

**THE MEANING AND EXPERIENCE OF
INTENTIONAL CHILDLESSNESS FOR MARRIED WOMEN**

by

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Abstract

A qualitative phenomenological research design was used to explore the meaning and experience of intentional childlessness for heterosexual, married women. Six women between 38 and 44 years of age from Vancouver and the Lower Mainland volunteered to discuss their experiences of being childless by choice in individual, audio-taped, in-depth interviews with the researcher. Seven common themes were drawn from the participants' interview transcripts using Colaizzi's (1978) procedure for phenomenological data analysis.

The results indicated that the women had a strong sense of independence and autonomy that they believed would be compromised by having children. The women sensed they needed to maintain control over their own lives and environments, especially controlling their fertility, their sense of order and certainty, and their home environments. Most of the women had experienced some uneasiness and discomfort when around children. Parenting was viewed as an overwhelming responsibility that they perceived included objectionable emotional investments, sacrifices, and risks. Primarily, the women stated they had no desire to have children; mothering was perceived as hindering careers and the pursuit of other meaningful endeavours. Sensing they were different than other women and especially most married women who "traditionally" are mothers, the participants had rarely directed "maternal" feelings toward children; they lacked both a desire for children and regret for not having them. Perceiving that many other people expected them to have children, the women experienced being called upon to justify their choice and had withstood criticism for choosing to remain childless. The participants perceived childbearing as optional for women and had exercised their right not to have children, presenting their choice as a morally responsible act. The women were constructing their paths through life by evolving a sense of self not identified with motherhood, but instead, a self characterized and defined by engagement in other personally fulfilling and meaningful relationships and pursuits.

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Chapter One - Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The Outer Context

On their journey through adulthood, women are expected to marry and bear children (Phoenix, Woollett, & Lloyd, 1991). However, some married women choose to remain childless, selecting a life option that rejects the cultural imperative of parenthood (Glenn, 1994; Ireland, 1993; Jacobson & Heaton, 1991; Kiernan, 1989; Morell, 1990; Peck & Senderowitz, 1974; Snitow, 1992; Veevers, 1980). In particular, married couples are expected to want children and to reproduce (Peck & Senderowitz; Veevers; Woollett, 1991). Hence, voluntary childlessness for married couples is considered to be a "deviation from traditional family norms" (Jacobson & Heaton, p. 79), a deviant lifestyle within the social community (Bram, 1978; Callan, 1983a, 1985; Morell, 1990, 1993; Ramu & Tavuchis, 1986; Veevers, 1980, 1983).

Within our society, those who are voluntarily or involuntarily childless are stigmatized (Bram, 1978; Callan, 1987; Miall, 1986), informally sanctioned (Callan; Ory, 1978; Veevers, 1983), marginalized (Alexander, Rubinstein, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1992; Morell, 1990), and negatively perceived and stereotyped by others (Calhoun & Selby, 1980; Callan, 1983a, 1985). Pronatalist ideology predominates and, as with any ideology, the views of the dominant group make "the existing order seem inevitable" (Glenn, 1994, p. 9) for those within the subordinate group, in this case, voluntarily childless women. "Thus, by depicting motherhood as natural, a patriarchal ideology of mothering locks women into biological reproduction, and denies them identities and selfhood outside mothering (Glenn, 1994, p. 9)."

It is nearly unthinkable to question reproduction because it is often considered pivotal to issues of identity, survival, and immortality within our society (Peck & Senderowitz, 1974; Morell, 1993). The term pronatalism refers to the dominant "reproductive ethic" (Peck &

Senderowitz, p. 1) in our "pro-birth" (p.1) society, that encourages reproduction and exalts the parenthood role. Veevers (1983) states, "The pronatalism that is pervasive in virtually all cultures is functional for the continued recruitment of married couples to the difficult and often demanding tasks of childbearing and child rearing (p. 91)." Consistent with this perspective, voluntarily childless couples are usually criticized for their decision to remain childless (Ramu & Tavuchis, 1986). The childless lifestyle is considered "alternative" (Veevers, p. 76), and "is neither supported nor encouraged by the society's normative and value structure" (Poston & Kramer, 1983, p. 290).

However, only married women are encouraged and expected to bear children; lesbians and single women are discouraged from having children (Morell, 1990, 1993; Richardson, 1993). As Richardson states, if there is a maternal instinct, it is curious that only married women are expected to have it. "It appears that it is not motherhood that is idealized but only motherhood under patriarchy, that is, within the socially acceptable confines of marriage" (Rich, cited in Hare-Mustin & Broderick, 1979, p. 115-116).

A "parenthood mystique" (Veevers, 1980, p. 41) that is encouraged in our society promotes the idea that having children is inevitable for married individuals, and is compatible with and necessary for self-fulfillment. This mystique also includes the idea of an innate need for children based on instinctual urges, and to feel healthy and purposeful (Veenhoven, 1974). In addition, the existence of a "myth of motherhood" (Hare-Mustin & Broderick, 1979, p. 114) combines a complex of contradictory themes (e.g., all women need to be mothers in order to feel fulfilled and to satisfy the ideal of adult femininity, some women make "bad mothers") (Glenn, 1994; Wollett, 1991; Richardson, 1993). Women receive messages of their value and worth based on their fertility status (Bartky, 1990). "For patriarchy, femininity is not the core of mothering; mothering is the core of femininity" (O'Barr, Pope, & Wyer, 1990, p. 4). The myth "that mothering is a natural and instinctive phenomenon"

(Braverman, 1989, p. 229) and that all women want children (Woollett), can elicit guilt in women without children (Braverman; Snitow, 1992). By identifying all women as mothers or potential mothers, North American culture portrays women as a unified, homogeneous group, thereby, necessarily suppressing differences between women (Morell, 1990, 1993).

Some feminists have articulated distinctions between the experience and institution of motherhood (Rich 1976/1986; Ruddick, 1980), and others have called for a freer atmosphere of inquiry surrounding compulsory motherhood (Firestone, 1970; Snitow, 1992).

"Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (Rich, p. 42). Social prescriptions for women to mother are constraining for many women (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993; Morell, 1993; Rich; Simons, 1984). While the experience of mothering has been reclaimed as desirable by feminists and nonfeminists alike, the conditions under which women mother have not changed significantly (Bartlett, 1994; Gerson, 1985; Snitow). Mothers, whether they work outside the home or not, still do most domestic work and take major responsibility for children (Hochschild, 1989). A woman's responsibility for her children becomes particularly highlighted after divorce because, as French (1992) has suggested, children are twice as likely to live in poverty after divorce, due to the fact that only 44% of fathers are still paying child support as soon as four months after a marital breakup.

In summary, our patriarchal social context upholds mothering as the ideal of female adulthood and imparts strong pressure on heterosexually partnered women to become mothers (Bartlett, 1994; Morell, 1990, 1994). Parallel to this pronatalism in both the public and private spheres, there exists a general expectation for, and devaluation of, the relational and domestic work carried out by women (Miller, 1991; Morell, 1994). For some women who are cognizant of this, then, motherhood may appear to be a rather unappealing life option (Bartlett). However, little is known about women who choose not to conform to pronatalistic

norms. It is, therefore, important to learn more about women who are intentionally childless so that we may better understand their lived experiences of voluntarily not becoming mothers within a social context that dismisses voluntary childlessness as a viable life option for women.

The Inner Context

Women's sense of self is formed through interactions with other people, the environment, circumstances, and the culture (Josselson, 1987). Erikson's (1980/1959) traditional developmental theory includes the generativity stage that involves producing and guiding one's offspring as a part of healthy development during adulthood. Despite strides in theorizing on women's development since Erikson, even current feminist theories reinforce mothering and relationships as an important part of psychological health and development for adult women (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1991). "The issue of women's self-development continues to raise the specter of selfishness, the fear that freedom for women will lead to an abandonment of responsibility in relationships" (Gilligan, p. 130).

The notion that virtue for women lies in self-sacrifice has complicated the course of women's development by pitting the moral issue of goodness against the adult questions of responsibility and choice. In addition, the ethic of self-sacrifice is directly in conflict with the concept of rights that has, in this past century, supported women's claim to a fair share of social justice (Gilligan, p. 132).

Dominant theories of female development assume intimacy, nurturing, caretaking, and relational connections to others as central to women's lives (Morell, 1994). Some confound womanhood and motherhood (Landa, 1990; Morell, 1990, 1994). Thus, women may experience both external and internal pressure to reproduce in order to fulfill a gendered mandate for admission to full adulthood status (Alexander et al., 1992; Morell, 1990, 1993; Wollett, 1991; Richardson, 1993).

Theories which posit relational functions as essential to women's identity and development have been criticized as eradicating differences between women (Gerson, 1985;

Morell, 1990, 1993), and for polarizing "men and women into two distinct and unified categories with motherhood as a central defining characteristic of women" (Morell, 1994, p. 10). Lerner (1988) also charges these theories with falsely polarizing the sexes by reifying and exaggerating differences between men and women.

By affording motherhood such an important role in women's psychological health and development, even feminist-oriented theories cast women who do not have children as underdeveloped or "male-like" (Morell, 1994, p. 6), and thereby imply that women who have chosen not to become mothers are not psychologically healthy, despite considerable evidence to the contrary. Such cultural and theoretical bias toward purposively non-reproductive women persists, despite the increasing number of women who consider and select this life option.

The Research Context

Very few statistics exist on the actual numbers of women who have chosen to remain permanently childless. Canadian estimates range from 5% (Veevers, 1980) to 12% (Connidis & McMullin, 1993). Changes in women's ability to control childbearing (Gee, 1988) and their greater workforce participation (Gerson, 1985) would seemingly have some impact on the numbers of women choosing not to have children, but there appears to be a dearth of informative statistics on voluntary childlessness.

Most of the research in the area of voluntary childlessness involves identifying correlates and motives of being intentionally childless or examines reproductive decision-making (Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1980). Frequently, research on childlessness has sought explanations for this "deviant" behaviour (Veevers) rather than exploring the experience as a viable life option for women (Wollett, 1991). Some recent research, however, has explored intentional childlessness in a way that is respectful of women and their right to construct their own lives (Baruch, Barnett, & Rivers, 1983; Gerson, 1985; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990, 1993,

1994) and will be reviewed in depth later. However, none of the research to date has explored women's experiences by using a phenomenological paradigm.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to understand the lived experience of heterosexually partnered women who are intentionally childless. Our pronatalistic culture mandates a path through adulthood (i.e., parenthood) that these women do not live (Woollett, 1991). Since little was known about what it is like to live as an intentionally childless woman, a phenomenological method (Colaizzi, 1978) was employed to provide a window into the women's experiences without imposing pre-suppositions about what is meaningful in their lives (Osborne, 1990, 1994).

This study was aimed at identifying the complexity of feelings, thoughts, and meanings related to the experience of childlessness for partnered women, within a cultural milieu that expects partnered women to become mothers. The guiding research question was: **"What is the meaning and experience of intentional childlessness for partnered women who have selected this life option?"**

It was hoped that this research might contribute to the voluntary childlessness literature by providing a detailed exploration and thematic analysis of the meanings that women attach to their experiences of intentional childlessness. By hearing from intentionally childless women themselves, it was hoped that the information gained might help to decrease the invisibility of intentionally childless women, to increase exploration and validation of diverse options for women, to lessen the impact of social sanctions resulting from demonstrations of autonomy by women, and to establish these women as healthy adult role models who have selected to live out one particular life option.

Furthermore, it was hoped that this study might contribute to theory on women's development by illuminating how some women have realized a sense of fulfillment and life

purpose in ways other than through bearing and raising children. It was hoped that this study might further highlight "the possibility of different destinies for women within [the world]" (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 119).

Counsellors and therapists working with individuals and/or couples contemplating childlessness or living this "alternative" experience, it was hoped, might find this research useful in understanding childless women's lives, and in being better informed when guiding exploration of reproductive options with clients. It is hoped that informed counsellors, as a result, could validate all aspects of reproductive choice, including the option of intentional childlessness for those who desire it.

Terminology

Cognizant that definitions characterize women via their relations (or nonrelations in this case) to children, this study will employ the following terms interchangeably: **intentionally childless** (Morell, 1990), **childless by choice** (Veevers, 1980), **childfree (lifestyle)** (Veevers, 1980), and **voluntarily childless**. For the purposes of this study, **childless woman/women** will be used to refer to a voluntarily childless woman/women, unless otherwise stated (e.g., in reviewing some research).

Chapter Two - Review of the Literature

This chapter begins with a review of primarily empirical research into voluntary childlessness that focuses on: (a) prevalence and incidence of voluntary childlessness; (b) social perceptions of voluntary childlessness; (c) motives, correlates, and life satisfaction related to voluntary childlessness; and, (d) non-reproductive decision-making. The second section of the chapter briefly discusses reproductive decision-making as it relates to women's identity shaping. Lastly, this chapter reviews studies that have explored women's experiences of intentional childlessness.

Empirical Research into Voluntary Childlessness

Prevalence, Incidence, and Trends

The rate of voluntary childlessness has fluctuated over the course of the twentieth century. Between 1920 and 1940, the rate of voluntary childlessness amongst all childless women is reported to have been between 25% and 40% (Poston & Kramer, 1983). After World War II, a significant overall decline in childlessness heralded a "virtual absence in voluntary childlessness" (Poston & Kramer, p. 292), with almost every ever-married woman producing at least one child unless infertility affected one of the union's partners (Gee, 1988).

Since the 1970's, researchers who have examined voluntary childlessness have often focused on the incidence and trends of childlessness (Boyd, 1989; Jacobson & Heaton, 1991; Kiernan, 1989; Poston, 1990; Poston & Kramer, 1983; Veevers, 1980). From the 1960's to the 1980's an increase in voluntary childlessness has been noted by some authors (Boyd; Poston & Kramer; Veevers). In 1980, based on estimates of deliberate childlessness in Canada and the United States, Veevers stated that about 5% to 7% of all married couples in North America were deliberately childless. During structured interviews in a study of 678 Canadian men and women beyond childbearing years, 12% of the participants related being childless by choice (Connidis & McMullin, 1993). Gee (1988) reports that if childlessness (including

voluntary and involuntary) amongst women in Canada reaches 15%, it will have returned to "traditional" levels, whereas childlessness exceeding 20% will have surpassed childlessness amongst earlier cohorts of women.

Fairly reliable fertility control via contraception is recent for Canadian women. While American doctors have legally been able to prescribe contraception since 1930, Canadian physicians could not legally do so until 1969 (Stewart & Robinson, 1989). Furthermore, until 1988, Criminal Code of Canada limitations on abortion, as well as geographic differences in accessibility, have restricted the use of abortion as a backup to contraception (Gee, 1988). A revolution in women's ability to control their fertility and to participate in nonfamilial endeavors are hypothesized as contributing to the increases in childlessness seen between 1955 and 1973 (Poston & Kramer, 1983).

By all appearances, given more readily accessible contraception and abortion, it would seem that the choice to be childless is currently a viable one for women. However, Russo (1979) astutely pointed out that contraception and abortion are the prerogatives of only mature middle class women because they have the experience and economic resources to obtain access to reproductive controls that young, poor, or minority women do not have. Russo implies then that not all women have the opportunity to choose not to have children, and that choosing not to have children is only more viable for women in the middle-class. Contrary to this contention, 75% of the 34 childless women studied by Morell (1990, 1994) reported that they were from poor or working-class family backgrounds, and many women attributed their upward class mobility to remaining childless. Inasmuch as it is working women of differing races and classes that are choosing to remain childless (Bachu, cited in Morell, 1994), and that increasingly more women are in the workforce (Gerson, 1985), this then implies that more women may choose childlessness in the future. It would appear then,

that if women can procure access to birth control, education, and employment, they can opt for childlessness.

Contrary to the idea of childlessness increasing, however, other authors predict a decrease in voluntary childlessness due to social trends toward conservatism, pro-family, anti-equal rights, and anti-abortion movements (Houseknecht, 1982a, 1982b; Houseknecht, 1987; Jacobson & Heaton, 1991). Apparently, then, experts disagree on whether the trend toward voluntary childlessness is increasing, decreasing, or levelling off (Houseknecht, 1982a, 1982b; Jacobson & Heaton; Veevers, 1983).

It is important to note that trends in voluntary childlessness are often difficult to ascertain because statistics are often not reported separately for voluntarily or involuntarily childless women. Furthermore, actual versus expected rates of childlessness are imprecise indicators of eventual permanent childlessness. The later onset of attempted childbearing does not result in the expected children for some women. Other women, intending not to have children in the future may, in reality however, eventually bear children.

With women's greater workforce participation and emerging patterns of delayed childbearing (Gerson, 1985), it is conceivable that the numbers of voluntarily childless women could continue to grow. Given the changing realities of women's lives and reproductive activities, and because little is known about the experiences of women who have chosen not to become mothers, it becomes increasingly important to understand how women that have eschewed having children construct meaningful lives for themselves.

Social Perceptions of Voluntary Childlessness

Some researchers have looked at societal attitudes toward motherhood and parenthood (Callan, 1983a, 1983b; Hare-Mustin & Broderick, 1979; Veevers, 1980). Hare-Mustin and Broderick affirmed some support for a motherhood myth among younger women who were much more likely to idealize motherhood and its rewards and were less likely to

support abortion rights than were older women. Seventy-five percent of the sample (N=301, 177 female and 124 male undergraduates, graduate students, and their parents) rejected the notion that women derive their identities from motherhood. This would seem to contradict the notion that there is a cultural myth that females need to be mothers in order to identify themselves as fully female.

Significant direct and indirect pressure to conform to fertility norms is reported by voluntarily childless couples, especially by deciders who articulate their intentions not to have children early in their marriages (Callan, 1983b; Houseknecht, 1977; Ramu & Tavuchis, 1986). A Canadian study of 57 voluntarily childless couples (data collected in Winnipeg between fall 1975 and spring 1977) reports that a significant proportion of the individuals were criticized and stigmatized by family, friends, neighbours, and co-workers who called them selfish, self-centered, immoral, irresponsible, childhaters, and boors (Ramu & Tavuchis). Furthermore, voluntarily childless couples report that some inquisitive people question whether they are infertile and/or have marriage problems, and others assume that they dislike children. However, 31% of the 114 childless individuals in Ramu and Tavuchis' study report either support or neutrality from their parents regarding their decision to remain childless.

Not surprisingly, Jacobson and Heaton (1991) report a negative correlation between childlessness, and traditional family values and the support of extended family. This implies that those who want to maintain close bonds with their families may experience more pressure to conform to reproductive norms, if those families hold traditional values.

Houseknecht (1977) reports that VC women are conforming to the fertility norm (i.e., desire no children) of their reference groups. Women desiring no children choose reference groups that support their choice but also have fewer reference groups that they consider when making their decision (to be childless) than do women desiring children. Nonmothers

appeared more autonomous and less concerned about negative pressure and social sanctions from others than did intended mothers (Houseknecht).

Correlates, Motives, and Life Satisfaction

Researchers who have examined voluntary childlessness have primarily sought to identify demographic, psychological, relationship, and career correlates of voluntary childlessness (Bram 1978, 1984; Callan, 1987; Gerson, 1986; Gerson, Berman, & Morris, 1991; Goodbody, 1977; Houseknecht, 1979; Kiernan, 1989; Ory, 1978; Veevers, 1980; Watkinson, 1984). In attempting to understand why some individuals voluntarily forego parenthood, other researchers have attempted to identify women's motivations for choosing not to have children (Bram, 1978, 1984; Callan, 1983a, 1983b; Callan & Hennessey, 1989; Campbell, 1983; Gerson, 1986; Gerson, Posner, & Morris, 1991; Kaltreider & Margolis, 1977; Ramu & Tavuchis, 1986; Veevers). Houseknecht (1987), in a review of the literature on voluntary childlessness, found 29 studies reporting rationales for this life choice. Life satisfaction experienced by voluntarily childless individuals has also been the focus of some recent research (Alexander et al., 1992; Baruch et al., 1983; Callan, 1987; Connidis & McMullin, 1993).

Demographically, voluntary childlessness in women has been shown to be correlated with unusually high levels of education when compared to the educational levels of women in other parental statuses (Bram, 1984; Goodbody, 1977; Houseknecht, 1987; Kiernan, 1989; Veevers, 1983). Jacobson & Heaton (1991) found a positive linear correlation exists between women's childlessness and their number of years of education. Childless women reportedly earn relatively high incomes (Houseknecht; Veevers). Voluntarily childless women are more likely to have married when they were over 30 years of age and to have been only children (Kiernan) or eldest siblings (Kaltreider & Margolis, 1977). In two studies of parenthood motivation amongst childless individuals, older females in the samples were less motivated to parent than were younger females, and younger females valued children and the benefits of

childrearing more than older females did (Gerson, 1986; Gerson, Posner, & Morris, 1991). Several researchers have also noted that voluntarily childless women consider themselves nonreligious and rarely attend church services (Houseknecht; Ireland, 1993; Ory, 1978).

Antecedent conditions and attitudes are often correlated with childlessness (Bram, 1984; Goodbody, 1977; Kaltreider & Margolis, 1977; Veevers, 1980). Women were described as the tomboy of the family or father's pet, and were often the oldest child in the family (Kaltreider & Margolis). The influence of early socialization experiences and family roles, doubts about parenting interests or abilities, and a dislike of children and childish things are other correlations cited by some researchers (Bram, 1978; Campbell, 1983; Gerson, Posner, & Morris, 1991; Houseknecht, 1987; Ireland, 1993; Kaltreider & Margolis; Veevers). As such, women appear to be negatively judged in some studies. Barnett and MacDonald (1986) described their respondents as "inwardly oriented" (p. 157) and motivated by personal interests rather than by social concerns (e.g., overpopulation). But rather than viewing these as valid choices for women, these researchers added a negative connotation of selfishness or self-centeredness to these findings. In another study, from a psychoanalytic-psychiatric perspective, Kaltreider and Margolis report that their paid volunteer sample of women who were choosing either contraception or tubal ligation held certain attitudes and beliefs related to their mothers and to their own ability to mother. The research questions and choice of measures seemed to be mother-blaming, and meanings were not extrapolated from interview data (e.g., What does 'bad mother' mean? What would it mean to these women to become like their mothers?).

Psychological correlates and motives related to voluntary childlessness have often been the topics of study. The possibility of greater self-fulfillment has frequently been cited by childless women in various studies as one of the most important psychological motives for not having children (Bram, 1978; Houseknecht, 1987). Maintaining control over self, one's

future, and a childless daily routine (Campbell, 1983), and avoiding risks involved in childbirth (Houseknecht) have also been cited as motives for remaining childless. Not wanting to contribute to an already overpopulated planet, and a reluctance to bring children into a world where uncertainty about future world conditions exists were also motivations reported by some women for remaining childless (Callan, 1983a; Houseknecht).

The psychological correlate of voluntary childlessness most frequently cited by researchers is a sense of personal freedom experienced by women because of not having childcare responsibilities (Bram, 1978; Houseknecht, 1987; Kaltreider & Margolis, 1977). Childless women were found to value the freedom, spontaneity, independence, self-determination, and mobility of a childfree lifestyle and appeared to fear its loss through parenting (Goodbody, 1977; Houseknecht; Landa, 1990; Ramu & Tavuchis, 1986; Silka & Kiesler, 1977). According to Kaltreider & Margolis, some women apparently perceive an overwhelming responsibility associated with motherhood.

