to any paternal-like needs to nurture that were met by caring for pets. Instead, I was left to infer from their behaviours around their

animals during our interviews that these men do indeed care deeply for their animals. Gord talked to and wrestled with his dog during our conversation, and Shadow's loving tolerance for his puppy's intrusions on our conversation clearly reflected his love for his dog. Brett, too, spoke gently to his shy cats as he introduced them to me.

Children. This descriptive theme portrays the multitude of contacts and interactions with children enjoyed by the men in this study. Through work, family, and community roles the men "give back" to children and are rewarded by the satisfaction of enriching children's lives.

Many of the men in this study described relationships of commitment and caring with children. For example, Shadow has been a social worker and family therapist working for years with disturbed and disadvantaged children. Josh has dedicated his career to teaching adolescents, and although he is now no longer in the classroom, he continues to pass on his experience and support to student teachers. Fred worked with children in a recreation centre as an extra job before changing careers from construction to teaching high school where he thoroughly enjoys being part of teens' learning experiences. Prior to becoming a business owner, Brett was for many years an itinerant teacher, then a librarian in a children's department of a public library. Other men like Phil expressed their caring and interest in the well-being and happiness of nieces and nephews in his comment that "we're very happy with the way things have turned out for them." Shadow reflected on his efforts to develop a relationship with his niece, admitting that "it's like I parent her at times, although I treat her as an adult." Gord and Mynh reported enjoying the pure fun of indulging nieces and nephews.

None of the men in the study expressed dislike or intolerance for children, nor have any chosen to live an exclusively adult-oriented lifestyle with minimal involvement in children's lives. Indeed, Mynh's simple reflection on his childless choice aptly summarized those of many other men in the study: "It's not that I dislike them I just have found no reason to have any." Other men explained that not having children at home was a perfect complement to their rich and

fulfilling contacts with children through work and family. For example, Fred explained how as a teacher he enjoys a balance between his child-centred job and his adult lifestyle during non-work hours: "I come to work everyday at the school and I'm involved with kids here a lot so I don't feel a need or to have my own kids to be involved with all the time". Josh reflected on the same satisfying balance between a childfree lifestyle and a career with children, and talked about how his role as teacher probably supported his childless choice: "...it may have been a deciding factor being a teacher and being with kids all day. There was, I didn't need kids at home, I forgot about that, that may have been a factor."

For those men who had ongoing relationships with children, they reported that their interactions with children were delightful in large part because they were of finite duration. The opportunity to control the nature and extent of contact with children was the condition under which these men felt free to fully enjoy the children in their extended families, neighbourhoods, and workplace. Gord reflected on time spent with his nieces and nephews, and his appreciation that there is always an end to their visits: "...the nicest thing about having nephews and nieces is you get to give them back, you have them over, spoil them, have fun with them, play games, shoo – and send them home. It's ideal." Mynh enthusiastically described his contacts with his nephews and how time limitations on their visits works in everyone's best interests:

...they're in Ontario so it's you know Christmas and birthday presents and visiting when I'm back there. So we're kind of the mysterious uncle and aunt you know, who come bearing presents. And they can't wait to see us and they're so excited, and it's like The Beatles showing up when we come by. And then we're gone and it's great because the kids never get tired of us and we don't get tired of them. They're good kids so they're not difficult.

Several of the men told stories of careers and family bonds that highlighted their profound commitments to supporting and caring for children, over and above their roles as uncles. Some of the men explained that by eschewing parenthood they were freed up to enjoy children in ways and contexts unavailable to parents. Shadow explained with some humour the

ease and flexibility with which he can fulfill a role in children's lives simply because he is not a parent: "I have a totally different relationship and I can walk in and walk out. It gives me the freedom. I don't have to hit them to make them listen!"

The men also told stories of their relationships with children in which they assumed a broad range of roles: teacher, guide, mentor, model, and coach. Shadow described how his childless choice helps him to fulfill a deeply meaningful set of values and ideals:

I think for me it allows me to be more of a friend and a teacher and a guide. I'm part Native Indian and one of my totems is as a healer, a guide. And so I think that has helped me in terms of sharing with kids. And I tend to do that with kids...so there's a connection there, but it's not like I have to have my own to feel connected.

Both Josh and Fred acknowledged that teaching is an alternate means of parenting children. Fred reflected on the "touching" opportunities his job affords him to cultivate an intimacy with children not dissimilar to that experienced in a parent-child bond:

Every once and awhile you get a kid coming up to you and saying "oh can I talk to you about something?" And in this school especially, we have a lot of home stay kids. We have a lot of kids from overseas who come here and they're boarded out. So sometimes they don't have a close relationship with their home stay parents. So they'll come to you and they'll say like one kid came to me and said "I failed my English." He's an ESL student, right? So he's used to getting good marks so he was a little crushed that he wasn't at the top...

Gord suggested that he too, was a teacher-albeit outside a classroom. He told the delightful story of taking his nephews on fishing trips and teaching them the basics of fishing and camping: "I feel like I should be a teacher to those guys because I've got years of experience and they have squat so I can be a good teacher for them."

Some of the men also depicted themselves as coaches to children's interests, both creative and athletic. Fred expressed great satisfaction with coaching school children in physics clubs during his non-work hours. He explained that "it's a great way of getting a little closer to the kids...and a little more personal." Shadow also said that he missed coaching children's sports, an activity he undertook as one means of contributing to children's lives.

Shadow was the only man in this study who suggested that he modeled the childless choice to children. In the course of his work with children, teens, and families, he hoped that his life would be an example of alternate ways of being a man:

...there are other models out there than just ... a man that needs to be in a family with kids. It's alright to be a male without kids, you know. It's alright to want to not have children but to share what you know or what you learned with the less fortunate kids out there so they get an opportunity... .

In summary, the men unanimously expressed their appreciation of the balance they had struck in meeting their many personal needs and priorities by forgoing fatherhood, yet still finding ways to enjoy and contribute to children's lives. These men have created alternate roles to fatherhood in which they can "enjoy them (children) in a different way." None of the men expressed a sense of "missing out" on contact with children because they declined to become fathers. Rather, they described rich contacts with children across a range of family, work, and other venues. Mynh echoed the reflections of the other men in his observation that his daily life is not deprived of children:

...absolutely not. I have children influencing me all the time. We're this, their whole essence swirls around my life, it impacts it, maybe not as much as people with children, but it's still everywhere.

Friendships. This descriptive theme elaborates on the flexibility and variety of friendships enjoyed by the men in this study.

All the men in this study confirmed that their spouses were their closest friends and preferred companions in daily living. The men also reported that they did not deliberately seek out friendships with similarly childless men. They described a variety of friendships, both in numbers and activities shared in the time spent with friends. Mynh indicated that he maintains a "large network" of friends with and without children. He appreciates the flexibility in his time that allows him to visit a variety of friends whose availability for socializing is often more restricted than his. Brett and Ernst concurred with Mynh in comments that their childlessness

does not influence their choice of friends. Shadow expressed his abundant appreciation for all his friends and compared their significance in his life to not having children: "it's not important to have kids in the family as much as other people that I can share with." Josh described having friends "in both camps" of parents and non-parents, and said that his childless choice is seldom a topic of interest or conversation when he is among friends of either group:

I've got friends, close friends in both camps. And you know, it's always, I don't know if supportive is the right word, it's not just something that comes up. But it certainly, I never feel any, from the ones that do have kids I certainly never feel like they're saying you should have had kids. So I never feel I'm being singled out or there's something wrong with me as a result of that.

However, men like Gord and Phil agreed in their observations that their friendships have been impacted by friends' lack of time to share outside of their family commitments. Gord noted that his friendships with men who are parents tend to "shift...until the baby's a little older and then when they're a little older they have a little more time" to spend together. Ernst explained how his fathering friends must go to great lengths to join him for outings, and that he sees less of them than when they were childfree:

I'd be going for a hike every weekend in the summer and you know some of them would say "well let me know when you're going hiking and I'll go with you." Well it was a major reorganization of their life to get to come out there on one hike in the summer.

Phil reflected on this same tendency that his friendships can and have waxed and waned over the years according to friends' involvement in family life. He noted that his friendships have dwindled over the years:

...that's an interesting thing. You lose a lot of friends when you don't have kids... You know you've got friends who end up, they've got kids and so you never see them again because they don't bring the kids here. They go visit other families where they have children, where the children can play. So you never see them you know... We don't have a lot of friends. Friends have come and gone over the years...

Fred spoke of couple friends he enjoys with Marceline and also mentioned how parenting friends are less accessible than those who have grown children or have not yet had families:

...it's not that I go seeking out somebody who doesn't have kids so that you know they are free. A lot of the friends we have are maybe a little older than us and their kids are already grown up. So you know they don't have that responsibility of taking care of their kids now. On the other hand, some of them are just starting out and they are only just having kids. So ya, some of them you know have small babies right now. Although it does tend to, like we've had other friends that we sort of lost touch with who had kids and now their kids are getting in the 5, 6, 10 year olds, and we don't see them as much because they are busy with their kids. Marceline is my best friend, right? So we spend a lot of time together and we don't have a lot of real close friends that are always with us.

In summary, the men in this study did not describe changes in the quality or intimacy of their relationships with friends who became fathers. Rather, they indicated that their friendships incorporated many other interests beyond family life including sport, cars, and work. The men also did not report any efforts to manage boundaries in their friendships with fathering peers. The men referred only to changes in friendships that arose because of fathers' time commitments to family life. The men sometimes lost track of their fathering friends over the years, but most of them anticipated eventual renewal of those friendship bonds. Most of them expressed a philosophical and accepting attitude towards the time constraints imposed on their friendships with their fathering peers. Moreover, they indicated that they maintained a wide range of friends across which their needs for companionship could be readily met.

The missing collective. This theme depicts men's awareness of living in a small collective of childfree adults in the mainstream culture of parenthood. None of these men felt peripheral to the larger collective of parents, and they easily negotiated the occasional moments in which their reproductive choice was more visible.

The men in this study expressed a range of lived experiences and perceptions of their daily lives as members of the small minority of non-parents in our society. Although none of the men described an ongoing or recurring self-consciousness of their childless choice, almost all of them expressed their awareness that there were few childless adults among the larger collective of parents. Starting with their childhoods some of the men recalled their early impressions that childlessness was rare. Josh described how even as a child playing in his friend's neighbourhood

he noticed a couple that did not have children: "...I remember at the time thinking 'that's really strange. How come they don't have kids?' That's when I was 10 or 11, 12 maybe." Shadow also recalled some childless couples on the military reserve during his childhood whose memory served to remind him that he, too, could pursue alternatives to the adult norm of parenthood. Mynh described the lasting positive impression made on him by his contact with a couple who had no children:

...when I was a kid my uncle and aunt had, they still have friends who are probably around 60 now who are childless. And they're very interesting people and they're very young you know, among their age group. I can relate so well to them because they think young and have never been parental and gotten old...

Only Gord admitted that prior to our interview he had never before considered himself in a minority group of adults. However, he concurred with the other men in the study that his minority status is a trivial descriptor of his life as a childless man. With humour and some sarcasm, he reflected on this new way of regarding his childless status in our strongly pronatal society:

I never looked at it like that before. We're in a smaller group, I guess. We're the have-nots, I guess: we have not any children. Well what am I to say? Hurray!! (laughter)...That's okay, I don't care. I don't want to be with, well, ya why would I want to be with the kid people? I don't have any kids, why would I want to be? I never looked at it as part of a group or club. So ya, I just chose, I didn't want to have kids so here I am, I have no kids, perfect.

Although some men reported having a few social models for their childless choice, most of the men in the study were similar to Phil who confirmed he had made his childless choice without social support or validation. At the time of his choice in the early eighties, Phil acknowledged that: "I didn't know of any others, I didn't get this idea from anybody else." He recalled his inner struggle to reconcile his rejection of fatherhood with society's view that childlessness was abnormal:

I think maybe what we did was definitely not the normal thing to do, I think that's what it really is. See you have to challenge your psyche as to whether you know whether you are out in left field on that...

Josh also referred to the notion of 'normal' as the critical criteria for membership in the general social collective of adulthood. When I informed him of the growing numbers in the childless minority he expressed surprise and relief that perhaps this social trend would serve to validate his choice as less deviant: "Oh really? I don't know, I guess it makes me feel better knowing that there's 15 or 20 per cent of the population, that it's not something wrong with me, it's not just an aberration... ."

Although Phil and Josh had queried their own 'normalcy' with respect to their childless choice, their voices were consonant with the other men in the study who denied that they felt detached or peripheral from mainstream culture in the course of their daily lives. Although they acknowledged their minority status in our pronatal culture, most concurred with Mynh's opinion that there was no longer any "stigma" associated with childlessness that would marginalize them from mainstream adult living. Mynh reported that social values have changed over the years to render childlessness a more accepted life choice:

Since the '60's or '70's, where there was kind of traditional family units were kind of attached, people were living together all of a sudden. And then there was the acceptance recently of gay unions. And you know, not to have kids is like the least of, you know of those evils, probably. So no, I don't feel there's any stigma attached to it anymore.

Fred confirmed Mynh's assumption in his statement that although his childless choice differs from the majority of adults, it does not manifest as a felt difference in his interactions with other adults: "I haven't been judged differently because people know that I haven't had kids." He further emphasized that no particular interpersonal difference ought to render him a social anomaly, whether it is his childlessness or a natural attribute: "I don't consider myself as being different...I have red hair, I'm in the minority. Does that make me different?"

Shadow made similar statements confirming that he feels very much a part of mainstream society and is only infrequently reminded that his childless choice situates him in a minority of adults. He commented on his embeddedness in mainstream society: "I live in it everyday. I have

mainstream society in terms of work... ." Ernst added his belief that childless women are perhaps more subject to marginalization than men because mothers are more focussed on their children's lives than fathers. He reported that he has never felt estranged from his fathering friends during ordinary social contact:

...it's (childlessness) not as recognized by the guys. And I'd have to say in my experience I don't think you're looked on as any kind of oddball or something, if you come along and get in a conversation with people and say that, no, I don't have kids...

Perhaps Fred provided the most colourful example of how the men in this study appeared to easily negotiate the real and perceived differences between themselves and the majority of parents in the course of daily living:

I'll tell you a story. It was a few years ago. Marceline was trying to get a tape of this singer who does kids' songs. So he was at a mall opening and we went there and so you know there's all, because he does kids' songs, lots of kids and parents there. So I'm standing there listening and Marceline is there sitting with all the kids. She's just thrilled about this, and he says "oh I'm going to need a volunteer" and I happen to be wearing a red jacket and he says "will that gentleman in the red jacket come up on stage?" So I went up on stage and he said "would you put on this little dress, this little sunflower hat and lead the kids in a dance and play music?" So I did it, you know, as you know any parent would, right? If you get chosen you have to show that you're a good sport sort of thing. So I did it - I wasn't a parent but I still did it. And I don't know, is there any difference really whether you have kids or whether you don't? You can go and enjoy the same things and participate.

Several men in this study remarked with some wry humour that parenting friends and coworkers had expressed envy for their childless choice, and the resulting lifestyle benefits. This feedback was often interpreted by the men as social validation for their childless choice which, although welcome, was never sought or needed. Mynh referred to his membership in the minority group of childless adults as "much coveted" by others. Ernst reported that his parenting friends have often told him that he is "lucky" not to have children. Josh described how peers occasionally expressed regret about their decision to become parents:

...a lot of times people will say, like we're talking about kids or something, and they say "ah, kids are so much trouble you know. I don't know if it was the right thing to do. It's overrated to have kids."

Gord commented that to his surprise, older persons of a strongly pronatal era were consistently supportive of his childless choice. Following is his paraphrased version of the typical conversation he has with his elderly clients when they ask about his parental status:

...a lot of older people ask me, "Oh do you have children?" And I say "No, we have a dog and a horse." "Oh that's fine." "We decided not to have kids." "Oh that's a good choice nowadays." A lot of people would say that.

Although all of the men confirmed a strong sense of belonging to mainstream culture of adult living, a few of them offered examples of occasional experiences when they felt momentarily separated from the parenting milieu of their workplace or community. Shadow reflected on the unpredictable moments when he felt "peripheral" to the activities and lives of parents with their children, particularly in relation to his former activities of coaching sports for youth:

...now that we're not part of that, I'd be sitting on the outside. You see the soccer games, you see the football games. So that would be the only peripheral experience that I would see when driving by the sports field and see the kids and their families, thinking "ya, that must be neat," or see them sitting in the rain supporting the kids. You know, you're soaked. That must be fun to see your kid's first goal, or touchdown.

Shadow confirmed that during such moments of reflection he felt isolated and separate from the dominant group of parents around him. Both Shadow and Mynh also reflected on interactions with their work colleagues, the majority of whom are parents. They reported falling silent during others' child-focussed conversations, an example of how social space can spontaneously open between parents and non-parents in the course of ordinary daily living. Mynh explained such an experience in his workplace: "...sometimes people at work will talk about kid stuff and you know I listen and I have no input and that's fine."

Phil offered a slightly different perspective that group differences between parents and non-parents can be highlighted by communication difficulties. He described with frustration, how he feels unheard in conversations with parents when he attempts to explain the validity of his childless choice:

...anybody who has children you cannot explain this to them, they just don't understand it right? It's not until their kids are adults that they stop and think clearly. They can't see past the end of their nose. I'm convinced of that and that's fine. In fact in some ways thank goodness it's like that you know "only a mother could love it" thing.

Overall, the childless men in this study did not feel that their minority group status affected their sense of belonging to, or acceptance by the larger collective of parenting men. Although they were aware that they did not belong to a substantial or particularly visible collective of non-parents, they reported only fleeting moments of feeling peripheral to the dominant group of parents in society. And they reported no instances of feeling rejected from the larger collective of adults by virtue of their childless status, although at times they said they felt unheard by their parenting peers when trying to explain their childless choice. More often, they noted that parents often validated their childless choice and expressed envy for their childfree lifestyles.

Comparisons of Lived Relation: Women and Men

Findings from this study revealed some differences between spouses in the roles they created for animals in their lives. The husbands made nominal references to their animals, a stark contrast to the abundant expressions of love and devotion reported by their wives. Moreover, several of the women reported that their relationships with animals satisfied their maternal inclinations to nurture, and some admitted that having animals was almost akin to having children of their own – including their sense of obligation and responsibility for providing the best possible care to their pets. On the other hand, the men did not indicate that their relationships with pets satisfied any “paternal” urges to caretake. Overall, the women pet-owners in this study appeared to be more committed to creating special space in their lives for animals, to derive more meaning and joy from their human-animal bonds, and to consciously fulfill their needs to nurture through caretaking of their pets.

Most of the men and women in this study described an array of enriching roles they play in children's lives. These roles derive from family relationships, career and volunteer work opportunities, and community ties. However, for the men who have ongoing contact with children, their descriptions of those relationships differed subtly from those of the women. In particular, the men only rarely acknowledged that their contacts with children either invoked or satisfied father-like or natural urges to nurture children. Rather, these men reflected with delight and satisfaction on their capacity to support, teach, and guide children. In contrast, the women appeared more inclined to interpret their interactions with children as meeting maternal tendencies or needs to nurture children. In spite of this difference, however, the men and women who have ongoing contact with children all implied that their enjoyment of such contact was due in large part because it was of finite duration. Exercising control over the kind and duration of contact with children appeared to be a critical means of maintaining these participants' sense of personal freedom in relationships.

The significance of friendships varied across all participants in this study, although all the men and women denied that their childlessness influenced their friendship patterns. Among the adults who maintained active friendships, there appear to be some subtle differences in how friendships with parents are negotiated and maintained. In contrast to some of the women's descriptions of friendships with mothers, the men in this study did not describe changes in the quality or intimacy of their relationships with friends who became fathers. The men also did not report any experiences of managing boundaries in relationships with fathering peers. On the other hand, some of the women reported assertive attempts to preserve adult-oriented bonds with mothers - friendships they hoped would continue to include shared interests and activities outside the realm of motherhood. More women than men expressed frustration that they had diminishing shared interests with their mothering peers. Men, on the other hand, related only that their friendships with fathers were compromised by the lack of time available to fathers to spend with

their childfree peers. All of these participants, however, related their practical adjustments to such challenges in their friendships. They either sought contact with other friends who may or may not have children in their daily lives, or they stepped back from those friendships with hopes that they might resume in the future when children were older and less dependent on parents.

Finally, the participants' stories were explored for their awareness of membership in a small minority group of non-parents, and their experience of that minority status. Overall, the men and women related similar views that in the course of their daily living they were not consciously aware of the social status conferred by their childless choice, nor were they troubled by the small size of their non-parenting cohort. Almost all of them enjoyed relationships with others across an array of groups wherein childlessness was an irrelevant criteria for belonging. Most participants were, however, aware that the prevailing cultural discourse implied negative views of their childless choice. Nonetheless, they denied that they experienced ongoing manifestations of social judgment in their daily lives. Occasionally they encountered pronatalist comments or queries about their childless choice, but all participants greeted these incidents with disinterest and a ready rejection of such judgments as relevant to their lives. Occasionally these encounters invoked more uncomfortable feelings of frustration and irritation, isolation, and hurt. The women portrayed these moments as causing them more emotional distress than did the men. Overall, most of the men and women in this study acknowledged either a historical or current pronatal cultural discourse emanating from the large majority of parenting adults. Direct and negative experiences of that discourse were not a source of ongoing distress, however, as they arose infrequently and for some participants, not at all.

Lived Space: Women

The existential of lived space refers to the ways in which we move through space, and how we occupy and exist in space. Our being in physical space is typically not in our conscious awareness and we rarely speak of it, yet space almost always affects the way we feel.

The women of this study referred to the physical space that frames their daily lived experiences, the spaces of home and the larger world they entered through extensive travel. The women also alluded to intangible psychological space within the self - the space accompanying each woman as she moved through all outer physical spaces. Inner space appeared as a reservoir of energy and potential, while self-conscious space was the private space into which the women might retreat when feeling self-conscious about their childlessness.

Physical space reflects the physical world in which the women exist. They described many qualities of their physical lived space; it is public or private, shared or solitary. It is occupied simply and pragmatically, or it is filled with objects and embellished with artful sensibilities. Some spaces, like work space, confer structure, duty, and roles upon these women. Others offer each woman the freedom to simply be as she is without the demands implied in other spaces. For example, Elsie clearly described the distinction of lived experience between home and work space. Without the responsibilities of a job or the obligations of parenthood, she delights in the spontaneity and simplicity of homelife. She also reflected on how her experience of time and tasks at home differs from her image of a mother's daily life:

I feel like for me there is a dichotomy between work and home in that work is regimented, you have to plan and so forth, there are demands made on you, that's part of the reason why I like my days to be more spontaneous. I like digging dirt and getting my hands dirty because you can't get your hands dirty at work (laughing) not in that, you know, getting down to it kind of -- it doesn't matter kind of way. It does matter at work and you have to be much more structured. So with children, it strikes me as having to be more regimented that way. Having less freedom of choice. Having more demands and less fun.

The women of this study talked about occupying physical spaces that are clearly boundaried. Some boundaries, like those denoting home space, are declared and fiercely protected. Most often, though, there is some flux to these boundaries. Several of the women appeared to move fairly fluidly from familiar to foreign space, eagerly seeking adventure and growth either by traveling or relocating to new communities. I discerned two distinct experiences of physical space known to the women of this study.

Physical space: Home space. The descriptive theme of home space illustrates the women's valuing of quiet, privacy and intimacy offered by their homes. Home space is where they can elude the clamour of the outer world, and reconnect with themselves and their spouses. Home also can be a palette for expression of creative sensibilities.

I entered many of these women's homes for our interviews where we talked in living rooms and kitchens - the spaces of daily living. I saw how home can be a refuge for these women from the demands of work, a place where each woman can calm her frayed nerves, rest, and reconnect to herself and to her spouse. Doll explained that sharing public space with social conventions of small talk can be stressful and anxiety-provoking. Unlike mothers, she cannot use small talk about children to ease her discomfort and establish shared and friendly bonds with others. At home she can relax and spare herself any social intrusions or uncomfortable contacts. In contrast, Buffy affirmed that she lives her life outside home – at the barn, in the workplace, in her counselling office, and at classes. Home becomes the base to which she returns from her busy life and where she shares quiet time with her husband. She is free to spend time away from home as she desires, and to return at her convenience. There are no obligations to children that could constrain her mobility and demand that she spend more time at home.

Angel reflected on her home and particularly her garden as a haven – a space for not thinking, free from the constraints of a highly intellectual work life. Once home from her paid

and volunteer work, she can disengage from others and indulge in her own pleasures and thoughts – a little known luxury to mothers:

...so whether it is in the house or whether it is outside, that is when I am most relaxed and most calm. Actually, I just thought that the best thing in the world is in the summer time when I am out in my garden and I am surrounded by my animals. That's heaven for me. And if I could do that 24 hours, seven days a week, that's heaven.

Sharlene also appreciates her home as a "peaceful" place where she supports her husband ("I'm his gopher") as he undertakes home projects. A recreational property provides them a second home which Sharlene has appreciated for years as a retreat from the pressures and stresses of daily living. This home offers the pair a space of quiet intimacy. They do not take this second home for granted, and Sharlene acknowledged that hard work and a childfree lifestyle has allowed them to afford this luxury of quiet sanctuary:

...one of our friends calls it the love nest. And I think going up there, getting away from everything and just being there relaxing, we tend to cook and everything up there, you know, like for the next week, but just sort of maybe just relaxing, lying on the chesterfield or reading or whatever, it is so nice that we can do that. And we don't have a T.V. or anything. So we are really getting away from it all. And it is great that we can do that. (23)

Several of the women in this study portrayed how home space can also be a palette or backdrop for self-expression. I admired rooms in their homes that had become canvases for favorite hues of color, with shelves displaying favorite objects and precious belongings. Anna's home both nurtures and showcases her talent; home is her studio for creating art and her gallery for displaying her pieces. Achieving the "right" décor and design of her home space is important to her. Anna reflected that she is less concerned about what others think of her childless choice than what they think of her home, a work-in-progress in which she has invested her creative and aesthetic sensibilities:

...in some ways it doesn't really matter. I mean, there is a lot of things that matter more to me. Like when people come to my house and say, "I really like your place". That's really important to me...I mean, it is comfortable, and it's cozy and the whole thing, but the styling isn't exactly what I want, and I don't know how to achieve that, and there are so

many things that are happening. So when someone comes in to affirm that this is nice, it is really important to me.

