Childless or Childfree? Women's Narratives of Ambivalence and Identity

by

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Abstract

The childlessness discourse is overpowered by biomedical interventions of infertility, while ambivalence is overlooked. This study aims to vocalize this overlooked perspective by focusing on the identity narratives of seven women without children as the result of experience ambivalence. The identity narratives of these women were explored through seven semi-structured, in-depth interviews and one group interview. This research highlights that ambivalence stems from multiple sources and can be experienced in different ways. The examination of the intersection of motherhood and womanhood has shown me that while motherhood is but one way of expressing womanhood, women without children are still categorized and stigmatized. Additionally, women who do not have children can acquire some identity as motherly through roles such as stepmothers or mentors. Ultimately, research such as this helps to create more awareness about the different experiences of childlessness, namely experiences that do not center on infertility but rather on ambivalence.

Key Terms: Ambivalence, Womanhood, Motherhood, Choice, Identity Narrative, Childless, Childlessness

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Introduction

As a young woman, I often think about what my life will look like as I grow into my middle-age years. Naturally, I have contemplated motherhood and when doing so, it dawned on me my own ambivalence when considering notions of choice, motherhood and what it means to be a woman. This research explores such ideas and sheds light on the choices women make on the road towards motherhood or non-motherhood. This research vocalizes an often-overlooked perspective - a perspective of choice, womanhood and motherhood.

Women that are childless are often depicted by the infertility literature as women who could not have children due to fertility issues, or women that made an easy and deliberate choice to have no children (Letherby, 2002; Wilson, 2014). This depiction excludes the experiences of women who have not had children due to more ambiguous life circumstances. Women's role in reproduction has created a strong bond between womanhood and motherhood (Wilson, 2014), potentially leading to dueling feelings in some women between motherhood and other personal aspirations, and thus, generating ambivalence (Aumann & Galinksy, 2012).

For purposes of this discussion, we define ambivalence as the state of having mixed feelings or two minds about a particular state of being and more specifically, the state of women who felt they had a choice about becoming a mother and felt both drawn to and deterred from aspects of motherhood. These women went back and forth on the matter until they reached a point where they could no longer consider having children.

In addition to exploring the role of ambivalence in childless women, this research also examines the influence of the connection between womanhood and motherhood on identity through the following research question: *How does the intersection between womanhood and motherhood affect identity narratives of women who are childless due to ambivalence?* This research analyzes the

thoughts and feelings expressed by seven women who felt that having children was a conscious decision, which they had the ability to make without intense familial or cultural pressures. Though this research offers insight into the experience of those women who have ambivalence towards becoming mothers, it should not be used to generalize the experience of all women.

As this research is grounded in feminist life course and maternal theory, it will help to illuminate the relationship between womanhood and motherhood, and how this connection can generate stigmatization of childless women. This research will begin by reviewing scholarship dealing with motherhood, womanhood, childlessness and ambivalence while laying a theoretical framework to structure the analysis. I will explain the research methods used before discussing the three main themes of this research: ambivalence; the treatment and perception of the women; and how the women viewed the intersection between womanhood and motherhood at both a personal and societal level.

Overview of the Literature and Theoretical Framing of the Research

The following section will explore the evolution of the concept of ambivalence from psychology into sociology and how it is a useful concept for this social anthropological study. Additionally, I will draw from theorist such as Beauvoir (1952), Butler (2007), Letherby (2002) and Wilson (2014) to examine the theoretical relationship between motherhood and womanhood. I will go on to discuss the current ways by which literatures address the childlessness discourse, and in doing so will address the gaps that exist with regards to ambivalence within the motherhood, womanhood and fertility literatures. Through the theoretical framing, I will offer perspectives from theorists that explore many of the ideas of womanhood, motherhood and childlessness. In the analysis section I will expand upon ambivalence by using experiences from the women interviewed while also reevaluating ideas of womanhood and motherhood through the ways the women spoke

about their experiences of being women without children.

Ambivalence

In the late 1970s the concept of ambivalence was taken from psychology and repositioned in opposition to rationality as a behavioural defect that deviates from inherent social roles and statuses (Merton, 1976). Barber (1976) argues the importance of normative social roles in order for ambivalence to occur. Connidis and McMullin (2002) suggest that ambivalence has been conceptualized at two levels; the social structural level in which sociological ambivalence has been seen as deviation from the normative expectation of institutional practices, and at the individual level in which psychological ambivalence has been viewed in primarily subjective situations. Connidis and McMullin suggest a new perspective of sociological ambivalence is in order where ambivalence is seen as being created by the contradictions experienced by individuals as they interact with others, and thus a feature of social structure and catalyst for social change. According to Connidis and McMullin, this reconceptualization is valuable because it considers ambivalence to be an ongoing feature of negotiations of social relations.

Around the 1920s and 30s women's sole roles as mothers and wives began to expand, offering more opportunities outside of the home. Consequently, as motherhood came to be seen more as a choice, ambivalence surrounding motherhood became a greater factor in family planning (Moen, 1992). Moen, for example, shows how mothers often experience ambivalence by discussing how some who work outside of the home feel like they should be spending more time at home, while others feel they are spending too much time at home and would like to take on different roles outside the home. Though Moen is describing women who already have children, the key concept of ambivalence, nevertheless, is being represented in a very important way: women having contradictory feelings between personal goals and societal expectations.

Women experience contradictions within the current Canadian social structures in respect to their roles as women. They have agency to decide whether or not to become mothers, yet that decision is complicated due to the draws they experience between different social roles within a specific social structure. Thinking about Connidis and McMullin's (2002) outlook, ambivalence towards choosing motherhood can be seen as the interaction between individual agency and social structures.

Raison d'être

In the past womanhood was seen as a collection of females uniformly fulfilling the same gender-conforming practices.[1] However, as Butler (2007) argues, though sex may be understood to be more physiological and constitute part of the body's materiality, gender roles that accompany one's sex are dictated by the social world and, therefore, one performs gender roles. Butler (2007) argues that no one is born with a gender but rather gender is learned through seeing how people perform gender. As a result, gender is performative as it is being reproduced continuously. Thus, womanhood is understood to be the unifying experiences of people who identify as women by means of a process of interaction with social structures that dictate the roles of women. However, as will be discussed later on, gender roles are constantly being challenged and changed.