Childless women appear to have higher self-esteem than women in other parenthood statuses (Gerson, 1986; Gerson, Berman, & Morris, 1991), and seem to hold achievement goals as sources of satisfaction (Bram, 1978, 1984; Houseknecht, 1979; Ireland, 1993). Personal goals, personal growth and self-fulfillment, career, and educational success are highly valued by many voluntarily childless couples, and parenthood is perceived as a threat to the achievement of these values (Goodbody, 1977; Ramu & Tavuchis, 1986; Veevers, 1980). Many studies have reported that childless women are more autonomous, independent, and privacy-seeking than women of other parental statuses (Baruch et al., 1983; Callan & Hennessey, 1989; Houseknecht, 1987; Ireland; Veevers). These women appear to possess an internal locus of control (Watkinson, 1984), and to hold nontraditional views of female roles (Bram, 1984; Houseknecht, 1987; Ireland; Morell, 1990, 1993).

Protecting primary relationships is a motivation noted by many researchers. Childless women cite maintaining a happy or special marital dyad as very important to them (Baruch et al., 1983; Bram, 1978, 1984; Callan, 1983a; Campbell, 1983; Houseknecht, 1987; Ramu & Tavuchis, 1986; Veevers, 1980). Correlates of voluntary childlessness in marriages appear to include the childless women's valuing of egalitarian marital relationships which stress companionship, personal growth, and the self-development of both partners (Bram, 1978, 1984; Houseknecht; Veevers). Childless women in some studies have reported having higher marital satisfaction (Watkinson, 1984), and greater dyadic consensus, than women in other parental statuses (Callan, 1987).

Many authors have noted that childless women are gainfully employed in the labor force (Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1983), and that they are disproportionately engaged in high-status occupations (Bram, 1984; Houseknecht; Ireland, 1993; Kiernan, 1989; Veevers). Childlessness apparently affords some women the opportunity to develop career success and economic advantages (Baruch et al., 1983; Bram, 1978, 1984; Callan, 1983a; Houseknecht). Childless women value work as much as they value marriage and family, these women indicate a commitment to their careers by stating they plan on working indefinitely or until retirement (Bram, 1984).

Many studies have compared the life satisfaction of parents and nonparents (Alexander et al., 1992; Callan, 1987; Connidis & McMullin, 1993; Holahan, 1983). One prevalent sociocultural notion is that voluntarily childless individuals will be lonely, unhappy, or socially isolated as a result of their decision in later years (Connidis & McMullin; Veevers, 1980). Studies investigating life satisfaction report high levels of subjective well-being and mastery in the lives of intentionally childless women (Baruch et al., 1983; Connidis & McMullin).

For example, in a recent Canadian study, 678 persons aged 55 and over of varying marital statuses were given three measures of subjective well-being to determine whether and how parental status and other demographic variables correlated with happiness, depression, and life satisfaction (Connidis & McMullin, 1993). Participants, interviewed in their homes for an average of 1 hour and 9 minutes each, responded to forced-choice and open-ended questions in measures of subjective well-being. Childless participants were asked if they were childless by choice or circumstance. Parent-child closeness / distance was ranked by parents for each of their children on a scale between 1 (extremely distant) and 7 (extremely close), and then an overall score of closeness or distance from their children was established by the researchers.

Connidis and McMullin (1993) hypothesized that close parents and individuals childless by choice would report greater happiness, less depression, and more life satisfaction than either distant parents or participants childless by circumstance. Independent variables in this study were parental status, age, income, health, gender, and marital status, and dependent variables were happiness, depression, and life satisfaction. The researchers based their hypotheses on the assumption that it is the quality of one's support network, which may include one's children, rather than parental status per se that determines one's subjective well-being.

Their results suggest that there was no difference in subjective well-being between parents who are close to their children and people who are childless by choice, for both males and females (Connidis & McMullin, 1993). In contrast, participants childless by circumstance reported significantly lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction and higher levels of depression than parents who reported being close to their children. Distant parents were less happy and satisfied with their lives than were close parents. For women, higher income and greater health were significantly related to all of the subjective well-being measures.

The implication of Connidis and McMullin's (1993) research is that the quality of parental relations with children, rather than whether or not one has children, affects subjective well-being in older men and women. Furthermore, the researchers state that issues of choice, control, and mastery over aspects of one's life affect levels of well-being. Poor relations with one's children and being childless by circumstance, both indicative of some lack of control over fulfilling one's desires, appear to be correlated with lower subjective well-being. Individuals who reported parent-child closeness or childlessness by choice are similar in having high levels of subjective well-being, something the authors attribute to sharing similar levels of mastery over fulfilling their life desires.

This research (Connidis & McMullin, 1993) was a more inclusive study of childlessness than most because they interviewed and compared women (and men) of all marital statuses. Furthermore, addressing the topic of childlessness as one that has implications for the complete life-course, rather than just implications for the part of adulthood where reproductive decision-making is salient, is key because it lessens the invisibility of individuals who are childless by choice and assumes that these individuals are still important to discussions of family life.

In another study, women report being happy with the levels of variety, privacy, relaxation, and independence in their lives (Callan, 1987). Women further report satisfaction with their freedom to choose how they spend their spare time, gratification with their life purpose and achievements, contentment with the quality of their friendships, satisfaction with their economic well-being, and contentment with the amount of admiration they receive from others (Callan).

In various studies, many intentionally childless women report viewing parenthood as a restriction of personal freedom, an obstacle to class mobility, and as an impediment to occupational and educational success and to the development and maintenance of marital

couple solidarity and satisfaction (Baruch et al., 1983; Bram, 1978; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990, 1993; Ramu & Tavuchis, 1986; Veevers, 1980). The examination of these correlates of voluntary childlessness are useful. However, they do not inform us about the lived realities of women who choose not to be mothers, a socially invisible and marginalized group. As mental health practitioners it is important to know more about how these women construct meaningful lives for themselves. Feminist scholars have called for research valuing women's experiences, pertinent to women's lives, exploring differences amongst women, and targeting changes to oppressive conditions (Harding, 1987; Worell & Etaugh, 1994). Although some researchers have described specific aspects of intentionally childless women's lived experiences (Baruch et al.; Gerson, 1985; Ireland; Morell, 1990, 1993, 1994), none have employed a phenomenological paradigm in their studies. These studies of women's experiences will be reviewed in depth later in this discussion.

Reproductive Decision-making

Most of the voluntary childlessness literature has focused on the decision to remain intentionally childless (Callan, 1983b, 1984; Callan & Que Hee, 1984; Campbell, 1983; Goodbody, 1977; Houseknecht, 1979; Veevers, 1980). According to Silka & Keisler (1977), voluntarily childless couples think about and discuss their reproductive decision earlier and consider it for longer than couples in other parenthood statuses. Goodbody found the decision-making process among participants followed one of two courses: weighing parenthood vs. nonparenthood and then choosing parenthood, or as an evolving lifestyle into which children would not fit. Veevers states that childless wives think a lot more than their husbands about avoiding parenthood and tend to promote the advantages of remaining childless. Silka and Kiesler found voluntarily childless couples more likely to use, and anticipate continuing to use, birth control.

Houseknecht (1979) conducted personal, in-depth interviews with 51 married women who are childless by choice. She found that the timing of the decision to remain childless can vary, but that women usually cannot pinpoint exactly when they resolved to remain childless. Early articulators decide early on, often before marriage, that they desire to remain childless. Houseknecht reports that they are generally antinatal, tend to not like children, and are attuned to the costs of childrearing. On the other hand, postponers reportedly came to their decision gradually over time and tend to perceive the benefits of their current, childfree lifestyle. They are not antinatal, but rather they are afraid that children would disrupt their current lifestyle or the marital dyad. Houseknecht's study of types of decision-makers also reports that both groups of childless women valued autonomy and are characterized by an achievement orientation.

Veevers (1980) conducted unstructured in-depth interviews with 120 childless wives and 36 childless husbands between 1972 and 1977 to illuminate the sociologically relevant themes and issues of childlessness. Open-ended interviews explored sexual and marital adjustment, and the respondents' feelings about parenthood. Veevers' findings are similar to those of Houseknecht (1979), in that she also reports two categories of decision-makers among voluntarily childless participants: repudiators and aficionados.

Repudiators, early articulators that do not accept the parenthood mystique, adamantly reject the parenthood role, often before marriage (Veevers, 1980). This path involves the early recognition and clearly stated intentions to remain permanently childless. Veevers states that repudiators are concerned with the disadvantages of parenthood, tend to dislike children, view themselves as different than parents, and hold an "antinatalist philosophy" (Veevers, 1983, p. 93). This is in sharp contrast to the views of the postponers who reportedly do not view themselves as different than others, and who choose to become aficionados of interests other than parenting (Veevers, 1980). Aficionados, postponers that have a passion for

pursuits that would be hampered by having children, reach their decision gradually after marriage because of increasing attraction to and focus on a childfree lifestyle. This more common path of decision-making involves a succession of indefinite postponements, a questioning of the inevitability and desirability of the parenthood option, with the eventual realization that a decision to shun parenthood has been made.

Veevers (1980) claims that it is theoretically critical to distinguish between repudiators and aficionados when conducting research or generalizing about childlessness. Veevers (1980, 1983) states that differences between types of decision-makers goes beyond the mere timing of the decision and reflects basic differences in motives for childlessness.

Among other things, the family backgrounds of early articulators and postponers have been compared to one another by researchers seeking correlates of reproductive decision-making. Houseknecht (1979) reports that early articulators experienced lower levels of warmth in their families of origin, and recounted a sense of psychological distance (measured as differing attitudes) from their parents during adolescence. The mothers of the early articulators in Houseknecht's study ostensibly stressed achievement. Callan (1983b) observed in his work that those who chose early and definitely not to have children were raised in smaller families, reported that overpopulation concerns had influenced their reproductive choice, and that they had encountered more negative reactions to their decision than had postponers. Some postponers' parents reportedly encouraged autonomy which allowed the postponers to resist social pressures to reproduce (Houseknecht, 1979).

Some further differences that researchers have examined between early articulators and postponers are reviewed here. Houseknecht (1979) noted that early articulating women were more likely than postponers to have been previously divorced. As evidence for the greater degree of commitment to the childless decision thought to be demonstrated by early articulators, Callan (1984) reported that early articulators were more likely to seek an abortion

or adopt out any child born to them than were postponers. Furthermore, many studies reported that early deciders were more committed to their childless option than were postponers because the early articulators were more likely to have been voluntarily sterilized (Callan; Callan & Que Hee, 1984; Houseknecht).

Postponing women typically opt for permanent childlessness after years of experiencing maternal ambivalence and consequent delays in reproduction (Houseknecht, 1979; Ireland, 1993; Veevers, 1980). Delays grant women time to consider and reject the lifestyle changes that parenthood would necessitate (Veevers), and to realize that their sense of personal fulfillment does not hinge on becoming mothers, as the pronatalistic cultural messages implied (Baruch et al., 1983; Veevers). Careers take on increasing importance for many postponers as the years pass and the likelihood of motherhood diminished (Ireland).

Reproductive Decision-Making and Women's Identity Shaping

Many women now have control over their reproduction through the use of contraception and abortion. Gilligan (1982) claims that fertility choices present a moral dilemma for women. Women's identities are traditionally defined by relationships that follow from the reproduction of children and shape the women's moral judgments. According to Gilligan, despite society's support for a variety of reproductive choices, the exercise of reproductive choice privately brings women into conflict with a feminine moral imperative equating goodness and self-sacrifice.

Decision-making is critical to achieving a sense of identity. Marcia (1980) hypothesized identity formation as a gradual, nonconscious process arising from making many small decisions repeatedly, which eventually "form themselves into a more or less consistent core or structure" (p. 161). Voluntarily childless women construct their own identities as they choose a lifestyle based on small decisions not to reproduce (e.g., with each sex act when they use contraception). The decision-making process has been described as

cyclical for some childfree women, with the decision being reaffirmed again and again in the context of transitions in marital status or career (Landa, 1990).

In my study, I interviewed women who were deliberately and permanently childless. Other researchers (Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990) stated that the resolve to remain childless does not necessarily translate into the reality of permanent childlessness for all women, however. Women who are postponers, or are childless by delay (Ireland), are often women who expect to have children eventually and are waiting for a better time, relationship, or set of circumstances before they have children. The actual decision to be permanently childless may never be made, rather the decision may be taken out of the women's hands by an external event such as the gain or loss of a relationship, or by biological/physiological events such as health problems or menopause. For other women, the circumstances may change and their resolve not to have children may dissolve as they revert from being postponers to being mothers.

Not having children is part of who these women are, in essence, it is part of their identity. The commitment not to have children is most clearly seen amongst early articulators (Ireland, 1993; Veevers, 1980). Often these women have made a decision to be childless irrespective of partners or circumstances, have undergone sterilization, and for many their continuing childless status is part of a marital agreement with their partners (Veevers). Early articulators are committed to their childlessness through their own intent and deliberation, rather than by default or delay. Given the differences between postponers and early articulators in their commitment to remaining childless, it seems important in any study of voluntary childless women to ensure that the women have clearly articulated and lived with their decision to remain permanently childless, for at least two years. This will more likely ensure that they have integrated this aspect of their lives into their identities.

Despite strong pronatalism and the continuing cultural feminization of characteristics such as nurturance and care for relationships, it appears that a substantial number of women are choosing life options other than motherhood. As reviewed in this chapter so far, most research to date focuses on the demographic, sociological, and psychological correlates of voluntarily childless individuals, their decision-making processes, and their life satisfaction (Bram, 1978, 1984; Callan, 1983a, 1983b, 1984, 1987; Callan & Que Hee, 1984; Campbell, 1983; Connidis & McMullin, 1993; Gerson, 1986; Gerson, Berman, & Morris, 1991; Gerson, Posner, & Morris, 1991; Goodbody, 1977; Houseknecht, 1979; Kaltreider & Margolis, 1977; Kiernan, 1989; Ory, 1978; Ramu & Tavuchis, 1986; Silka & Keisler, 1977; Veevers, 1980, 1983; Watkinson, 1984). Sometimes this research has had a pronatalistic slant which casts these women as social deviants (Jacobson & Heaton, 1991) and personally deficient (Gerson, Posner, & Morris, 1991), or as having defective personalities (Kaltreider & Margolis, 1977). Women who are childless by choice and who could serve as healthy role models of diversity in reproductive decision-making are still somewhat invisible in society (Morell, 1994; Wollett, 1991). English's (1989) stories of childlessness as told by the individuals themselves about their own lives and presented as alternative forms of parenting (although not analyzed as data), have begun to flesh out the diverse experiences of childlessness.

I now turn to the work of a few researchers, who despite the complicated nature of the task, attempt to illuminate various reproductive and general life options available to adult women. These researchers waded into the complexities of women's experiences in their attempts to honour diversity amongst women.

Experiences of Intentionally Childless Women

Cultural invocations of motherhood as an inevitable path for married women falsely homogenizes women's desires, aspirations, life circumstances, and opportunities, and erases the possibility of differing life options for adult women. Feminist research has shown that

"differences among women, and among men, are greater than those between them" (Worell & Etaugh, 1994, p. 446). When such variability amongst women is considered, the process of arriving at permanent childlessness is more complex than simply choosing not to have children (Morell, 1990). Some interview research has grappled with the complexities of choice and has attempted to disentangle the notion of female identity from motherhood in order to highlight diversity amongst women (Bartlett, 1994; Baruch et al., 1983; Gerson, 1985; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990, 1993, 1994).

In an effort to investigate what it is like for British women not to become mothers in a context that expects women to mother, Bartlett (1994) conducted 50 in-depth interviews with women between 22 and 75 years of age, from varying marital statuses, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic statuses. Women first completed a detailed questionnaire and then were later interviewed in person or by telephone in either a loosely structured way that pursued a broader understanding of childlessness or in conversations that targeted specific issues. Bartlett reports that there is no one "type" of woman that chooses not to become a mother, but that the shared characteristic amongst her participants was that they were "distinctive." She found her participants to be "determined, imaginative, thoughtful, loving, funny, sometimes sad, often fulfilled and happy, always spirited" (p. xii). Overall, Bartlett's book interestingly weaves her participants' stories of their experiences of being voluntarily childfree together with social issues, an extensive literature review, and many up-to-date statistics related to women's social and economic realities. Limitations of this study include a sample of women from varying marital statuses and sexual orientations without results reported consistently, a loose design, inconsistent data collection and analysis methods, interviews that did not target the women's lived experiences specifically, and a lack of coherent synopses of the most common themes elicited from the women's narratives. My study of partnered heterosexual women investigated the lived experiences of intentionally childless women using a

phenomenological method, rather than seeking responses to specific issues assumed to be related to voluntary childlessness in the way Barlett did.

In an attempt to understand how women make "inextricably linked decisions about work and family" (Gerson, 1985, p. 240) and to explain the subtle but emerging changes in patterns of work and childbearing for women, Gerson conducted and audio-taped structured, in-depth, life-history interviews with 63 homemakers, working mothers, and childless workers, between 27 and 37 years of age, who were from a variety of educational, class, and occupational backgrounds. These randomly-chosen working- or middle-class women were variously single, married, or divorced. Fifty-five percent had two to four years of college and most of the remaining 45% had finished highschool. Forty-nine percent of the women had no children at present, and 22% planned to remain childless in the future. Pretests indicated that these women's decisions about work and family were "cumulative, interactive, and developmental" (Gerson, p. 245).

Gerson's (1985) findings disclose that these women negotiated diverse developmental paths through early adulthood. Her concise summary of these complex navigations through career and family commitments reveal four groups of women:

Each group can be distinguished by its initial orientation toward work and family (determined primarily by early childhood experiences) and the subsequent experience of stability or change in adulthood. Some of those who began adulthood wanting to become mothers and homemakers stayed on the domestic path; others veered away from the private sphere and into the workplace. Among those who entered adulthood ambivalent toward motherhood and aspiring for workplace accomplishments, some remained on this nondomestic path, and others moved toward domesticity over time. Those whose initial life plans did not change enjoyed supportive circumstances that sheltered them from challenges to their goals or from enticements to new directions. In contrast, unexpected obstacles or opportunities faced those who did change as they moved through the early stages of adulthood (p. 21).

Gerson (1985) argues that the expectations on mothers to do an excellent job of childrearing has increased. Gerson's extensive and well-documented study reveals some of the complexities involved for women in making choices about work and family. However,

this study is limited for several reasons. First, by asking structured interview questions, the researcher presumed to know what was meaningful to respondents about having or not having children. Second, the women interviewed were all still within their childbearing years. They varied in their commitments to childlessness, and their circumstances or proclivities may yet become more conducive to reproduction. Third, Gerson interviewed women of varying marital and reproductive statuses. In my study, in contrast, I did not employ a structured interview, nor did I assume in advance what was meaningful about women's experiences of choosing to remain childless. Furthermore, participation in my study was restricted to participants who were partnered heterosexual women that were deeply committed to permanent childlessness.

Married employed childless women were one of six groups of women between 35 and 55 years of age investigated by Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers (1983) in their study of 300 women. Procedures included 62 in-depth interviews and 238 randomly-sampled, interviewer-conducted surveys with women. The researchers investigated the influence of the major life domains of marriage, children, homemaking, work, sexuality, parents, and finances upon women's sense of well-being. Well-being was measured on two dimensions: Mastery and Pleasure. The first dimension, Mastery, was related to action and instrumentality, and was comprised of measures of self-esteem, a sense of control over one's life, and low levels of anxiety and depression. The second dimension, Pleasure, was related to feelings and the quality of the women's interpersonal relationships, and was comprised of measures of optimism, satisfaction, and happiness.

Baruch and her colleagues (1983) interviewed women in six groups: married without children, at home; married without children, employed; married with children, at home; married with children, employed; divorced with children, employed; and, never-married, employed (childless). For the purpose of identifying relevant topics and issues for inclusion

in the survey questionnaire, and prior to survey-interviewing the 238 randomly-selected women, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with about 10 women from each group (62 women in total, located through snowball sampling), to gain a sense of what each group's pleasures, problems, conflicts, and issues were in the major life domains.

Baruch et al. (1983) concluded that for these women their well-being did not hinge on whether or not they had children. Rather, well-being was correlated to satisfying employment. However, whether the women had a choice about their childlessness or not did affect their sense of Mastery. In this regard, the voluntarily childless women reported a higher sense of Mastery than did the involuntarily childless women. Whereas employment appeared to positively influence the Mastery component of well-being in all four groups of employed women, whether or not women had children did not in itself predict well-being. Satisfying employment was a particularly important component of both Pleasure and Mastery for the childless married women in this study (Baruch et al.). Employed married childless women had nearly the highest sense of Mastery of any group of women in the study. In contrast, at-home married childless women's sense of Mastery was the lowest of any group in the study. These women's sense of Mastery was reportedly heavily dependent upon their obtaining approval from their husbands.

Overall, childless women were likely to score as high as mothers did on measures of both Mastery and Pleasure. These findings contradict the myth of motherhood which states that women need children in order to feel happy and fulfilled (Baruch et al., 1983). Linked to this is one of our most persistent cultural myths about childlessness, the belief that childless women regret not having children. In direct rebuttal to this myth, the authors had this to say about the childless women (including voluntary and involuntary) in their study, "Rarely did women express the kind of deep, wrenching sorrow that childless women are expected to experience, and many expressed no regret at all" (Baruch et al., p. 125). However, a major

concern of childless women was their feeling of missing out on the unique experience of having children and a "real" family, which Baruch and her colleagues point out may include exaggerated notions of happiness that would not match the actuality of having a "real" family. The sense of missing out depressed the Mastery scores of childless women at home but did not depress the Mastery scores of employed childless women (Baruch et al.).

Rewards, rather than regrets, seemed to accompany childlessness for the women in Baruch et al.'s (1983) study. Married childless women reported the major rewards as freedom to do things spontaneously, to follow their own interests, and to involve themselves more in other responsibilities, and as freedom from the financial and emotional demands of childrearing. Furthermore, these women reported being rewarded by feeling a "sense of specialness" (p. 129) about their marriages.

Married women in this study also derived Pleasure from the intimacy and sexuality available to them in marriage (Baruch et al., 1983). For childless women, sexual satisfaction with their husbands played an especially important role in their attainment of Pleasure. While working childless women reported that they derived Pleasure from both love and work, Pleasure for childless homemakers appeared to derive from focusing their lives upon their husbands and marriages, and also appeared to depend heavily upon the sexual satisfaction they achieved with their husbands.

Baruch et al.'s (1983) survey is important because the authors asked women to what extent things in each domain of their lives were rewarding or distressing to them, that is, what mattered to them. This very valuable and comprehensive study of adult women's experiences is limited, however, because the purpose of the study was to collect and analyze data with a view to understanding what contributed to or undermined women's well-being. By asking what was gratifying or troubling, even the initial interviews served to focus the attention and responses of the women in the study in a particular direction. In my interviews

with childless partnered women, I proposed to simply orient women toward their experiences of childlessness and allow them to speak of these experiences.

