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Womanhood without motherhood: A critical discursive analysis of how older, childfree women navigate stigma through talk.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

Voluntary childlessness is relatively common in Westernised contexts but remains stigmatised, especially for women, owing to dominant gendered discourses shaping reproductive norms. In Aotearoa, New Zealand research on voluntary childlessness is scarce, with only several published studies. Globally, research tends to reinforce dominant constructions of voluntary childlessness as abnormal and deviant by focusing on explaining voluntary childlessness (who makes the decision not to parent and why) and the presumed negative consequences, mostly among women of 'childbearing age'. Research that does consider older women often focuses on potential negative outcomes in later life, echoing common assumptions that childfree women will be sad, lonely, and regretful as they age. Very little research investigates older, voluntarily childless women's experiences from their own perspectives, and there is no local research to date. Therefore, my research focuses on older, voluntarily childless women living in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Using a feminist poststructuralist lens, under the broad umbrella of reproductive justice, I explore how older women navigate dominant gendered discourses, and how they use discourses to resist stigma associated with their decision not to have children and construct a positive identity. I analysed the interview data generated in interviews with 14 women between the ages of 50 and 71 who identify as childfree from across Aotearoa, New Zealand using critical discursive psychology, applying the principles of reproductive justice and feminist poststructuralism to make sense of my participants' talk, and what they achieved using the discursive strategies. Four main themes were identified in my analysis, with the first two taking a non-confrontational approach and the final two taking a more critical approach to resisting mandated motherhood, namely:

1. Child-freedom as an equally valid alternative to motherhood,
2. "It's no big deal": Minimising and normalising being childfree,
3. Regret-free: Resisting a deficit identity, and
4. "Motherhood is optional, obviously": Resisting the 'motherhood mandate' through liberatory discourses.

My research findings show that these women often drew on dominant discourses of essentialism and diversity to construct motherhood and non-motherhood as equally valid options for women. However, they also adopted progressive discourses to problematise motherhood as women's only source of happiness. While these discursive strategies sometimes contradict each other, the

overarching sentiment is that women should be able to occupy the subject position of mother or non-mother without stigma. Accordingly, I argue that by resisting gender essentialist and pronatalist discourse, these women can construct positive, childfree identities and multiple possible subjectivities that constitute womanhood.

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Approval for this study was obtained by the Massey University Ethics Committee.

Glossary

Term	Definition
Māori	The Indigenous people of New Zealand.
Pākehā	New Zealand European.
Aotearoa	The name for New Zealand in the Māori language.
Wahine/wāhine	Māori woman/women.
Te Tiriti o Waitangi	The Treaty of Waitangi was an agreement made between Māori and Europeans in 1840.
Tangata Whenua	A Māori language term describing Māori people as the Indigenous people of the land of Aotearoa New Zealand.
Iwi	Tribe/s.
Koha	A Māori custom of offering a gift, contribution, or donation.
Kaupapa Māori	An Indigenous approach to research and knowledge, centring Māori cultural knowledge and experiences (Rua et al., 2023).

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction

As a childfree woman in my mid-30s, I have become increasingly interested in reproductive freedom and the decision not to have children. Within the context of abortion becoming legal in 2021 in my home country of Aotearoa, New Zealand, while currently undergoing bans in many states in the United States where I currently live, my interest in reproductive decision-making has only grown. In reviewing existing research on voluntary childlessness, I noticed a lack of inquiry into diverse identities and an absence of childfree people in older age. Additionally, there was a gap in the research focused on the gendered differences of childfree people's experiences. With my research, I wanted to add to the limited research on older, childfree women, illuminating their voices which have largely been absent from research on voluntary childlessness. I also wanted to study voluntary childlessness within a New Zealand context, which has not yet been researched.

Childlessness is becoming more common in Aotearoa New Zealand and across the globe, with an increasing number of individuals choosing not to have children (Allen & Wiles, 2013; Boddington & Didham, 2009; Sappleton, 2018). This has led to increased research inquiry exploring the reasons behind and impact of the decision not to have children, both for individuals and for society. However, as I discuss in this chapter, research beyond childbearing/middle-age is scarce (de Medeiros & Rubinstein, 2018; Stahnke et al., 2020) and tends to homogenise older, childless people. Accordingly, research has largely failed to capture the diversity of older childless individuals, the impact of choice, and the role of gender and other identity factors on their experiences. Moreover, as I show in this chapter, pronatalism, an ideology that celebrates parenthood and encourages reproduction, acts as the broad backdrop to reproductive decision-making and affects different people in different ways according to intersecting identity categories (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status) (McCutcheon, 2018). The gendered nature of voluntary childlessness, and its presumed negative consequences for women in older age, means that inquiry into the experiences of voluntarily childless older women from a variety of social locations is needed.

I begin this chapter with a note on terminology, which has been debated both by researchers and voluntarily childless individuals. I will then provide an overview of the research to date, gaps in the research, and the rationale behind my research question.

1.2. A note on terminology

Terms such as voluntarily childless, and the more colloquial 'childless-by-choice', have more recently been critiqued for implying that people who do not have children inherently lack something in their lives, constructing them as deficient and contributing to the pronatalist assumption that parenthood is essential to personal fulfilment (Hayfield et al., 2019; Morison et al., 2016; Stahnke et al., 2020). Consequently, the term 'childfree' has become commonly used by individuals without children, and increasingly by researchers, to reflect agency and reject narratives of lack (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Lynch et al., 2018; Moore & Geist-Martin, 2013). The term childfree emphasises that some individuals have made a choice to forgo having children and experience a sense of personal freedom due to being without children (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). The use of childfree terminology by researchers, then, hints at a move from assumptions of deviance and deficiency towards a more positive construction of childfree women (Lynch et al., 2018). However, childfree terminology has also been criticised for focusing *too much* on individual choice and implying a dislike of children (Allen & Wiles, 2013; Morison et al., 2016). Additionally, individuals who are voluntarily childless, childless-by-choice, or childfree, may not identify with these terms (Moore, 2014). I therefore use these terms interchangeably throughout my research to acknowledge disputes around terminology and include a diverse range of participant identities.

1.3. Research on voluntary childlessness

Both experiences of and research on voluntary childlessness, and reproductive choice in general, have been shaped by the dominant discourse of pronatalism which encourages reproduction. Childlessness was historically assumed to be a non-choice based on the pronatalist assumption that people, especially married, heterosexual people, both want to and should have children (Veevers, 1973, p. 199). Consequently, little attention was paid to those who had chosen not to have children, leading to the experiences and perspectives of voluntarily childless individuals remaining understudied and, therefore, poorly understood (Lynch et al., 2018; Shapiro, 2014). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in voluntary childlessness among researchers (Shapiro, 2014). However, this research remains limited, continuing to be shaped by

the pronatalist assumption that voluntarily remaining childfree is an abnormal phenomenon requiring explanation. Accordingly, voluntarily childless individuals have often been pathologised, as researchers have studied personality traits, the so-called 'risk factors' to becoming childfree, the pathways leading to voluntary childlessness, and the presumed negative consequences of this reproductive decision on wellbeing, particularly later in life (Lynch et al., 2018; Macleod et al., 2019; Shapiro, 2014). In this way, psychological research has reinforced dominant cultural narratives that construct voluntarily childless people as deviant and, therefore, position them lower on the social hierarchy than parents.

Moreover, research on voluntary childlessness has been predominantly quantitative, mostly originating in North America, and focused on a homogenous group of individuals (Lynch et al., 2018; Stahnke et al., 2020). Shaped by pronatalist ideology, research has reinforced parenthood as a natural stage of adult development and essential for a fulfilled life (Harrington, 2019; Lynch et al., 2018). These taken-for-granted assumptions have shaped which reproductive decisions, and for whom, are deemed questionable and worthy of research inquiry. Accordingly, as outlined by Lynch et al. (2018), socially privileged women deemed "fit to reproduce" (p. 34) have been the primary subject of research on voluntary childlessness; predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual, married women of childbearing age, for whom reproduction is encouraged and expected.

Understandings of child-freedom have therefore largely been drawn from this homogenous group of women, but pronatalism affects women, and all people, in different ways. More research is needed on a diverse range of individuals from different socio-cultural contexts to understand the diversity of experiences of those who have chosen not to have children, including understudied groups of women, such as older women, and understudied countries, such as Aotearoa New Zealand. In the following sections, I discuss the existing research and identified gaps in the research, namely: who would choose not to have children, and why, the role of gender, the assumption of negative consequences, childfree older women, and research on stigma. I will then follow with an exploration of the limited research within the local context of Aotearoa New Zealand before outlining my research question.

1.3.1. Who would choose not to have children, and why?

Early research sought to categorise voluntarily childless individuals by searching for universal truths and 'risk factors' that lead to the decision not to parent (Allen & Wiles, 2013; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Macleod et al., 2019; Shapiro, 2014). This began with demographic enquiries seeking to understand and explain who the voluntarily childless are. This research suggests that voluntary childless individuals are more likely to be white, have a higher education, higher income, more professional and managerial roles, and live in urban areas (Basten, 2009; Blackstone, 2014; Boddington & Didham, 2009; Shapiro, 2014; Waren & Pals, 2013). It also suggests that voluntarily childless individuals tend to be less religious and hold less traditional ideas about gender roles (Basten, 2009; Waren & Pals, 2013).

These demographic inquiries are motivated by the need to explain the reasons for childfree individuals' deviance from the parenthood norm. In a recent systematic literature review, Macleod et al., (2019, p. 32) point to the "normalised absence" of parenthood and "pathologised presence" of childlessness in reproductive research. They explain that the decision to have children is seen as unremarkable and 'normal' such that it remains largely absent from research, except in cases of socially marginalised individuals such as those considered too young, too poor, or otherwise unsuitable for parenthood (Macleod et al., 2019; Morison et al., 2016). In contrast, voluntarily forgoing reproduction and parenthood is seen as questionable and 'abnormal' so that women who decide to remain childfree are problematised, deemed worthy objects of research and requiring explanation.

To further understand and explain voluntarily childless individuals, researchers also began to explore the different 'pathways' to childlessness. This research sought to explain how and why people stray from reproductive norms. Early research grouped pathways to voluntary childlessness into two categories: (1) 'early articulators' who decide not to have children early and stick to that decision, and (2) 'perpetual postponers' who delay parenthood until they can no longer have children (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). This initial binary categorisation fails to capture the multitude of pathways that can lead to the decision not to have children (Allen & Wiles, 2013; Harrington, 2019; Lynch et al., 2018; Shapiro, 2014). More recent research has problematised this oversimplification, finding that individuals may decide early on and stick to this decision, defer parenthood for a multitude of reasons, initially intend to have children and change their minds

later, or end up childless by chance and happy with the outcome (Boddington & Didham, 2009; Lynch et al., 2018). Therefore, the choice not to parent may be passive or active and is more complex and nuanced than a simple, one-off decision (Basten, 2009; Moore, 2014; Settle & Brumley, 2014). For example, in a qualitative study examining the experiences of intentionally childfree women in mid-life, DeLyser (2012) found that women revisited and re-evaluated the possibility of becoming a mother or remaining childfree multiple times throughout their life course. Thus, the pathways to childlessness can be understood as diverse and varied, rather than a universal experience.

Research on the pathways to childlessness has also explored the potential macro- and micro-level motivations for remaining childfree (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). Macro-level motivations include the rise of feminism, the increasing participation of women in the workforce, and more reproductive freedoms including contraception and abortion (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). Research suggests that these societal changes have given many women more reproductive and life choices, leading to higher levels of voluntary childlessness due to its availability as an option. More recently, societal concerns such as climate change have also been cited as a factor in the decision to remain childfree (Helm et al., 2021). On a micro-level, researchers have explored individual motivations in relation to individual freedom (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). For example, Gillespie (2003) found that women felt a pull towards remaining childfree to retain personal freedom, and a push away from motherhood, with the responsibilities and perceived loss of identity it entails. Carmichael and Whittaker (2007) also found that individuals chose childlessness as a rejection of the maternal role, preferring the freedom of non-parenthood to the lifestyle changes that come with being a parent.

The focus on women's freedom has, however, also been criticised as overly simplistic and contributing to the construction of childfree women as selfish, individualistic, less nurturing, and less warm than mothers (Shapiro, 2014). A narrow focus on freedom fails to consider the multitude of factors contributing to the decision not to parent. Indeed, some voluntarily childless women do cite several freedoms that come with a childfree identity as contributing to their decision, including the freedom to pursue self-development and hobbies, travel, have a rewarding career, more money, and more rewarding intimate relationships (Gillespie, 2003; Houseknecht, 1987; Mollen, 2006; Park, 2005). Yet, others cite different motivations: that their personalities are not suited to

motherhood, that they have never wanted children, or altruistic motivations such as environmental concerns or the ability to volunteer their time and contribute positively to society (Mollen, 2006; Park, 2005; Settle & Brumley, 2014; Shapiro, 2014).

While discourses of choice and freedom allow for different embodiments of femininity, they can also decontextualise reproductive decisions, removing them from the socio-cultural context in which they occur, including considerable social pressure to fit in with gendered norms of femininity by becoming a mother and widespread stigmatisation of women who decline motherhood (Riley et al., 2018). The narrow focus on freedom also highlights mainstream (white) feminism's problematic treatment of women as a homogenous group with equal concerns (Morison, 2021). In focusing predominantly on heterosexual, married, middle-class, white women's experiences, researchers have framed the concerns of these socially privileged women, such as freedom to pursue a meaningful career or their own personal interests, as synonymous with the reproductive concerns of all women. Additionally, the focus on inquiring into women's pathways to voluntary childlessness reinforces the taken-for-granted assumption that women are most responsible for reproductive decision-making, as I will explore further in the following section.

1.3.2. The role of gender

Voluntary childlessness is a gendered phenomenon (Moore, 2014; Morison, 2021). Research on voluntary childlessness has largely focused on women, partly due to the essentialist assumption that women are responsible for reproductive decisions and valued for their reproductive capacity (Basten, 2009; Shapiro, 2014). The intersection of gender essentialism and pronatalism is evident in the "motherhood mandate" (Russo, 1976, p. 143), which equates womanhood with motherhood and constructs motherhood as evidence of 'good' femininity. Thus, mothers are seen as embodying ideal femininity, while non-mothers are deemed abnormal and worthy of research inquiry. Dominant discourses of pronatalism also construct the desire to have children as a maternal instinct, suggesting that all women should possess a biological drive to have children and, therefore, be the drivers of reproductive decision-making. Accordingly, women are deemed more responsible for deviance from the parenthood norm than men, with voluntarily childless women deemed more questionable than voluntarily childless men.

Research on voluntarily childless women has largely focused on demographic characteristics and personality traits, in addition to exploring their pathways to and motivations for child-freedom as previously explored. In focusing on the characteristics of childfree, researchers have sought to understand and explain which women would choose to remain childfree and why. This research suggests that voluntarily childless women are more likely to have obtained higher education, are more represented in professional and managerial jobs, and are less traditional in gender roles (Shapiro, 2014). Research has not supported the assertion that women's voluntary childlessness is primarily due to career commitment. Instead, many women cite a desire for a higher quality of life as their motivation for remaining childfree, often expressing aspirations for early retirement or financial stability (Shapiro, 2014). Ultimately, research into why women remain childfree reveals varied and nuanced motivations and pathways to becoming childfree, suggesting that the experience of women's (non)reproductive decision-making is not universal (Settle & Brumley, 2014).

Though research has focused primarily on women as subjects, little attention has been paid to the gendered nature of voluntarily childless women's experiences through the lens of power and oppression. Gender is not the only source of oppression for women, instead there are multiple identity factors, such as race, class, and sexuality, that contribute to women's diverse (non)reproductive experiences (Sappleton, 2018). Moreover, pronatalism is inherently intersectional, affecting women of different identity factors and social locations in different ways (Morison, 2021; Morison et al., 2016). As previously mentioned, voluntary childlessness is a more stigmatised identity when occupied by socially privileged women for whom reproduction is encouraged and expected (Lynch et al., 2018). This intersection of pronatalism and the motherhood mandate has shaped research, which has only asked those women considered desirable, or fit to reproduce, to justify their decision not to have children (Hayfield et al., 2019). Hence, the diversity of women's experiences has been largely ignored, with women being treated as a homogeneous group in reproductive research.

Consequently, researchers have predominantly valued the experiences of heterosexual women, resulting in the absence of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women from research on voluntary childlessness, who are often assumed to be childless by default. One exception is Hayfield et al. (2019), who took an intersectional approach, examining the diversity of childfree women's

experiences in relation to different identity factors to see how heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, and queer women negotiate their childfree identities in response to the motherhood mandate. Through this intersectional approach, the diversity of childfree women's experiences can be illuminated.

Due to the gendered assumption that women are responsible for reproductive decision-making, men have been largely absent from research on voluntay childlessness. However, childfree men also make reproductive decisions, face social and societal pressures to become parents, and also occupy stigmatised identities, with fatherhood perceived as a normal stage of adult development (Blackstone & Stewart, 2016). Very little research has focused on men alone, but some research, mostly qualitative in nature, has recently begun to explore the gendered nature of voluntary childlessness in studies including both women and men. The findings of this emerging work suggest that the experience of childfree men differs from that of childfree women (Blackstone, 2014). For example, a qualitative study by Park (2005) suggests that men and women have different motivations and pathways to childlessness, with men citing a lack of desire to sacrifice financially and otherwise, and women wanting to pursue career and leisure activities that they felt would be incompatible with motherhood. Similarly, Keizer et al. (2008), Parr (2010), and Waren and Pals (2013) also found some significant differences between voluntarily childless women and men, with higher education and higher-status jobs increasing a woman's likelihood of remaining childfree but decreasing that likelihood for men.