The increased involvement of women in the workplace in the 1940s and 50s continued to challenge the traditional roles women were assumed to acquire (Beauvoir, 1952). As marriage began to no longer be viewed as an institution of necessity it followed that motherhood itself became redefined as voluntary role, thereby liberating women from their reproductive 'obligations'. Moen (1992) goes on to suggest that women do not necessarily have to opt out of the role of the mother in

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[1] Female and male refers to sex, whereas woman and man refer to gender (Butler, 2007).

desperate. Although such negative stereotypes would have been more prevalent in the past, as will be shown in the analysis section, they still exist. These stereotypes create stigmatize women who do not have children due to the perception that they deviate from accepted or agreed upon standards of femininity (Veevers, 1980).

Being childless by choice was previously seen as socially deviant. Arguably, this view continues to some degree in the present. Though Goffman (1963) does not discuss childlessness directly, his work dealing with stigmatization with regards to blemished characters can easily be applied to childless women (Veevers, 1980). As Goffman explains, stigmatization refers to the collection of false stereotypes that create understandings of social deviance or abnormality amongst a homogenous group. Because social deviance constitutes the straying away from societal norms and expectations, to the extent that motherhood is a social norm, childlessness can be considered as a social deviance that results in spoiled identities, likely to cause stigmatization (Veevers, 1980). Veevers (1980) suggest that the processes of stereotyping occur to explain the behaviors of childlessness and justify negative reactions towards women without children. Women who are childless by choice are stigmatized for their perceived "blemished" character and lack of femininity (Veevers, 1980).

Parenthood can be seen as something prescribed for all married adults and, as Layne (2003) argues, grants parents a new position within society. However, parenthood continues to be more connected to womanhood than to manhood (Rittenour & Colander, 2012; Veevers, 198) and women tend to place more importance on the motherhood aspect of their identities than men (Rittenour & Colander, 2012). Men do not face the same stigmatization centering on rebelliousness and selfishness that women do because of their ability to demonstrate masculinity through outlets aside from fatherhood, such as through being a prominent lawyer or a successful athlete. Women

experience more stigmatization because their identities as women and femininity have been closely connected to rearing children. This is an interesting observation that has been changing within Canada, as women are increasingly becoming prominent lawyers and successful athletes.

The topic of infertility dominates the childlessness literature and perpetuates the idea that people make an active and engaged choice in favour of or not in favour of having children. Childlessness is often depicted through the binary categories of *voluntarily* or *involuntarily* childless. Basten (2009) reinforces this idea by distinguishing between women who wanted children but were unable, and women who never wanted children, by labeling the former as child*less* and the latter as child*free.* Therefore, women are either categorized as mothers, voluntarily child*free* or involuntarily child*less*. Poston (2010) suggests a third category of childless women called "Temporarily childless", in which women identify they will have children, just not yet. Wilson (2014) complicates the dichotomies of both Basten and Poston by arguing that women often do not have a clear identity or understanding or their childlessness, and suggests that one can transcend traditional boundaries of motherhood and non-motherhood. The idea of a *voluntary/involuntary* continuum, as opposed to a dichotomous classification, allows for a better understanding of how one does not make a simple choice. Rather, one can move between wanting and not wanting based on life circumstances, and thus cannot be easily categorized *involuntary* or *voluntary* (Letherby, 2002).

Understanding motherhood as socially constructed allows for Letherby (2002) to suggest that although a woman may not have a child of her own, she can still have a mothering relationship with a child, and thus develop a motherly identity. Motherhood is a social role that can be expressed as a continuum due to motherly characteristics, such as the ability to nurture and care for another person, being qualities of many women with and without children (Letherby, 2002). Any woman with such qualities can be in a position of a nurturer or mentor to a younger person whom would not

be perceived as the woman's own child. Wilson (2014) for example, refers to a group of childless women called *God-aunties* who have a close and nurturing relationship with a child that is not their own. These women transcend childlessness and acquire some identity as a mother. Similarly, as Talbot, (1996) points out, some women continue to identity as mothers after the death of a child, thus illustrating how mother is an identity not dependent on the materiality of a child.

This research demonstrates that a woman's experiences with non-motherhood are complex and cannot be easily defined nor understood. The concepts of womanhood and motherhood are important as they are created through the unification of individuals identifying with each other and operating within particular systems of power. Porter et al. (2008) and Springgay et al. (2012) state that the woman's body has been historically treated as an object of study rather than a subject of study. Rittenour and Colaner (2012) argue that the empirical and colloquial fascination with motherhood is due to the demonstrative power to control women's lives. The study of women's bodies as the "maternal body" in an objective manner has occurred over time and space and perpetuates the connection between womanhood and motherhood. This research works to deconstruct this connection by examining the identity narratives of women through the research question: *how does the intersection of womanhood and motherhood affect the identity narratives of women that did not have children due to ambivalence during childbearing years?*

Research Methods

This research is based on seven semi-structured, in-depth interviews and one group interview that were conducted between December 2016 and April 2017. Individual interviews ranged from forty minutes to an hour and the group interview was two hours in length. Research participants were required to be middle-aged women who were childless due to life circumstances apart from

infertility and did not have plans to become pregnant at any future point.[2] The participant age range was chosen because pregnancy would no longer have seemed as possible as it was at a younger age and these women would have had more time than younger women to explore how themes of ambivalence, the connection between womanhood and motherhood and childlessness had affected their own identities.

As required by the nature of my research, I used mixed methods of recruitment and sampling was purposive. My main methods of recruitment were asking my social network to post a flyer on their Facebook pages and reach out to those they knew that fit the criteria of this research. At the end of each interview, I would inquire about the participants knowing any others that would have been interested in participating. Women who had fit my criteria and were part of my study referred all further participants to me. I recruited participants from Toronto, Ontario, however, since the study is exploratory and focuses on the intersection of motherhood and womanhood, locality was not an important criterion in recruitment.

In a study conducted by Davies and Welch (1986) on ambivalence amongst mothers, the researchers interviewed a small number of participants in order to explore and develop an understanding of how women perceive their own situations. As such, they did not come up with a strict set of variables in order to better allow for women to explain their situations as they see them. This research followed the same approach as Davies and Welch (1986) in exploring how people talk about their lives through the language they use and the connections they make to reveal how they see their worlds (Gilligan, 1982).