Women childless by choice were one of three groups of women investigated by Ireland (1993). Three hundred and thirty women initially responded to two television interviews and a newspaper article about the research. Brief screening questionnaires were used to select 100 women between 38 and 50 years of age, of varying marital statuses, sexual orientations, and racial backgrounds, who were then "stratified" (p. 162) into three childless groups: childless by choice ("transformative"), childless by delay ("transitional"), and childless by infertility or other health reasons ("traditional"). Participants completed a standardized instrument for measuring "masculine", "feminine", and "androgynous" character traits before the focused in-depth interviews were conducted. Transformative women "more frequently exhibited a masculine or undifferentiated sex role" (p. 164) orientation than did women in the other two groups. Transitional women "more frequently exhibited an androgynous orientation" (p. 164). Based on her results Ireland states that a "masculine" orientation can facilitate the development of a professional career and help maintain resistance to social pressures to reproduce. She further states that women with undifferentiated orientations do not perceive themselves in traditional gender-role terms. With regard to the transitional women, Ireland reports that women with an 'androgynous' orientation express maternal ambivalence and have a long period of exploration of various activities as they develop themselves. She ponders whether this "reflect[s] the fact that the traditional masculine and feminine worlds are equally compelling to them" (p. 164).

Family of origin findings for transformative women include 25% of these women reporting that at least one of their parents was significantly afflicted by emotional difficulties or alcoholism (Ireland, 1993). Forty percent of transformative women (childless by choice) and 25% of transitional women (childless by delay) report having been a caretaker or

"parental child" (p. 168) in their families of origin. In comparison to the other two groups, more women in the transformative group are the eldest children in their families of origin. Although 20% of the transformative women report having been scapegoated in their families of origin, achievement is emphasized more in these families than in the families of the other two groups. Transitional women's families, on the other hand, emphasize independence, interpersonal connections, and a loving attitude toward others. Nearly two-thirds of the 39 women in the transformative group are professionals, whereas one-half of the 32 women in the transitional group are professionals. Non-professionals, unemployed women, and students comprise the other one-third of the transformative group and the other one-half of the transitional group.

Many transformative women experience their primary relationships as egalitarian and not rigidly fixed into a traditional gendered division of labour (Ireland, 1993). They emphasize the importance of the quality time they spend with their partners. The strong connection that some women have with their partners reportedly is a significant reason why these women decided not to have children. They expect that the egalitarian nature of their relationships will be disrupted if they introduce a child into their marital dyads, and that they will have to shoulder the bulk of childcare responsibilities.

Consequently, many transformative women view having both a career and children as mutually exclusive (Ireland, 1993). They recognize that the major responsibility for parenting will fall on them if they become mothers and they do not want to be trapped in roles that they believe will disrupt their egalitarian marital relationships and interfere with other activities and relationships.

Transitional women have shorter primary relationships than do the women in the other two groups (Ireland, 1993). Over half of the women in this group are single or divorced, and not in committed-partner relationships. Many women in this group want both

the career advantages brought about by social change and, possibly, motherhood. However, maternal ambivalence and an inability to create the right circumstances for childbearing contribute to delays in motherhood. For these women who had anticipated being mothers 'sometime', midlife and the realization that they have delayed childbearing beyond possibility prompts a questioning of the meaning of their childlessness for their lives. This questioning often involves transitional women redefining themselves and seeking outlets for nonmaternal creative expression (e.g., career changes or deeper commitments to creative aspects of careers, arts, community involvement, and nurturing of others).

Transformative women report satisfying their creative impulses within the contexts of devoting themselves to excellence in their careers or other endeavors (Ireland, 1993). The researcher reports that women in all of the groups experienced a subjective shift in the cultural meaning of not being mothers, "from absence [of children/mothering] as something missing to absence as creative potential" (p. 126). This new meaning of absence opened up space for creativity and self-definition.

Ireland's (1993) study is valuable because it points to a separation of female identity from motherhood by challenging gender "as the most important category for structuring human experience" (p. 42). Oddly enough, however, one limitation of this study is that gendered theoretical frames of reference and the use of a standardized instrument for measuring gender identifications partially structures the data interpretations around gender categories, thereby perpetuating gender stereotypes. Second, while it is a strength of Ireland's study that she included women from a variety of childless statuses (by choice, by delay, and involuntarily childless), marital statuses, and sexual orientations, for my study, women who are partnered, heterosexual, and voluntarily childless have been chosen because our culture most strongly pressures these particular women to reproduce. A third limitation of Ireland's study is that she provides insufficient explication of data collection and analysis procedures

associated with her focused in-depth interviewing, thereby leaving reviewers with inadequate means to assess or replicate her procedures. In my study, I will not be using gender as a theoretical frame, the sample will be limited to partnered heterosexual women that are childless by choice, and I will be using a phenomenological interview to elicit participants' lived experiences of intentional childlessness.

Morell (1990, 1993, 1994) interviewed 34 intentionally childless heterosexual women between the ages of 40 and 78 who were either legally married or in long-term live-in relationships, for the purposes of giving attention to the lives of women who are not mothers, to recognize diversity amongst women, and to denounce the ideology of motherhood which equates femaleness with motherhood. Women selected for this study were either permanently childless due to being beyond menopause or they were deeply committed to childlessness. All of the women were European-American, except one woman who was Latina. A significant number of these women were from first or second generation eastern European immigrant families. Although three-quarters of the women were from poor or working class backgrounds, 33 of the 34 women in the study had college education and the majority of them had advanced degrees. While most were professionals, business professionals, or worked with some specialized knowledge or artistic skill, others were full-time students or retired.

Prior to the interviews, all of the participants completed a brief written autobiographical exercise, wherein they conceptualized their lives like books with chapters (Morell, 1990). Audio-taped interviews started with the participant "narrator" (Morell, 1994, p. 156) reading and discussing each chapter of her life with the interviewer. As narrators told their stories thusly, the interviews "became very focused on the participant's experiences" (p. 157).

A common experience of the women in Morell's study was of having a sense of "being different" (Morell, 1994, p.45) than other women, and of their developing "nonconformist identities" (p. 44) that were outside the gender definitions of acceptable culturally acceptable femininity. Differences experienced by the women, even prior to their choosing not to be mothers, often included physical appearance, childhood interests, education, religion, and ethnicity. Morell suggests that many of these women's sense of difference from other women was encouraged, not by their own choosing necessarily, but by their not fitting into the "stereotypes of correctness" (p. 43) for women (e.g., 'too tall' or overweight, culturally different, intellectually or occupationally ambitious).

Narrators described social prejudice against their childless status and the necessity of creating a strong sense of self not dependent upon cultural approval (Morell, 1990, 1993, 1994). Morell observed that these childless women held desires and interests subversive to societal gender norms, especially the norm of motherhood. All of the women described that they regularly had to engage in the "explanatory work" (Morell, 1990, p. 121) of providing reasons to inquisitive others for their childless status. It was common for these childless women to reverse the standard cultural meanings ascribed to mothers and not-mothers by contradicting the usual attribution that childless women live empty, meaningless lives. As Morell (1994) said,

the women I interviewed constructed having children as a loss of present gratifications and future possibilities. Thus they reversed the taken-for-granted *meanings* of motherhood and childlessness. Motherhood is perceived as the negative condition, characterized by loss. Remaining without children is the affirmative practice (p. 68).

In fact, these narrators often ascribed their sense of personal fulfillment to their chosen childless status. "Freedom" (Morell, 1994, p. 144) was commonly identified as an advantage of being childless, although this freedom, for some women, resulted in their overcommitting themselves in their chosen work or public spheres.

Women in Morell's (1990, 1994) study rejected the "do-both" ideology, which suggests that women can be effective in a career and also undertake to manage a household, a marriage, and care of children. Morell says,

Rather than fulfillment, doing both motherhood and self-defined work was viewed as an impossibility, a "set up" leading to frustration and failure and loss. These women were clear about the lack of supports available to them. Co-parenting was not perceived as a viable option by most women given their husbands' lack of enthusiasm and/or demanding employment (1994, p. 64).

Some voluntarily childless women considered their marital relationships supportive, loving, and the embodiment of deep friendship, although most women in the study refused to identify themselves as a "wife" (Morell, 1990). They believed that they could not maintain an egalitarian marriage if they became mothers because structural subordination inherent in the motherhood role would be engendered with the introduction of children into the marriage, and deep interpersonal conflict between spouses would ensue. Some women believed that they could not count on men to support them emotionally or economically, and they did not desire parenting under these circumstances (Morell, 1993). Furthermore, Morell (1994) argues that in North America the cultural expectations of mothering have become extremely rigorous, demanding "detailed responsibility for the child's intellectual, psychological, social, and physical growth" (p. 65).

Wedges purportedly developed in the childless women's friendships with mothers (Morell, 1990, 1993, 1994). The women felt they had dropped to a position of secondary importance and that they could no longer look to their women friends for support and emotional connection once these women became mothers. Being childless, Morell's participants reported that they often felt excluded when in a group of mothers.

While the majority of the childless women in Morell's (1990) study experienced some moments of doubt about their choice to stay childless, "they didn't regret not having children; they never desired to have children in any strong way" (p. 167). However, for some of the

narrators who wanted young people in their lives, they apparently had difficulty establishing and maintaining permanent intergenerational bonds. Because they did not have children to rely on, Morell's participants reported that they tended to carefully plan for self-sufficiency in old age by having money and developing social networks to ward off isolation or public institutionalized care in later years. Often, however, these social supports that they had established were not recognized as valid by others.

In her analysis of the data, Morell (1990, 1994) declared her overtly political goal of deconstructing dominant patriarchal discourses which attempt to normalize motherhood and to discredit and pathologize intentionally childless women by labelling them deviant. She stated that she interpreted the participants' words politically while attempting to stay as close to the reality of the women's statements as possible. Morell reported that childlessness emerged not as a 'lifestyle choice', but rather, as a political act in the contest over power and meaning between childless women, other individuals, and patriarchal society in general.

The postulate that participants' experiences are socially constructed limits Morell's (1990) sociological study to an interpersonal realm. A second limitation is that the focus of Morell's study was on the deconstruction of discourses and meanings assigned to voluntary childlessness in our society. She provides both political analyses and alternative constructions of discourses about childlessness. Despite the participants exploring their meanings of intentional childlessness through answering open-ended questions, Morell's interpretative focus was clearly on the interactions and negotiations between childless women and their patriarchal context. Sociological rather than psychological theoretical assumptions appear to have guided the data interpretation. In contrast, my data analysis will seek to find existential commonalities in women's experiences of childlessness.

Overall, the studies reviewed in this section on women's lived experiences of intentional childlessness have added to our knowledge of the issues and difficulties women

face in choosing not to be mothers (Baruch et al., 1983; Gerson, 1985; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990). As women who value independence, personal accomplishment, self-development, and autonomy, many of the intentionally childless women in these studies reported viewing motherhood as a constraining role that prevented a satisfying commitment to a career simultaneously (Gerson; Ireland; Morell, 1990). Many intentionally childless women in these studies reported frequently experiencing pressure to explain their reasons for not having children (Gerson; Ireland; Morell), sometimes being labelled selfish by others (Morell). Ironically, in response, many women in Morell's sample reported demonstrating pro-social practices of caring for the social welfare of others by contributing time and money to charitable organizations and institutions.

Voluntary childlessness was experienced by many women in these studies as the result of a complex process arrived at rather than as a decision once made (Gerson, 1985; Ireland, 1994; Morell, 1990). "Women's routes to childlessness as they described them were complex and varied, encompassing psychological and social explanations" (Morell p. 142). Women negotiated their own paths through adulthood, with their lifecourses being influenced by the interaction of work and family decisions (Gerson). Gerson says:

Aside from those with infertility problems, most women who have postponed or rejected motherhood have found the option of childbearing difficult to implement *and* have found other options more attractive. Their choices thus reflect both constraints on their fertility behavior and opportunities to pursue other goals. There is, furthermore, an uneven distribution of fertility as economically disadvantaged women with fewer attractive alternatives to motherhood tend to have more children than educationally advantaged women. (p. 10).

On the issue of choice, Morell (1990) says,

Commonly constructed as a "choice" or a "decision," few women actually experienced childlessness as such. Rather, the majority of nonmothers described a long, complex historical process that culminated in living permanently without children. There were many explanations, many variables, related to changing circumstances. Even though their behavior remained consistent, i.e. no children, some women reported on-going reconstructions of why this was so. For some, it was difficult to understand oneself, much less try to explain oneself to others. (p. 141).

Previous researchers have found the process of choice to be more complex than first imagined (Gerson; Ireland; Morell).

Although very valuable findings emerged, these researchers (Baruch et al., 1983; Gerson, 1985; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990, 1993, 1994) all employed theoretical frameworks to structure the studies, collect and analyze the data, and understand the findings. Hence, these studies have assumptions embedded therein about what is important and meaningful to investigate about women's experiences of voluntary childlessness.

There are no studies to date which have used an unstructured phenomenological interview method to obtain descriptions from women who are under 45 years of age of their lived experiences of not being mothers. We have not heard about the experience of childlessness from the women's perspectives. Most of the previous research has been within a positivist paradigm, without exploring the richness, depth, or complexity of the phenomenon. For the most part, those studies appear to have imposed some structure upon the possible expressions of the participants by either using standardized tests, semi-structured interviews, or data analysis methods which sought to impose presupposed categories of meaning onto the data (e.g. dividing the women's experiences into early articulators or postponers as done by Veevers and others).

Chapter Three - Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological method was employed to obtain complete descriptions of adult women's experiences of intentional childlessness. Harding (1987) suggests that women should be studied "from the perspective of their own experiences so that women can understand themselves and the world" (p. 8). In my literature review I was unable to locate any studies which had used unstructured, in-depth, phenomenological interviewing to elicit partnered, heterosexual women's descriptions of the experience and meaning of being childless by choice.

An existential-phenomenological approach was appropriate to elicit the stories of intentionally childless women because it attempts to capture the lived experiences of the women and to understand the meaningfulness of these experiences as they are lived in everyday life (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990; Van Manen, 1990). The goal of this research was to elucidate individuals' understandings of their voluntary childless, to allow them to bring their deep, perhaps unexamined, meanings to consciousness, and to provide an opportunity for the women's expressions of their personal meanings of being childless by choice (Osborne, 1990). The present researcher sought to uncover deep and rich meanings of women's experiences of intentional childlessness, set against the backdrop of their experiences of living in a culture that offers few role models of married/partnered women who are not mothers.

Lather (1986) suggests that construct validity can arise from the definitions given by the participants. For several of the themes in this study, "categories arising out of the language of respondents" (Lather, 1986, p. 69) were gleaned from interviews and stood as themes of the phenomena of voluntary childlessness. The other themes were extrapolated after dwelling at length on the data for the meanings of the experiences (Colaizzi, 1978). A phenomenological approach was useful here because the unstructured interview method

allowed the participants to express what was most meaningful to them about their experiences and, in this way, allowed participants to guide and structure the interviews. This phenomenological researcher did not impose *a priori* assumptions about what was meaningful, and hence, important to investigate about the phenomenon of intentional childlessness.

Personal Assumptions

The person of the feminist researcher enters the research in a way that was remarkably unlike former "objectivist" approaches to research (Harding, 1987). The subject matter of the research and the person of the inquirer are placed on "the same critical plane" (p. 9), enabling a fuller scrutiny of the results, with researcher biases revealed.

An existential-phenomenological approach also requires that the personal assumptions of the researcher be examined because the "content-method-approach" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 55) is considered a unity. The choice of research subject matter and methodology shapes the researcher's approach and is coloured by the presuppositions of the researcher. The present researcher is "a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests" (Harding, 1987, p. 9). Consistent with other theorists writing about the impossibility of a value-free research method, Van Manen (1984) places the researcher squarely within the frame of the research, rather than outside of it. He states:

phenomenological research....is always the project of someone: a real person, who, in the context of particular individual, social, and historical life circumstances, sets out to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence (p. 40).

Openly acknowledging our assumptions, presuppositions, and ideologies, however, makes it even more critical for researchers to implement methods for unearthing and containing potential sources of bias and influence if we wish our research to be considered credible, trustworthy, and rigorous (Krefting, 1991; Lather, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Self-assessment or self-reflection, also called "reflexivity"

(Krefting, 1991, p. 218) or "bracketing" (Husserl, cited in Van Manen, 1990, p. 47), were recommended in order to reveal and attempt to articulate any influences the researcher might introduce from her perceptions, background, or interests when she framed the study, and organized and analyzed the data.

We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character (Van Manen, 1990, p. 47).

Colaizzi (1978) posited that in coming to understand our own personal interest in a research topic through examination, scrutiny, and analysis, we truly appreciate that understanding an investigated phenomenon is an excellent criterion for undertaking a particular research project. Therefore, Colaizzi suggested that the first question of the researcher to herself needs to be "Why am I involved with this phenomenon?" (p. 55).

In response, the present researcher is a voluntarily childless divorced woman who has never been pregnant. During the data analysis, my 25-year-old stepson re-established contact with me after 7 years of having no contact. Throughout the years I worked on this study, my preference has been to remain biologically childless. My personal concerns go back to 1972-1974 on the issues of overpopulation, reproductive freedom, and the right to abortion. They have also been long standing regarding the lack of adequate familial and social support for mothers; children's impact on the personal freedom of their parents; how children may interfere with intellectual and creative activities by demanding time and attention; how children may impact the dyadic closeness, relationship, and sexuality of a married couple; and conversely, questions about what the consequences are to be for me in old age if I do not have children.

My assumptions about what I expected to find are openly revealed hereinafter as part of the reflexive process. First, I believed that the women would probably have experienced

pressure to have children, and I anticipated that during the in-depth interviews they might express some hostility or resentment about this. Whatever their accompanying emotions, I did not expect to find these women feeling neutral or indifferent about this aspect of their experience, because mothering has been fairly central to both cultural definitions of female adulthood and adult women's definitions of themselves (Phoenix, 1991). I suspected that these women would engage in the "explanatory work" (Morell, 1990, p. 121) of accounting for their childlessness when others inquired about it.

I expected these childless women would have found meaning in their careers, personal interests and activities, and/or primary heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, I expected to find that the participants received validation and support in their childlessness from their spousal partners or other reference group members, and I assumed that they would indicate contentment with their childless lifestyles. Alternatively, I expected that these women may at times have been faced with a lack of meaningful alternatives for achieving recognition from some people (e.g., parents, friends, co-workers, acquaintances) with regard to their femininity and status as "complete" adult females, due to their nonreproductive fertility statuses.

I expected the participants to engage in "reverse discourse" (Morell, 1990, p. 126) during the interviews. Morell defined this type of discourse as explanations that are both self-affirming and yet challenging to interpretations of childlessness framed "as loss, as absence, as the vacant opposite of motherhood" (p. 126). I expected that some participants might have reframed their childless status from the "deficient" definition given by the culture into one of "superior" status. In their discourses, Morell's participants reversed the dominant assumptions about feminine or characterological deficiencies that were held ideologically within the culture and also postulated within psychological development literature. Morell's participants "present[ed] themselves as complete, fulfilled, as missing nothing" (p. 127). In

this regard, I expected to find the childless women in my study describing themselves as fully complete and satisfied, but also as different from women who had or planned to have children.

Participants

Colaizzi (1978) suggests the term "co-researcher" (p.69) for the researcher and the participants in order to equalize the relationship between them. The terms **participant** or **co-researcher** were used to refer to the women in the study.

In this study, a non-random purposive sample was used (Veevers, 1980). According to Veevers, availability sampling is appropriate for certain types of research, especially if the alternative is to abandon the research. The first six participants who met the selection criteria discussed below were included in the study.

An important criteria for inclusion in this phenomenological study was that the participants were able to articulate their experiences (Colaizzi, 1978). Only participants who had demonstrated an ability to articulate their experiences of intentional childlessness were included in the study.

Six heterosexual, partnered or married women, between the ages of 38 and 44, who stated that they had been intentionally childless for at least two years were interviewed for the study. The women who volunteered for this study were Caucasian, working- or middle-class women with varying educational and family of origin backgrounds, and differing religious affiliations.

Six women were interviewed for this study. This number was considered adequate to "illuminate the phenomenon" (Wertz, cited in Osborne, 1990, p. 82) and to ensure that the experiences contained in the women's descriptions would be recognized by others who had shared in the experience of the particular phenomenon under investigation (i.e., intentional childlessness)(Krefting, 1991). Sandelowski (cited in Krefting, 1991) called recognition by

others "truth value" (p. 215), and Osborne (1990) referred to this phenomenon as "empathic generalizability" (p. 82).

To be included in the study, women needed to state clearly that they were childless by choice (Houseknecht, 1979). In order to be included, participants had to have been aware of their commitment to a childless life option for a period of at least two years for two reasons. First, in this study I wanted participants who were living with their decision to remain childless, whether or not they had actively pursued permanent treatment to prevent pregnancy. Living for two years with the awareness of their voluntary childlessness was presumed to demonstrate commitment to this life option, while it provided time for reflection upon the choice. Second, this phenomenological research was aimed at capturing reflective accounts of the co-researcher's lived experiences. The subjective experience of time, "lived time (temporality)" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 104) was considered a fundamental existential of the "lifeworld--our lived world" (p. 105). Thus, it was hoped that a two-year period of living as a voluntarily childless woman would have cultivated the participant's personal meaning-making of the experience and fostered her ability to articulate it. Recounting the lived experience of intentional childlessness necessarily included reflection on past experience, and for the purposes of this study, it was hoped that a minimum period of two years was adequate time to have passed while the experience was lived and reflected upon.

Women needed to be heterosexually partnered, specifically either married or in live-in relationships that they considered to be committed and/or permanent. This criteria was important because Snitow (1992) has suggested that partnered heterosexual women experience more pressure to reproduce than do single women or lesbians. One step-parenting woman who was biologically childless by choice was included in this study. Women's self-definitions and identifications are equally important to definitions imposed by

researchers, thus, it would have been remiss to exclude this step-parent who volunteered to be in the study and defined herself as intentionally childless.

Women between 30 and 55 were eligible to be in the study because sexual and reproductive maturity for this group of women coincided with feminism and changes wrought by the women's movement, such as changing roles for women in the home, workplace, and society. These changes afforded increased opportunities for women to advance into realms previously reserved for men. During this time contraceptive availability and reliability increased, allowing women more options in terms of their fertility status, at least biologically and theoretically, if not in social actuality. The actual age range of participants (38 - 44 years) who volunteered was much narrower than the criteria would have allowed, however.

Heterogeneity of the participants was considered important in order to reflect the reality of very real differences among women and, possibly, of their experiences of voluntary childlessness. Therefore, the researcher did not exclude women based on class, socioeconomic status, and religious or ethnic background.

Procedures

Colleagues were made aware that I was looking for heterosexually partnered women who identified themselves as intentionally childless, to participate in this research. These individuals were asked to encourage possible participants to call me for information about this study. As with any volunteer sample, those who volunteer may have different characteristics than those who do not (Veevers, 1980). In this case, however, a volunteer sample was justifiable because this research was concerned with individual, not generalizable, experience (Osborne, 1990).