Elsie also emphasized the importance of achieving a special look and atmosphere for her home.

She explained that home space must meet her emotional needs for peace and respite:

I like my house to be a certain way. Because to me my house is my sanctuary, so it has to feel right. And I want it to be calming and comfortable. So I will do a lot of planning and implementing and making things for it.

The ambience of home was similarly critical to Angel whose passion for precious antiques and period finishing is evident throughout her beautiful heritage home. Like Anna, she has always had a vision of her ideal home and admits that "I have always wanted to have a very nice home", with "things" out where they can be seen and admired. These "things" are symbolic of her working self – they are carefully selected treasures, the rewards of her intense and demanding career. More than just a gallery of extraordinary objects, for Angel home is symbolic of all that she has accomplished. As did several of the women, Angel mused that if she were a parent she would expect to have much less, most probably "a modest house of modest furnishings".

Not all the women projected themselves into their homes by utilizing creative energies or an artistic eye. Instead, personality and values were reflected in the minimalist style embraced by Roberta. She rejects the lavish and feels encumbered by excess. Instead, she takes pride in her willful rejection of materialism and tells the story of culling down belongings and living comfortably with the basic necessities of life. Buffy's home space is similarly simple and furnished to meet the practical needs of daily living. Doubtless these women's homes would contain far more than their personal tastes now dictate, if they were furnishing a home to meet the needs of children.

Physical Space: Worldly space. The descriptive theme of worldly space reflects the women's enthusiastic descriptions of travel and exploration of unknown places beyond home.

They expressed their eagerness to leave the comfort and routine of home space for opportunities to immerse themselves in foreign space. They also reflected on the role of travel as a means of re-affirming their marital bond.

The women's accounts of traveling with their spouses emphasized the rewards of visiting new lands and cultures, the stimulation of adventure and ambiguity in unknown places. These women relish the learning and excitement of travel and have counted it among their most appreciated lifestyle qualities. Almost all confirmed that having children would likely diminish their current opportunities to travel, and they would be reluctant to sacrifice this freedom of mobility for the constraints of family life.

Doll described the profound significance for her of being-in-the-world, the opportunity to be part of human kind. She is compelled to be part of a world much larger than that which she occupies in daily living. Reading, attending lectures, and paying careful attention to others with worldly knowledge help make her feel more worldly. But travel is the critical physical means of reaching beyond her familiar space. Through travel, she feels she becomes both student and citizen of the world. With cynical humour she reminded me that she "swing(s) on a short rope" by living all her adulthood in one town where she has always worked in the same place. As she described her passion for travel, I could envision how her trips abroad removed that rope, freeing her to experience the world and herself more fully. Doll elaborated on how awe-inspiring experiences of travel have affected her:

...you know, I stood in front of this sarcophagus kind of thing in England and I realized, you know, it was ancient, and to get a feeling of your own mortality, you know. Like to me that's fascinating. I drink it in. I love all that stuff. So, yeah, to me that's -- that's what it is all about.(41)

Anna also looks to the world as her personal classroom so each year during summer break she and her husband schedule a trip. Situating herself in new cultures and places, she stimulates her growth and development. She impressed me as a keen student of the world when

she travels, then as a teacher who imparts her knowledge to students upon her return home. Anna explained how her travels enhance her capacity to teach:

...during the summer time we travel. When we are traveling, even though I am not helping, it is meaningful because I am learning. So ... education is another aspect. If I am learning and learning about what's going on, I am learning about culture.

Angel, Anna, and Elsie expressed another dimension of being in worldly space with their spouses. For these women travel is a relational experience, a significant means of restoring and reaffirming their marital bond. For Elsie, major holidays with her husband are interspersed with short respite trips where they can enjoy being a couple, uninterrupted by the demands of their child-centred work. Elsie explained their need for regular breaks: "... we do like to get away. We go to Yellow Point every year for a few days and stay over there. You can't take kids there. (I have heard about that). And they have to be over 14 for them to go (laughing)."

In home and familiar space these women live busy lives in which schedules do not always convene for spousal contact or allow for exclusive interactions. Angel looks forward to leaving the constraints of home space and moving into the world with her husband. These trips provide her and Mynh opportunities to spend time together, and to share in the fun and adventure of foreign travel:

And now that we've got the house decorated and we have done what renovations we want to and so on, we have traveled in the past, and I think fair to say we both are planning on doing more traveling, because it is something that we both truly enjoy.

Perhaps Anna best articulated the power of being-in-the-world with her husband. She explained that at in her marriage at home "we are separate but together", each with their own interests, friendships, and ways of being in daily living. Worldly travel exposes them to new experiences that demand interdependence and evoke shared wonder and appreciation of the world. Anna alluded to the intimacy and connection that is reinforced in their relationship when they travel: "...there is connection with Josh and I, we need to be together and travel. So

that's where we really connect when we travel. Travel is a really important source of bringing us together."

For the women who value worldly travel as a means of connecting with their partners, there is an unspoken assumption that children could substantially disrupt this ritual of time spent together. Anna reflected that although some people do travel with children, she could not imagine undertaking the efforts to do so. Angel surmised that motherhood would entail a sacrifice of all opportunities to travel, and hence to spend time alone with her husband. And Elsie's preference to visit adult friends in exotic places would likely be overridden by children's holiday destinations.

To summarize, the women in this study told life stories set in two distinct dimensions of physical space: in the familiar environs of home and local space, and the unknown spaces of the world to which they often travel. Much of the women's time is spent in the ordinary space of home, space that is often created and decorated as an extension of their aesthetic sensibilities and personal values. For most of these women, home is a place to rest and seek refuge from the world of work and other commitments.

Doubtless the tenor of home space described by these women would be transformed by the presence of children. Home might not continue to offer a quiet refuge or intimacy with spouses, nor might the preferred décor and furnishings sustain the wear and tear of family life. Moreover, several of the women conceded that the financial demands of parenthood would preclude owning the homes they can now afford.

Many of the women also described their passion for travel, the opportunities to venture into worldly space where they can learn about other cultures and about themselves. In addition, traveling with their spouses can be a means to nurture their marital relationship. All of the women acknowledged that their childfree status enables them to afford such travel, and

to take vacations that meet their adult needs for intellectual stimulation, personal growth, and pleasure.

Psychological space: Inner space. The first theme of psychological space is that of inner space. The theme denotes the inner reserve of energy, anticipation, and optimism with which the women greet and move through the world. It also contains their passion for learning and exploring their talents.

During my interviews with the women I was continually impressed by the positive and compelling energy with which they told stories of their daily lives. I felt energized and inspired in their presence. Each woman exuded a spirit and vitality from a space I could neither see or name. I could only infer that within each of them there was a space filled with the drive to live life fully and to embrace all lived experience. Roberta's description of her outlook on life as a childless woman exemplified the passion with which these women engage in their life projects:

...your life is still full of lots of discoveries, you still see life as lots of options out there for you to just you know I don't know, I still say I don't know what I want to be when I grow up and because I don't see that this is the left, this is the only career I'm going to have, I've had a whole bunch, I still want to have a whole bunch more, I don't want to read about it just in a book I want to go do it.

Some of the women also implied that this psychological space provided refuge from the clamour of external expectations and daily living, an inner retreat where they can quietly consider life's major questions. Ultimately, time spent in this private space yields answers with which to create purpose and meaning in life. Elsie recounted the period when she explored the deepest sentiments of her childless choice in this invisible space of meaning-making:

... I tuned into myself in terms of, "okay, what am I supposed to do with my life? Who am I supposed to be? How am I supposed to be using my talents? What contribution am I supposed to be making?"

Elsie's words also suggested that psychological space is reflexive space. In the following quote Angel described her lengthy occupation in this space when in her early forties, she

reconsidered her childless choice. She explained how she was reluctant to demand a family of her husband and instead retreated into a private space of self-reflection:

...it was for moral reasons that I didn't proceed at the time, but rather took the time to just sit back and give it a lot of thought. Because it had also occurred to me that maybe I was just going through a phase in my life where I was mistaking what I wanted, and that I thought that having a child would solve the problems, or solve the concerns and fill something that was missing. I wasn't one hundred per cent sure. And so I took the time and I am glad that I did.

Other women in the study tapped their inner space for energy to create and to learn. Anna enters this space as she attends art classes, creates pieces, and passionately reads about contemporary art. Marceline also accesses her creative space as she haunts dollar stores to find novel materials for her kindergarten classes, and makes arts and crafts projects for her home. Elsie thrives in jobs that allow her to take creative initiatives to solve problems and enhance the quality of life for others. And Angel looks forward to reducing her law practice so that she can take language and crafts classes. These women thoroughly enjoyed exploring the potential contained in their inner creative space.

As I listened to the women, I envisioned inner space as a landscape of the self; some is well-traveled and familiar while other portions await exploration. Here the self is constructed with painstaking attention to goals and desires. Sharlene and Doll both described how they have turned inward to establish a life path and to set goals. Sharlene stepped back from her intense work commitment after her sister's death to cancer, wondering what else she might do with her life. From this place she set a renewed life course by taking classes, spending more time with her husband, and undertaking an intense and long-term commitment to volunteer work for cancer research. In reflecting on her sister's death Sharlene said:

So I think in a way it was a good thing because it made me take a step back and think about my own life, and I really didn't have a life...So I took a look at my life and decided there was more.

Doll described her current angst-ridden search for a new path in work and school. She tolerates the stubborn quietness of her inner space that has not yet yielded answers for her future. I sensed her frustration and mounting distress as she reflected on her unsuccessful efforts to ascertain a heart-felt passion or interest that might come from within:

I wish to goodness there was something I could find to do that I felt a passion for. If I did, all hell would break loose, you know (laughing), but I have to find something out there at 44 years old that I think might fit...I envy you. I envy anyone who feels that they want to pursue a certain path.

Inner space also invites learning and acquisition of knowledge. Several of the women have returned to school to satisfy a need to grow through education. Elsie, Buffy, and Anna met the challenges of graduate degrees. Buffy and Roberta love pursuing all manner of interests through education, while Anna simply states that "the most meaningful thing to me is learning and helping... learning fills my need of the intellectual." As part of her search for a new career Doll set a goal to complete a GED. For many years Sharlene expanded her inner world by typing masters' and doctoral level theses. It was "another kind of work. And I enjoyed it. I learned a lot. I met some fabulous people." For Sharlene and many of the other women, inner spaces have become repositories rich with knowledge-of self and of the world.

These women demonstrate a willingness to take risks and an openness to new experiences. They speak in terms of possibilities and rarely refer to limitations – either within themselves or imposed by the world around them. From their optimistic attitudes and active engagement in daily living, I inferred a psychological sense of freedom that is unfettered by obligations incurred by parenthood. Elsie has moved across the country numerous times to accommodate both her and her husband's career developments. Roberta has walked away from lengthy and secure employment in the public library to undertake adventures in career and leisure in partnership with her husband. Sharlene devoted years to volunteer work in addition to her paid job, and Buffy continues to indulge in her passion for horses on a daily basis. Angel has

always worked twelve hour days, and plans worldly travels for breaks. None of these women have known the constraints of motherhood that might define more concisely their options and obligations in daily living. There is no felt imperative among these women to pursue a singular and conventional path through life; they move fluidly through time and places, selecting opportunities for living that best fit their nature and goals. These women perceive themselves as free to engage in life on their own terms.

In summary, the women's accounts of their lived experiences suggest that they each have a reservoir of inner strength, energy, and drive which compels them to live life to the fullest. In this space they can pause for reflection on their life ideals, or they can tap into creative ideas and set goals for learning. This is the inner place in which a sense of self is constructed from quiet reflections, passions and desires, and decisions to pursue a life rich in possibilities.

Psychological space: Self-conscious space. This descriptive theme illuminates the self-conscious space that emerges for these childless women in social space, at the intersection where the daily lives of nonmothers meet and mingle with those of mothering peers. Doll struggled to explain what commonly occurs for her at this point of contact.

They ask very cursory questions to me about, so what do you do, you know? But when they find out, it is funny, I don't know if I am generalizing, but when they find out you haven't been down the same road as them, very often I find women just-it is not like you are dismissed, it is just-you are just not-I think two different worlds and they collide...

In this self-conscious space differences are evoked and highlighted, awkward moments of disconnection are encountered, and conflicted feelings surface. Doll, Roberta, and Sharlene reflected on their heightened awareness of difference between themselves and mothers. They alluded to a one-way barrier dividing this space; non-mothers see and hear mothering but feel invisible and unheard themselves. These women described how sometimes, interactions can feel unsatisfying because child-centred conversations overtake dialogues of diversity. Doll recalled

one such conversation when, after revealing her childfree status her life and interests seemed no longer relevant to her mothering acquaintances:

I had to listen to all about the shower times, you know, when they get up and what time does such and such have their shower in the morning and all this extremely boring bloody stuff. And I want to talk about -- you know, there is a world out there, there is countries, there is politics, there is all sorts of stuff, and I've got to hear about bloody shower times.

Self-conscious isolation and resentment can colour this space. Sharlene explained how she at times has felt excluded from the larger collective of mothers in her workplace:

...there is the problem where I think people get preferential treatment because they do have kids. And one of the things that kind of bothers me a little bit once in a while is it is like they -- they sort of get together and they talk and I am excluded.

She struggles to make meaning of this social wound and to cope with the awkwardness imposed on her in this shared space. Sharlene does not know how to bridge the gaps that open in social space between mothers and non-mothers. She feels there is no invitation to cross over into the exclusive social space of motherhood. Like Roberta she sometimes feels trapped and alone.

Sharlene described the division between herself and mothering co-workers in her office:

I don't think it is very nice that they just kind of there is all these sort of private discussions and I am just sitting there on my own. I don't like that. I don't know why it bothers me, but it does.

The scrutiny of others in her former workplace at the public library could also move Roberta into self-conscious space. Acceptance of difference between mothers and non-mothers was seemingly overruled by the traditional social norms by which she felt judged:

...definitely, you work in the children's department you see lots of expectant moms, new moms, and people ask you questions about that and it's the tone of the response after you say you don't have children or the expression on their face...and every so often you catch them glancing to your left hand um (What's that like for you?) Um, annoying I guess, here we go again and I didn't just walk in and dismiss you, "oh - she's pregnant" um I didn't think that, I thought "oh well she's doing her thing".

However, for some of the women in this study, awareness of difference reinforced their childless choice. Buffy becomes especially conscious of her childfree state while empathically observing harried mothers. Her self-consciousness fades to relief as she notes the struggles and

demands of motherhood. She made the following observation of mothers whose lives she does not envy:

If I am in a grocery store because often I have to pick something up on the way home for dinner and I feel so sorry because I know these women have worked hard all day and they are stopping to get dinner with two screaming kids, and I just think it never ends for them, you know. It never ends. And I have clients in that same situation, you know, and they don't have a lot of support and I think that's a really hard life.

Elsie explained how she tries to affirm her childfree choice when she feels self-conscious of her non-motherhood. Like Buffy, she notes the realities of parenthood but uses this knowledge to conjure up humorous images of her own parenthood potential or lack thereof:

The only time it comes to mind that I am childless is when I hear other people kind of having to worry about their kids. Or the times when I hear of kids doing dumb things, or not being very nice or whatever. And I think, God, am I glad I don't have kids. Or coming home with purple hair. What would I do with that? Would I tolerate that? Yeah, probably would because, you know, it is self-expression and so forth. What would I do if my friends said something? I would go through these little fantasies.

Nonetheless, appreciation of being childfree was also tinged with momentary wistfulness for some of the women. Angel admitted that although she is rarely self-conscious of her childless life, she occasionally reflects: "Oh yes, it would be nice if I had a cute little girl." She finds the thought of motherhood momentarily appealing when she attends places where women and children gather. Anna also explained how exposure to mothers and daughters (her students) mirrors back to her the image of her childless self. She both admires and appreciates the mother-daughter bond from a distance, but does not envy it even in her fleeting moments of self-consciousness as a non-mother. Instead, she is satisfied by her intimate involvement in her students' lives, "I feel close to them, I feel close to the kids and being a part of that." She explained how she feels self-conscious about her childlessness when she is with her female students and their mothers:

the mother and daughter come and there is myself, and I become conscious of it that I don't have any children, and look at them and I think – and their relationship with their 17-year-old or the 18-year-old and these young women is so beautiful. You know, beautiful for that time...

Although the women reported diverse emotional experiences in this self-conscious space, all enter this space infrequently and unpredictably and stay only briefly. Elsie suggests "I am not even most aware" of being childless in any particular physical space. Roberta indicates that she is aware of being childfree on "only certain occasions, I don't generally think about it." Angel explains how a moment of wistful fantasy dissipates quickly, "it is very fleeting. I don't come home and dwell upon it." Anna explained that when she feels self-conscious of her non-motherhood status she tends to idealize parenthood as a purely positive experience. She moves herself out of this self-conscious space by reminding herself that parenthood has its difficult moments. With some humour Anna reflected:

And then I become conscious of...because I would be with those students for eight years, knowing all the trauma that the parent has gone through. And then I sort of say, "oh, right. Trauma. (laughing)"

In conclusion, the women in this study described how self-conscious space ebbs and flows over time and across physical and social spaces. There is discomfort and isolation in this space for some women, while for others there is spontaneous affirmation of their childless choice. Occasionally, self-conscious space elicits brief desires and admiration for mothering. These are the fantasies of maternal contentment that dissipate quickly when the women remind themselves that parenthood is demanding and exhausting. The women in this study do not inhabit self-conscious space frequently or for long periods. Rather, they all reported that childlessness is not an attribute to which they pay much attention in daily living.

Lived Space: Men

The men in this study described active and dynamic daily lives in a variety of physical spaces from which three descriptive themes emerged: the familiar environs of home and community, and the more expansive spaces of foreign lands and mother nature. The men also intimated the existence of a second dimension of space, that of psychological space. Within this

private world exists invisible space of conscious self-awareness, reflection, and intentionality. A second quiet space of self-consciousness is also depicted as a descriptive theme, space wherein the men occasionally wrestled with emotional reactions to their state of non-fatherhood.

Physical space: Home space. This descriptive theme reflects the men's valuing of home as a place where they can both rest and pursue a range of projects for interest and personal growth.

The men of this study depicted their homes as their preferred space of daily living. They implied that home marks the boundary between work and leisure, and between public and private life. Several of them echoed Fred's sentiment that home is a pleasant refuge from the routine and stress of work:

...we're used to going home to our house that's on a cul de sac and it's nice and quiet and we can sit there and have a quiet dinner and watch the news you know after we're finished. And it's quiet, it's restful.

Josh expressed his appreciation that he could fully relax at home, laying on the couch and listening to music. He acknowledged that this ordinary experience of daily living would become an unlikely luxury if he were a parent: "...my life would have been totally different I mean I wouldn't have been laying on the couch reading and listening to music." Gord similarly reflected that laying on the couch at home was often a preferred choice to going out and visiting with family members, and he emphasized that at such times he would "...rather do nothing basically. You know doing nothing actually means a lot to me."

Several of the men also described how they had set aside home space for offices in which to work that they did not share with their wives. Home was also an exclusively adult space; children are 'scheduled' into home visits with their uncles and aunts. However, some of the men expressed reluctance to invite children into their homes. Mynh explained that although he is happy to have children in his neighbourhood, he cringes at the thought of them coming into his home that is filled with valuable antiques and beautiful furnishings:

...as long as they don't come over, there's so many breakable things, every time kids come over something gets broken or smashed or, we don't have a very child friendly house, so having kids around is fine.

Shadow welcomes children into their home but uses these visits as opportunities to teach children how to manage themselves in unfamiliar environments and to respect others' property. He described how he believes that his childless status affords him a unique opportunity to interact with children during their visits:

...except for maybe the electrical stuff, other than that no, the house is not dog proof, child proof, it just happens...Because I think that kids need to learn to respect what's not theirs and learn to be in other people's homes and being childless really helps us where we've had difficulty with some kids coming in, it's like you take care of your kids if not I will and here's what we have, here's what you can do, you can do different things but you have to learn to respect it, so I can talk to kids different than even their parents and that is something that I do appreciate.

Almost all the men in this study depicted their homes as the space in which they pursue a wealth of activities. In some cases the house itself was the project at hand, either for remodeling or renovation. Phil explained that he had undertaken the mammoth task of installing a chef's style kitchen and was designing and building it from scratch in its entirety. Mynh mentioned that he had spent much of his time renovating his heritage home. For the majority of these men, home space also hosted their pursuit of innumerable projects that reflected a range of interests and skills. Home was a place in which to build or create projects, to test and implement ideas. For example, some men had built dark rooms in their homes to pursue their photography hobbies. Gord had transformed his dining room into a music studio and space for drum practice. Ernst and other men spent time at home combining their passion for learning with creating projects that would enhance their skills and talents. Ernst explained that he would be quite content to stay at home during his off-work hours in the midst of his projects and hobbies of building computer systems and fixing cars. He, like Phil, thoroughly enjoy the projects of their home space and confirmed that they were natural homebodies. Ernst described how his home environment is a

place of intellectual stimulation, with computer and other projects that are thoroughly engrossing:

Doll seems to be more of the one that gets us out of the house. I could settle in at home quite well because... we have sets of days where she's working where I'm off sometimes for three days at a time without her being off, and I stay at home and entertain myself completely. Like I'll be on my computers or trying something new or building another one. I've got four computers upstairs all networked together, my little lab (laughter) for playing around. You know, to me I can stay at home and find stuff that stimulates me intellectually. Like I love to learn.

Gord affirmed the experiences of many of the men by acknowledging that although home provides the basic comforts of refuge from worldly demands at the end of the day, it is also a space in which he felt free to take on projects of personal interest.

All of the men conveyed expressed appreciation that they could relax into their home space without pressure to attend to anything or anyone aside from themselves and their wives. At home they can focus intensely on projects or opt to simply "putter" about and arbitrarily take on tasks or interests that occurred to them in the moment. Gord's description of home captured this casual attitude and relaxed sense of being at ease in his home: "...well it's just you know a place to sleep and live and I putter around the garage and stuff and like fixing stuff and making stuff and do whatever."

The men in this study provided variable reports of how their choice of communities and neighbourhoods had been influenced by their childlessness. Some, like Ernst and Fred had chosen their homes with former expectations of raising a family in those homes, and had remained in their homes despite their eventual decisions to forgo parenthood. Only Gord declared his preference for living in a community where there were few children around their home, preferring a quiet area of older residents. He admitted that his childlessness influenced his home purchase: "...mind you we did look around the neighbourhood and we realized that all of our neighbours are kind of old. We thought that would be good – no kids around. Yes, I guess it did influence our choice."

On the other hand, Shadow reported having lived in several homes in family-oriented areas, largely because "...we like to have kids around and we like the sound of kids." Such neighbourhoods provide a "family feeling" reminiscent of his own childhood on the military base with its community of caring adults and family life. He reflected that as an adult living in family-oriented neighbourhoods he has often undertaken the role of "co-parent" to many neighbourhood children. He also acknowledged that his childlessness has provided him a unique flexibility of lifestyle and capacity to accommodate multiple career changes with moves across Canada. He described how his childless lifestyle has freed him up from the constraints that parenthood would impose on career and geographic relocations: "...the flexibility to move back and forth, and not to have to worry about school, not to have to worry about health issues..." Josh described a benefit of childlessness opposite that of Shadow, with his observation that he would be unable to afford a home in his present neighbourhood if he had children. By remaining childless, he and Anna have been able to stay many years in their small home without pressure to buy a larger home in a more affordable area.

To summarize, the men in this study described their home space as the base to which they return from the busy world of work and other activities. In that space they derive great satisfaction from designing and pursuing an array of projects and activities. The men depicted home space as the container for expression and exploration of their interests in the form of ongoing projects of small and large proportions.

Physical space: Wordly space. The men's references to travelling with their wives, for leisure and adventure, were incorporated into this descriptive theme.

Several of the men in this study reported their appreciation and excitement about traveling in either familiar or foreign places. Mynh reported how holidays with his wife were adventures in exploring new cultures and places:

Our trips are always adventure - minimal planning, flying by the seat of our pants generally but that's what we like to do, you know we can ah, we can do that, she's pretty worldly, she's been around, traveled quite a bit more than me so she's a good lead hand on those.

Some of the men who traveled widely also described themselves and their wives as a team that ventured into foreign countries. Ernst explained how he and Doll compliment one another well as they travel: "...she's the ideas person...and I'm the one that does the implementation." Josh reflected briefly on how many years of regular trips with Anna have become an integral part of both their lifestyle and their relationship: "...every year Anna and I travel for two months, or we have most, many years. That's a very important part of both of our lives and of our relationship, is going away together for two months."

Some of the men mentioned their visits to places closer to home while camping and car touring. Brett described his passion for traveling across Canada and Fred referred to adventures in camping far from home. Fred reflected on the perspective on his own life gained through travel, a means for appreciating the home and community space that he might otherwise take for granted: "...it gives us a chance to see what we have is good, where we live, because we go to other places and see what other people have...."

Overall, the majority of men in this study briefly expressed their appreciation for travel and indicated that it was an integral part of their lifestyles. For the few men who stated that they have not already traveled extensively, their future plans include travel. The men's travel destinations have varied tremendously, from camping locally and car trips across Canada, to international travel across almost all continents of the world. The men suggested that travel is also a positive part of their relationships, enhancing their view of the marriage as a team to which each spouse makes valuable contributions during their trips.

Physical space: Natural space. This descriptive theme captured the men's connection to nature and their love of remote, outdoor space away from the din of urban living and the demands of work and other obligations.

Several of the eight men in this study described their appreciation for being in natural, outdoor spaces. Gord and Brett elaborated on their wonder and appreciation for the environment while fly fishing. Brett volunteered the following description of the beauty and tranquility of being in natural space:

You have to understand that my goals in fishing is not to go fishing, some people may go to catch fish but I don't, my idea of a perfect day is to go out at 8 o'clock in the morning and get my fly rod out and the fly on it and start fishing and I walk upstream, I always walk upstream and at lunch I stop and sit down and have my lunch and look around and enjoy everything, and then I cross the stream and in the afternoon I fish my way back down to where I started and I'll trade you one day of that, raining or not, hot or cold, bugs or not, I'll trade you one day of that for three weeks all expenses paid wherever you want, I'd take that day. I don't care if I catch anything, I don't even care if I see anything...I just like being out and just ah it's so lovely out there.

