



ARTICLE



<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-026-06908-7>

OPEN

# Current understandings of childfreedom

Davinia Thornley<sup>1</sup>✉

This article aims to outline a rising demographic category: that of people who have chosen not to have children, also known as ‘childfree.’ While this category is becoming more widely recognized (and tolerated, if not fully accepted) in Western media and throughout related popular culture, many people—both academics and the general public—are unclear about several aspects of childfree life. These (mis)perceptions include how to define childfree vs. childless people; the reasons why people might choose to be childfree; and the current, ongoing struggles that childfree people still face, particularly in relation to reproductive consciousness and justice. In addressing the relationship between childfreedom, social ideologies, and activism as a member of this community, I locate how childfree people are negotiating their subjectivity within a rapidly changing demographic, economic, media-saturated cultural landscape. Therefore, my article is girded by what is “happening right now” and includes several examples gleaned from the Western popular cultural public sphere.

<sup>1</sup>Department of Communication and Media Science, Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary. ✉email: [davinia.thornley@uni-corvinus.hu](mailto:davinia.thornley@uni-corvinus.hu)

## Introduction

This article aims to outline a rising demographic category: that of people who have chosen not to have children, or the ‘childfree’ (Agrillo and Nelini 2008, p. 347; Kelly 2009, p. 157; Shapiro 2014, p. 1). While this category is becoming more widely recognized (and tolerated, if not fully accepted) in Western media and throughout related popular culture, many people—both academics and the general public—are unclear about several aspects of childfree life (Blackstone 2019).

These (mis)perceptions include how to define childfree versus childless people; the reasons why people might choose to be childfree; and the current, ongoing struggles that childfree people still face, particularly in relation to reproductive consciousness and justice (Leong 2015, p. 1359). In addressing the relationship between childfreedom, social ideologies, and activism as a member of this community, I locate how childfree people are negotiating their subjectivity within a rapidly changing demographic, economic, media-saturated cultural landscape.

Here, my aim is to discuss what is “happening right now” at the nexus of humanitarian and sociological thought. Below, I have specifically chosen subject areas where I have noticed debates are currently ‘live’ in the popular press. I contextualise these debates because childfree people are often talked about, not to, and so this article provides a space to speak first to them and then to others interested in this group. In that regard, current discussions of environmental issues and ‘third rail political stances’ (covered in the later sections of this paper) are precisely relevant, even if the latter understanding vis-à-vis childfreedom is so new there is no archived academic literature on it at present. Valuable and thorough coverage of additional areas, such as content analysis, demographics, and prevalence rates, can be found in reviews by, for example, Agrillo and Nelini (2008) and Hartnett and Gemmill (2020).

## Defining and situating childfreedom

In the 21st century, the childfree choice is inevitable (US National Center for Health Statistics 2022). Headlines from the *Pew Research Center* (Minkin et al. 2024), *News-Medical*, *Swiss Info*, *Research Gate*, *British Psychological Society*, and even *Wikipedia* align on the increasing rate of adults voluntarily choosing not to have children (Brown 2021). And yet, this term remains one of the most misunderstood and overlooked categories within the life course, often being relegated to a subset of childlessness (Kelly 2009, p. 158). The two terms are actually at the opposite ends of a spectrum (for further explication of these terms, please see Thornley 2022). Childless people wanted children but could not have them for either biological or circumstantial reasons (and it therefore follows that they are not living the life they would like to be living). Childfree people, on the other hand, have chosen not to have children and so have been able to achieve one of their most closely held life goals, something many childfree people see as a primary organizing factor of their existence (Moore 2014, p. 167; Peterson and Engwall 2013, p. 381). I want to be clear here, though, to avoid appearing facile with this assertion. Achieving this goal never occurs in a vacuum; often societal pressure rubs the edges off the clarity and fulfilment commonly imagined when people reach goals they hold dear (Avivi 2017; Blackstone 2014a, p. 69; Hintz and Brown 2020; Nandy 2013, p. 54).

Another difficulty arising when childfree choices are subsumed or elided into the more recognized category of childlessness is that it becomes very hard to talk clearly about childfree people’s motivations, even within the community itself. There are not hard boundaries around this choice and often there are several—sometimes even conflicting—reasons why a person may have decided to be childfree (Albertini and Brini 2021; Ball 1993, p. 51;

Salgado and Magalhães 2024, p. 3; Wood and Newton 2006, p. 342).

Also, unlike groups that cohere around hobbies, similar personalities, or children (as just a few unrelated examples), there is not a unifying principle around which the childfree can gather. Yes, all childfree people have chosen not to have children, but it is hard to develop a long-standing community around something that did not and will not happen (Bays 2017; Blackstone and Stewart 2016; Connidis and McMullin 1993). This fact is also what delineates childfree communities from child/parent-centred communities (Somers 1993): while the latter are always changing as children grow, at base, they are still built around a concrete entity. Children exist, whereas the childfree idea rests on not taking up that option. While reproductive justice activists wholeheartedly celebrate the right of all people to decline an identity that does not serve them or has no place in how they understand their lives, it remains that it is difficult for wider society to think about, to understand, to legislate something that is not ‘there’ when seen from the larger, more conventional perspective (Gotlib 2022).