If word-of-mouth and networking did not elicit enough co-researchers, I was prepared to contact, No Kidding!, a Vancouver social organization for childless women and men and

request permission to post and/or circulate a recruitment notice (Appendix A). This recruitment step was not necessary, however, because a colleague was able to refer more than enough potential volunteer participants for my study.

All of the six participants interviewed for this study were recruited by another researcher, Laurie Minuk, for her study of voluntarily childless women at mid-life (between 45 - 55 years of age, who were no longer fertile). These women had responded to either her notice in a Vancouver and Lower Mainland area newspaper (Appendix B) or to a CBC radio interview where she asked for volunteers. The women interviewed in this study did not meet the reproductive cycle or age criteria (i.e, they were not post-menopausal and/or were too young) for Minuk's study.

After obtaining the permission of eleven women who did not meet her criteria, Minuk passed me their names and telephone numbers. These women lived in the Vancouver and Lower Mainland area and were potential participants for my study. Starting at the top of the list of names and going down it in the same order each time (skipping women I had already spoken to), on four different days I attempted to contact potential participants. If I got no answer or I got an answering machine I moved to the next person on the list (without leaving any messages on machines). When I reached a woman in person, I introduced myself, explained that Minuk had given me her name, told her briefly about the purpose, procedure, and time commitment of my study, screened her to ensure she met the criteria for this study (Appendix C), and invited her to participate. The first six women I spoke to in person (numbers 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10 on the list) met my criteria and agreed to participate. The first, third, fourth, and fifth women from the list had responded to Minuk's newspaper notice (Appendix B), and the eighth and tenth women had responded to the radio interview. With each woman, she and I agreed upon a mutually convenient date, time and place to conduct the in-depth interview.

Unstructured in-depth audio-tape recorded interviews of forty-five minutes to one and one-half hours were conducted with participants to obtain descriptions of their experiences of being childless by choice.

As a method of inquiry, interviewing is most consistent with people's ability to make meaning through language. It affirms the importance of the individual without denigrating the possibility of community and collaboration (Seidman, 1991, p. 7).

The research question under investigation was: **"What is the meaning and experience of intentional childlessness for partnered women who have selected this life option?"**

Participants were asked to speak in the first-person because "The first-person voice is the self that speaks from experience, that knows from observation....is authentic; I will call it the 'I,' the authentic self" (Jack, 1991, p. 94). De Vault (1990) suggested that difficulties women have in articulating their experiences during interviews can speak volumes to the researcher prepared to mine the meanings.

First, participants were briefed about the purpose of the study and informed that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. They were asked to sign two copies of an ethical consent form and to keep one for their own records (Appendix D). To help the women focus clearly on the purpose of the research, I read aloud an orienting statement (Appendix E) that explained the study and stated my wish for them to describe their experiences of being childless by choice (Colaizzi, 1978). They were asked if they had any questions and if they understood everything that was being asked of them.

During the interviews, I listened empathically to the women's accounts in order to grasp the meaning of these experiences for them. Empathic reflections, probes, and open-ended questions were used to facilitate the women's explorations and to help clarify and expand upon the deeper meanings of their experiences (Appendix F). The statements within the accounts and the structure of the accounts themselves were expected to reveal meanings

and to illuminate how the women organized and made sense of their experiences of being voluntarily childless. If, during the interview process, the women requested information about my interest in this topic, they were assured that I would share my story with them or they could ask me questions at the end of the first interview.

After the transcription of the first interviews, I wrote a biographical synopsis (bio-synopsis) about each participant that included relevant demographic data and a brief narrative account of her intentional childlessness. Following careful analysis of the data, I mailed each participant a copy of her own bio-synopsis and the synopsis of common themes from all of the protocols for her authentication. I asked the women to verify the accuracy of my narrative reconstructions of their experiences of voluntary childlessness and to validate my interpretation of the common themes (Krefting, 1991; Lather, 1986; Osborne, 1990).

Next, I conducted a follow-up validation interview (Appendix G) with each participant so that she had an opportunity to authenticate or suggest changes to her own bio-synopsis and my common thematic descriptions. Validation interviews or "member checks" (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 77) are considered an important part of providing credibility to qualitative research. Related to establishing trustworthiness, this member checking allowed the participants to review the data analysis to ensure accurate representations of their viewpoints (Lincoln & Guba, cited in Krefting, 1991). This kind of validation is recommended because it ensures the face validity or "truth value" (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 76) of the data analysis. Participants confirmed that the researcher's interpretations of the data had a goodness of fit and rang true for them (Krefting, 1991; Lather, 1986; Osborne, 1990).

After the follow-up validation interviews, I had the common themes reviewed by three childless women who were nonparticipants in the study. They verified that most of these themes accurately illuminated their own experiences of intentional childlessness

(Appendix H). This step was for the purpose of establishing "empathic generalizability" (Osborne, 1990, p. 82).

Rigor

Lather (1986) suggests certain minimum requirements for the trustworthiness of data and the credibility of research which openly criticizes the status quo or dominant ideology of a culture. Her recommendation for the triangulation of methods was met in this research. While phenomenological data analysis methods generally call for a search for common themes (Colaizzi, 1978), Lather (1986) maintains that a search for counterpatterns, seeking to disconfirm data convergences was a requirement for meeting triangulation of methods. Lincoln and Guba (1986) suggested, as one method of increasing rigor, employing an exhaustive searching for "negative instances relating to developing insights and adjusting the latter continuously until no further negative instances are found" (p. 77). A triangulation of theory was not necessary in this study because it did not propose to test theoretical propositions.

A "systematic self-reflexivity" (Lather, 1986, p. 72) was undertaken and documented by the researcher, as I reflected on how the "logic of the data" (p. 72) had altered my perspective. During data collection and analysis I engaged in extensive reflexivity in order to document my personal response to the participants and the context of the research. Described below are the two kinds of documentation that I kept and their rationales: a research field journal and interview fieldnotes. Krefting (1991) suggested the use of a field journal to record the daily schedule and logistical aspects of the study and to record methodological decisions and their rationales. Furthermore, as she recommended, this researcher logged personal information such as feelings, ideas, thoughts, and hunches arising from contact with participants. I also documented media events that I suspected might have

influenced myself or the participants during the course of the data collection and analysis in the research field journal.

Second, I made fieldnotes immediately after each of the interviews. Fieldnotes were to include the context, place, and time of the interview, any timely historical events that could have influenced myself or the participant, unusual occurrences, non-verbal behaviour, facial expressions and emotional reactions of participants, as well as pacing and speed of the interview. Predominant themes or repetitions of ideas which came to my awareness during the interview were to be documented here. I found, however, that each interview was an intense and emotionally draining experience for me. As a result, my own process and feelings tumbled out into the fieldnotes along with observations I had made about the participant in the interviews, rather than my documenting my own internal process separately in the research journal. Fieldnotes and transcripts of each interview were kept together in a folder for each participant. The dated research journal and interview fieldnotes assisted me in becoming aware of any unforeseen biases and in capturing my immediate responses to the interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Written consent was solicited from the women at the beginning of the initial interview (Appendix D). Participants were ensured anonymity by offering a pseudonym for themselves to be used in all oral and written communication regarding the study. The transcripts were kept in confidence between my typist, myself, and my research supervisor. Personally identifying information was excluded from the bio-synopses of individual participants. Participants only saw their own bio-synopsis and the overall themes extracted from all of the protocols in the course of the validation interviews.

Participants were advised that support was available throughout the research if their personal explorations evoked helpful insights or painful feelings. They were informed that if

further assistance was necessary I could give them several referrals to mental health services for counselling (e.g., Family Services of Greater Vancouver, YWCA). During data collection and the follow-up interviews, I kept the participants informed about their role and my expectations. They were encouraged to ask questions about the research procedures and process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded according to guidelines for the thematic analysis of phenomena devised by Colaizzi (1978). First, taped interviews were transcribed in their entirety. All of the protocols (transcripts) were read and reread (Colaizzi, 1978). Interview tapes were listened to while I read the transcripts, in order to immerse myself in the data and meanings contained therein (De Vault, 1990; Opie, 1992). Opie (1992) suggested that a written transcript of the spoken word loses emotions, intensity, and the range and movement of speech patterns which can give richness to the data. Listening to the tape while reading the transcript simultaneously helped the researcher to understand more fully the horizontally present meanings and inferences which were strongly conveyed by voice, intonation, and emphasis but were not conveyed by the written words in the transcript (De Vault). Pauses and spaces of silence were deliberately left by the interviewer during the interviews, enabling the women time for thoughtfulness. Pauses, hesitations, and changes in direction mid-sentence (De Vault) suggested that thought processes, feelings, and new awarenesses were percolating to the surface of the women's consciousnesses. Second, each protocol was carefully read, and significant statements or phrases related to the experience and meanings of intentional childlessness were highlighted and extracted (Colaizzi, 1978).

Third, extracted statements were creatively formulated into meanings by attempting to discover and illuminate the hidden meanings that were only contextually or horizontally present in the protocols (Colaizzi, 1978). Fourth, a creative mindset was employed in order to

make the leap from the meanings to the themes (Colaizzi). The extracted meanings and statements from all of the transcripts were organized onto a master chart, a visual representation of the data and formulated meanings were thus arranged into clusters of themes (Colaizzi). This step of discerning and weaving together data into common themes was the most time consuming and difficult part of the process; it required dwelling on the material at great length. Clusters of themes were validated by referring back to the original protocols to ensure that all possible themes had been gleaned and that clusters of themes accurately represented what was implied in the original protocols (Colaizzi). At this point, I had five common themes. All of the clusters of themes were validated. A search for disconfirming case examples was done in conjunction with this step (Lather, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1986), and discrepancies and contradictions were woven into the analyses of common themes (Colaizzi, 1978). Colaizzi (1978) said, "the researcher must *rely upon his [her] tolerance for ambiguity*: he [she] must proceed with the solid conviction that what is logically inexplicable may be existentially real and valid" (p. 61).

Fifth, an exhaustive description of the experience of intentional childlessness for heterosexually partnered women was written that attempted to integrate all of the results obtained up to that point (Colaizzi, 1978). Sixth, Colaizzi suggested that researchers ought to formulate a statement that attempts to identify the fundamental structure of the phenomenon of living as a voluntarily childless woman, but I did not comply with this step.

Seventh, I conducted follow-up interviews with participants and asked them to comment and or correct their bio-synopses and the list of common themes (Appendix G)(Colaizzi, 1978). Relevant new data that emerged from the first four follow-up interviews was woven into the final account of the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness. A theme that had initially seemed weak and that I had collapsed into another theme once again emerged strongly as a result of the validation interviews. I constructed a thematic category in

which it stood on its own. This new theme was checked out with the last two co-researchers when I conducted their follow-up interviews and they agreed that it could stand on its own as a theme in their lives.

Next, the clusters of themes were checked for empathic generalizability by intentionally childless women who were not interviewed for the study (Appendix H)(Osborne, 1990). Changes they suggested were considered in conjunction with a reexamination of the original data. Protocols were reread by the researcher to discover if the suggested changes made sense in light of the data of the participants' experiences of being childless by choice. After dwelling on one rather complex theme, I reinterpreted aspects of it and divided it into two separate themes, which allowed for more clarity.

Limitations of the Study

The results of this phenomenological study are not statistically generalizable, instead most of the experiences of these co-researchers have empathic generalizability (Appendix H) to other women who have experienced or are experiencing the phenomenon (Osborne, 1990). However, the theme entitled, *A Sense of Uneasiness Around Children*, which was a theme in the narratives of the six co-researchers, did not have empathic generalizability to the three theme readers. Another limitation is that while it was hoped the co-researchers would be heterogenous, those who actually did volunteer for the study were demographically fairly homogeneous with regard to race and socio-economic status. Furthermore, as women who volunteered to be interviewed, these women may have different characteristics than women who did not volunteer (Veevers, 1980). Finally, the fact that so few women were interviewed, and that they were volunteers in response to another researcher's recruitment, rather than being recruited through extensive random sampling procedures, limits the generalizability of the findings even to other voluntarily childless married women.

Chapter Four - Results

A short, biographical synopsis of each of the six participants begins this chapter. In the next section, the seven common themes that were extracted from the women's narratives of their experiences of intentional childlessness are discussed.

The Women's Biographies

The six women in this study were recruited via a notice in a large daily Vancouver and provincial area newspaper and in response to a radio interview with another researcher. Each participant chose a pseudonym for herself at the in-depth interview. The participants' biographical synopses follow.

Annie J.'s Biography

Annie J., 44 years of age, was raised in a family that moved a lot because her father was in the Air Force. The eldest of two siblings by four and one-half years, she resented having to babysit and take her little brother places. She also hated having to babysit other people's children for money. Annie came from a strict but intact family of origin, where she reported being "seen and not heard." Her mother worked outside the home sporadically "to keep busy while the kids were in school."

Annie J. has known since the age of twelve that she did not want children. When Annie J. was nine, her mother was pregnant. Annie remembers that her mother lost that baby and vividly recalls the scene of her parents coming home from the hospital without the baby and of her mother being very upset.

As a girl Annie was sure she was born in the wrong body, sure she should have been a boy. Her interests were in "boy stuff." She climbed trees, and went fishing, hunting, and camping. At age eleven or twelve, about 1964, she went to the local RCMP detachment in Whitehorse "looking for information on how to be a Mountie and got told that girls can't become Mounties." She felt this was "damned unfair" but it "passed from [her] mind" until

years later. As a child, her other career interests included being a pilot or a lawyer. Like her father, Annie J. went into the Air Force right out of high school. Her father had always emphasized achievement and, although he had hoped she would go to university, he was pleased that she entered the Air Force. She was a non-commissioned officer, working shift work in top secret communications for about two years before leaving the Air Force because, as she said, she could not take orders without questioning them.

Annie J. has taught adult education courses (e.g., motorcycle riding, defensive driving) in the past, but currently does not have a paying job. She stated she liked her life unstructured. She did some "emotional counselling" of others, crochet, reading, and attending science fiction conventions. She stated that she enjoyed letting her curiosity take her where it may, for example, into learning about psychology, history, archeology, cultural anthropology, medicine, and religion. She requested that I include that she had been aware of the "immanence of deity" on an "intuitive and instinctive" level all her life and had recently been engaged in its formal study.

Both of her marriages began after her stipulation to her future husbands that she would definitely not be having any children. Annie J. first married at age 23, and parted company with her first husband of one and one-half years because, although they liked one another, they fought constantly. She is still friends with him and her "wife-in-law" because they share the common interest of attending science fiction conventions. Married to her second husband for 14 of their 16 years together, Annie J. is currently in a strong, "attuned" marriage with a "patient" man ("the opposite of me"). She went through menopause 16 years prior to this interview when she went into the hospital to have a tubal ligation, the doctors found tumours, and so they conducted a complete hysterectomy on her. She stated that it is a relief not to have to use pills, foam, or other contraceptives.

Annie J. is in regular contact with her brother's family, and she enjoys good relations with both her mother and her mother-in-law. Her dad died at the age of 50 when she was about 22 years of age. Annie J. and her husband have three cats that sleep with them in their kingsize waterbed.

Participating in this research prompted these statements of relief, "I'm not the only one; I'm not alone."

Bette's Biography

Bette, a 38 year old woman, described herself as coming from a "very dysfunctional" family and as being raised by "two children" who were both children of alcoholics but were not drinkers themselves. She has one sister, two and one-half years younger who is single and childless, though she has investigated the possibility of adopting. As a teenager, Bette really disliked babysitting. Having never felt happy within her family of origin, Bette is puzzled at the incongruence she feels between her recollection of life in her family and the happy looks on their faces in the family photos of her childhood.

Bette was supported by her mother in her opposite-gender interests and received most of her "gratification" as a child and youth from her father because of excelling in school. As a child she observed that Mom did not do anything exciting, but that Dad did, and hence, Bette stated that she preferred guns and playing "Cowboys and Indians" to playing with dolls. As an adult she took up "hunting, fishing, and killing things." Bette's mother was at home with the children, although she had worked as a teacher of mentally handicapped children before Bette was born. Bette's mother died of a brain tumour at about age 48-50 when Bette was 21. (Bette does not know her mother's birthdate). The family dissolved at that point; Bette reports that her dad then virtually abandoned she and her sister as daughters.

Bette is a microbiologist and works in the environmental field; recreationally, she instructs adults in sports and teaches piano to adults and children, and loves hunting and

horse-showing. As a microbiologist, she does not have any hope for the future of the Earth, she stated, "The world is falling apart, as a species we won't survive."

Bette has "always known" that she did not want children. All of Bette's three marriages were contingent upon her not having children. She underwent a tubal ligation when she was "about 29 or 30," once she found a doctor who would perform the surgery. About a year and one-half to two years after that when she began experiencing problems with her menstrual cycles, she refused a hysterectomy suggested by her doctor and subsequently went through early menopause.

Relationships have not been easy for Bette. Her first two marriages were ruined, in her opinion, because of her excessive expectations around doing everything perfectly and her inability to relate in ways that would maintain the relationship. In her third marriage now of three years, she has spent time doing intensive work on herself through counselling and self-help, and as a result expects this marriage to last her lifetime.

Bette has infrequent contact with her Dad because he and his current wife fight and argue constantly. She has a "distant but polite" relationship with her sister that is "improving as we learn to trust each other more." Bette is the only woman in the study with stepchildren (a girl aged 9, and a boy aged 5), although she still emphatically defines herself as voluntarily childless. The children visit on occasion, but Bette definitely does not see herself as a surrogate mother to these children.

Catsky's Biography

Catsky, 43 years old this year, is the youngest of a large family of six sisters ranging from seven and one-half years to fourteen years older than she is. She was an aunt by age nine and an incident with a baby relative alerted her to her own desire not to have children. As a youth, she disliked being expected to babysit her sisters' children, and did not enjoy being with the children but never voiced her displeasure to her family. She has been married

to her partner for 23 years, a man from an "enlightened" family where he and his one older and one younger brother were taught by their mother how to cook. In Catsky's extended family, all of her sisters but one are married and have a "lot of children," and she reports that some of the sisters are "not very happy with their marriages." She says that she and her husband do not feel that they have very much in common with her sisters. Catsky felt very strongly that she was not cut out to be a mother and, therefore, she made the choice not to have children permanent for herself by having a tubal ligation in 1977 at the age of 24. In their decision not to have children, she and her husband were partly supported by other voluntarily childless people belonging to their social network. Catsky's mother, although not broaching the subject, had sensed Catsky's discomfort with children from early on and, after the fact, expressed relief to hear about Catsky's tubal ligation.

Catsky's mother was a schoolteacher before she married "later in life" at the age of 26. Catsky's dad died when she was 14; she was not included in the funeral planning, and instead she was removed from the home while the arrangements were made. She had felt closer to her father than she was to her mother at that time, and her adolescent experiences of high school and her power struggles with her mother were very painful as she just tried to survive the trauma of her dad's death.

Out of highschool in the early 1970s, Catsky took a commercial secretarial program and worked in offices for seven years. Next, she became a letter carrier for six years, and enjoyed her "very untraditional" co-workers. No longer able to "pack mail" after a traffic accident, she began and left a food services program because people were too "traditional" for her liking. She switched into a health care diploma program and graduated from that four years ago. She is currently studying health care management and working casual part-time. Catsky's mother respects her current school accomplishments.

Catsky and her husband had a friendship before they became partners. They like travelling, camping, canoeing, and socializing with their politically-minded and "non-traditional" friends. They have three cats. She currently has a good relationship with both her mother and mother-in-law. An important influence throughout Catsky's life has been a cousin that is close to her in age, who lost her mother within a year or two of Catsky losing her Dad, and who has also decided not to have children. Catsky has limited contact with her sisters, usually only seeing them at Christmas. Catsky has observed how her sisters were "tied down" with their children, and for her, observing the "overwhelming responsibility of parenting" has been the most significant reason she declined becoming a mother. Catsky believes that her decision-making around whether or not to have children was hampered by a lack of available information.

Catsky's friendship network of politically-minded people has given her "a sense of identity", has supported her "autonomy of thought", and has made her feel "not alone" in holding her value of equality in relationships and in valuing those of differing sexual orientations.

Jane's Biography

Jane is a 42 year old woman, who was raised by her single mother. When she was a teenager, Jane was told about "the circumstances of [her] birth" by her mother. Jane's parents were never married, her mother was legally separated from a husband at that time, and Jane's father only lived with Jane and her mother for the first six months of Jane's life. After that, her father only came by occasionally for short visits until Jane was six or seven years old, and she recalled that that was about the last she saw of him. Back then, in the mid-1950s, Jane felt stigmatized by not having a father around. While her mother worked to support them, Jane was often left to live with her aunts and cousins. When Jane developed a stutter, a counsellor suggested that the separation from her mother was harmful for the little girl and that she

needed to live with her mom. Thereafter and until Jane was 12, she and her mother lived in situations that had an older, stay-at-home landlady that Jane could come home to for lunch and after school. Jane believes that her relationship with her mother has left her scarred from having had her ideas and opinions continually undermined.

Upon graduating from high school, Jane took a practical college course in business administration and executive secretarial skills because she believed that no one would want to marry her, that she would have to support herself. At age 23, Jane jumped on the opportunity to get out from under her mother's domination when her mother agreed to allow Jane to travel, doing missionary work. Jane believes life began anew with that break from home. She stated that it was the first time she had had any psychological or emotional space for self-discovery in her life; around this time she worried that marriage and children would compromise her "wonderful autonomy and independence." Doing missionary work she travelled and lived in various cities in Canada. After she arrived at B.C.'s "Bible Belt," she met her current partner, who has now been her husband, best (and only close) friend, for 15 years. She says he is the only person she is really comfortable to talk about all the details of her life with.

One year after they married, Jane and her husband decided not to have children, that they liked their "lifestyle" as it was; she referred to herself as "childfree." Jane had a hysterectomy when she was 37 years old. She and her husband have never regretted not having children, as he too felt it was more responsibility than he was willing to take on.

In her most recent job of 13 years, Jane did administrative and secretarial work for a local government, during which time she received a promotion to assistant manager. She ended that career 2 years ago, and "retreated" to her home to devote herself more to her church, social, and domestic activities. Jane recently returned to university to study languages briefly but has now left because of their acquisition of a very demanding puppy.

Jane currently has as little contact as possible with her aged mother who lives across the country. She says she does not tell her mother much about her life because she wants to avoid her mother's continuing criticism and her "explosions."

Kim's Biography

Kim is a 43 year old woman, the middle child in a family with three daughters. Her happy pre-adolescent period was spent in a remote area seventeen miles from the nearest community, in a "female-dominated household in a female-dominated area" that imposed no constraints on girls about what they could and could not do. When the family moved into a community, and she began menstruating and developing physically, her father began to place constraints on her freedom. This made her very unhappy. Kim reported that her father was an alcoholic who held to rigid sex roles. He had difficulty accepting that his wife wanted to begin going out to work once the daughters were in their teens, in anticipation of the girls leaving home. Kim's homelife became rocky through her teenage years and she could hardly wait to leave home. Kim recalled that she had given herself a pep-talk in the mirror to "just hold on" for about 5 years until she could leave home. (She left in 3 years at age 18). Like other teenage girls, Kim babysat a few times to earn money but she found it distasteful so she gave it up. Kim perceived that her mother wanted her to have the experience of earning money.

