How are Voluntarily Childless Women's Identities Constructed in Response to Dominant Representations of Them Within Society?

Abstract

Gender differences and ideologies are deeply ingrained features of Western society, influencing social expectations and identity formations of both men and women. A substantial body of research over time has explored the roots of gender-differentiated beliefs, including theories of innate biological differences that determine what roles each gender should assume, for example, men should situate themselves within the working world, and women should take up domestic roles. Despite theories of biological influence being proven as insufficient explanations, societal expectations remain in the twenty-first century that dictate that the terms woman and mother are synonymous, due to the 'communion' attributes that society's construction of an ideal woman should possess. As a result, women who choose not to have children are stigmatised, evidenced by previous research and discourses that present voluntarily childless women as 'cold', 'uncaring', and 'selfish'. Stigmatised individuals often experience struggle and conflict when realising their identities, due to the pressure of expectations and the threat of ostracization. The current research utilises critical discourse analysis to explore how six voluntarily childless women construct their identities in response to dominant discourses regarding them. Three repertoires were identified: *Rejecting Existing Repertoires, Sometimes, Choice is No Choice* and *More Than Biology*. Analysis presented findings highlighting that traits are not attributed based on gender or whether an individual has children but rather are an aspect of human variation. Additionally, themes of societal power and influence are underlined and call attention to the broader scale of oppression of women within Western Capitalist societies.

Introduction

In the book titled Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (Rich, 1976), Rich states that the institution of motherhood affects everyone, including those who are childless. Motherhood as a potential, a possibility, is buried beneath motherhood as an institution (Rich, 2021).

Due to the division between men and women, both socially and economically, the belief that men and women are naturally predisposed to differing roles emerged. Gimenez (2005) details how the oppression of women and the divide between women and men are the observable effects of the structures of society, e.g: capitalism. In contemporary Western society, idealised women are assumed to inherently possess traits that mean they are perfect for domestic roles in the home, and men are assumed to inherently possess traits that make them ideal for the working world (Joshi & Pandey, 2017). When interrogating these stereotypes that are based on the foundations of biological predispositions, which reflect roles that men and women played in surviving in hunter-gatherer societies, it has been suggested that instead of these biological predispositions being responsible for these gender-role differences, it is systemic, societal roles that are ingrained even in the way that children are raised (Ellemers, 2018). For example, Joel et al., (2015) found, through analysing over 1,400 MRIs of human brains, that most human brains consist of unique collections of features, some of which may be common in males or females but ultimately display what should be viewed as human variance, as opposed to the idea that male and female brains are wired differently. Additionally, Gordon et al., (2010) found that oxytocin, which is typically presumed to be a maternal hormone responsible for social, emotional and interpersonal behaviours, tends to be similarly present in both mothers and fathers in the first months of parenthood. This stands against the discourse that it is solely women who should inherently possess these 'caring'

qualities and suggests instead that it is a result of becoming a parent, regardless of gender.

Despite these findings that call into question the foundations on which these societal roles

and norms are built, it is abundantly clear that these gender-related, stereotypical beliefs still

thrive in Western societies. As Lewis et al., (2019) state, even in the twenty-first century, the

terms 'woman' and 'mother' are essentially synonymous within Western societies, meaning

women who make an active choice to not become mothers are often faced with negative

perceptions and stigmatisation, that is to say, that they do not fit the widely known and

accepted picture of what a 'good' or 'normal' woman looks like. This aligns with Burr

(2002)'s statements regarding how women who choose a career over motherhood face the

consequences, socially, of not fitting traditional expectations of femininity and womanhood.

Likewise, men who choose to take more of a domestic role are less socially accepted as men.

As noted, contemporary Western constructions of womanhood and what it means to be a

woman highlights a need for women to possess traits that make her ideal for domestic roles.

Women are assumed to be communal, possessing traits such as 'warmth', 'femininity' and

'communion', whereas men are thought to be 'competent', 'instrumental' and 'masculine',

(Breda et al., 2020). Martin (2020) details how gender is considered to be a social construct

that illustrates society's normative view of the gender binary. Someone who is born

biologically male should be masculine, and someone who is born biologically female should

be feminine. It is important to consider that stereotypic thinking regarding gender is

incredibly common and come with ease as gender is a readily noticed facet of an individual,

and because of this, stereotypical ideas of gender can be heavily prominent (Hentshel et al.,