From early in the organization of childfreedom, almost fifty years ago now, activists such as Peck and Senderowitz (1974, p. 258) recognized that “a dearth of knowledge about nonparents contributes to socialization for parenthood”. Dykstra and Hagestad discuss several authors’ work, emphasizing “how dramatic the new element of choice was in the lives of women.” They single out Ireland (1993), who used the phrase ‘a new psychology of choice’ and argued that it necessitates a reconsideration of theories on women’s development (2007, p. 1289). In more recent movements, such as the Alliance of Childfree Voters (AoCV) formed in 2024, the steps for greater recognition have been explicitly modelled after the LGBTQ+ platform. The first is around destigmatizing the childfree choice, the second is to make this community more visible (e.g. having politicians acknowledge and visit childfree representatives), and the third leads on to gaining rights, such as policy creation, pay transparency, and political prioritization (T. Shechter, personal communication, 9 Sept 2024).

A further ideological stumbling block occurs between childfree adherents and feminism. Wood and Newton (2006, p. 347) are uncompromising in skewering “the failure of feminist approaches to really challenge motherhood, and in fact their tendency to valorize women’s procreative potential and mothering practices”. The often-totalizing discourse around womanhood equaling motherhood cannot account for the childfree, then leaving feminism in the difficult position of not accommodating those for whom it professes to speak (Houseknecht 1979). Intriguingly, in a foundational 1973 article in the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, Polatnick (1973) suggested that voluntary childlessness provided an opportunity for women to opt out of one of the central components of female oppression. This recognition challenges many feminists’ basic tenets—often in uncomfortable ways.

For example, in the popular cultural public sphere, a new misunderstanding around childfreedom has arisen that suggests it is time limited and/or a lifestyle choice. One clear example of this is when commentators refer to parents and people who care for children as ‘childfree’ because their children are not currently with them. These scenarios can range from children being babysat for the night through to ‘empty nesters.’ The childfree community does not recognise these examples as childfreedom because the people in question still bear primary responsibility for children, even if they are not currently exercising that responsibility. Going back to the spectrum between childless and childfree, many community members would also argue that choosing to be childfree is not a mere ‘lifestyle choice’—such as a car

collection or choosing to build a new house—but central to their understanding of themselves and their lives (Moore 2014, p. 173). As Therese Shechter—prominent childfree documentarian and activist—phrased it in the inaugural webinar of the AoCV, childfreedom is the ability to “live an authentic life despite the pressure not to.” This takes time, effort, and energy (Shaw 2011). Accordingly, Ireland notes some are “becoming childless” in a long, often complicated process “involving the tension between living one’s life and giving one’s life particular meaning” (qtd. in Wager 2000, p. 393).

Work on the childfree so far has an inherently comparative dimension because it collects a range of genres, including academic work, activist manifestos, and literary essays. It demonstrates cross-disciplinarity: both methodologically (e.g. employing a range of qualitative methods, such as archival research, interviews, autoethnography, and textual analysis, alongside quantitative surveys and statistics) and theoretically (e.g. through the application of literature and theoretical insights from several disciplines, such as media/communication studies; history; sociology; philosophy; critical cultural studies; economics; environmental research; and psychology). This is unavoidable for a newly ‘recognized’ area such as childfreedom, where academic resources and statistics are often far-flung. Several of these reviews have concentrated on shoring up the gains so far won in establishing childfree research as a legitimate and growing area of investigation through systematic analyses of the academic literature (Agrillo and Nelini 2008; Blackstone and Stewart 2012; Duxbury et al. 2005; Frejka 2017; and more recently, Stahnke et al. 2024) and/or outlining the parameters for research in this area (Blackstone 2014; Ciesielski 2024a).

### Childfree contributions to research

The premises that centre childfree communities offer important interventions for several disciplines and sub-fields. Gender and family/life course studies are popular locations for childfree research, both in the academic literature and within university course offerings. However, as I wrote above in the section on feminism, often ideologies in these disciplines clash with the activist missions of some childfree people (Moore 2014, p. 173). This is because childfreedom unseats many of the most cherished aspects of these fields, throwing into question the relevance of the life stages and the assumed connections between ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ (Ireland 1993; Wager 2000). Here, one interesting example is the corrosive aspects of ambivalence around procreation (Frankfurt 1971), seen as one of the lynchpins of life course studies. People who fall into this category are often referred to as “fence-sitters” by the childfree community: Meyers (2001, p. 763) argues that “postponers” delude themselves because they spend so long imagining a parenthood that they do not actively work to bring into being—“(women) never articulate richly individualised self-portraits”.