Kim got married to her current partner when she was 18 years old and they made a "5-year-plan" not to jeopardize their youthful marriage by adding a child to it. She also witnessed her younger sister have a child at 16 and, subsequently lose her marriage; Kim was reluctant to risk a similar fate. Kim recollected that she believed she had three spontaneous abortions early in her marriage.

As a young married couple, she and her husband travelled for years at a time during the first 5 years of their marriage. Subsequently, they made a second 5-year-plan, which

again did not include children because they wanted to continue working hard and saving their money to fund their continuing extensive travelling. She reports that they were also into partying and drinking, and children would have hampered this lifestyle.

After that period, Kim was enrolled in university and they did try on occasion to conceive a child but she realized that often she would postpone trying to get pregnant because her school work took precedence in her life. Kim was the only woman in the study that had tried to become pregnant on a few occasions. She reports that at the time "having a baby seemed like it would secure the future" with her husband. At one point in her marriage, Kim had reevaluated her own life and their future together, and had realized she was responsible for her own happiness and that her lifeplan did not include children. At age 29, in 1981, Kim made her final decision not to have children and has not tried to conceive a child since then. In the follow-up interview she stated, "In hindsight I realize that each attempt at having a family was a foolish attempt to guarantee that I'd be taken care of."

Kim completed a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology and has worked for a family planning organization. She now provides job-search instruction to single mothers seeking educational and employment upgrading, and her workplace provides contact with children. She and her husband have more plans for travel. She has "frequent and loving" contact with her family of origin, after having worked through her "painful childhood issues".

Kim reports that her parents and in-laws are disappointed that she and her husband did not have children. Kim has observed that her mother and sisters (who are mothers) have a connection that Kim and her mom do not share.

Sarah's Biography

Sarah, a woman of 43, is the older of two daughters by two years. She was born in New York state and raised in Connecticut. Her mother was frustrated at not being able to have both a career and children. Sarah's father, a social worker, had been a conscientious objector during

World War II, and worked at Yale University. Sarah described her family of origin as "very healthy, happy, and authentic," where each individual was respected and appreciated for who they were. The children were encouraged to express their feelings and to communicate openly with their parents. The family supported the children's interests, choices, and creativity. Sarah's parents respected the children by not pulling them into any problems they may have been experiencing. Sarah said, "My parents get an A+ for parenting."

Sarah said she knew from about the age of four that she did not want children. Sarah left home at age 18, has a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Dance, and a Master of Fine Arts degree in Theatre Arts. Sarah said, "My nature is one of being a creative artist." She teaches movement and dance, and works with actors at the university level. She finds that her work continually invigorates and nourishes her sense of creativity. In particular, she said teaching acting is extremely powerful for her because of the emotional intensity involved in aspects of acting. She considers her contact with young people in her career as "a way to nurture someone who's already here," as opposed to bringing another person into the world.

Sarah's mother is very supportive of Sarah's choice to be childless and she is excited for Sarah because she sees her daughter living the independent life she wanted for herself. Sarah's mother is now in her seventies, finally living an independent life, flying all over the world without Sarah's father. Sarah's grandmother was also independent; she had four children and she worked. Sarah feels that by not having children she is living out the dreams of her foremothers, dreams that were "genetically" resting in the female "psyche" of her family lineage. In contrast to her, Sarah's sister had an overwhelming impulse to have a child, and lost a boyfriend that she loved because he did not want children. Her sister married a man that also wanted children and they now have a child together.

In selecting a mate, Sarah consciously chose a man that did not want children and who would support her independence. She weeded out other potential partners prior to her

husband, based on knowing that they wanted children; Sarah was certain that she did not want children (even if those potential partners did not believe her). She has been with her husband "about 17 or 18 years," and she says they both agree that they are individuals that each need a lot of independence.

Common Themes

Seven common themes were formulated during the data analysis as they emerged from the in-depth interviews conducted with the participants. Each of the themes reflects the experience of intentional childlessness for all six married women interviewed for this study. The participants usually began their narratives of their experiences of being childless with early memories, although the themes are not necessarily laid out chronologically here. Instead, they are presented in a rough order of how they seem to relate to what the women value, why they did not want children, how the participants explain their differences from women who are mothers, how they have dealt with pressure to become mothers, and who the women are.

The first two themes are related to how the women have constructed their lives in ways that are meaningful to them. The next two themes are related to how the women experienced children and how they viewed parenting. The fifth theme involves how the women viewed themselves in relation to other women, especially mothers. The sixth theme involves the women's perception of other's expectations of them and of how they justify their choice not to be mothers. And finally, the seventh theme involves the women's sense of themselves and their identities. Quotes were drawn from the women's narratives to illustrate the essence of each theme. The seven themes are:

1. A Strong Sense of Independence and Autonomy.
2. A Sense of Needing Control and Certainty.
3. A Sense of Uneasiness Around Children.

4. A Sense of Parenting as an Overwhelming Responsibility.
5. A Sense of Being Different than Other Women.
6. The Experience of Withstanding Demands to Mother.
7. An Evolving Sense of Self Not Identified with Motherhood.

Each of the seven themes are elucidated and expanded upon in the following section:

A Strong Sense of Independence and Autonomy

The experiences of independence and autonomy were strong themes in the participants' narratives. The words "choice", "freedom", "seeker", "exploration", "rebellion", "creative", and "independence" are sprinkled throughout their personal stories. Freeing the body, mind, and soul from domination is a thread in many of the narratives. An evolution of independence was apparent in these women's experiences and, for most, an historical family context set the stage or supported these developments. Maintaining sovereignty over their bodies and autonomy in their lives, the participants related experiences of creating their own paths. Most had shaped a sense of self grounded in their own values rather than on an identification with their parents or husbands. Generally, this sense of independence and autonomy was supported and approved by the women's marriage partners. Freedom from monotonous daily routine, freedom to make choices, and flexibility in life direction were values of these women. The freedom to engage in creative or learning processes unencumbered was important to the participants.

Personal responsibility was shouldered by these women in exploring and creating their own lives. All endeavoured to understand and live by their own values. All have cherished and protected their autonomy in considering what was best for themselves: "I don't actually think I've ever had a role model for anything. I've sort of gone on my own direction for everything." Another woman related: "I pretty much always called my own

shots as a woman....If what I am living is not a happy thing, then I need to recreate my life, I need to invent me...."

Independent strivings of women's mothers or female ancestors were meaningfully identified with by some of the co-researchers. For example, one woman reflected how her mother had yearned for a career, independence, and children, but that society did not support such choices for women then. Also her grandmother had been "very, very independent...she had four children, but she was like a suffragette, she fought for women's rights, and so there's a lineage thing." This participant reported devoting herself to a career and to raising others' awareness of environmental and overpopulation issues, and like others in the study, she experienced herself as living out the "manifest destiny" of her female lineage.

Historically, some participants had received parental support for their independent interests, and some women's parents had role-modelled independence and the defiance of "authorities" for their daughters. For example, one woman reflected how her father had told a school librarian to let his daughter read what she wanted, when the librarian had tried to hinder her from reading "boy's" books. Another woman wanted to study sciences because she was interested in becoming a "scientist", "astronaut", "doctor", or "veterinarian." She experienced pressure from a high school principal to take sewing and home economics. She remembered that her mother "went tromping down there [to the principal, saying], 'No. No. No.'," supporting these early opposite-gender science interests. Also, the mothers and/or fathers of participants were reported to range from indifferent and non-intrusive to supportive of their daughter's choices not to have children.

Independence evolved in many of the women's lives after they had experienced being hurt by the thwarting and invalidation of their early attempts at expressing their thoughts and feelings, and, for some women, by having to justify their existences within their families of origin. Some reported being "seen and not heard." As children, some of the women had

sensed that they were not "liked", not "welcome", the "wrong gender", treated like "chattel", or "a prisoner" within their families. One woman recounted how adults had misunderstood and disrespected her as a child: "All of my feelings were invalidated, 'You don't feel that way. Oh, that's stupid'." In contrast to the home environments they had witnessed other children living in, several of the women in this study experienced safety in not sharing conflicting opinions with a parent. For example, one participant "learned to be quiet and keep things to myself." Another woman's independence was fostered as a young girl when adults "had no respect for my opinions" and she responded by claiming her autonomy, thinking "Well, screw you. I'll do what I want. I'm just going to live my life and I don't have to live yours. And I don't have to live up to your expectations."

Undergoing emotional evolutions engendered greater independence in several of the women's lives. For example, one participant spoke of an earlier emotional state: "I was so shut down I didn't really know who I was." Four counselling sessions promoted her ability to recognize and assert her individuality. She reflected, "Now, it's no problem....I know where I am and I end. And I know where you are and where you begin." Several women reported recognizing their own value and worth after they left home as young adults and recalled becoming more assertive in that process; some had little sense of their own opinions and values until after leaving home.

With many of the women characterizing themselves as rebellious, these women reported refusing to relinquish their autonomy in matters affecting their liberty. For example, one woman, married to a man with children from a previous liaison, stated that she had not conformed to her husband's expectation that she don the mantle, "stepmother." Rebelliousness appeared to be bolstered by assertiveness for many of the women in the study.

Aware of the pronatalistic cultural context in which they live, these women have claimed their personal right to choose for themselves not to become mothers and to exercise

their own judgment in carving out a life for themselves, as illuminated by one of the participants: "...never did...my view of a family, ever include children....I knew...that that wasn't exactly the norm...." Several women articulated that they had no need to "prove" themselves as women by producing offspring. The women in this study have steadfastly maintained autonomy from the societal expectation that adult women ought to have children.

A reluctance to rely on others, and a lack of faith in the ideal of two-parent stability and harmony was evident in the narratives of these women. For example, several women ensured that they were financially self-reliant because they feared having to rely on men. Many of the participants viewed parenting as necessitating dependence upon a partner and they rejected this type of vulnerability for themselves, in particular because they distrusted men to fulfill their parenting obligations and they feared marital disharmony or breakup were they to become parents.

Self-reliance was also the key for these women in avoiding conception. They recounted that they had taken responsibility for their own capacity to reproduce by controlling their fertility with various means, such as, delaying sexual intercourse until the legal age to obtain "birth control," recording menstrual cycles and avoiding sex during ovulation, having tubal ligations ("tubals"), and undergoing hysterectomies (for medical reasons). One participant summarized the common experience, "I have taken steps to ensure that [pregnancy] never happens." Another woman's struggle to obtain a tubal ligation illuminated the participants' shared experience of desperation in trying to maintain sovereignty over their reproductive capacities and avoid the ramifications of pregnancy:

I started bugging my physician that I wanted my tubes tied. And I was petrified because at the time you still had to go through a board at the hospital if you wanted an abortion...that's like out of my control, and that really scared me for some reason....I had to make sure that I wouldn't have to like, go the States or, you know, have some back alley [sentence trails off]....I didn't want to get pregnant....so I did find a physician...[to] give me a tubal.

Three women reported that their decision to remain childless was made independent of partner influences. Of the other women, one woman realized that she was still "not ready" for children after four years of marriage, and another woman clarified in discussions with her husband that children were not to be part of her life as she was constructing it.

The women's desire for autonomy and independence was apparent even in their relationships with their life partners. Some women identified themselves as "just me," rather than referring to themselves as half of a marital dyad. As one woman said, "When I refer to myself I don't take into account that I have a partner." Another always referred to her husband of nearly a quarter century as a "partner," never once referring to him as husband, and described her marriage, thusly: "collecting experiences is the way we've come to explain our time together." These ways of speaking subtly underscored the less-than-traditional identifications with marital roles experienced by most of the women. Only one woman referred to herself as a "wife." With the exception of this woman who described her marriage as "traditional," most of the women and their spouses had taken liberties in creating marriages that allowed each partner a lot of independence. The women described their marriages as "egalitarian" and "respectful", and they reported that their "husband and friend" had encouraged their autonomy and independence. All spoke of the importance of their relationship to their husband ("my best friend"), and most conceptualized their marriages as shaped by flexible roles and rules that were open to renegotiation depending on the evolving and shifting life interests of the individual partners. For example, one woman's comment illuminated the women's shared experience: "...we've done this wonderful improvisational dance,...we recognize...[that each of] our own 'what-we're-doing-in-the-world' is equally as important."

An important theme in these women's lives was the lifelong desire for freedom. The narratives generally reflected the shared notion that parenting represents a loss of freedom

and autonomy, as summarized by one woman: "...to me a child represents...an enormous amount of responsibility and staying in one place." Another said, prior to her marriage, that she had thought, "If I were to get married and have kids, then I would lose that wonderful autonomy and independence that I had finally gained for myself." All of the participants appreciated their sense of liberty in making choices and changes in their lives without having to account for children. For example, they specifically valued their autonomy in making work, money, and residency choices without being constrained by the ramifications of such choices on children. One woman articulated this shared experience of appreciating choices: "The choice is...of a career,...of making money wherever I want to...[and of] who I want to work for," and, a second woman reiterated it as "freedom....if I want to switch careers, if I want to live in different places in the country, if I want to travel...."

Having the freedom to become engrossed in their own pursuits and move with them if necessary was important for the women in this study. Participants reflected that they valued spending their time and money as they wished, as well as enjoying sharing activities with their husbands or others. Several women mentioned that they enjoyed having the autonomy to use their time to their own ends, unimpeded by the presence of children, having not felt "selfish" in doing so. One co-researcher articulated the participants' shared belief regarding the potential impact of children on the pursuit of personal interests: "Kids would probably get in the way of that." The women in the study imagined that having children would have impeded them from giving full attention to pursuits of importance in their lives. A few women had previously reflected on travelling or moving households with children and, during the interviews, denounced the feasibility of these undertakings because they believed having children, again meant "staying in one place until the child graduates."

The women in the study perceived that they experienced more freedom than parents, whose lives appeared to revolve around daily schedules geared to children. The participants

valued "...being able to get up and go whenever I want to," and "being able to drop everything and go and do things." They commented on a felt sense of freedom from having to organize their schedules, holidays, careers, and lives around children's needs for consistency in daily schedules, children's school holidays, and the availability of babysitters and daycare. These women stated that they preferred either an "unstructured" life or at least a flexible schedule. Emphasizing this point, the women declared that children would not fit into their "lifestyle[s]."

Another important aspect of freedom for several women was the possibility of becoming absorbed in an unfolding creative process. They believed that having children would impede this kind of spontaneity. One woman linked her creativity to her exploration of new ideas and possibilities in in-depth conversations. She reported having experienced children as disruptive to this process. Fulfilled in her creativity, another woman expressed a second link between creativity and children that was shared by several of the women: "I'm always learning, always creating....I don't need a child to manifest the creative process because my life is that."

In summary, the theme of independence and autonomy pervaded many aspects of these women's lives. Of particular importance to all of the women was their desire for freedom and their ability to create their own lives without the perceived constraints of motherhood.

A Sense of Needing Control and Certainty

The possibility of losing control over their own lives and environments contributed to the non-appeal of parenting for the participants. In some of their descriptions of themselves, and with varying degrees of subtlety and intensity, the women conveyed this sense of needing control and certainty. The women said things like about wanting things "neat and orderly," or "wanting to do everything really well." Some labelled themselves with terms

such as: a "control freak", a "perfectionist", or a "decision-maker." All of the women stated that they wanted to govern the direction of their lives and futures.

Maintaining this control for the women in this study included not bringing any biological children into their lives. All of the women had brought the issue of controlling their own fertility into the conscious realm and all had actively sought to avoid pregnancy. Furthermore, they had all viewed the choice to parent or not as being within their control, and most had questioned others' expectations of the inevitability of their becoming parents.

Although the participants had a high need for freedom as discussed earlier, paradoxically their need for personal control over their lives and environments points to a concurrent high need for certainty in their lives. In the narratives it is clear that the women perceived that children's demands would have impeded their freedoms, but the participants also emphasized their belief that children would have added an unwanted unpredictable element into their lives. One woman stated, "Kids shift your boundaries of control." Another woman revealed that parenting would threaten to overwhelm her own sense of certainty:

As a mother....you don't really have control....you're on the edge all the time of being out of control....I'm still learning about control and not control, but I'm doing it in a way that it's not going to devastate me.

Another participant stated that she could only work on one or two things at a time because she liked to do everything "perfectly," and that children would overwhelm her sense of wanting to have control over how things turn out.

The women described a desire to control their surroundings to obtain quiet, alone, or private time when they wanted it. One woman summarized this shared experience, saying that she liked "the choice of having quiet when you come home from work." Most of the women believed that living with children would have interfered with this.

In a broader context, some of the women in this study commented that having children might have resulted in their living in poverty. One woman's comment painted a

grim view of the imagined potential impact of having children: "It's almost impossible to do it [childrearing] the way you want to do it....Yeah, you could live in a low rent district where there's rats running around and eat macaroni and ...[exist in] poverty."

A Sense of Uneasiness Around Children

A sense of uneasiness around children was common to many of the women in this study if they could not control the extent of the contact¹. Several women sought ways to put distance between themselves and children to ease these feelings. A number of women avoided contact with children if possible, and only one of the participants mentioned that she actively sought the company of children (e.g., holding newborns at work). Many of the women expressed their particular aversion to what they perceived as children's dependent and undisciplined behaviour. Most of the participants reported a sense of uneasiness around children since an early age, and have orchestrated their lives so as to permit minimal contact with children.

Most of the women in the study recounted how they had felt a disinclination toward babysitting as teenagers. A couple of the women expressed resentment at being "stuck" or "forced" to babysit family members. One woman had felt trapped "babysitting for other people because it was the only way you were allowed to make money when you were a teenage girl....I hated it." Another woman's experiences with babysitting were similar, "I couldn't hack it, didn't like it, didn't enjoy it.... couldn't cope...didn't want the responsibility....it was exceedingly hard for me to empathize." The women recalled with

¹. One woman is an exception to this. She stated, "I do not hate children. I love children," although she did express some dislike of children's noisiness. All three women who read the themes for empathic generalizability (Appendix H) stated that this theme was not true for them, that they liked being with children, and believed they would have made good mothers.

discomfort their experiences of babysitting, underscoring their uneasiness with children from an early age.

All but one of the women expressed having uncomfortable internal reactions to the presence of children when they were being "noisy", "demanding", "screaming", "very defiant", "strong-willed", or "jumping up and down." In referring to this behaviour several of the women said, "it drives me crazy." A few of the participants simply did not like being around children at all. Many of the women felt confused, anxious, "exhausted", "impatient", "terrified", irritated, "annoyed", rageful, vindictive, or spiteful when they were in proximity to rambunctious children.

While in public with strangers or with children in their extended families, several women experienced anger and an impulse to lash out at crying children. Several also described their annoyance with parents who were not able to curtail what the participants perceived as children's loud and inappropriate social behaviours. These strong feelings arose early in the participant's lives, but the women were uncertain of the sources of these feelings.

One woman expressed these shared sentiments in the following words:

The first memory I have is a screaming baby, or a baby that's crying. And to me it sounds like screams. It drives me nuts. And I never liked that. I would just get all ooooh very nervous and tensed up....

For most of the women interviewed, proximity to children seemed to be a situation that they tried to avoid. Whether at family gatherings or in public places, such as grocery stores or shopping malls, many of these women actively made efforts to get away from nearby children, especially noisy ones. One woman described leaving a store without her intended purchases because there was "a screaming child by my elbow." A couple of women described maintaining physical distance between themselves and children when possible. One woman stated, "The first thing I think of when the first one comes in the door is, 'How

do I get the hell outta here?'" For these women, proximity to children was uncomfortable and they sought relief by distancing themselves from them.

Several women in the study were hesitant or anxious about having children over to their homes. For example, one participant that has stepchildren (but still defines herself as childless) must share her home with her stepchildren on occasion. She does not accept a parenting role with them and she takes breaks away from the house when they visit. Now, having gradually adjusted somewhat to her stepchildren, she vividly described her difficult initial experiences with them, "I don't know how to behave in front of children, like they scared the hell out of me....I was terrified of them and, I mean, they'd start screaming and jumping up and down, and like I would burst into tears." She was at a loss as to how to cope with their behaviour. Another woman's discomfort with children was expressed by her attempts to discourage potential visitors with children. She recounted her suggestion to parents, "I don't child-proof my home. There are things lying around and I'm not about to start putting them up on the shelves....if you want your kid to stay safe, maybe you'd better find a babysitter." For more than just these two women, home was a safe haven that reflected the adult-oriented lifestyles of the women in this study, and they felt uncomfortable when their private space was visited by children.

The women reported that contact with children through employment situations or family gatherings ranged from being pleasurable on occasion to being seen as an unwelcome part of family obligations. Several participants recounted occasional situations or specific instances (e.g., teaching music to children and seeing their "beaming" faces; holding newborns and experiencing feelings of "tenderness") where they had enjoyed being with children. Another woman, the one step-mother in the study, had evolved from being frightened of her stepchildren and of not knowing what to do with them, to now cautiously enjoying them. On the contrary, several participants described uncomfortable experiences with children in family

or public situations. So, even though some of the participants at times reported having enjoyed the experience of being around children, their general lack of initiative in pursuing contact with children suggests an underlying uneasiness with children and a preference for not being around them, except in situations in which they themselves had control over the extent of the contact.

The participants in the study preferred the company of adults, and preferred engaging in pursuits and interests that do not include children. Several women mentioned that they had been disinterested in being with children or in admiring and holding babies since they were children themselves. One woman expressed a disinterest in children's preoccupations and games. None of the women in the study described a child as a friend, although two women stated they felt close to nieces and nephews and one woman described being visited by neighbourhood children.

Many of the women also expressed dislike of the dependent behaviour exhibited by children. Several participants observed that they did not like the way children were "demanding", needy, "self-centered", "disruptive", and "in your face." Several women expressed feeling annoyed with the way they observed children making demands of their parents, particularly when children interrupted adult conversations. Some of the participants found it frustrating trying to visit with people in the presence of children because these childless women wanted the focused attention of the other, but children's "constant" interruptions foiled this aim. In summary, most of the women in this study expressed a sense of discomfort with any constant children's presence and did their best to avoid being subjected to the demands of children.

A Sense of Parenting as an Overwhelming Responsibility

For all of the women in the study, aspects of parenting were viewed as being overwhelming responsibilities that they were not prepared to take on. Several participants

emphasized, however, that their repudiation of motherhood was fundamentally about their lack of desire to parent, rather than about evading the responsibilities of parenting. All of the women viewed parenting as being hard work, and being a good parent as incredibly challenging. Most could not visualize themselves being the mothers they believed women "should" be. Some felt that they were "not adaptable" to becoming parents; one woman expressed the common sentiment as follows: "I just could not see myself as a mother quite literally." Another woman said, "[even] at 12 years old...I couldn't ever see myself in that position." Mothering appeared overwhelming to most because they perceived no respite from the strong associated emotions or temporal constraints. Many women had observed that not all parents appeared to find it rewarding and, in comparison, some of the participants considered their own lives and marriages happier than those of some parents they knew. Most women stated that single parenthood appeared particularly overwhelming, and it was viewed by these participants as an unwelcome eventuality in many cases. A few women stated that they believed that women ought to quit their careers when they become mothers, something that a few of these participants were loathe to do.