2019). There is a substantial body of research that has explored the perceptions of voluntarily

childless women, giving insight into the assumptions and opinions that still remain despite

voluntarily childlessness being considered more accepted. Koropeckyj-Cox et al., (2018)

found that university students perceive childless women to be considered less warm in nature than mothers, and to be more emotionally troubled. This suggests that it is not just older generations who perceive VCW this way, but also the younger, more liberal and educated populations. Additionally, Ashburn-Nardo (2017) found that childless individuals were viewed as less psychologically fulfilled, as well as eliciting more moral outrage than those who did have children. Ciaccio et al., (2021) adds to this with findings that childless women were viewed as possessing less warm and caring traits, and more independently driven traits than mothers. Colledge & Runacres (2023) present further evidence of the enduring belief that women must have children in order to gain social acceptance and ultimate fulfilment as women remains, despite a shift and growing acceptance in terms of gender roles and societal norms. Research was conducted into the perceptions belonging to millennial mothers in regards to voluntarily childless women, given that during their life-span, the millennial generation is one known for championing equality, diversity, and an empowered and politically engaged society. While it was found that millennial mothers outwardly display positive views of voluntarily childless women, it was also found that they hold internal prejudices. This collection of findings not only suggests that women who choose not to have children are viewed as colder individuals, but also that these beliefs carry across generations within Western society, having stemmed from the deeply ingrained construction of gender. Cook et al., (2019) describe how individuals are socialised, based on their gender, from birth, about how they should fulfil their gender role. Therefore, this would also explain why certain opinions are held, due to the fact that everyone is socialised to the same set of standards.

It is important to be aware of and acknowledge how stigmatisation can occur when individuals do not possess the characteristics associated with the group they belong to, and the impact that stigmatisation may have on how identities are formed. Goffman (2009)

defines stigma as viewing an individual as tainted, discounted, and not the usual within the frame of reference of the group they belong to. This happens due to the fact that society establishes the categorisation of people, the groups that they belong to, and the attributes that are considered normal and natural. When an individual, who at first appearance is assumed to tick the boxes of attributes linked to their salient identity, then demonstrates that they do not adhere to all qualifying factors of said identity set by societal expectations, they are then, in essence, discredited. Watson (2008) details how individuals strive to shape their personal self-identity within the context of other people trying to tell them who they are, along with cultural, institutional and discursive opinions being pushed upon them. This would suggest that stereotypes and stigmatisations of people, in the case of this study, voluntarily childless women, could create conflict, struggle, and difficulty for those individuals when it comes to constructing their self-identity. In addition, Beech (2008) explains how identity work is not just the way in which individuals are categorised by either themselves or others, but that it is also interested in how symbolic, textual, verbal and behavioural representations or images hold meaning and can form part of the individual's identity.

To date, research has largely focused on how individuals respond to assumptions and challenges. There is limited research in terms of voluntarily childless women's identities and the way in which they navigate through stigma and stereotypes. Park (2002), through their findings, brings to light ways in which voluntarily childless women navigate and negotiate perceptions of them and their choice in social situations. Methods that were identified include: passing, in which individuals feign future plans to have children. Identity substitution, in which individuals would shift the focus of their not having children to other reasons, such as infertility for example, that would elicit different reactions. Condemning the condemners, in which the voluntarily childless would shift the focus onto those who do have

children and potential reasons for doing so. These findings suggest that voluntarily childless women feel the need to battle against stigma and judgment from others, and are not just simply accepted. It also implies that these women feel the need to continually justify what is a deeply personal choice, and not something that should be negotiated. Hovsepian (2022) explored the ways in which childless women view themselves in relation to dominant ideas and discourses regarding womanhood and motherhood, and how a woman who has positively chosen to be childless views herself as childfree, and transformative against dominating ideas, while women who are unintentionally childfree experience more feelings of loss and grief, therefore holding more closely to the idea of the mother archetype. These findings suggest that, in both groups, the idea of motherhood being a defining feature of womanhood has become deeply ingrained, and women without children see themselves as either challenging these ideas or feeling that something is missing. Given the prevailing focus on the attitudes of others towards voluntarily childless women, this study will seek to expand the current knowledge base through an exploratory study into how voluntarily childless women (VCW) construct their identities in response to dominant discourses about them. To do this, critical discourse analysis will be utilised in order to examine the way in which the abuse of social-power and inequality are combatted by talk (Van Dijk, 2015).

Method

<u>Participants:</u>

Six participants, aged from 22 – 35 were recruited, using purposive sampling as it meant participants could be selected based on the knowledge of their experiences as voluntarily childless women (Robinson, 2024). Specifically, criterion sampling was utilized as participants needed to meet the requirements of currently being voluntarily childless women and would allow for data to be collected from relevant and reliable sources (Nyimbili &

Nyimbili, 2024). Prior to taking part in the interview, participants were asked to provide a unique identifier code should they choose to remove their data within the allotted window of time. Additionally, in concordance with ethical and GDPR considerations, all identifying information, including participant names, is pseudonymised within raw data of the transcripts and this report's write-up to ensure participants cannot be directly identified (Heaton, 2022).

Materials:

Qualtrics was used to gather participant information and consent. Microsoft Teams was used to both conduct and record the interviews, which were then stored in a password-protected one-drive until the transcription process had been completed. The interview consisted of eleven open-ended questions (Appendix A), examples being: 'What does it mean to be a woman in today's world?' and 'What would you like to change about the perception of voluntarily childless women?'.