To explore gendered differences further, Blackstone and Stewart (2016) employed a qualitative approach to illuminate the complexity of the decision-making processes of childfree men and women. They found gendered patterns in their research, with men citing consequences for their own lives and women citing the external consideration of others or more altruistic motives as reasoning for choosing non-parenthood. This research begins to illuminate the gendered nature of voluntary childlessness. However, more research is needed to understand the role of gender in the childfree experience. Importantly, the exploration of gendered experience should take care to avoid reinforcing gender essentialist discourse.

Despite the gendered nature of voluntary childlessness, there is a clear lack of feminist research in this area (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Lynch et al., 2018). A few researchers have begun to inquire into voluntary childlessness through the lens of feminism, examining the role of

power and discourse in shaping feminine identities that sit outside the motherhood norm. For example, Moore (2014) explored identity construction online, taking a feminist poststructuralist approach to examine how childfree women used discourse to construct a positive childfree identity online. Similarly, Gillespie (2003) also used a qualitative approach to examine the gender identity of voluntarily childless women through the lens of feminism. This research found that, through a rejection of motherhood as innate, these women were able to construct a "childfree femininity" (p. 134). This works to disrupt taken-for-granted truths that suggest women must become mothers to achieve fulfilment, instead allowing the embodiment of a positive feminine identity without motherhood.

1.3.3. The assumption of negative consequences

Research on ageing childlessness has been shaped by the assumption of lack and need, reinforcing dominant narratives that suggest childlessness has negative consequences on the individual and society as a whole (Albertini & Kohli, 2009). Within pronatalist discourse, children are constructed as necessary for providing social support, care, and security in old age or ill health (Letherby, 2002; Morison et al., 2016; O'Driscoll & Mercer, 2018). Consequently, researchers have largely attempted to discover whether childless older people (a) have lesser social support systems and have poorer physical and mental health outcomes than older parents, and (b) are a financial and care burden on society (Albertini & Kohli, 2009; Basten, 2009; Dykstra & Wagner, 2007; Křenková, 2019).

At the individual level, research has focused on individual deficit, grounded in the pronatalist assumption that childless people lack something in their lives and that their childlessness (whether voluntary or involuntary) will have a negative impact on their wellbeing as they age. In fact, research has revealed few, if any, negative consequences of childlessness on wellbeing over the life course (Allen & Wiles, 2013; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). For example, Umberson et al. (2010) found that childlessness, whether voluntary or involuntary, had varying advantages and disadvantages for different groups of people. Though childless individuals have been found to have smaller social networks, less contact with family, and a greater likelihood of receiving professional help and entering institutionalised care in old age, research suggests that their social networks are more diverse, including more contact with friends and neighbours, and

points to their childfree status having no negative effect on their overall wellbeing (Křenková, 2019).

Research has begun to explore the diversity of childfree experiences in old age, finding that experiences differ based on identity factors such as gender and relationship status (Křenková, 2019; Stegen et al., 2021; Vikström et al., 2011). This research suggests that individual wellbeing in later life is more complex and nuanced than parenthood status alone. In this vein, research conducted by Allen and Wiles (2013) in Aotearoa New Zealand examined how older, voluntarily and involuntarily childless men and women positioned themselves in the face of stigma. Through this research, they began to illuminate the nuanced nature of childlessness across the life course and shed light on the diversity of childless individuals, stating that binary categorisations (such as involuntarily and voluntarily childless) are insufficient to consider the diversity of childless experiences.

At the societal level, childlessness is constructed as having negative consequences on societal productivity and prosperity, with ageing childless people frequently framed as a societal burden, putting strain on the welfare system, healthcare, and aged care facilities (Albertini & Kohli, 2009; Boddington & Didham, 2009; Dykstra & Wagner, 2007). However, research on the social consequences of childlessness has not supported the assumption that childless people's societal contribution is inherently negative. Furthermore, a few researchers have begun to reframe older childlessness by exploring the positive contributions of childless individuals, challenging the notion that childlessness is synonymous with negative societal outcomes. For example, research by Albertini and Kohli (2009) conducted across 10 countries in Europe focused on what childfree people give to their communities, finding that people without children have diverse social networks and contribute to the wellbeing of others through voluntary and charity work.

In a similar vein, research by Cwikel et al. (2006) conducted in Australia found that older, never-married childless women did not constitute a social burden but that they were coping financially, often had health insurance, and "while they are less likely to be providing family caregiving, they are considerably more likely to provide volunteer services." (p. 1999). This research contradicts the dominant ideology that constructs voluntarily childless individuals as less

productive members of society who burden the system through their need for financial and social support.

Considering the assumption of negative consequences focusing on older age, much of the research including older people commonly groups childless and childfree men and women together. Little attention has been paid to the role of choice and gender in shaping older, childfree people's experiences. Accordingly, as I will outline further below, more research exploring the gendered experiences of voluntary and involuntary childlessness in older age is needed.

1.3.4. Childfree older women

As previously mentioned, voluntary childlessness is a gendered issue. While it is widely assumed that voluntary childlessness will have negative consequences for women in later life, research on voluntary childless women beyond middle age remains scarce (Allen & Wiles, 2013; de Medeiros & Rubinstein, 2018; Harrington, 2019; Stahnke et al., 2020). The exclusion of older women from voluntary childlessness research is related to the treatment of voluntarily childless women as a largely homogenous group in research, assuming a universal experience (Morison, 2021; Shapiro, 2014). As previously explored, pronatalist discourses construct several intersecting motherhood norms, which determine which women are deemed fit to reproduce and are, therefore, expected to do so (Macleod et al., 2019). As a result, these women are most often the subject of enquiry for research on voluntary childlessness (Moore, 2014). This has led researchers to focus on younger women, of 'childbearing age', who belong to these privileged categories (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Lynch et al., 2018). Consequently, the views of older, childfree women have been largely excluded from research inquiry.

The limited research on childlessness in later life continues to group all childless older women, failing to capture the diversity of childless experiences. Only a few researchers have begun to explore the experiences of older, childfree women. For example, DeLyser (2012) inquired as to whether menopause may trigger a sense of regret in the lives of voluntarily childless women aged 46 to 60, however, this research did not confirm that hypothesis. Instead, these women expressed a lack of regret in their decision to remain childfree. Stahnke et al. (2020), examining the experiences of childfree women over the age of 65 in the United States, found that the women felt a sense of fulfilment and meaningful connection with younger generations in their lives. The

limited research conducted suggests that older, childfree women perform identity work to construct a positive identity in the face of stigma (de Medeiros & Rubinstein, 2018). However, it remains that little is understood about older, childfree women and more research is needed on this group.

The importance of including older women in research on voluntary childlessness lies in the unique interaction between age, gender, and their childfree status. Dominant constructions of femininity primarily value women for their beauty, youth, and reproductive capability (Chen et al., 2020; de Medeiros & Rubinstein, 2018; Kincaid, 2022). Recent research by Kincaid (2022) emphasises the gendered nature of ageism, which impacts men and women differently. Of note is the diminishing social power experienced by women as they age beyond 50–60 years old, attributed to dominant constructions of ideal femininity valuing women primarily as either sexual objects or mothers (Kincaid, 2022). That is, women are valued for their capacity to reproduce and raise children. Hence, multiple deficit identities are attached to older, childfree women, leaving them open to stigma. Research on stigma will be explored further in the following section.

1.3.5. Research on stigma

Stigma research has historically focused on documenting the negative perceptions and biases against voluntarily childless individuals (Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2018). This research has led to an understanding of the general perceptions of childfree individuals as cold, selfish, materialistic, individualistic, and undesirable (Harrington, 2019; Park, 2002; Shapiro, 2014). Recent research suggests that these negative perceptions of childfree people have persisted. For example, research has shown that childfree individuals are perceived as less psychologically fulfilled than parents and elicit moral outrage from their reproductive decisions (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Bays, 2017; Ekelund & Ask, 2021). Moreover, the decision to remain childfree has been shown to require defence in conversations with others, whereas the decision to have children does not (Hintz & Brown, 2019). For example, Hintz and Brown (2020) investigated the dismissal of the decision to remain childfree as legitimate by examining the discussion of "bingos" (p. 244) experienced by childfree individuals online. Bingos can be defined as challenging a person's own values or identity, for example, questioning their childfree status with quick dismissals such as 'you will change your mind', which frame parenthood as inevitable and their childfree identity as a temporary state (Hintz & Brown, 2020). As such, childfree identities are disbelieved and disregarded, constructed as illegitimate or unacceptable (Gillespie, 2000).

While research has primarily focused on documenting stigma, some more recent discursive research has begun to explore how childfree people negotiate stigma, which involves either repurposing dominant discourses to claim a positive identity or drawing on alternative discourses to create new explanations. For instance, Morison et al. (2016) examined how childfree people utilised dominant discourses of choice to either position themselves as autonomous, rational decision-makers or frame themselves as "naturally childfree" (p. 134), thus minimising personal responsibility for their childfree status. Similarly, Park (2002) found that voluntarily childless people used a diverse range of communication strategies to negotiate their stigma and retain a positive self-identity. This included defensive techniques that accepted and used pronatalist narratives, intermediate techniques which challenged dominant narratives, and proactive techniques to reframe childlessness as a valuable lifestyle (Park, 2002).

As previously mentioned, women are primarily held responsible for reproductive decision-making and, therefore, any negative outcomes of non-parenthood. Researchers have only recently begun to explore the gendered nature of stigma (Shapiro, 2014). From this research, we know that childfree women experience unique marginalisation and stigma in relation to their (non)reproductive status (Bays, 2017; Hintz & Brown, 2019; Moore, 2014; Shapiro, 2014). For example, research by Ciaccio et al. (2021) examined the gendered nature of stigma, finding that men and women received backlash for their childfree identities in different ways. Further, Hintz and Brown (2019) found that when women request sterilisation procedures, they face a unique stigma during the medical consultation. This included the physician relying on pronatalist assumptions that the women would later regret their decision, consequently denying them access to the sterilisation procedure. This study adds further nuance to our understanding of gendered stigma in relation to power and oppression, with medical professionals acting as the gatekeepers to women's bodies and the reproductive options available to them.

Research on the gendered nature of stigma suggests it is not simply the fact that childfree women have not had children but the fact that they did not *want* to that leaves them open to stigma (Shapiro, 2014). According to Wilson (2014, as cited in Harrington, 2019), women are categorised into three groups; mothers (good and bad), those who are desperately infertile but curable through technology or adoption, or the militantly childfree suspected of careerism or lesbianism. This

suggests that pronatalist assumptions continue to shape understandings of women in relation to their reproductive status.

As a result, voluntarily childless women are stigmatised, being constructed as selfish, immature, and ultimately deviant (Shapiro, 2014; Shaw, 2012). This stigmatisation can be seen as a form of gender policing, where society demands that people adhere to the normative gender expression of their biological birth sex (Harrington, 2019). As motherhood is constructed as normative, or 'good', womanhood in dominant narratives, those women who do not reproduce are exposed to stigma and marginalisation. Research shows women who 'fail' to correctly express their gender through becoming mothers are considered 'failed' women, reducing their power in society (Macleod et al., 2019). However, it is the choice to deviate from the norm that deems voluntarily childless women responsible for that 'failure'. Thus, the voluntarily childless woman is portrayed as unnatural and abnormal, eliciting moral outrage from others (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Hintz & Brown, 2019). Contrastingly, involuntarily childless women do not elicit blame and outrage for their childlessness, as it was not chosen. This results in voluntarily childless women being perceived as cold, materialistic, and selfish, while mothers and involuntarily childless women are perceived as warm, kind, more caring, and nurturing (Bays, 2017; Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2018).

A few studies have explored how women in particular manage the stigma of their childfree identities. This was first considered in the 1970s when Veevers discovered two strategies used by childfree women to manage stigma: (1) concealing their decision to remain childfree by suggesting conformity, or (2) expressing beliefs and values that are incompatible with motherhood (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). More recent research has further explored the construction of childfree femininities to manage stigma. For example, Moore (2021) found that women reject narratives of regret in online communities by claiming a 'fixed' or 'repaired' subjectivity after voluntary sterilisation. Thus, these women construct their childfree identities as natural, challenging the idea that motherhood is an innate, biological desire for all women. In a similar vein, Gillespie (2000) found that women created a radicalised feminine identity outside of motherhood, challenging pronatalist discourses that equate motherhood with ideal femininity.

Furthermore, in an attempt to add more nuance to gendered stigma research, Hayfield et al. (2019), explored how heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, and queer women construct their childfree identities. This research found that women were constantly negotiating their childfree status to establish themselves as ordinary, rational, and reasonable. By focusing on diverse sexualities, the researchers also highlighted how intersecting identity factors shape women's experiences of child-freedom and the importance of exploring this nuance. Research on stigma negotiation and how women create new narratives and meaning through discourse provides nuance and illuminates people's agency in constructing their own non-reproductive identities.

1.3.6. Choosing not to have children in Aotearoa New Zealand

Research on voluntary childlessness in Aotearoa New Zealand is scarce. The limited research on childlessness in Aotearoa New Zealand has focused on the circumstantially childless (e.g., Tonkin, 2015, as cited in Shaw, 2012) or explaining the trends in, and implications of, childlessness (e.g., Boddington & Didham, 2009). Through this limited research, we know that childlessness is rising in Aotearoa New Zealand, including more people choosing not to have children. However, little is understood about the motivations, decision-making processes, and experiences of childfree people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

A few researchers have documented the stigma and social pressure experienced by childfree individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand, suggesting that negative attitudes towards voluntary childlessness remain, with childfree people seen as selfish, individualistic, materialistic, anti-children, unfulfilled, immature, and lonely (Shaw, 2012). For example, research by Riley (as cited in Shaw, 2012) and Cameron (1990, 1997, as cited in Shaw, 2012) suggests that childfree identity in Aotearoa New Zealand is met with disapproval, social pressure, negative stereotypes, social exclusion, and isolation. This implies that attitudes towards childlessness in Aotearoa New Zealand mirror those of other contexts, but more research is needed to better understand the diverse realities of childfree people in Aotearoa New Zealand. One exception is research by Allen and Wiles (2013), which illuminated the diversity of late-life childlessness in Aotearoa New Zealand. The researchers explored how older, childless men and women construct their childlessness, using positioning theory to make sense of childless people's narratives about their lives. This research challenged the oversimplification of childlessness as fitting into the binary, homogenous categories of

'voluntary' or 'involuntary'. As such, Allen and Wiles (2013) call for further research to explore the diversity of childless and childfree experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond.

1.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how pronatalist assumptions have shaped research on voluntary childlessness, concentrating primarily on who becomes voluntarily childless, how and why, and the anticipated negative effects of that choice. Further, researchers have largely used quantitative approaches, grouped involuntarily and voluntarily childless people together, and focused on a homogenous sample of women deemed most fit to reproduce, ignoring the role of identity factors such as gender, age, race, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and culture, to name a few. More qualitative research on a diverse range of individuals from different socio-cultural contexts is needed to better understand the diversity of childfree experiences throughout the life course.

Despite the evidence that voluntary childlessness is a gendered experience, there is a clear lack of feminist research on the subject (Shapiro, 2014). Only a few researchers have explored ageing childlessness, and very few have considered the role of choice and the intersection of gender and other identity factors such as age, race, and sexuality. Thus, research has failed to explore the diverse realities of women's reproductive decision-making, concealing the different ways in which pronatalist discourses affect different women's reproductive freedoms (Morison et al., 2016). The taken-for-granted assumption that less privileged women should not or will not reproduce has led to a lack of inquiry into their voluntary childlessness. As a result, few studies have examined the decision not to parent among 'Other' women, such as lesbian women, women who are not white, women of low socio-economic status, or those who are unmarried (Hayfield et al., 2019; Settle & Brumley, 2014). Therefore, little is understood about these women's pathways to remaining childfree. Accordingly, more nuanced research that considers the diversity of women, with a diverse range of people in a range of socio-cultural contexts, is needed.

Speaking to this gap, some qualitative research adds some nuance to what we already know about the pathways to childlessness, illuminating the diversity and complexity of the decision to remain childfree. For example, Keizer et al. (2008) found that pathways to childlessness differed significantly by gender. Similarly, Blackstone and Stewart (2016) examined how men and women make the decision to remain childfree, illuminating the complexity of their decision-making as a

lengthy process of careful deliberation, rather than a single, one-off decision, and highlighting the gendered nature of the experience. To understand the diversity of pathways to voluntary childlessness, Settle and Brumley (2014) explored the reproductive decision-making process of childfree women with a diverse range of identity factors, including race, age, marital status, and occupations. They found that women of colour had differing pathways to remaining childfree than white women, with all women of colour in this study being single, citing the lack of a suitable partner in their decision not to parent, and experiencing more uncertainty throughout their decision-making process (Settle & Brumley, 2014). This suggests that the role of gender, social privilege, race, and other identity differences in the choice to remain childfree needs further exploration.

Moreover, this research has often grouped childless individuals together, failing to consider the diversity of experiences depending on whether childlessness was voluntary or involuntary, along with the multitude of factors that contribute to an individual's wellbeing over the course of their life. As previously discussed, most research has used the experiences of a homogenous group of women of childbearing age as a universal truth. As a result, we have a limited understanding of the diversity of voluntary childless women's views and experiences and how this plays out across the life course, into old age. As many of the presumed negative stereotypes and consequences of voluntary childlessness involve the wellbeing of women in old age, I suggest that this is an important population largely missing from the research. Within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, which has an ageing population, this research will become more important as more voluntarily childless women grow old (Allen & Wiles, 2013; Stahnke et al., 2020). Accordingly, more research is needed to provide nuance and diversity to the experiences of childless people into old age.

With the identified gaps in the current research in mind, I propose a focus on older women who have passed their 'childbearing' years. Taking a feminist poststructuralist approach, I will aim to include a diverse selection of women from different intersecting identity factors in Aotearoa New Zealand, including race, class, and sexuality, to gain an understanding of diverse experiences through the lens of reproductive justice. My motivation for exploring voluntary childlessness through this feminist lens is based on the deeply gendered nature of the issue. This is not to erase or minimise the involvement of men and partners in reproductive decisions, but instead to

acknowledge that women are most often the focus of pronatalist reproductive politics and to explore their gendered experience of occupying a voluntarily childless subject position in society.