The women in this study believed that they had no illusions about parenting. As one participant observed, "[mothers] work harder than just about anybody else and I'm too damned lazy to put myself into that." These participants witnessed parenting as both frustrating and exhausting. They viewed it as "grunt work", "maintenance", and "discipline" mostly, not colouring and storytime. One woman expressed this shared experience of seeing the responsibilities inherent to the role, "I have no illusions...no fantasies at all...about it's going to be like this or like that." She said in summary, "I know that I could have a child and it would a wonderful experience and it would be an awful experience." Few women expressed any positive sentiments about the possible joys and benefits of parenting; when

they did it was related to the possibility of (painful) personal growth associated with motherhood.

Another aspect of parenting that the women in this study perceived and rejected was that mothers could never get away from, waive, nor have respite from the "enormous responsibility" and care that children required. A few women commented on the 24-hour-a-day nature of parenting. One woman said, referring to an emotional bond she perceived parents had with their children, "You can never get away, you are always connected." Most of the participants recognized that a child's dependent and demanding behaviour might realistically conflict with their own wants and needs in life (e.g., the child might need a lot less sleep than they do), and that as parents they would have to adjust to the child's needs, something that was highly disagreeable to them. An issue for many women in this study was that they perceived that parenting requires structure, organization, pre-planning, and preparation in order to meet children's needs or to venture out anywhere. These kinds of practical issues were cited as being mundane and repetitive by many of the participants, and they expressed their adamant rejection of being constrained in this way.

Several women emphasized the long-term nature of the commitment to raise children, a commitment they believed would change their lives in ways that they were not willing to have happen. A few women stated that they were not willing to embrace the "selflessness" that the attachment was believed to evoke in parents. For example, one woman was aware that her career as an artist would have been jeopardized by the temporal demands of childrearing. She summarized the views of most of the participants when she said, "Kids are time consuming."

Most of the participants believed that parents need to be able to rely on extended family members in dealing with the demands of childrearing. Several indicated that historically, they had received a lack of support from their families of origin, and they

believed that this, in turn, would hinder their ability to parent effectively. For example, one woman indicated that part of her refusal to parent was because she wanted to maintain a distant relationship with her own mother: "By being overbearing, she's pushed me away from the support she otherwise could have given....I've felt alone, afraid and not willing to take the chance."

Another aspect of parenting that seemed staggering to many women was the world that children born today must face. The women were fearful about not being able to keep children safe. A number of women stated that society was not "safe", "nurturing", "loving", or "right" for children, and that the future seemed unpredictable because the world was "changing so quickly." Moreover, the women had been distressed to witness that children were the targets of "resentment", "hate", "abuse", and "neglect." Participants imagined that if they were parents they would always be worrying about "pedophiles", "perverts", "kidnappers", "molesters", "teachers" introducing children to the "joys of child pornography", "babysitters", and having to screen out sex and violence from children's television viewing. Reflecting the sentiments of several co-researchers, one said, "I don't want to bring a child into a world...that I don't, first of all, fundamentally believe in." A constant psychic vigilance, which was thought to be exhausting and stressful for parents, was deemed necessary for keeping children safe. These kinds of parental worries were perceived as both daunting and unsavory to the participants.

Most of the participants perceived the world as overpopulated, and as environmentally and socially unfit. Expecting to have intense feelings of wanting to protect their offspring were they to have them, these participants felt helpless to provide children with the necessary protection against such powerful external forces. Reflecting the mostly common meaning of this perceived state of the world with regard to not having children, the women said things like: "I don't want to subject a human being to that. I'd be going against

my own belief system, which is, I don't believe in this world, so why am I bringing someone else into it?"; "I worry about...the state of the world. Would you bring a child into this world?"; "The world is falling apart." The participants who held this belief in a deteriorating social and biological environment stated that their not having children meant that they were taking personal responsibility for not subjecting a human being to an uncertain future and for not contributing more people to an already overpopulated planet.

Several women were frightened by the intense feelings of anger they experienced toward children, and they worried about how they might have acted had they become mothers. One woman was the exception to this, she stated that she thought she would have made a "great mother." All of the women, except her, expressed feeling scared even thinking about what kind of parents they would have been at one time or another. One woman expressed that her "drinking and drugging" in her twenties would have made her a "horrible" parent back then. Some women, although they did not agree with the way they had been raised, believed that they did not know a better way to parent. Many women were afraid that they would not have been able to control their angry feelings and aggressive impulses with children. One participant had noticed her aggressive feeling reaction toward her niece's "very defiant, very strong-willed, and really cocky" behaviour. She summarized the experiences of several of the women with her example of her impulse to control the child's behaviour:

She gets away with it, and I find it so hard to hold my tongue, because I know that I never would have gotten away with those things when I was a child.. And I just want to grab her and shake her and tell her off and I want to be my mother to her. I want her to get what I got....I don't say anything, but I go home and I'm so angry, and for months after that I'll think about "Maybe I should have said this to her or that, you know, she really shouldn't have gotten away with that." And when I see myself, I think "Good grief. How would I have treated her if that really was my child?"

She stated that she feared that her upbringing had been too deeply "ingrained," and that dealing with children (were she to be a mother) would be to risk stirring her aggressive

feelings and treating her children similarly to how she had been treated: "I don't like it, but it's really hard for me to change....twenty-three years of discipline and expectations have been drilled into me....How can you alter that? It's inextricably a part of you."

Summarizing this as one of her reasons for her not having children, she characterized the view of several participants: "I'm trying to straighten out my own life instead of inflicting a mess on someone else." Another woman emphasized why not having children was the right move on her part: "I'm not patient, I have a temper...I don't think that a kid would be in any physical danger from me but...I could yell, and psychological damage is as bad as physical damage...."

The women who had experienced their own parents as unsatisfied, emotionally unstable, or harmful to them in some way, implied that this had tainted their view of the possible pleasures of parenting. As children and adolescents, some women mentioned that they had been exposed to emotional or physical abuse and control by parents, and some had witnessed "terrible" parental "fighting." That some of their parents had appeared ill-prepared for and disinterested in parenting did not go unnoticed by these women as children. One woman said: "I don't think my parents ever liked me," and in adulthood, her experience of being tossed aside by her father after her mother died seemed to link with her not wanting children: "He's just sort of thrown his family blood away....I think somehow it connects with 'Well, no wonder you don't have kids.'...I'm still a child [age 21 when mom died] and my dad throws me away." Several women reflected that they had sensed that as children or adolescents they were a bother rather than a joy to their parents, and had then concluded for themselves that parenting was a burden rather than a pleasure.

For these non-mothers, the prospect of single parenting appeared distressing. Several women had seen their worst fears of parenting manifested in the lives of single mothers they knew. One woman reflected watching her sister's hardships resulting from an unplanned

pregnancy nearly twenty-five years ago had confirmed her own fears that adding a child to her (then) teenaged marriage might have resulted in financial privation and marital breakup. She said, "living through that experience seemed to cement it [postponement of childbearing] even more." To the women who had witnessed others close to them (mother, sisters) carry the burden of single motherhood, it appeared to be a strenuous task to conduct singlehandedly. A woman in the study who was raised by her single mother recollected her childhood feelings related to her mother's responsibilities and, apparent but unspoken, struggles:

I always felt sorry for her responsibilities as a parent and that she had to work and be away from me...*that was my view of parenthood* [italics added], not of two people sharing the responsibility, but of one person, and I saw it as just too heavy a load to carry.

This woman reported that she had been deeply affected, had felt "abnormal", because of her father's absence and uninvolvedness in her life.

Some of these women had taken years to experience the strength of their marital bonds, and as such, they still viewed the possibility of single parenthood as a hazard for any mother. Several women feared that, even with the best of intentions, women in general can still end up as single moms raising children in poverty, having given up their careers. These participants revealed their conviction that to undertake parenting women must expect and be prepared to be solely responsible for their children because husbands might ultimately prove irresponsible. Men were not trusted to be faithful in their commitments to childrearing. One woman stated that she did not believe that men wanted to be fathers, with all that the role and title implies. She said that, to date, she had never heard a man express that he *wanted* children (except to pass off his belongings to when he dies), although a neighbour had confided in her about *his regret for having had children*. With regard to not being able to rely on men for support, one woman suggested, "The whole issue of child support...[is] a big

hoax....nine out of ten women do not get child support....so chances are if you get divorced you're gonna have to support that child by yourself." Another woman summarized the shared sentiment of women expecting to bear the burden of sole responsibility for children when she stated:

...if I could not of my own resources, feed and clothe that child and shelter that child, I would not expect that of any other person, because bottom line is *I'm responsible* [italics added]. And if they back off on me...I'm screwed.

The women in this study viewed the possibility of single parenting as a predicament that they believed all mothers needed to be prepared to face, a situation that they themselves were not willing to risk.

The last aspect of these women's sense of parenting as a limiting and unwanted responsibility was that several of the participants viewed mothering as an either/or proposition with regards to their careers or pursuits of passions. One woman's observation of working mothers illustrated an important aspect of why the women viewed mothering as an either/or task when she said: "Nothing gets the full benefit of you, not your children, not your husband, not your job....Aw man, I've got some friends that are just run ragged." She also stated that had she wanted to become a parent, she would have married someone able to provide financial support for her to stay home with her children. Several women imagined that they would actually have given up their careers in order to parent. The women considered mothering a full-time career, and ventured that children need to be raised by their mothers. Concerned that children lodged in daycares are "dissociated" from the values of their families, one participant worried that in adolescence, these daycare children would be emotionally hungry from the lack of one-to-one attention and might, therefore, seek meaning and belonging amongst gangs or get into using drugs. Despite the women's notion of parenting as an either/or undertaking, it is very important to note one woman's comment that reflected the sentiments of all of the participants:

I'm not saying that I didn't have children because it would be hard for me [to do both], [that] I wouldn't want to give up something else....I don't *want* to do both....*this* is what I want to do.

The women in this study perceived parenting as an unwanted, crushing responsibility. The practical, psychological, and emotional demands of parenting appeared daunting, especially given these women's lack of faith in men to follow through on their commitments as fathers. The women witnessed single motherhood, or even mothering without extended family support, as devastating. The women were frightened of what they perceived as uncontrollable emotions of deep caring and/or intense anger that they experienced, or imagined they would experience, being stirred by children. As well, most of the women were alarmed about the state of the world. The women experienced themselves as impotent to protect offspring from their own internal reactions, and from unpredictable external forces. The women imagined they could not undertake and do well at both mothering and a career. They experienced a lack of desire to devote the time, energy, and patience to mothering that they believed was required. Although some women stated that they would have made good mothers, several participants believed they were not capable of meeting their own high standards for parenting.

A Sense of Being Different than Other Women

A common experience for all of the women in this study was a sense of being different than other women, and it was characterized in a number of ways as it emerged from the narratives. For example, by having different interests in childhood from siblings and friends; by not having a father around and instead being raised by a single mom, aunts, and landladies; by having opposite-gender interests; by lacking the desire to procreate; and, perhaps by missing out on a significant female experience. Most experienced themselves as having different interests and different focuses than women who are mothers and, therefore, of not always fitting in with these other women.

Some women experienced themselves as different because they had, since an early age, not shared in typically female interests (e.g., some participants, even as children themselves, had not been very involved with or interested in babies or children). As one woman summarized the shared experience, "[children] are not what I'm interested in." Referring to when they were children, several women reported being more interested in opposite-gendered pursuits, such as "playing Cowboys and Indians" or "playing with guns instead of dolls." One woman said, "I was a very rebellious little girl. I wanted to do boy things."

All of the women described never having had the longing, and most described never having had the intention to become mothers. Different than other girls around them as pre-adolescents, four of the women knew that they did not want to have children. They currently perceived themselves as different than women who are mothers because they had "no desire", "need", or "longing" to have children. Reflecting on not wanting children the women said: "I have had this sense of not wanting a child from very early on"; "I've always, always known that I never wanted children"; and, "I don't know how I got to that point...I just know that one day...it just came out of the blue, 'I'm never going to have kids'." Contrasting an acquaintance's attempts to conceive a child with her own lack of desire to procreate, one participant said:

...towards ovulation time she...would be full of optimism and hope and plans and joy, and thenshe'd start to bleed [menstruate] and she'd crash and be in despair....And I have never felt anything like that ever...never had the longing to have my own child.

Lacking a desire for children and highly valuing their freedom, the women had taken pains from an early age to avoid an accidental pregnancy that would have compromised their desire for a childfree life. One woman stated that she "absolutely" would have terminated any accidental pregnancy that might have occurred, before her tubal ligation offered her permanent sterility. These women were childless and they had gone to lengths to stay that

way. Several women had insisted that remaining childless be a stipulation in their marriage contracts, with potential husbands being told, in the words of one woman, "There will be no children by me." Another woman recollected how this foreknowledge that she did not desire children had delineated who would and would not have been an appropriate choice for a husband, "that was always...a really strong issue for not continuing [in a relationship]."

None of the women experienced "maternal" feelings with regard to wanting children of their own, although some stated that they acted on their maternal feelings or desires to "nurture" others through their guiding, teaching, or emotional work with others. For example, one participant reflected that she had "tons of maternal instincts" that were "fulfilled" through contact with her students. Summarizing the perceived difference between herself and women who are mothers, and based on her own non-experiencing of maternal feelings toward children, one woman summarized the common perception that many women in this study held of themselves: "...you always tend to think of Mother [as]...the Madonna type of figure, which I'm definitely not."

All of the women have integrated being childfree into their identities, and this experience contributed to their feeling different than other women. These women did not normally spend much time thinking about children (or not having children) once their decision had been made. For all of these intentionally childless women, reaching the decision not to bear children had been a process of information seeking, self-examination, self-healing, and puzzling over their own reluctance to give life to children and to become mothers. For example, one woman reflected upon a rocky period in her life when she had been trying to make sense of her future and her marital relationship, and described her evolution away from becoming a mother: "It was in that re-birthing process that I thought 'Will there ever be children?'....No, it doesn't include children."

All of the participants have regretlessly accepted their rejection of mothering as part of what defines them as individuals, and have not doubted or questioned their choice to remain childless. They made the following kinds of statements: "I've never experienced any regrets"; and, "I don't think I'm missing anything." One participant, warned by other women that she would feel regrets after her hysterectomy because of not having children, recollected her experience of lying at home in bed after her surgery: "...holding onto the edge of the bed waiting for this incredible emotional experience to overwhelm me, and...it never happened. I never experienced anything." She stated that experiencing a lack of regret confirmed for her the rightness of her decision not to have children. Her experience invalidated the inferences of others, countering their underlying proposition that deep down all women want children. So, despite the fact that society expects women who do not mother to regret that decision, the women in this study all stated emphatically that they did not suffer any regrets because they chose not to have children.

A couple of women wondered whether they were missing out on an important part of female existence by not experiencing pregnancy, however. While they felt different than most other women as a result of not sharing in this common female experience, they maintained that they did not regret their choice to remain childless. Some participants were curious about how pregnancy would have felt, while others were relieved that they did not have to experience pregnancy. A mild sense of sadness was expressed by one woman because of not having experienced pregnancy, although she did not regret foregoing the experience of motherhood. Pondering her feelings and the implications of her choice, this same woman said:

...to not experience that feeling of pregnancy, the quickening, that seems real sad to me....It seems like the significant one [experience] in a woman's life. How is it that it's missing in mine, and yet I'm not prepared to get pregnant to feel that...?

Having witnessed most other women around them reproducing, and thus being different than themselves, most of the women in this study expressed curiosity as to why some women, themselves in particular, did not want children. "I'm so curious about 'Why not?' because it seems to be the norm to do it." Meanwhile, a few women's curiosity also leaned in the other direction as they questioned why people have children: "I'm more...really interested in....what makes women *want* children in the first place."

For two of the women in the study, their lives included neither parenting nor a full-time career at present. One of these women had attended university for interest's sake, and the other mentioned neither formal studies nor a career. These women experienced themselves as different than both mothers and career-oriented non-mothers.

In adulthood, all the women reported having created the lives of their choice, although they perceived them as different from other married women's lives. These participants had chosen to deviate from the traditional female norms for married women, that of having children and embracing motherhood. One participant remarked that she had not set out to be different, instead she highlighted that she was living her own values: "Being who I am is more important than being different." She meant that motherhood did not fit for who was and that she was more concerned with being true to her own evolution than to prescribed norms that did not fit for her.

The Experience of Withstanding Demands to Mother

All of the women in this study had experienced a conflict between their choice not to become mothers and other's expectations of them. They sensed that other members of their families or society expected them to justify their lack of conformity to the norm that married women ought to have children. One woman stated, "Others come to you, expecting you to conform." Their lack of drive to procreate was noticed by others in society and manifested in the participant's lives, at one time or another, as pressure to reproduce. Reflecting on her

childhood intentions not to have children and others' responses to that, one woman said: "...when you make up your mind so young, people tend to think that you'll come around. And it is always this idea of 'coming around,' as if you are some kind of aberration." Many had received unnecessary and unwanted reassurances from others that they would come to their senses, and most related that they had, at times, been disbelieved about their stated or implicit intentions not to become mothers.

Several women in the study expressed that others had applied pressure for they and their husbands to have children, and/or had implied that something was intrinsically wrong with them for making the choice not to have children. Being criticized and stigmatized for their decision to remain childless was a common experience for the women in this study. Conceiving of their choice not to procreate as a private matter, the women reported having been offended by these invasions of their privacy. They indicated that they did not feel the need to justify their choices to others, instead they reported reacting defensively or "offensively" in protecting their privacy. Women had felt especially hurt and defensive if there was an implication that they were "selfish" for not having children. Most had been "embarrassed", "frustrated", or "angry" when casual acquaintances, co-workers, job interviewers, friends, or immediate and extended family members applied pressure for the participants to reproduce and made the following kinds of remarks: "Are you pregnant yet?", "Are you starting a family?", "You look four months pregnant," or "How far along are you?" These remarks were experienced by the women as "mean", "nasty", "rude", or "catty", and were believed to have a stigmatizing overtone. The participants reported responding to such remarks in a variety of ways including: "tell[ing] him to piss off", being "volatile" or reacting with an angry "outburst", by "get[ting] in [their] face real fast" or, by just saying "Oh, we've decided not to have children." Some women also reported responding "diplomatically ...with a smile," having embarrassed the offenders by saying, "I can't have children," or "I'm just fat."

Another woman suggested: "It's almost better just letting them think I'm selfish than trying to make them understand, 'cause they're not going to understand."

Several women noted that they had experienced greater pressure to become mothers, and criticism for not doing so, when they were living in small towns or in particular areas, in contrast to when they were living in cosmopolitan, urban centers (e.g., in the West End of Vancouver) where there is a greater acceptance of diverse lifestyles by individuals in the community. With reference to when she was a childless career woman living in a predominantly Christian area, one woman narrated the following experience of being criticized: "...we've received a lot of unacceptance about our decision....people telling us we are selfish...[or that] I should really be staying at home taking care of children instead of having a career."

Several participants experienced others stigmatizing them, sometimes covertly and subtly, for their choice not to become mothers. One participant experienced a "cold reception" from the receptionist at her doctor's office when she was planning her tubal ligation. Another woman reported her experiences of being in a small-town Canadian Catholic hospital for a tubal ligation and being deliberately neglected by the nurses once they found out that, although she did not have children, she was being sterilized:

I had asked the nurse...please don't forget to roll me back down ...before I fall asleep....When I woke up the next morning I was still sitting up in bed....[Another day] I wanted to have a shower and they wouldn't...help me. [They said], "Well fine! Take a shower."

Recounting an incident construed as stigmatizing, one woman described how her sister-in-law, a mother with children and health issues that made childbearing dangerous for her, was refused a tubal ligation at a Catholic hospital in a very large city Canadian city. Another participant, relating how she had been shunned by mothers in her community, recounted an experience of "People not wanting to be my friend 'cause I don't have children and they can't

identify with me." In contrast, one woman related that in the context of her career in a male-dominated field, there was no expectation that she ought to become a mother and no stigmatization directed at her because of her choice.

During the interviews the women tended to explain their choice not to procreate, although under most circumstances they said that they did not like being called upon to justify their choice to others who might try to get them to account for their "aberrant" behaviour. Painfully aware that their reproductive behaviour was construed as different than what is normally expected of adult married women in this society, these women had sought to resolve this conflict within themselves. One woman's decision was a slow evolution, her inner conflict respected by members of her political group who attempted to heighten her awareness of reproductive options. In their narratives, the women revealed that they had carefully reflected on their choice not to have children. For example, one woman said "I have had all kinds of time to think about how it is that I have chosen what I have chosen." The women's justifications to themselves have shifted over time, as articulated by the same woman:

...there have been different reasons at different times....All the reasons that I have or had are true. What proportion of truth they are, I don't know....They seemed to have a huge proportion at the time.

The women in this study revealed that they had responsibly refuted, in their own minds, the social disapproval that they perceived was directed toward them because of their choice to not have children. For several women, this meant processing negative emotions aimed at them by other women, especially biological sisters, who seemed jealous of their greater independence and freedom. Key in this integration process were the women's strongly held beliefs in their right to choose their own reproductive behaviours. From their reflections emerged a sense that their choices were warranted based on their personal contexts and judgments about the world, choices framed as moral rights and responsibilities.

The women tended to justify their behaviour as contextually relative based on their own upbringing, circumstances, beliefs, and interests. All viewed their own choices as morally responsible.

The women in this study refuted socially stigmatizing labels, such as "selfish" and "irresponsible", that had sometimes been applied to them by attempting to show that they had taken what they believed to be the most responsible action available to them, given their particular context, personality, and lifestyle. For example, one woman said, "You know, if you're not prepared to do the responsible thing, then you shouldn't do it. I'm not responsible for myself, how can I be responsible for somebody that young?" They viewed their choices not to procreate as the most morally responsible act they could take toward these unborn children. These participants boomeranged the charge of "selfishness" by pointing out that parents frequently appear to engage in "selfish reasons for having children." One woman empathized with parents who wanted to have a child to satisfy their needs for "creativity", but recommended that these individuals just give birth to one biological child and then adopt other children if they want a larger family.

To summarize, the women in this study all stated that they firmly believed they had made the right choice for themselves. They had a sense of being expected to become mothers, had at times experienced pressure to conform, and had been called upon to justify their decision not to have children to family members and others. For the most part, however, they believed reproductive choice was a private matter, and felt insulted when others invaded their personal decision-making process. They confidently demonstrated through moral reasoning that their choices not to procreate were justified by referring to personal rights, beliefs, feelings, and contexts, to their lack of maternal drive, and to the state of the world to support their decision not to reproduce.

An Evolving Sense Self Not Identified with Motherhood

The participants in this study referred to themselves in various ways that are illustrative of their meaningful and creative roles in life. These women variously named themselves "non-mother", "non-nurturer", "seeker", "instant action type", "healer", "fixer", "non-traditional", "creative artist", "gypsy", "learner", "student", "teacher", and "forever student." It appeared that the women's identities were strongly defined by their sense of needing freedom to move, grow, and change; in essence, to evolve.

