Stigma Resistance in Online Childfree Communities: The Limitations of Choice Rhetoric

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Abstract

People who are voluntarily childless, or "childfree", face considerable stigma. Researchers have begun to explore how these individuals respond to stigma, usually focusing on interpersonal stigma management strategies. We explored participants' responses to stigma in a way that is cognisant of broader social norms and gender power relations. Using a feminist discursive psychology framework, we analysed women's and men's computer-assisted communication about their childfree status. Our analysis draws attention to "identity work" in the context of stigma. We show how the strategic use of "choice" rhetoric allowed participants to avoid stigmatised identities, and was used in two contradictory ways. On the one hand, participants drew on a "childfree-by-choice script", which enabled them to hold a positive identity of themselves as autonomous, rational, and responsible decision-makers. On the other hand, they mobilised a "disavowal of choice script" that allowed a person who is unable to choose childlessness (for various reasons) to hold a blameless identity regarding deviation from the norm of parenthood. We demonstrate how choice rhetoric allowed participants to resist stigma and challenge pronatalism to some extent; we discuss the political potential of these scripts for reproductive freedom.

Keywords: childfree, choice, online, pronatalism, stigma resistance, voluntary childlessness

Voluntary Childlessness, Stigma, and Resistance: The Use and Limitations of

Choice Rhetoric in Online Communities

Research in a range of contexts has drawn attention to the stigmatisation of voluntary childlessness as a non-normative social identity, especially for women (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Shapiro, 2014). A few qualitative studies have explored childfree people's own perspectives and experiences of stigma. These studies draw largely on Erving Goffman's (1963) stigma theory, in which "stigma management" is held to be a general feature of social interactions occurring in relation to identity norms. For the most part, these studies have explored accounts of the behavioural and communication strategies used by childfree people in order to manage their identities when interacting with others. The findings show how childfree people reflexively or pre-emptively avoid or reject "spoiled identities" (in Goffman's terms) and attempt to preserve a "good self" through considered self-presentation, impression management, and strategic disclosures concerning their reproductive status (Durham, 2008; Park, 2002; Riessman, 2000; Veevers, 1973). The focus work using stigma theory is largely on the micro-politics of interpersonal interactions within local settings.

In the current study we expand on previous work to consider also the broader social norms and power relations that surround reproduction. Using a feminist discursive psychology approach, we explored the relationship among the rhetorical organisation of talk, the discursive purpose of particular rhetorical strategies, and power relations (Bamberg, 2004). Our data were generated from childfree-specific websites and email interviews. We sought to understand how childfree individuals construct and manage their online identities, and identify the rhetorical strategies they employ in resisting pronatalist discourses when accounting for their decision to remain childfree.

Our feminist discursive theoretical approach allowed us to conceptualise voluntary childlessness as a struggle against dominant, regulatory norms that promote procreation

(Butler, 1993). We theorise responses to stigma as discursive practices that either reinforce or resist dominant norms, and in so doing shape the reproductive possibilities available to women and men. We chose to conduct an online qualitative study utilising childfree-specific websites, because these websites, with the aid of social networking, have helped develop a growing international "childfree" movement comprised of virtual communities. The websites offer support and allow childfree people to connect with like-others. The internet allows people to construct identities in ways that might not otherwise be possible, given both the relative uncommonness of voluntary childlessness, and the marginalising effect of the normative expectation of parenthood (Moore, 2014). Online childfree communities allow spaces for information-sharing, legitimation, and solidarity, and also potentially for the formulation of strategies of resistance (Basten, 2009; Blackstone & Stewart, 2013; Moore, 2011, 2014).

In our online study we noted that participants attempted to address stigma in a range of ways, using a number of rhetorical strategies. Our initial reading of the data highlighted the use of "choice" as one such strategy. In this paper, we focus on the ways that participants in several online settings attempted to avoid stigmatised identity positions by drawing on the rhetoric of choice in their identity work. "Choice" is a central concept in contemporary Western understandings of selfhood, that emphasise autonomy, individual agency, personal freedom, and empowerment (Gill, 2008).