I seek to understand the experiences of a population that has been largely overlooked in psychological research. This will be the first research in Aotearoa New Zealand to specifically inquire into the experiences of older, voluntarily childless women. With this research, I aim to explore older women's discursive identity work as they negotiate the stigma of their voluntarily childless identity, through the lens of feminist poststructuralism and reproductive justice.

1.5. Research Question

How do older, voluntarily childless women negotiate stigma and construct womanhood without motherhood in their talk?

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I explain the methodology used to answer my research question, including the theoretical framework and its applicability to my research, data collection and analysis methods, quality assurance, and, finally, ethical concerns. I begin by explicating my theoretical framework, which is comprised of feminist poststructuralist and reproductive justice theories.

2.2. Theoretical framework

I have combined feminist poststructuralist and reproductive justice theories to illuminate the complexity and diversity of older women's experiences of 'choosing' not to have children in Aotearoa New Zealand. Feminist poststructuralist theory allows for an exploration of the pronatalist discourses that stigmatise voluntarily childless people and, importantly, illuminates the power relations that oppress and govern women's reproductive choices. Through this lens, I am able to explore how older, childfree women negotiate the stigma of their voluntary childlessness (Gavey, 1989; Moore, 2014). However, while feminist poststructuralist theory concentrates on gender, it does not as clearly illuminate how other categories of difference interact with gender. I therefore turn to reproductive justice theory. This framework enables the exploration of gendered oppression alongside other identity factors as it draws on the theoretical notion of intersectionality (Parker et al., 2019). Reproductive justice is an excellent tool for examining the diversity of women's experiences within the socio-cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand, which demands consideration and protection of tangata whenua, or Māori experiences.

The addition of a reproductive justice framework's intersectional lens complements and adds nuance to my feminist poststructuralist inquiry by focusing specifically on the reproductive issues that impact women along multiple axes of difference (age, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.). This is important because, as discussed in the previous chapter, research on voluntary childlessness has focused predominantly on the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual, married women, often failing to mention or explore the impact of identity factors outside of gender, such as age, race, class, and sexuality. Instead, I focus on a group of women who have been excluded from the research due to their age (having passed their 'childbearing years').

As I shall show, combining reproductive justice theory with a poststructural framework allows for the exploration of how multiple, intersecting identity categories shape the construction of subjectivity (social identity) and sensitises the analysis to the operation of power as re/produced and re/enforced through socio-cultural discourses and practices related to femininity, sexuality, and reproduction (Chiweshe et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2019). Situating my feminist poststructuralist study within the broader framework of reproductive justice allows me to capture the complexity and nuance of the power relations shaping diverse older women's reproductive choices, including those at the intersection of ageism, pronatalism, racism, and colonialism. As Ross (2017) states, reproductive justice offers a way to apply intersectionality to reproductive politics.

2.2.1. Feminist poststructuralism

Feminist poststructuralism focuses on gendered power relations. Using a poststructural theory of language, discourse, and subjectivity, feminist poststructuralism offers a useful framework through which to explore gendered oppression (Davies & Gannon, 2005; Gavey, 1989). This theoretical lens allows researchers to interrogate knowledge about gender, the social identities (subjectivities) it allows, and what seems natural, obvious, and common sense (Gannon & Davies, 2012). Societal truths about gender are related to the historic moment in which they are constructed, illuminating the diversity of women's experiences. Therefore, intersectionality is critical for feminist poststructuralists to consider as they explore how different identity factors such as age, race, class, and sexuality can shape women's oppression in different ways (Weedon, 1996). Drawing on feminist poststructuralist inquiry, then, allows researchers to avoid universalising women's experience, instead exploring how identity factors constitute subjectivity (Parker et al., 2019). Hence, the nuanced identities of women can be explored and illuminated. In the following sections, I will discuss the key tenets of feminist poststructuralism, namely: language and discourse, power, subjectivity, and resistance.

2.2.1.1. Language and discourse

The role of language and discourse in exercising power relations and developing individual subjectivity is key to feminist poststructuralist inquiry. Language has traditionally been understood as a mirror of reality, describing the real world, but feminist poststructuralists argue that there is no inherent meaning in language or experience. Instead, language constructs reality. Individuals

use language to create meaning, making sense of themselves in relation to the world around them through talk (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1996). Thus, social realities are "actively spoken into existence" as people attach meaning to the world through language (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 14). Thus, language constructs one's social reality as it enables individuals to think and speak about their experiences, thereby giving them meaning and making sense of them (Weedon, 1996).

One aspect of discourse critical to feminist poststructuralist theory is the use of binary categories. Binaries are a key means of understanding, categorising, and placing people within a social hierarchy. These binaries constrain how people think about themselves in relation to the world, and the possibilities made available to them (Gannon & Davies, 2012). In the example of gender, a key consideration for feminist poststructuralism, the binary gender categories of woman and man are assigned to individuals based on biological sexual differences (Weedon, 1996). Consequently, the female 'sex' is conflated with the gender category 'woman', attaching social meanings based on collective 'truths' about gender, including the expected performance of normative femininity. Feminist poststructuralism aims to "disrupt the grip that binaries have on thought and on identity" (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 5).

Accordingly, feminist poststructuralists argue that the categories of woman and man have no inherent meaning. Instead, meaning is attached to these categories through discourse and comparison (Weedon, 1996). For example, women have historically been pathologised, as their differences from men are constructed as abnormal compared to the male 'norm'. Similarly, different ways of being a woman are compared against one another. Through the discourse of mandatory motherhood, bearing and raising children is seen as evidence of being a 'good' woman, complying with gender norms, held in direct contrast to women who do not want to bear and raise children, constructed as 'bad' by comparison. Hence, social meaning is attached through language in relation to the physical capacity of women to bear children (Weedon, 1996). Feminist poststructuralism illuminates how these discourses, and the political assumptions within them, affect and oppress women.

In poststructuralism, language is understood as a set of discourses: ways of understanding the world that people use to make meaning about their lives and the world around them (Gavey, 2011). A discourse is a system of making meaning through language and each one is situated within

the wider historical and socio-cultural context within which it occurs and so each represents a socio-culturally and historically specific way of understanding (Burr, 2015). For example, gender essentialist discourses in a socio-cultural context that subscribes to pronatalist ideology (such as Aotearoa New Zealand) posit that motherhood is a biological drive for all women, also called the maternal instinct. Feminist poststructuralism understands this discourse not as absolute truth, but as one way of making meaning about women as subjects. That is, according to feminist poststructuralism, there is no single truth that represents an objective reality, but many versions of reality.

Discourses also inform collective meanings, or 'knowledge', and limit the language available to us when thinking and speaking about an object (Burr, 2015). If womanhood is understood through the dominant discourse of gender essentialism, the idea of the maternal instinct becomes a collective 'truth'. Through this lens, motherhood becomes a normative expression of femininity, understood as essential for women to achieve in order to feel fulfilled. By contrast, non-mothers are understood as lacking or abnormal through the lens of gender essentialism.

However, it is important to note that feminist poststructuralism also views discourses as dynamic, changing over time and across social contexts. Moreover, multiple discourses exist alongside each other at any given time, offering different, often contradictory, ways of understanding the world (Davies & Gannon, 2005; Gannon & Davies, 2012; Gavey, 1989). For example, the dominant discourse of gender essentialism posits that women are a homogenous group with universal traits, whereas diversity discourse posits that each individual is different, with unique personalities and desires. Diversity discourse implies, then, that women, as individuals, are inherently different from each other, thereby contradicting gender essentialist discourse. As a result, while people are subject to and constrained by the discourses that are available to them, dominant discourses are always susceptible to change or displacement. As different discourses are drawn upon at a micro level, through thinking, speaking, or writing about experiences, people create new or different meanings. The individual is therefore able to modify or challenge discourses, creating alternative ways of understanding the world, and in so doing enact resistance and social change (Burr, 2015; Weedon, 1996). For example, using diversity discourse, individual women can resist the idea that all women have a maternal instinct and create new ways of

understanding womanhood. The use of discourse as a means of resistance is explained further below.

2.2.1.2. Power

According to feminist poststructuralist theory, power is exercised through discourse. Each discourse offers a different way of knowing and understanding, which constitute different 'knowledges'. However, not all discourses hold the same power (Burr, 2015; Weedon, 1996). Knowledge is inextricably linked with power, as the groups in power determine which discourses become known as the ultimate 'truth' (Burr, 2015; Gannon & Davies, 2012; Gavey, 1989). Knowledge, then, is a set of dominant discourses that benefit the groups in power while marginalising the 'other' (Gannon & Davies, 2012; Weedon, 1996). Dominant discourses form collective knowledge and what is understood as normal, natural, and common sense (Gavey, 2011). This, then, determines the norms against which individuals are expected to abide. For instance, according to gender essentialist discourse, becoming a mother is a natural stage of development that all women should aspire to and achieve (Shapiro, 2014). The innate desire to reproduce is referred to as the 'maternal instinct', suggesting it is an innate, fixed behaviour all women should possess naturally due to their biological sex. Accordingly, mothers are deemed normal, fully developed women, while non-mothers are pathologised.

It is in the assumed naturalness of the dominant discourse that power is exercised and maintained. Dominant discourses hold the status of being obvious, natural, and true and shape the norms against which people are governed and surveilled (Weedon, 1996). In this way, dominant discourses regulate how individuals can look, think, speak, and act, placing them within a social hierarchy (Burr, 2015; Gannon & Davies, 2012). People also govern themselves and others based on the dominant discourse, and established norms, of their particular socio-cultural and historical context. For example, in Western countries that subscribe to pronatalist ideology, parenthood is considered an essential, normal stage of development, especially for married, heterosexual couples. Despite the availability of alternative discourses, power is maintained by the dismissal and suppression of resistant discourses that challenge collective knowledge and the status quo. Accordingly, the dominant discourse of pronatalism retains its power, considered the ultimate 'truth'.

Feminist poststructuralists argue that patriarchal power relations are maintained by making unequal gendered arrangements seem natural and inevitable (Gavey, 2011). For example, within pronatalist discourse, heterosexual relationships, which maintain the nuclear family structure (wife, husband, and children), benefit those in power by maintaining the workforce in capitalist society (Burr, 2015). As alluded to above, traditional Western gender discourse maintains a binary understanding of gender, constructing women as inherently different from men by virtue of biological differences. For instance, discourses of love, marriage, and family present women as naturally more caring and empathic and so inherently suited to the nurturing roles of wife and mother, which are constructed as the only path to fulfilment. These discourses uphold the more powerful position of men in society in relation to women who are persuaded or compelled to provide free domestic labour (Burr, 2015; Gavey, 2011).

Furthermore, women who do not fill the prescribed roles of wife and mother threaten the existing power structure and are often subjected to coercion as a form of governance (Weedon, 1996). An example of this is “coercive pronatalism” (Heitlinger, 1991, p. 345) which, according to women’s identity factors and social position, may take the form of others pressuring particular women into having or not having children. For example, while white, heterosexual, middle-class women have struggled to gain the right to avoid unwanted motherhood through access to contraception and abortion, marginalised women have been denied motherhood through coercive birth control measures, including nonconsensual sterilisation (Gillespie, 2003).

Importantly, as intimated above, pronatalism, or other forms of oppression, are not experienced equally by all women. Rather, various identity categories shape gendered power relations. Gender intersects with other social categories, such as sexuality (heterosexual/lesbian or bisexual) or reproductive status (mother/non-mother). Each social category is assigned normal or abnormal status by the discourses through which they are understood (Davies & Gannon, 2005). For example, through the pronatalist discourse of family as the key to social order, adult development, and life satisfaction, white, middle-class, heterosexual, married mothers are given power through their normative status, perceived as ideal mothers. Conversely, women with devalued identity characteristics (e.g., non-married, lesbian, childfree, poor mothers, ‘young’ mothers, or ‘old’ mothers) are viewed as Other and open to stigma and marginalisation. Different identity factors shape women’s experiences of privilege and oppression. For example, while

women with higher incomes are expected and encouraged to reproduce, with nonreproduction requiring explanation, poorer women may be encouraged to have fewer children through family planning programmes (Shapiro, 2014). Feminist poststructuralism has not traditionally been attuned to these intersections of identity. This theoretical limitation will be discussed further in this chapter.

2.2.1.3. Subjectivity and subject positions

From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, in line with the view of reality as socially constructed discussed above, language structures individuals' understandings of themselves and is the foundation of subjectivity, or social identity. Subjectivity relates to a sense of self, that is how individuals think about and understand themselves in relation to the world, and is socially produced through discourse (Gannon & Davies, 2012; Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1996). Discourses construct different subject positions, or ways of being, for individuals to take up, including gendered subject positions prescribing how one is expected to look, behave, and find fulfilment (Weedon, 1996). According to feminist poststructuralism, there is no essential self for individuals to enact, so subjectivity is not constant or fixed throughout the life course. Instead, social identity is understood as contradictory, multiple, and constantly in process, being revisited throughout the life course as people use discourse to make sense of themselves in relation to the world (Weedon, 1996). Thus, feminist poststructuralism views the self as fragmented, inconsistent, and contradictory (Gavey, 1989). Every time an individual thinks and speaks, they use different discourses to reconsider and renegotiate their subjectivity.

Dominant discourses construct which subjectivities are taken for granted as 'natural' or 'normal', and thus socially acceptable and desirable, so that people actively take them up, while othered subject positions become unattractive as they lack power and leave the individual open to marginalisation (Davies & Gannon, 2005). There are a range of 'normal' subject positions offered within particular discourses (Weedon, 1996). Social identity is produced by an individual's active use of the discourses available to them, identifying with the subject positions within them or constructing new ways of being through talk (Burr, 2015; Weedon, 1996). Individuals are categorised by the subject positions they take up or construct, and the meanings attached to those subjectivities (Gannon & Davies, 2012). Moreover, subject positions vary regarding the

possibilities they allow for action (what is sayable and doable) and, hence, the power afforded to those who subscribe to them (Gavey, 1989).

For women, certain versions of femininity have more social and institutional power than others (Weedon, 1996). As indicated above, the primary roles offered to women in pronatalist and traditional gender discourses are wife and mother, as the nuclear family (husband, wife, and children) is constructed as the natural social arrangement and the way to achieve true fulfilment (Weedon, 1996). This leaves women who do not have children open to stigma. Accordingly, motherhood often becomes a more attractive subject position to take up than non-motherhood to gain social power.

2.2.4. Resistance

Feminist poststructuralism views the individual as agentic, able to choose between discourses and construct new possibilities (Davies & Gannon, 2005). While the discourses that are available at any given time and place limit the subject positions that speakers can take up, they are also able to choose between discourses, resist discourses, and create new meanings from the clash between multiple, contradictory discourses (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1996). It is in this space of contradiction that new discourses can emerge. By disrupting binaries and highlighting the norms and the way in which language and discourse construct them, feminist poststructuralism opens up possibilities for being and acting otherwise (Davies & Gannon, 2005; Gavey, 2011). For example, by making visible pronatalist discourse and its construction of motherhood as mandatory, feminist poststructuralism reduces its power, opening this up for question and allowing for new discourse and subject positions to emerge for women to take up.

Discourses therefore enable action and resistance to dominant norms and, in this way, individuals can construct their own meanings, realities, and subjectivities, positioning themselves within various discourses. This may include identifying and conforming with the dominant discourse, or resisting, rejecting, and challenging and, therefore, resisting power (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1996). It is important to note that this resistance may come at a social cost, and individuals may be limited in terms of where and how they may employ alternative or resistant discourses depending on their level of power and privilege.

2.2.2. Reproductive Justice theory

The reproductive justice framework is a feminist theory that is, like feminist poststructuralism, fundamentally about power (Morison, 2023). Reproductive justice not only acknowledges the right to have or not to have children, but also illuminates the complex ways intersecting identity factors and socio-cultural context impact the reproductive lives of women and other marginalised people (Ross & Solinger, 2017). The framework comes from Black feminist critiques of traditional mainstream (white) feminism's assumption that women are a single, homogenous group with identical concerns (Eaton & Stephens, 2020; Morison, 2021). Rather, reproductive justice theory challenges gender essentialism and the notion that there are universal women's issues (Morison, 2021; Ross, 2017). According to Ross (2017), reproductive justice theory captures the diversity of experiences that different women have as a result of reproductive privilege or oppression. Therefore, reproductive justice theory takes the feminist poststructuralist exploration of power further, recognising that not everyone is oppressed in the same way and that interconnected oppressions shape the reproductive choices available to different people (Eaton & Stephens, 2020; Morison, 2021; Ross & Solinger, 2017).

Importantly, the theory situates reproductive decisions within gendered power dynamics and the socio-cultural contexts in which they occur (Morison, 2021, 2023). That is, reproductive decisions do not occur within a vacuum, but are influenced by the dominant discourses and power structures of the particular society or group to which the person belongs. The concept of intersectionality is used to show how intersecting oppressions, such as gender, race, age, and sexual orientation, enable or restrict women's ability to make reproductive decisions (Crenshaw, 1989; Eaton & Stephens, 2020; Ross, 2017). This view allows a more nuanced exploration of gendered power relations which encompass multiple identity factors and oppressions. For example, coercive pronatalist discourse exercises power over women, alongside other dominant discourses, simultaneously encouraging socially privileged women to reproduce and discouraging women of colour, or women considered too young or too poor from reproducing, sometimes even through coercive means such as imposed long-acting contraceptives or sterilisation (Morison, 2021; Ross, 2017).

By dictating who should (and should not) have children, dominant discourses and taken-for-granted norms govern people's reproductive lives (Ross, 2017). Reproductive justice theory

therefore highlights the role of reproductive oppression as a form of social control, governing women's bodies and reproductive decisions (Morison, 2021; Parker et al., 2019; Ross, 2017). Foregrounding power and oppression, a reproductive justice perspective also necessitates an exploration of the role those in power play and their obligation to create a safe environment for all women to make the choices that suit them.