Procedure:

Prior to the interviews, participants were invited to take part in research related to how voluntarily childless women make sense of their identities in today's society. Information sheets (Appendix B) were provided, detailing the aims, nature, and approval of this research study. Informed consent was gained and ensured through the use of Qualtrics, assuring participants of how their data and personal information will be stored and protected, along with their right to withdraw. Once consent was granted, they were then provided with example stimuli of prominent discourses regarding voluntarily childless women (Appendix D), which were collected from various social media sites. Participants then took part in a one-

to-one, semi-structured interview lasting approximately thirty minutes. Following the
interview process, participants were debriefed both verbally as well as in the form of a
debrief form (Appendix E), answering any queries they may have had, and signposting to any
support if required.

Ethical Considerations

When undertaking qualitative research, it is crucial to regard various ethical considerations to
maintain a balance of potential benefits and risks of the research, as well as ensure participant
safety and well-being (Arifin, 2018). In concordance with the BPS Code of Ethics, (British
Psychological Association, 2021), four principles should be adhered to: respect, competence,
responsibility and integrity.

Respect requires consideration of issues such as privacy and confidentiality, and consent. To
consider these within this research, informed consent was a requirement from participants
before interviews took place, details and aims of the research were explained, participants
were advised of their rights to withdraw and end the interview at any point, and only if they
agreed to, and gave consent, were they able to take part as a participant. Additionally,
participants were informed that to ensure their privacy and confidentiality, any data collected
will be stored securely within a password-protected OneDrive and any identifying
information will be pseudonymised in order to protect their privacy.

In order to adhere to competence, throughout the entire research process, the researcher has
been sure to maintain high standards of competency, along with gaining support from their
project supervisor when concerned of any potential limitations in regards to competency.

To address responsibility, mainly the welfare of participants, after each interview the
researcher debriefed participants both verbally and via a debrief form which included contact
details for additional support should the participants require it. It was imperative that

participants did not leave the interview feeling distressed due to the possible nature of sensitive content.

To follow guidelines regarding integrity, throughout the entire research process, the researcher engaged in reflexivity in order to mitigate against biased representations, conflict of interest, personal and professional boundaries, and any potential misconduct.

Analysis

To analyse the data, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used due to the political stance that it takes, and the aim to underline the resisting discourses from the marginalised group of voluntarily childless women to aid liberation. CDA is concerned more with ideas rather than knowledge and is used to highlight ways that discourse creates realities and power relations. (Wiggins, 2017). While CDA studies social phenomena, it does so in a way that explores linguistic devices as tools used to construct meaning (Wodak, 2014). As such, analysis of this research will explore discursive devices used by participants, and how they create and develop interpretive repertoires.

Throughout the analysis process, various repertoires emerged across the participant sample that illustrated how VCW construct their identities in response to dominant discourses regarding them.

Repertoire 1: Rejecting Existing Repertoires

One of the most apparent repertoires that emerged in data from all participants was one that takes up opposition against the discourse that voluntarily childless women lack the

'nurturing' and 'warm' qualities deemed necessary to fit with Western societies' construction of womanhood.

When discussing the representations of voluntarily childless women on social media, in extract 1, Nicky described the prevalent perception of voluntarily childless women, and how she feels as though they are separated as an 'other.' However, when viewed alongside extract 2, she constructs an opposing repertoire in quite a straightforward manner.

Extract 1 (Nicky):

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.hhh but it's massively stigmatised. You're put into a
category (.) of you are- you don't have a hea:rt, (.) you
don't care for other people. That means you can't care
for children because you don't have a child. .hhh and
(0.2) I think (0.2) you almost are ostracised.
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Extract 2 (Nicky):

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Like, .hhh how do you know? Just because we've not got
children, how do you know that we don't look after a
child every day (.) of somebody else? … Like I take next
door but one, my neighbour… Erm I take her little boy to
school every other day because (.) just to help her out,
like people don't know that. Like, I literally look after
my Godchildren all the time in Stafford. So (.) stop
thinking that we're that person.
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In extract 1, Nicky describes how it feels to openly be a voluntarily childless woman and the direct effects of the dominant repertoires and stigma that come with them. Throughout her description, Nicky uses the pronoun 'you' instead of 'I', despite explaining her own experience. This use of 'you' is also known as the 'generic-you' and has been speculated to influence the way information is interpreted, for example, increasing the connection between the speaker's content and the addressee, and adding a sense of objectivity and neutrality to the content (Niu et al., 2025). The 'generic-you' is also assumed to create psychological distance, allowing the speaker to tell their story without fully confronting the negative emotions (Orvell et al., 2019). When viewing Nicky's content with her use of the 'generic-you' in mind, she invites the reader into her shoes and makes her experience more accessible and connectable. Additionally, she presents the repertoire of VCW being perceived as 'cold' and 'uncaring' with the use of phrases such as "you don't have a heart" which is both figurative, as it is not intended to mean a lack of the actual organ, but also dehumanising, as a common association with being human tends to be one's ability to care and love. Her choice to use words such as "don't" and "can't" when describing prevalent perceptions of VCW being uncaring also adds to the idea that VCW are incapable, rather than simply making a choice, and that their inability to care for others is a result of them not having a child. While this is not representative of Nicky's own opinions, it does offer insight into how the identities of VCW can be in conflict due to dominating ideas about them.