Gord offered a similar description of his fishing experiences, including a kind of timelessness that emerges in this natural space:

Standing in my boat, looking at my fly line straight on the water, anticipating the strike, that's my favorite thing in the whole world, yup, because I can stand there all day, I can go from sun up to sun down, I can spend the whole day there. Sure there's other things in life that are pleasurable you know eating, sex, whatever, but that's you know when you look at it as a period of the day you spend a little bit of time doing those things whereas fishing I can spend all day fishing, never get tired of that.

Ernst's love of the outdoors translated to a passion for hiking. Although he takes his mother-in-law with him, the two hike separately and he talked about how he enjoys the solitary connection to nature. After his heart attack, Ernst was warned by medical professionals that hiking may not be in his better interests in terms of safety. Nonetheless, he has included a return to hiking as an integral part of his lifestyle and desire to stay connected to nature:

...last year I got out for one hike and I'm fully intending to get right back to my hiking because even though my doctor tells me I shouldn't but I'm sort of the opinion that if I can't you know, I feel like I can do it then if something happens out there then that's just a chance I'm taking.

Josh's descriptions of his daily life included several references to walking along beaches and in local parks during his personal time. Phil similarly referred to a period of several years when he was an avid sailor with a strong attraction to the ocean. Both he and Fred also described camping trips as enjoyable forays into the wilderness, and Fred commented on hiking as one of his favourite leisure activities.

Over half the men in this study expressed a passion for being outdoors in natural space where they enjoy the peace and tranquility of the environment. They described activities ranging from fly fishing to camping and hiking. They often passed time outdoors alone, without interactions with others that might disrupt the stillness of natural space and the contemplative mood with which they often moved through natural space. The opportunities to enjoy natural space as a place of refuge from the world would doubtless be interrupted by children's needs if the men in this study were fathers. Gord commented on his experience of taking his nephews out fishing, "when I take the kids fishing I don't really fish, I just let them fish, set them up and make sure they hook fish." Both he and Ernst also referred to friends who could not accept invitations to either hike or go fishing because of parenting responsibilities. It appears that these men are very appreciative of their time outdoors, a benefit of their childfree lifestyle.

Psychological space: Inner space. The first descriptive theme of psychological space is that of inner space. This theme denotes the invisible reserve of energy and passion with which the men in this study pursued personal goals and projects. This space also offered the men a place for quiet self-reflection as they contemplated questions of identity and purpose in life.

All of the men in this study exuded energy and a verve for living life to the fullest. They provided numerous examples of interests and activities that reflected an openness to new experiences and a compelling curiosity to explore new ideas and opportunities. Perhaps Phil best captured the enthusiasm and engagement in a plethora of activities so common among the

men in this study: "I've always got a new hobby, something is always there, ya, model railroading or astronomy or something you know, I think when you don't have kids you really find yourself doing all kinds of stuff." The men's stories were also replete with references to their passion for learning, studying, and applying new knowledge and skills. I heard the men make many attestations to the critical significance of living a life that is stimulating and that challenges them to learn and grow. All of them described their passions for learning and knowledge. Josh and Shadow pursued graduate degrees and ongoing professional development opportunities to broaden their professional expertise and to ensure continuous personal growth in their work. Shadow explained how a lifelong course of learning has supported his personal quest to grow and change over time, and to enhance his capacity to contribute to others' lives in meaningful ways:

when I decided to go back to school it was important for me and it always has been, it has continued. So I continue my education to this day. I'm always taking courses, sometimes too many, but it has allowed me to share with an awful lot of these street kids and with adults, it's a way of giving back...

Several of the men alluded to their inner space as the source from which they derive their capacity for independent thinking. Brett and Ernst both referred to their resistance to following cultural norms and a natural inclination to "push back" social expectations which are contrary to their sense of self. Ernst explained his natural contrariness to social expectations of adult behaviour, and his reliance on himself for decision-making:

...it's in my nature and makeup. I've developed as a person who decides for himself what he wants and like I say doesn't respond well to pressure. Like don't try and lay something on me or influence me. I mean I'm perfectly willing to listen to a logical argument, you know, and sit down with you and discuss anything on an intellectual level, but don't just say this is the way it's supposed to be or you know you better give me reasons for why I'm supposed to be doing this or whatever and reasons that I like or agree with or whatever...

Brett echoed Ernst's proclivity for independent thinking and strength of conviction in his own belief system:

I'm not someone who responds to pressure. Like I said we all have, there were four kids and none of us have trouble in speaking our minds or being who we are, you know human beings. You push a human being and what does a human being do, pushes back.

Both Phil and Fred spent time in their inner space where they eventually distinguished their own beliefs about parenthood from those of the prevailing pronatal cultural beliefs with which they were raised. From within his inner space, Phil garnered the clarity and strength with which to untangle the threads of pronatal discourse as they were intertwined with his own ideals of the reproductive choice that was right for him. Phil recalled how, at his wife's urging, he first revisited his assumptions that he would have a family:

I was a little surprised about it and then I thought about it, you know why are we? you know we, it's not that we want them, it's that everyone else wants us to have them and so we talked about it a lot and just said well let's not, let's not have kids, why do we have to have them? Couldn't think of any reason why we should except that everybody else thought that we should and we didn't think that that was a good enough reason.

Fred's story of his childlessness suggested that he fell quite unexpectedly into his inner space for contemplation and reflection on his lifelong assumptions of becoming a father. Quite unexpectedly, his wife Marceline announced that she had decided against pursuing family life. Fred described how he responded by retreating to an inner space where he wrestled with entrenched beliefs about family and married life taught to him by family and the pronatal cultural values of our society. Eventually he concluded of parenthood that "I don't know why we should, because I mean who's to say we should?" Before arriving at this conclusion, however, Fred endured an unsettled time in his inner space where he sorted through his confusion and strived to reorient himself to a new reproductive choice and a new way of being in his marriage:

I mean that's one of the reasons you get married right? That's what people say. Then I thought about it, I mean I thought well "why do you get married?" No, I got married because I love Marceline not because I wanted to have kids more, right? So I realized that I don't want to leave Marceline just so I can have kids you know. We are good together and I like her and I love her and I want to stay together.

Unlike Fred's unanticipated childless choice, Shadow's decision to forego parenthood was a dynamic process extending over many years from his youth to his late twenties. During this

process he frequently revisited his inner space for guidance from his intuitive sense that he could choose from an array of role options for his adulthood. When he was considering the childless choice, he asked himself: "...what do I want to do, how do I want to be? and, Am I okay with that?" and "...do I want to have kids and would I be a good parent?" These periods of inner reflection provided him the assurance and self-confidence to choose childlessness despite strong opposition from family and friends who accused him of being selfish in his childless choice.

Most of the men in this study told stories of their daily lives that revealed the self-assurance and pride with which they live out their life choices. Their valuing of independence and expression of individuality were readily apparent in their self-descriptions as competent, hard-working, motivated, and conscientious men. Their felt sense of independence also emerged as they described how they made their childless choice. Shadow readily affirmed that he was "very comfortable with difference" including his mixed racial heritage of African-American and Aboriginal peoples and his childless choice. Mynh affirmed his ease with making choices in life that are not always consistent with others' expectations, stating that he "...enjoys being different." Phil described himself as a "black sheep," while Ernst's strong sense of individuality and self-respect was apparent in his description of his relationships with male co-workers:

...guys at work you know I think they look at me as a bit of an oddball anyhow because, more because of my political stances and things like that you know, but I think I'm very well accepted, I know I'm respected. You know guys respect my opinion.

Brett also felt free to assert his unique self as a man who sees no point in acquiescing to social norms that are contrary to his personal values and goals. Now 50, Brett explained how he has maintained a consistent sense of self, impervious to social expectations of conformity to pronatal and other normative behaviours in our culture. He used the following humorous metaphor to illustrate how he shrugs off social pressures:

I just don't really care what people think in general. People who matter to me, obviously yes, but I just don't care you know. Ask my hairdresser, I've worn my sideburns the same way for 30 years, just you know for awhile I'm in fashion, for awhile I'm perfectly in

fashion and then I'm not and then I am. Everything goes like this and you know same with, I mean I've worn blue jeans and t-shirts since...It wasn't fashionable at all. I just saw blue jeans and liked them and saw t-shirts and liked them and I remember my sisters trying to talk me out of it and "you'll never be attractive to women if you look like that", and me looking at them, "oh never mind, I don't care."

To summarize, the men in this study described daily lives infused with passion, energy, interest, and curiosity. They embraced a variety of opportunities that met their expressed needs for intellectual stimulation and challenged them to grow and discover new ideas and interests. Their stories exuded a verve for living life to the fullest and for taking risks that they might otherwise avoid because of the constraints of parenthood. For most of the men, their childless choice was but one factor constituting their sense of a unique self, a self that was often resistant to conforming with prevailing social norms. Their stories also featured strong tones of individuality and independence - core values around which these men had constructed their identities. They all affirmed their general comfort with difference and conveyed their underlying pride in their capacity to stay "true to my course" of making life choices - including non-parenthood, that were consonant with their inner sense of self.

Psychological space: Self-conscious space. This descriptive theme denotes the space occupied by the men when they became aware of the differences and distance between themselves and parents. These were rare moments in daily living, however, and they did not induce lasting self-consciousness or feelings of distress regarding their childless choice.

The men in this study consistently reported that they do not experience their childlessness as an attribute of which they are self-conscious in either social or more private spaces such as home. Rather, the men dismissed their childless choice as a lifestyle characteristic that has little bearing on how they feel during interactions with others. Josh reflected about his childlessness, saying it seldom emerges in his social life: "...most of the time it doesn't come up, I have a number of friends actually who are childless as well and when we get together I never even think of it, it never comes up."

Brett shrugged off his childless choice as irrelevant to his self-concept, stating that "...other than odd little occurrences I've never thought of myself as childless." Both he and Fred likened the naturalness of their childless choice to their hair colour. Brett has not thought of his childlessness "...anymore than I've thought of myself as being someone who has brown hair." Fred elaborated on the insignificance of his childlessness as an attribute by which others might notice or judge him. He expressed his belief that childlessness is largely an invisible attribute in which neither he or others are especially interested. To illustrate his point, Fred provided an example of how, as a high school teacher in the school milieu, there is no occasion that draws his own or others' attention to his childlessness:

How should that affect me? Just by having a different hair color, it's something that you're different but you know it's not as if everybody who has kids always has the upper hand. So they're walking with their kids, you see people you know in the school who have kids but there's no evidence right there with them that they have kids right? So people like the students they see me and think oh well, he's a teacher, he's a man, he has kids, maybe they think, but they ask me and I say "no I don't have kids", and that's usually it, they don't say "why don't you have any kids?"

Some of the men however, noted infrequent occasions during which they feel a heightened sense of awareness of their childless status. The cues that trigger such moments of self-consciousness are reportedly external to these men, arising from interactions with, or observations of others around them. None of the men suggested that self-conscious feelings arise solely from an inner dialogue or conflict about their childlessness.

Phil could generate only one scenario during which he might become cognizant of not having children, but during which he simultaneously is able to confirm that his childless choice is right for him. He described the few occasions when he ponders his childlessness:

...aside from the times when you sort of wonder "well I wonder what the little bugger would have looked like" you know. I tell you where that happens is when you're with some other kid who seems like the perfect child you know, and you think "well gee if I could have had a kid like that maybe I wish I had" you know, but then you'll find ten other ones that change your mind right back (laughter).

Shadow confirmed the infrequency with which he is aware of his childlessness. Although he thoroughly enjoys residing in a family-oriented neighbourhood, this environment occasionally elicits a "twinge" around "oh, we don't have our own kids." He added that his brother's recent paternity also caused him to note his childlessness, and to reflect on his childless choice:

I think there might be a rare twinge, you know my brother, my younger brother just had a baby boy and you know he's all proud, it's nice to see him, and it's like I wonder what I would have been like as a dad.

However, he confirmed that his self-consciousness is an unpredictable experience that waxes and wanes over time and is not consistently associated with any particular time or place:

...most of the time it's not in my conscious or awareness - not having kids. I mean it's just I never think about it on a day to day basis, or think about it every day. It's a rare occasion that it might, you know even if I go past the soccer field I may not think about not having kids or think about having kids, so that's a very fleeting moment, as I said. So it's never in my consciousness or sub-conscious about not having kids, so when we were talking about that wistful feeling around children I would say that's fleeting, ya, so I hope I answered your question because it's just not there, I don't even think about it.

Josh reflected that he becomes more conscious of his childlessness while walking in the parks and at the beach, the places where families are often at play and enjoying themselves. He also noted that time spent with parenting peers can elicit some self-consciousness of his childless choice:

I'm most aware maybe outdoors at a place like the park where a lot of people are walking with kids, so any place where there is adults with young children. Or I guess another place would be when I'm with friends. Ya, actually when I'm with friends who have kids and I see the interaction between them. Actually that's probably the most aware of not having children, ya.

Josh went on to specify that perhaps one friendship in particular reminds him that he is childless.

When I asked Josh how these moments affected him, he struggled to find words to capture his mixed emotions of envy and relief:

What's it like? Well like I say sometimes I feel sad that I don't have that opportunity but um ah I don't know what it's like. There would sometimes be a sadness but I don't know if sadness is right. No not sadness, it's, maybe it is I'm not sure. (Is it a sense that something is missing?) That something could be missing, maybe. But I don't regret the decision but I, actually you know it's not just, actually this is a good point, it's not with

all of my friends. There's only actually just one friend come to think of it who has quite a nice relationship with his daughter who's 14, and so sometimes when I see him with her I think "gee that's, they have a nice relationship and it would have been nice to have a relationship like that." But I have other friends who, they're relationships aren't so good with their kids, so at those times I think gee I'm glad I don't have kids.

Josh and Shadow were the only men in this study who provided examples of social experiences that strongly contradicted the general consensus among the men's reports that they do not encounter times or situations in which they endure troublesome feelings or self-consciousness about their childlessness. Josh reported a situation that clearly portrays how childlessness can create awkward distance between parents and non-parents. In a casual group setting, Josh found his childlessness suddenly visible to an audience of parents, an experience that evoked feelings in him of uneasiness and exclusion. In this self-conscious space Josh struggled to respond to the group's inferences that his life without children was in some manner deficient and unhappy:

I was taking part in a focus group for VanCity or something, and we went around, everybody told a little bit about themselves, and I was the only one that said I didn't have any kids. And the reaction of the interviewer or the person leading the focus group was, well there's lot of other kids here you can have some of ours. It was like feeling bad for me that I didn't have kids. Now it might have partly been the way I said it because I didn't feel sad. But I felt a little embarrassed because everybody else talked around having kids, what their kids were doing... it might have been the way I said it I'm not sure, but they certainly made a point of saying it's like "ah that's too bad, you can have some of our kids."

Shadow also referred to instances when others observed his childlessness as his loss. He claimed to be well-practiced in rebuking such comments without allowing them to elicit self-consciousness or moments of social awkwardness. He gave the following as an example of interactions when others insist that his childlessness is depriving him of happiness:

...some people say "Oh you must be jealous of your brother having some wonderful kids" and I say "no." Or "You're missing out by not having kids", and I say "no I'm not missing out"...Missing out, missing out is a big one. "Oh you don't know what you're missing by not having kids." And I say "I'm not missing anything because I get to enjoy them in a different way."

Both Josh and Shadow indicated different ways of coping with these moments when their childlessness is suddenly rendered so visible. Josh explained that he consciously musters up some philosophical and calming thoughts to revalidate his childless choice:

I just think I cope with it by probably thinking, as I've said before, there's some, my life would be different and in some ways it would be better. In some ways it would be better if I had kids. But in other ways it's better that I didn't have kids. So I'd probably maybe think all that relatively quickly and also think you know, I'm happy with my life.

Shadow reflected that he has become accustomed to others' occasional comments that his childlessness is "selfish" and that he suffers from lack of meaning and purpose in life. Looking back over years of social commentary from friends and family who share strong pronatal beliefs, he explained how he copes with their comments: "...when I look at it today there probably was judgment but ... it has never really played a major role, it's like, that's your opinion not mine."

Overall, the men in this study described themselves as being very much at ease with their childlessness during social interactions. They confirmed that in the course of daily living they are generally oblivious to their childlessness and to any real or perceived differences that childlessness might pose between themselves and parents. These men reported only rare instances of feeling socially isolated or uncomfortable in a self-conscious space because of others' attention to their childless choice. Rather, they experience occasional fleeting moments of envy or appreciation for parents' opportunities to enjoy their children. More often than not, self-conscious space is also the space in which the men can validate their childless choice. Only two of the men depicted experiences of social exclusion and judgment about their childless choice.

Comparisons of Lived Space: Women and Men

The stories told by the men and women in this study suggested that they experience two dimensions of space: physical space and invisible, inner space. With regard to physical space, all the participants clearly distinguished between the comfortable and familiar environment of home space, and the worldly space of different cultural and geographic places to which they often

travelled. Both were highly valued, with some gender differences in the appreciation expressed for particular aspects of each. For example, more women and men emphasized that home was a refuge from their busy daily lives, a sanctuary they entered to rejuvenate themselves. Also, although they pursued interests and some creative activities at home, the women did not describe projects similar in scale and nature to those described by the men. Rather, the women related several examples of how home space was an extension of themselves because it reflected their artistic and stylistic sensibilities. In contrast, the men tended more to view home space simply as the container in which they indulged in their interests and projects. The men and women generally concurred, however, that their homes are adult-oriented environments that do not readily accommodate children's company.

The large majority of participants in this study had travelled extensively throughout the world. All of them expressed the pleasure they experienced while traveling with their spouses. However, the men's stories featured fewer references to travelling than did the women's, and the men appeared less inclined than the women to highlight travel as a means of reinforcing their marital bonds.

Curiously, very few of the women mentioned experiences in which they interacted with the natural environment. Two of the women spoke of their passion for gardening, a more local experience of nature which provided them with emotional and aesthetic rewards. One of the women referred to her growing appreciation of hiking as a shared activity with her husband. In contrast, over half of the men in this study referred to the pleasure they derived from being in outdoor, natural spaces. The activities they undertook while in those spaces suggested a solitary and peaceful experience of connecting both with the world around them, and perhaps with themselves.

The men and women in this study told stories that hinted at the presence of an inner space, a reservoir of enthusiasm, optimism, and vitality for daily living. There appeared however,

to be a subtle difference between the expression of energy and attitude that emanated from this inner space. In particular, the men tended to more strongly declare their sense of individuality and insistence upon independent thinking. Doubtless the women felt assured and confident in their uniqueness as childless women, but their reflections on daily living featured fewer overt expressions of individualism or independence.

The participants also alluded to a second invisible space, that of self-consciousness. The men and women entered this space when social circumstances invoked self-conscious awareness of their childlessness. As a group, the women appeared to be more sensitive to social judgments about their childless choice, and to experience self-conscious space in more interactions and settings than described by the men in this study. Nonetheless, the women were no more inclined than the men to dwell on their childlessness as a source of social awkwardness or discomfort. As with the men, such moments passed quickly as the women reaffirmed the appropriateness of their childless choice for themselves.

Lived Time: Women

The lived existential of time refers to our subjective experience of time, distinct from the passage of time that is marked in objective measures – clocks, days, months, and years. Van Manen (1990) suggests that lived time can speed up or slow down according to our experience in the moment. We can be lost in time, or feel time stand still. Lived time is our shifting sense of what came before, and our wondering of what is yet to come. As we move through time and witness how it shapes us and the life world around us, we continually feel its presence in our bodies, our relationships, and in the spaces we occupy.

The women's accounts of daily living without children reflected a range of lived experiences of time that cohered into four descriptive themes: the time is now, spontaneous time, my time, and unknowable time.

The time is now. This theme features the felt imperative to live fully in the moment. The women did not value revisiting life decisions or past events, nor did they worry excessively about the future. Rather, these women optimistically invested in opportunities of the present through which they could best achieve short-term goals.

The women in this study conveyed their keen attunement to the immediate moment of lived experience. Several of them described a conscious, willful engagement in the present that is compelled by a personal philosophy of time. Roberta explained how at a young age she became aware that her parents had postponed pursuing their hopes and dreams until later in life, as they struggled to meet their parenthood commitments. Once there, fate intervened and illness stole time and opportunities from them. Roberta is thus determined to live her life fully for today, and she makes only limited projections for tomorrow. Her childless choice has helped insure that her middle years will not become a waiting period for old age. By eschewing motherhood, she has also reduced the risk of failing to accomplish her life goals. By the time she was in her twenties she was weighing the costs and benefits of parenthood, in favour of the opportunities provided by the childless choice. She reflected that "as I got older it seemed like it was the right choice. I want to do all these things because you can't predict."

For some of the women, an awareness of life's unpredictable course was sufficient motivation to become more appreciative of today. Marceline talked about living with heart and a robust sense of fun and humour for whatever the moment brings her. She said she makes no assumptions about what tomorrow may offer and insists on living well in the moment. Marceline explained her 'live and let live' attitude toward daily living:

... I live by, and Fred to a certain extent – eat, drink, and be merry and tomorrow you may die! Sure, okay, save your money. But I am not going to have a hundred thousand dollars in the bank when I am going without something right now. And I tell you right now, I don't want to be on my death bed and say "dam I wish I had that piece of cheese cake"!

Doll echoed Marceline's attitude, but she emphasized the finiteness of human life. She makes no assumptions about the parameters of her or her husband's lifespan, particularly given the medical predictions of his premature death and his heart attack four years ago. She wryly discounted the future as unknowable and thus irrelevant to making meaning of her life. Her task is to find meaning in the here-and-now, in part by accepting whatever comes her way. In Doll's words, she will:

...just let it play out the way I want it to play out. And I keep hammering away to myself and I should to you, that in 500 or 5 years none of this will matter. My history will not matter to the world. While I am present here in this plane, this existence, I will make it as rich as possible.

Maintaining a balance of emotional energy across past, present, and future however, appeared to be an elusive ideal for some of the women in the study. They acknowledged that they cannot always stay fully present to life in the moment and may focus instead on other timeframes. For example, Anna talked about struggling with her predisposition to look ahead and to worry about the future, an orientation to time so different from her husband. She described how her concern for the future frustrates both of them:

I look too much into the future, and what will happen. Sometimes Josh says, "it hasn't happened yet so just do it now." Yeah, but this could happen. Or this could happen, or that could happen. Or that could happen. "Well, it hasn't so what are you worried about?" I say, "Yeah, but you have to be prepared."

Lost in the intensity of endless work, Sharlene was jarred back to the reality of the present by her sister's death. Work had justified itself by moving Sharlene towards future financial goals but it had also effectively detached her from years of living in the moment that she cannot reclaim. Looking back, she expressed her regrets about this lost time. She recalled the boat she and Phil bought and sailed during those years. Although she joined him on many trips, she was unable to fully appreciate the slowed pace and relaxation of those trips. Years later, and having come to realize the merits of living life in the present moment, Shirley stated that "now I would probably enjoy being out there and the solitude."

Almost all of the women appeared to focus their energy and attention on matters of everyday living in the present. Sharlene has re-aligned herself with what is important to her now and has not lost track of herself in time since her sister's death. Angel checks her life course and progress against long-term future goals of career success and affluence, then resumes her intense focus on tasks of today that move her toward those goals. Roberta immerses herself in short-term life projects during which she is passionately committed to maximizing all opportunities to grow and to explore life. She said she will not commit herself to long-term life projects that risk interference from unforeseeable life events. Elsie reviews her past when considering major decisions, always seeking a sense of continuity in her life. After making her decisions (e.g., job change, residential moves), she maximizes their potential by trying to live fully in the present.

Among the women's stories I was unable to discern any melancholy calls of unfinished business that elicited ongoing reflection on the past. Nor did I hear the women make references to nagging bits of history that obscured their appreciation of lived experience in the moment. Indeed, their pasts seem to have receded as might a backdrop to the stage on which they live for today. Sharlene told her story of resisting the powerful influences of past events and their potential to distract her from living fully in the present. She worked with professionals over the years to deal with past tragedies. For awhile she relied on prescription medications to deal with emotional problems, then successfully replaced that dependency with positive coping. She spoke proudly of her success in overcoming past hardships. She feels she is now freed up to live for the moment, and to look forward to the future: "I have been for counselling and I am doing a lot better and I am not on any medication. Apparently I am a bit of a miracle because I was on a lot and I got off all of it." With the exception of Anna, the women did not expend much energy anticipating the future. Doll explained that she is not compelled to think much beyond today because "I don't have the worry that would come with children." Without children in their

immediate lives and the incumbent responsibility to look ahead on their behalf, the women of this study felt freed up to live fully in the present.

I noted one exception to the women's dominant focus on matters of the present. Some of the older participants described their increasing reflection on and awareness of, and the significance of estate planning and wills. For example, Sharlene described how she feels the salience of these complex tasks, and her struggles to feel altruistic towards extended family. She spoke of the challenges involved in choosing benefactors when one does not have children. Both her and her husband's concerns must be factored into this process:

He is now talking about his brother's kids. And I don't feel that I want them to be sort of well off because of what I earned. Because I have seen, I have heard of situations where people receive an inheritance, they go out and blow the money. I don't think these kids will do it, but on the other hand, I really don't want them to. Yes, it is tougher out there, but we earned this dam money and, you know, donating it to charity I think is—someone is going to appreciate it a lot.

Anna similarly talked about looking towards her final years and trying to plan for how the material rewards she has accumulated to-date will be dispensed to others in the future. The eventuality of death seems to become more apparent for both her and Sharlene as time passes in their middle years. The death of her mother prompted Anna to reflect on her own childlessness and to worry about what might become of her treasured belongings when she dies:

I could die of a heart attack, or I could be very quick and be finished and that's it... That's why I better start getting my will in place. We do have wills, but they need to be updated. So that's another thing—so wills, so what do we do with our wills? That's another thing not having a child... So all these things you think about when you are 50-something.