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were valuable as they allowed for me to both ask a series of comparable questions across all interviews, and to ask unscheduled questions to explore

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[2] Infertility was excluded because it is a less ambivalent situation and is better understood through other social research

new concepts and ideas that spontaneously came up (Berg & Lune, 2012). I asked questions that were tailored to get at the interviewees' experiences of childless as middle-aged women. Interviews typically began with a series of questions that would help me tailor later questions to be more relevant to their life experiences while still addressing the main themes of this research. Studying identity narratives through semi-structured, in-depth interviews was useful as it allowed for freedom to focus on questions and themes that particularly applied to one's conceptualization of one's experiences.

Interviews provide an understanding of the world or a phenomenon as conceptualized by the researcher (Johnson, 1996; Kirby & McKenna 1989) but focus groups - or in this case group interviews - are designed to help understand how a collective views a topic. The three members of the group interview had already been individually interviewed and so meeting once more allowed for an opportunity to clarify general and overarching questions that arose during the coding process of the interviews. Additionally, the group interview allowed for me to test preliminary findings to help understand how the women as a collective contextualized and categorized gender roles and childlessness. The group interaction allowed for a vibrant discussion instead of a bilateral exchange with the researcher (Johnson, 1996). The group data was important in this research as it allowed for a better understanding of how the collective understood concepts of motherhood and womanhood. As well, the spontaneous interaction of the group members produced insight that was not readily obtained in interviews and helped to develop a collective story.

While transcribing the interview I conducted a preliminary analysis where I began with writing a brief summary of the interview and then moved into identifying the main points; nonverbal information; surprises I had during the interview; things that confirmed my expectations; and connections with concepts and theory and thoughts the interview generated in me. I asked a series of

questions of analysis of each interview in order to draw out over arching themes (See Appendix D).

After writing a brief summary and examining the questions of analysis, I created codes that addressed different aspects of the major themes of this research and systematically placed a code at the end of a section of the interview that encapsulated that theme. When all data had been coded, I collected each section of text that addressed a code and compiled the sections into a new document organized by themes, from which I could begin to observe patterns. If a new code emerged during the coding process I would revisit previously coded interviews and code according to the new theme.

A limitation of this research is the lack of methodologies to study ambivalence and the ambiguous nature of the concept. Smelser (1998) argues that there are challenges the social sciences face when studying ambivalence as an empirical phenomenon because of the lack of methodologies that allow for ambivalent behavior. Smelser further argues this point by suggesting that the social sciences' research methodologies aiming to rationalize phenomenon are flawed because human behavior in itself is fraught with ambivalence. To overcome this limitation, I focused on the exploratory nature of the study and allowed for the participants to address concepts and themes that they saw as important to explaining their experience of childlessness.

Risks or discomforts associated with my research were unlikely to supersede those incurred in daily life, but might have included discomfort resulting from the discussion of an emotional topic. Strong feelings could have arisen if individuals felt particularly emotional about the overall topic or a particular question in the interview or group interview. I mitigated this risk in both the group interview and individual interviews by creating a safe space for participants to discuss only what they felt comfortable sharing by informing them that they may choose to not answer any question and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time.

An Analysis of Seven Women and Their Experiences

This section will focus on three themes that emerged from the data collected from the seven interviews and one group interview. The analysis will begin by exploring what ambivalence looked like amongst the participants and by doing so will demonstrate how choosing motherhood is no easy task as one must weigh through the pros and cons of becoming a mother. Second, the analysis will explore the treatment of childless women through four sub-themes: treatment in the workplace; familial perceptions; relationship with other women with children; and finally, how they reported being treated within their social networks. The analysis will conclude by discussing the third theme: how the participants view their relationship between womanhood and motherhood, and how this relationship is being reconstituted by challenging traditional gender roles.

Theme 1: A Look at Ambivalence During Childbearing Years

All the women that participated in this study spoke clearly about the reasons they did not have children. Many childless by-choice women saw themselves not as career-oriented feminists but rather as reasonable people concerned about the responsibilities of motherhood (Wilson, 2014). Additionally, many women also believed they were childless, in part, because of their own day-to-day attitudes that allowed them to "forget" to have children. Included is a diagram the women collaboratively made during the group interview by me drawing out what I thought ambivalence looked like and them telling me what words they thought belonged on the sides of "wanting children" and "not wanting children".

Diagram A: Group Interview Explaining Ambivalence

Not Wanting Children

- Freedom - time and money
- Responsibility
- Insecurity about being a mother
- Fear of not loving the child
- Narcissism
- No partner

Wanting Children

- Unconditional love
- Special bond with a person
- Belonging to a special group
- Expanded social network through children

∿∿ : A woman's path of ambivalence

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In the diagram, the list for "wanting children" is smaller than the list for "not wanting children." The reasons for wanting children all have to do with love, intimacy, and community. Interestingly, when the women in the group interview were asked whether or not they could get those things from another person they reported that they could not, but they could get them from multiple sources like careers, partners and friends.

The women in the group interview were aware that motherhood does not guarantee these positive attributes. This idea was reflected both in my conversations with the women and through the words on the "not wanting" side that focus on insecurities and fears. The women in the group interview would often say a word for the "not wanting children" list and then give an example from one of their mother friends or sisters to justify their answer. However, when speaking about positive qualities, they always reiterated that they knew that motherhood did not always work out in that way.

This was highlighted when the women spoke about the concerns they had about their care

as they aged. Many articulated that they were worried they would come to regret not having children out of fear they would not be cared for.

> k.d.: And people will say, "You don't have kids? Who is going to take care of you?"
> Billie: That is a whole other thing about not having kids.
> Carmella: You can have kids and be totally alone so having kids doesn't necessarily provide comfort.

The women feared not being cared for but also recognized that children were not always willing to care for their aging parents.

I had not thought about the role of fear until an interview early in the study, when I asked Sabine if there was anything she would like to add. There was a long pause until finally she said that we had not spoken about fear. For Sabine, and many others, fear underlined many of the reasons for not wanting children. Fear looked different amongst the women but it was the prevailing emotions fueling their ambivalence. Women feared divorce, raising a child without support, being bad mothers or having bad children, and not loving their children.