In extract 2, Nicky rejects this dominant repertoire with an opposing one. Explaining how she helps her neighbour by taking their son to school regularly, along with looking after her Godchildren. While this alone could arguably infer that, contrary to popular discourse, Nicky is able to look after children and does possess the ability to be caring and warm, this opposing repertoire is amplified by her use of membership categorisations. The categories of "little

boy" and "godchildren" both offer more tangible representations of the children that she takes care of. The implied young age of her neighbour's son and the fact that she is a godmother provide more credibility and reliability to her opposing argument that VCW do not lack those caring qualities.

Adding to the theme of rejecting existing repertoires regarding VCW, both Evie and Ioana refer to the discourse in which VCW are labelled as 'selfish' for their decision, as it is often interpreted as the woman choosing to focus on herself rather than a child.

Extract 3 (Evie) :

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'cause (0.2) not everyone's meant to be a parent, and I'm
(.) very aware that I probably am ↓ not.
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Extract 4 (Evie) :

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Uh it definitely (.) frustrates me and makes me kind of
angry when it's like "you're selfish." … I'd rather (.)
not bring bring someone into the world, … which I am
instinctively not going to be very comfortable with.
(0.2) Because that is not going to, that's not service to
me and it's not a service to the child. I (.) I am not
gonna be, I will not want to be one of those people that
(.) didn't want a kid, had one anyway and just (.) goes
along with and grits their teeth because … if they think
it does not impact the child at all, they're wrong. …
whereas my dad just up and le:ft. A:::nd so (.) I partly
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think (.) probably parenting was not for my dad, so my

dad went bye.
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Across these two extracts, Evie identifies that parenthood is something that not everyone is suited to, regardless of gender, as she references her father. She also outlines the implications for the child should a parent not be committed to their role, and that she would not want to cause that trauma to another person for the sake of doing what society deems she should be. She emphasises her intention not to bring about the same turmoil for someone else that she experienced, with her use of modal verbs. For example, "will not" takes more of a firm and assertive stance as opposed to a possible 'do not want to', and underlines the importance she feels on the matter, and further suggests a level of care and compassion towards her hypothetical child, in that she definitively will not put them in that position. Evie also uses the discursive device of contrasts. While not explicitly using language such as 'we should do x and not x' or 'rather than', she combats the repertoire of VCW being selfish for choosing not to have and care for a child, by presenting a view of parenthood that contrasts with the idyllic perspective of it constructing an argument that having a child while not wanting to be a parent is more selfish and uncaring than not having a child.

Building upon Evie's comments, in extract 5, Ioana also draws upon the repertoire that VCW are selfish when discussing the differing perceptions of men and women when making choices regarding reproductive health surgeries.

Extract 5 (Ioana):

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Uhm (0.2) for the men is like, oh, you're responsible,

it's a smart move. And for the women that you're called
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selfish. .hhh I think it's for my my view of this is more

selfish to have kids, to be honest, and not (.) raise

them £right.£ (0.5) So this thing with the selfish is

(0.2) you know, yes, I know so many parents that abuse

their children and they're not even thinking that they do

something wrong.
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Extract 6 (Ioana):

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So (.) are you telling me I am selfi:sh for not want to

have kids when you do that to your ↑kid?
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Ioana points out the distinct difference between the opinions on the decisions of both men and women, further adding testament to the idea that women who take steps to prevent having children are doing something immoral and unjust. However, she then creates a switch in this narrative, similarly to Evie, pointing out the fact that having children and being a parent does not inherently make someone a good person. While she avoids generalising this sentiment to all parents, she refers to the reality that some parents do abuse their children. This counters the widely accepted notion that parents take up a more moral subject position simply by having children, and without regarding how they treat their children, than women who make a choice not to become parents. In doing this, she also dismantles the repertoire that paints VCW as negative, selfish and unprincipled individuals.

Repertoire 2: Sometimes, choice is no choice

Another emerging theme across data sets is that participants' choice not to have children is not always a choice that they have actively made. Participants bring into focus the socio-economic influences that dictate the life paths that they are currently on. Across the following extracts, Daisy (27) details her position in relation to the economy, one that many currently face and that is not just her individual circumstance, and begins to reconcile with the ideological dilemma that her choice to remain childless is not really her choice.

Extract 7 (Daisy):

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…the key factors that have (.) put us off it completely,
so far, have been that … even though we work full time
jobs cannot afford our own rent and bills, nevermind
bringing another human into that. And then, .hh uhm we
both work full time jobs, so who's going to look after
the baby? And can I afford to take time off of work to be
pregnant?
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Extract 8 (Daisy):

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.hhh Uhm, (.) so that and having all of those three
things like perfect at the same time just feels
↑impossible to me and I don't want to have a kid unless
all of those three things are in place.
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Extract 9 (Daisy):

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I want to have ki::ds, but I definitely don't want to do
it in a way that puts (.) our finances or our health or
our (.) living situation at risk. And then also not to
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get like too heavy about it but, the planet's dy::ing,

man. … I just, I find it crazy to imagine having

conversations with a kid where I'm like, oh, yeah, this

part of the world used to exist, and then (.) we made it

so that it doesn't anymore. And I don't feel super

chuffed about the idea of bringing a kid into that world.