In attending to intersecting reproductive oppressions, reproductive justice theory also calls for centring marginalised women's voices (Ross, 2017). In centring marginalised voices, multiple oppressions can be explored, exposing social privilege that may otherwise go unseen (Luna & Luker, 2013). For example, in exploring voluntary childlessness through mainstream discourses of choice, researchers have largely failed to account for the various ways women's reproductive choices are restricted and regulated. If marginalised women are centred in the research, we can expose how one's level of social privilege impacts how they are oppressed. However, the reproductive justice framework also applies beyond marginalised populations, highlighting the complex nature of oppression to explore how women are oppressed in different ways.

In necessitating an intersectional view and the inclusion of marginalised populations, reproductive justice makes room for a more nuanced, complex, complete, and critical view of the reproductive issues affecting women, and the power relations and oppressions that underpin them (Morison, 2021). Taking a reproductive justice approach highlights diversity in a way that is uncommon within voluntary childlessness or childfree research; a subject that has often been steeped in choice rhetoric and framed socially privileged women's issues as universal, with a predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual voice implied as speaking for "all" women. The framework adds the nuance required to adequately explore the diversity of older, childfree women's experiences through a feminist poststructuralist lens. When used alongside a feminist poststructuralist lens, pronatalist and other oppressive discourses can be illuminated (Parker et al., 2019). Reproductive justice highlights these contradictory discourses and associated gendered power relations as they apply to reproduction, through the lens of intersectionality (Ross, 2017). Without an intersectional view of reproductive oppression, this nuance may be lost, as the focus is on the presumed universal woman's "right to choose" when or whether to have children. The reproductive justice framework allows me to take the reproductive politics that have shaped older

women's lives beyond choice rhetoric, situating their reproductive decisions within the socio-cultural context within which they occur.

2.3. Method

In this section, I outline my method for completing this research, including recruitment, participants, data collection, data analysis, quality assurance, and the appropriateness of this method for my research question and methodology.

2.3.1. Recruitment

To gain the depth of understanding and analysis required for qualitative analysis, I aimed to recruit ten to fifteen participants. Recruitment was done via online and offline avenues to reach a diverse range of potential participants. This included internet groups, social media, and online advertising, as well as posters displayed in community spaces such as libraries. Recruitment relied on self-identification regarding gender and having voluntarily opted out of parenthood, whether through explicit choice or in a less direct way. Women 'past childbearing age' who have not been mothers and identified themselves as voluntarily childless or childfree or in some other way were the focus of this research. Thus, those who were unable to have children or are involuntarily childless (e.g., due to deferring until they were unable to become pregnant, being estranged from their children, or having had children who are no longer living) were not eligible to take part. In terms of age, I initially sought to recruit women aged 60 years and older, but in the end opted to include some participants over the age of 50 to ensure a diverse range of women were included.

Previous research, as mentioned above, has primarily focused on white, heterosexual, married, middle-class women who are primarily encouraged to reproduce (Morison et al., 2016; Shapiro, 2014). To avoid contributing to the pronatalist assumption that only certain women are fit to reproduce, I aimed to include a diverse range of older, childfree women. All efforts were made to encourage diversity in participant selection by recruiting through multiple avenues to include queer women, Māori women, women of different relationship statuses, as well as women from other ethnic groups and different socioeconomic classes and backgrounds. Recruitment avenues included Māori and Pasifika groups where possible and used inclusive language (e.g., calling for wāhine who have chosen not to have children). I also made the decision to reveal my

identity as Pākehā-Māori, naming my iwi (tribe), and as bisexual to ensure people from diverse backgrounds understood where I was coming from in my approach.

2.3.2. Participants

My research included fifteen older women from a variety of different locations across Aotearoa New Zealand, including cities and small towns. Their characteristics are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1.

Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Sexuality	Relationship Status
Anne	69	Pākehā	Heterosexual	Partnered (married)
Beverly	70	Pākehā	Heterosexual	Partnered (de facto)
Christine	70	British	Heterosexual	Partnered (married)
Dawn	61	Pākehā	Heterosexual	Partnered (de facto)
Dette	66	Pākehā-British	Heterosexual	Partnered (married)
Donna	68	Pākehā	Lesbian	Partnered (married)
Harriet	61	Pākehā-Scottish	Heterosexual	Single
Heather	65	Pākehā	Heterosexual	Single
Jill	71	Pākehā	Heterosexual	Single
Jan	66	Pākehā	Heterosexual	Partnered (married)
Julie	50	Chinese	Heterosexual	Single
Laura	52	Pākehā-Māori	Bisexual	Partnered (de facto)
Linda	51	Chinese	Heterosexual	Single
Renee	63	British	Heterosexual	Partnered (de facto)
Toni	60	Arab American	Asexual/ aromantic	Single

Due to the gendered nature of voluntary childlessness, this study includes cisgender women who were biologically capable of getting pregnant and most likely to be affected by the motherhood mandate. Owing to this, and because there is a lack of research on this topic in Aotearoa New Zealand, I focus on these women's experiences while acknowledging that voluntary childlessness affects other individuals, who may or may not be presumed to be pregnancy capable. However, the need for further research including men and all genders to better understand the diversity of voluntarily childless experiences is considered (see Chapter Four).

All participants were between the ages of 50 and 71 years old, as I intended to illuminate the perspectives of childfree women in later life whose voices are largely missing from the

research. Of these women, 11 were European/Pākehā (one of whom advised she is of Pākehā-Māori descent but identifies as Pākehā), 2 Chinese, 1 Arab American, and one Pākehā-Māori. 6 of my participants were single/never married, while 9 were either in long term committed partnerships (de facto or legally married). Most of my participants were heterosexual (11); 1 was bisexual, 1 was lesbian, and 1 identified as asexual/aromantic (previously heterosexual). This larger number of White/Pākehā and heterosexual participants can be explained by the greater pronatalist pressure on these women as ideal mothers compared to low-income women or women of colour (Lynch et al., 2018; Morison et al., 2016; Shapiro, 2014). Based on my discussions, my participants came from varying socioeconomic backgrounds and statuses, however, all participants had obtained some form of higher education (e.g., a diploma, undergraduate, or postgraduate degree), reflecting the trend for voluntarily childless women to be more likely to be highly educated (Boddington & Didham, 2009).

2.3.3. Data Collection

Qualitative data was gathered through one-on-one interviews to explore stigma management and meaning making through talk. Interviews were conducted via video call or telephone, which was anticipated to suit a diverse range of individuals. Given the age of participants and the global pandemic creating the risk of potential COVID-19 risks and restrictions, this offered a safer, but now-familiar, means through which to communicate, allowing for as close to the face-to-face experience as possible (Lupton, 2020). Video calls and telephone interviews also offered ease and flexibility of scheduling, while allowing the participant to choose their own private space in which to talk (Hanna & Mwale, 2017). Additionally, video and telephone interviews were not geographically restricted, offering a broader sample of participants throughout Aotearoa New Zealand (Hanna & Mwale, 2017). Participants came from various cities and towns, from Oamaru to central Auckland.

Advertisement for the study invited participants to express their interest by phone or email, as was most comfortable for them, to avoid excluding people who did not know how to use email. Participants were then scheduled for an introductory phone call to learn more about them, discuss the study, and answer any questions. They were advised that this was simply an introduction, with no obligation to participate in the study. At the end of the call, their interest in participating in the study was gauged, and, if they confirmed their interest, informed consent was gained (see

Appendix A and B). Participants chose either a telephone or video interview based on the platform that made them most comfortable.

The participants were interviewed using a semi-structured, participant-led interview approach, as I aimed to gain insight into how these women use discourse to make sense of the motherhood mandate, negotiate stigma, and construct their womanhood without motherhood. I asked open-ended questions surrounding their experience of 'voluntary childlessness' throughout their lives. Interviews were recorded using a recording device for telephone calls or pressing record on the video call, with participants advised of the recording and audio storage process, and informed consent gained prior (as per Appendix A and B). A koha (gift) was provided after the interview to thank participants for their time in the form of an online voucher to the value of $30.

2.3.4. Data Analysis

Critical Discursive Psychology offers a method of discourse analysis appropriate for my methodological framework in that it offers a means of analysis focused on power, context, intersectionality, and social justice (Morison, 2023). Critical Discursive Psychology offers a means through which to explore power as constructive in creating the gendered norms that govern and place the individual within a social hierarchy (Locke & Budds, 2020). This allows for an exploration of the motherhood mandate through the lens of power and governance over women's reproductive decisions.

Based on the approach detailed by Locke and Budds (2020), my research topic was grounded in a critical discursive psychology framework by ensuring an open research question that focused on participants use of language as social action in taking up or resisting different subjectivities offered by discourse (Locke & Budds, 2020). Therefore, it is a fitting methodology through which to explore the identity work required to negotiate the stigma attached to older, voluntarily childless women's identities, and how they position themselves in the discourse. Additionally, interviews were semi-structured to allow participants and researcher to co-produce knowledge through conversation (Locke & Budds, 2020). After collecting the data, I transcribed my interviews with participants verbatim, using minimal transcription notations other than noting pauses, and significant features such as laughter or raised volume, as suggested by Locke and Budds (2020). Analysis focused on the full interview to examine how participants construct their

identities through discourse, without significant intervention from myself as the researcher (see Appendix C for the interview guide, which was used only to guide conversation when needed).

According to the method outlined by Locke and Budds (2020), the first stage of analysing data is familiarisation and coding. To familiarise myself with the data, I read each interview multiple times and noticed different phrases or ways of talking about the topic of voluntary childlessness. This led me to initial themes, which I coded using *Taguette* (an open-source qualitative coding software system). My next step within this first stage of analysis was to note any subject positions or identities within this talk, for example, mother or childfree woman.

Once initial themes and subject positions have been identified, Locke and Budds (2020) suggest examining the discursive constructions within participants' talk. A second analysis of my initial themes allowed me to group themes together according to their discursive constructions of the subject positions within their talk. For example, I found that within multiple of my initial themes, there was a pattern of minimising choice and stigma, constructing participants' childfree identities as "no big deal" (see Chapter Three). This secondary analysis allowed me to combine my initial themes into 6 overarching ways of talking about voluntary childlessness.

The third stage of conducting a critical discursive psychology analysis involved identifying the interpretative repertoires (Locke & Budds, 2020). Interpretative repertoires are familiar and recognisable ways of talking about and framing subjects, drawing on common cultural understandings, tropes, and themes (Locke & Budds, 2020; Wetherell, 1998). For example, the interpretive repertoire of diversity posits that everyone is different, possessing unique personality traits. Along with identifying each interpretative repertoire, I considered what discursive purpose they served, that is, what the participant achieves in using that interpretative repertoire. For example, in using the interpretative repertoire of diversity, participants were often able to challenge the dominant discourse of gender essentialism that considers all women as a homogenous group with the same biological traits, such as a maternal instinct. This brought me to 4 main discursive constructions resourced by 12 common interpretive repertoires (see table 2, p. 46), and the discursive purposes they achieve, which are explored in Chapter Three. In this way, I was also able to examine how my participants constructed themselves and positioned themselves within discourses. For example, as explained further in Chapter Three, by using a "disavowal of choice"

interpretative repertoire (Morison et al., 2016, p. 184), my participants constructed their non-motherhood as natural and normal.

The final stage of my analysis involved interpreting what my analysis of the data as a whole means in practice. This involved a consideration of what the discursive strategies participants used, and the discursive purposes they achieved, mean in relation to my research question (Locke & Budds, 2020). Namely, how my participants negotiate the gendered stigma of voluntary childlessness through their talk. As one example, constructing non-motherhood as natural achieves the discursive purpose of minimising stigma and shifting accountability from themselves. Accountability and power are key considerations for a critical discursive psychology analysis (Locke & Budds, 2020). Therefore, I considered how my participants managed accountability and negotiated a more positive subject position in the face of stigma toward their childfree identities. This allowed me to consider how they were repurposing dominant discourses or using alternative discourses to resist power and construct a more powerful, positive identity through their talk.

2.3.5. Quality Assurance

To ensure this research is of high quality, the following evaluation criteria were applied. Firstly, I ensured the quality of interview data by confirming that both the participants and I had good quality internet or phone connection. This involved connecting to the internet via an ethernet cable or remaining in a single location with an excellent phone connection while asking participants to do the same. I also used high-quality software, utilising *Skype* and *TalkHelper* for audio interviews and *Zoom* for video interviews. This also relates to the trustworthiness of the data.

In addition, trustworthiness of qualitative research is determined by rigour, or the thoroughness of the research process, and its relevance (Finlay, 2006). To provide the reader with a means of evaluating the rigour of this research, I have provided a clear outline of the epistemology and theoretical framework, explicitly stated the research question, and detailed the processes of recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation. I have also demonstrated the relevance of this study by explaining the knowledge gap this research aims to fill, alongside the appropriateness of feminist poststructuralism, reproductive justice, and critical discursive psychology for examining and analysing this topic.

Another important aspect of quality assurance is reflexivity. According to Clarke and Braun (2019), it is important for feminist researchers to include autobiographical material that reveals relevant information about their identity, views, biases, and social agenda, as well as illuminating their findings. In addition, it is important to acknowledge and explicitly state my own social location and privilege as researcher both in terms of the negotiation of power and co-construction of meaning throughout the research process (Baillie, 2015; Kitzinger, 2004). As a voluntarily childless woman, I share a marginalised identity with my participants, which allowed me to establish rapport with the participants. Our shared identity to some extent positioned me as an "insider", allowing me to use my personal experience of being childfree to inform my research question and methodology, connect with my participants as a member of their group, and interpret the interview data (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013).

However, as outlined by Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2013), other aspects of my identity made me an outsider at other times, for example, being younger than participants and of 'childbearing age' marks a difference. In terms of power dynamics within the interview process, my younger age may have given my participants more power to tell me their experiences and opinions, as an older childfree woman that has much more experience of child-freedom over the life course than myself. Contrastingly, their experiences are different due to their generation having different dominant discourses and pronatalism coming to bear on them differently after exiting their childbearing years, as previously discussed.

In addition to being reflexive about my own identity and how it played a role in my research, I continually reflected on my preconceptions and assumptions and my agenda to challenge the motherhood mandate and gender essentialism. This enabled me to express my thoughts and opinions while acknowledging the role these play in shaping my research. I kept a journal and engaged in regular supervision to ensure self-reflection throughout the entire research process. Finally, to further facilitate transparency and allow for the quality of my research to be evaluated, I show how my interpretation is grounded in data by providing quoted examples drawn directly from interview transcripts throughout my analysis.

2.4. Ethical Concerns

In this section, I explain the ethical concerns considered for my research, including informed consent, confidentiality, beneficence, data usage, and cultural considerations and Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi).

2.4.1. Informed Consent

Written consent was obtained from all participants by signing an information leaflet explaining the research process and research aims in detail (see Appendix A). Participants were informed that they could opt out of the research at any stage in the process, and their decision to agree to the research project remained autonomous. Participants were allowed to make their own decision once they had all the relevant information.

2.4.2. Confidentiality

Participants were informed that their personal information will not be accessible to anyone other than me. As the interviews were conducted via the internet or telephone, care was taken to discuss the additional risks this poses, including the need to ensure a private space in which they will not be overheard. The risk of third-party data breaches in using software was also discussed to ensure the participant was aware of any potential risks. As soon as the interviews were transcribed, the interview recordings were deleted. To protect confidentiality, I applied pseudonyms to all interview transcripts, with participants' real names and corresponding pseudonyms kept in a password protected document accessible only by me.

2.4.3. Beneficence

I took care to ensure that any benefit to my participants—as well as voluntarily childless women more broadly, the field of psychology, and the people of Aotearoa New Zealand—outweighed any potential harms. This was achieved by ensuring research was participant-led and conversation-based and that participants had the opportunity to ask questions at any stage of the research process. I aimed to avoid validating pronatalist norms and stigma, giving the participants power to construct their narratives, and feedback or discussion was welcomed at any time. Upon concluding the interview, I checked with participants how they were feeling and was willing to offer a referral for psychological assistance if they felt any negative emotions. All participants

reported that they had enjoyed the conversation and felt positive after discussing their experiences with me.

2.4.4. Data usage

The data collected was used only for the described research project. The data was stored securely, under the agreed pseudonym. Any personal information attaching them to their pseudonym was stored in a password protected document accessible only by me. Any information that might identify them was also removed from the interview transcription, such as relatives' names. Interview data will not be used for any purpose not disclosed to the participant.

2.4.5. Cultural considerations and Te Tiriti o Waitangi

I aimed to include a diverse range of women with different intersections of identity. My research is informed by a wider social justice perspective that seeks to promote reproductive justice, including the freedom to have children or not, free from social pressure or stigma (Morison, 2021). The findings may therefore be beneficial to women, broadly speaking. Importantly, the consideration and inclusion of Māori participants and other ethnicities was prioritised to ensure the research is not ethnocentric (like past research) and includes a diverse range of experiences, in line with the call for decolonisation of knowledge.

This research project is not Kaupapa Māori (by and for Māori), but all research conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand is of relevance to tangata whenua (Māori people). To ensure the research upholds Te Tiriti o Waitangi, I took care to ensure that my interview, data collection, and interpretation processes are culturally congruent and safe, following Te ara tika ethics guidelines and liaising with Māori cultural advisors before commencing the research process. I consulted with a leading advisor from my iwi (tribe), Ngāti Rangi ki Ngāwhā, who is involved with Te Tiriti o Waitangi matters to determine any cultural issues for Māori participants; none were found. However, it is noted that only one Pakeha-Māori person came forward to participate in this research through advertisements on an iwi (tribe) Facebook page.

2.5. Conclusion

I have outlined the theoretical framework and research methods employed to answer my research question, along with exploring the ethical concerns considered. The potential benefits to participants, the field of feminist psychology, and New Zealand society were deemed greater than

the potential for harm, and this study was confirmed as posing little to no risk by the Massey University Ethics Committee. In the following chapter, I will outline my analysis and discuss my interpretation of the interview data gathered from my participants.

CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Introduction and overview of findings

In this chapter, I will share the findings of my data analysis and discuss my interpretation of those findings, based on the methodology outlined in Chapter Two. First, I will begin with an overview of my research findings before exploring in more depth the discursive strategies used by my participants, the discursive purposes achieved by those strategies, and the interpretive repertoires and discourses participants drew on to negotiate stigma and construct a positive childfree identity.

The discursive strategies identified below share an overarching discursive purpose; that is, they allow participants to construct positive childfree identities and resist the motherhood mandate without directly challenging the validity of motherhood. This purpose was achieved in various ways. The following analysis groups together common discursive strategies used by my participants according to their specific discursive function (i.e., what they achieve discursively), including how this accounts for stigma negotiation, as summarised in Table 2.

The first two discursive strategies, as I will show in Part One of the analysis, offer a subtle, non-confrontational approach to rejecting dominant constructions of deficit while allowing the subject positions of mother and non-mother to co-exist. This differs from other research on voluntary childlessness, where participants have constructed one subject position as superior to the other. For example, people have been shown to ‘condemn the condemners’ and reverse negative attributes, such as selfishness, onto parents (Park, 2002, p. 34). Then, the latter two discursive strategies are more overtly critical of traditional dominant discourses that construct motherhood as essential for all women, as I demonstrate in Part Two of the analysis. However, the overall sentiment among participants was that motherhood is just something that is not for them, rather than inherently problematic. These strategies rely on contemporary discourses of progress, freedom, and family planning to resist the subject positions offered by traditional discourses, as I will explain below.

Table 2.
Overview of findings

Discursive Purpose	Discursive Construction	Discursive Strategies	Discourses and Interpretative Repertoires (IR)
Non-confrontational resistance	Child-freedom as an equally valid alternative to motherhood	▪ 'We're all different' ▪ Different life paths ▪ Non-maternal instinct	▪ Diversity IR ▪ Essentialist discourse ▪ Naturalising IR
	It's no big deal: Minimising and normalising being childfree	▪ It just happened ▪ I don't really talk about it ▪ It doesn't define me	▪ Diversity IR ▪ Disavowal of choice IR ▪ Minimising stigma IR ▪ Naturalising IR ▪ Essentialist discourse
Critical resistance	Regret-free: Resisting a deficit identity	▪ I haven't missed out ▪ Non-traditional ageing ▪ It's just given me freedom	▪ Independence IR ▪ Personal responsibility discourse ▪ Freedom IR ▪ Fulfilment/personal growth IR ▪ Femininity discourse
	"Motherhood is optional, obviously": Resisting the motherhood mandate through liberatory discourses	▪ Rejecting traditional gender roles ▪ It's a choice, not a determinant ▪ Pros and cons	▪ Progress IR ▪ Women's liberation discourse ▪ Diversity IR ▪ Freedom/independence IRs ▪ Family planning discourse

3.2. PART ONE: NON-CONFRONTATIONAL RESISTANCE

In Part One of my analysis, I discuss the discursive strategies my participants used as a means of non-confrontational resistance to the motherhood mandate. Namely, strategies which served the discursive purpose of (1) constructing child-freedom as an equally valid alternative to motherhood and (2) minimising and normalising being childfree. These strategies, and what they achieve discursively, are explored further below.

3.2.1. Discursive strategy 1. Child-freedom as an equally valid alternative to motherhood

These discursive strategies emphasise and celebrate differences between women, resisting the construction of women as a homogenous group, though not always the essentialist discourse underlying this construction. A central interpretative repertoire in this talk is that of diversity, as

shown in Table 3. The diversity repertoire was used to challenge the homogenisation of women, either on (1) biological grounds—as shown in the first two discursive resources, (i) we're all different, and (ii) different life paths—or (2) reappropriating dominant discourses—as shown in the final discursive strategy, (iii) non-maternal instinct.

Table 3.
Overview of findings (part one, discursive strategy 1).

Interpretive Repertoires/Discourses	Discursive Strategies
▪ Diversity IR	i. *'We're all different'*
▪ Naturalising IR	ii. *Different life paths*
▪ Essentialist discourse	iii. *Non-maternal instinct*

3.2.1.1. "We're all different" - resisting homogenisation by emphasising diversity

Drawing on an interpretative repertoire of diversity, my participants rejected gender essentialist discourse and its construction of women as natural nurturers who are biologically driven to have children. According to Fikslin (2021), this includes the assumption that every woman possesses innate maternal qualities and a 'natural' inclination to become a mother. Conversely, my participants commonly constructed women as a diverse range of individuals with different personalities, thoughts, desires, and needs. Thus, they explicitly challenged the notion that "every woman" shares the desire or necessity to have children.

For example, Julie (50, Chinese) stated: "I don't think that's like every woman... some will think differently... some just don't want to take the responsibility, to enjoy the freedoms... I don't think all women will want to be a mother." Similarly, when asked her thoughts about the idea that all women naturally want children, Toni (60, Arab American) laughed and said, "That's about as likely to be true as the idea that all children love chocolate. It's simply not true. Yeah, you can't make blanket statements like that." Like Julie and Toni, my participants frequently rejected generalisations ("every woman/all women", "blanket statements") that are supported by essentialist discourse, instead emphasising diversity. Through this discursive strategy, they commonly rejected the gender essentialist construction of women as governed by an innate drive to have children, and instead depicted women as diverse individuals. The following example illustrates this discursive strategy of emphasising diversity.

> **Extract 1, Harriet** (61, Scottish): For some things, there's no one answer and that's part of what makes life interesting, too. The fact that not everybody has kids, or whatever, and that's fine. That's part of the rich tapestry of life and it takes all sorts doesn't it... Yeah, I like the fact that people are different, and they've got different circumstances. And, yes, childbearing is a large factor for many women, but it's not the be-all and end-all for women.

In this extract, Harriet employs the interpretative repertoire of diversity, using a tapestry metaphor to emphasise the diversity between people. Accordingly, the difference between women is construed positively as making life "interesting" and "rich". In this way, she constructs a positive view of childfree women's deviation from the norm. This positive portrayal enables her to reject the deficit subject position of sad, lonely childless woman and take up a new subject position as a unique individual. As part of this, the idea that "people are different" is constructed as part of the normal human condition ("part of … life"), challenging the dominant construction of motherhood as crucially significant for all women's identities ("not the be-all and end-all for women").

Using the interpretative repertoire of diversity, Harriet's talk constructs women as unique individuals with varied personalities, which could tacitly be read as associated with the motivation for having children or not. This depiction implicitly counters the essentialist view of motherhood as a biologically motivated inevitability. While essentialist discourse renders childfree women's difference from the norm deviance and abnormality (Gillespie, 2000; Lynch et al., 2018), the interpretative repertoire of diversity allows for it to be depicted as acceptable ("that's fine"). Moreover, this strategy allows Harriet to reject the construction of motherhood as essential to all women's happiness, modifying the position to "many women".

By stating that there is no "one answer", Harriet introduces a relativist stance that contradicts the supposed 'truth' posited by essentialism that all women naturally want and should have children. Instead, she suggests that people, implicitly women, are free to pursue their own unique desires. This discursive strategy constructs fulfilment as different for everyone, and downplays gender, referring to "people" rather than "women". By minimising the emphasis on gender, she can avoid any moral judgement of non-motherhood, constructing any means of achieving fulfilment as "fine", whether through parenthood or other pursuits ("or whatever").

Through this discursive strategy of emphasising and celebrating diversity, she gently rejects the motherhood mandate by constructing motherhood and non-motherhood as two equally valid options for women to pursue, depending on their personalities.

3.2.1.2. "Different life paths"

In a similar vein, my participants often rejected the construction of motherhood as a biological imperative by suggesting that women can take different "paths" to fulfilment. Again, drawing on an interpretative repertoire of diversity, my participants resisted gender essentialist and pronatalist discourses which construct motherhood as essential for women to achieve fulfilment. As previously discussed, pronatalism often assumes that childfree people, especially women, will be sad, lonely, and unfulfilled in older age (Moore, 2014; O'Driscoll & Mercer, 2018; Shapiro, 2014; Shaw, 2012). This rhetorical strategy again allows gentle resistance to pronatalism, without directly challenging the dominant essentialist discourse of gender.

Like the previous discursive strategy, participants also drew on an essentialist discourse to suggest that different people have different innate (or essential) personalities. This reappropriation of a dominant essentialist discourse allows a subtle approach to *gender* essentialism, celebrating diversity while downplaying the role of gender in shaping one's essential personality. Unlike other research on voluntary childlessness where participants are found as reverse negative attributions such as selfishness onto parents (Morison et al., 2016; Park, 2002; Shapiro, 2014; Terry & Braun, 2012), my participants constructed parenthood and non-parenthood as equally valid options. This is illustrated in the following extracts where participants draw on the metaphor of "different life paths".

> **Extract 2, Linda** (51, Chinese): Different people have different life paths. Some people have kids and then go one way and then for some others who don't have kids, they go another way, it's still a life path. People that I know who don't have kids either, they still have families, they still hang out with friends like me. They still enjoy their lives.

> **Extract 3, Jan** (66, Pākehā): I don't regret not having them [children], and if I'd had them, I would have had a different experience of life and that would have been fine, too … you can take two different paths, but you somehow end up back in the same place anyway. I'm 66 now, and I feel like well, I could have gone that way and ended up here, or could have

gone that way and ended up here, but we're both still here. And we've just had a different path.

In these extracts, Linda and Jan use an interpretative repertoire of diversity to construct multiple potential "paths" to life satisfaction. Both women convey the notion that whichever "path" one takes, she can achieve happiness and fulfilment ("you somehow end up in the same place anyway" and "they still enjoy their lives"). In extract 3, Jan takes this idea further by suggesting that she could have had children "and that would have been fine, too", claiming that she would be happy either way. This discursive strategy allows participants to resist the pronatalist assumption that all women need children to be fulfilled, instead framing fulfilment as something that can be achieved in many different ways. This discursive strategy performs identity work: participants can reject the deficit identity offered by pronatalist discourse and construct a positive subjectivity, as an agentic, fulfilled childfree woman equivalent to motherhood. Ultimately, this discursive strategy enables participants to resist any stigma associated with voluntary childlessness in older age, without directly challenging the validity of motherhood as an option.

3.2.1.3. "Non-maternal instinct": naturalising being childfree

Many participants used the dominant discourse of essentialism in resistant talk. In line with other research, rather than creating an opposing discourse, they repurposed the dominant discourse to their own ends (Foucault, 1990, as cited in Baaz & Lilja, 2022). This is evident in a discursive strategy in which participants position themselves as "naturally childfree", a strategy also identified in other research involving childfree women of diverse sexualities (Hayfield et al., 2019) and childfree adults more broadly (Morison et al., 2016). With this discursive strategy, my participants did resist gender essentialist discourse to some extent. However, rather than directly challenging the dominant discourse, they used the discourse to position some women as naturally non-maternal, claiming that they "didn't have that urge to have children" (Jill 71, Pākehā). Such claims do not dispute the prevalent notion of a maternal instinct, but question its universality. For example, Anne (69, Pākehā) stated that "not everybody's maternal. Not everybody wants children and I happen to be one of those." By repurposing the discourse of essentialism, these women construct their voluntarily childlessness as a result of naturally possessing no urge to have children. This rejects the pronatalist assumption that all women have the drive to reproduce while leaving the underlying dominant maternal instinct narrative unchallenged.

In terms of identity work, self-positioning as naturally childfree serves to shift the responsibility for being voluntarily childless away from themselves. Childfree women cannot be held responsible for deviating from the norm, as their reproductive status is constructed as simply the result of their innate personality or inherent make-up; it's just the way they are (Morison et al., 2016). For example:

> **Extract 4, Beverly** (70, Pākehā): … as much as I couldn't quite understand how women wanted to have children, they couldn't understand how I could not want to [...] But when I came to that realisation [of not wanting children], I think one of the thoughts that I had was, it's not something I can do. Even though, if someone said, well, why not? I couldn't have expressed that. So it was, perhaps we could call it a non-maternal instinct.

Here, Beverly draws on essentialist discourse to construct her childfree status as innate and beyond her conscious control. With this discursive strategy, she implies that her voluntary childlessness is not something she can be held accountable for. This notion is reinforced by describing the lack of desire to bear children as a "realisation" rather than a conscious decision to deviate from the norm. Likewise, the reference to a "non-maternal instinct" renders her lack of desire as natural and biological. In mirroring the essentialist language of the 'maternal instinct', she uses dominant essentialist discourse to reaffirm the idea that everyone has innate traits while resisting the idea that all women are maternal. This is evident in the claim "as much as I couldn't quite understand … they couldn't understand" As such, she describes the urge to have children as incomprehensible and impossible for her. Once again, the implication is that all women are different and she happens to be a "non-maternal" woman and cannot be held responsible, or sanctioned for what is beyond her control.

Such talk enables participants to occupy the subject position of childfree woman without blame, while also refraining from challenging the validity of motherhood for those women who "wanted to have children". In the context of an individualist society, the implication is that each individual is unique and free to be their true self. Thus, the subject positions of mother and non-mother are allowed to co-exist peacefully. Naturalising strategies, such as self-positioning as naturally childfree, "represent aspects of human life as outside choice and control and thus minimise personal responsibility and deflect blame or condemnation for deviating from the

prescribed norm" (Morison et al., 2016, p. 192). However, the limitation of this discursive strategy lies in its reliance on essentialist discourse, which constructs oneself as innately different, and could leave one open to stigma or pity—similar to involuntarily childless/infertile women—due to still being perceived as outside the gender norm, albeit not deliberately.

3.2.2. Discursive strategy 2. It's no big deal: Minimising and normalising being childfree

These discursive strategies work to minimise potential stigma and normalise being voluntarily childless as "no big deal". As part of this, participants downplayed the role of choice in their childfree status and constructed their non-motherhood as a small part of their identities and not conducive to their happiness and well-being, echoing other research findings (Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2018; O'Driscoll & Mercer, 2018; Stahnke et al., 2020). Supporting this talk is an interpretative repertoire of diversity, seen in the allusion to women having different wants, needs, and personalities, with motherhood not necessarily (the most) important and/or reproductive status only one facet of a woman's identity. This talk comprises three common discursive strategies: (i) it just happened, (ii) I don't really talk about it, and (iii) it doesn't define me, which I will explore below.

Table 4.
Overview of findings (part one, discursive strategy 2).

Interpretive Repertoires/Discourses	Discursive Strategies
▪ **Diversity IR**	
▪ **Disavowal of choice IR**	*i. It just happened*
▪ **Minimising stigma IR**	*ii. I don't really talk about it*
▪ **Naturalising IR**	*iii. It doesn't define me*
▪ **Essentialist discourse**	

3.2.2.1. It just happened: child-freedom as a non-choice

My participants often disavowed the role of conscious choice in relation to being voluntarily childless, constructing their reproductive status as something that "just happened". As part of this, motherhood was framed as either never occurring to them or not ranking high on their priority list. For instance, Laura (52, Pākehā-Māori) stated, "I grew up not really thinking about it at all actually... It was just never, ever, ever a thought for me." Similarly, Dette (66, Pākehā) said, "I didn't actually think a great deal about it. I didn't gnash my teeth or anything like that. I just thought that's what it is, and I continued leading my life". As these quotes show, participants

constructed their voluntary childlessness as something that was not even consciously thought about and so not deliberately chosen.

Similarly, several participants described being voluntarily childfree as the result of a natural evolution over time, rather than a single, one-off decision—a pattern observed in other research conducted across the world (Hayfield et al., 2019; Shapiro, 2014). For example, Dette (66, Pākehā) explained "I think it was something that happened. I was just too busy living life." Likewise, Harriet (61, Scottish) commented "Well, I don't think it was really a decision, it just sort of happened." This strategy is exemplified in the following quotes.

> **Extract 5, Julie** (50, Chinese): I guess I'm not in any relationship. Plus, it's not in my plans or anything to be a mother. I heard some friends say, "Oh, I really want to be a mum because I enjoy being with babies" and stuff like that. I don't really have that plan or thought, so I don't know. Maybe it's just a personality... I'm not like forcing or not happy or whatever... It wasn't like must have children or must not have children... if I really wanted to have children, then I will go into that path of looking for a partner and have a family and have kids... But for myself, it just naturally happened and I just accept it. I guess that's my conclusion on why I don't have children.

> **Extract 6, Donna** (68, Pākehā): I thought maybe one day I'll just wake up and suddenly, like a butterfly out of a chrysalis, I will just suddenly become that person and understand everything. And it never happened. Right? No, I just continued growing. As you would. So, it was funny because I never ever thought that I'd be a parent. I never thought that I'd be a wife. I never thought I would partner for life or anything at all like that. I don't really know why. I think I wanted to have adventures.

In the extracts above, being childfree is not associated with a clear decision not to have children. In extract 5, Julie constructs being voluntarily childless as the result of ambivalence ("It wasn't like I must have children or must not have children") and suggests that motherhood was not a priority for her by saying that if she "really wanted to have children", she would have prioritised finding a partner. Instead, she describes being voluntarily childless as having "just naturally happened" in her life. Likewise, in extract 6, Donna constructs her non-motherhood as something that just happened, or who she became over time. Musing on the reasons for not having

children, rather than a conscious decision she made, her statement “I don’t really know why” implies that there is not any specific, chosen reason she did not have children. She speculates that her voluntary childlessness is the result of wanting to have adventures or pursue other priorities than mothering.