Sabine, who for the majority of her life had never wanted children but experienced ambivalence when in a relationship with a serious partner, explained how her fear came from watching her mother's struggles. Wilson (2014) suggests in her ethnography that fear generated from a woman's own experience of watching her own mother struggle with the responsibilities of motherhood is common. However, in this research the most common cause of fear was rooted in the strong desire to have a support network that would allow a woman to be a good mother, both emotionally and financially.

Other words that appear in the diagram that tend to incite ambivalence are words like freedom and narcissism. Women without children are often viewed as narcissistic by themselves and others for the reason that they have more freedom to do the things they wish compared to women with children. Participants often told stories of being judged for their ability to do

leisurely activities like shopping and baking because they had the time, and did not need to care for another.[3] Women in the study often shared instances when they felt guilt for their freedom, but they also expressed that a part of the coming to terms with being childless was realizing and embracing their freedom.

> Carmella (group interview): So if I was going to miss that special bond, if I was going to miss that continuity or that legacy, or building something or help a human be nurtured and bringing them into this world. If I was going to miss those pieces, which I cannot get, they are gone, then I wanted to take the benefits of all things about not having kids, which is a lot less responsibility.

The above quotation reflects the sentiments of many of the women that had felt more strongly towards having children. The women who had wanted children felt that if they were to miss out on being mothers then they were going to enjoy the advantages of being childless, such as more financial security, freedom and autonomy. These were reasons they wished to be childless and yet at times felt guilt or judgment for experiencing these aspects.

In this study, ambivalence looked different amongst the women. Some of them had initially felt strongly they did not want children, but a partner's desire or a momentary change of heart made them reconsider, and therefore, experience ambivalence. Other women felt a strong calling to be a mother and experienced grief when they realized that they would not have children.

> Carmella (individual interview): I also feel, for me, there was a grieving process, like when you talk about what do you think women feel like when they go through this, everyone is different. If you consciously say no I didn't want to have kids I think you're kind of more like "Oh I didn't and here we are" but you do go through a lot of the societal stuff. But I definitely grieved about not having children and then I hit a point, and I talked about this in my interview too, where as I hit a certain age, I felt a little bit of relief not to think about it anymore.

Like Carmella, the majority of the women had felt more strongly that they would have liked to

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[3] Though women like the women in my sample are the most likely demographic to provide informal care to a relative in need of care (Pope et al., 2012).

be mothers, yet their moments of realization looked different than Carmella's. Many women expressed they "forgot to have children" and were surprised by how they did not experience grief from missing their opportunities to become mothers. However, they felt they did not consciously make a decision to not have children; rather, they prioritized other parts of their lives until they no longer felt they could have children. The sentiments of Rachel more uniformly represent the women in study when she shared, "Actually, funnily enough, I thought it would be kind of depressing, but it was kind of a bit of a 'Okay, that's that and it's no longer an opportunity so let's live and move on.' It didn't have a negative or depressing effect on me at all, it was just sort of 'well, yup.'"

Though the women expressed feelings of sadness, they were ultimately thankful for the lives they led and continue to lead, even if that meant they did not have children. This was highlighted for me when all women responded that they would not change their current situations in order to have children because they did not want to compromise different parts of their lives. This was especially true for k.d. and Carmella, who worried about passing hereditary diseases on to their children.

> Patricia (individual interview): I wouldn't have had my career, because I started my career when I was 30, so I probably would have already started having kids by then, which means I wouldn't have met a good chunk of the people that are in my life right now. My life would have been completely different, completely different. I wouldn't have my career! Which is a big part of my identity. So maybe I would have substituted my care identity. My identity is my career, versus my identity being a mother.

Overall, some of the women spoke about moments of coming-to-terms with being childless as intense and painful, whereas for others the moment was painless. Some reported that losing the ability to have children through marriage or for biological reasons made things easier for them because they no longer felt like they had the weight of making a choice.

"Are you baby making material?": The most common reason women reported not having children was because they did not have the right partner at the right time. Women felt they did not want to raise a child on their own. They wanted a support system. The "traditional" family was an important factor for many of them when they were choosing to have a child. For them, the traditional family represented a network of support and a small community that would foster strong feelings of belonging and intimacy. As seen in the diagram, a sense of community and a support network were felt to be necessary in order to raise a child.

Even if a woman was married to her life partner during her fertile years, she could still have experienced ambivalence stemming from them. For example, k.d. reported being unsure of having children because she was worried raising children would not be a joint venture with her husband and she was not prepared to raise children on her own. This sentiment illustrates the societal connection between womanhood and motherhood through the assumption that women are to be the main caretakers of the children, while men will fulfill their role as the main "breadwinner". However, many of women mentioned, and the group interview further discussed how ideas of the "traditional" family have drastically changed. The women desired aspects of the traditional family, yet did not desire to fulfill traditional gender roles that their parents had experienced.

Choice: As mentioned earlier, the choice to not have children is not always simple. The following quote from an interview with Billie Baker encapsulates the attitudes of many of the women, "If it had been a slam dunk, I probably would have had kids, and it felt like a choice but at the same time somewhat not a choice. It was a very deliberate choice to not jump through hoops." Billie, like many women, had wanted children but had not wanted them badly enough to prioritize it over other aspects of her life in order to overcome the obstacles that lay between her

and motherhood. The women felt like the choices they made were because the alternatives would have been too hard of routes to take and so, they cannot be easily categorized as *voluntarily* childless.

The idea of "choice" is very interesting because it implies that one can make a deliberate decision either way. However, as seen in Wilson's (2014) ethnography and exemplified through this section, the reality of choice is complex. Within the childlessness literature, there is an assumption that a woman either wanted a child but was infertile, or she had not wanted a child and so did not. When in fact, the choice could sometimes be a collection of factors that lead to a woman not wanting to have children. For example, if a woman does not have a partner or the financial means required to have a child, does this mean she voluntarily made a choice? Sometimes one can feel they made a small choice in response to larger forces out of their control. Choice is complex when thinking about childlessness. Therefore, ambivalence is an important concept that better represents many women's experiences of not having children.

Theme 2: Barren? Bereft? Childless? Childfree?: The experience of being Childless

In Canada, motherhood is seen as a role that should freely and voluntarily be taken on, yet the women in this study shared moments in their lives when they had been mistreated and felt stigmatized for not having children. Many of the stereotypes of childless women as being desperate, immoral or selfish prevail to some degree even today as will be demonstrated in the following section. This section will explore how others treated the participants in response to their childlessness by primarily focusing on three subthemes: treatment in the workplace; familial perceptions; and finally, how they reported being treated within their social networks.