So, (0.2) yeah, if I could be like, ooh, capitalism is

the reason. Climate change.

Extract 10 (Daisy):

If you want to £donate£ (.) to this cause, go ahea:d.

Extract 11 (Daisy):

I think if the world like society wants me to have kids,

which I feel that it does, (0.2) it would be great if

society could put some genuine effort into making it a

much better world … for us to have babies in. … You know

what if it was piss easy to have a baby? I'd be more than

happy to accommodate society and have loads, but it's

actually like (.) nigh on impossible I feel for people my

age to even consider having a child. So (.) you know,

maybe ↑society needs to up it's game.

These extracts, presented in chronological order from Daisy's interview, illustrate how she

comes to terms with the idea that her decision not to have children yet is not a choice that is

in her hands. She starts by describing her and her partner's situation, that they both work full-

time jobs yet still struggle to find the money to support themselves. Currently, in order to survive, have somewhere to live and food to eat, they both are required to work full-time, and even then, still find that they are not able to feel comfortably secure, in a situation with just the two of them. She then adds another layer to this by questioning how they would navigate their cost of living whilst having a child in terms of childcare and taking time off during pregnancy. This initial extract provides insight into Daisy's thought processes and concerns when considering having children, and tied with extract 8, highlights how important it would be to Daisy to ensure that her family would be in a stable and secure position in life.

Moving forward to extract 9, she explicitly states that she does want children but implies that she does not feel comfortable doing so in the current climate, both financially, but also concerning the state of the world in terms of climate change. When referring to changes to the planet, Daisy uses the phrase "we made it so that it doesn't (exist) anymore". It can be inferred that by "we", she is referring to humans in general, given that climate change and its consequences are influenced by human behaviour, such as production and consumption. Before she even refers to capitalism, she identifies that the nature of life that Western society imposes on people causes damage to the planet. Already, in both talking about economic struggles and the climate situation, Daisy takes up the subject position of a powerless agent amidst the structures of society. This is the life that a capitalistic, Western society has created, and Daisy has to abide by its structures in order to simply survive.

In extracts 10 and 11, Daisy continues to reconcile with the ideological dilemma that society as a structure inhibits her agency as an individual, and calls upon society, as the agent with power, to provide support and implement facilitative measures to allow her true agency to make a choice. She addresses the incompatible expectation of society regarding women

having children, alongside its restrictive economic structures. There is a societal belief that women should become mothers in order to reach their full potential as women, however, society has also created a reality in which women are not able to afford to become mothers. Daisy also alludes to more than just the deep-rooted expectation. By saying that society "wants" her to have children, she alludes to there being something more than simply the socially constructed idea that women should have children, as opposed to it being an option. The idea that society "wants" women to have children suggests that there would be some form of benefit for society, which would support the idea that capitalist society depends on mothers to produce more children, who would in turn become more workforce for the capitalist structure (Armstrong, 2020). With this in consideration, Daisy then challenges society, reconciling the dilemma by calling for society to "up its game", to provide a better environment for women to have children. This would benefit both society's desires and also grant agency to women who may want to have children but are in a position where they feel it is impossible to do so.

To add weight to this repertoire, other participants also refer to both the states of cost of living and the climate when talking about their decisions not to have children.

Extract 12 (Becky):

> I shouldn't be having a child because I'm being rushed
> into (.) a decision. And I still, I ↑still don't know
> permanently if that is the decision I'll make, (.) but it
> doesn't make sense to me to rush into that life altering
> choice, particularly with the way that I feel the ↑world
> is. You know, my parents and grandparents have

continuously said to me that (0.2) the world that they lived in was easier in terms of getting a house (.) and a job and just just having a life and a pension and things like that. And now it feels like it's it's been taken away from people my age, which is 30, it feels, feels like (.) it's just getting worse. So I can only <u>imag</u>ine how much worse it will be for (.) any kids that I would have.

Extract 13 (Becky):

You know, we say all this stuff about wanting to (.) save the planet and save the trees and the whales and everything (.) when bringing human life into the world. That's just <u>ex</u>tra resources that are needed that we <u>don't</u> have enough of as it is, (.) and we don't, we don't have enough healthcare. We don't have enough places for people to live.

Extract 14 (Becky):

And now I'm seeing these people (.) that ↑have got one or two kids and <u>both</u> of the parents are working and they're still ↑broke all the time.