This construction of a natural progression in these quotes is supported by a naturalising interpretative repertoire where, as discussed earlier, participants appropriate essentialist discourse in a way that minimises personal responsibility and deflects any potential criticism for their deviation from the norm (Morison et al., 2016). This is evident in extract 5, where Julie implies that she did not “naturally” have a strong enough desire to pursue having children. Similarly, in extract 6, Donna describes assuming that “one day” she would “suddenly” feel the desire to have children. However, she suggests that moment “never happened” for her. This discursive strategy can be read as working to shift the blame for her childfree status. The stigma attached to childfree identities often lies in their choice to go against gendered norms (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Hintz & Brown, 2019; Shapiro, 2014). Constructing one’s reproductive status not as a conscious act of rebellion from the motherhood norm but as something that evolved over time therefore resists the stigma associated with the assumed voluntary nature of remaining childfree. Accordingly, this discursive strategy allows them to construct a blameless childfree identity, as something that happened to them rather than an outright decision to deviate from the norm (Morison et al., 2016).

3.2.2.2. I don’t really talk about it: child-freedom as a non-issue

Constructing being childfree as “no big deal” also involved framing it as a non-issue, that is as a relatively insignificant aspect of their lives that causes minimal trouble for them. In this vein, my participants described being voluntarily childless as something that is rarely talked about and just an accepted fact. Most participants expressed that they had not felt any stigma for not having children. Although a couple of my participants mentioned encountering questions from others, the overall sentiment was resoundingly that any questions are manageable and have no impact on them. Research has identified this as a common way of responding to stigma in which people minimise their difference from the norm and normalise being childfree (Morison et al., 2016; Park, 2002). My participants echoed this sentiment in their talk, constructing child-freedom as a non-issue that is avoided or easily managed with a quick comment or explanation, thus minimising stigma. Toni (60, Arab American) said “it's the kind of thing that often comes up, like

when you start a new job or something like that and people are like ‘oh, do you have any kids?’ And I say no. And that's pretty much the end of it.” Similarly, Linda (51, Chinese) said, “I don't normally talk about it because … they all know I don't have kids. And if they don't know, I just tell them.” In these examples, it is implied that they can “just tell” someone that they do not have kids without issue or being questioned.

The following quote further demonstrates the construction of their childfree identity as a relatively unquestioned aspect of their lives.

> **Extract 7, Dawn** (61, Pākehā) People don't ask me. People just know me for who I am. And, as I say, if somebody asked me, I don't think anyone's asked me in years, “Why did you not have children?” And if they did, I'd say something silly like—well, you know, I don't think it's really their business—but I'd say oh “Well, I had dogs instead” or something, or “I just never wanted to” or “Never got around to it” or whatever. But most people don't ask.

In this extract, Dawn constructs her voluntary childlessness as not a big deal in her interactions and relationships with others, unlike other research with younger women who describe unwanted questions about their reproductive choices as invasive (Addie & Brownlow, 2014; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017). Though she does highlight being asked about it as rude or invasive (“none of their business”), she generally constructs questioning as easily managed and, therefore, a non-issue. She suggests that any potential questioning about children could be easily resolved by providing a “silly” and brief explanation that is quickly accepted by others, reinforcing the idea that being childfree is not of great importance. This notion is further reinforced by the assertion that “most people don’t ask”. Constructing the childfree woman as having made a choice that is readily accepted by others may also resist being positioned as a pitiful childless old woman.

Dawn also remarks that no one has asked her whether she has children “in years” which may be related to being beyond her ‘childbearing’ years. The motherhood mandate tends to impose pressure on women deemed fit to reproduce, specifically those who belong to privileged groups in the ‘ideal’ childbearing age group (Macleod et al., 2019). Some forms of stigma, such as disbelief and disregard identified by Gillespie (2000), may also be more applicable to women in their childbearing years who are assumed to be “future mothers” and expected to change their minds (p.

228). My participants frequently stated that people no longer ask them or already know, potentially contributing to their perception of a lack of stigma about their childfree identities. Hence, being past childbearing age may contribute to their construction of questioning as uncommon and unimportant. Additionally, as women mature, they may become more confident and assured of themselves, as expressed by Laura (52, Pākehā/Māori) who said “It's been different over the years, and I guess that's just as I've grown and matured myself. It's so lovely to be in my 50s and not give a fuck.” Here, she suggests that her response to stigma has changed as she has grown older and become less concerned about others’ expectations and perceptions of her. This discursive strategy works to construct a positive identity as a self-assured, independent woman who lives life by her own rules.

3.2.2.3. It doesn't define me: minimising childfree identity

My participants tended to minimise the importance of their voluntarily childless status in shaping their identities. Though a few participants did use the term “childfree” to describe themselves, most expressed their avoidance of ‘labels’ such as childfree or childless by choice. For example, when asked if she uses any terms to describe her decision not to have children, Dette (66, Pākehā) replied, “No, I don't because it doesn't take up that space in my mind. I am me and I'm not defined by anyone else.” Similarly, Dawn (61, Pākehā) said, “I'm pretty relaxed about terms that people want to use. I've never really labelled myself like that. I'm just who I am type of thing.” This rejection of labels aligns with other research in which people choose not to adopt labels that identify them in relation to their reproductive choices (Moore, 2014). In this way, most participants constructed being voluntarily childless as just a small part of who they are, resisting the pronatalist view of motherhood/reproduction as a defining feature of women’s identities, and womanhood itself (Russo, 1976). Instead, they constructed themselves as more than their (non)reproductive status, as exemplified by the following quote.

> **Extract 8, Renee** (63, English): It's part of what I am, but it doesn't define me. Childlessness, or whatever... I guess it's not a part of my life that's that important to me in some ways. If somebody asked me to describe myself, I would say things like I'm quite a creative person. I was trained as an academic, but really there was a right-brain side of me wanting to get out and I'm quite creative now, and I consider myself a bit of an environmentalist... I'm a little bit taller than your average. I'm in this age group. [Pause].

> I'm heterosexual, I've got a partner, but we don't have any kids. I'd come to that eventually. But it wouldn't be, the first label I would put on myself would be, I'm an individual. I'm me.

In extract 8, Renee downplays the significance of her voluntary childlessness by portraying it as just one "part of what I am" that "doesn't define" her. She highlights various aspects of herself, such as her height and other demographic and personality traits, before the fact she does not "have any kids", rendering her identity as being more than her reproductive choices. By stating "the first label I would put on myself would be, I'm an individual. I'm me.", she draws on the interpretative repertoire of diversity to suggest that every "individual" is unique. In an individualist society, the implication is that each individual is free to be herself and follow her own interests. This discursive strategy allows Renee to reject the gender essentialist assumption that all women's identities are determined by their reproductive choices. Consequently, she can resist the binary subject positions of either a staunchly childfree woman or a pitiful childless woman imposed by gender essentialist discourse. This discursive strategy enables participants to subtly resist the dominant discourses of pronatalism and associated subject positions, while avoiding directly challenging the validity of motherhood. In this way, participants can again resist gender essentialist discourse without challenging the essentialism underlying it. By emphasising individual uniqueness, they construct deviating from gender norms as unproblematic.

3.3. PART TWO: CRITICAL RESISTANCE

In Part Two of my analysis, I discuss the discursive strategies used by my participants as a more critical means of resisting the motherhood mandate. With these strategies, participants took a more confrontational or directly critical approach, constructing non-motherhood as fulfilling and motherhood as unappealing to them personally. Specifically, these strategies achieved the discursive purpose of (1) constructing their childfree identities as fulfilling and asserting they are "regret free" to resist a deficit identity and (2) constructing motherhood as something that should be opted into, rather than a determinant for all women. These strategies and their discursive achievements are outlined further below.

3.3.1. Discursive construction 1. Regret-free: resisting a deficit identity

Many of the participants in this study consistently brought up regret and ageing without any specific prompting throughout their talk about voluntary childlessness. Dominant discourses of the life course suggest that all childfree women will inevitably experience loneliness and regret in older age (Moore, 2014; O'Driscoll & Mercer, 2018; Shapiro, 2014; Shaw, 2012). This is grounded in pronatalist discourse that assumes that women need children to achieve fulfilment and that older, childfree women will be regretful due to having 'missed out' on the rewards of having children, both emotional and instrumental (Moore, 2014; O'Driscoll & Mercer, 2018; Shapiro, 2014; Shaw, 2012). These pronatalist assumptions create a "deficit identity" for voluntarily childless older women, who are "defined by lack" of children in their lives based on their age and gender (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005, p. 198). Thus, they are defined by what they are not (i.e., non-mothers) and positioned outside the motherhood norm. As I demonstrate in this section, participants rejected this deficit identity offered to them by pronatalist discourse by employing interpretative repertoires of independence and freedom.

Table 5.
Overview of findings (part two, discursive strategy 1).

Interpretive Repertoires/Discourses	Discursive Strategies
▪ **Independence IR** ▪ **Personal responsibility discourse** ▪ **Freedom IR** ▪ **Fulfilment/personal growth IR** ▪ **Femininity discourse**	i. *I haven't missed out* ii. *Non-traditional ageing* iii. *It's just given me freedom*

3.3.1.1. "I haven't missed out"

Though I did not specifically ask my participants about regret, many overtly expressed having no regrets about being voluntarily childless. For example, Jill (71, Pākehā) emphatically said, "I've never regretted it. I've never ever regretted it, really. Never." Likewise, Anne (69, Pākehā) told me, "I don't feel that I've missed out, don't feel that I've lacked anything." By explicitly expressing a firm lack of feeling "regret" or of having "missed out" or "lacked anything" in their older age, my participants challenged the pronatalist assumption that they will inevitably be filled with regret. This allows them to reject the subject position of the stereotypical sad, lonely, old woman and opens alternative ways of being. Their age is important when considering this

strategy, as all participants are approaching the age where these presumed consequences may become a reality. The following quote demonstrates how this discursive strategy is put into action.

> **Extract 9, Laura** (52, Pākehā/Māori): I think at the heart of it, I don't feel like I've missed out on anything. That unconditional love thing, I can have that anyway, you know, without having a child and I can unconditionally love people, which I have and do. I think that kids can give great opportunities for learning sacrifice and patience. You need a lot of patience I'm coming to realise. But again, I think my life experiences have created situations where I was afforded those opportunities for patience and for empathy, and those sorts of things.

In this extract, Laura rejects the positioning of childfree women as lacking and specifically that they will "miss out" by not having children. She emphasises instead what she has gained by remaining childfree, asserting that her "life experiences" without children have provided her "unconditional love", "sacrifice", "patience", and "empathy", all "without having a child". This discursive strategy allows her to resist the deficit identity imposed by pronatalist discourse and construct a positive childfree identity. In this talk, Laura negotiates a new subject position by extending the ideal feminine attributes outlined by femininity discourse, traditionally associated with mothers (e.g., being self-sacrificing and unconditionally loving). These idealised feminine attributes are depicted as not being the sole preserve of mothers, but available to all women, including non-mothers. Thus, she constructs her "childfree femininity" (Gillespie, 2003, p. 134) as an equally valid alternative to idealised motherhood femininity, one that still allows her to experience the full extent of love, relationships, and personal growth required to be a fulfilled woman. Through this discursive strategy, demonstrated in extract 9, participants repurpose femininity discourse to offer a direct challenge to the pronatalist assumption that having children is the only way for women to achieve fulfilment, constructing fulfilment and growth as attainable through other relationships and experiences.

3.3.1.2. Non-traditional ageing

This discursive strategy addresses a prevalent belief that women will regret not having children in old age, namely that they will lack social connections, support, and care in old age (O'Driscoll & Mercer, 2018; Park, 2005). The expectation that children serve as the primary source of support in old age is grounded in traditional developmental discourse, which constructs children

as the main providers of care for their parents (O'Driscoll & Mercer, 2018). This construction is supported by a traditional instrumentalist discourse of the value of children in which children's value resides in their material contribution to their household or family, rather than the contemporary Western emotional discourse of the value of children, in which children are rendered as having emotional value such as providing joy and meaning to life (Morison & Macleod, 2015). According to Morison and Macleod (2015), instrumentalist discourse works to construct "childfree people as missing out on an essential value of having children, namely that they might care for their parents in their old age" (p. 88).

Despite expressing some uncertainty about how ageing without children would unfold in the very last stages of their lives, participants maintained an indifferent tone throughout their discussion about ageing. At times, the potential disadvantages of ageing without children were discussed light-heartedly, with humour, and constructed as just a potential challenge to overcome. For example, Jill (71, Pākehā) joked, "I may have regrets when I'm older and infirmed and I've got no child to look after me [laughs]… I just look after myself, but I've got a band of people about my own age that we all kind of look after each other." Jill's comment illustrates the two key ways in which my participants resisted dominant constructions of the 'normal' life course. Firstly, they rejected the norm of caregiving as contained within families, positing that caregiving and social support can come from outside the nuclear family structure (i.e., not your children), such as the "band of people" Jill refers to above. Secondly, they challenged the traditional development discourse that constructs older people as necessarily dependent (O'Driscoll & Mercer, 2018), as shown in Jill's remark "I look after myself".

The latter discursive strategy (independent ageing) was more common than the former (communal care in ageing), aligning with the dominant Western values of independence, autonomy, and personal responsibility. This reflects "the culturally-dominant moral evaluation of dependence as a bad or undesirable state to be avoided at all costs" (Kemp & Denton, 2003, p. 745). As part of this discursive strategy, wherein the position of old-age dependence is rejected, my participants constructed themselves as independent women who have taken responsibility for their own ageing. This allows them to resist the dominant construction of children as a necessary support in old age, instead constructing ageing as an individual responsibility. Christine (70, British), for instance, framed ageing as something she and her husband have thought about more

deeply due to not having children, taking up a socially desirable position of having avoided dependence through proper planning (Kemp & Denton, 2003).

> **Extract 10, Christine** (70, British): I think they're conversations that when you're busy with a family, maybe you don't have until it's almost too late, whereas it's something that he and I have thought of and worked through, and we've made our plans accordingly. So many people seem to think that the children have to be the caregivers when they get old and all the rest of it, but it's not an option that we will ever have so we have to be adult about our choices.

In this extract, Christine approaches the subject of ageing with a pragmatic tone, which contributes to the position of independence she negotiates here. She declares that she and her partner have “thought of and worked through” the challenge of ageing and are well prepared, with “plans” already in place. In this way, she resists the dominant construction of old people as necessarily dependent. She also implies that her preparedness is due to her childfree identity, as it is an alternative to the norm where “children have to be the caregivers when they get old”. This implies that, where parents are dependent on their children by default, childfree people have to be independent “adults” about their “choices” as they age.

Using the interpretative repertoire of independent ageing, she describes herself as having properly planned, which she construes as “adult” behaviour, thereby positioning herself as pragmatic, independent, and capable of taking care of herself. Accordingly, she rejects traditional development discourse and constructs a non-traditional possibility of ageing independently, having control over her own plans, supported by dominant social norms that allow her to position herself in a socially desirable light (Kemp & Denton, 2003). By contrast, parents are subtly positioned in the opposite light, as leaving things “until it’s almost too late”, based on their assumption that their children “have to be” their caregivers. This approach can be inferred as not adult or as irresponsible, particularly considering prevailing social norms in which “dependence [is] viewed to an extent as preventable, if individuals [take] the proper steps to prevent being a burden to others” (Kemp & Denton, 2003, p. 745).

In this vein, some participants overtly criticised the notion that people should have children as a strategy for old-age care. For example, Laura (52, Pākehā/Māori) implied that this is a

problematic reason for having children, stating: "what I've heard over the years is the different reasons why people wanted babies, for example, a mate was like, well, who's gonna look after you when you're older? And I remember thinking but that's like a child is a resource, then. And then just also, sometimes feeling a lack, wanting someone to love them so much, which children would, and they must be this [pause] but again, I wouldn't want a child just because then I would be loved." Here, Laura tacitly constructs the traditional instrumentalist discourse of the value children, discussed above, as selfish and outdated by stating that she would not want a child just to have someone to look after her when she's older or to ensure she "would be loved". This comment reflects a discursive strategy that allowed my participants to suggest that even if the support of children would be beneficial in old age, this is not a good reason to have children.

Such talk negotiates a positive moral position for the women and furthers their construction of themselves as pragmatic and independent, as Heather's quote below shows.

> **Extract 11, Heather** (65, Pākehā): So, I guess now, as I'm getting older, I'm thinking about in the traditional way where children might have stepped in and provided additional support or advice, I don't have that. So, I need to put some strategies in place to have that under control... I guess the future of being childfree is going to have some complications, but I still don't think that was a good reason to have children so that they could provide you with old-aged care... And I think I'm a pragmatic person. I think if you put plans in place, and you're clear about it, it'll be what it is.

Heather explicitly describes securing old-aged care as not "a good reason" to have children, thereby constructing a positive identity as a pragmatic person who has made sensible, perhaps even virtuous, reproductive decisions. By framing children's anticipated support as "the traditional way" to deal with ageing, she implies the existence of alternative (non-traditional) options. While conceding that voluntary childlessness may present some challenges, she downplays them as mere "complications" that require "strategies" to overcome, implying that they are not insurmountable. Drawing on Western discourses of personal responsibility, wherein one actively plans ("put plans in place") in a conscious way ("clear about it") allows her to dismiss these "complications" to some extent. Thus, she calls on the dominant construction of dependence as preventable through

proper planning (Kemp & Denton, 2003), as mentioned earlier, to reinforce her positioning and reject the notion that children are necessary in old age.

Utilising the interpretative repertoire of independent ageing, supported by the discourse of personal responsibility, she constructs herself as "a pragmatic person" capable of putting "plans in place" to ensure her well-being in old age, without relying on children. This discursive strategy shifts the responsibility for aged care to the individual rather than their children. As a result, Heather resists the dependent subject position that traditional development discourse offers her, instead constructing herself as an independent woman who has made wise decisions and taken responsibility for her own well-being as she ages.