There are also important research interventions into areas that may seem, on the surface, to be quite distinct—both from each other and from childfreedom as praxis: philosophy; linguistics; environmental studies; work/labour studies; aging; and even theology and religion. Many of these occur because people who foreground childfree perspectives must step outside the current intradisciplinary debates in various fields and instead revisit the core assumptions undergirding those arguments, which then encourages the ‘disciplinarily located’ researchers to accommodate new perspectives.

**Relationship and life satisfaction.** Along with the cons of fence-sitting, childfree research also addresses the negative impact of children on relationships: several studies have found an inverse

relationship between whether children are present (as well as the number of children) and the happiness experienced by the partners (Ball 1993; Hall 2003; Hansen 2012; Holahan 1983). Comparing couples with and without children, researchers found that the rate of the decline in relationship satisfaction is nearly twice as steep for couples who have children than those who do not (Doss et al. 2009). Likewise, having a better relationship with one’s partner is a more frequently cited reason (Carroll 2000; Elias 1997; Salgado and Magalhães 2024, p. 3), according to an article by Avison and Furnham (2015, p. 48) on personality and childfreedom, “going against the traditional perception that children are necessary for a happy and fulfilling relationship”. Several related studies looked at the gendered aspects of these results, including increased risks for women once they became mothers due to the lack of gender equality (Bahtiyar-Saygan and Sakalli-U’gurlu 2019; Bays 2017; Callan 1987; Carmichael and Whittaker 2007; Ciaccio et al. 2021).

The childfree community often references statistics like these to argue for the legitimacy of childfree relationships (both heterosexual and LGBT+ e.g. see Clarke et al. 2018) and also for not being in a relationship at all. Hall gives the example of what he terms, following Anthony Giddens, a ‘pure relationship,’ where the couple involved understand their connection as the primary (and perhaps sole) *raison d’être* in their relationship. Giddens believes it is possible to “transform intimate relationships into *sites* for self-actualization” (qtd. in Hall 2003; original emphasis). Several other childfree scholars study people who are not in relationships and may not ever want to be: this work often dovetails with research into sexuality (including asexuality: cf. Winer 2024) and changing family formations, altering how the public understands what constitutes a ‘family’ (Casper et al. 2016).

Along those lines, many childfree people have accepted the premise that we cannot actually ‘do it all.’ Discussion within the community centres around unearthing and contesting the unhelpful social ideologies that tell people (usually always women) they should smoothly juggle all the responsibilities that go along with keeping a family unit operating successfully (Rich et al. 2011; Riley 2008). “I’m one of those people who doesn’t believe that you can do all those things [motherhood and career] equally well and everybody turns out all right. I think that’s a fantasy. I think it’s a delusion, the superwoman thing” (qtd. in Kelly 2009, p. 163). Childfree studies work to contextualize and legitimize the conscious choice that goes into many childfree people’s decisions not to attempt to conceive (and to proactively avoid it through contraceptive use and sterilization); often this choice is solidified when people realise they need to be selective in terms of how many life responsibilities (e.g. marriage/partnership; career; housing; health; financial stability; extended family care; community contributions; and several additional, equally legitimate categories) they can fulfil adequately.

**Linguistic and philosophical shifts.** As one example, and as already shown in the Definitions sections of this article, accurately referring to people who choose not to have children means thinking more expansively about many of our most common definitions, such as ‘woman,’ ‘mother,’ ‘family,’ ‘relationship,’ and ‘less’ versus ‘free’ (DeLyser 2012, p. 72). Just as essential work was done by feminist and linguistics scholars, such as Luce Irigaray and Robin Lakoff, to highlight the masculine bias inherent in most languages (Mercadal 2021), a valid next step for childfree research could be to unearth the extent to which our language relies on reproduction-related words and sayings (e.g. ‘conceive,’ ‘bring into being,’ etc.), given that the Oxford English Dictionary counts ‘reproduction’ as one of its 5000 most common words.

Helen Petersen and Kristina Engwall's article on the "silent bodies" of voluntarily childless women is groundbreaking in this regard because it coins a term for women who do not mother that does not automatically see them as barren or lacking. However, even these authors found that when their participants used this term—silent bodies—they eventually fell back on biological determinism, which in turn reinstated the central role of pronatalism. As the authors recognize: "The study hence highlights how persistent the social and cultural link between motherhood and womanhood is, but also how this relationship can be challenged" (2013, p. 376). Gotlib's (2022, p. 186) work builds directly on Petersen and Engwall's definition by taking its liberatory potential a step further: what she calls "for is nothing short of a reification of new kinds of narratives about being female that speak to many longings, dreams, fears, and (self)-understandings—without any of them (necessarily) including considerations of motherhood". So, in her essay, Gotlib (2022, p. 197; original emphasis) understands Petersen and Engwall's silence as "not uncertainty at all—it is *the affirmative response itself*". She also philosophizes that these narratives will need to be recognised and upheld by wider society for childfree women (people) to 'take their place' as fully-fledged members of our larger human community (p. 201).