Extract 15 (Elizabeth):

Uhm, (0.2) money is a big one. You know, who has the, <u>you</u> can't buy a house for 20p anymore,… It takes a <u>lot</u> of

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saving up and then, (.) you know, bills and everything is
really expensive. … Erm even before the cost of living
crisis, though, we still we've had a housing crisis for
so long. And (.) you know, if I were to have kids, … I
would want them in a nice house and with lots of space in
a good area where it's sa::fe
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Extract 16 (Elizabeth):

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£Like,£ (.) you know, you guys have (.) given us however
much money to pay in ridiculous, extortionate bills and
you're burning the planet … and like you expect me to
change my mind based on the environment that you have
created.
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When examining Becky's extracts, she simultaneously describes and stands against the pressures placed upon her as a VCW. The use of the word 'rush', in terms of being 'rushed' into something, suggests the feeling of being forced into something, and usually with haste and little care. She then places this pressure within the context of 'how the world is', making reference to the drastic changes in the state of economics for her generation compared to previous ones. This information is not presented as just her opinion, but in a manner with more accountability, as it is information corroborated by her parents and grandparents. Consequently, this gives more credibility to the claims that today's society has become an increasingly difficult environment to live in, without considering starting a family. Becky then goes on to consider the possibility that the state of things may continue to get worse for future generations. Additionally, when she talks about this easier world being 'taken away'

from her generation, her choice of phrasing suggests that it is not something that simply changed, but that the ability to set up a stable life has been removed from them. The change in circumstances feels like more of an intentional action. In extract 13, Becky then goes on to detail the issues with climate change and the lack of resources, suggesting that she would be concerned about bringing a child into the world where there is not enough healthcare or places for people to live. Having those concerns alone could arguably imply, linking to the first repertoire, that VCW are not inherently 'cold' and 'uncaring' individuals, in contrast with common perceptions of them. In extract 14, Becky also refers to having witnessed couples go through the struggle of having children, both working, and are still struggling financially, which would give credibility to her concerns, and would point towards her awareness that her choice is heavily influenced by the state of society.

Elizabeth, in extract 15, provides similar sentiments regarding the shift in economic climate and the difficulty that would be involved in having a child and providing for it in a safe and suitable manner. Again, this would suggest that, contrary to popular beliefs, VCW do not lack these nurturing qualities just because they do not currently have children. She then follows on, in extract 16, by noting how society seems to expect women to change their minds despite the environment that society has set up. Simply by acknowledging this, Elizabeth seems to begin to reconcile with the idea that her choice is not necessarily a decision that she has actively made.

Repertoire 3: More Than Biology

A third repertoire was identified that stands against the biological imperative and inevitability that only acknowledges women's ability to give birth, an idea that sits in line with socially

constructed gender roles as discussed in the introduction. Participants referred to how these

deep-rooted ideas are imposed on them and how they subvert these ideas by establishing that

they are more than their ability to reproduce.

Extract 17 (Elizabeth):

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I'm like, you don't get to tell me (.) what I am. I'm not
valued by my ability to have birth. You know, it's very
↑that's just such a Handmaid's Tale way of thinking about
things like just divide women into these two different
groups
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Here, Elizabeth connects the lack of acceptance of voluntarily childless women's choice not

to have children and the feelings of division and pressure that come from it, to Margaret

Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. Margaret Atwood considered her novel, in which fertile

women are forced into reproductive slavery for the ruling class, to be a 'speculative fiction',

claiming that those circumstances could be a feasible future based on societal events taking

place when she wrote it in the 1980s (Armstrong, 2018). Though written in 1985, The

Handmaid's Tale is currently well-known due to the ongoing television adaptation and is

therefore an accessible representation of feelings of fear and concern regarding the

oppression of women. What Elizabeth does here by making a connection between the current

divide of opinions and The Handmaid's Tale, is to put a spotlight on the more insidious

possibilities that could stem from the continued oppression of women. Despite being a

fictional story, The Handmaid's Tale presents a circumstance in which women's rights and

autonomy are stripped away, and they become dehumanised objects with the sole purpose of

reproducing. Considering women's history and the struggles for equality that are still

ongoing, while it may seem to some as though a situation such as The Handmaid's Tale presents is something not likely to happen, it is not unreasonable for women to make comparisons and identify with the issues raised in the fiction. The fact that Elizabeth felt it important to reference the novel, along with the knowledge that the novel was based on political issues, suggests that it, while of course dramatised for media consumption, is a genuine point of concern, and representative of the power relations between society and women.

Adding to this repertoire regarding the biological imperative assumed of women, when discussing an experience that she had with a potential date, Ioana details an interaction with him in which she is questioned on her decision to pursue a new career, and told she will be needed at home to look after the children.

Extract 18 (Ioana):

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And he was like, (.) but I thought we're gonna have three
kids and I need you home to look after the kids. And I'm
like, ↑excuse £me.£ He didn't even ↑met me yet, and ↑I'm
not just a £cow you can take and bring home to like, pop
out kids.£
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Here, she describes how the assumption and expectation that she will inevitably be a stay-at-home mother by someone she has barely formed a connection with makes her feel, through the use of a metaphor. The imagery she invokes by using the metaphor of being a cow that can be taken home to reproduce is powerful, given that it alludes to her being like a farm animal that can be owned and used to yield produce. Not only is this indicative of the power relations inbuilt in society and the oppression of women, by suggesting that women are seen

as objects to be procured and used for the benefit of others, but it also implies that women are often made to feel less than human.