Angel provided a different perspective on being a non-mother and planning for distribution of her growing estate. She expressed great satisfaction and pleasure with the business of writing a will. In particular, she stressed how remaining childfree has assured her a vast array of options not just in lifestyle, but also in how she can benefit the world after she dies:

We are in a position where instead of having, or being expected to leave our estate to our children, we are in a position where we can leave it to the humane society or some

other animal welfare organization. So I am thrilled that we have that freedom to do that.

To summarize, virtually all of the women in this study expressed their natural inclination to live life fully for today, and to dismiss any worries of an unknowable future. They also did not appear to harbour distress related to previous life decisions or past experiences. Instead, the women reflected how the finiteness and unpredictability of life compels them to appreciate the richness of the present. As childless women, they are free of the planning and worry inherent in childrearing that would demand a redirection of their focus to the future, on behalf of children. The future merits careful attention and planning only when some of the women have considered matters of estate planning.

Spontaneous time. This temporal theme reflects the women's flexibility and sense of freedom in time. Simply put, this theme captures the women's appreciation that their childlessness allows them to do what they want, when they want.

All the women in this study expressed delight about the spontaneity of their ordinary daily lives. The women's stories and reflections suggested that they move fluidly through time, responding to whatever opportunities or limitations may evolve in the moment. The women are very selective in choosing the amount of structure or routine with which they are willing to live. Outside of work-related commitments and formal social obligations, the women in this study appeared to insist on retaining flexibility and autonomy in their schedules. I heard each woman declare at least once that "I do what I want when I want" as she described the freedom to respond in the moment to any inclinations she might have had. Without the obligations of motherhood, the women in this study enjoy a degree of control over time that they believe is largely unattainable for mothering peers. Doll gave an example from ordinary daily living of the flexible parameters of her time, and compared the spontaneity of her days to the time demands placed on mothers:

...and today, at 11 o'clock Ernst and I thought, "Oh, we will go to Langley and take back that bedspread from Sears" – so we did that. And when we were in Langley Ernst says "What do you want to do for lunch?" I said, "I don't know". And he said, "How about Fort Langley to our little place?" Lovely. So of course it gives you that power because you don't—I don't have to be back at four o'clock for such and such. I don't have to pick up a child—there is none of that being childless is there?

Marceline similarly talked about how she values how readily she and her husband can alter plans and do as they please. She compared the spontaneity of her lifestyle with the responsibilities of parenthood, when the needs of a child override adult preferences or limit opportunities to change plans in the moment:

...we have a good life, and it is not selfish but we do what we want to do. And it is interesting talking to people that I know that have children and sometimes, like we can say "Oh, let's go do this and we can be gone!"...If we had children we wouldn't be able to do that, we have to go home and he has to have his nap, or we don't have the clothes or the diapers, all that stuff.

Elsie explained how she preserves spontaneity in daily living by refusing to structure her time outside of work and other formal obligations. She consciously releases herself from schedules and commitments, and allows her time-off to simply evolve in the moment without compulsion to meet others' expectations. Elsie relaxes in her time away from work, enjoying a casual laissez-faire attitude that would probably not survive the intrusive demands of motherhood. She explained how she uses an intuitive sense to guide her through time and how she resists the structure of schedules in daily living after work and on weekends:

I try not to plan a huge amount in my personal life. Or make it too regimented and so forth. I try to just do what comes naturally and what feels right and so forth in terms of just going with the flow.

In summary, the women of this study told stories reflecting how they create and live their daily lives in response to whatever opportunities emerge in the moment. They described their resistance to imposing structure and planning on time outside of formal commitments to work and to others. This spontaneity in daily living was a highly valued attribute of their childless lifestyles. All the women presumed that they would lose this treasured aspect of daily living if

they became mothers. They predicted that the routine and structure required of childrearing would override their freedom to "do what I want, when I want."

My time. This theme reflects the women's needs for personal time outside their marital relationships, time to pursue their own interests or to spend with friends.

The women participants shared how they fill their days with people and projects. They give their time to friends and family, to the community, to their marriages, and to their work. Almost all the women participants emphasized, however, the imperative of reserving time solely for themselves. This is considered peaceful time - a break from others when each woman can rest, restore flagging resources, and reconnect with herself. Personal time appears to be a cherished quality of these women's childfree lifestyles, time that mothers doubtless sacrifice to the ongoing needs of their children. Buffy reflected on the endless cycle of demands on mothers' time that she need not endure:

You know, when you are working a lot and busy and you don't have anything in the fridge for dinner and you are tired and laundry needs to be done. I think what would it be like if I had to come home and have a good meal every night for kids and then whip them off to their activities? I mean, people are exhausted.

The extreme time demands of Angel's career have taught her that although her childfree status may afford her more time for herself, "time is precious." Despite 12-hour work days she promises and gifts herself with personal time in her home. She emphasized that "I need my downtime where it is just myself. I enjoy my own company". Doll works part-time now, and believes she is recovering from burn-out in a long-term caretaking role with the infirm and dying. When she returns home from work she is determined to claim her personal time. These pockets of time are critical for coping with the mental and physical fatigue of her work. She explained the value of her private time:

... probably because my job is so stressful, we are understaffed and not appreciated. So my downtime is for me, and I get selfish about it, I suppose. I don't know if that is the right word, but I do what I want to do.

For Angel and Doll "downtime" appears to be synonymous with solitude. Alone, each woman tries to shut out the clamour of the world. Angel explained how essential it is that she takes time-out from all contact with people in her personal and work life: "Like I need time without Mynh around, without people around, again, because in my work I am dealing with people. And the phone ringing constantly." Apparently the activity of this downtime is irrelevant; it may be simply digging in the garden, going for a long walk, reading, or dancing in the privacy of home. Rather, the value in this time is in the solitude and quiet of the moment.

Both Angel and Doll talked about how they strategize to assure themselves personal, private time. Doll has scheduled her shifts so that they fall opposite those of her husband, noting that otherwise "we spend too much time together." Angel related the length to which she sometimes goes to avoid all social contact, including that of the little girl next door who seeks out Angel's company for garden visits:

And it is funny actually, because for the first couple of years I couldn't go out into the garden without Suzy coming over and she would want to help. And, you know, Suzy is so sweet, but I really cherish my time being out in my garden on my own because it is my time not to think and I deliberately -- after a while I stopped gardening in the front because in the back I couldn't be seen. So there again that emphasizes I think how important it is to me to have my private time.

The women of this study described how they clearly distinguish time for self from shared time with spouses. Although they enjoy being with their husbands, almost all of the women insist on taking time-out from the marital relationship to meet their individual needs. Marceline explained how earlier in her marriage she and her husband had continual contact with one another for an entire summer. She recalled how quickly staleness set into their marriage:

...we drove to work together, we were together, had coffee and lunch together, and we drove back together... we drive home -- or, we sit at the table, "hey, I heard a joke today" and I go, "oh, never mind, you were sitting there". We didn't have anything to talk about because we had the same day. Like it was boring.

Marceline said she now readily asserts her boundaries with her husband and has no compunction to improvise on shared time so that her interests and needs are met. She interjected the humorous

example of their varied tastes in movies to illustrate how she draws a line between personal time and couple time:

...and same as the movies. And we go sometimes to a show-I don't want to see it. He goes there, I go next door. Like I don't have to be beside him all the time. I don't have to share my popcorn or my drink!

Buffy shared how her personal time is filled with activities outside the home that are separate and distinct from her married life. She does not sacrifice her personal time in daily living for her husband, nor has she expectations that he will give up his time to be with her. Outside of work hours, couple time is pieced together between their respective schedules of personal time. Buffy explained the mutual respect each has for the other's time commitments. She compared their shared valuing of personal time with the marriages of women friends whom she knows from her world of horse riding:

I have friends who ride whose spouse is very jealous of the time they spend at the barn. Or very unhappy with the amount of time they spend at the barn and it makes it difficult for them, or at least not fun. Whereas he expects that that's what I am going to do. And we have always said to each other, you love that, that's great, we want you to love it, that's okay, go have fun. We both have enough things in our own life that we enjoy doing that we don't expect the other person is going to be waiting around for us and needs us to entertain them. When we spend time together, it is great because it is just pleasurable.

Most of the women in this study described their private time as a precious commodity in their busy lives. Solitude and privacy appear to be critical attributes of their personal time, as is the chance to be separate from their spouses. However, the women also revealed how they infuse this time with extraordinary energy directed to a vast array of activities. In their descriptions of their daily lives, I noted examples of how these women seek opportunities to explore themselves, to realize talents and abilities that they do not readily access when involved in other commitments of daily living. For the women in this study, personal time appears to be a critical medium for their growth and self-development.

For example, several of the women in the study stressed the importance of learning in their lives and have used their personal time to pursue educational goals. These goals have

required long-term time commitments and sacrifices, and have rewarded the women with successful and stimulating careers. Other women in the study have set aside personal time to take courses of interest at the community level and of professional interest. Buffy explained how she has continued her professional development by taking courses that follow-up her graduate counsellor training:

And other things that I like to do is learn. So right now I am taking an intermediate and advanced hypnotherapy certification, I am really interested in that. I went this summer and took a course in the States on hypnosis for birthing and I am going to be doing classes for that.

Some of the women are voracious readers who use their personal time to learn without the structure of formal classes. These women seek out literature that compliments their interests. Anna enthusiastically described her forays to the library at the local art college where she forages for books on contemporary art that meet her hunger for learning - both as an artist and as a student of the visual arts:

So I have a real passion for contemporary art. And I have a community library card to Emily Carr, and when I go there it is like letting a little girl loose in a candy store, you know, take whatever you want. I just go crazy, you know. I just bring tons -- well, I can't bring tons, I bring three books home and take them back and get some more and I just love reading about contemporary art.

Doll and Elsie both described a zeal for reading similar to Anna. Doll described how she typically transforms her personal time into reading opportunities that feed her hunger for all types of knowledge. The sophistication of her choices in literature reveals how she challenges her intellect during her personal time:

I read a lot... biographies, history, Queen Elizabeth I. Now, she was just a remarkable woman. But again, you know, I don't have many people I can discuss Queen Elizabeth I with, you know what I mean? (So you are a voracious reader?) I am right into Margaret Atwood. Oh, God, she is brilliant. I didn't realize that. I had no idea. I can't find her equal. I tried Margaret Lawrence, she is just not, she is different.

Like Doll, Elsie enjoys a variety of literature that reflects a broad scope of interests. Reading is a major pastime among a number of activities she pursues in her personal time: "I do a lot of

reading, and I go through different kinds of styles of reading. Sometimes it is just fictional kinds of things. Sometimes it is like books. Sometimes I will read articles or something like that."

Some of the women in this study also described how they dedicate their personal time to creative endeavours. Marceline's home is decorated with arts and crafts, all products of her personal time. In her humourous style, Marceline observed the differences between how she and her husband enjoy their personal time, and how she prefers to stay busy with particular goals:

Fred would be the perfect welfare recipient. He has that personality where he would be content watching a bit of T.V., read his book, do a bit of gardening, go for a walk and be content and have something to eat. Whereas I am the type, I am the type that has to be doing something, like producing something.

Anna similarly uses her time to pursue her artistic talents. At the time of our interview, she was attending a diploma program in creative arts. She occupies much of her personal time with school assignments of art projects and other creative ventures of her own interest. She described how she takes time to create lovely things for her nieces, hopeful that they will be especially meaningful because they are created from the heart: "So I do a lot of creative kinds of cards and books and send things to them in a very creative way, that is a little bit different than what they would receive from other people."

In summary, the women in this study reported that personal time is when they enjoy privacy and quiet. It can also be a time during which they pursue favorite activities and interests, either academic or creative. Separate time is a precious commodity that is carefully boundaried from husbands and others. Indeed, this is time for self-discovery and self-development – a time to thrive on talents and to realize unknown potential. The women admitted that creating exclusive time for the self is another luxury of childfree living.

Unknowable time. The women in this study described two dimensions of unknowable time; the future of aging and ailing without children, and the "what if" questions of the un-lived life of motherhood. The first theme of the unknowable future reflects the unresolvable anxieties

about the uncertainties of health and caretaking, and the disconcerting possibility of losing one's spouse. The second theme captures the women's melancholic wonderings about what life might have been like had they taken the path of motherhood. Despite the fleeting discomfort caused by such reflections, the women denied feeling regret for their childless choice.

Most of the women participants expressed a strong and positive orientation to life in the moment. They described few causes for concern that might distract their focus to matters of the future or the past. Nonetheless, each woman spontaneously disclosed her awareness and apprehension about what may lie ahead for her aging, and possibly infirm years. "Will she have years of declining health?", "Will her husband predecease her?" "Who, if anyone, will comfort her and care for her?" I heard in these women's questions their realistic appraisals of what they as childless women might expect in late life. They spoke with candour and frankness about the unknowable years ahead. And although not one woman spoke aloud about fear, an inaudible anxiety and expectation of vulnerability in late life was apparent in their words and stories.

For example, Anna told the story of her mother's decline in late life. Prior to her mother's death Anna had not reflected on her own final years or how they would unfold. Anna projected herself into her mother's situation of dependency and vulnerability, and tried to envision her own needs and circumstances as a childless elderly woman. She described the nagging questions that arose while her mother was dying, and the possible dilemmas for which she cannot yet provide answers:

...and so it really came to mind, only then did that happen. Who was going to take care of me when something like that happens to me? I could only pray that I die like that – a heart attack - and not have to be dependent upon anybody or feel sick for a long time because there would be no one there for me.

Anna confirmed that she feels passing "sadness" when thinking about the unknowns in the years ahead. Doll rendered a similarly distressing prediction of her later years and she admitted that "this is where it takes a downturn for me, probably very bleak. In terms of loneliness." She

anticipates early widowhood because of her husband's chronic heart problems. Also, years of working in a nursing care facility have provided her intimate knowledge of the world in which she envisions herself at life's end. As she talked, her vision shifted from a poignant snapshot of herself in old age to one of resignation:

I will probably be quite lonely, if Ernst dies before me, which I anticipate he probably will. I am not gregarious. I don't have a huge social network. What else? I just think that I will probably be one of those old sweethearts up there, 50 years from now, 40 years from now with a blanket over my knee, right. Is that so bad? I don't entirely think so. There is families who -- I look after old people who have huge families and none of the kids come to see them, you know. Probably because they have been an old rotter all their lives, you know, or because of the world we live in now, kids are scattered all over the world because of transferring and that. I think the idea of the huge nuclear family, like a hundred years ago, we don't have grandma in the basement, not like the other cultures do.

Despite their predictions that they will likely encounter some difficulties and distress in late life, all the women in this study stressed that they are no less assured of problems in life's final years than their parenting peers. The women repeatedly dismissed as a "myth" the common assumption that children will care for their aging parents. Rather, they emphasized that "there are no guarantees" a child would be there for them if needed. Doll expressed her belief that family ties are undependable in today's world:

...there is no guarantee that you are going to have this Disney like old age just because you have five children. Four of them could be back East and one of them probably hates you, lives five blocks down the road and won't come and visit.

Buffy also related that she would be mistrustful of family bonds as adequate insurance against a lonely future. Her work experience as a health care administrator has taught her the difference between ideals of family life and the reality of how the aged often endure lonely years in care facilities:

I would never expect my kids to look after me anyway. And I think that's the wrong reason to have kids, so that they can look after you. And if you ever visit -- for part of my job we do a lot of training in intermediate and extended care facilities, so I am often there visiting students and checking up and things like that, and I meet so many residents whose kids never visit them. And that is something that I have known for the last ten years working in this field, if it ever would have occurred to me that that would be the reason to have kids, you just have to take one look and see that's not so at all.

Marceline was yet another woman in this study who cynically challenged the "myth" that children will care for parents in their later years. She described how she counters others' concerns for her childless future:

...there is no guarantee that they are healthy. And a lot of people will say, "Oh well, who is going to take care of you when you are older?" And my response is "There is no guarantee that my child will outlive me. There is no guarantee they are going to live nearby to take care of me. There is no guarantee they are going to be financially able to take care of me. And there is no guarantee they are going to want to take care of me."

None of the women described any instances of wondering whether having children would have served to provide more peace of mind about the future. Rather, all the women seemed to have found ways of coping with the ambiguity of their aging process and later years of decline. Some of the women described how they have simply dismissed the immediate relevance of such concerns. They have consciously chosen to set aside their worries until the reality of future circumstances becomes more apparent. For example, Anna described how she briefly visits the problem of aging, then abruptly withdraws from the futility of worrying over the unknowns of the future. At this time in life she sees her aging process as a vague quandary that only the passage of time will help her resolve:

I think about it, but there is nothing I can do about it. Like Josh would say, it hasn't happened, don't worry about it. Wait until it happens, then you can worry about it...who knows where our life will be?

Roberta has lived the role of caretaker to her in-laws and is well-acquainted with the emerging needs of elderly persons in later years. When she reflected on her childlessness she talked about not knowing how her future needs might be met. But she copes by looking ahead with some optimism, preferring to assume that the future might bring positive changes that ease her aging experience. Indeed, from Roberta's perspective, a concern of today (e.g., health, access to family members and friends) may be a problem solved tomorrow:

The only thing that would be of concern, or is of concern is that discussion of as the adults get older their children take care of them... On the other hand in 20 years or 25 or 30 years some of the same concerns now may not be their concerns.

Some of the women in this study reported believing that they will likely receive some occasional help from nieces and nephews in times of future need. They were careful however, to respect the privacy and resources of their extended family members. Anna described a conversation she had with her older brother when they were caring for their ill mother. Her words reflected her intense reluctance to become dependent on others:

My brother said, "I will be there, I will make sure you are cared for." "Jonathon, you are ten years older than me, eight years older than me, you have to have someone to take care of you (laughing) and you have your children." And his children are really wonderful as well and very nurturing. And he said, "well, Angela will take care of you." The last thing I want is Angela to feel responsible for taking care of me.

On the other hand, Sharlene appeared somewhat less resistant to relying on her niece and nephews to respond to her needs in late life. Given that her husband will likely predecease her, she draws some comfort that "well, one thing I know is that Phil's brother's kids would be really good."

Overall, when they contemplated their later lives as childless women, all the women of this study acknowledged the probable challenges of their eventual aging processes. Unlike their mothering peers, they looked to their futures without the psychological security of assumptions drawn from traditional family values. However, they were also aware and drew some comfort from the reality that having children does not guarantee love, support and care in later life, especially given shifting family values of our culture.

Some of the women of this study also expressed awareness of a second dimension of unknowable time. They described specific instances when they wondered about the unlived life of motherhood. For example, in her early forties Angel was prompted to reconsider her childless choice by the "now or never" question of age and declining fertility. In reference to that review

process, she shared her fears about what might have become of her life and marriage had she become a mother:

Now when I sit back and reflect on everything, I have realized that - I have concerns, I should say - about whether I would have been happy with the outcome because it certainly would have had a substantial impact on my career, which I have taken a number of years to build...I would have had concerns about whether it would have had a detrimental impact on the marriage, where you have one spouse who wants a child and the other spouse who really does not.

Angel's appraisal of the "what if's" of motherhood clearly affirmed her childless choice. With considerable relief, she admitted that "things could have gone terribly awry if I had pursued this," citing the possible loss of her marriage and probable resentment towards a child whose arrival had disrupted her life. Anna also believed that the arrival of children would have stressed her marriage. She explained how she would have faced "conflict" with her husband over basic value differences, particularly those that reflect their differing commitments to their shared religious and ethnic background. She predicted that "all of a sudden you have a child that could be a conflict" and whose presence would demand changes in the marriage: "Having children, we would have had to have a lot more in common...our relationship would be very different."

Like Angel, Elsie has also revisited her childless choice, often compelled by concern for her future. She described how she poses questions of "what if?" when she reflects on her childlessness: "Will I regret it in the future? Like, will I regret when I am 80 that I didn't have any kids? So a bit of "should I do it for prevention?" Elsie's revisitation process evoked an awareness that she will not fully experience parts of herself that might have emerged in a mother role. She admitted that family life is not unappealing to her and she is certain that parenthood would have elicited many positive qualities in herself. She described a family life that would have been rich and rewarding:

Shadow is so good with kids, he could offer so much to kids. And together we could offer so much to kids... So I think, "okay I have a lot to offer too that I could have offered kids", and we could have raised some really nice kids because we would have fun together. And we enjoy each other as a couple. So there is a lot of love around.

Nonetheless, Elsie balanced her positive attributes for mothering with a realistic assessment of her limitations. With such a 'balance sheet' for reviewing her unlived life of motherhood, Elsie said she always concludes that remaining childless is the only means by which she could fulfill her profound sense of purpose through work. The "what if?" questions of motherhood have thus receded for Elsie behind the pleasant affirmation that she could have been a good mother had she wanted. Doll also wonders about what was missed on the maternal road she has not taken in her life. She described occasional fantasies of family life like those that arise at Christmas: "I have said to Ernst many times, "if we had children, oh, I would have dressed the house up and that would have been fun." And then two, three days pass and it passes. Again, it is very superficial."

However, not all of the women in this study had pleasant and wistful fantasies of motherhood. Some emphasized that parenthood may have been rife with disappointments. Angel was among the women who expressed a dubious view of potential motherhood in her comments: "You don't have any guarantee that the child you are going to have is going to be an angelic child...the child may be a demonic child and cause all sorts of headaches and grief." Anna similarly commented wryly on the unpredictable outcomes of parenthood:

When you have children you are never sure of anything. You can't be assured that that child is going to be supportive of you, is going to be a wonderful child – son or daughter, to you. You are not assured of anything.

Anna further elaborated on her cynical vision of motherhood by disclosing that, as a woman in her twenties, she experienced great emotional distress whenever she thought of motherhood. At that time she interpreted her upset as confirmation that motherhood was "not even part of my constitution." Today, Anna still feels anxiety about motherhood, albeit much less than thirty years ago. She described her torment of bygone years in the following words: "When I was younger I would dream and I would wake up having anxiety attacks if I would be dreaming of having my own child. Now, I don't."

Just as they joined voices in a chorus that "there are no guarantees" of security or happiness inherent in motherhood, all of the women denied feeling regret for their childless choice. Elsie offered this description of her occasional melancholy when thinking about the foregone choice to mother:

And I can honestly say, I have never really regretted not having kids. Not at a deep level. I mean, there is superficial regret when you say, "Oh, you could have fun times together", but you think of those kinds of moments like Xmas or something. Because Xmas is an important time for me but we have sort of built our own Xmas traditions now and have had them for many years. And so it is regret on a superficial level but not on a really heartfelt, emotional level.

On the flip side of this coin, the other women in the study described positive emotional experiences related to their childless choice. Their words did not reveal any traces of regret or enduring sadness, doubt, or inner conflict. Instead, the women's stories of daily living were punctuated with comments of appreciation for their childless choice. During our conversations many of the women paused to describe not just the practical benefits of childlessness, but also the emotional rewards inherent in the childless choice. These sentiments are reflected in Marceline's words: "...yeah, the more I talk about it the more I am glad I made that choice...No, I don't have regrets. Every year it is reconfirmed more." Angel summarized her similar feelings: "No, I am glad that we are still childless and I don't have any regrets." Buffy expressed her gratitude for her childfree lifestyle when she stated "I just think how lucky I am that I am not a mother." Anna, Elsie, and Sharlene all commented on the many occasions when they said to themselves "Thank God I don't have children." Instead of feeling regret about their childless choice, the women's words allude to the relief afforded them by that life choice. Perhaps Sharlene's reflections on the significance of being childless best captured the sentiments of the women in this study: "Certainly when we made the decision there was a huge sense of relief. And I still feel that as I say it now. It is like "Wow". And I don't really know what else to say."

In summary, the women described two dimensions of unknowable time: the unpredictable future of aging without children, and the unlived life of motherhood. There was an undercurrent of apprehension in their visions of the future, which the women offset in part by reminding themselves that children would not necessarily diminish the unpleasantness of aging. They similarly reflected that although motherhood would have offered them many delights and pleasures, it may also have proven a disappointing and unrewarding experience, taking a toll on careers and marriages. Whether considering the unknowable future or the forgone option of family life, none of the women expressed regret for their childless choice. There was instead a resounding chorus of satisfaction and relief for having declined motherhood.

Lived Time: Men

The men's stories contained references to time that are presented within the same four descriptive themes that characterized the women's accounts: the time is now, spontaneous time, my time, and unknowable time.

The time is now. This descriptive theme expressed the men's valuing of the present moment, and the affirmation that the present moment is the only one that can be fully known. For the men in this study the uncertain future does not merit worry, nor does the past deserve revisitations to rehash old decisions that might elicit regret or dissatisfaction with the present.

Each man in the study expressed in his self-descriptions the underlying belief that time is a precious and finite resource. Moreover, several of the men related stories of past unpredicted life events from which they had learned the lesson to live life to its fullest in every passing moment. Gord recalled the vow he made to himself in his late twenties when his father died: "Life is short. I made up my mind right there that I'm going to do what I want to do while I want to do it." Ernst related how his heart attack two years ago at age 48 had reinforced his belief that worrying about the future is an unworthwhile diversion of his emotional and physical energy: "I'm more the type to just jump into life and not worry about things that you don't really have a

lot of control over." When he was hospitalized for his heart attack, Ernst explained to Doll that he was satisfied with the life he had lived to that point. By staying fully oriented to the present, he believed that he had maximized his opportunities to enjoy life:

I've always sort of been one to run off and do what I want to do. I think I actually scared Doll at one point during the heart attack because I said to her, "you know, if I do wind up dying now, it's with no real regrets because I've lived a full life in a lot of ways, done a lot of things I wanted to do." And you know, I've always been pretty happy with what I was doing.

Phil shared the story of how he eventually abandoned the religious teachings of the faith in which he had been raised. He explained how eschewing traditional religious thinking - including the imperative of reproduction and the guarantee of an afterlife - he more fully oriented himself to the present, and to living according to his own values and beliefs. Phil explained his changed philosophy about life with the joke that "...since I've given up hope things have been much better" and reflected on the necessity of living fully for the present: "I just damn well better enjoy as much as I can while I'm still here, right?"