**Environmental concerns.** This wider culture has haltingly begun to realise that there can be—and should be—positive associations made between being childfree and environmental concerns, and not only through the direct correlation made by having 'one less child to tax the planet' (Gietel-Basten et al. 2022; Schneider-Mayerson and Leong 2020). Childfree people understand the necessity of choosing values and actions according to their moral code in the present and their responsibilities while they are here on earth (Milfont et al. 2012; Nakkerud 2021). Expressing strong connections with the natural world, 'Mary' discusses how this link shapes her conceptions of fertility:

I don't believe I'm any more or less of a woman whether I let my eggs become fertilized. I always tend to think of fertility...in terms of land and growth of natural things. As opposed to being fertile and infertile, in terms of reproductive ... Just because I don't have kids ... I think of earth, I think of nature, Mother Nature. I don't define it back then into procreating. I believe that I can be fertile in how I give back to the land. (qtd. in Matthews and Desjardins 2017, p. 36).

Rather than a kind of endlessly future-orientated unfurling whereby it is "always about doing it for the children," the childfree position asks: what if we did the right thing *now*, precisely because it is the right thing to do? Being childfree removes the option of moral projection and asks people to account for their actions in the here-and-now (Wynes and Nicholas 2017). Although essential work is being done on the positive links between caring for the environment and childfree perspectives through research centres such as the University of Michigan's Society, Population, and Environment program, and [Population Balance.org](http://PopulationBalance.org), further academic research is needed, particularly in gathering more robust quantitative data.

**Working conditions.** In the workforce literature, although several earlier studies only included the childfree position as one in several demographic groups focused on participating more fully in paid employment (Mueller and Yoder 1997; Riley 2008; Runkles-Pearson 2002), more recent research has taken a different approach (Boiarintseva et al. 2019/2021; Verniers 2020). New

work revisits the core assumptions of the labour disciplines by asking, as one example, whether a career and/or motherhood are the only two positions available to women (Dever and Saugeres 2004; Wood and Newton 2006). A compelling—and somewhat subversive—'childfree research-adjacent' work on women who regret becoming mothers by Donath (2017, pp. 204–5) phrases it this way:

The thought that motherhood might in itself be intolerable for women is often perceived as impossible because it is allegedly women's *raison d'être*. Due to this disbelief, one of the common reactions to regret is to assume it is due to difficult circumstances in the mother's life, especially the struggle between motherhood and paid work. This function has a wider context, in that motherhood and paid work outside the home are the only two options that women had in the collective imagination: either you want to be a mother, or you want to be a career woman.

Giving women (and others who parent/plan to parent) only two socially sanctioned options and forcing them to choose, Donath argues, is a blunt tool and can lead to regret. On the other hand, Kelly finds that many childfree people are not overly focused on career, although she also highlights the limited research on any groups apart from white, middle-class and above women, which may then limit the usefulness of findings that show childfree people stepping in and out of the workforce to pursue other aims, such as artistic endeavours or travelling (2009, p. 163). However, this flexibility also becomes a tightrope: as I show in the conclusion of this article, one of the main stereotypes against childfree people revolves around a kind of exasperation that they have this freedom to begin with (Ashburn-Nardo 2017; Bays 2017; Calhoun and Selby 1980). I then address the importance of unpicking these stereotypes, particularly in terms of the extent of childfree people's civic responsibilities.

**Aging, 'regret'—and the contemplative life.** Another persistent stereotype that childfree research has overturned is the idea that, in later years, people will regret their choice not to have children. If elderly people are childfree (rather than childless, both as defined at the start of this article), they evidence less regret than parents across the research literature (Abma and Martinez 2006; DeLyser 2012; DeOllos and Kapinus 2002; Dykstra and Hagestad 2007; Hansen et al. 2009; Newton and Stewart 2013). As one example, Koropecj-Cox (2002, p. 962) found participants who chose to remain childfree "scored similarly to mothers who reported excellent parent-child relationships on loneliness and depression scales". The core point appears to be whether those people being interviewed made a conscious choice: if they feel control over the choice they made, they are then content with their decision over the long-term and have no wish to revisit it (Stahnke et al. 2020; Stegen et al. 2021). Further, in terms of revising the life course literature, DeLyser (2012, p. 72) suggests "Developmental maturity could be expanded and thus conceived as achieving the ability or psychological capacity to consider another human and engage in relationships, with the outcomes differing between those who chose to parent and those who did not"; thus making psychological, social, and academic room for a group that—until only recently—has been steadfastly overlooked (Gold and Wilson 2002; Harrington 2019; Mollen 2006).

One of the reasons for this lack of regret by older childfree people is that this choice requires a level of sustained introspection on the part of most people making the decision, particularly when such a decision is constantly brought into question by wider social norms (Blackstone and Stewart 2016;

Ekelund and Ask 2021). This may also gesture towards why there has long been alignment between the spiritual orders and celibacy/choosing not to have children. It is an open—and interesting—question whether some members of these orders may have been drawn towards this kind of commitment *precisely* because it required them to disengage from the social (and within that, abstain from procreation and the parental) and move towards the scholarly and godly realms instead. Connected to this idea, Baumgarten (2004, p. 178) writes compellingly about research claiming that under the dominant religious precepts of the 12th century—that considered devout women heroes and even martyrs to be honoured—some mothers deliberated needs and desires oscillating between familial and religious values, which in some cases led them to leave their homes and children in favour of an ascetic life in a convent.