Additionally, Daisy adds to this repertoire by addressing the assumptions that it is inevitable for women to follow a biological imperative, as it is often assumed that women are only fulfilled if they become mothers.

Extract 19 (Daisy):

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Like people think we must really be, like, filling a
ho::le. Hence (.) crazy cat lady like they think we must
be finding other things to fill our time with because we
must be lost without babies. And it's like, actually, no,
my life is really full and busy and (.) crazy uhm enough.
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Here, Daisy rejects other common assumptions, such as the idea that women will never feel full or fulfilled without having children, using repertoires such as 'crazy cat lady' and contrasting them with her reality as a VCW. She reasons why stereotypes such as 'crazy cat lady' exist, and links it to the common belief that women who don't have children feel that they must find something else to fill the child-shaped hole in their lives. This idea ties in with the gendered stereotypes and assumptions that women are biologically wired to be children, and that without becoming a mother, they must find something to substitute for that inherent need within themselves. To add context to Daisy's contrasting comment about her life being full despite not having children, she earlier mentioned her full-time job and her loving relationship. By using the strategy of contrasts, Daisy rejects these damaging assumptions and instead outlines the reality of her experience, that she does not feel lost or as though she is missing something without a child.

Discussion

This research aimed to explore how voluntarily childless women construct their identities in response to dominant representations of them within society. Findings presented three interpretive repertoires that challenged and subverted existing discourses and identified various linguistic devices that were used to construct these repertoires. The first of these interpretive repertoires indicates that participants' identities, in terms of traits and attributes, are not dependent on whether they have children. This, in relation to research findings detailed in the introduction, stands against the common perception of VCW as 'cold', 'uncaring' and 'selfish' individuals, along with the gendered societal expectations of how women should be. This is important due to the fact that much of the previous research (see Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2018, Ashburn-Nardo, 2017, Ciaccio et al., 2021, Colledge & Runacres, 2023), is based on the interpretation of others outside of the community of VCW. However, by generating these repertoires of their own, participants challenge the invalidating and often dehumanising perceptions that have been long ingrained within society, and therefore commonly exist either consciously or unconsciously. Participants acknowledge these existing discourses and, through detailing their own experiences, present elements of their identities that subvert these perceptions. While they do not outwardly name the attributes that they consider to be part of their identities, elements of their identities shine through when paying attention to their narratives. When Nicky talks about her role as a godmother and an occasional carer for her neighbour's son, she presents herself as someone 'nurturing' and 'warm', traits commonly only associated with women who are mothers themselves. Additionally, while Evie acknowledges that being a parent is likely something that she is not meant for, she then goes on to detail that she has experienced the pain caused by an absent parent, and that she would not want to inflict that upon someone else. Having

that level of forethought and concern for someone else's experience arguably implies a level of compassionate and kind-hearted nature. Likewise, when Ioana disputes the perceptions that VCW are selfish, and points a spotlight towards parents who treat their children in unjust, cruel ways, she creates an argument for the fact that the qualities of an individual are not dependent on whether they have children, and vice versa. Aspects of this repertoire are also found in the second repertoire, *Sometimes, Choice is No Choice*, as participants discuss not wanting to bring a child into a world where they would be subject to struggle and instability.

The second repertoire, *sometimes, choice is no choice*, introduces the ideological dilemma that for some women, the choice not to have children is not always a choice that they are active participants in making. Discussions regarding the economic and financial climate, along with concerns regarding environmental crises, reveal a context in which people, not just women, are in positions where it is not viable for them to be able to responsibly afford and support having a child. Participants describe how it is common in today's climate for couples to barely be able to afford their rent, bills and food, despite both working full-time jobs, and that the expenses and logistics of having a child are either not financially possible or would cause great difficulties. The interesting thing that this commentary highlights is that it conflicts with the pressures imposed upon women within Western societies to meet social expectations. As previously noted within the introduction, the structures of Western society play a substantial part in instilling gender-differentiated beliefs, which have become widely accepted ideas for a considerable time. The consequences of these expectations placed upon women then lead to the stigmatisation of those who do not meet them, thus having ramifications on the stigmatised individuals' identities. When pairing these two narratives involving society, it would suggest that at present, women find themselves in an impossible position between being marked as tainted, but also unable to fulfil the life path they may want

to due to economic restrictions. An extra layer to this situation emerges when considering women who have children, or reproduce the workforce, so to speak, hugely benefit the capitalist society. Society relies on reproduction, but has created an environment that would make it unfeasible for those who do wish to have children to fulfil that expectation. Instead of this being acknowledged, those women still face oppressive treatment and are labelled as 'other' for making a choice that in truth is not a choice. This is not to say that any woman who is not a mother should be stigmatised or is any less of a woman, but to highlight the reality of power relations between society and all women, not just voluntarily childless women.