Remaining childless can be seen as a social deviation within many cultures, including Canada, (Veever, 2008), and as Goffman (1963) argues, social stigmatization is the result of

social deviance. Goffman explains social stigma as the societal disapproval and judgment towards a person due to the person's transgression away from social norms. Sentiments of stigmatization were often shared during the interviews.

> Linda (individual interview): I think that the way I have talked about [why I am not having children] has changed over time because I felt that social pressure and when people would ask me if I was going to have kids I would be quite vague and say, "Oh well it's just not in the cards," and just leave it at that and make people think "Oh well maybe she just isn't able to have kids and this is sensitive so I am not going to pursue it," because I felt like if I said, "I don't know if I really want to have kids," it would make me seem selfish or weird and you certainly hear that.

Similarly, Patricia states:

> Yea. I feel that other people will say like "What's is wrong with you? Why did you not get married? Why did you not have kids?" "You seem to have everything going on, there must be something wrong." To have not fulfilled that role of being a wife or a mother, which is the status quo that most women do end up doing, I feel like sometimes I am being judged or I think I am being judged and it's my own thing, maybe I am not. (individual interview)

These quotes demonstrate the pressures women feel towards having children and that being childless or not wanting children can be seen as a deviation from a social norm. Linda shared that it is sometimes easier for her to be seen as infertile because it does not generate the same stigmatization centered on stereotypes of selfishness and rebelliousness. This was highlighted when almost all women in the study reported a moment when they misled people to think their childlessness was the result of infertility in order to stop a conversation with someone they did not know well.

Treatment within the family: There were three major ways the women categorized their families' treatment of their childlessness: two women reported their families to be deeply upset and viewed the women as incomplete women due to lack of children; the majority of the women reported that their families had expressed some interest in them having children but these women felt no pressure from their families; and the third way was that the families had no reaction or opinion and that the matter was never addressed.

Many of the women spoke about motherhood being something that was impressed on them as a child through their parents saying things such as, "When you have a daughter..." or "When you have children....". Though the women all felt that motherhood was a choice they could make, many felt there were some greater expectations by their families that they would have children.

All felt that their siblings were supportive of them not having children. Rachel felt that though her sister would have liked Rachel to have children so they could raise their children together, she was supportive of her sister's choice. Others, like Patricia, shared that her sister was sometimes even envious of Patricia's childlessness because of the freedom it allowed her.

Treatment in the workplace: A common theme that emerged amongst most women was the different ways women without children were treated in the workplace. The participants that brought up this disparity felt that women without children were expected to work later hours and do more work than women with children. This was for the reasons that it was understood that mothers needed to tend to their families and assumed that women without children had more freedom and flexibility, and therefore could work more. The group interview articulated that women in the workplace, who do not have children, and no intention of having children, were treated more similar to men in the workplace. Interestingly, the women all reported that they were more likely to get hired and/or promoted because their employers see them as being more committed to their careers.

The women shared with me that women that did not have children were expected to be career-oriented feminists. Some women in the study, who felt that mothers who work had "jobs", whereas childless women had "careers", perpetuated this idea. The treatment of all women in the workplace through assumptions that mothers needed to care for their families and the connection

made between women without children and men, sheds light onto women's roles as either the main child caregiver or a career woman. These assumptions create differences amongst women with and without children. Women are designated different responsibilities and expectations based on their statuses as mother or non-mother. Women in the study indicated that this was not the same for men for the reason that men were treated as a homogeneous group.

Not all women in this study did have careers. One was a student and another was an artist with a part-time job who struggled to understand where she fit within society. She was not a mother nor was she a career-driven feminist.

> Carmella (individual interview): Growing up you were either a career women or a mother and I wasn't a mother and I am not a career woman, so who am I? Because there isn't really another slot for where a woman sits. It's like if she doesn't have a family- most women want both- but if she doesn't have a family, if she doesn't have one then she better be really good at the other. So, a woman who decides to stay home and leave her career for a while to raise the kids, feels like she has to be this super mom to make up for the fact she's not at work. There is all this guilt and shame in society that she has to be everything, and it flips the other way too if you don't have kids. There is this expectation, "Well you better be good at something." So, there is this need to prove yourself, to be bigger. If you are someone like me and don't love the corporate world at all, and didn't have kids, it's like, "What is my identity? Who am I?" I don't have a plan B. I was thinking, I think unconsciously, that if I had a family that would be enough, and I would work and do the things I needed to keep the family afloat but the career was never going to be my identity, it was going to be about building this place and this family and this home.

The women reported at times being treated in a hostile or judgmental manner by mothers in the workplace. Women said they would receive small comments or gestures that would indicate a judgment of their childlessness. However, no comments or gestures were significant enough to be raised in conversation. Two examples from the women highlight this judgment in the workplace rather well. Rachel, at the age of 40, moved to a new city for a job opportunity and would often experience people judging her ability to have been able to move.

> Rachel (individual interview): "You have no family? You have no kids?" You know, that type of stuff. So, and I did get the vibe of "Hmm, that's odd." So, I am going to take back my words about never feeling like people thought I was less than [laughs] because I do remember now when thinking back on it that the experience of moving to a new city for work, because it's unusually for someone in their early 40s to have that freedom of being able to move and not have any encumbrances of having worry about children or a husband or anything like that.

In the second example, Sabine addresses a specific encounter with mothers in the workplace, but also touches on a more general understanding of women who are childless.

> Sabine (individual interview): I was recently on a contract with two other women, both mothers, and yes, I felt like I was the outsider. They would talk about things with their children and I would kind of… and they would express, "Well Sabine you don't understand because you aren't a mother." And I think sometimes women with children have this idea of me of having, and they are right, having a more freewheeling lifestyle or you know, somehow, I don't know, more rebellious or something, which I'm not. I think that's probably a pretty natural perception, you know, a single person who doesn't have any obligations or responsibilities.

The above quotation is an answer to a question posed to Sabine to discover if she had ever felt mistreated or misunderstood by other women in the workplace. She admitted to feeling that she was misunderstood and mislabeled as *rebellious,* which highlights how childless women can often be labeled as deviant, and therefore experience stigmatization. Women reported this judgment being most common in the workplace because of a lack of the same personal connection that exists with friends and family.