### Current childfree concerns

This section addresses current struggles that the childfree community still faces. I look at legal provisions, intersectionality, and the continuing necessity of disproving stereotypes, while acknowledging that there are still other important areas that cannot all be covered here.

In 2025 with several Western countries still seeing childfreedom as a “third rail” in political jargon—that topic which is political suicide for any party that raises it—the major areas of activism must still be concentrated on the close and essential relationship between reproductive freedom and reproductive justice. Childfree research recognises that one precedes the other. Childfreedom is not possible without access to contraceptives, abortion, and sterilization (Campbell 1999); while at the same time, securing the ability to choose allows people to *understand* that they have a choice in whether to procreate (Moore 2014, p. 173). As Shechter (personal communication, 9 Sept 2024) addressed to the AoCV audience, “when we can’t control our reproductive life, we can’t control the rest of our life. When we allow others to define and misrepresent us, we lose the ability to command respect and have a voice in our own future.”

Following on from this realization—one Moore (2014, p. 173) terms reproductive consciousness—reproductive justice moves what could be seen as an individual epiphany squarely into the realm of policymaking and equity concerns. This brings into focus areas such as legal provisions that favour childbearing and rearing, often at the expense of other demographic groups and their rights (Thornley 2022). Leong (2015) has written about the ongoing inability of American jurisprudence to recognise any other avocational commitments to the same extent it venerates procreation:

The claim that having a child or engaging in other caregiving warrants a leave, yet these other pursuits [examples provided such as travel, political activism, volunteering, or writing] do not, is certainly defensible, but we should recognize it openly as a normative judgment that requires justification. Thus far, such policies are, as Case and others describe them, “undertheorized” [fn. 339]. The argument that child-rearing is a social good in excess of all other human activities is not entirely satisfying [fn. 340] (p. 1411).

Malik (2024) from *The Guardian* views this conundrum from the opposite perspective, stating:

Women with children are handed social acceptance for their vital investment in “the future”, in exchange for unrewarded, unsupported labour that props up and stabilises the economic and social status quo. All the while suffering sneeriness about the value of their work in

comparison with the serious graft of the men who win the bread.

Reproductive justice provides the next logical step in greater representation and recognition for childfree people, and—indeed—everyone who cares for others (i.e. all people). In this case, protection of parenthood and families should also extend to protection of childfree people under the law, in all countries. In the third decade of the twenty-first century, this is hardly ever the case. Blackstone (2019) notes: “While rates of childlessness have nearly doubled since the advent of reliable birth control in the 1960s, our cultural norms, values, and beliefs haven’t caught up to this reality”. One might read this impasse as a failure of our sociological imagination, a failure to imagine—for women, but also for childfree people more generally—the multitude of ways it is possible to make a good life. Through this article, I hope readers begin to glimpse that not only is it eminently possible to be childfree and fulfilled, but also that childfreedom may prove one of our most valid and sustainable ways of life as we collectively face an uncertain future.

That said, what becomes clear in looking at the literature more widely is that there is still a critical need for broader perspectives on the childfree demographic than those only provided by middle- to upper-class, White, able-bodied women (Ireland 1993; Veevers 1979). The shadow of intersectionality suggests that white privilege may be an undertheorized factor in how people decide to become childfree and what that experience means for them (Kelly 2009, p. 163). For example, sometimes minorities and people of colour are making a childfree choice from a place of constraint, unlike the popular cultural understanding of the childfree demographic being ‘carefree’ and unburdened by financial or intersectional concerns, such as race, ethnicity and nationality.

Another largely unrecognized reason may be the importance placed on children as a way to ‘grow the demographic’ in certain under-represented ethnic groups; this often makes it extremely difficult—and sometimes even impossible—for members of that demographic to label themselves as ‘childfree’ (Riley 2008, p. 53). And it would be remiss not to highlight the numerous examples of forced sterilization across different nations and ethnic groups—often in the name of colonization—where women’s choice was removed before the fact, without their knowledge or consent (Gillespie 2003, p. 124). As one of the main ‘absences’ in childfree demographics, minority women are a muted group, just as childfree people form a similar muted group within feminism—and within the consciousness of wider society. So, there are several groups of childfree people who are not yet recognized or adequately represented in the current conversation; more research is needed to bring those voices out further.

Finally, and somewhat personally for me, it is also important to recognize and name a subtle but damaging assumption about people without children (for whatever reason): that they are more committed to their communities, their jobs, other people (Casper et al. 2016; Doyle et al. 2012; Giles et al. 2009). Recent rhetoric from politicians ranging from J.D. Vance [US] through to Viktor Orbán [Hungary], as well as received wisdom (BuzzFeed), suggests they should be, at least—as though to somehow counter their ‘lack’? (Turnbull et al. 2016). I also experienced this presumption occurring during the 2025 55th annual Popular Culture Association Conference, where I attended a panel session on Women’s Studies: History and Politics. Specifically, I was interested in a talk on “Reclaiming ‘Childless Cat Lady’: A Content Analysis of Feminist Memes vs. J.D. Vance’s Rhetoric”; in the Q&A, the presenters talked about how many childfree people commenting online were at pains to point out their step-parenting, pet parenting, and wider community-building efforts.