In the third repertoire, *More Than Biology*, participants bring attention to the idea of motherhood as a biological imperative that still exists within society. This ties in with ideations discussed in the introduction that synonymise womanhood and motherhood. Participants draw upon these ideas, reflect on the insidious and harmful implications, and argue against the assumptions that they depend on becoming mothers to reach fulfilment in life. Both Elizabeth and Ioana explore how ideas of biological imperative have created dangerous and dehumanising ideations regarding women only being viewed by their ability to give birth. References to A Handmaid's Tale and being likened to a farm animal responsible for producing illustrate the position that women feel that they are put into, simply for being a woman and possessing the biological ability to give birth. This subject position that participants identify with is demonstrative of the power relations that are built into society, which place women in an oppressed position, while society itself, and seemingly men, are in a position of power and control over women. Women are dehumanised and situated as objects to benefit others. Additionally, when arguments against the idea that a woman's life is not fulfilled if she does not have children are put forward, participants construct their

identities to be much more than just their biological nature. They do not feel that they are missing something or are lost without having children.

When discussing the implications of this research, it is important to first note that intentions are not to suggest that women should meet the societal standards set, both in terms of characteristics and wanting to be a mother. Findings may be indicative of the reality that voluntarily childless women can possess these communal traits, such as 'warmth' and 'nurturing'; however, the broader implications would be that an individual's nature and personality are not dependent on whether they have children or not. Additionally, concerning the findings regarding the ideological dilemma of choice, it is also crucial to acknowledge that while they shed light on the futile position that society places some VCW in, they do not suggest that this dilemma exists for all VCW.

The key insight that should be focused on instead is the problematic structures of society and how it maintains power over women with the use of inflated economic circumstances and prejudiced generalisations. As seen with the research referenced in the introduction regarding perceptions of VCW, it appears that commonly, when people's attention is brought to VCW, it is usually with a negative lens and focused on the woman with little regard to her circumstances. An explanation for this could be due to implicit bias. Greenwald & Krieger (2006) explain that implicit bias suggests that individuals do not always have conscious control over their processes of social perceptions and impression formations. Rudman (2004) also details how implicit biases are influenced by experiences and cultural biases and explains that these prejudices are often so commonplace that they become automatic. When considering how, as previously stated, gender-differentiated repertoires are arguably an observable effect of capitalism and Western culture, it would be reasonable to conclude that

these prejudices against VCW stem from society. This, in turn, then leads to the widespread implicit biases taking precedence over the problematic reality that some VCW are inhibited from making the choice they want to due to the constraints of society. Women without children become the perceived issue instead of society itself. Within the analysis, participants demonstrate their realisation, acceptance, and confront society with the irony that it extends these social pressures for them to become mothers. Which then leads to stigmatising opinions of them, but at the same time, has put them in a position where they can not feasibly become mothers. Participants refuse to shoulder the disapproval for not having children, and instead challenge society to offer more support, given that it is in society's best interest to encourage more reproduction.

While findings can be theoretically generalised in terms of providing insight, and representations of voluntarily childless women generated by voices belonging to that population, it is important to acknowledge any possible limitations to this research. Due to the nature of qualitative research, this paper only analyses the accounts of six voluntarily childless women, all currently living in England. While one participant is native to Romania, it would be valuable for future studies to explore and give a voice to voluntarily childless women in a variety of areas. Additionally, when exploring the experience of stigmatised individuals and their identities, it is important to acknowledge the presence of intersectionality. While it was not the intention of this research to dismiss potential intersecting identities of participants, due to academic restrictions, in-depth exploration into these was not possible. It would be worthwhile for future research to explore the stigmatisation of voluntarily childless women whilst also considering their intersecting identities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has provided a platform for voluntarily childless women to construct their own identities, which opposes the perceptions held by society and, as a result, other people. Findings have subverted the prevailing discourse that VCW lack communal traits, are selfish, and that, as women, they will not feel fulfilled without being mothers. Additionally, by navigating their identities, participants reconcile with the ideological dilemma posed by both the structures of society and the societally constructed perceptions and expectations. Findings call into question the social constructions of gender-related issues and how these are deeply ingrained within society, for the benefit of society. The oppression and marginalisation of women, and in terms of this research, focus on voluntarily childless women, is a result of Western capitalist structures that rely on women taking up domestic roles of reproduction. Women are also used as scapegoats and shoulder the blame for not contributing to the capitalist society, due to the socially constructed perceptions.

Reflexivity

My position in relation to the research, and as the researcher, is also that of a voluntarily childless woman. I found it important to further the research in this field as, from my own experience, I am aware of the stigmatisation that voluntarily childless women face and, as a result, the effects it has upon navigating one's own identity. Therefore, my goal with this research was to present and provide a platform for other voluntarily childless women to voice their experiences and identities, offering a new perspective as opposed to existing research that focuses on how these women are viewed. Despite my standing as part of this marginalised group, throughout this research process, I have, myself, gained insight into the differing experiences and feelings of voluntarily childless women. For example, I myself do not identify with feelings of loss of agency in regards to making my decision to remain

childless and the economic standings of society inhibiting my decision. However, I feel it is

important to acknowledge and display the variety of identities and reasonings that voluntarily

childless women have.

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