There was another interaction childless women often spoke about in the workplace that is important to address because it highlights the sense of community childless women build that I will discuss in more depth when looking at "social networks". Professional women in this study often addressed the mentoring relationship that would occur between younger and older childless women in the workplace. Older women without children served as mentors to younger women that were struggling with the decision to have children. Carmella spoke about her experience of both being mentored and later being a mentor. For her, the experience of being able to talk to an older woman that had the same struggles she did was a helpful part of the coming to terms process. The topic of women obtaining guidance from each other and building a community was acknowledged in all the interviews.

Social networks: All women that participated in this study reported that their social networks changed as the result of not having children. Women felt that their relationships with female friends that became mothers changed, and also a community of childless women formed as women with children focused more on the needs of their children and adjusted routines and schedules accordingly. A common scenario that was shared was of the women going to friends' homes and being interrupted by the children or the visits revolving around the children's most recent hockey games or the struggles of finding good ballet lessons. This lack of commonality or interest caused some women, like Sabine and Patricia, to drift from friends with children, but it also made some women reevaluate what their role was in that friendship. For the women in the group interview their friends becoming mothers allowed them to realize their role as nurturers for their friends with children.

> Billie Baker (group interview): I can remember being in situations in people's kitchen where I went to visit a friend who had little kids running around or preteens and thinking "I am not going to talk about anything to do with my life because it's really all about them, and the kids and what the kids are doing", and I felt like the nurturing part comes out of me and I nurturing my friend's all-encompassing life and mine is just secondary in this because they're not engaged in it at all and maybe that's subjugating but I also think that's a nurturing thing: you are nurturing them.

Similarly, Carmella states:

> You'll also end up being the friend that other friends come to because you haven't been drained totally by junior's meltdowns before and after school. You are the person people call when they are having trouble or need a hand because you are available. You have some energy and nurturing to give to them that you might not have had.

The women in the group interview were some of the oldest women of the study and so were able to provide insight into another stage of their social network's evolution. They spoke of how even though they had lost touch with some friends because of children, many reconnected later on in life once the children became adults.

> Carmella (group interview): I think the odd time about being childless and I feel like I am coming out of it myself, where you're looking for nurturing and community and your entire rest of your tribe is out having babies and giving all their attention and energy into their kids and it's very difficult in that period, I think, as a woman to engage and have that sense of community. That is the most isolating period I would say, and then you hit a point and all their kids are off in school and everybody is suddenly free and reconnecting. So, I think one of the challenges about not having the kids and where you put that nurturing energy is in that period of about 10 years when everyone is so involved in their own little tribe that you're kind of floating around looking for your own sense of community.

The above quotation not only highlights the reconnection amongst friends but also the isolation some women experience from not having children and the deep need for community. This need for community could explain why all the women in the study reported being closest to women without children and potentially why, when recruiting, all my participants came to me through other women without children.

The judgment of women without children due to choice stems from the once strongly fused connection between womanhood and motherhood that has been continuously challenged through new expressions of womanhood that serve to redefining womanhood within Canada. Though misunderstandings and misjudgments of women without children do occur, it is not stigmatized the way it once was. With every subsequent generation, more choices are seen as possible and legitimate. Therefore, stigmatization is always being challenged, and what was once seen as social deviant and stigmatized may not be by subsequent generations.

> Carmella (group interview): I do feel like that with every generation that goes through the subsequent generation sees a woman with more options; it doesn't seem so weird [not to have children]. There was a time when everyone was feeling like "When are you having kids?", "They aren't having kids, what wrong with them? Is there a problem?", "Oh don't ask at the baby shower because she is going to cry." All of that stuff, which was very black and white; you got married within a year they were starting to ask when you were going to have babies. I think that we have had now a full generation where that has already stopped happening. Like my mother would have come through school and had the option to be a teacher or a nurse, right?

Theme 3: *Raison d'être?*: The connection between womanhood and motherhood

  The women in this study voiced a deep and complex relationship between womanhood and motherhood. Fundamentally, they felt that womanhood is not dependent on motherhood, but rather is a way of expressing womanhood. As a result, women in this study often reduced the connection between womanhood and motherhood down to the female body's role in procreation. On a spiritual or intellectual level the connection was seen as no more than just one path a woman could take. However, the women felt that there was a difference between their personal connections and a societal connection, further illustrating the perception and stigmatization of women without children.

  Redefining womanhood: When conducting the interviews, I would ask if any of the women ever felt their identities as women had been challenged by not having children, many were confused or offended. For these women, their identities as women had in no way been affected by not having children. Many explained how other aspects of their lives created their identity, and though their bodies had a biological connection to motherhood their social roles as women were created by other fulfilling parts of their lives such as their careers. Thus, we can start to examine how femininity can be expressed through outlets aside from motherhood, which, as Veevers (1980) argues, was an essential reason why men did not experience stigmatization because of their abilities to express their masculinity through other outlets.

> Patricia (individual interview): Our bodies were meant to have children. It is part of our makeup, but I don't know if there is necessarily a connection [between motherhood and womanhood]. They don't have to be together. But traditionally they are. I would say, I don't know what the statistics are I am think 80% of women are mothers in the world, not just in North America. When you think of women in the world that don't have careers, in India or in Africa, or in China, most women are mothers.

This quote demonstrates that while motherhood is one way of expressing womanhood, womanhood can also be expressed in other ways such as a career and that throughout time and

space there has been a strong connection between womanhood and motherhood, or femininity and motherhood. The women in the group interview spoke about how people are meant to create and for many women motherhood is a way of expressing a person's creativity and not necessarily their femininity.

Societal connection: The women in this study often expressed how their sense of womanhood was in no way compromised by not being a mother. Many expressed how, on a personal level there was not a connection between womanhood and motherhood, but on a societal level there was a connection. The following is a conversation that emerged from the group interview:

> Carmella: In some ways, you also equated more like a man in the workplace in that you were seen as someone that was just going to run off to junior, so if there was a chance for advancement and you were a woman without kids you had a better chance. I remember specifically in a job interview when I was 40. The woman was looking at me and I could tell she was trying to suss out how old I was but she couldn't ask but she could ask if I had kids and so she said, "Tell me about your family" which was her way of sussing me out and I said, "I don't have children and I know you are wondering so I will just let you know I have no plans for children," because I knew my chances of getting the job if I was someone who wasn't just about to take off on a maternity leave was much higher, and she actually told me she was glad I said that because there was actually another candidate and he was a man and that was what equaled me out.
> Billie: Yea I have had the same thing where I have had to say something in a job interview.
> Carmella: It's sad that you have to say that but the truth is with society that women are measured based on their baby making potential.