3.3.1.3. "It's just given me freedom": The benefits of voluntary childlessness

An interpretative repertoire of freedom was a common theme in my participant's talk about their childfree identities. Like other research on voluntary childlessness, almost all my participants expressed a sense of freedom to pursue their own interests and freedom from the responsibilities of motherhood (Shapiro, 2014). For example, Renee (63, English) said "There's a certain freedom to it I think... There are things that you can do spontaneously, that you might not have been able to do if you had a family to think of." Likewise, Harriet (61, Scottish) explained, "I've had more freedom to do things easily, without having the constraints of kids in terms of following interests or travelling or whatever." Constructing non-motherhood as granting the freedom to pursue certain activities or interests without "constraint" is part of a discursive strategy that resists the dominant construction of motherhood as essential to women's happiness and fulfilment. For example:

> **Extract 12, Donna** (68, Pākehā): … it's just given me freedom, basically, that would be the word... I travelled all over the world with my work and never felt that I couldn't. If I'd had a child or children, that would have really had a big effect on what work I accepted and didn't accept. There were times I did some warzone work, for example, that I probably wouldn't have done if I'd had kids... Yeah, so it's really given me the freedom to think I can do what I bloody like.

In this extract, rather than depicting not having children as involving lack—a deficit identity—Donna constructs her childfree identity as giving her the freedom to pursue her interests, such as travelling "all over the world" and pursuing jobs she "probably wouldn't have done if I'd

had kids". By contrast, having children is depicted as constraining, potentially causing her to miss out and, implicitly, restricting her fulfilment. She explains that becoming a mother would have had "a big effect" on her ability to pursue the opportunities she has. In stating "it's just given me freedom", she implies that the effects of non-motherhood have been positive. Using the interpretative repertoire of freedom, Donna rejects the idea that motherhood is essential to fulfilment and the subject position of a sad, unfulfilled childless woman. In contrast, she somewhat defiantly frames voluntary childlessness as giving her the "freedom" to "do what I bloody like" in her life. In this way, she positions herself as an independent woman, someone who has pursued exciting opportunities and done things differently thanks to her freedom from the restrictions of motherhood.

It is important to note the role of gender in accounts that use the interpretative repertoire of freedom. In the extract above, for example, Donna does not explicitly mention freedom from traditional gender roles which limit the employment options of women and expect women to take care of a nuclear family's household. However, this is the broader background to accounts of women's occupations and many of my participants raised the point that this freedom was new to women of their generation, especially related to reproduction. Donna mentioned a lesbian feminist movement in the 1970s and 80s, with a discourse of women building a world without men. Other participants mentioned a "girls can do anything" discourse (Dette, 66, Pākehā) and a "feminist feeling" when women could "decide for themselves what they wanted" (Anne, 69, Pākehā) in their adolescence and young adulthood. They also mentioned the newly found, though limited, availability of contraception and the lengths they still had to take to avoid getting pregnant. Within this context, the freedom to "do what I bloody like" was only beginning to be possible for women of their generation.

The following section examines more explicit talk about gender within the context of the women's liberation movement, as participants use the interpretative repertoire of progress to construct motherhood as optional. This is directly contrasted with women of previous generations, who are constructed as having less power to decide whether they will have children or not. Through the interpretative repertoire of progress, these women examine the increased power and reproductive freedom granted to their generation.

3.3.2. Discursive construction 2. Motherhood is optional, obviously": Resisting the 'motherhood mandate' through liberatory discourses

In this section, I illustrate how participants' talk aligns with the gendered context influencing their reproductive decisions. This section captures talk that addresses societal expectations imposed on women of their generation and the generation before them (i.e., their mothers). As I demonstrate below, my participants actively resist conforming to these gendered subject positions and instead construct alternative ways of being, explicitly rejecting traditional gender norms through three discursive strategies, namely: (i) expressing disinterest in adhering to such norms with statements like "I didn't want that," and (ii) emphasising that motherhood is a choice, not a determinant, and (iii) suggesting that both motherhood and non-motherhood identities have their pros and cons. Employing an interpretative repertoire of progress, the participants contribute to the portrayal of women as a diverse group of individuals. Furthermore, they utilise women's liberation and planned parenthood discourses to their advantage to reject the motherhood mandate and assert, as exemplified by Toni (60, Arab American), that "motherhood is optional, obviously."

Table 6.
Overview of findings (part two, discursive strategy 2).

Interpretive Repertoires/Discourses	Discursive Strategies
▪ **Progress IR** ▪ **Women's liberation discourse** ▪ **Diversity IR** ▪ **Freedom/independence IRs** ▪ **Family planning discourse**	*i. 'Rejecting traditional gender roles* *ii. It's a choice, not a determinant* *iii. Pros and cons*

3.3.2.1. "I didn't want that": rejecting traditional gender roles

A major element of pronatalist discourse is the construction of traditional gender roles as normal or ideal femininity (Gillespie, 2000). It is through this lens that motherhood is constructed as the norm against which to compare all women. Many of my participants explicitly mentioned the traditional gender roles offered to women—housewives expected to do most of the domestic labour and childrearing in the household—as something they did not want for themselves. They often described witnessing clear gender roles in their childhood homes, with their mothers doing all the housework and taking care of the children.

For example, Dette (66, Pākehā) said, “roles were pretty defined in my parents’ generation, about what a woman did and what a father did, and I saw that and thought ‘that’s not for me’.” Similarly, Anne (69, Pākehā) explained “when I was young, there was a real division of labour in families. Men worked and looked after the gardens and lawns and vegetable gardens, women looked after the rest of the house and the children and didn’t go to work... And I didn’t want that.” By explaining how things used to be, my participants contextualised being voluntarily childless within the gendered subject positions that were available to them in their childbearing years. They also problematise the pronatalist construction of motherhood as inherently fulfilling for all women by highlighting the lack of power offered to women by traditional gender roles.

For example, Heather highlighted the power differential between her mother and father, as shown in the following quote.

> **Extract 13, Heather** (65, Pākehā): I was always aware that my mother deferred to my father in everything because that was the right way to do things... and especially because my mother worked and was a teacher and earned a good wage, I couldn't reconcile in my mind why she didn't have as big a vote... maybe because I had the example of a working mother at a time when that was unusual, I used to kind of think, “Well, hang on, you both leave the house at the same time, you both get home roughly the same time. How come dad goes and sits down and reads the paper and waits for dinner and mum just comes in, takes off her coat, puts down her handbag and starts peeling potatoes?” I just don't quite see this as fair. Definitely, definitely, that influenced me. I'm like, “I'm not buying into this bullshit.”

In this extract, Heather describes the gendered division of labour as not “fair” on her mother. She describes the power differential between her parents, with her mother “deferring” to her father as well as taking on all the domestic labour while her father “goes and sits down and reads the paper and waits for dinner”. Looking to her mother as the example of a potential life with children, she asserts “I’m not buying into this bullshit.” This statement conveys her refusal to invest in (“buy into”) the traditional hetero-gendered subject positions in the conventional nuclear family that disadvantage women, mothers in particular. Hence, her language suggests a rebellion against the gendered expectations put on her by society (Terry & Braun, 2012). Drawing on the

interpretative repertoires of diversity and progress, she instead constructs women as having the freedom to pursue their own unique desires and choose their life path, which allows her to rebel against the subject position of housewife offered to her by gender essentialist discourse and construct a positive subject position of free and independent woman.

As Heather's account shows, using the interpretative repertoire of progress highlights how reproductive freedom gives women more power to shape their own realities and pursue their own desires. Participants' framing of motherhood as an option rather than a determinant for women, as discussed in the following section, supports this idea. Once again, it is possible to see the interpretative repertoire of progress being drawn on.

3.3.2.2. "It's a choice, not a determinant": Drawing on discourses of women's liberation

Drawing on an interpretative repertoire of progress (through women's liberation discourse), my participants rejected the motherhood mandate and the deviant subject positions offered to them by gender essentialist discourse. As a component of this, my participants constructed motherhood as an important choice that should be (a) opted into and (b) not taken lightly. This directly challenges gender essentialist discourse and its construction of motherhood as an inevitable part of a woman's life trajectory. Instead, women are constructed as being liberated from the motherhood mandate and free to pursue their own desires—whether that be motherhood or otherwise. This is demonstrated by the extract below.

> **Extract 14, Jan** (66, Pākehā): I always kind of thought, "one day I'll have children of my own" but just as a given, because that's how life works. But I didn't think consciously about what that would look like or anything. But as I got older, it just almost kept getting further and further away from actually what I wanted to do in the short term. So, although I spoke in that kind of conceptual way, or "that's something to tell your grandchildren" or blah blah blah, I didn't actually ever have a plan as such for that to become a reality. […] I didn't choose not to have them. I didn't choose to have them. And that's quite a different paradigm.

Though Jan describes assuming she would have children "one day" as "because that's how life works", she says she "didn't think consciously" about having children. This alludes to the traditional development discourse that constructs motherhood as a mandatory developmental stage

for all women. She continues to explain how her deviance from the motherhood norm evolved over time, as the reality of having children simply "kept getting further and further away" from what she "wanted to do". Here, Jan constructs motherhood as an important choice that did not match what she wanted for her life. Due to having other priorities, she did not make "a plan" for having children. This discursive strategy constructs motherhood as something that should be opted into rather than a "given" and something that women need to make "a plan" to do. The implication here is that women should actively choose motherhood rather than having children because it is expected of them by a pronatalist society. This brings into question the validity of traditional development discourse.

Advancing this talk, participants drew on an interpretative repertoire of progress, to frame traditional development discourse as a thing of the past—suggesting that it is obvious that motherhood is a choice in this day and age. In this way, my participants constructed reproductive freedom as positive progress. For example, Beverly (70, Pākehā) stated, "I mean, it's a choice, not a determinant, and there's no wrong answer." In this instance, Beverly is implying that women's happiness is not determined by whether they have or do not have children, but that women are free to make their own reproductive choices. In a similar vein, Dawn (61, Pākehā) pointed specifically to the culture of Aotearoa New Zealand as progressive, saying "I mean, the obvious [factor] is that growing up at the time I did, that I did have a choice. In certain cultures, the choice would be less, you wouldn't have as much choice because there'd be a lot more pressure to have kids." Using the interpretative repertoire of progress to construct reproductive freedom as positive, Dawn hints both at the increased level of freedom she had compared to both women of previous generations and women from other cultures where "there'd be a lot more pressure" on women to reproduce than there is in Aotearoa New Zealand.

This discursive strategy allows my participants to directly challenge the motherhood mandate, which is constructed as outdated, and normalise their own voluntary childlessness as a valid option within their socio-cultural context. For example:

> **Extract 15, Anne** (69, Pākehā): I think, like a lot of women of my generation, it was just expected that we would get married and have children. Because back then, it was still frowned upon to have children out of marriage. So, it was like you get married and then

> you have kids. So that was the prevailing idea when I was forming my ideas about motherhood, I suppose [...] I don't think there was any financial support back then either for unmarried mothers, so the choice was kind of, there wasn't really a choice, you got married and then had kids [...] Now, I think it's absolutely anyone's choice... But let's go back to when I was a teenager. I mean, you couldn't even get hold of contraception really, you just had to rely on luck [...] So, the choice was to not have sex if you didn't want children, try and use various forms of contraception that weren't very reliable. Yeah, that was it.

In this extract, Anne constructs women as lacking the power to make their own reproductive decisions when she was a teenager, stating “there wasn’t really a choice, you got married and then had kids”. She constructs the modern reality for women as different, saying “now, I think it’s absolutely anyone’s choice”. By describing the lack of choice in the past, where women “rely on luck” or abstinence to avoid unwanted pregnancies, Anne constructs the motherhood mandate as outdated and negative. As shown in extract 15, Anne uses the interpretative repertoire of progress to normalise women choosing when and whether to have children and, therefore, her own voluntarily childless identity. This allows her to construct a positive identity as a woman who has the freedom and power to make her own reproductive choices. This is made possible by her socio-cultural context, as contraception is widely considered central to women’s rights and empowerment in Western societies compounded by the trend towards delaying parenthood until the ‘right’ time in Aotearoa New Zealand specifically (Boddington & Didham, 2009; Cole & Geist, 2021). Within the context of their age and gender, it is important to note that these women gained more reproductive freedom than their mothers’ generation due to the women’s liberation movement in Aotearoa New Zealand at the time, which was explicitly mentioned by multiple participants (as above). Thus, women’s liberation is a means through which to construct a positive identity through the interpretative repertoire of progress.

3.3.2.3. Pros and cons

My participants commonly rejected the pronatalist idealisation of motherhood by suggesting there are pros and cons to every reproductive decision, including motherhood. For example, Julie (50, Chinese) spoke light heartedly about the challenges of motherhood “it's good and bad. I guess it's a journey that if you choose to be a mum, you have to take responsibilities [...]

Caring, compassion, 24 hours seven days. [Laughs] … like listening or hearing friends talking about the kids, the good, the bad, the naughty, the illness [...] So they are good and bad things." With this discursive strategy, my participants challenge the idealised motherhood identity by suggesting that mothers also have some "bad" experiences due to having children. This is exemplified in the quotes below.

> **Extract 16 Linda** (51, Chinese): If you have a kid, of course you have some joy playing with them, but on the other hand if they are naughty or they are not doing well in some ways you might be very frustrated or something like that and parenting is difficult, parenting is really difficult. It's not as easy as you think and every kid is sort of different and you don't know until you have one [a child]. So I cannot comment. But I know that things have both sides, a coin of both sides... there are always pros and cons. There are always advantages and disadvantages.

> **Extract 17 Dette** (66, Pākehā): There are lots of positives in not having children and there's lots of positives in having them really, so you spin the coin whichever way you want really, or whichever way life spins it I suppose.

In extract 16, Linda primarily talks about the "pros and cons" of motherhood, directly challenging the idealised version of motherhood presented by pronatalist discourse. While she says there is "some joy" in motherhood, she also constructs it as "really difficult" and having "advantages and disadvantages" in parents' lives. While she softens her approach by conceding that mothers would know more about motherhood than she does ("you don't know until you have [a child]"), she ultimately posits that motherhood is not as perfect as idealised motherhood discourse might suggest. Similarly, in extract 17, Dette takes a soft approach to challenging idealised motherhood by saying that there are "positives" to both "having" and "not having" children. This works to challenge idealised motherhood discourse by suggesting that motherhood is not all "positive" and that non-mothers also experience "positive" outcomes from their decision not to parent. This discursive strategy allows motherhood to be framed more as a logical choice than a determinant.

Underpinning this is family planning discourse "in which a rational decision-maker makes good choices about the timing of motherhood" (Macleod et al., 2019, p. 36). Family planning

discourse works to my participants' advantage as it opens up the subject position of a responsible reproductive decision-maker who waits until the right time to reproduce (which may happen to never come). The implication is that women can rationally weigh up their current situation and decide whether or not they are 'ready' to become a mother. My participants repurpose family planning discourse to suggest that they are able to rationally weigh up the pros and cons of motherhood and non-motherhood to determine which option is best for them. Thus, this discursive strategy allows participants to construct a positive identity as someone who has made rational and responsible (non)reproductive decisions.

However, planned parenthood discourse is also contradicted in my participants' talk by statements that disavow choice and suggest non-motherhood can just happen naturally over time, as seen in section 2.1, which we also see here as Dette draws on the interpretative repertoire of choice to suggest it can either be a rational choice or just happen ("so you spin the coin whichever way you want really, or whichever way life spins it I suppose"). This suggests that, while participants emphasise women's right to choose when and whether to have children, they minimise the role of choice in their own childfree identities. Hence, while they are constructing a positive identity as responsible reproductive decision-makers, they are also navigating the stigma that remains attached to childfree women's identities by minimising the level of choice in their own voluntary childlessness. This exemplifies my participants' inclination to reject the motherhood mandate without being overly critical of mothers.

3.4. Conclusion

As I have shown, my participants both repurposed dominant discourses and used alternative discourses to resist the stigma attached to their childfree identities to some extent. Overall, my participants maintained an inclination to gently challenge the motherhood mandate without overly criticising mothers. Instead, my participants used interpretative repertoires and discourses to shape a reality in which mothers and non-mothers can co-exist peacefully and without stigma. In the following chapter, I will further discuss my research findings and situate them within (1) the socio-cultural context in which they occur and (2) research on voluntary childlessness.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

4.1. Introduction

I set out to understand how voluntarily childless women over the age of 50 negotiate the social stigma associated with occupying an identity outside the gendered norm. This included exploring how they construct womanhood without motherhood in the context of a prevalent 'motherhood mandate' in Aotearoa, New Zealand, as in other pronatalist societies. Locating my study broadly within a reproductive justice framework, and drawing on a feminist poststructuralist lens, sensitised the analysis to how power is exercised through discourse, not only in relation to gender but also other intersecting identity factors, particularly age. Using this lens, I focused on how the participants resist the discourses that normalise motherhood and construct older women's childfree identities as deviant and deficient.

Using Critical Discursive Psychology to analyse my data allowed me to see my participants as active 'discourse users' and to explore the discursive strategies they used to negotiate stigmatising dominant discourses in their talk, either by repurposing dominant discourses or using alternative discourses to construct a positive identity. In my analysis, I demonstrated how participants adopted both a subtle, non-confrontational approach by means of two discursive strategies: (1) *constructing child-freedom as an equally valid alternative to motherhood*, and (2) *'it's no big deal': minimising and normalising being childfree*. I also identified a more overt, critical approach to resistance enacted through another two discursive strategies: (3) *regret-free: resisting a deficit identity*, and (4) *'motherhood is optional, obviously': resisting the 'motherhood mandate'*. Despite these different forms of resistance (subtle and overt), I showed that the overarching sentiment of participants' talk was that of individual self-expression where, rather than problematising motherhood, they constructed it as something that just was not for them personally. I also showed how participants sometimes adapted dominant traditional discourses such as gender essentialism and other times drew on alternative discourses (progress and diversity) to negotiate stigma, resist deficit identity, and construct a positive childfree identity in their talk.