The men also described their stubborn resistance to worrying about the past, particularly by dwelling on former decisions. They conveyed an 'over and done with' attitude towards their past choices, a philosophy that there is no time to spare for rehashing the past. Ernst emphasized that "...when I made a decision that's my decision...No, should-have's, would-have's and could-have's don't count." In the following excerpt Josh mused over the question of regrets for his childless choice. He expressed the realistic assumption that he will never be fully assured that all his life choices, including that of childlessness, will have been the best for him. Nonetheless, he conveyed his resistance to indulging in self-doubt and worry about the choices he has made:

I don't think I have any regrets. You know we go through life, we make decisions and ah sometimes we might say, "that's the wrong decision." But at that point it's, you know, you just can't go through life worrying about what decisions you've made. But even in that I sometimes I feel, gee, it would be nice to have a grown up child that I could have a nice relationship with. But I don't really think there's regret, you know I don't. Sometimes, like I say, that would be nice, but I'm not unhappy about the way my life has gone. And I sometimes think if I was going to do it all over again, if I had the opportunity

to be 20 again and do it, would I have kids? I really don't know, you know, I'm not sure whether I would. It probably would depend on the person I was with and maybe the other life choices I've made.

The men also dismissed the merits of worrying about the future. Most acknowledged that issues will arise during their senior years that will cause them some concern, but none of the men expressed a tendency to focus on long-term planning or efforts to resolve future difficulties. Fred admitted that "we don't usually plan too far in advance" for holidays or other longer-term goals. He also reflected that he was not motivated to "get ahead" or become overly invested in planning for his future:

...so I don't always look at things as being "oh I'm striving to get to this spot." It's just "well whenever it comes, I take it and I've got to make the best of it." So to me what's important in my life is being with my wife, Marceline, and having someone to love me and being able to do the things we want to do.

Brett similarly explained: "I'm not a sort of analytical, forward looking person. I just let things be." He described his willingness to embrace circumstances and opportunities as they arise in the moment, without being overly concerned about the implications thereof. He referred to the outlook with which he entered the restaurant business, a very new career for which he's had no formal training:

...for me going into it I went into it the way I go into everything. I bring myself up to it and do it. I don't go, "oh my God what if this happens?, Oh my God what if that happens?" To me that's counter-productive and I'm just not that kind of reflective person. I'm reflective but not that way, not "Oh, where am I going to be 10 years down the road?" and all that...

To summarize, all of the men in this study either directly or indirectly expressed a felt imperative to fully engage their energy and attention in the immediate moments of daily living. None of the men described long-term plans or a focus on concerns for the future. Instead, they undertook tasks in the present that would help them accommodate some predictable future changes in their lives, such as employment change. However, just as they resisted revisiting former life choices or past life events, they also declined to worry about such future events.

Spontaneous time. The men's stories included numerous references to the central element of this descriptive theme: the flexibility and fluidity with which they moved through time, free of the agendas and obligations associated with fatherhood.

All of the men in this study remarked on the freedom with which they could manage their time – to fill it with activities, to alter agendas, to be busy or to simply "just lie on the couch." The men's comments clearly indicated that they try not to take for granted the spontaneity with which they are able to live their daily lives as non-fathers. Mynh expressed his appreciation that he has retained control over his time and was dubious that he could have preserved this spontaneous quality of life if he were a father: "I love the spontaneity of it. You know what? I never forget that, that it's available to me...we could have had a nanny and probably been somewhat spontaneous, but I don't know..." Fred noted how the lack of parental obligations in his life has freed him up to infuse his lifestyle with as much or as little activity as he wishes. Although he lives a busy life as a teacher and coach in after-school clubs, he enjoys the flexibility of responding to whatever interests emerge in the moment: "I don't think it's really busy, you know we go out when we want to go out but we relax at home a lot too." Mynh added that his childfree status also affords him the flexibility to respond to extra demands at work: "I can free up the time and there's no constraints keeping me from coming in to work, so I can pursue my career." Phil suggested that the spontaneity with which he and Sharlene live their lives has likely reduced their opportunities to socialize with parenting friends who do not have such flexibility in their schedules of daily living: "That's probably why we don't have so many friends, actually...we tend to want to do our own thing the two of us, you know. If we want to go to the theater we'll go to the theater." In some cases, the men's pleasure with the spontaneity of their daily lives seemed to reflect their natural inclinations to resist structure in their lives. Brett referred to his reliance on an intuitive sense of how best to use and enjoy his time: "I go a lot with what feels right."

Some of the men alluded to spontaneity that infused a broader sense of time than that contained in daily living. These men told life stories that implied a flexible and fluid sense of time in which they have negotiated a range of changing circumstances across their life course - from career and educational pursuits, to residential relocations. Ernst had recently completed training in a new trade to account for a probable future lay-off situation, while Brett had left his former career of twenty years in teaching to become a librarian and then a restaurant owner. Shadow had moved across the country at least five times to take advantage of career opportunities, or to support his wife's career. Fred had left a career in construction and returned to university to become a high school teacher. These men had taken on challenges and risks to reorganize their lives-risks that would likely have been curtailed by family life. They were able to flexibly shift the course of their lives to accommodate emerging goals, both for themselves and their wives.

In summary, the men in this study expressed their delight in the spontaneous quality of their daily living. They referred specifically to the lack of constraints on their time that would otherwise arise from the obligations of parenthood. The ability to "do what I want when I want" was a treasured aspect of their lives - both in daily living and in charting a path across their life course.

My time. This theme integrated the men's references to their needs for personal time. They devoted this time to pursuing a broad range of projects and interests that met their needs for learning and personal challenge, or they preserved it as quiet time uncluttered by activities or social contacts.

The men in this study reported using their personal time to pursue a broad range of interests and activities, either alone or with friends - time separate from the shared dialogues and companionship of their marriages, time that is devoted to meeting personal needs. Ernst referred to time spent with friends:

...what I like is the freedom to make my own choice in what I want to do. You know, like if I decide I'm going to go somewhere with my friend Dave, I basically just have to, I consult my schedule usually and I mean there's lots of times I've gone even though Doll was off. Because I mean we do spend enough time together that she doesn't begrudge it if I'm going to take a day and go away or whatever.

Gord affirmed that in his ordinary daily living of interests and activities, "Buffy has her own stuff she likes and I have my stuff that I like." He described how they each occasionally venture into one another's worlds of separate interests, she to the boat and fly fishing with him and he to the barn when she needs his help. Despite these sporadic forays into each others' respective worlds of activity, Gord has continued to maintain separate and distinct interests that he pursues in his own time: "...so there's a couple of little things that we you know do a little bit together but for the most part not much."

Josh reiterated the comments of the other participants that having personal time is one of the many benefits of a childfree lifestyle. He explained the value of spending time with and for himself, time he assumes would be compromised by the responsibilities of parenthood:

I really like to spend a lot of time alone. Ya, I think that's a big thing. My life, I wouldn't have been able to spend as much time alone. I would have had this commitment to another person. You know you have to make dinner every night. Maybe it's more of a selfishness that I've sometimes thought "Gee, maybe I'm just a selfish person." But that's this responsibility, the commitment of being a parent.

When Ernst compared his opportunities to use time to explore his interests and favorite pastimes with his friends' harried lives of fatherhood, he concluded: "I feel quite lucky that I've got piles of hobbies and I can focus on that, I've got time for myself."

All of the men in this study described a variety of ways in which they utilize their personal time. Some, like Gord, admitted that the value of personal time is the privacy and option to simply rest: "Doing nothing means a lot." Fred similarly expressed his appreciation that he can use his own time for a quiet and private break of pleasant activities, or to focus on the challenge of learning something new:

...when I'm alone I usually spend my time in my yard gardening or going for a walk. One thing I'm starting to do now, I'm going to take a flight training course, and I don't know, things like that. I usually spend time doing them alone, not with other people or friends.

Most of the men appeared to devote themselves to a rich array of activities and interests during their personal time, including playing and watching sports, cooking, listening to and playing music, reading, creating home projects, watching movies, and photography. Across this variety of pastimes, all of the men emphasized the significance of using their time to learn different skills and to acquire new knowledge. Hence personal time is cherished as the time during which these men develop their interests as an expression of who they are, and who they wish to become. Ernst reflected on his continuous evolution through learning, most of which he pursues during his personal time: "I'm always in flux, there's always something I'm interested in, wanting to learn about, and I've always been that way." Some of the men explained that they utilize their personal time to work at home, an option that allows them to maintain their commitments to their workplace and to their professional development.

In conclusion, the men in this study described the multitude of ways in which they enjoyed their personal time, private moments of rest and reflection and busy periods in which they keenly devoted themselves to activities and interests. They emphasized the importance of private time as the venue for acquiring information and building knowledge in their areas of interest, and for practicing their skills and talents.

Unknowable time. This descriptive theme incorporated the men's thoughts and reflections of the future, as well as their wistful wonderings about their unlived lives as fathers.

All of the men acknowledged that to varying degrees they have considered the implications of aging without children, and in some cases with few or no family support systems in the foreseeable future. All of the men also spontaneously shared their thoughts about the unlived life of parenthood, through either casual references to others' parenthood or through

descriptions of the moments when they wondered how parenthood would have shaped them and their lives differently. Hence the men in this study offered their reflections on two distinct dimensions of unknowable time: the unpredictable future, and the life path of parenthood that all had declined to take.

In terms of the future, the men clearly distinguished their expectations to continue their rich, satisfying lives into the foreseeable future from those of late life aging - a time when they anticipate years of dependency and vulnerability. Shadow recalled that in his twenties he was already raising questions about old age without children: "Who would look after me when I'm old? Who can we rely on? Who would be there to bury me when I die? Who would care? Because there's no one really that close except Elsie." Perhaps Josh expressed most profoundly the sadness of ending his childless life in circumstances wherein he feels forgotten and invisible to the world. The eventual possibility of relying on strangers at such a vulnerable time in life lent a disturbing tone to his vision of the future:

...sometimes I think when I'm getting older it would be nice to have kids to help look after me. That's the main thing. (The security that might come with that) Ya, ya. And what are my older years going to be? Am I going to be alone if Anna dies before I do? Who's going to look after me? You know this whole idea, not so much of dying alone but being stuck in a hospital bed for five years and being incapable or, you know, all those things that come along - dependent on people that really have no interest, don't care about me.

Josh appeared to counter this unhappy image of his future with the thought that his decline in late life would not pose an imposition on others: "I like the idea that nobody has to see it as a chore to come and look after me." Other men in the study insisted that there were no guarantees or assurances that children could ameliorate the challenges inherent in aging. Fred expressed this common perspective when he reflected that his elderly parents have not derived any particular benefits for their aging process from having had children:

So okay, Kelowna's not that far away but we never get up there that much, maybe once, twice a year, that's about it. So I am now really realizing that it wouldn't be such a great hardship if there's nobody around because most old people don't get visited. At least in

our society, maybe in other societies where the parents live with the children it's different, but not for us right? And so when you get old you are still by yourselves whether you see your kids that often.

Some of the men anticipated that in their ailing years they will likely request help from nieces and nephews, hoping that the commitments they have made to that generation will yield some reciprocity of time and support when it is most needed. Gord offered his glib assumption that his nieces and nephews "... get to fight over our money when we're getting ready to die (laughter). Basically it's like, okay, you don't want to help us, look after us, then there's no piece of the pie." Ernst also expressed his hope that "if I become incompetens where I can't take care of my own affairs, the most I can hope for is that there will be some niece or nephew that's willing to step in and help me out."

The men also offered their reflections on a second dimension of unknowable time, that of the un-lived life of fatherhood. All but one man referred to occasions of "wondering," "second guessing," or "fleeting moments" during which he contemplates where the alternate path of parenthood may have taken him. Phil suggested that such occasional reflections on parenting a child constitutes a natural inclination to review one's life experiences:

...to this day there's still, you still have to face the feeling of what would my kids have been like if I'd have had them? I think everybody has that you know. How do you ever get away from that? And of course you get this a lot from people who have kids - they sort of always give you a ribbing over it.

Shadow emphasized that his reflections were "very fleeting, it's not a long-term oh, I should have or could have or something like that - no." Mynh also referred to the transitory nature of these reflections. He shared the observations of other men that such moments do not invoke any lasting emotional distress:

Yes I could have done it, and you know, on the odd occasion, sometimes I'll say "wow you know what would it have been like to have a little prodigy?" And you know what? It leaves as quick as it comes and I think to myself, you know what, I'm so happy with the way things are now that I wouldn't give it up for anything.

Moreover, several of the men described how their reflections on fatherhood actually reinforced their childless choice. Shadow admitted that he feels a rare "twinge" of "missing the opportunity" to parent, but insisted that in fact he is "...not missing anything because I get to enjoy them in a different way." Ernst admitted to occasional melancholy thoughts that he has missed the opportunity to "shape and mold" a young life. However, he is quick to also remind himself of the benefits of his childlessness:

...even though there might be the odd time where you look back on it and say "oh, what if?..." there's lots of times where I'll stop and think "Isn't this nice. We can only do this because we didn't have kids."

Other men in the study stressed the difference between wistful or melancholy fantasies of paternity and the more realistic assessment that parenthood is rife with challenges. Gord emphasized that even the best efforts to parent can not guarantee happy family life:

...you could be the nicest parent in the world and you got a messed up lousy arse of a kid. That can happen. They just mix in with the wrong crowd. They just want to be a bad ass for some reason and that would really, that would just break your heart wouldn't it? So there's no guarantees what you're kid is going to be. Sure, they say that they adopt your morals and your values and stuff, but there's no guarantee for that.

Some of the men's comments reflected their assumption that parenthood would have put their marriages at risk of significant change. Ernst expressed his conviction that Doll would have relegated him to the "back burner" of family life, as she undertook the many obligations of motherhood. Shadow also referred to his assumptions from thirty years ago that raising children would have surely altered the dynamics and intimacy of his marriage. He remains convinced that parenthood would have significantly infringed on his relationship with Elsie:

...to force myself or Elsie into something that maybe five or ten years down the road would create problems for us, or you lose touch with the other person and you grow so far apart that the kids end up not having what they actually need, and you forget about each other - that came into play in terms of my decision as well.

The men in this study also referred to the general sacrifices they believe they would have necessarily made in a life of fatherhood. Ernst summarized the values and activities that most men in the study suggested would be compromised or lost in family life:

I do value my time reading my books and learning new things and I value my time with my wife and I do feel having, if we'd had children, I do feel all that would be further back on the burners.

Shadow reflected that parenthood would have altered virtually all aspects of his daily life. Like the other men in this study, he conceptualized parenthood in terms of losses and limitations:

I would not have had the opportunity to travel. I would not have met people I met. I would not have had the opportunity to spend the money on school, the opportunity to do the things the way I would like to with kids - unless I worked very hard.

It was readily apparent from the men's stories that despite "fleeting moments" in which they "pondered" the unlived life of fatherhood, not one man felt regret for his childless choice. Gord enthusiastically asserted that "I have no regrets, I'm super happy with the choice," adding that "...I don't know what I'm missing and quite frankly I don't care." Fred echoed Gord's assumption that regret is not an appropriate descriptor of how he feels about his life without children, since "I don't know what the difference would be." Josh stated: "I sort of think if I haven't had serious regrets now I can't imagine why I would have them in the future. I don't think so."

Several men actually expressed relief that they had declined fatherhood. They referred directly and indirectly in their stories to the freedom they enjoy in their childfree lives - freedom to continue pursuing their passions and ideals unencumbered by the demands of fatherhood. Mynh emphasized his relief that he has not undertaken the burden of responsibility inherent in parenthood: "...there's consequences even in having the best kid in the world. I don't want to have to worry about them." Ernst described his unpredictable future at work where he anticipated a lay-off, adding that he feels relieved of any burdens that his circumstances might impose on family life:

...to tell you the truth just sitting here thinking about it now, I mean in a way it's nice not having kids and having that hanging over you. Ya, like if I had three kids I was trying to put through University or something like some of my friends right now; I wouldn't need the added stress of being told you could be out the door any day now.

In conclusion, the men in this study distinguished between two dimensions of unknowable time: the eventuality of aging and ailing without children, and the unlived life of fatherhood. Most of the men expressed concerns about the unknowable years of late life without children. Although they denied that children would guarantee them the help and support they expect they will need, the men did not describe any plans for mitigating against the health and emotional difficulties of aging. Rather, they concurred that such future concerns were not yet clear or resolvable and hence did not merit continuous worry.

With respect to their unlived lives as fathers, all but one of the men acknowledged having moments in which they "wondered" or "pondered" what they and their children would have been like had they opted for the traditional choice of fatherhood. These moments sometimes elicited "fleeting" sadness and melancholy, but none of the men described these moments as expressions of regret for their childless choice. Indeed, some of the men suggested the impossibility of feeling regret, since it was too difficult or impossible to miss something they had never had. Instead, the majority of them expressed relief for their childless choice. Others emphasized that having children would have made their lives simply different, not better. Nonetheless, all the men acknowledged that fatherhood would have resulted in some losses and sacrifices of the favoured attributes of their childfree lifestyle, including the intimacy of their marriages.

Comparisons of Lived Time: Women and Men

The men and women in this study expressed an enthusiastic orientation to the present. Few of them described detailed long-term plans or any inclination to worry about future or past events and life choices. Only a handful of women admitted to concerns over one aspect of the future, the task of estate planning as childless women. The participants also all expressed great

appreciation for the spontaneity with which they could live their lives without the encumbrances of attending to children's needs. Although fewer of the women described the large-scale changes in their life course than did the men, many actually had taken advantage of their childfree status to enact significant life changes beyond the scope of daily living. Women like Anna, Elsie, Roberta, Buffy, and Marceline, referred in passing to career and educational goals that required reorganization of life priorities and time to accomplish those goals. Across all the participants there was a common refrain that "I am free to do what I want when I want", indicating the high value placed upon flexibility in time afforded by the childfree lifestyle.

All of the participants referred to the significance of creating private time in their daily lives. However, a major difference emerged between the men's and women's expressed needs for private time. Several of the women emphasized the absolute necessity of declaring and taking personal time. They also asserted the need to protect that time from the demands and presence of others, including their spouses. In addition, their accounts of this time suggested that they value it more highly than the men, for the opportunity to rest quietly in private. Only one of the men in this study expressed similarly strong needs for private time and solitude, separate from all other contact with either friends or his wife.

Despite these differences, all the men and women told stories of how their private time facilitated their opportunities to explore their talents and to acquire knowledge. This is the time during which the participants sought to expand and develop themselves to their fullest potential. All the participants confirmed their belief that the childless choice was the critical factor affording them the freedom to take and utilize personal time to meet their needs, unencumbered by responsibilities to children.

All of the participants in this study spontaneously reflected on two dimensions of unknowable time: the un-lived life of parenthood, and the future of ailing and aging without children. Almost all the men and women admitted to instances of wondering and "what if"

questions about their unrealized potential of motherhood. These moments were variably described as “wistful”, as if something was “missing”, and in some cases as “sad.” However, all of these reflections were also described as “fleeting” or “brief”, and did not elicit ongoing feelings of distress or discomfort regarding the childless choice. More often than not, during these moments the participants reminded themselves of the long-term commitments and constraints of parenthood – reminders that offset any melancholy feelings and instead reinforced that the childless choice was right for them. Among the few participants who had endured difficult revisitations to their childless choice, they similarly emerged from these periods feeling stronger in their conviction that childlessness was the best reproductive choice for them. None of the participants reported feeling regret for their childless choice, and all expressed relief and pride that they have not wavered from their natural inclination to forgo parenthood.

The unpredictable nature of future circumstances of aging was also raised by the participants as an area of some concern. The men and women expressed varying levels of worry about their future, however, and any plans to ameliorate potential difficulties were only vaguely articulated in terms of enlisting the support of nieces and nephews. The participants expressed the futility of worrying about the future, and instead focussed their attention on living fully in the moment. In a related vein, none of the participants were interested in establishing a legacy that would outlive them. Instead, and in keeping with their focus on the present, they described the imperative of living rich lives and seeking ways in which to create a living legacy that allowed them to realize the best of their talents and abilities.

The Lived Experience of Voluntary Childlessness for Couples

The couples in this study were invited to discuss their shared experiences and perspectives on voluntary childlessness. Their accounts of life without children were explored using the four lived existentials as guides for reflection and interpretation. The materials did not, however, yield descriptions of living without children that were substantially different than those

derived from accounts provided by the individual spouses. Rather, the stories told in the marital interviews contained a variety of elaborations on the materials that had emerged previously in the individual interviews. The couples described the same predominant lived experiences of voluntary childlessness, for which they offered interpretations very similar to those made during the spousal interviews. Hence there were no indications in the couples' dialogues of how they co-created meanings of their childlessness, particularly in light of some gender differences that emerged among the spousal accounts of childlessness.

Despite the similarities in content of the stories told by the couples and spouses about their childlessness, I observed some differences in the processes occurring within the two sets of interviews. For example, during the individual spousal interviews the participants made numerous disclosures of very personal and private matters. At times they prefaced those disclosures with concerns about the confidentiality of their interview materials: "...this is confidential, right?" and "no one gets to see this, right?" Some of these disclosures contained reflections about themselves or their histories, while others concerned their thoughts about their spouses and marriages. In addition, in almost half of the spousal interviews participants openly expressed a range of emotions, from marvelous humour to melancholy and tearful sadness. These poignant moments arose during recollections of loved ones, and during reflections on difficult times with others who queried, pressured, or misunderstood their childless choice. Other participants became emotional when describing difficult family histories. Although these emotional moments were infrequent, they lent several of the individual interviews an intimate tone of sharing and vulnerability.

In contrast, the couples' interviews featured an overall tone of levity in dialogues that were quite general and only rarely referred to more intense or emotionally-laden matters. The couples frequently laughed together as they gave accounts of shared life experiences and comments they made in the interviews. They appeared to enjoy chatting about their relationship

history, and describing the attributes of their relationships and lifestyles that they found rewarding. They exchanged their ideas about childlessness without hesitation, and offered many expressions of support and affirmation to one another. At no point during these conjoint interviews did the spouses disagree with one another over any major observations or experiences of living without children. Occasionally, they diverged in how they recollected the details of particular experiences but they generally agreed about which experiences were relevant to descriptions of their childfree lives. At some points, spouses made comments that surprised their partners. However, none of these added comments were significant revelations to how the couples viewed their childlessness. Overall, during the couples' interviews, the participants appeared to be relaxed and spontaneous in expressing their ideas about their lives as voluntarily childless couples

In contrast to many of the individual spousal interviews, the couples did not reveal any emotional content associated with the comments and stories they provided. There may have been a number of other reasons why the depth and intensity of these couple interviews differed from the spousal interviews. For example, it is possible that during conjoint interviews the participants may have felt more guarded and less inclined to disclose their experiences to the degree they felt comfortable during their individual interviews. Possibly the spouses were attempting to be sensitive to their partners' feelings and needs, or towards some of their shared difficulties or struggles.

Meta-themes of Meaning

The men and women in this study told stories that provided glimpses into how they live their childless lives in a variety of spaces, and across different dimensions of time, relationship and personal experience. Their lived experiences are thus captured within the frames provided by the four existentials, frames which help to reveal the many nuances of constructing a meaningful life without children. Perhaps the most apparent finding that emerged from the existential

descriptions is that neither the childless choice itself, or the 'condition' or 'state' of childlessness comprise experiences which in and of themselves are particularly relevant in the lived moment for the participants in this study. Ernst clearly made this assertion in the following excerpt:

...to me it (being childless) is just a condition of life that I've chosen, and in some ways it's no different than say, being wealthy...you can't say "what do you find meaningful about being wealthy?" You know to me it's just a condition of life...

Fred similarly reflected on his ability to enjoy and engage in his life projects in his statement that "I don't see that it makes much difference whether I have kids or not", and Mynh shrugged off the relevance of his childlessness with the simple self-description that "I'm just a guy that doesn't have kids." Buffy joined the participants' chorus that diminished any inherent relevance of the childless choice: "I don't even ever think about it. It's just not even considered," while Anna insisted that "childlessness is just a small part" of her life and who she is as a woman. And Brett chided me for inviting him to participate in this research study:

I'm not a good subject in that having or not having children doesn't, as far as I can think, and I've thought about this since I spoke to you a week ago, as far as I can tell it doesn't influence me...it doesn't pattern my life at all.

Rather than associating a strong sense of meaning with their childless state, the participants in this study emphasized that they derive meaning from *how* they live their lives-the sensibilities and manner with which they greet and move through their daily life world. In their verbal descriptions I heard comments such as "just contribute and be a good person", "be nice", "help others", "think for yourself", "I would like to do the choosing", and "do what you want to do, but do it with integrity." Within such expressions of life values and interwoven across the participants' descriptions of daily living, I discerned two constant and powerful meaning-themes: the freedom of autonomy and choice, and the compelling drive to live a responsible life. These two themes encompassed the materials contained within the four existentials, testimony to their prevalence and significance to all the participants in the study.

Freedom: The Expression of Autonomy and Choice

The participants in this study readily affirmed that freedom is the most cherished and significant attribute of their childless lives. They explained the many ways in which they felt unconstrained by the obligations and commitments to children's lives that are embedded in the cultural life scripts of parenthood. Indeed, the theme of freedom emerged in their rich accounts of daily living across all four of the lived existentials, lending a quality or tone to their lives of possibility, anticipation, and optimism.

Nonetheless, there exists in the childless choice a more profound source of meaning, a compelling inner value that motivated these men and women to make the childless choice and that assures them the subjective sense of freedom they enjoy in their daily lives. This value or conviction is that of autonomy, the striving for self-management and self-accountability. The participants in this study acknowledged how their childless choice is a critical means of enhancing their sense of self-responsibility and independence in daily living. By declining to pursue parenthood, they have effectively eluded the power and influence of one of the most dominant discourses of our culture and thereby preserve a strong sense of independence in their daily lives. Ernst offered a metaphor to illustrate how he tries to live life as a series of conscious choices, among which he counted the childless choice as a key to preserving his independence and self-direction in living:

I think most people get into having children because they don't really know what they're getting into ... it's just something that happens to them. I am more of the type of person that usually tries to make a conscious decision. I try to look ahead in my life and think about where it's going and channel it, rather than just being in a boat swept down the river which is how with some of my friends I'd say that's the way it's gone with them. It's more like they're, they weren't making conscious decisions on some of the decisions in their life and they've been swept along by life. And you know, I'd rather row than just be swept along, pick a direction and at least try and get there. I mean, the current still does stuff with you but at least you feel like you're having some influence on which way you're going with things.