Several women stated that they were striving toward personal fulfillment. The women wanted to stay open to new experiences, ideas, and opportunities rather than being what they perceived as constrained by motherhood and a more predictable homelife. For example, several women reported being involved in fulfilling careers that required ongoing learning to keep up in their field.

For all the women in this study, identifying themselves as childless was less important for them than was identifying themselves as women who were consciously making choices in weaving together the threads of their lives. Rather than choosing motherhood as a path to growth, these women fostered their own sense of continued growth and development through various experiences. This was illuminated by the comment of one, "I just chose not particularly to have that experience [mothering], 'cause I'm choosing a lot of other ones that are basically satisfying to me." Most of the women viewed motherhood as one of many challenging experiences they could have chosen in life, but one which they did not desire. One woman illuminated the women's common experience of not defining themselves primarily by their reproductive status when she reflected on her decision to remain childless and its subsequent impact on her life: "...it doesn't really impact the rest of my life...I go on with whatever I'm doing." Another woman, remarking on one of her creative processes as it related to her evolving self, stated, "my mind evolves it's own language." An example of her evolving notion of self spontaneously emerged during her interview when she referred to

herself as a "non-mother", and then remarked that this identification was a new word and insight for her.

Additionally, women who had been hurt in their families of origin were in the process of emotional and spiritual mending, and considered it appropriate and responsible to care for and heal themselves rather than adding to life's burdens by becoming mothers. Reflecting the sentiments of many of the participants, one suggested she was "evolving to a place of self-acceptance." Another woman, had experienced substantial emotional healing from some negative early experiences, but a persistent addendum to her narrative of healing was always, "But I still don't want kids." Most women stated that they were growing as people because of experiencing "unconditional love" in their lives from husbands, friends, counsellors, and cats. One woman, valuing her continual self-evolution said, "I am my own laboratory, I don't need a child to be a laboratory....everyday I'm changing." The women characterized themselves by these diverse experiences of personal growth and evolution.

Several women in the study related that keeping abreast of political, social, and environmental issues was central to who they were, and related that this was made more possible because of not having children. For example, one woman identified a priority as working for global betterment, and being open to novel solutions, a thread that was found running through most of the women's narratives:

I'm working very hard....[to] be part of new solutions that are gonna have to be made very quickly....I wanted to spend my time...[on] a planetary focus, rather than doing the raising the child thing which gets very microcosmic rather than macrocosmic....I prefer to keep that central issue...and not splitting it into time with a child....

Many participants wanted to focus on these larger societal issues, rather than be limited to a family experience of raising children.

For all of the participants, their strongest identification seemed to be with viewing themselves as lifelong learners and/or teachers. Most characterized themselves as keen

learners and expressed interest in a great variety of topics. Almost all were involved in the physical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual growth of others. Many aspects of their identities were founded upon helping others gain insight and emotional experiences, education and employment, or recreational skills that would enhance other's lives. In some cases, they intended specifically to give other women, men, or children opportunities for personal or career development. Several women loved to watch their students "get it." One woman described her work training actors, "it's the passion...the intuition...the instinct that I love, that's the kick I get." Another woman, a teacher of sports and music, stated that she really enjoyed teaching because it was an opportunity for "giving back"; she reported delighting in watching her students get satisfaction from learning new skills.

An important component of many of these women's value of lifelong learning and their evolving identities was their continued contact with the exploration-oriented, "child-like" parts of themselves and other adults. One woman spoke for most of the women when she said, "I'm still a child myself in a lot of ways." Another, a teacher who fosters the child-like qualities of openness, creativity, and playfulness in her students, said: "I've made my life full of children...not literally, but what a child represents, I've surrounded myself with that." In referring to the continued freshness of her relationship with her husband of nearly twenty years, the same woman stated, "We are each other's children." These examples illustrate that some of these women likened their creativity to child-like qualities, and valued them as part of their identities. Invigorated by being in contact with people and situations reminiscent of what childhood represents, the women valued their own sense of curiosity and wonder in the face of new experiences.

In affirming their identities as women who are not mothers, several believed that their experiences could be used to help others examine the notion of mothering as inevitable and desirable for all women. Several women in the study had worked at "raising consciousness"

by offering themselves as teachers and role-models, spreading awareness of reproductive choices. They shared their experiences through discussions, workshops, and vocational positions, in order to teach others about reproductive options and alternatives to mothering/parenting, to assist other women and men to thoughtfully construct their adult lives. They wanted others, in the words of one participant, "not to do that hindsight thing." For example, one woman had worked to promote reproductive planning in an organization. Another woman had manifested her desire to enlighten others by supporting an organization concerned with overpopulation. She had also convened a panel workshop for university students to explore lifestyle alternatives and to help them mindfully examine the possible ramifications of parenting on their future careers.

For most of the co-researchers, their identities were revealed to be embedded and entwined in their broad intellectual, educational, creative, recreational, social, political or environmental concerns rather than in the traditional adult female identification that holds motherhood at the centre of women's lives. These women saw themselves as creating meaningful lives that were not identified with children nor even necessarily with childlessness. One woman said, "It just means that I'm not taking care of children." For her and others, there was a rejection of motherhood but not of fostering others' growth in different ways. She summarized the shared experience of being a woman whose identity is not concerned with motherhood or children per se, but instead is attuned to the responsibility of meaningfully constructing a life, "I don't view myself as childless, I view myself as ...having my life to live."

Chapter Five - Discussion

This chapter begins with a restatement of the purpose of the study, and with the essential common structure of the participant's experiences of voluntary childlessness as gleaned from their narratives. Next, the results of the study will be discussed in relation to the literature on women who are intentionally childless. In closing, implications for future research and counselling are proposed.

Restatement of the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to understand the lived experience of heterosexually partnered women who are intentionally childless. The guiding research question was: **"What is the meaning and experience of intentional childlessness for partnered women who have selected this life option?"** A phenomenological approach was employed to elicit the women's own experiences of living this "alternative" lifestyle.

The Essential Structure of the Experience of Being an

Intentionally Childless Partnered Woman

The six co-researchers in this study were partnered women between the ages of 38 and 44 that had chosen not to have children. They were working and middle-class Caucasian women, born and raised in Canada and the United States, and of varying ancestral and educational backgrounds. The co-researchers had been married to their current partners for between 3 and 24 years; some had been in more than one marriage. Only one woman in the study reported having stepchildren. The women reported never having had a longing to have a child, although some had expected to become mothers to fulfill the societal expectation that all women should become mothers. Awareness that they would not be mothers came early in childhood for some and in adulthood after marriage for others. The women were of various family compositions and birth order placements, and most had sisters if they had siblings at all. Most had been raised by stay-at-home mothers.

The commitment to childlessness was very strong amongst the women, the decision having been made not less than 14 years ago by any of the participants. Childlessness was made a certainty for most of the women, having had either tubal ligations or hysterectomies, but the others had also found ways to successfully stand by their earlier commitment. None of the women expressed any regrets that they did not become mothers, and none expressed worry about their later years without children.

All of the participants had a strong need for independence and autonomy, which they believed would have been curtailed by motherhood. Children, it was imagined, would have hindered their freedom to move and travel, to change directions in career, to engage in the uninhibited pursuit of their personal interests, or would have changed their role-flexible marital relations with their husbands. The women believed their autonomy would have been compromised by having to consider the ramifications, for their children, of any choices and changes they made in their lives. Parenting was thought to require full and constant attention, something these women would not give themselves over to.

Being riveted to the raising of children for 20 years was unthinkable to these women. For them, it would have meant that their attention was frozen and not free to turn to other passions. Whereas children *demand*ed a commitment and attention, in all other things the women's attention was given *voluntarily* and could be turned away again at any time to be refocused on something else. In essence, these women believed that parenting would have erased their lives as they knew them, including the freedom to create their own futures. This was one of the main reasons that participants reported for not wanting children.

Each of the co-researchers had a sense of self not identified with motherhood. The most striking defining feature of their identities was their desire to evolve, grow, learn, and change as human beings, growth that they perceived would be impossible as mothers. These women had experimented with careers, marital roles and lifestyles, and educational and

recreational pursuits in their bids to create meaningful lives for themselves, and were continuing to do so at the time of the interviews. All of the participants strongly identified with learning and education as ways of continuing their personal growth. They conceptualized themselves as lifelong learners and most felt a strong desire to contribute to others through teaching. It was believed that having children would have meant being less focused on learning and/or teaching.

The women felt fulfilled in their lives without children. They strongly identified with flexibility and change, far more than with adherence to traditional lifestyles. Paradoxically, although the freedom to be flexible was highly valued by all of these women, it was of the utmost importance to them to be in control of their own time, activities, and life's direction. For them, consciously constructing their lives by letting certain things (people, experiences) in and keeping other things out was paramount. So although they wanted to change and evolve through exploration of different mediums (e.g., meditation, education, relationships), they undertook calculated risks in this regard, as opposed to opening themselves up to the unknown risks of parenthood and its accompanying irrevocable responsibilities.

All of these women perceived aspects of parenting as an "enormous" responsibility, and felt relieved that they had not undertaken them. Most of the women in this study perceived mothering as an overpowering and major responsibility that was exemplified by a 24-hour-a-day, long-term, commitment that necessitated women's staying home, having given up their careers or other passions, and thanklessly attending to children without much support from either husbands, extended family, or other members of society. The women were fearful that their own interests, desires, and sense of self would get lost in the process, and they were unprepared to struggle under the weight of such a difficult task.

None of the women felt they would have adapted very well to the demands of children because they all preferred to turn their attentions to things at their own pace, rather

than when it was being demanded of them. All had witnessed their own parents' conflicts, struggles, or indifferences with parenting. All had intuited that responsible parenting required compromises, sacrifices, and risks for women, forfeitures, and trading away their freedom to pursue their own passions. Some of the women harboured a distrust of men to fulfill their parenting obligations, and most feared that solo mothering could happen to any woman, no matter what her initial intentions or visions for a stable nuclear family might have been.

Several women suggested that mothers ought to stay home with children, giving up their careers to become full-time mothers and do the "responsible" thing. Moreover, all of the women held high expectations of how parenting ought to be conducted. Many of the women felt that it would have been irresponsible of them and unfair to the children if they had become parents. They gave reasons as to why it was good that they had not become parents (e.g., lacking patience with children, having a desire not to be rooted to one spot, or not wanting to expose a child to a socially and environmentally unsafe world). Furthermore, most of the women believed that at various times throughout their adult lives they would have fallen short of their own parenting standards.

The women in the study had found themselves uneasy with children at times. A number of the co-researchers had disliked babysitting as teenagers, and some had been angered by being "forced" to babysit younger siblings or relatives. Although sensitive and empathetic to children's lot in life (e.g., being raised by abusive parents or exposed to the dangers in society), the women had minimal contact with children, and few of their friendships with adults seemed to include children. Some participants enjoyed being with children on occasion in controlled or time-limited situations, whereas others had avoided contact with babies or children since they were children themselves. The participants tended to avoid situations of extended contact with children. It was common for the women to

experience uncomfortable internal reactions (e.g., feeling angry or fearful), when they were in the presence of loud and unruly children or children who were displaying what the women perceived as demanding and dependent behaviours; their desire to escape these situations was strong.

The women in this study had perceived themselves as different from other women for various reasons, and had experienced this at different times and in different contexts throughout their lives. All of the women, at times during their childhood and youth, had experienced a kind of turning inward that was evoked by a sense of needing safety in a dangerous world, of not belonging, of being injured by others, or for some, by a need to protect themselves from family troubles.

The women's disinterest in becoming mothers had attracted varying amounts of unwanted pressure from others for them to reproduce. They experienced receiving disapproval and criticism for their decision not to embrace motherhood. Social response to their choice had left them feeling maligned and angry about this perceived invasion of their privacy. Most of the women resented feeling that they had to justify their choice to reject motherhood; a few women reported feeling hurt by others' criticism. All wished that their choice could be comprehended and respected by others for its meaningfulness to them: they all lacked a desire for children, and some felt that parenting would not have easily or happily fit their personalities.

The participants expressed the conviction that their choice not to have children was a personal right, and was warranted based on their own personal histories, beliefs, and interests. Thus, the women wished that their decision could be viewed, accepted, and understood by others as morally responsible. The women refuted the charges of being selfish and irresponsible by experiencing and expressing a sense of entitlement to create their own lives as they saw fit; they noted that many parents appear to reproduce *for* selfish reasons.

For all of the women except one, arriving at a place of feeling entitled to their own desires and personal rights as individuals had been a long and difficult struggle.

Discussion of the Findings

The experience of living as an intentionally childless partnered woman was explored in the present study. In this section, findings from this research are organized into subsections and compared to the literature on voluntary childlessness, including comparisons to the few studies that have used structured interviews in an attempt to access women's experiences of intentional childlessness.

Sample Comparison

The women in the present study had made a strong commitment to childlessness at least 14 years prior to the interviews. They had secured their childless status in ways reportedly similar to women interviewed in previous studies (Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990; Veevers, 1980); for example, three women had made it a condition of marriage, and two others had promoted childlessness to their husbands after marriage. All of the women in this study had first been married under the age of 30 years; this is dissimilar from Kiernan's (1989) suggestion that voluntarily childless women are more likely to have married after age 30.

All of the women in the present study considered themselves intentionally childless and were pleased with this status. Arriving at their current childless situations had been a complex process for all of the women, an experience similarly reported by voluntarily childless women in several previous studies (Gerson, 1983; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990). For some women in this study, the process had involved an early decision and mate selection based upon this. Unlike women in Veevers' (1980) study who were named "repudiators" or Houseknecht's (1979) study who were labelled "early articulators," some of the early decision makers in this study had passionate attractions to other pursuits and their decision was not necessarily based upon disliking children. The process of arriving at the childless status for

other women in this study had involved postponements of childbearing, lengthy discussions with husbands, and realizations that they had satisfactory life situations (and/or marriages) without children. In Veevers's study, those whose decision had evolved through postponements were named "aficionados," however, women in this study who had arrived at their decisions through postponements were not necessarily involved in passionate pursuits which would have precluded time and energy for children. Instead, the postponers in this study had simply evolved lives that they were content with, lives that did not include children. Overall, women in this study arrived at their childless status as part of a process, rather than as a one-time decision, and they did not all necessarily have similar characteristics to one another depending upon how and when they made their decisions, as Veevers' and Houseknecht's findings have suggested.

All of the women in the present study were from working- or middle-class families of origin. Similar to most of the women in Morell's (1990; 1994) study, all the women in this study were Caucasian, all had been able to successfully obtain and use birth control, most had post-secondary education, four were currently employed, and one was "retired" (though only in her early 40's). None of the women in the present research mentioned fearing that parenthood would interfere with their freedom to pursue upward class mobility, unlike the women in Morell's (1990) study. Most of the women in this study were content with the balance of work, activity, and recreation in their lives, unlike women in Morell's sample who often found themselves overcommitted to work and other activities.

Similar to the women in Ireland's (1993) study who were childless by choice ("transformative"), most participants in this research reported that their parents had emphasized achievement and ambition and that they themselves valued these aspects of women's identities. The women's perspectives were consistent with those of several feminist authors, researchers, and philosophers (Franz & Stewart, 1994; Heilbrun, 1988; Simons, 1984),

who said that women's ambitions and desires for achievement have been overlooked and that there has been too much emphasis on women's nurturing qualities. For most of the women in this study, while their need for connection and nurturance of others was important, so was their desire for a sense of accomplishment.

All of the women in this study spoke of the importance of their marital dyad, expressing similar sentiments to those of participants in many previous studies (Baruch et al., 1983; Bram 1978, 1984; Callan 1983a; Campbell, 1983; Houseknecht, 1987; Ramu and Tavuchis, 1986; Veevers, 1980). All of these participants spoke highly of their spouses, and of the egalitarian relationships they had negotiated together. Most valued the self-sufficiency and independence of both marital partners within the marriage. Most of the women spoke of the intensity of the bond between themselves and their partners, as well as the respect and emotional support they shared with one another.

Independence and Autonomy

A sense of needing independence, personal freedom, privacy, and autonomy emerged from the narratives of the women in this study. Participants expressed that they valued these characteristics in matters relating to their personal interests, career and educational choices, lifestyle, and leisure activities. The women valued these aspects of their lives highly and feared that parenthood would provoke a loss of various freedoms related to career and educational success, their marital relationship, acting spontaneously, and would increase financial and emotional demands. Similar findings have been reported in previous research (Baruch et al., 1983; Bram, 1978; Callan & Hennessey, 1989; Gerson, 1985; Goodbody, 1977; Houseknecht, 1987; Kaltreider & Margolis, 1977; Landa, 1990; Morell, 1990; Ramu & Tavuchis, 1986; Silka & Kiesler, 1977; Veevers, 1980, 1983).

Most of the women in this study had a desire to be self-sufficient. Career ambitions were important in four of the women's lives; these women required the autonomy to pursue

their goals. All of the women in this study believed that parenting would have interfered with their independence, autonomy, personal accomplishments, or self-development, as women had reported in other studies (Gerson, 1985; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990, 1994).

For some participants, this drive for self-reliance was fueled by past experiences of non-supportive families or their belief that men could not be relied upon. The women were reluctant to rely on men either emotionally or financially as sources of support for mothering.

Similar to women in Morell's study (1994) who felt the term "wife" connoted certain behaviours and a socially subordinate role, all of the women in the present study except one rejected the term wife in favour of references like partner or best friend. These findings are similar to those of Gerson (1985), Ireland (1993), and Morell (1990, 1994). In contrast and unlike other participants in this study, one childless homemaker in this study stated that her main interpersonal focus in life was on her husband, and she valued and identified strongly with the notion of being a "traditional" wife. The experience of this woman is similar to Baruch et al.'s (1983) finding that childless homemakers depended heavily on their husband's approval for their life satisfaction.

All but one woman in the present study valued non-traditional female roles (e.g., not taking on the family responsibility for cooking and cleaning, having interests independent from their husbands', not taking on the role of "step-mother" just because of being married to a man with children), similar to voluntarily childless women in previous studies (Bram, 1984; Houseknect, 1987; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990, 1993). With the exception of one woman, the co-researchers in the present study, like women in other studies (Gerson, 1985; Hochschild, 1989; Ireland; Morell (1990); Veevers, 1980), believed that the addition of children shifted women into more traditional female care-taking roles, and irrevocably altered lifestyles and egalitarian marital relations.

Needing Control and Certainty

The women in this study reported experiencing a need to maintain control over their environments, lives, or futures. All the women in this study wanted to be in control of their own lives. Some participants believed that childrearing would result in a loss of personal control and autonomy. Similarly, Campbell (1983) reported that a substantial proportion (30%) of the childless women in her study had avoided parenthood because they feared a loss of control over their own self, identity, daily life, and future. Like women in Morell's (1994) study who had strategized not to have children in order to experience some of the freedoms and possibilities usually only reserved for males in our society, women in this study acknowledged the sense of control they needed, wanted, and achieved in relation to their time and lives as a result of not having children. As most women in this study took action on their own behalf and felt in control of the direction of their lives, so have employed childless married women in Baruch et al.'s study reported a sense of control (as a component of Mastery) in their lives. For Baruch et al.'s participants, mastery involved a sense of control over one's life; it was conceived as related to action and instrumentality, and was related to low levels of anxiety and depression. While women in the present study felt in control of their lives because of actions they took for themselves, it is hard to tell how these actions affected or were related to their experiences of anxiety or depression that they might have had.

Uneasiness around Children

One theme that emerged from the data in this study, was the sense of uneasiness that most of the participants experienced when around children if they could not govern the amount of the contact (e.g., at family gatherings and in public places). The sense of discomfort was eased for several women when they were able to control the situation and the extent and kinds of interactions they had with children (e.g., contact at work or as their

teacher). In fact, four of the participants, like half of the women in Morell's (1994) study, were working with children or were working in ways that "directly benefitted children" (p. 119). This theme of having controlled contact with children to keep discomfort in check has not been explored in depth by many authors, with the exception of Morell (1990, 1993, 1994) and Veevers (1980), some of whose participants admitted not liking children, childish things, games, or the demands of children. Houseknecht's (1987) extensive review article cited some studies that had considered discomfort with children as a motive for childlessness. This thematic finding is significant because it points to an experience of childless women that has largely been overlooked by previous researchers. One explanation for this oversight may be that the experience of discomfort with children and of controlling contact with them is not an expected or accepted attitude for women to have (Morell, 1990; Gilligan, 1983).

Parenting as an Overwhelming Responsibility

The participants in this study perceived mothering as an onerous responsibility, and simultaneously held high expectations of women who become mothers; and, most believed that at times, they would have fallen short of reaching the expectations they held for themselves, had they become mothers. Gerson (1985) and Morell (1990, 1994) have similarly reported that their participants had similar perceptions and expectations. Rich (1976/1986) has suggested that our cultural definition of what constitutes adequate mothering has become more rigorous. Participants perceived mothering as too much to bear, especially because they witnessed that mothering was often carried out in relative isolation from the authentic and substantial support of husbands, extended family, and community. These perceptions of the conditions under which women mother have also been reported by other authors (Gerson; Morell, 1990, 1994; Rich). While women in the present study believed strongly in non-traditional roles for women, several concurrently believed that parenting and career should be "mutually exclusive" (Veevers, 1980, p. 49) occupations. Women in previous studies have

held similar views that it was impossible to do well at both mothering and work outside the home simultaneously (Gerson; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994; Veevers). However, women in this study emphasized that first and foremost, they *did not want* to be mothers.

While it seems that the women held contradictory beliefs as they made meaning of their experiences, Colaizzi (1978) has suggested that researchers must tolerate and accept ambiguous data: "what is logically inexplicable may be existentially real and valid" (p. 61). In this instance, all of the women stated that they did not want to be mothers but that they believed motherhood and other pursuits were an either/or choice. Thus, the belief that women were faced with this "dichotomous choice" (Veevers, 1980, p. 49) would lead one to conclude that these women had no real freedom, had they wanted to pursue both motherhood and other passions. Secondly, many of the participants believed that mothers should stay home and raise their children, but they concurrently held a belief that mothering happened in isolation and that mothers need, but do not get, support from their husbands, extended families, or communities. Again, these beliefs lead women to conclude that the sole responsibility for raising children was too much for one person to bear, and therefore, parenting was overwhelming.

A few women in the present study feared poverty and downward class mobility if they were to become single parents, similar to women in previous studies (Bartlett, 1994; Morell, 1990). One woman in the study was raised by a single mother and had been careful to provide for herself financially because she assumed she would always be single, too. She and several other participants not only worried that single parenthood was synonymous with poverty, but they worried that no matter how strong their marriage might have looked at the outset, they feared that they too could have ended up as single parents had they decided to reproduce. The insights of several women in this study had penetrated the impoverished financial realities of single parenthood, a reality indicated by statistics cited in French (1992).