My research findings offer perspective on how pronatalist and gender essentialist discourses shape ways of talking and being available to the women, and how they negotiate them in their talk to avoid stigma. Childfree womanhood disrupts the motherhood mandate which relies on gender essentialist and pronatalist discourse to construct motherhood as both essential and

normal for all women. However, the motherhood mandate remains prevalent in many socio-cultural contexts, including Aotearoa New Zealand, and continues to exercise power over women by shaping the reproductive decisions considered socially acceptable for them to make. Therefore, I argue that even in the context of the progression of women's reproductive rights in Aotearoa New Zealand, dominant traditional constructions of motherhood as an essential stage in women's lives continue to render childfree women's identities as deficit and deficient, assuming they will inevitably be sad, regretful, and unfulfilled as they age. This is an example of stigma, with childfree women linked with a negative stereotype (Beddoe & Clarke, 2023). Hence, my participants must perform identity work to negotiate this stigma through their talk, to justify their reproductive decisions in a way that mothers do not have to.

In this chapter, I will further discuss my research findings before reflecting on methodology and providing suggestions for future research on voluntary childlessness.

4.2. Discussion of findings

Examining how dominant discourses oppress and govern women's reproductive choices is central to reproductive justice as it pertains to women's right to not have children without experiencing stigma or negative social consequences, which are a form of reproductive oppression (Morison, 2021; Shah et al., 2022). Feminist poststructuralism offers a way to explore how participants negotiate the lessened power they are given by dominant pronatalist and essentialist discourses in occupying a stigmatised, non-normative identity as non-mothers. Through this lens, my participants showed agency as they used the discourses available to them to negotiate a more powerful and socially desirable subject position.

Participants commonly used the interpretative repertoire of diversity as a discursive strategy to negotiate stigma. This is discursively useful in that, as opposed to gender essentialism, it offers a heterogeneous view that celebrates diversity between women, opening up multiple ways of being that can constitute womanhood. This lies in direct contrast to the motherhood mandate's assumption that women are heterogeneous in their innate desire to have children, constructing the absence of children as deficit. Through the interpretative repertoire of diversity, my participants can open up subject positions (other than mother) to take up and construct them as simply a different type of womanhood.

This discursive strategy involved repurposing discourses of essentialism that suggest each individual has an innate personality. Within the context of Western society, discourses of self-expression shape the dominant construction of individuals as having an essential selfhood that they should be free to express (Kim & Sherman, 2007). By using this repurposed essentialist discourse in tandem with naturalising and diversity interpretive repertoires, my participants constructed their voluntary childlessness as natural or innate. That is, their voluntary childlessness is constructed as part of their essence and evidence of them being their true selves. This strategy is effective in that it achieves the discursive purpose of negotiating blameless identity. In other words, they have not been purposefully deviant but simply ended up this way. Though this strategy is useful for shifting potential blame, it is limited in that they are still left open to the potential stigma of being constructed as inherently abnormal.

Interpretative repertoires surrounding freedom and progress were among the most commonly used strategies by my participants as a means of resisting the traditional gender norms that mandate motherhood. Participants often expressed freedom as one of the benefits of non-motherhood, while acknowledging that each option available to them (motherhood and non-motherhood) has its advantages and disadvantages ("pros and cons"). The interpretative repertoires of progress, including women's liberation and family planning, allowed participants to build on the freedom repertoire and challenge the motherhood mandate through the lens of gendered oppression. Having the freedom to occupy an identity outside of mandated motherhood is constructed as positive by comparing their options to the limited or restricted options of previous generations of women (particularly their mothers). Thus, the identity of childfree woman is a sign of progress and women's liberation, partly through the availability of contraception which enables women (and their partners) to choose when and whether to have children.

This discursive strategy is useful as it repurposes the dominant discourses of family planning and women's liberation to construct mandated motherhood as a thing of the past. By relying on discourses of women's liberation and family planning my participants to negotiate more agentic, positive identities through interpretive repertoire of progress. These discursive strategies construct traditional gender roles as undesirable for women and highlight the lack of power previous generations of women had by comparison. Thus, it renders the motherhood mandate as regressive and undesirable for women. The family planning discourse is discursively useful in

suggesting that women should delay motherhood until they are "ready", constructing those who plan their reproduction as rational and responsible decision-makers (Hawkes, 1995; Macleod et al., 2019). The implication is that the 'right time' simply never came for my participants. However, the limitation of this strategy is that it focuses on personal freedom for individual women, in a similar way to the previous strategy. At the same time, it does not entirely challenge the dominant family planning discourse, potentially leaving intact the gendered norm that expects women to have children eventually (when they're 'ready') and the possibility for stigma.

The discursive strategies identified appear to be at odds. Disavowing choice and repurposing dominant essentialist discourses allows gentle resistance and a blameless childfree identity. However, these strategies also minimise agency over reproductive decisions, directly contradicting the interpretative repertoire of progress that suggests women should have agency and choice over their own reproductive lives, including the freedom to choose not to have children without justification or societal stigma. Through the lens of feminist poststructuralism, the historical moment in which these women situate their reproductive choices is of particular interest. The construction of traditional gender roles as unappealing is important, as participants were the first generation to have more options available to them due to effective modern birth control methods and more employment opportunities, in comparison to the generations of women before them. Accordingly, these discursive strategies allow them to construct a gendered identity that is more agentic than that of previous generations of women. However, again, the interpretive repertoire of progress is directly contradicted in their construction of their own child-freedom as a non-choice. While these strategies seem contradictory, using them together offers a way to construct a positive identity—by endorsing choice broadly while simultaneously constructing their own voluntary childlessness as a non-choice—demonstrating the power negotiation women are required to undergo to forge a positive, childfree identity in a pronatalist society.

Though minimising stigma is a common method of resistance, as mentioned above, we also know that pronatalist pressure is disproportionately placed on women of childbearing age (Lynch et al., 2018; Riessman, 2000). The participants' minimisation of the impact of stigma on them may be linked to ageing femininity, as they appeared to capitalise on the reduction of stigma as they move beyond their reproductive years. In Westernised societies, older women are

constructed as having less value due to no longer having reproductive capacity or being desirable sexually, both of which give younger women power and status (Chen et al., 2020; Kincaid, 2022). However, my participants tended to use ageing femininity to their advantage, showing agency within the constraints of ageism and sexism. They expressed relief that they no longer have to deal with questioning as society turns its gaze away from them (see above). For instance, Laura (52, Pākehā/Māori) explicitly linked age to her increased ability to navigate stigma, stating, “It's been different over the years, and I guess that's just as I've grown and matured myself. It's so lovely to be in my 50s and not give a fuck.” This shift in societal focus away from reproductive potential and sexual desirability in older age provides a unique context in which the stigma surrounding voluntary childlessness may be minimised through a reduction in social pressure regarding reproduction. Hence, there may be more room to negotiate a positive childfree identity with less resistance from others.

Nevertheless, as I have shown, the participants must do identity work to construct socially desirable subject positions for themselves in ways that socially desirable mothers do not. They still need to counter the stigma attached to their identities, by repurposing dominant discourses or using alternative discourses to resist dominant narratives of deficit associated with their childfree identities. Due to their age, they must also navigate the compounding stigma of gendered ageism and the motherhood norm. In this research, participants have demonstrated an ability to navigate stigma, by using discourses to their advantage, though in ways that do not (overtly) challenge dominant gendered norms of reproduction.

4.3. Reflections and future research

This study contributes to the limited body of research on older women who are childfree. As I have previously shown, assumptions of deficit and lack attached to childfree women’s identities are often related to older age. Thus, research that includes older,the childfree women is crucial and studies including this group are scarce. Additionally, there is almost no research on childfree people in general in Aotearoa New Zealand, and this provides one of the first inquiries into their lives.

Qualitative research seeks to obtain a deep understanding of the nuanced insights, meanings, and experiences of individuals, rather than attempting to generalise findings across the

entire population (Baillie, 2015). Consequently, I deliberately chose a small sample size of 14 participants. This small sample size allowed for the depth of analysis required to examine the discursive strategies participants used to negotiate stigma and forge a positive childfree identity. Given the small sample size, this study is not intended to create a generalisable understanding of all childfree women in Aotearoa New Zealand. Instead, this research adds valuable insight to a previously unexplored area of older, childfree women's stigma negotiation in Aotearoa New Zealand.

It is important to acknowledge that both my supervisor and I identify as childfree, which has shaped this research project. My identity as a childfree woman has played a pivotal role in shaping the research design, recruitment, engagement with my participants during the interviews, and my analysis and interpretation of the interview data. I shared many similarities with participants and held my own biases regarding voluntary childlessness. However, I maintain that my first-hand understanding of the childfree experience has also allowed me to contribute richness to the research, fostering connection with my participants and enabling deep, candid discussions about childfree identities and womanhood without motherhood.

A notable strength of this study lies in the diversity of participants, who came from various countries/cultures, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and living in both small towns and major cities across Aotearoa New Zealand. While I initially intended to speak to childfree women over the age of 60, widening the age group to include those over 50 ensured more diverse representation, especially regarding different ethnicities. Additionally, my participants had varying pathways to voluntary childlessness, with some knowing from a young age, some feeling they had made a conscious decision, some postponing parenthood, and others who were childfree by circumstance but satisfied with the outcome. This diversity contributes richness and nuance to my research, incorporating multiple perspectives and social locations.

However, it is acknowledged that this research skewed toward professional women with higher education/degrees, and that the majority of participants were pākehā and heterosexual. This is not surprising given that other research has found most childfree women are socially privileged and well-educated, with more social pressure placed on those considered 'ideal mothers' to reproduce. Future research that focuses on more diverse participants of all genders is needed.

It is also worth exploring the role of my participants' social location in their power negotiation. As previously explored, the stigmatisation of child-freedom lies in occupying other socially privileged identities that construct them as fit to reproduce. The various ways individuals make sense of discrimination are "shaped by privilege and marginalisation" (Morison, 2023). Therefore, the power afforded to participants by their other, socially privileged identity factors may contribute to their ability to "press their own claims" (Riesman, 2000) against dominant discourse and those who stigmatise them, contributing to their capacity to resist stigma. Their socially privileged positions as middle-class, professional women equally oppress them and allow them to negotiate that oppression to construct a more positive subject position.

It is especially critical within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand that researchers consider the reproductive experiences of tangata whenua. Reproductive experiences are different for Māori and Pākehā women, in particular, Māori women may be more likely to be constructed as unfit to reproduce thus changing their experience of pronatalism and the way it impacts them (Morison & Le Grice, 2023). Therefore, reproductive research grounded in Kaupapa Māori and focused on the experiences of Māori women is required. In light of the reproductive justice framework in which this research occurs, it is critical to centre marginalised women and explore Māori women's realities. Though only one Māori-Pākehā woman over the age of 50 came forward for this research, I hope that research focused on Māori individuals will be conducted in future and that this research will be beneficial to all women as it illuminates some of the diverse ways in which pronatalism affects power over women's reproductive lives.

4.4. Conclusion

This research contributes valuable insight into the experiences of older, childfree women in Aotearoa New Zealand, shedding light on the complexities of identity work, stigma resistance, and power dynamics within a pronatalist context. By amplifying the voices of older, childfree women, this study calls for recognition of the nuanced impact of gender, ageism, and other intersecting identity factors on childfree people's experiences.

The focus on this age group also allowed me to address dominant constructions of childfree women as doomed to a life of loneliness and regret. My research findings echoed those of other research that suggests older, childfree women do not experience regret due to "missing out" on

having children, and find fulfilment in other areas of their life outside the traditional nuclear family. Additionally, I have demonstrated participants' agency in constructing positive childfree identities in the face of stigma to some extent. However, as I have shown, these women are limited in their resistance by the dominant discourses and resulting gendered norms that come to bear on them. That is, even with their resistance they continue to occupy an 'othered' identity that requires identity work to resist constructions of deficit, and despite their resistance, they may continue to be stigmatised for being considered abnormal according to normative gender expectations. Through continued research and advocacy, we can continue to challenge the motherhood mandate and work towards an inclusive, equitable society that values women's diverse identities, including ageing, childfree femininity.

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Appendix A: Information Sheet

INFORMATION SHEET
Experiences of older women who have chosen not to have children

Kia ora!

I am seeking participants to take part in my research. I am Jacquie Wootton, a Master of Arts (Psychology) student at Massey University. I am a bisexual woman of Pakeha and Ngāti Rangi (ki Nga Wha) descent who has decided not to have children and am interested in hearing from a diverse range of people. My research is supervised by Tracy Morison, a senior lecturer and researcher at Massey University. Her research is on reproductive decision-making and includes an interest in 'voluntary childlessness'. We have both chosen not to have children.

About the research

My research focuses on women in New Zealand aged 60 and over who have never been mothers/have not had children and will explore their experiences, including any stigma related to not becoming a mother. I am focusing on older women because there is hardly any research with this group.
I'm interested in interviewing women for whom their non-motherhood is to some extent chosen, wanted, or welcomed. They may have chosen not to have children for any reason, never wanted children, never felt the need, or had other priorities in life.
If you fit this description, I invite you to express your interest in participating.

Who can participate?

I am inviting volunteers who are

- Women,[1] aged 60 years and older, and
- have actively avoided motherhood or decided (actively or passively) not to have children for any reason.[2]

I am interested in women of any background, ethnicity, culture, or religion, and any sexual identity (eg: straight, lesbian, or bisexual).

What will be required?

This research project will involve a one-on-one audio-recorded interview with me. This will take place via video call or telephone at a time that suits us both. The interview will be about 1 hour long and it will be largely unstructured, so that I can hear the participant's story from her perspective, but I will have an interview guide to prompt our conversation if needed.
I may ask for a follow-up interview, up to 1 hour long, to gain more understanding of participants' thoughts about their experiences. This will depend on the willingness and availability of the participant at that time.

To thank those who take the time to participate, I will offer a gift voucher as a small token of my gratitude.

Confidentiality

All information provided to me at any point will be kept confidential, even those who enquire but don't take part or who withdraw from participating. Only the main researcher, Jacquie, will know the real identities of those who volunteer to take part.

Audio recordings will be deleted once they are transcribed. Participants will be referred to by an alias, and any identifying information will be altered or removed in transcripts and when writing about the findings.

I will store all materials related to your participation securely in both hard and soft copy forms and destroy all research materials 5 years after the completion of the research.

Risks and rights

I foresee no risk to taking part and I hope that these interviews will offer a supportive space to discuss and reflect on an issue that is often not talked about or met with negative responses.
Participation is entirely voluntary and if you do choose to take part, you may:

- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
- withdraw from the study up to one week after participating[3]
- decline to answer any question or ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be disclosed
- access a summary of the project findings when it is concluded

To inquire or express interest

If you have any questions or are interested in being interviewed, please let me know by phone or email. I will contact you again after one week to discuss further and see if you are still interested.

- Jacquie Wootton Email: [redacted] Phone: +64 [redacted]

- Dr Tracy Morison Email: T.Morison@massey.ac.nz Telephone: +64 6 951 9216

Head of Psychology Department, Massey University
Dr Mandy Morgan Email: C.A.Morgan@massey.ac.nz Telephone: +64 6 951 8058
Approved by:

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researchers named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research and will abide by the Massey University code of ethics.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Prof Craig Johnson Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director on 06 3569099 ext 85271 or at humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix B: Consent Form

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
TE KURA PŪKENGA TANGATA

Experiences of childless by choice/childfree women over 60

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read the information sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being image recorded.

I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.

I wish/do not wish to have the data placed in an official archive.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: ___________________________________ **Date:** ______________

Full name - printed: ____

Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa

Massey University School of Psychology – Te Kura Hinengaro Tangata
Private Bag 11222, Palmerston North 4442 T +64 6 356 9099 extn 2040 F +64 6 350 5673 www.massey.ac.nz

Appendix C: Interview Guide

INTRODUCTIONS

Get to know each other. Disclose voluntarily childless identity and research aims.

Thank you so much again for your interest in being involved in our research! As we've been over, we are looking to gain the perspectives of women over the age of 50 who have not had children. It's really focused on what you think - so there is no wrong answer to any of these questions.

Just a reminder that I'll be recording this session - once it's transcribed, I'll delete the recording and your interview notes will be stored under the alias you choose (or we can assign one to you). Did you have a name you'd like to use?

Warming up

To start, can you tell me a bit about yourself and your family?
What prompted you to join this study?

'CHOOSING'

1. What do you think about the decision not to become a mother? Anything you think is important or relevant.

    Tell me more about that
    What do you mean by …?

2. Can you tell me how it came to be that you don't have children?
    a. Would you say it was a clear decision? [Probe: postponing or delaying]
3. Some people say that they knew early on that they didn't want to have children – is that something you can relate to?
4. Can you remember a time when it first occurred to you that you wouldn't/might not have kids?
    a. If yes: tell me more
    b. If no: was it something more gradual? How did your decision evolve over time?

DISCLOSURE & SELF-IDENTIFYING

5. (How) do you talk about not being a mum/not having kids? Is there a term you use to identify yourself or to describe your decision not to parent?
6. Have you heard people saying that they are childfree, childless-by-choice, or voluntary childfree? What do you think about these terms?
7. (How) has remaining childless/childfree affected your identity or who you are as a person?
8. (How) have you communicated with others about the decision not to have children?
9. Probe: motivations for non-disclosure, particular people, place or times she might disclose or not
    a. How does discussing this issue with others make you feel?
    b. What experiences have you had talking about children with others?

EXPERIENCES

10. Can you tell me about your experience of being childless by choice/childfree?
    a. Any positive/negative outcomes?
    b. Have you encountered any stigma or prejudice for deciding not to have children? (If so, tell me more about that).
    c. Other challenges?
    d. Anything you would have done differently?

IDENTITY & CHILDFREEDOM

11. What do you think about the idea that all women naturally want children?
12. Some people see motherhood as a crucial step in the female life-course, has not having children shaped the way you think about being a woman in any way?
    a. Tell me more about why you say...
13. Are there any aspects of who you are or your background that have shaped your ideas about having children?
    a. Probe: Gender, ethnicity, culture, profession (NZ)
    b. How (if at all) do you think being in a relationship/not being in a relationship influenced or changed your experience?

WRAPPING UP

14. What advice would you give a young woman thinking about whether or not to have children?

Is there anything else you'd like to add? Any questions?

THANK YOU

15. THANK YOU for sharing your experience with me. How are you feeling after our chat?