Autonomy was also apparent in the participants' implicit and explicit references to the personal power and control they feel has been granted them by their childless choice. When they declined to follow the traditional path of adulthood, the men and women of this study declared their separate selves and reserved the right to choose an alternate life path more consonant with their personal needs and goals. Roberta spoke of "getting off the conveyor belt" of womanhood that would lead her inevitably to motherhood. Anna explained how she sought to avoid the role expectations of motherhood that would pressure her "to perform a certain way." By choosing childlessness, Doll announced that she had retained her personal power to direct her life. She insisted that "I am the author of my own future" and, in reference to her childfree choice, emphasized how "freedom was so paramount to me, to be able to call my own shots." Almost all of the men echoed such comments about the imperative to run their own lives and the role they feel that childlessness takes in assuring them of such control. Mynh reflected on the paradox of control and independence that is inherent in his childless choice, including the ultimate statement of responsibility to himself:

...it's probably a little sad that I'm so wrapped up in myself and the fact that I have to have control and that I don't think I could have shared it with somebody. But you know what? I don't need to, having children doesn't necessarily have to define you, you don't have to... you can just be your own person, I've no responsibility to bring people into the world.

Mynh's reflection also alludes to the participants' active search for opportunities in daily living that help them realize their potential, and to become the persons they believe they were meant to be. Indeed, the conventions and demands of parenthood were decried by almost all the participants as misaligned with their sense of self and purpose in life. They believe the childless choice affords them the autonomy with which to pursue a life path using their own criteria for growth and change, independent of those promoted by our pronatal society for adulthood. Josh stated that his childless life was less a process of self-discovery than it was of "being myself," and Shadow emphasized that "I'm free to be who I want to be, it is my choice." Elsie's

reflections captured her gratitude that childlessness has allowed her to create herself in ways that she believes best fit with her true sense of self. With accountability only to herself rather than to a family with children, she seeks opportunities in life that will help her to realize her own talents and abilities:

It means for me I have been able to develop myself as a person, and be the kind of person that I want to be. I perceive that if I had children, I would not have had the freedom, the opportunity, the psychic, emotional or physical energy to be able to do that, because of the many demands that you automatically have. When you have a child you give over a lot of those things.

The men and women in this study also emphasized how their childless choice allows them to limit the scope of relationships to which they are immediately accountable in their daily lives. Without children and the social network of relationships accompanying parenthood, the participants expressed their appreciation for another dimension of autonomy - carefully defining the relationships in which they feel loyalty and obligation, or accountability. Mynh reflected on his limited capacity for loving others, and his choice to be accountable to only himself and his wife:

I'm definitely at the age where I don't want to have kids. Like, you know I'm 43, I do not want to go through diapers and that. I'm very satisfied in the relationship and I don't need to love anybody but her. I don't feel I have the capacity for it first of all, and I don't really want to share her with anyone else.

Phil and Fred similarly commented on the ease with which they live life with primary accountability to only their partners. In Phil's words:

I think that's one of the biggest advantages to it, you know, is the fact that you don't have to answer to anybody, assuming of course as a couple you can, that you're thinking along the same lines, and we do.

To summarize, the men and women in this study told stories celebrating their felt sense of freedom in daily living without children. That freedom emanates from the profound valuing that the participants place on autonomy, a way of being in the world that they believe allows for independence and self-sufficiency. The childless men and women in this study have assumed the

challenge of forging a course through adulthood without clearly visible markers or standards with which to define their life purpose and meaning. Indeed, they have declared a preference to tolerate the ambiguity of their autonomy rather than complying with the cultural expectations and accountability inherent in parenting roles.

The Responsible Life

The men and women of this study have strongly conveyed the meaning they derive in their daily lives from the freedom and autonomy inherent in the childless choice. They do not, however, appear to lead self-focused and self-indulgent lives. Rather, the participants in this study are challenged to determine a balance between the independence and self-accountability of their autonomous strivings, and their broader accountability to the cultural expectations of responsible adulthood. The flip side of freedom and autonomy for these couples, therefore, is the mandate of self-restraint. The childless men and women in this study conscientiously define the parameters and systems of accountability within which to live their lives with integrity. Like the other men in this study, Mynh lives outside the parameters of fatherhood, wherein his role performance would have been informed and judged by a powerful discourse of parenthood ideology. He summarized how the onus of living his life well is the fundamental task of his being, a task for which he feels he receives no guidance from familiar role scripts:

...when I was young I decided that I took into account that passing on my genes and influencing young lives, and I just thought to myself, you know what? Those are not really that important to me. I just want to kind of make something of one life. See if I can do that and, because I think so many people don't make the most of their own lives and don't make the most of their kids' lives. They end up, the whole thing just becomes a big failure and a waste of a life.

The men and women in this study described a variety of ways in which they sought to live a responsible life with accountability to the greater society in which they live. For example, many of the participants expressed responsibility to themselves and to others when they considered their reproductive options. These individuals recognized personal limits and

resistance to parenting that they believed would impinge on their capacity to parent. Elsie and Gord admitted to insufficient energy to keep up to the demands of childrearing, Angel admitted to a natural resistance to "the smelly mess of babies," Buffy frankly reported her disinterest in children's worlds, and Anna expressed her unwillingness to tolerate the anxiety inherent in parenting responsibilities. By declaring and accepting such personal limitations, these participants then endeavoured to seek out other options for adult living that would enhance their strengths while avoiding demands on their lesser resources. Ultimately, they sought to create an adult life in which they could perform to their maximum capacities.

The majority of participants in this study emphasized the imperative of making a contribution to society as the hallmark of a life well-lived. They described a rich array of ways in which they attempt to transcend the immediacy of relationships and routines in their daily life world by making conscientious efforts to positively affect the lives of others. Indeed, the men and women in this study firmly believe that how they live in the here-and-now constitutes their living legacy. Josh explained how his living legacy has emerged over years of teaching:

My legacy. I don't think it matters one way or another whether you have kids or don't have kids. I guess my legacy is just what kind of a person I've been in my life. Also my legacy is left in the fact that I've been a teacher for a lot of years. I've taught children and I've taught adults and teachers and hopefully I've done some good there and that would get passed on. But ya these things, little streams dry up as you go along and in a 1,000 years most of it or all of it, no matter who you are, I think is pretty meaningless.

Shadow similarly views his contributions to children and families as his living legacy. He is committed to "giving back" the gift of respect, love, and acceptance that was provided him by caring adults during his childhood and teen years. Shadow explained how, as a childless man, he is now enacting his deeply felt obligation to contribute to others' lives:

...by not having children I've learned that it's important for me because I have been successful and I am successful in what I do, to give some of that back to people, to give it back to kids so they get a chance to be who I think they want to be or who they want to be. But it's that freedom to say to them "you have some choices." So giving back is very much the importance of not taking for granted what I have, making certain that if I've

been given this opportunity and using it...it's a legacy that you get passed on to you, or somebody gets started, and my role is to continue to pass it on...

Other participants in the study also reflected on the importance of improving others' lives by trying to make a difference on a greater scale than that of their daily tasks. Elsie described her sense of obligation to meet others' needs through projects that extend the outcomes of her work to the larger social context:

...when I look at the kind of work I like to do, I like to do work whereby I feel like there is going to be a wide sphere of influence that I can have on making something better...How can I improve things and make it work better? What can I do to make the best of this situation?

Sharlene provided a similar example of giving to society on a level extending beyond that of her daily life world. She challenged herself to transform the personal tragedy of her sister's death into something of value for the greater good. Through volunteer work with the cancer agency she created an opportunity to enhance the lives of countless unknown others.

I was determined that I was going to help someone. If I could save someone's life by being a volunteer -- so I got very heavily involved in the cancer society...I know that I have made a difference. So I think at some point I will volunteer again.

Some participants referred to their "social" and "political" conscience as the critical sources of motivation for contributing to society. Anna indicated that she has a keen "social conscience" and that "if I'm not helping others I don't feel like I'm contributing." Marceline described her ongoing conflict with an auto manufacturer that she had taken public on the internet, an action she believes is a reflection of her efforts to live a principled life. And Ernst explained how his political conscience prompts him to attend political rallies, and to pay close attention to social issues that affect parents and non-parents alike:

Well, I care about the world I live in and future generations, even if the future generations aren't mine. I have these interesting conversations with guys at work sometimes because I say to them, "it's you that have the children and the world is changing in a way that's going to affect them. And you're sitting on your butt and you don't want to know about it. You'd rather watch Friends or Seinfeld than something educational and politically involved, or educating yourself politically and getting

involved politically. You're too tired, you don't have the time." I said "Here I am - no kids and I'm trying to save the world for you (laughter)."

Other participants gave themselves fully to the tasks of their careers, using their work to insure they make a meaningful contribution to society on a daily basis. Doll explained how a simple nursing task can make a profound contribution to a range of people beyond the recipient of her actions:

...motivating someone at work to get up and walk if they haven't walked in five days, right. In the report it says he has taken to his bed, but for some reason he responds to me. So it is my shift, I go on the floor and I get him to walk. To me that's contributing. That's contributing to someone's well being. To the nursing team. (Yes.) And how his family, they are so glad. You get the kudos. So that's contributing.

Marceline related that as a kindergarten teacher she has made a significant contribution to society because she has "... touched all those lives," a sentiment echoed by the other teachers in this study. Fred also confirmed that he creates meaning in his life largely through the contribution he makes to society as a teacher: "It's what you do for other people, how you help other people and we get that through the kids...and in that way to society."

The men and women of this study also demonstrated accountability in their daily lives by undertaking a broad range of roles in which they could affect children's lives as non-parents. None of the participants expressed a dislike for children or a desire to avoid involvement in the lives of the next generation. As teachers, counsellors, social workers, coaches, aunts and uncles, and caring neighbours, the men and women in this study demonstrated their interest and concern for the needs of children and the society in which they grow and develop. At the opposite end of the life spectrum, the participants also told stories of their commitments to caring for their aging parents. Roberta, Sharlene, and Brett were committed to caring for their aging parents, and Josh reflected on his growing attention to his elderly father. A picture emerged from the participants' life stories that portrayed their caring and compassion for all generations, testimony to their keen attunement to the world in which they live highly responsible lives.

Finally, some of the participants in this study stepped outside the realm of human connections to declare that caring for the environment and for animals are important expressions of human responsibility. Angel has dedicated her life to the welfare of animals and considers her legacy in terms of the number of animals she has saved, and the opportunity to provide her time and money to support their needs in her local community. Several participants suggested that their childlessness has provided a small bit of relief from the demands placed on the environment by an exploding population.

Overall, the men and women in this study provided rich accounts of how they derive meaning in their childfree lives. They described numerous ways by which they live with integrity and a felt sense of responsibility towards others, the environment, and animals. In the absence of cultural guidelines that clearly prescribe and reward the achievements of parenthood, the childless couples in this study seek alternate means of declaring accountability and responsibility to society – opportunities that imbue their lives with meaning. The participants' self-reflections suggest that they believe they have succeeded in meeting and exceeding social standards of responsible living. With the flexibility and autonomy afforded them by their childless choice, they utilize time and tasks in their work and personal lives to enact their genuine feelings of commitment and caring to the world around them. Across a range of non-parenting roles, through paid and unpaid work, and with a heart-felt desire to better the lives of others, the childless couples in this study continue to demonstrate their will to live responsibly, and thus, to derive meaning from their childfree lives.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to review the results of this inquiry in relation to the diverse literature concerning voluntary childlessness, and to counselling practice and future research. I will open with a restatement of the purpose of the present study, followed by a discussion of the theoretical implications of the study's findings. Implications for counselling practice are then explored, followed by a review of the limitations of the study. Comments are also offered regarding the unresolved linguistic challenges of studying the lived experience of voluntary childlessness. Finally, the chapter concludes with suggestions for future research to further illuminate our understanding of how adults construct their lives without children.

Restatement of the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to reveal the meaning and the lived experience of voluntarily childlessness among spouses and couples in contemporary times. This phenomenological inquiry asked: "What is the meaning and experience of voluntary childlessness, for married heterosexual adults, individually and as a couple?"

The study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological method to explore the lived experiences of eight childfree couples, and to seek out the underlying meaning-structures around which these adults have come to understand and live their childless lives.

Theoretical Implications

The following discussion relates the findings of this study to those of previous studies of voluntary childlessness. I present this material by collating the findings into three segments: descriptive themes derived from exploration of the lived existentials, and the meta-themes of meaning. I then review the contributions of this study's findings to prominent theories of adult development.

Descriptive Themes

This study's exploration of the daily lives of childfree men and women revealed descriptive themes across the four existentials of lived body, lived relationship, lived space, and lived time. These themes provide insights into the similarities and differences reported by spouses in their respective experiences of daily life without children. These themes also augment and in some cases contradict, the findings of published studies on the childfree.

Lived body. With respect to their physical or bodily selves, the men and women in this study reported different experiences of being childless by choice. The women participants reported a conscious awareness of not fulfilling their biological potential to reproduce, largely because childbearing felt unnatural. They also reflected on the effects of time on their reproductive options. There are several references in the literature to similar physical experiences of childlessness for women. For example, Lisle (1996) highlighted unique challenges that the body poses to women without children, such as feeling grief for the unused biological potential of reproduction. And Morell (1994) reported that many of the 34 childless women in her study had never felt that pregnancy and childbirth were a 'natural' expression of their bodily selves. In the present study, the notion of a biological clock was affirmed by many but not all of the women. Again, researchers like Morell and Lisle have observed that there is variability among childfree women in awareness of a 'biological clock'. The women in this study also reported that they had not experienced a compelling 'maternal instinct' to bear children, a result that supports other research findings that there is "no gene for motherhood; no universal instinct" (Safer, 1996, p. 154).

Contrary to findings reported by other researchers and writers exploring the lives of voluntarily childless women (e.g., Ireland, 1993; Lisle, 1996; Safer, 1996), the three 50-plus women in the present study did not report menopause as a particularly salient time of reflection upon their childless choice. Lisle suggested that menopause was especially symbolic of

childlessness among women who are reluctantly childless - those who still experienced dissonance about their choice as they entered their fifties. In the present study, however, almost all of the women had made early, spontaneous choices to decline motherhood. The remaining others had made careful choices with which they were fully satisfied. Possibly their early confidence in the childless choice off-set any tendency to intensely reflect on their childlessness during the menopausal years. Rather, the women appear to have been more inclined to revisit their childlessness in their forties – a time in which the window slowly closes on the option to reverse the childless choice. This finding is consistent with that reported by Fisher (1992), who similarly suggested that childless women in their mid-forties may feel several dimensions of sadness, particularly for things still missing in their lives and choices made that denied other options in living. Most of the women in the current study explained their reflections on childlessness during their forties as responses to the 'now-or-never' pressure of decreasing fertility. Interestingly, Morell (1994) reported that only one of her 34 respondents had wrestled with a last-minute review of her childless choice. It appears that childless women may vary considerably as to the age when they are more inclined to reflect on their childless choice, ranging from the forties through to their menopausal years.

Taken together, the findings of the present study generally affirm the reports of feminist writers and researchers that childfree women retain a sense of a maternal physical self throughout much of their lives (e.g., Ireland, 1993; Lisle, 1996). For the women in this study who spoke of their maternal bodies, their reflections appeared to confirm Lisle's observation that women's experience of femininity need not involve pregnancy and childbearing. Rather, she suggested that what is important for instilling a sense of femininity is recognizing and valuing the procreative potential of the female body. Possibly some of the women in this study had intuitively discovered this means of experiencing a feminine self when they reflected on their unused potential to bear children or when they revisited their childless choice.

In contrast, the men in this study did not report any prominent themes of physical experiences in relation to their childless choice. This finding is consistent with assumptions throughout the literature on childlessness that men's bodies and lives are not primarily defined by conception and child-rearing (e.g., Gergen, 1990; Ireland, 1993). There is no suggestion in the literature of a "paternal urge" to complement the notion of a "maternal" or "biological" urge felt by women to become mothers. Indeed, some feminist writers conclude (e.g., Miall, 1994) that motherhood is considered by most to be biologically based, while fatherhood requires learning. Moreover, men's lifespan and timetable for realizing personal potential appears not to be attuned to a biological clock or family life. Rather, men's development across the lifespan is more oriented to opportunities and obligations encountered in the public sphere (Neugarten, 1969).

Lived relationship. The participants in this study reflected on a variety of relationships in their daily life worlds. A prominent theme depicted how they developed meaningful and satisfying relationships with children. The assumption that non-mothers can readily enter into and share children's worlds is well-documented in the childless literature (e.g., Morrell, 1994). Indeed, childless women in previous historical times were highly valued as social mothers (Lisle, 1996; Tyler-May, 1995). Writers have also observed that there is an ongoing social need for childless women to extend themselves to children, particularly those children who are inadequately parented (Fisher, 1992; Lisle). Fisher proposed that we can view mothering and childlessness as a continuum, and encourage childless women to situate themselves on that continuum according to their emotional and physical relations to children. Similarly, Letherby (2002) emphasized the significance of childless women assuming roles in which they can parent socially instead of biologically.

The results of this study extend the notion of women as social mothers to include men who express their desire to create meaningful relationships with children. Almost all the men in the study reported extensive and rewarding contact with children either currently or historically,

across work, family, and community roles. And none of the men expressed a dislike for children, a finding that contradicts earlier research reports that this is a common motivation for the childless choice among men (Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1980). According to Fisher (1992), the continuum image of mothering allows both women and men to assume a range of roles in children's lives, as either social or biological parents. The men in this study demonstrated their capacity to undertake a variety of roles in children's lives through which they could 'parent' and care for the next generation.

The men and women added a caveat to the pleasure they experienced in their relationships with children. All the participants emphasized that the childless choice assured them control over their contact with children, a condition that protects their sense of personal freedom and allows them to avoid the worries and obligations of more parent-like role demands. When they perceived adequate control in their relationships with children, all the participants felt free to make ongoing and significant commitments to children's lives.

The results of this study also featured participants' emphasis on the space they created in their lives for animals. The women in particular described the importance of caring for pets as a means of expressing a maternal urge. There are few discussions in the literature about childless adults and their pets. Lisle (1996) and Morrell (1994) noted that childless women may joke about their pets being child-like, but that love for animals is not compensatory for the absence of offspring in their lives. The assumption that animals become child-substitutes for the childless is doubtless an expression of the negative discourse of childlessness in our culture. Rather, the bonds between childless adults and their pets is valued simply for what it is – a source of ongoing happiness and pleasure in daily living. Veevers (1980) similarly notes the social stereotype of childless adults' inordinate fondness for their pets, and the assumption that pets are used as child-substitutes. Among her research participants, few confirmed that their animals were

child surrogates. Veevers concluded that like any other healthy adults, the childless by choice appreciate their animals as outlets for affection and sources of companionship.

With respect to friendships, the findings of this study suggest that childless women more than childless men experience trying times in their friendships with parenting peers. This finding has been widely reported as a common experience among intentionally childless women (e.g., Lisle, 1996; Morell, 1994). Some of the women in this study described growing estrangement from mothering peers, due to the time constraints faced by mothers and to diminishing common interests. They also reported how they subtly imposed limits on "mother talk", or insisted on exclusive time together with mothering friends. These efforts to manage friendships in efforts to preserve intimacy have not been widely reported in the literature. Rather, Morell described "friendship wedges" (p. 127) of limited time and diminishing common interests that create space between mothering and non-mothering women. However, it is important to note that not all the women in this study conveyed experiences of distance and disappointment in their friendships with mothers. It appears that some women may be more vulnerable to such shifts in friendships, for a variety of possible reasons that have not been fully explored in the literature on childlessness. For example, it is possible that history of friendship intimacy, types of shared interests, ages of children, strength of marital ties, size of friendship network, and general interest or attraction to children may be factors that influence the perceptions and experiences of friendships for childless women with their mothering friends.

On the other hand, the men in this study did not report feeling emotional distance in relationships with their fathering peers. Rather, they referred only to their friends' limited time as the primary obstacle to their ongoing friendships. This finding is not surprising and is consistent with research suggesting that men's adult identity is not heavily derived from their reproductive status (e.g., Gergen, 1990). Men's social contacts and interests may be less child-oriented, and

social interactions can be filled with conversation and shared pastimes that allow for less frequent, but continually satisfying friendships between fathers and non-fathers (Ireland, 1993).

The overall findings in this study regarding friendships of childless men and women are somewhat contrary to cautions expressed by writers who claim that the intentionally childless are at significant risk of losing friendships (e.g., LaFayette, 1995; Lisle, 1996). LaFayette concluded that childfree adults must make concerted efforts to develop relationships with other childless couples. Without these connections, she warned that childless couples will be at risk of social isolation in the larger collective of parenting adults. Lisle similarly assumed that childless women typically lose friendships with mothering peers, simply because of divergent interests and the inability to know one another's life experiences. However, the men and women in this study explained that their childlessness has not generally interfered with or patterned their choice of friendships. Rather, they demonstrated an open and accepting attitude towards friends with children, and some affirmed a small group of similarly childfree adults with whom they also socialized. They described friendships with adults who have not yet had children, and those whose children had grown. This finding suggests that perhaps childless men and women are less at risk of social isolation and loss of friendships than is reflected by the literature. On the other hand, it is possible that the sample in the present study comprised a unique group of individuals who were generally at reduced risk of incurring social losses. Future research that incorporates larger samples of childless adults may help to elaborate on the discrepancy between the above finding in this study, and those in the literature on childlessness (e.g., LaFayette).

Both the men and the women in this study reported awareness of their minority status as non-parents in an adult milieu of parents. However, they were almost unanimous in emphasizing that they feel fully ensconced in mainstream culture of adulthood – in work, community, friendships, interests, and activities. All but one participant denied feeling socially isolated, marginalized, or peripheral to the larger collective of parenting peers. This finding contradicts

several reports and assumptions in the literature that childless adults – particularly women – are vulnerable to experiencing a sense of social isolation and marginalization (e.g., Daniluk, 1999; Lafayette, 1995; Morrell, 1994; Veevers, 1980). Rather, most of the men and women in this study described brief and infrequent experiences of feeling separate from, or peripheral to social interactions with parents. In these instances they were cast into the role of "other" within the larger collective of parents (Daniluk, Gillespie, 2000), and rendered momentarily silent in conversations concerned with children and parenting. However, the rarity of such experiences and the number of participants who altogether denied any awareness of "othering," suggest that fewer intentionally childless individuals may feel marginalized as members of a minority group than presumed by reports in the literature.

The participants in this study described vibrant relationships in professional, creative, academic, work, and other communities. They often sought membership in groups wherein their childless choice was an irrelevant criteria for belonging. These groups may form what Housknecht (1977) called "reference" groups, alternative collectives to the majority group of parents where the intentionally childless are validated for a range of attributes other than parenthood. Fisher's (1992) observations of the childfree extend Houseknecht's notions of alternate reference groups. She suggested that non-parents lack a strong sense of membership in their minority collective, and that there is no common activity or language such as those inherent in parenthood. Many participants in the present study confirmed that they knew almost no other childfree adults, but few expressed interest in joining a social organization of childless adults. The adults in this study thus confirmed other observations in the literature that childless adults do not tend to seek out members of their childless collective to assuage any sense of social isolation or minority status. Rather, they appeared to live comfortably in mainstream society and associated with groups in which their reproductive status was unimportant.

Lived time. This study also reported descriptive themes arising from participants' reflections on lived time. Perhaps the most resounding finding was their appreciation of the freedom and spontaneity with which they lived their childfree lives. This finding has been widely reported across many studies of childless women, couples, and men (e.g., Burgwyn, 1981; Houseknecht, 1987; Lunneborg, 1999; Veevers, 1980). The men and women of this study also told stories that reflected their strong orientation to the present. Their inclination to live fully in the moment, without dwelling on the past or worrying excessively about the future comprises another finding pertaining to lived time. Moreover, the participants reported the personal significance of taking time for themselves, separate from time spent with their spouses or others. The women in particular emphasized the absolute imperative of taking private time devoted only to meeting their needs for peace and quiet. Lunneborg (1999) reported that the 30 men in her study similarly valued their privacy and time for themselves. The literature on childless women has not reported findings that distinguish the value of personal time from more general commentaries about spontaneity and flexibility in the childfree lifestyle. However, several research studies report that childfree women seek challenging careers and pursue demanding goals of self-development (e.g., Veevers, 1980; Lisle, 1996). The finding that these childless women carefully guarded their private time may be a general reflection of their need for quiet time, solitary moments in which to restore their energy and to rest from the demands of their work lives and creative pursuits.

The findings of this study also revealed participants' awareness of unknowable time, both past and future. Almost all the men and women confirmed that they had pondered their unlived lives as parents. These participants explained that such moments were accompanied by feelings of wistfulness, melancholy, and sometimes sadness for opportunity missed. These instances of wondering are well-described in the literature on childless women (e.g., Bartlett, 1994; Burgwyn, 1981; Lisle, 1996; Morell, 2000, 1994) as unexpected and short-lived disturbances in women's

satisfaction with the childless choice. Morell referred to these moments as "wavering no's", when the appeal of motherhood challenged women's convictions that the childless choice was right for them. Importantly, the men and women in this study confirmed findings in the literature (e.g., Bartlett; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994) that these moments did not induce any feelings of regret or other distress. Indeed, the respondents in this study emphatically insisted that they experienced the childless choice as relief from the role demands of parenthood that they perceived as constraining and demanding. They echoed Morell's observation that the childless choice thus became the "saving no", a critical life choice that ensured opportunities to create the self and one's life as desired. Importantly, the findings of the present study strongly suggest that childless men are no less inclined than their wives to ponder their unlived lives as fathers. The men in this study reported numerous experiences in which they contemplated the road not taken, and confirmed these moments did not induce prolonged emotional distress. Rather, they valued their choice as the "saving no," a fundamental life choice that allowed them to explore alternative, desirable life opportunities.