But I ask: why the need to constantly justify simply being childfree?

This ‘divide and conquer’ approach benefits no one and continues to pit parents against non-parents in unhealthy and unproductive ways (Sapleton 2018). Just as we need to understand that until everyone is free to make the reproductive decisions appropriate for their lives, no one is, so it is important to extend that understanding to other aspects of everyday life. We can make space for choice and growth in all of us, most especially when our choices differ.

### Data Availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Received: 12 August 2025; Accepted: 26 February 2026;

Published online: 20 March 2026

### References

- Abma JC, Martinez GM (2006) Childlessness among older women in the United States: trends and profiles. *J Marriage Fam* 68:1045–1056
- Agrillo C, Nelini C (2008) Childfree by choice: a review. *J Cultural Geogr* 25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873630802476292>
- Albertini M, Brini E (2021) I’ve changed my mind. The intentions to be childless, their stability and realisation. *Eur Societ* 23:119–160
- Ashburn-Nardo L (2017) Parenthood as a moral imperative? Moral outrage and the stigmatization of voluntarily childfree women and men. *Sex Roles* 76:393–401
- Avison M, Furnham A (2015) Personality and voluntary childlessness. *J Popul Res* 32:45–67
- Avivi A (2017) Childfree women: surviving the pushback and forming an identity in the internet era. A womb of her own: women’s struggle for sexual and reproductive autonomy. Routledge, New York, pp. 145–169
- Bahtiyar-Saygan B, Sakallı-Uğurlu N (2019) Development of attitudes toward voluntary childlessness scale and its associations with ambivalent sexism in Turkey. *J Fam Issues* 40:2499–2527
- Ball AL (1993) Childless by Choice: Couples Who Sidestep the Parent Trap. NY 26:48, 50–53
- Bays A (2017) Perceptions, emotions, and behaviors toward women based on parental status. *Sex Roles* 76:138–155
- Baumgarten E (2004) Mothers and children: Jewish family life in medieval Europe. Princeton University Press, New Jersey
- Blackstone A (2019) Childfree by choice: the movement redefining family and creating a new age of independence. Penguin, New York
- Blackstone A (2014a) Childless or childfree? *Contexts* 13:68–70
- Blackstone A, Stewart MD (2016) There’s more thinking to decide”: how the childfree decide not to parent. *Fam J* 24:296–303
- Blackstone A, Stewart MD (2012) Choosing to be childfree: research on the decision not to parent. *Sociol Compass* 6:718–727
- Boiarintseva G, Ezzedeen SR, Wilkin C (2021) Definitions of work-life balance in childfree dual-career couples: an inductive typology. *Equality Diversity Inclusion*, <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-12-2020-0368>
- Boiarintseva G, Ezzedeen SR, Wilkin CL (2019) Work-life balance of dual-career professional couples without children: a qualitative study. *Acad Manag Proc* 1:12462
- Brown A (2021) Growing share of childless adults in U.S. don’t expect to ever have children. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/11/19/growing-share-of-childless-adults-in-u-s-dont-expect-to-ever-have-children/>
- Calhoun LG, Selby JW (1980) Voluntary childlessness, involuntary childlessness, and having children: a study of social perceptions. *Fam Relat* 29:181–183
- Callan VJ (1987) The personal and marital adjustment of mothers and of voluntarily and involuntarily childless wives. *J Marriage Fam* 49:847–856
- Campbell A (1999) Childfree and sterilized: women’s decisions and medical responses. A&C Black, London
- Carmichael GA, Whittaker A (2007) Choice and circumstance: qualitative insights into contemporary childlessness in Australia. *Eur J Popul* 23:111–143
- Carroll L (2000) Families of two: Interviews with happily married couples without children by choice. Xlibris Corporation, San Francisco
- Casper WJ, Marquardt DJ, Roberto KJ, Buss C (2016) The hidden family lives of single adults without dependent children. *The Oxford Handbook of Work and Family*, New York, 182–195. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199337538.013.15>
- Ciaccio V, Bronson CA, Contrada RJ (2021) Gender stereotypes and parental status: A comparison of fathers, mothers, and the childless-by-choice. *Psychol Men Masculinities* 22:7
- Ciesielski P (2024a) Construction and validation of a tool for measuring prejudice toward childfree people. *Eur J Psychol Assess*, <https://doi.org/10.1027/1015-5759/a000822>