The women in the group interview also spoke about how many of the ideas that connect womanhood and motherhood are perpetuated by interactions between women.

> k.d. (group interview): Going back to this idea of womanhood, I think women also create a lot of the challenges women have through these ideas of identities about if you're a mother or not a mother, and it's not necessarily all oppression from men, that we have - we the greater women- have continued these ideas. The first thing people ask you when they meet you is, "Are you married?" "Do you have children?". All of these markers that we use to identify and place women within society. We perpetuate that.

This quote demonstrates assumptions about how women ought to be and highlights how gender is performative by showing how power structures work to fuse women to gender roles associated

with the female body.

Personal connection: When asked about when growing up if the women wanted to be mothers, they often responded that they always thought they would be mothers. Rachel shared that, "I didn't really sit down and visualize it, I should say I just assumed [I would have children]. When I was growing up there was that assumption that that was what was included in your life. Marriage and kids." Rachel's response highlights how motherhood is ascribed onto females because of assumed gender roles, and therefore, is almost like a default future identity for young girls and women. One is presumed a future mother until they prove otherwise. Sabine further expressed this idea by sharing that when she was younger, people would often tell her that her desires to not have children would change and she would eventually want to have children.

Motherhood as a social role: Many of the women in this study expressed that they felt they had very motherly attributes and were often in situations of mentorship or guidance to younger women and children. Wilson (2014) suggests that women can be *godmother aunties*, a role where women are mother-like without actually being a biological or adoptive mother. Godmother aunties could be aunts, stepmothers, godmothers, and/or family friends. They are women that are nurturing and loving - ideas of what motherhood ought to be - towards a younger person in their lives. As discussed earlier, motherhood can be seen as a spectrum (Letherby, 2002) ranging from mother to non-mother, thus open to positions such as godmother aunties. The role of mother is not necessarily exclusive to "mothers" because one lives the role, caring and nurturing a younger person.

> Carmella (group interview):I think there's a kind of relationship that is like a mothering relationship and it can be mentoring, caregiving, or being a good listener. It's the ability to empathize, to feel a desire to take care of someone when they are in crisis. I would also say that I am technically a step-mom too, and that brings out all sorts of weird mother behaviours in me that

I didn't know I had until my world collided with them. It's almost like a hat. When you talk about abstract mothering, it's almost like a hat that you wear.

Conclusion

Through the research question *how does the intersection of motherhood and womanhood affect the identity narratives of women that have not had children due to ambivalence during childbearing years*, I have been able to explore three major arguments. The first is that ambivalence can look different amongst women. Secondly, I have been able to determine that being childless cannot be dichotomously categorized, and further, that one can transcend childlessness and be motherly. Motherhood should be looked at as a continuum ranging from mother to non-mother. Finally, I have been able to argue that motherhood is a way of expressing womanhood, yet women without children are still categorized and stigmatized.

Motherhood is a way for a woman to express her identity as a woman as well as her creativity. As Linda suggests, "fundamentally I don't believe there is a connection. I think that motherhood is one way you can express womanhood but it's not a fundamental way. It's not inextricably linked; it's a branch." Though the women acknowledge a link between motherhood and womanhood, they express that womanhood is no longer defined by motherhood. Additionally, motherhood can take several different forms, as it is a social role that can be seen as a part of a continuum.

This research focused on seven Canadian women who felt that having children was a conscious decision that they had the ability to make without intense familial or cultural pressures. This study analyzed seven interviews and one group interview and though this research offers some insight, it should not be used to generalize the experience of all women who are childless due to ambivalence.

Human behaviour is fraught with ambivalence. As such, the narratives that have been discussed in this study should be seen as no more than a snapshot of the women's feelings and thoughts. I encountered these women in a moment when they felt and spoke in a particular way about their experiences. Perhaps, if one of the women was ill or had lost her partner she may have spoken differently about her regrets of not having children. Just as the women's senses of identity have been shaped by the structures they operate within, so too are the ways that their feelings are experience.

Ultimately, research like mine may help raise awareness about the different experiences of childlessness, namely experiences that do not center on infertility but rather on ambivalence. To better understand the idea of abstract motherhood, more research conducted amongst stepmothers would be insightful. Another interesting direction of study would be women who experience ambivalence during childbearing years but did have children. Such research could contribute to the concept of ambivalence through an anthropological lens. Further research is necessary to explore the progression of the once rigid connection between womanhood and motherhood and how it changes with every subsequent generation because of the trailblazing role models they have who change the idea of the "typical womanhood".

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Appendix A: Consent Forms

A1 Group Interview consent form

CONSENT FORM (Group Interview)

Identity Narratives of Women Without Children

You are invited to take part in research being conducted by me, Tess McCutcheon, an undergraduate student in Social Anthropology, as part of my honours degree at Dalhousie University. The purpose of this research is to interview middle-aged women who were in two minds about whether they wanted children and who did not have any, in order to explore their perception of how this affected their identity. I will write up the results of this research in a paper for my class, called the honours thesis.

As a participant in this stage of the research you will be asked to participate in a focus group with about five other women, discussing questions about how not having children has affected your identity. The focus group should take about an hour and will be conducted in a quiet location. With everybody's permission, the focus group will be audio-recorded. When I quote any part of it in my honours thesis, I will use a pseudonym, not your real name, and I will remove any other details that could identify you from the quote. I will have a classmate with equal training in qualitative research to help take notes during the focus group so that I can focus on facilitating the discussion. She/he will not share what she/he hears outside of the focus group and will hand the notes over to me as soon as it has finished and will sign a confidentiality agreement.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to answer questions that you do not want to answer, and you are welcome to leave the focus group at any time if you no longer want to participate. If you decide to stop participating after the focus group is over, you can do so until March 1. I will not be able to remove the information you provided after that date, because I will have completed my analysis, but the information will not be used in any other research.