Powerful feelings of caring and helplessness, and of wanting to keep children safe from mighty external forces and from intense emotional states experienced by the women (had they become mothers) had seemed like awesome and unachievable responsibilities. Uncertainty about the state of the world and the future, and concerns about planetary overpopulation were strong themes in the narratives of most of the women in the present study. The sub-theme of the responsibility of wanting to protect children but feeling helpless to do so has not been examined in depth in any previous research, other than by Callan (1983b) and Houseknecht (1987) who have reported that concerns about world conditions and overpopulation were presented by participants as motives for childlessness.

Being Different than Other Women

Early experiences of being different than other girls were characteristic of the early lives of the women in the study (e.g., several women disliked babysitting, several women knew from childhood that they did not want to be mothers, one woman had no father in her life, several were independent little girls, several experienced having different interests from their sisters). Like women in Morell's (1990) study that reported feelings of difference or exclusion in their youth, most of the women in this study who had experienced themselves as being different from other girls believed that these early feelings were the foundation for their development of a nonconformist identity. Conflict and resistance to gender norms that began in their early lives fostered their independence and self-development, a notion suggested by Morell (1994) in her challenge of a fixed feminine orientation that delineates the parameters of what is considered "feminine" behaviour. Several of the women in this study had sought independence equivalent to what they perceived men, or those of other sexual orientations as having.

All of the participants in the present study expressed a very strong lack of longing and desire to have children, and construed it as the most important reason that they did not

become mothers. This lack of desire, and acceptance of it by the women, was a finding similarly reported by other researchers (Callan, 1983a; Morell, 1990).

The motherhood mandate that exists in our culture also promotes the belief that women who do not have children will regret that choice (Baruch et al., 1983). Contrary to this belief, the women in this study said that they did not regret not having children. In fact, in stark contrast, they feared that having children would ruin the lives they currently have, a finding similarly reported in other studies of childless women (Baruch et al.; Gerson, 1985; Morell, 1990, 1993, 1994). Women in Gerson's study employed "discounting" strategies (p. 138) to downplay the potentially negative consequences of remaining childless, and similarly, women in this study did not mention any negative consequences of childlessness.

Similar to women in Barlett's (1994) study, some women in this study mused about what the experience of pregnancy might have been like, while others expressed relief at not having gone through "morning sickness" or "being fat" during pregnancy. None, however, expressed regret over missing this experience. Although Baruch et al.'s (1983) findings indicated that most women did not regret being childless, they suggested that some women in their study felt that they had missed out on the experience of having a "real" family. In the present study, no women expressed such a regret. This difference between Baruch et al.'s participants and those in the present study may not necessarily imply that women in her study would like to change their childless status, but rather it may imply an imagining by her participants of the path not taken.

Withstanding Demands to Mother

All of the women in the present study had experienced some criticism for being childless and demands from others to explain their choice; as well, some women had experienced being pressured to conform by having children. These findings are similar to those reported by women in many previous studies (Callan, 1983b; Gerson, 1985;

Houseknecht, 1977, 1987; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990, 1994; Ramu & Tavuchis, 1986; Veevers, 1980). Women in this study engaged in "explanatory work," (i.e., seeking and giving reasons for their behaviour), and also reversed the meanings of childlessness, emphasizing that their lives were meaningful precisely because they do not have children, like women in Morell's (1990) study were reported to have done. The participants emphasized that freedom from parenting was what allowed them to pursue personal fulfillment. All of the women in this study, like voluntarily childless women in previous studies, (Alexander et al., 1992; Baruch, et al., 1983; Callan, 1987; Connidis & McMullin, 1993; Gerson, 1985; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990, 1994) reported being satisfied with their lives as they had constructed them. Most appeared to obtain pleasure and satisfaction from their interpersonal relations, similar to women in Baruch et al.'s (1983) study.

Like women in Houseknecht's (1977) study who were seen to be conforming to fertility norms of a reference group, most of the women in this study had at least one group that they could compare themselves favourably to as childless women. For example, one participant was in the arts and with actors; another had conceptualized herself as a traveller and had seen children not travelling well with others; another drew strength from her socio-political friendship network composed of individuals in varying family constellations and of differing sexual orientations; and, another woman, a microbiologist, could compare herself to others in her field and see that they did not expect her to have children. One participant appeared to have only her husband as her ally in childlessness, and she felt isolated (although not unhappy) in her choice, particularly because she lived in a so-called "Bible Belt" where traditional family types and reproduction were strongly held values. Another woman did not mention any reference groups and stated she had felt curious about why she and others had chosen to remain childless. She had rejected joining a Vancouver socializing group for childless individuals because of its "coffee-klatch" and "support group" nature that did not

provide her with the answers she sought. Most women in the present study were similar to women in Houseknecht's (1977) study, in that they had found that having other childless individuals or groups to align themselves with as childless women had been helpful for withstanding negative pressures and social sanctions from others.

Similar to other studies (Callan, 1983a; Morell, 1990), women in the present study refuted the label of "selfish," in that they believed that they had the right to choose their own life paths for themselves. Women in this study, rather than perceiving themselves as selfish, were decidedly prosocial, like women in previous studies have been noted as being (Baruch et al., 1983; Gerson, 1985; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990, 1994). The women all expressed deep caring about the state of the world, social conditions, the rights and entitlements of children. The women in this study defined themselves as caring people who were giving their time and energy to other people and causes; they viewed themselves and their actions similarly to how women in Morell's (1990) study did. Morell's description of her respondents also describes how women in this study refuted being labelled selfish:

engaged in "reverse discourse," asserting that their childless status permitted them to reach out to others in ways that mothers might find difficult given their family responsibilities....women reclaim[ed] their right to be seen as caring people and described the nonfamilial forms their caring assumed (p. 160).

By placing their own self-interest first, women in the present study were living contrary to the social dictate that women ought to place others' needs before their own (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976/1986), and were, thereby, "risking an assertion that seems [seemed] selfish and hence morally dangerous" (p. 143). The women in this study looked at their choice as juxtaposing self-sacrifice vs. rights (Gilligan), and they chose to make their personal rights a priority, rather than sacrificing themselves in service to other's expectations of them.

In justifying their behaviour, they construed their actions and differences from other women (who have become mothers) in a way that *combined* goodness (e.g., It would be in the best interests of children not to bring any more into the world), responsibility for others (e.g., I would not do an excellent job of parenting and children need excellent parenting), and choice (e.g., I do not want children, I like my life the way it is). They were able to counterbalance their personal right to construct their own lives with an ethic of care for others (Gilligan) by conceptualizing caring as not reproducing.

Women in this study appeared to be in the process of on-going reconstructions with regard to their reasons for not having children, a similar finding to what Morell (1990) reported in her study. Three women said it was difficult, even for themselves, to understand their own reasons for not wanting or having children. Three other women said they understood their own reasons, although they varied in the amount of clarity. As the women learned, grew, and developed as human beings, they understood more and more about their own inner processes and motivations for many choices in their lives, not just the choice about having or not having children.

Evolving Self Not Identified with Motherhood

For many women in the present study, learning and teaching, satisfying creative impulses and urges to learn and grow, making conscious choices about the direction of their lives, and keeping informed about concerns in the larger world, were of utmost importance to their lives and to their identities. Similar to findings by Ireland (1993), the women in this study perceived their ability to creatively evolve as a direct result of their not having children. Ireland conceptualized the absence of children as space for creative potential to exist. The women in this study experienced this space as freedom to develop and evolve, and used this space to explore what was meaningful to them. The women in the study were in a *process* of continually creating their lives because our culture had not provided them with a script to

live by; instead, they were in effect "composing a life" (Bateson, 1990). The women preferred to turn their attention voluntarily to their chosen passions rather than to have their attentions demanded by children.

Women in this study perceived personal growth and self-fulfillment as worthy goals to strive for, and parenthood was perceived as threatening their attainment, a finding also noted by other researchers (Goodbody, 1977; Ramu & Tavuchis, 1986; Veevers, 1980). Turning inward for self-definitions and motivation toward personal interests were common experiences for women in this study. The women in this study tended to construct their lives around what was most meaningful to them, a possibility these women believed was only attainable *as a result* of not having children; a finding similarly reported in many other studies (Baruch et al., 1983; Bram, 1978; Callan, 1987; Connidis & McMullin, 1993; English, 1989; Gerson, 1985; Houseknecht, 1987; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990; Veevers, 1980). This finding is contrary to cultural assumptions highlighted by Morell (1990), specifically the notion that women live empty, meaningless lives without children. Contrary to popular notions of "emptiness" in childless women's lives, these independent women stated that they lead very "full" lives.

The women in this study seemed to have evolved a strong sense of self that was not dependent upon living up to cultural messages (as in, 'good/real women become mothers' or 'all women want to become mothers') in order to get the approval of others, a finding similarly reported by Morell (1990). Having children was not central to their lives; their actions had decentered motherhood from their feminine identities (Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1990). Many authors (Baruch et al., 1983; Glenn, 1994; Ireland; Morell, 1990, 1994; Oakley, 1990; Wollett, 1991) have suggested that separating femininity and womanhood from motherhood is crucial in order for women who are intentionally childless to gain recognition as complete adult human beings and to become less invisible in society.

To summarize, the most important and significant themes of voluntary childlessness emphasized by women in this study (more than by women in previous research) were: (a) that they wanted a sense of control and certainty, (b) that they felt uneasy with children when unable to govern the extent of the interactions, (c) that they strongly lacked a desire or longing to become mothers, (d) that they valued personal growth and individual freedom, and (e) that they believed the task of protecting and caring for children was overwhelming, given their belief in an unsafe world.

Implications for Future Research

All of the intentionally childless women interviewed in this study were Canadian or American, Caucasian, heterosexual, married women between the ages of 38 and 44, from working- and middle-class backgrounds; in all, a fairly homogeneous sample demographically. This raises the question of whether the themes that were common to this sample of women would be salient for a more diverse sample of women with regard to age range, class, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation. Further research could explore the themes of childlessness for a more heterogeneous group.

All of the women in this study, although under the age of 45, had responded to another researcher's recruitment efforts and had volunteered to participate in a study that had an age criteria of between 45 and 55 years of age. These participants had responded to a study for which they were ineligible, perhaps indicating that they had a very strong desire to tell their stories in an interview. Therefore, it is possible that this sample is not representative of intentionally childless women under 45 years of age. Future research could be done with women who are recruited specifically with the criteria of being under 45 years of age.

At least three of the women in this study had been voluntarily sterilized while in their 20's, indicating their very strong commitment to childlessness. Future research could explore whether the themes of childless that emerged in this study would be generalizable to a

sample of voluntarily sterilized, childless women, including women of other sexual orientations.

The present study used a small sample of six women to do a qualitative exploration of themes. Studies done with larger numbers of women may allow researchers to continue to refine the themes and may be useful in extending the findings of the phenomenological meanings of being childless by choice.

Future research could investigate the possibility of cohort differences. Follow-up longitudinal research done with the same sample of women (e.g., 20 years from now), when these women are in their 50's and 60's, might explore whether intentional childlessness is a similar experience with similar meanings for them at that time. Another kind of cohort research could be done in the future (e.g., 20 years from now) to investigate whether women in the same age group as the women in the present study have the similar experiences and offer similar meanings of intentional childlessness. Phenomenological research with both of these cohorts might offer similar and/or different themes to the present research.

The women in this research spoke highly but briefly about their spouses; they seemed to be very attached to their spouses. About half of the women in this study came into their marriages stating to their husbands that they did not want children; the other half of the participants negotiated their childlessness with their partners after marriage. In future, researchers could explore phenomenological experiences in several areas: (a) the process of partner selection by women who are certain they wish to remain childless, (b) the experience of couples negotiating the childless decision, and (c) the experience of marriage and attachment for voluntarily childless couples.

Several themes that emerged in the present research were important to the women's sense of self, identity, freedom, and autonomy. Five of the women in the study viewed the world and future as unsafe for children. Future research could extend these

phenomenological findings by exploring intentionally childless women's: (a) sense of independence and autonomy, (b) their sense of self and identity development, (c) their perceptions of the world, and (d) personality characteristics related to the themes.

Implications for Counselling

The women in this study had few childless role-models, or childless women that they were aware of, when they were growing up. They had felt different and, perhaps, odd at times. Had some of these girls or women been exposed to a range of reproductive options as young women in high school, they might not have felt so out of step. This implies that there is a need for young women to be informed about a wide range of possible life and reproductive options. This could be done in school, as part of family life or sexuality education. Voluntary childlessness could be suggested as one option. One woman in the present study had arranged a panel of speakers including mothers and non-mothers to come and speak to her university-age acting students about the range of reproductive options, including not having children, and the implications of childbearing on an acting career. For women in this study, it would have helped them feel less alone when they were younger if they had known others without children who could have served as role-models and sources of information.

The women in this study had felt different than other women at various times in their lives because they had no desire for children, and no regrets for not having them, although none of the women mentioned having specifically sought counselling help with their decision to remain childless. Counsellors who deal with women's reproductive decision-making might wish to become aware of the benefits of voluntary childlessness so that they can validate this potential choice to clients who are seeking help with ambivalence around family planning decisions. Counselling married women who do not want children in order to normalize this experience could be useful for those clients, because in our culture where

married women are expected to want children, there are few visible exemplary marriages that do not include children.

All of the women in the study stated that they lacked a desire to become mothers, and some women linked this lack of desire to painful childhood issues and unresolved family of origin problems. These women stated that these experiences had tainted their view of parenting, had affected their view of themselves as possible parents, and had influenced their decision not to have children. Counsellors may wish to explore and help clients who are ambivalent about becoming parents resolve childhood issues as part of the examination of their desire to become parents in the reproductive decision-making process.

Women in this study valued their right to independence and autonomy, and to personal freedom. Three women in the present study had followed through on their decisions to be sterilized when they were in their 20's, after much deliberation, forethought, discussion, and/or planning. Of these three, one woman reported being badly treated by nurses when she was in hospital for her tubal ligation, and another reported being treated rudely by her doctor's receptionist. These experiences of women being criticized for acting on their personal rights may alert counsellors that some women may require extensive support, encouragement, and effective strategies for acting independently and autonomously, if they are to withstand the criticism directed at them when they do act in their own best interests.

All of the participants had hoped that their decision, which they perceived as a private matter, would be treated with respect. When others (employers, friends, family members, co-workers, health care providers and those who work closely with them, etc.) treated the women disrespectfully, the women were hurt, angry, and offended. Experiences of some participants point to a need for counsellors to continue supporting women's choices and educating others to respect individual values and rights. The negative experiences of the two women previously cited point to the need for the education of health professionals and their

staff in order to increase their sensitivity to women's rights. Health care professionals might wish to acquire knowledge and skills that could help them treat clients less judgmentally, adopting a client-centered approach so as to set aside their personal attitudes and values with regard to clients' individual rights and differences.

The women in this study had withstood criticism and pressure over their reproductive choice; they perceived our culture as affording little recognition of their choice as important and valid. Most of the women found that their participation in the study, especially reading the common themes, validated their own experiences and helped them feel less alone with their childless decision, despite the fact that many women had reference group support in their lives already. A focus group counselling or peer support group process could be meaningful and validating for voluntarily childless women, in order to help them gain recognition and visibility.

Although all the women in this study very clearly stated that they did not want children, they also perceived that parenting was an overwhelming task making it impossible to do a great job of both mothering and working outside the home concurrently. The women believed that having children was a very risky proposition for their own and the children's overall sense of security in the world. Counsellors can inform women that some research (Baruch et al., 1983) has indicated that having multiple roles (i.e., marriage, children, and work) actually involved less risks for women, and more possibilities for happiness and well-being. Baruch et al. suggested that counsellors could help women stop thinking in either/or terms, because women can happily "do-both," although they cautioned counsellors not to assume that all women necessarily "want it all" (p. 305), or want to do both.

Many of the women in this study specified that self-fulfillment was a goal of theirs, and that they were diligently working on their personal realization of this goal. Counsellors could validate women's accomplishments and achievements not related to motherhood, and

help the women appreciate the value of these. Counsellors could help women view their accomplishments as identity-forming milestones. Several had received counselling to overcome past difficulties and were now focused on planning for the future and their retirement. Counsellors may wish to help clients who are considering remaining childless become oriented toward what they would like their life to look like, to help them visualize their desired outcomes, and help them make a lifeplan toward finding personal fulfillment.

Several women in the study devoted a lot of energy to nurturing others, energy they believed they would not have had if they were raising children. Counsellors might wish to note the ways that many of these childless individuals devoted themselves to the education and personal growth of others, doing "generative" (Erikson, 1980) work or "alternative parenting" (English, 1989). It is hoped that these and other results of this study will be useful to counsellors, especially those working with adult developmental, transitional, and lifespan issues. In particular, counsellors could share these potential ways of nurturing and guiding the next generation (and others) with both voluntarily and involuntarily childless individuals who are seeking ways to meaningfully construct a life without biological children. Counsellors could expand the range of alternatives that clients see for channelling their energy into meaningful relations with others (e.g., mentoring, guiding younger generation, volunteering as Big Brothers or Big Sisters).

The process of participating in this phenomenological interview research was important to many of the women. Several said that telling their story in the interview at length and in-depth from the beginning of childhood, and being listened to by an interested person, helped them make sense of the evolution of their childlessness. Participation also helped some women gain greater overall awareness of themselves, and of how they had acted on their values and rights. Counsellors may find it helpful to listen to the clients' complete life stories in detail so that both client and counsellor get immersed in the context. As

witnesses and catalysts, counsellors can validate clients' meaning-making and, thereby, help clients to claim their right to act in ways that honour their meanings and values.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Recruitment Notice

A study exploring

Partnered Women's Experiences of Being Childless by Choice

Women today have more choices about when and if they wish to become mothers than they did in the past. This study will explore women's experiences of choosing not to have children in a society that still expects women to become mothers.

You can contribute...

...if you are a woman between 30 and 55.

...if you are married or in a live-in heterosexual relationship.

...if you are childless by choice and have been aware of this intention not to have children for at least 2 years, and you have never had a biological child.

Participating in this study involves...

...discussing your experiences of intentional childlessness with a female researcher on two occasions for a total of about 3 hours.

...reading and commenting on a summary of your experiences and on the themes common to all of the women in the study.

This master's thesis research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. J. Daniluk, Counselling Psychology, University of British Columbia. Participation in this study will be completely confidential. If you would like to participate or to have more information, please call:

Sandra Michener XXX-XXXX, Master's Candidate or **Dr. J. Daniluk XXX-XXXX**, Research Supervisor.

Appendix B - Newspaper Notice

Vancouver Sun, January 25, 1995

Archibald Rollo, Columnist

WOMEN WANTED

University of B.C. student Laurie Minuk is working on her master's thesis in counselling psychology. She is studying the experience of women being childless by choice.

Laurie would like to interview women between 45 and 55 years of age who believe they had the opportunity and capacity to have children within a committed relationship, but remained childless. The women should also believe they are no longer fertile.

Laurie says two separate confidential interviews lasting about three hours total is involved. Results of the study will be shared with participants. Call Laurie at 271-6391.

Appendix C - Research and Screening Questions

Research question

What is the meaning and experience of intentional childlessness for partnered women who have selected this life option?

Screening questions

How did you hear about this research?

Are you between 30 and 55 years of age?

Are you married or in a committed live-in heterosexual relationship?

Are you intentionally childless (childless by choice)?

How long ago did you become aware of this intention?

Are you available for one interview of approximately 2 hours, and one interview of approximately 1 hour for a total of about 3 hours?

Appendix D - Consent Form

A Master's thesis research study on
**Partnered Women's Experiences of
Being Childless by Choice**

If you agree to participate, this is what you will do:

The researcher will meet with you on two separate occasions for a total of approximately 3 hours, for the purposes of hearing and documenting your experiences of being an intentionally childless partnered woman.

The first 2-hour interview will be audio-taped and transcribed in its entirety. All identifying information will be deleted from the study for your confidentiality. Anonymity will be further insured by your provision of a pseudonym to be used in all oral and written study communication. Prior to the second interview, you will be asked to read a synopsis of your experiences as summarized from the first interview, and to ponder the common themes that the researcher derived from the interviews with all of the participants. At the second interview, you will be asked to indicate whether or not these themes authentically reflect your meanings and experiences of intentional childlessness. Your comments and suggestions will be heard and taken into consideration for the final written account.

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this project please contact me at XXX-XXXX or call my supervisor, Dr. Judith Daniluk, Department of Counselling Psychology, at XXX-XXXX.

You may refuse to participate and are free to withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice. You may also refuse to answer questions that you are not comfortable with.

I, _____, agree to participate in the study and acknowledge receipt of a copy of this consent form. I may be reached at:

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Date _____

Signature _____

Researcher: Sandra L. Currie Michener, XXX-XXXX
Department of Counselling Psychology
Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia

Appendix E - Orienting Statement

The purpose of this research is to find out how partnered adult women experience intentional childlessness. We would like to know what the experience of being childless by choice is like for you and how this is related to your perceptions of yourself.

Because most women do become mothers, we know very little about how adult women make meaningful lives for themselves if they do not become mothers. The research in this area has primarily been from a sociological perspective which focuses more on the factors influencing childlessness, the kinds of lifestyles that childless people lead, and the timing of their realization that they do not want to parent. Some psychological research has looked at the personal characteristics of childless adults. What we find out in this study about women's experiences of childlessness can help us in our counselling of women and couples contemplating not becoming parents.

I would like to know more about the lived experience of being a partnered woman who has selected not to have children. I would like to understand the meanings you attach to the experience of not having children and how you define yourself in a world of parents. It might help you to structure your experiences of being voluntarily childless like a story with a beginning, middle, and an end.

Please speak as freely as you wish about anything relating to your experience. Please speak in the first-person, (i.e., using "I" statements), as much as possible. In order to get more clarity, I might ask you to explore certain topics you raise if they seem meaningful to you, so that I can understand your experience more fully. Again, you are not obligated to answer any questions you are not comfortable with. Generally, I am interested in hearing about anything that you feel is important to you about your lived experience of being an intentionally childless adult woman in this society.

Do you fully understand what I am hoping to learn about *your* personal story of living as a voluntarily childless woman? Do you have any questions before we begin?

Appendix F - Supplemental Interview Probes

What prompted you to participate in this research?

How did you come to be childless by choice?

What is it like for you being a woman who has selected not to have children?

What does being childless by choice mean to you?

How do you refer to yourself with regard to your childlessness? Has this evolved over time?

How do you understand and make sense of not being a mother?

Is there anything or anyone that you feel has influenced your reproductive decisions?

Appendix G - Follow-up Validation Interview

Introduction

The purpose of this interview is to give you an opportunity to respond to the way your story has been summarized and to the researcher's interpretation of common themes that emerged from the data of all the participants. Please feel free to express any comments, suggestions, or disagreements that you may have with these interpretations. Where possible, your suggestions will be woven into the final account contained in my master's thesis.

Probes

Do you feel that these summaries authentically reflect your experiences of being childless by choice?

Do all of the common themes resonate or ring true with you?

Are there any thoughts or feelings that you would like to add to the summary of your story or to the common themes?

Is there anything within your own bio-synopsis that you would like to have changed or removed?

Appendix H - Empathic Generalizability

Introduction to task for theme readers:

Please read these common themes and tell me if, in your experience of being a partnered woman who is childless by choice, these themes accurately reflect your lived experience of intentional childlessness.