- Clarke V, Hayfield N, Ellis SJ, Terry G (2018) Lived experiences of childfree lesbians in the United Kingdom: a qualitative exploration. *J Fam Issues* 39:4133–4155
- Connidis IA, McMullin JA (1993) To have or have not: parent status and the subjective well-being of older men and women. *Gerontologist* 33:630–636
- DeLysér G (2012) At midlife, intentionally childfree women and their experiences of regret. *Clin Soc Work J* 40:66–74
- DeOllos IY, Kapinus CA (2002) Aging childless individuals and couples: suggestions for new directions in research. *Sociol Inq* 72:72–80
- Dever M, Saugeres L (2004) “I forgot to have children!” untangling links between feminism, careers and voluntary childlessness. *J Assoc Res Mothering* 6:116–126
- Donath O (2017) *Regretting motherhood*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA
- Doss BD, Rhoades G, Stanley SM, Markman H (2009) The effect of the transition to parenthood on relationship quality: an 8-year prospective study. *J Personal Soc Psychol* 96:601–619
- Doyle J et al. (2012) A phenomenological exploration of the childfree choice in a sample of Australian women. *J Health Psychol* 18:397–407
- Duxbury L et al. (2005) Childfree by choice: a study of childfree women in North America—Summary report. Centre for Research and Education on Women and Work, Ottawa
- Dykstra PA, Hagestad GO (2007) Road less taken: developing a nuanced view of older adults without children. *J Fam Issues* 28:1275–1310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07303822>
- Ekelund M, Ask K (2021) Stigmatization of voluntarily childfree women and men in the UK: The roles of expected regret and moral judgment. *Soc Psychol*, <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000455>
- Elias M (1997) Couples in pre-kid, no-kid marriages happiest. *USA Today*
- Frankfurt H (1971) Freedom of the will and the concept of person. *J Philos* 68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2024717>
- Frejka T (2017) Childlessness in the United States. In: *Childlessness in Europe: contexts, causes, and consequences*. Springer International Publishing, Cham, Switzerland, pp. 159–179
- Gietel-Basten S, Rotkirch A, Sobotka T (2022) Changing the perspective on low birth rates: why simplistic solutions won’t work. *Brit Med J*, 379. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2022-072670>
- Giles DC, Shaw RL, Morgan W (2009) Representations of voluntary childlessness in the UK Press, 1990–2008. *J Health Psychol* 14:1218–1228
- Gillespie R (2003) Childfree and feminine: understanding the gender identity of voluntarily childless women. *Femin Soc* 17:122–136
- Gold JM, Wilson JS (2002) Legitimizing the childfree family: the role of the family counselor. *Fam J* 10:70–74
- Gotlib A (2022) Refusing to be othered: redefining the “silent bodies” of childfree women. *childfree across the disciplines: academic and activist perspectives on not choosing children*. Rutgers University Press, pp. 185–204. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2v55gxf.15>
- Hall DR (2003) The pure relationship and below replacement fertility. *Can Stud Popul* 30:51–69
- Hansen T (2012) Parenthood and happiness: a review of folk theories versus empirical evidence. *Soc Indic Res* 108:29–64
- Hansen T, Slagsvold B, Moum T (2009) Childlessness and psychological well-being in midlife and old age: an examination of parental status effects across a range of outcomes. *Soc Indic Res* 94:343–362
- Harrington R (2019) Childfree by choice. *Stud Gen Sexuality* 20:22–35
- Hartnett CS, Gemmill A (2020) Recent trends in US childbearing intentions. *Demography* 57:2035–2045
- Hintz EA, Brown CL (2020) Childfree and “bingoed”: a relational dialectics theory analysis of meaning creation in online narratives about voluntary childlessness. *Commun Monogr* 87:244–266
- Holahan CK (1983) The relationship between information search in the childbearing decision and life satisfaction for parents and nonparents. *Fam Relat* 32:527–535
- Houseknecht SK (1979) Timing of the decision to remain voluntarily childless: Evidence for continuous socialization. *Psychol Women Q* 4:81–96
- Ireland MS (1993) *Reconceiving women: separating motherhood from female identity*. Guilford, New York
- Kelly M (2009) Women’s voluntary childlessness: a radical rejection of motherhood? *Womens Stud Q*, 37:157–172
- Koropecyj-Cox T (2002) Beyond parental status: psychological well-being in middle and old age. *J Marriage Fam* 64:957–971
- Leong N (2015) Negative identity. *South Calif Law Rev* 88:1357–1419