Information that you provide to me will be kept private and will be anonymized, which means any identifying details such as your name will be removed from it. I cannot guarantee other participants will keep all information confidential but I will ask that all participants respect the confidentiality of the other participants in the focus group by not sharing who they are or what they say. Only the honours class supervisor and I will have access to the unprocessed information you offer after the focus group.

My classmate will not have access to any of the material after the focus group and will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. I will describe and share general findings in a presentation to the Sociology and Social Anthropology Department and in my honours thesis. Nothing that could identify you will be included in the presentation or the thesis. I will keep anonymized information so that I can learn more from it as I continue with my studies.

There will be no direct benefit to you in participating in this research and you will not receive compensation. The research, however, will contribute to new knowledge on women's identities and experiences of childlessness. If you would like to see how your information is used, please feel free to contact me and I will send you a copy of my honours thesis after April 30.

If you have questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me or the honours class supervisor. My contact information is ts490512@dal.ca. You can contact the honours class supervisor, Dr Martha Radice, at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Dalhousie University on (902) 494-6747, or email martha.radice@dal.ca.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation *in* this research, you may contact Catherine Connors, Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email ethics@dal.ca.

Participant's consent:

I have read the above information and I agree to participate in this study.

Name:
_____

Signature:
_____

Date:
_____

Researcher's signature:
_____

Date:
_____

A2: Individual Consent Interview Consent Form

CONSENT FORM (Individual Interview Consent)

Identity Narratives of Women Without Children

You are invited to take part in research being conducted by me, Tess McCutcheon, an undergraduate student in Social Anthropology, as part of my honours degree at Dalhousie University. The purpose of this research is to interview middle-aged women who were in two minds about whether they wanted children and who did not have any, in order to explore their perception of how this affected their identity. I will write up the results of this research in a paper for my class, called the honours thesis.

As a participant in the research you will be asked to answer a number of interview questions about how not having children has affected your identity. The interview should take about an hour and will be conducted in a quiet location of your choice. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. If I quote any part of it in my honours thesis, I will use a pseudonym, not your real name, and I will remove any other details that could identify you from the quote.

Information that you provide to me will be kept private and will be anonymized, which means any identifying details such as your name will be removed from it. Only the honours class supervisor and I will have access to the unprocessed information you offer. I will describe and share general findings in a presentation to the Sociology and Social Anthropology Department and in my honours thesis. Nothing that could identify you will be included in the presentation or the thesis. I will keep anonymized information so that I can learn more from it as I continue with my studies.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to answer questions that you do not want to answer, and you are welcome to stop the interview at any time if you no longer want to participate. If you decide to stop participating after the interview is over, you can do so until March 1. I will not be able to remove the information you provided after that date, because I will have completed my analysis, but the information will not be used in any other research.

There will be no direct benefit to you in participating in this research and you will not receive compensation. The research, however, will contribute to new knowledge on women's identities and experiences of childlessness. If you would like to see how your information is used, please contact me and I will send you a copy of my honours thesis after April 30.

If you have questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me or the honours class supervisor. My contact information is ts490512@dal.ca. You can contact the honours class

supervisor, Dr Martha Radice, at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Dalhousie University on (902) 494-6747, or email martha.radice@dal.ca.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may contact Catherine Connors, Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email ethics@dal.ca.

Participant's consent:

I have read the above information and I agree to participate in this study.

Name:
_____

Signature:
_____

Date:
_____

Researcher's signature:
_____

Date:
_____

Appendix B: Interview Guides

B1: Individual Interview Guide

<u>Interview Guide</u>

- I'd like to start by finding out a bit more about you so that I can put your answers to my questions in proper context.

- First, can you tell me a bit about yourself? For instance, what work do you do, and do you live with anyone else at the moment? Are you from Halifax/Toronto originally, or have you lived other places, too?

- So, moving on to the topic of my study. When you were growing up, did you picture yourself as a mother? What did that look like?

- How did that image of yourself change over time?

- What were the circumstances that led to you not having children?

- What feelings did you experience when you started to realize that perhaps you were not going to have children?

- How do you feel now about not having children? Do you feel you have come to terms with it? How did you achieve that 'coming-to-terms'?

- Was there ever a time that you felt that you were treated differently than women who had had children?

- Do you ever feel that your experience with not having children is misunderstood?

- Was there a point when you felt that not having children affected your identity as a woman?

- Do you think motherhood and womanhood are connected? How so?

- What do you think your life would be like now if you had had children? What would be different?

- Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experience?

B2: Group Interview Guide

Because the focus group is designed partly to explore preliminary findings, exact questions will depend on the themes that emerge in interviews.

- What do you think women who want children go through when they start to realize that perhaps they are not going to have children?

- How do you think not having children affects women's identity as women?

- Are women without children treated differently than women who have had children?

- Do you ever feel that society understands the experiences of women that do not have children?

Appendix C: Recruitment Material

C1: Email for Interview Participants

Dear (insert name here),

I am a social anthropology student from Dalhousie University and I am conducting a study exploring the identity narratives of middle-aged women who were not sure whether wanted to have children and did not have any, because of reasons apart from infertility. More specifically, I am looking for women who felt they had a choice about becoming a mother, but were not sure about it or went back and forth on the matter and ended up not having any. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to hear you talk about how this has affected your identity and your experience. Participation consists of a single interview lasting up to one hour, and optionally also a focus group lasting roughly two hours.
All the data that you provide will be kept secure and confidential.

For more information, please contact me by email or phone (902-719-4833).

Kind regards,

C2: Recruitment Flyer

Information on recruitment will be as follows.

Are you a woman with no children? Are you aged 45 to 55?
I would like to hear from who were not sure whether wanted to have children and did not have any, because of reasons apart from infertility.

Join a social anthropological study exploring the experiences of women who didn't have children. Participation consists of one hour-long interview, and optionally also a focus group lasting roughly two hours.
Please contact Tess McCutcheon for more information!
Ts490512@dal.ca

Appendix D: Questions of Analysis

- When do women experience ambivalence?

- Why did they experience ambivalence?

- How have they felt misunderstood?

- Do they feel misunderstood by people they have personal relationships to?

- Do they see motherhood as a part of womanhood?

- What was the experience of realizing they were not going to have children?

- What were the effects on identity?