The participants in this study also described their unease about the future of aging without children, albeit with varying degrees of anxiety and fear. Their concerns tended to focus on the potential for loneliness and unhappiness in old age, a finding that has been previously reported in the literature on childless adults (e.g., Lisle, 1996; Safer, 1996; Veevers, 1980). The men and women of this study also expressed disbelief that having children would have resolved concerns about their unknowable future. Again, other childless adults have reported similar skepticism that having children does not guarantee a trouble-free future (e.g., Lisle, 1996). Moreover, the participants did not anticipate regretting their childlessness in later life. Indeed, much of the literature exploring childlessness and aging has found that the childless elderly experience levels of well-being that equal and sometimes exceed those of elderly parents (Rempel, 1985), and that the rewards of childlessness (e.g., personal freedom/privacy; less

responsibility, worry, stress) are still highly valued among elderly women (Houser, Berckman, & Beckman, 1984). Still other researchers have reported that common cultural beliefs linking childlessness with late life unhappiness are not supported empirically (e.g., Koropecykj-Cox, 1998). Rather, marital status is an influential factor which may shape late life regrets about the childless choice (e.g., divorce, widowhood). However, one research study determined that pressures and stigma of this culture's strongly pronatal discourse – and marginalization in particular, were linked to intermittent experiences of late life regret for childless women (Alexander, Rubinstein, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1992). It appears that the degree to which women, and possibly men, are able to diffuse or reject negative discourse about their childless choice may forecast their future regrets for eschewing parenthood. Overall, however, the results of the present study are well-aligned with research findings that the aging childless do not feel regret for their reproductive choice. It appears that if the childless feel no regret for their reproductive choice in mid-life, they are unlikely to feel significant regret in their later years.

Lived space. The participants' life stories implied that they occupied two dimensions of space in their daily lives: physical and psychological. With respect to physical space, the significance of home emerged in descriptions as both a refuge from busy career and social lives, as well as a container for exploring interests and creating projects. The men in particular expressed their pleasure in home space as a place to engage in large projects, while several of the women described their homes as extensions of their aesthetic sensibilities. Similar findings have not been described in the literature on voluntary childlessness. Only Lunneborg's (1999) investigation into the lives of childfree men suggested that home was a space of personal relevance. Among her sample of 35 men, she discerned a common theme among some and called them "homebodies," or men who enjoyed and preferred home space as familiar environs in which to express their creative potential and spend their free time. Possibly home space has simply been viewed by researchers as an incidental environment in which childfree couples live

a portion of their lives. Nonetheless, van Manen (1990) emphasizes that home is a fundamental space to which all persons are naturally drawn both physically and emotionally, space in which we can simply "be" who we are. The findings from this study support van Manen's description of home space, suggesting that home space met important personal and shared marital needs in the daily lives of these childless couples.

Physical space was also described by the participants in terms of worldly space. The majority of the men and women in this study emphasized the importance of travel in their lives, opportunities to move from the familiar environs of their homes and communities to explore new places and cultures. These individuals actively sought to project themselves into the world, and to feel part of the larger collective of humanity. Interestingly, some of the women in this study expressed appreciation of travel as a means of nurturing their marital bond, a finding that did not emerge in the men's references to travel. There are no specific references to the significance of travel in the lives of childfree couples in published studies of childlessness. Rather, travel may be an example of how couples enjoy the freedom and spontaneity that they typically rank as the most valued of their lifestyle attributes (e.g., Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1980).

A third facet of physical space was described most often by the men in this study, that of natural outdoor space which they valued for the peace and beauty of mother nature. The men's appreciation for nature echoed the findings in Bram's (1989) study of four childless couples whose daily lives were organized around four dominant themes. One of those themes was "love of nature and active lifestyles." The current findings suggested that the women participants in this study were not equally drawn to spend time in outdoor space, although some of the women's passion for gardening may imply a similar attraction to nature on a smaller scale.

The participants also alluded to psychological or invisible space within themselves, inner space of vitality and a passion for learning. The men and women in this study directed this life energy to pursuing a rich array of goals and activities through which they actively sought to

develop themselves – spiritually, intellectually, interpersonally, and creatively. The extant literature on childlessness has referred to similar findings as the quest for self-actualization or personal growth (e.g., Bartlett, 1994; Bram, 1989; LaFayette, 1995; Lunneborg, 1999). With respect to the women participants in the present study, the theme of self-development fits well with Ireland's (1993) suggestion that childless women can convert their metaphorical "absence" of non-motherhood to a space from which all manner of creative endeavours can emerge.

Lunneborg's interviews with childless men revealed that her participants similarly valued opportunities for realizing their talents and abilities, and for pursuing interests outside the role obligations and prescribed tasks of parenthood. Indeed, the participants in the present study lived their lives in ways that demonstrated how "it was the events of adulthood, not necessarily family life, that stimulated self-actualization" (Rowland in Lisle, 1996, p. 230). Connidis and McMullin (1993) similarly inferred from their research with older adults that the childless by choice achieve mastery over their lives by creating life projects that are fulfilling and rewarding. Hence findings of the present study support a growing body of research suggesting that the intentionally childless transcend the traditional linkage between parenthood and self-actualization, by assuming tasks and roles outside the parameters of parenthood.

A second invisible space was also named among the findings of this study, that is, self-conscious space. In the course of ordinary daily living, almost all of the participants affirmed that they were not consciously aware of their childlessness, a common finding reported in the literature (e.g., Lisle, 1996; Lunneborg, 1999). Occasionally, however, circumstances arose in social interactions that moved some of the participants into self-conscious space wherein they were suddenly aware of the differences between themselves and the parents in their immediate milieu. This experience of self-conscious space has been alluded to in published studies of childlessness, most often in reference to how childless adults may perceive and respond to negative social judgments of their reproductive choice (e.g., Gillespie, 2000; Veevers, 1980).

Importantly, the findings of this study revealed that these childless adults rarely felt ill-at-ease about their childlessness regardless of events in their social environment. For those who did experience self-consciousness, those moments were fleeting and superficial, and did not elicit distress or upset. These observations support Marshall's (1993) contention that childless couples recognize and value the parenthood ideology and pronatal discourse of Western culture, but they do not allow these values and beliefs to dominate their conscious awareness of themselves and how they live their lives.

In conclusion, the descriptive themes that emerged from this study largely affirm those reported in the extant literature on childlessness. Importantly, some of the findings from the present study suggest that many of the well-documented descriptions of women's experiences in daily living without children also apply to childless men (e.g., the "waving-no's" and "saving-no's," occasional experiences of "othering," desire for contact with children). The realization that childless men and women may share many experiences and construct their lives according to similar values and needs comprises a significant contribution to the literature on voluntary childlessness. In particular, this insight challenges many postulations in the theoretical and research-based discussions that childless women face more negative challenges than men in creating an adult identity because of strongly negative discourses of childlessness (Bartlett, 1994; Gergen, 1990; Gillespie, 2000; Ireland, 1993).

This study also sought to explore how couples co-created the meaning of childlessness. In conjoint interviews couples were invited to provide accounts of their marriages and daily lives without children across the domains of the four lived existentials. The couples' descriptions of childlessness did not yield descriptive themes that differed noticeably from those presented during individual spousal interviews. This finding of congruence between couples' and spouses' thematic material contrasted significantly with my preconception that couples are tasked with creating shared meanings of childlessness that differ from individual spousal meanings. My

assumptions were derived from repeated assertions in the scholarly and popular literature that there are significant gender differences in cultural discourses of childlessness, and that men and women therefore have very different lived experiences of voluntary childlessness (e.g., Gergen, 1990; Ireland, 1993; Lunneborg, 1999). I presumed that those purported gender differences would emerge over the course of the marital relationship and induce couples to create meaning of their childlessness as they experienced it together rather than separately.

There are a few plausible explanations why couples' co-creation of meanings of childlessness was not apparent in this study. For example, I chose not to invite couples to reflect upon any gender differences that emerged from descriptions of the childless choice in spousal interviews. Although such a discussion about gender differences might have elicited couples' joint meaning-making processes (e.g., exploration and negotiation of differences), my goal was to provide a fresh opportunity for couples to explore their shared lived experiences that was untainted by references to the spousal interviews. I thereby hoped to solicit couples' spontaneous accounts of married life without children, stories that reflected their shared experiences and exemplified how they co-create meaning of their childlessness. I also did not invite couples' reflections on comments that individual spouses had made during their respective interviews, in order to honour participants' need for confidentiality regarding disclosures they had made about themselves and their marriages.

I also noticed that during the marital interviews spouses tended to affirm each other's individual comments, opinions, and observations. Any comments of difference were swiftly dismissed as minor points of amusing curiosity and were not elaborated as points of dissention or relevance to how they viewed childlessness as a couple. The harmonious exchange of ideas between the spouses suggested that their respective individual views of childlessness are very similar. Without significant differences in their views, these husbands and wives were probably not compelled to engage in any joint meaning-making processes during our interviews. It is also

possible that their individual accounts of childlessness contained co-created meanings that have evolved over the course of their married lives, making it difficult to distinguish between spousal and joint meanings of childlessness.

It is also notable that more than half of the couples in this study admitted that they had not made more than passing comments to one another about their childlessness during the course of their marriage. Indeed, the majority of these couples did not recall having any in-depth discussions about their childlessness. Even among those couples who undertook a deliberate and shared decision-making process that resulted in the childless choice, none had since revisited their choice for discussion. It seems therefore, that the conjoint research interview may have presented a highly unusual situation, an invitation for these couples to explore in-depth their shared lived experiences of voluntary childlessness for perhaps the first time.

Finally, the design of the study may have limited my opportunities to uncover shared meanings of childlessness. In particular, each of the spouses appeared to fully disclose their experiences of childlessness during the individual interviews and therefore may have had no additional insights to contribute for exploration during the marital interviews.

Meta-themes of Meaning

Much of the literature on voluntary childlessness describes the social meaning of childlessness as it is conferred on non-parents by a strongly pronatal cultural discourse (e.g., Lisle, 1996; Veevers, 1980; Wager, 2000). Some researchers (e.g., Marshall, 1993; Morell, 1994) suggest that social discourse frames personal meaning-making of childlessness, a process that reflects the embeddedness of all humans in the larger social and cultural milieu. However, a key finding of the present study suggests that for some voluntarily childless couples there may be only nominal personal meaning ascribed to intentional childlessness. In effect, the participants in this study elaborated on their lived experiences of childlessness as either implicit or explicit attributions to, or outcomes of the childless choice. In other words, they inferred more meaning

from the qualities or characteristics of life *because* they are childless, than from a more pure sense of the condition of not having children.

There are a few plausible explanations for the unexpected way in which the participants in this study appeared to derive meaning from their childless lives, that is, through attributions to their childlessness. First, they may have struggled to reflect on childlessness as something that is described in terms of 'absence' or a state of 'not-having' something. It may well be difficult to attribute meaning to a condition that is language as an emptiness or void. This linguistic conundrum is well-described in the extant literature on childlessness (e.g., Bartlett, 1994; Ireland, 1993; Morrell, 1994), in that we have a meagre language of deficiency or "less-ness" with which to frame our discussions of living 'without' children. Moreover, in her treatise on childless women, Lisle (1996) points out that there are no precise phrases or words to describe childlessness without reference to the opposite state of parenthood. Words such as non-mothers, other-than-mother, not-mother, and non-parents designate the lives and identities of the childless. Hence the reference point for meaning-making and descriptions of lived experience exists *outside or opposite* the lived experiences of childless adults, rather than within.

A third factor may also have confounded participants' efforts to reveal underlying meaning-structures of their childless lives. That is, the adults in this study do not appear to occupy roles with life scripts of purpose and meaning according to which they can chart their life course (Ireland, 1993; Lisle, 1996). Without role definitions that validate and distinguish childless adults from their parenting peers, childless men and women are tasked with independently creating meaningful lives. This task becomes a highly individualistic and private endeavour that is not witnessed by a strong or visible collective of similarly childless adults. Nor are these individuals rewarded by the larger collective of adults for pursuit of goals that are not child-centred. In short, expressing meaning-making processes that occur within a very personal realm may be inhibited by the formal inquiry of a research study.

Few published studies have attempted to discern the personal meanings ascribed to childlessness. Most have instead inferred personal meaning from discussions of the prevailing negative discourse on voluntary childlessness and from descriptions of the lifestyles of childless adults (e.g., Bartlett, 1994; Bram, 1989; Lisle, 1996; Lunneborg, 1999). In the present study I undertook to specifically seek out the underlying meaning-structures of childlessness. Despite the above-described challenges to articulating and discerning the meaning of childlessness, this study presents two meaning-themes that were interwoven throughout the participants' descriptions of their daily lives.

The first meaning-theme reflected participants' valuing of autonomy and personal choice, the fundamental tenets that they expressed as the freedom to construct and live their lives as they desired. The theme of freedom as a highly valued attribute of childfree living is well-documented in the literature on intentional childlessness (e.g., Houseknecht, 1987; Lunneborg, 1999; Veevers, 1980). Morrell (1994) aptly summarized the experience of freedom enjoyed by childless women as:

...the 'freedom from' worries and responsibilities of motherhood, and the 'freedom to' develop creative and meaningful work lives, to enjoy private and privacy, and to live with choices. (p. 134)

However, published studies on the childless choice have not fully explored *why* freedom is meaningful to childless adults. Some researchers and writers (e.g., Ireland, 1993; Lisle, 1996) have alluded to the significance of autonomy in childless women's lives. Lisle suggested that she and other childless women retain "the ability to direct her time, mind, and energy" (p.xii), a critical dimension of life without children. And Ireland described women who deliberately chose childlessness as having organized their identities around autonomy (p.70). The findings of the present study affirm that freedom is indeed an expression of autonomous strivings, personal efforts to realize one's potential in life and to maintain a strong sense of self-governance and self-accountability for all choices in daily living. Moreover, it appears that the desire for

autonomy both motivates the childless choice, and characterizes how childless adults construct meaningful lives. Autonomy was thus highlighted in this study as a critical dimension of meaning-making in the lives of these intentionally childless women and men.

The second meta-theme reported in this study reflects the participants' drive to live a responsible life. This drive is the mirror reflection of freedom and autonomy in living, the mandatory task of defining activities of responsible living outside the parameters of parenthood. Some participants achieved this goal by demonstrating a powerful social conscience, with many referring to their efforts to "give back" to society – adults and children alike – their knowledge, experience, and compassion. Other participants chose to care for animals and the environment, confirming some references in the published literature that "life-affirming" pursuits are as significant as "life-giving" tasks such as parenthood (Lisle, 1996; Lunneborg, 1999).

The meta-theme of living a responsible life of integrity and caring comprises an important contribution to the literature on childlessness. Previous accounts and research findings have not attempted to explain how the childfree negotiate the dialectic between freedom and the imperative of demonstrating to society that they are living responsible lives of value to the world around them. Rather, some of the literature identifies volunteer work and philanthropic activities as valued aspects of the childless lifestyle (Lunneborg, 1999; Veevers, 1980). Through the actions of responsible living, and in particular by making contributions to others, the childless adults in this study assumed a valued place in society. Their responsible lives certainly challenged the negative stereotypes of childless adults as selfish and self-centred, lazy, and less mature than their parenting peers (Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995).

Theories of Adult Development

The men and women of this study ranged in age from 40 to 62, thus representing the period of mid-life as it is commonly defined by psychological theories of adult development (Lachman, 2004). The core issues concerning adults in this life phase center around generativity,

caring, and concern for others, across domains of work, family, and community living (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Erikson's (1997) stage model of adult development identified the crisis inherent in middle age – the seventh of eight life stages - as that of generativity versus stagnation. This crisis is successfully resolved through tasks of producing and guiding the next generation, including mentoring or transmitting values to young people. Erikson acknowledged that generativity can be expressed through contributions to the larger culture or society, through productivity and creativity across many life domains. Levinson (1996) also viewed the mid-life transition as a period of generational awareness. Maslow's theory of self-actualization is similar to Erikson's stage model, as both described a mid-life shift from awareness and concern for the self, to focus on the needs of others (Slater, 2003). Neugarten's work highlights mid-life as a time of peak functioning, commitment and responsibilities to self and to others, and psychosocial competence (Neugarten & Datan, 1974). Other theorists have concluded that a sense of control is an important component of health and well-being in mid-life (Lachman).

The current study offers an important contribution to the traditional theories of adult development because they tend to portray mid-life as the time to fulfill parenthood roles and career goals (e.g., Erikson, 1997; Levinson, 1978). In particular, generativity is strongly associated with parenting and caring for the next generation. Although Erikson referred to exceptional individuals whose talents allow them to contribute to society through non-parenting roles, his theory "leaves little room for the ordinary, nonpathological childfree person..." (Lisle, p. 232). Lachman (2004) further emphasized that established psychological theories of adult development do not reflect a range of individual differences that might influence adult development, such as personality, marital status, culture, race, or ethnicity.

The present study elaborates on established theories of adult development by offering insights into the experiences of non-parents. Importantly, the findings from this study strongly resonate with the above-described characteristics of mid-life: generativity, shifting orientation

away from self towards others, and demonstration of increased control and mastery over one's life. The participants in this study articulated generative strivings variably, by "giving back" or "making a contribution" directly to the next generation, by caring for the environment and for animals, and by living according to a "social conscience." Similarly, the autonomy and self-accountability with which the participants pursued meaningful life goals aligns closely with theoretical assumptions that all middle-aged adults, regardless of their parental status, seek mastery and control in their lives. Indeed, in the absence of a clearly defined role as non-parent and an accompanying script of meaning-making tasks, the participants in this study emphasized the imperative of self-governance and responsibility for constructing a meaningful life. Moreover, among these adults, the foundations for constructing a meaningful life appear to be the desires, intentions, and goals which traditional theories have long associated with middle-aged parents. Although childless adults do not undertake parenthood, the results from this study imply that they seek similar experiences of gratification and meaning in life, that is, tasks of generativity and autonomy in living their lives.

Implications for Counselling

The findings of this study comprise important insights into how couples construct meaningful lives without children. These insights were gleaned from the participants' reports of satisfaction with the childless choice, in addition to their unanimous affirmation that childless marriages and lifestyles can be fulfilling and rewarding. Counsellors may find the results of this study relevant to a variety of clients, including clients wishing to explore childlessness as a life choice, or those requesting support to address issues that have arisen as a result of their childless choice (e.g., spousal conflict, family estrangement). In addition, clients who cannot successfully pursue their goals of parenthood and who are subsequently challenged to reorient themselves to a childless future, may benefit from the insights derived from this study. In their broadest application, the results of this study will inform counsellors of some aspects of voluntary

childlessness (e.g., friendship patterns, experiences of pronatal discourse, reflections on the future) - the alternate, less traveled path of adulthood about which we currently know relatively little. They can utilize this information to not only help clients, but to challenge their own biases and responses to the dominant cultural discourse of pronatalism (Daniluk, 1999). Indeed, if a counsellor believes that adults can only live fulfilled, meaningful lives by having children, they ought to refer couples dealing with the childless choice to another professional who can support childlessness as a viable life choice.

The following discussion focuses on the key findings of the study, inviting counsellors to consider individual, marital, and social factors that together constitute the complexity of the childless choice, and that suggest how childless couples might be assisted in creating meaningful lives.

A primary finding of the study is that neither the childless choice or the 'state' or 'condition' of living without children imbued the participants' lives with a compelling sense of meaning or purpose. Rather, meaning-making occurred in the experience of *how* these childfree couples lived their lives, that is, as expressions of their underlying values. The childless choice reflected personal, treasured ideals that guided these adults in living meaningful and fulfilling lives without children. In particular, the participants' accounts of daily living underscored the fundamental values of autonomy and of living a life of responsibility and integrity. For clients who seek counselling to explore voluntary childlessness as a life option, it behooves counsellors to convey that the childless choice is a value-laden choice.

In recognizing that the childless choice is primarily an expression of personal values, counsellors might undertake to help clients explore and clarify their most esteemed values, and to link those values to clients' visions of life without children. The extent to which clients anticipate sacrifice or compromise of heartfelt values and ideals by choosing parenthood could provide important clues that the childless choice may more aptly reflect their core values than a

life of parenthood. Indeed, the participants in this study indicated that their satisfaction with the childless choice was largely the result of having sought and achieved congruence between their values and self-concepts, and the opportunities to enact those values in daily life as non-parents. Most of the men and women in this study cherished the many ways in which their childless choice allowed them to pursue their autonomous strivings, and to make contributions to their lives and social worlds.

Counsellors might further help clients to explore the childless choice by inviting them to consider the degree to which they have lived the values of autonomy and responsibility, prior to considering their reproductive options. For instance, counsellors might ask clients about their career and relationships: How important is a sense of autonomy in their work? To what degree do they need a sense of separateness and independence in their work and/or relationships? How well do they tolerate feeling "different" from others? Answers to these questions might help clients to reflect on the degree to which they have spontaneously sought autonomy in their daily lives.

With respect to the second value of responsibility, counsellors might open discussions with clients about how they envision themselves making a contribution to society as childless adults. The participants in this study strongly contested the cultural value placed on childbearing and childrearing as the most significant means of contributing to the wellbeing of the community and larger culture. Instead, they emphasized the myriad ways of "being a good person" and "giving back" to society that did not involve parenthood. By taking time to enumerate with clients their interests and talents, in combination with their sense of social conscience, counsellors could encourage clients to clarify their visions of how they too might wish to "give back" to society, thereby enhancing their lives with meaning and purpose.

As described above, the findings from this study strongly imply that voluntary childlessness is not a life condition around which the participants constructed significant

meaning and purpose. In contrast, our pronatal culture deems that child-bearing and child-rearing are inherently meaningful life tasks, tasks that society also views as expressions of selflessness and adult maturity (Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Lisle, 1996; Veevers, 1980). The findings from this study suggest that voluntarily childless adults are challenged to create meaning in their daily lives in roles as non-parents that do not contain social ideals of meaning like those of parenting roles. Counsellors should be sensitive to the unique challenges faced by childless adults: to independently create a life that is rich in meaning and purpose - for the community, for themselves, for the next generation. Indeed, intentionally childfree clients may present to counselling seeking meaningful ways to express their sexuality, creativity, and generativity (Motherwell & Prudent, 1998). Counsellors must be willing to support clients through the ambiguity that accompanies such self-exploration and quests for meaning (May & Yalom, 1984; Owen, 1994) without implicitly or explicitly directing clients towards conventional gauges of meaning in adult living.

A caveat to the principal findings in this study is that counsellors ought not to assume that clients' childlessness is an underlying source of distress or dissatisfaction in clients' lives. Indeed, the large majority of participants in this study did not report any regret or discomfort stemming from their childless choice. Rather, almost all expressed relief that they had rejected parenthood and its attendant obligations and commitments to children. However, it is important to note that among the participants in this study, parenthood decision-making was not really a trying or significant issue in their lives. Many entered their relationships either clear that they did not want children, or not particularly invested in having children. It is possible that these adults comprised a unique sample, and that other couples or individuals who present for counselling may not be as resolved about their childlessness. For example, one woman participant in the present study reported a counselling experience that underscores why it is incumbent upon counsellors to view the childfree choice as a normal, satisfying, and viable option for adult living. This participant

related that her psychologist suggested her ennui and life dissatisfaction at that time was related to the participant's unfulfilled need to become a mother. A family physician subsequently reinforced this belief. This participant thus felt compelled by professionals' input to undertake a painstaking review of her childless choice. Years after completing this review, she still wondered whether she would have questioned her own judgment about her childless choice had these professionals not implied that her life was incomplete and dissatisfying because she had rejected motherhood.

This example of revisiting the childless choice in counselling reveals the pervasiveness with which our culture's pronatal discourse can subtly divert counsellors from attending to clients' genuine issues as they emerge during the counselling process. Counsellors may be at risk of making unconscious assumptions about clients' childlessness that do not accurately reflect the client's inner needs and desires. By demonstrating an open and accepting stance towards all reproductive options, counsellors can best support clients who are considering the childless choice, or who may be expressing doubts that their childlessness remains their best option in life. Counsellors might share findings from this research study and other books and resources that validate intentional childlessness as a legitimate path through adulthood. It is self-evident that counsellors should also insure that clients look within all realms of daily living for causes of general dissatisfaction or unhappiness, rather than limiting dialogue to the childless choice.

In addition to the meta-themes of autonomy and responsibility, the stories and experiences of the men and women in this study yielded several descriptive themes across the existentials of lived body, lived relation, lived space, and lived time. In some cases themes arose that reflected gender differences in how the participants experienced daily living without children. In other cases, the men and women reflected on life events or relationship dynamics pertaining to their childfree status. The following discussion features some of the more prominent descriptive themes from the participants' accounts, as they might similarly arise

among clients who present for counselling with issues related to their childfree lives. These themes suggest that childlessness can offer adults rich opportunities for self-expression and interactions in their daily lives, while also posing some unique challenges.

Some of the participants in this study described experiences during which they reconsidered or fully reversed their reproductive intentions. Their reports underscored that reproductive choices can be fluid and dynamic processes susceptible to unpredicted changes or challenges (Burgwyn 1981; Ireland, 1993; Letherby, 2002; Lisle, 1996; Morell, 1994). The resulting disruptions in the status quo of married lives can leave spouses and couples struggling to reorient themselves to new futures. For example, one of the men in this study related how his first wife announced her change of heart and new desire to have children. This resulted in an amicable divorce. This same participant reported how his second wife similarly broached the subject of revisiting their childless choice, but eventually recommitted to their mutual choice. Counsellors may also encounter clients similar to another man in this study who entered his marriage anticipating a future role as father, but whose wife later made a decision to forego motherhood. Counsellors working with similar cases will be challenged to support clients while they weather such disruptions in their married lives. Related issues of trust, anxiety, resentment, and marital estrangement may arise that counsellors should gently explore in couples' counselling to aid in their resolution. For those clients who opt to stay in their marriages and to accept their partners' change of heart, counsellors might offer individual sessions during which these clients can sort through the aftermath of their spouses' announcements. For some clients, counsellors may see a need to support a grieving process for the loss of a future self as parent that will now go unrealized (Daniluk, 1999; Lisle, 1996; Motherwell & Prudent, 1998).