- Malik N (2024) The right's obsession with childless women isn't just about ideology: it's essential to the capitalist machine. *The Guardian*
- Mercadal T (2021) Language and gender. Salem Press Encyclopaedia, New Jersey
- Meyers DT (2001) The rush to motherhood—pronatalist discourse and women's autonomy. *Signs* 26:735–773
- Milfont TL, Harré N, Sibley CG, Duckitt J (2012) The climate-change dilemma: examining the association between parental status and political party support. *J Appl Soc Psychol* 42:2386–2410
- Minkin R, Horowitz J, Aragão C (2024) The experiences of U.S. adults who don't have children. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2024/07/25/the-experiences-of-us-adults-who-dont-have-children/>
- Mollen D (2006) Voluntarily childfree women: experiences and counseling considerations. *J Ment Health Counsel* 28:269–282
- Moore J (2014) Reconsidering childfreedom: a feminist exploration of discursive identity construction in childfree LiveJournal communities. *Womens Stud Commun*, 37:159–180
- Mueller KA, Yoder JD (1997) Gendered norms for family size, employment, and occupation: are there personal costs for violating them? *Sex Roles* 36:207–220
- Nandy A (2013) Outliers of motherhood: incomplete women or fuller humans? *Econ Polit Weekly*, XLVIII:53–59
- Nakkerud E (2021) There are many people like me, who feel they want to do something bigger<sup>®</sup>: an exploratory study of choosing not to have children based on environmental concerns. *Ecopsychology* 13:200–209
- Newton NJ, Stewart AJ (2013) The road not taken: women's life paths and gender-linked personality traits. *J Res Personal* 47:306–316
- Peck E Senderowitz J (1974) *Pronatalism: the myth of mom and apple pie*. Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York
- Peterson H, Engwall K (2013) Silent bodies: childfree women's gendered and embodied experiences. *Eur J Womens Stud* 20:376–389. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506812471338>
- Polatnick RM (1973) Why men don't rear children. *Berkeley J Sociol* 18:45–86
- Rich S, Taket A, Graham M, Shelley J (2011) Unnatural', 'unwomanly', 'uncreditable' and 'undervalued': the significance of being a childless woman in Australian society. *Gend Issues* 28:226–247
- Riley TM (2008) *Childfree couples' experiences of stereotyping, harassment and pressure*. Diss. The University of Waikato
- Runkles-Pearson PK (2002) The changing relations of family and the workplace: extending antidiscrimination laws to parents and nonparents alike. *N Y Univ Law Rev* 77:833–865
- Salgado F, Magalhães SI (2024) Representations and experiences of childfree women. *Women's Studies International Forum* 102
- Sapleton N (2018) *Voluntary and involuntary childlessness: the joys of otherhood?* Emerald Publishing, Leeds, UK
- Schneider-Mayerson M, Leong KL (2020) Eco-reproductive concerns in the age of climate change. *Clim Change*, 163:1007–1023
- Shapiro G (2014) Voluntary childlessness: a critical review of the literature. *Stud Matern* 6:1–15
- Shaw RL (2011) Women's experiential journey toward voluntary childlessness: an interpretative phenomenological analysis. *J Commun Appl Soc Psychol* 21:151–163
- Somers MD (1993) A comparison of voluntarily childfree adults and parents. *J Marriage Fam* 55:643–650
- Stahnke B, Blackstone A, Howard H (2020) Lived experiences and life satisfaction of childfree women in late life. *Fam J* 28:159–167
- Stahnke B, Cooley ME, Blackstone A (2024) A systematic review of life satisfaction experiences among childfree adults. *Family J*, 10664807221104795. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807221104795>
- Stegen H, Switsers L, De Donder L (2021) Life stories of voluntarily childless older people: A retrospective view on their reasons and experiences. *J Fam Issues* 42:1536–1558
- Thornley D (2022) *Childfree across the disciplines: academic and activist perspectives on not choosing children*. Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2v55gxf>
- Turnbull B, Graham ML, Taket AR (2016) Social exclusion of Australian childless women in their reproductive years. *Soc Incl* 4:102–115
- U. S. National Center for Health Statistics (2022) *Childlessness*. Retrieved from [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key\\_statistics/c-keystat.htm#childlessness](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key_statistics/c-keystat.htm#childlessness)
- Veever JE (1979) Voluntary childlessness: a review of issues and evidence. *Marriage Fam Rev* 2:1–26
- Verniers C (2020) Behind the maternal wall: the hidden backlash toward childfree working women. *J Theor Soc Psychol* 4:107–124
- Wager M (2000) I. Childless by Choice? Ambivalence and the Female Identity. *Feminism Psychol* 10:389–395
- Winer C (2024) Understanding asexuality: a sociological review. *Sociol Compass* e13240, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13240>
- Wood GJ, Newton J (2006) Childlessness and women managers: 'choice,' context and discourses. *Gender Work Organ* 13:338–358
- Wynes S, Nicholas KA (2017) The climate mitigation gap: education and government recommendations miss the most effective individual actions. *Environ Res Lett*, 12, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/aab210>
- Matthews EJ, Desjardins M (2017) *Remaking Our Identities: Couples' Experiences of Voluntary Childlessness: Couples' Experiences of Voluntary Childlessness*. *The Family Journal* 25(1):31–39

### Author contributions

Sole authorship, therefore N/A.

### Funding

Open access funding provided by Corvinus University of Budapest.

### Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

### Ethics approval

NA.

### Informed consent

NA.

### Additional information

**Correspondence** and requests for materials should be addressed to Davinia Thornley.

**Reprints and permission information** is available at <http://www.nature.com/reprints>

**Publisher's note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

© The Author(s) 2026