An additional area for exploration in counselling derives from this study's findings that almost all participants were concerned to some extent about the circumstances and needs that will arise in later life without children. Although none of the participants allowed their concerns

to sway them from their childless choice, their realistic concerns remained unresolved. A reference to the uncertain future of a life without children ought to be raised by a counsellor during discussion of the longer-term implications of childlessness. Although future events cannot be accurately forecasted, clients may welcome the opportunity to express their anxieties about the unknowable future, using counselling to begin an open-ended dialogue of planning that may continue over the course of a couple's marriage.

Among the study's findings is the resounding affirmation that intentionally childless adults can successfully undertake a variety of non-parenting roles and activities in which their needs to nurture and caretake can be expressed. For example, the men and women in this study described numerous roles through which they contributed to children's lives, thus allowing them to be "social" parents instead of "biological" parents (Letherby, 2002). In other cases, creating space for animals in daily living was a similarly viable and welcome means with which to meet needs to nurture. Clients may appreciate knowing that adults in this study (similar to those in some of the literature) found many alternate ways of connecting with children, as well as animals, that are meaningful and fulfilling. Some may benefit from counselling discussions in which they try to elicit any nurturing sensibilities and to reflect on how those needs might be met in a childfree life. Other clients may feel no needs whatsoever to nurture others, nor a conscious desire to seek alternate roles with which to build relationships with children. Both of these possibilities merit respect in the counselling process, since the childless choice can be appropriate for meeting a range of expressed needs.

A further positive finding in this study derives from the participants' resounding affirmation that their lives were complete and fulfilled, and did not resemble the traditional stereotypes that childless adults are unhappy and 'missing something.' Clients who query whether childlessness may eventually yield regrets or dissatisfaction should be supported in openly discussing these concerns. Indeed, the pronatal cultural discourse continues to make strong

attributions of unhappiness, deviance, and deficiency to childless adults – particularly women (Gillespie, 2000). Some of the women participants in this study indicated awareness of these social perceptions but typically dismissed them as irrelevant to their experiences of childlessness. Nonetheless, counsellors should be conscious of the pronatal social discourses which imply that women cannot be fully satisfied in adult living unless they are mothers. Clients-both men and women-who have internalized such discourses may need support to disentangle their own intuitive sensibilities of which reproductive option is right for them, from the pervasive pronatal discourse that equates parenthood with maturity and fulfillment.

Finally, the participants' stories highlighted the variability with which they experienced their minority status as childless adults, among the large majority of parenting adults. Their reports indicate another potential focus for counselling, that is, the challenges of negotiating a life course along which childless adults encounter few peers (Fisher, 1992; Lisle, 1996). Clients who have made the childless choice may notice growing distance between themselves and parenting friends, or loss of friendships altogether as parents focus their lives on their children. Clients who are considering the childless choice may similarly express concerns that non-parenthood will result in estrangement from friends and render their life course lonely.

Some of the women participants in this study emphasized the importance of being flexible and renegotiating relationships with their mothering friends, in order to preserve a friendship bond that transcends parenting concerns. They confirmed that their friendships were somewhat at risk of losing former intimacy, due to divergent interests and less time to spend together. Counsellors might suggest that clients clarify their concerns and what they require of their friendships, and consider how to best present those needs to parenting friends. Counsellors might also encourage clients to consider how they might develop or expand their social network, taking advantage of some of the freedom they enjoy in their lifestyle to access a range of social connections with parents and non-parents. It is also important for counsellors and clients to note

that in many cases friendships with parents are possible or reconnection with old friends is possible once their children are older – so these friendships need not be lost indefinitely. Nonetheless, counsellors must offer support and empathy to any clients who express loneliness or upset about loss of friendships which they attribute to their childless choice. Counsellors should openly acknowledge that traveling the unpopular life path of intentional childlessness requires courage and independence, attributes which clients may find difficult to muster when they are feeling isolated or excluded from the majority of parenting peers and friends.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study that merit consideration. Some of them concern the nature of the sample, while others reflect the inherent challenges of applying hermeneutic phenomenology to answer the research question.

The first and primary limitation of this study concerns the self-selection process by which participants were included in this study. Six of the eight couples were recruited through a newspaper advertisement in the Surrey and South Surrey areas of the British Columbia Lower Mainland. The remaining two couples were recruited through word-of-mouth after they expressed interest in the research topic. Although all the men and women met the general criteria for participating in this study, it is likely that other factors also influenced their decision to respond to the newspaper advertisement or to telephone me via word-of-mouth referrals. For example, only people who reported having high levels of satisfaction with their childless lives responded to the call for participants. Their favourable reports may reflect how these 16 adults have chosen to represent their experiences of voluntary childlessness within a strongly pronatalist culture, efforts to counter negative discourses about voluntary childlessness and to create alternative, positive views of their life choice. Indeed, three couples explained that they had volunteered for the study as one such means of giving a positive voice to this alternative path through adulthood.

Spouses and couples who may have been dissatisfied with their childless choice did not come forward tell their stories, nor did those who might feel doubts or regret for their childless choice. Such persons may have felt uninclined to disclose their experiences in a research setting, possibly to avoid negative judgement of their childless choice. Certainly adults wish to be perceived as competent in their decision-making and would not wish to describe their childless choice as a mistake causing them dissatisfaction or regret. In addition, the personal nature of this life choice may have inhibited some couples from coming forward who may have provided more diverse accounts of life without children.

The exclusively positive accounts of childlessness provided by the participants in this study underscore that findings must be interpreted with caution. In their most specific terms, the findings are applicable only to this sample of eight couples. In more general terms, the findings may be applicable to childless couples who report similarly positive experiences of their childfree lifestyle. The findings cannot be applied generally to all childfree couples, since the study failed to attract participants who may have reported very different levels of satisfaction with their childless choice, or for whom the decision to forgo parenthood presented significant challenges or required considerable negotiation.

A second and related limitation of this study concerns the homogeneity of the sample of participants. All but one participant was white, and all were of middle class socio-economic status with education levels ranging from post-high school diplomas to graduate degrees. It has been well-documented that the phenomenon of childlessness is associated primarily with white, middle class, educated women (e.g., Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1980). Although much less is known about men who pursue childfree lives, it is likely that they are of similar backgrounds to the women they marry. However, more recent research on the demographics of childlessness indicates that not only is it increasing in popularity as a life choice, but that it is emerging across a greater range of racial and ethnic groups, educational levels, and socioeconomic strata

(Gillespie, 1999). The present study did not reflect such variability in participants. The homogeneity of the study's sample thus limits the extent to which findings can be used to illuminate the meaning of childlessness for persons of different ethnic, cultural, religious or socioeconomic backgrounds.

A third potential limitation of this study concerns the use of conjoint interviews to explore the possibility of shared meaning-making processes between spouses. As discussed in the couples' results section, these interviews did not yield information to indicate differences between how individuals and couples might view their childlessness. This finding is contrary to research suggesting that couples' interviews frequently present a more complete account of shared experiences than do individual spousal interviews (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982). It is important, therefore, that readers do not interpret the lack of more specific or divergent findings from the couples' interviews as affirmation that couples do not jointly construct meaning of their childless lives. Rather, it appears that for a variety of possible reasons, the spouses were more inclined to describe the attributes of their marital relationships during the conjoint interviews. This tendency may have reflected the reality that their marital relationship is the primary social context in which they live their childless lives. Indeed, their relationship with one another may be interpreted by both spouses as a more fundamental source of meaning in their lives than their childlessness, thereby relegating the topic of childlessness to less pronounced status for discussion. Nonetheless, some degree of shared meaning-making regarding the childless choice may still occur in these marriages and should be explored in other research endeavours.

A fourth limitation of this study is related to the scope of human experience encompassed by the research question. Couples and spouses were invited to describe their lived experiences of childlessness, a condition or state in which they lived their lives. The phenomenon of study was not a clearly boundaried, specific, or finite event or experience that easily lent itself to providing focussed accounts of their daily living. Rather, the spouses and couples in this study reported

experiences across virtually all dimensions of daily living. The breadth of this inquiry may therefore have allowed only for surface exploration of meaning-making processes, and obscured expression of more specific meaning-themes related to the lived experience of childlessness. This limitation of the study may also have resulted in participants' tendency to report their lived experiences as primarily attributes or outcomes of the childless choice, rather than experiences or meanings of voluntary childlessness in and of itself.

A further limitation of the study concerns the methodology used to explore the lived experience of intentional childlessness. Hermeneutic phenomenology is an exploratory method of inquiry that seeks to reveal and illuminate underlying meaning structures of ordinary lived experience in the daily life world (van Manen, 1990, 1997). This approach is not intended to identify correlational or causal relationships between different phenomenon, nor is its purpose to provide or support theoretical premises. Rather, hermeneutic phenomenology mandates an interpretive process and presumes that multiple sources of meaning-making are involved in derivation of research findings. Hence the descriptive and interpretive themes comprising the findings of this study reflect a unique combination of interdependent interpretive processes which cannot be precisely replicated. Another researcher, in combination with different readers of this text, may have identified alternate meaning structures underlying the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness. Nonetheless, hermeneutic phenomenology was viewed as a suitable approach to explore the lived experience of voluntary childlessness, a phenomenon about which little is known yet much is presumed by our pronatal social discourse. This study has contributed to the literature a first glimpse of the experience and meaning of voluntary childlessness, a glimpse afforded by the open and interpretive stance embraced by hermeneutic phenomenology. This same stance invites further research exploration and interpretations of voluntary childlessness, all of which may eventually cohere into meaning-structures that adequately represent this life choice.

Finally, the results of this study emerged from a guided existential reflection founded on four existentials of human experience: lived body, lived relation, lived space, and lived time. Van Manen (1990, 1997) offered these existentials as a heuristic strategy with which to structure research inquiry, analysis, and interpretation of participants' accounts of their daily lives. Taken together, the four existentials can frame research findings as meaning themes across multiple dimensions of human experience. However, despite their practical utility, it is possible that the domains represented by the existentials constrained this study's analysis of participants' accounts and biased the researcher's reading and interpretive processes. Alternate approaches to discovering and presenting meaning themes in hermeneutic research may have yielded different results than those reported above (e.g., Smith & Osborn, 2003). Nonetheless, the four existentials provided an effective structure to contain the broad scope of this inquiry, without which it may have lacked sufficient direction and focus to garner relevant and adequate accounts of voluntary childlessness.

Implications for Future Research

The purpose of the present study was to seek out and illuminate the meaning-structures that underlie the lived experience of voluntary childlessness. The findings of this study invite further research that may expand upon the descriptive and meaning-themes presented above, or that might reveal additional, divergent findings to contribute to the literature on intentional childlessness.

The phenomenological method applied in the present study allowed for exploration and discovery of the meaning of the lived experiences of childlessness, among a small group of participants. These participants were self-selected and comprised a relatively homogeneous group. They were demographically similar in terms of being Caucasian, well-educated, middle-class professionals. Only one participant was non-Caucasian. It is possible that alternate findings could arise in a study that incorporated a more diverse group of participants. Future research

might therefore attempt to explore the phenomenon of living without children based on a larger group of participants whose characteristics represent more ethnic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, particularly couples from cultural and religious groups in which the parenthood imperative is strongly prescribed and few if any other acceptable role options exist for women. The couples in this study were also unanimous in their satisfaction with their childfree choice. Certainly it is possible that those couples less satisfied with their childfree status may have been reluctant to volunteer to participate in a study of this nature. It would seem important that future researchers attempt to include those whose feelings about their childfree status are mixed or more equivocal. As the number of couples choosing childlessness increases, so will the diversity of lived experience of voluntary childlessness. Therefore, a more robust description and understanding of voluntary childlessness can only be derived from researchers' consideration of these individual and group differences.

The second suggestion for future research concerns methodological challenges inherent in phenomenology, that is, the related tasks of posing a clear research question, and remaining fully oriented to that question throughout the process of inquiry, analysis, and writing (van Manen, 1997). In the present study I attempted to explore an aspect of adult living that encompasses multiple dimensions of daily living. As a result, the participants' reflections on their daily lives did not always yield information that was directly relevant to the purpose and question of the research inquiry. Future research of voluntary childlessness might be enhanced by more focussed inquiry that strengthens the researcher's orientation to the research question and that invites more elaborate accounts of participants' lives without children. In other words, research questions that explore specific dimensions of the lived experience of childlessness might serve to reveal deeper or different meaning structures than those discovered through the general question posed in the present study. For example, inquiry into the experiences and manifestations of pronatal discourse in participants' lives might help to distinguish personal

meanings from social meanings of childlessness. Or future studies might explore friendships or other relationships of significance in the lives of childfree adults. Similarly, researchers might focus on the different paths taken by adults to arrive at the childless choice.

The task of refining the research question can also be applied in future inquiries that wish to further explore the findings of this study. For example, participants in future studies might be invited to describe in depth their experiences of "giving back" to society – the chosen means, the recipients, the effects on self-concept, etc.. The expression of autonomy and its connection to mastery and control in mid-life could also be pursued, possibly by asking childless men and women to explore how childlessness affects expression of these competencies across the four existentials. In short, the processes of meaning-making might be better studied by discerning and exploring discrete portions of the meaning themes and descriptive themes described in the findings of this study.

The participants in this study told stories of their lives without children during individual and conjoint interviews. Their shared accounts did not yield new or different information from that contained in their individual accounts. It is possible that this finding is an artifact of the order in which interviews were conducted, or an artifact of having conducted both spousal and conjoint interviews. Future research may benefit by making separate inquiries into childlessness that target not only particular dimensions of childlessness, but spouses and couples separately. In other words, studies that wish to explore shared meaning-making or shared lived experiences might incorporate only conjoint interviews, and explorations of gender or spousal differences may be similarly limited to individual accounts. These recommendations derive from the possibility that participants in this study may have fully expressed their thoughts and ideas during the individual interviews, with little left unsaid for subsequent shared elaboration in the couples' interviews.

The heuristic of van Manen's (1990, 1997) lived existentials was applied in this study to aid in conceptualizing and linking the descriptive themes that characterized the lives of the participants. Future research applying a hermeneutic phenomenological approach might enrich the results of the current study by applying a different method of analyzing and interpreting qualitative data. Since there is no established tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology in psychological research, future researchers should be encouraged to utilize different approaches to understanding human experience. It is possible, for example, that different frameworks for guiding reflections on research accounts will naturally emerge in the process of asking alternate, more refined questions about childlessness. Moreover, such strategies might incorporate additional sources of data, such as biographical accounts, relevant fiction or poetry, participants' journals or other autobiographical accounts of childlessness (van Manen, 1997). If researchers remain receptive to applying divergent interpretive strategies, they may successfully reveal new and different meaning themes underlying the lived experience of voluntary childlessness. These contributions will doubtless provide a deeper understanding of this life choice.

The findings from this study also respond, albeit secondarily, to the common criticism that feminist theories have failed to account for childless women (e.g., Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Ireland, 1993; Morrell, 1994). Feminism has been more attentive to the experience of women as mothers than it has to childless women's experiences (Hird & Abshoff). The present study may contribute to the work of feminist researchers who seek to deconstruct pronatal discourses and to augment feminist considerations of non-motherhood as a rewarding and fulfilling reproductive choice (e.g., Morrell, 1994). For example, the findings suggesting that some childless women are oblivious to pronatal discourses, and that others feel no impact of their childless choice on friendship bonds are areas in which feminist inquiries may continue to explore the interplay between social and personal meanings of childlessness. In addition, feminist investigations may value the finding that women participants experienced a heightened awareness of their maternal

bodies in their forties rather than at menopause. Perhaps this finding could be used to further explore Lisle's suggestion that femininity derives from women's awareness of their ability to reproduce, rather than actually doing so. Ongoing feminist dialogues on the subject of the maternal body will ideally help to sever the entrenched cultural view that women's anatomy equals their destiny (Daniluk, 1999; Gergen, 1990).

Finally, future research on childlessness might benefit from application of quantitative methods. In particular, studies might utilize measures that capture some aspects of the descriptive and meaning themes revealed in this study to investigate similarities and differences between parents and non-parents. For example, the Purpose in Life (PIL) scale assesses the degree to which meaning has been found in life, and the SONG assess the motivation to find meaning in life (Shaugnessy & Evans, 1987; Meir & Edwards, 1974). The Satisfaction with Life scale is a measure of subjective well-being that can also be used to explore the outcomes of life choices (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffiths, 1985). The Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS) (McAdams & St. Aubin, 1992) is another scale that may aptly reflect the generative strivings of parents and non-parents. Research might also inquire further into the relationships between values and meaning-making using values scales and measures of meaning (e.g., Crandall & Rasmussen, 1975) among childless adults, or between different samples of husbands, wives, parents, or non-parents. Moreover, the question of regrets for the childless choice in late life has been explored using predominantly qualitative approaches in the extant literature (e.g., Alexander, Rubinstein, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1992; Connidis & McMullin, 1993). Future studies using quantitative designs might utilize scales measuring life satisfaction and regrets among parents and non-parents of different ages across the life span (Jokisssaari, 2004).

Quantitative research of childlessness might also address the assumption made in the childfree literature that childlessness is defined and redefined over the life course (e.g., Bartlett, 1994; Connidis & McMullin, 1993; Lisle, 1996). It would be interesting to utilize a longitudinal

design in which non-parents are asked to complete measures across a period of adulthood, possibly with more than one cohort of non-parents in a cross-sectional design. These data might identify shifts in meaning-making, in attitudes towards childlessness, and in quality of the marital relationship, among others, over time. Inclusion of a comparison group of parents would augment findings from such a study. Future studies might also explore differences in meaning-making among childless adults according to how they arrived at the childless decision (e.g., Ireland, 1993; Veevers, 1980). For example, there is little known about the different routes to childlessness among men, and how these routes may affect men's experiences of childlessness or how they may differ from the routes taken by women (Ireland, 1993). Finally, the relationship between childlessness and life satisfaction and meaning-making merits further investigation. Quantitative designs and analyses offer the opportunity to study this relationship in the context of other relevant variables (e.g., marital satisfaction, friendship networks, experiences of negative discourse, and other sociodemographic variables) to best assess the influence of childlessness on subjective well-being. Studies that incorporate samples of parents and non-parents might thus determine the influence that parental status makes on overall satisfaction in life, or on meaning-making.

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Appendix A**Recruitment Advertisement****CHILDLESS BY CHOICE****Research Participants Wanted****Department of Counselling Psychology
University of British Columbia**

If you are 40-plus, married, childless-by-choice, and neither you or your spouse have children from a former relationship, your participation is needed in a research study investigating the lives and experiences of voluntarily childless couples. For more information about this study, please telephone Diana Mawson, Doctoral Candidate, at **604-928-8222**.

Appendix B

Telephone Contact Outline

The following information will be conveyed to persons who respond to the recruitment advertisement for the study, or who have heard by word-of-mouth about my research and express interest in participating.

Introduction of the Researcher

Diana Mawson is the student researcher for this project. The study is the dissertation research for a doctoral degree in the Dept. of Counselling Psychology at U.B.C.. The senior research supervisor is a faculty professor, Dr. Judith Daniluk of the Dept. of Counselling Psychology, U.B.C. Her telephone number for any information is (604)822-5768.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to uncover the meaning of voluntary childlessness by exploring descriptions of individual spouses' and couples' daily lived experience of their childless choice. The primary research question is "What is the meaning and experience of choosing childlessness for spouses and couples?"

Eligibility for Participation

Volunteer participants must meet the following criteria in order to participate in the study:

- Participants will be married and living with their spouses for a minimum of five years
- Participants will be committed to their childless choice. Commitment is implied with a verbal statement confirming intentions to remain childless for the foreseeable future.
- Participants will be a minimum of forty years of age.
- Neither spouse has children from a previous relationship
- Participants' childlessness will not be a result of fertility problems or failure of alternate parenthood possibilities, such as adoption or fostering.

Terms of Participation

Participants in this project will agree to the following conditions of participation:

- Participants will agree to participate in three confidential, audio-taped interviews over a period of approximately six months.
- Both spouses agree to participate in one individual interview during which they reflect upon and explore their thoughts, feelings, and daily living without children. This interview is expected to take approximately one hour.
- Both spouses are available to participate in one couple/conjoint interview, which is also expected to be of approximately one hour duration. During this interview each couple will be invited to describe shared experiences of being voluntarily childlessness and the meaning they attribute to their childlessness as a couple.
- Both spouses agree to meet together with the researcher in a follow-up interview to review findings of the study. This validation interview may also take place over the telephone.
- Participants will agree to having selected portions of their interview transcript included in the final research document and possibly in future scholarly publications or professional presentations, with the assurance that identifying information will be removed from the quotes and text in question.

Confidentiality

Participants will choose a pseudonym at the beginning of the first interview to assure them of anonymity in reporting of research findings. They will also be invited to indicate for deletion or alterations any other identifying information contained in the interview summaries. The researcher will endeavour to alter all such information in subsequent reporting of findings. Finally, audiotapes will be destroyed when the project is complete; transcriptions will be destroyed in five years.

Participation

If individuals confirm their interest in participating in my study after meeting the eligibility requirements described above, I will invite them to set times and locations for individual spousal interviews. After both spousal interviews are completed, I will schedule a conjoint marital interview a minimum of two weeks later. I will provide the participants with a telephone contact number for me, should they need to review participation requirements or change interview schedules. After completion of the analysis and writing of research findings, I will re-contact the participants by telephone to schedule a final interview in which to invite their feedback on the findings.

Appendix C

Telephone Screening Questions

Volunteer participants responding to the recruitment advertisements or through word-of-mouth networks will be asked to answer the following screening questions to ensure their eligibility in the study. These questions will be asked of one spouse after the researcher has provided general information about the study (see Appendix B).

1. For how long have you been married?
2. What ages are you and your spouse?
3. Do you have children from a former relationship?
4. Have you any parenting experience, such as being a step-parent or foster- parent?
5. Are you committed to your childless choice?
6. Are you willing to describe in conversational interviews your life without children, first in an individual interview and again with your spouse?
7. Are you able to make a commitment to participating in all stages of the research?

Appendix D

Interview Orienting Statements

Principle Research Question

What is the meaning and the lived experience of voluntary childlessness, for each married spouse and for couples?

Principle Interview Orienting Statement

Spousal interview "I would like to have a conversation with you about being childless by choice. I am interested in any thoughts and experiences that come to mind when you reflect on your childlessness as a husband/wife."

Conjoint interview "We have explored in our first interviews your individual experiences and the meanings you attribute to living as non-parents. During our interview today I would like to focus in on your shared experiences of daily living that you both believe reflect on what it is like to be a voluntarily childless, married couple".

Appendix E

Sample Spousal Interview Questions

Principle Research Question

What is the meaning and experience of voluntary childlessness, for each married spouse and for couples?

General Interview Questions

1. How did you come to decide or to know that you would remain childless? Can you tell me a bit about the process you went through to make this choice, and how you and your spouse experienced this together?
2. Please tell me about your ordinary daily life. What are your interests and activities or pastimes? What do you especially enjoy about your lifestyle as a childless person?
3. If you could describe what being childless by choice means to you, what would you say?

Lived Existentials: Areas for Inquiry

Corporeality

1. Have you thought about the experience of motherhood/fatherhood, in terms of your physical self? (e.g., creating life, passing on your genes, or creating a new generation?)
2. How have you reconciled the fact that you will not have children to pass on your social, genetic, and family history, or your wisdom and favorite possessions when you die?

Relationship

1. Do you ever talk about being childless to others? What is that like?
2. How have others reacted to your choice?
3. How are your friendships and relationships influenced by your voluntary childlessness? Can you give an example?
4. What is it like to be in a minority of adults, to be 'different', in our culture?
5. Do you have ways of coping with this difference?

Space

1. Where do you most enjoy spending time? Is there anything about being childless that is related to your enjoyment or preference for these places?
2. In what places or situations are you most/least aware of being childless?
3. Did being childless by choice influence where you chose to live?

Time

1. Have you revisited your commitment to childlessness? Was this a private reflection or something that you shared with your spouse? What was that like?
2. Does being childless now feel different than at other times in your life, and what is that like?
3. How do you see your future as a childless adult?

Appendix F

Sample Conjoint Interview Questions

1. Please tell me how your relationship began.
2. Many couples get married so they can start a family. This wasn't the case for you. Can you tell me a bit about what motivated the two of you to make a life-long commitment to each other?
3. How would you describe your relationship and lives since you came together as a couple?
4. How do you think your relationship differs from other couples who have children?
5. Many couples who have kids often see having and raising children as their contribution to society. How, as a couple, do you see yourselves contributing to society?
6. Many married couples talk about how being parents together has enriched and deepened their relationship. Given that you've chosen not to have children, what do you think has enriched and deepened your relationship over the years you've been together?
7. We live in a society in which most adults follow the socially sanctioned path of becoming parents. What perceptions do you think people have of you, and what messages have been communicated to you as a couple that has chosen not to become parents together?
8. People who have children frequently mark their time and age by how old their children are – for example, 'I'm the parent of a three year old, or a 13 year old or a 33 year old.' How do you think you mark the passage of time?
9. If a young couple you both know was struggling with the decision of whether or not to have children, and asked you for your advice or input, what would you say to them?
10. In our culture where the norm is still to have children, you have chosen a less-travelled path. If you could choose a metaphor that reflects your life together as a couple or family without children, what might that metaphor be?

The total time commitment for your participation in this study is approximately three hours. If you have any questions about participation in this study, both the Principal Investigator and the co-Investigator are available to discuss them with you.

Confidentiality

The first two interviews (individual and couple) will be audiotaped and transcribed. Your anonymity will be protected throughout the research process and in any future publications and/or presentations of the findings from this study. You will be identified only by your chosen pseudonym and your real name will not be included in any reports of the completed study. The audiotapes and transcripts will be used only by the co-investigator and principal investigator for the purpose of this research project. All interview materials will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and destroyed after completion of this research project.

Contact for information about the study

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the U.B.C. Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598.

Consent

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decline entry into the study or you may discontinue participation at any time, at your own discretion or by request of the co-investigator. Participation in this project and/or withdrawal from this project will not adversely affect you in any way. You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this consent form.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE

DATE

SIGNATURE of a WITNESS

DATE

PARTICIPANT'S PRINTED NAME

CHOSEN PSEUDONYM

COUPLE'S PRINTED NAME

CHOSEN PSEUDONYM