Choice and related ideas are suggested by the commonly used terms—such as voluntarily childless, childfree, or, more explicitly, childfree-by-choice—which are intended to reject associations with absence or lack (Gillespie, 2003). These terms are, however, contested in some instances precisely because of their over-emphasis on choice (as well as, *inter alia*, the preference to identify with different terms or not be named at all. For a full discussion on terminology see Moore, 2014). In this paper, we use the terms "childfree" and

"voluntarily childless" interchangeably, simultaneously acknowledging their contested nature and deploying them in light of the aims of our paper and our use of data from sites specifically identified as childfree.

As we shall show, choice rhetoric was central to two contradictory scripts that participants' drew on in their identity work. Sometimes participants drew on a "childfree-by-choice script," which foregrounds the idea of individual choice and allowed for self-positioning as rational decision-makers. At other times, they drew on an opposing discursive resource, the "disavowal of choice script," to reject the understanding that a particular action is freely decided upon. Instead, participants located their actions within biological processes or self-discovery of one's "true" nature (similar to the rhetorical strategy in "coming-out-the-closet" narratives of sexual identity, such as those reported by Gibson and Macleod, 2014). Each of these scripts represents broad overarching discursive resources, which were mobilised in particular rhetorical strategies to address stigma in different ways, by repairing troubled identities and, to varying degrees, challenging the normative status of parenthood.

In the following, we provide a contextual discussion of the stigma associated with voluntary childlessness. We first explicate the significance of pronatalism as the broad discursive backdrop against which reproductive decisions occur, particularly the relationship between pronatalism and social stigma. Second, we discuss the research on stigma management in relation to voluntary childlessness. We then outline our own feminist discursive psychology approach to the topic, within which we understand people's responses to stigma. Finally, we present the results and practical implications of our investigation.

Pronatalism and the Social Stigma of Voluntary Childlessness

The normative expectation of parenthood, together with negative social evaluations of the childfree, has been understood by researchers as being related to pronatalism (Moore &

Geist-Martin, 2013). Pronatalism encapsulates a number of key assumptions. First, having children is seen as natural and fundamentally located in human instincts and biology. Second, childbearing is viewed as a significant developmental milestone in the normal progression through heterosexual adulthood and as a significant marker of normal gender development.[i] Finally, parenting is seen as personally fulfilling, and as essential for a happy and meaningful life (Morison & Macleod, 2015).

Pronatalism intersects with, and is supported by, a number of culturally-specific discourses (such as nationalism or religious rhetoric) that manifest differently in various contexts. For example, depending on the contextual and political factors of a particular country, procreation might be constructed by the state as the patriotic duty of certain individuals (Moore & Geist-Martin, 2013). The strategy of "coercive pronatalism" (Heitlinger, 1991, p. 345), for instance, utilised in apartheid South Africa and more recently in India, mobilises ideas of ethnic purity and nationalism. Coercive pronatalism involves both encouraging procreation among socially privileged women—who have consequently struggled to gain the right to forgo motherhood by avoiding or terminating pregnancies—and, reducing procreation among less privileged women— who have had the right to motherhood undermined through disproportional and non-consensual sterilisation (Gillespie, 2003; Shapiro, 2014). Religious and cultural discourses also may buttress pronatalism. In many African contexts, for example, full adult status is not granted to people who are unmarried and childless (Dyer, Abrahams, Mokoena, & van der Spuy, 2004), while in Poland, pronatalist discourses and traditional multigenerational family patterns are reinforced by the strong influence of Catholicism (Garncarek, 2010).

Although there are various cultural inflections, pronatalist discourses tend to work together to support common assumptions underpinning pronatalism. Pronatalist assumptions ultimately uphold the social "norm of parenthood and convictions of its 'naturalness',

'rightness', and 'selflessness'" (Park, 2002, p. 25), even among those women targeted for restrictions on the number of children that they bear. At the same time, pronatalism maintains a "hostile discursive environment" (Meyers, 2001, p. 764) for many people who do not reproduce. These norms are further maintained when a scenario of "procreative heterosexual bliss" (Meyers, 2001, p. 762)—premised on an idealised or glorified view of parenthood and children's value—is contrasted with exceedingly negative constructions of childlessness (Meyers, 2001). When juxtaposed in this way, the possibility of not having children is dismissed as a viable alternative; purposeful deviation from the "normal," acceptable life course is regulated.

Indeed, it is precisely because their reproductive status is interpreted as a wilful deviation from the norm, that childfree people are open to stigma—especially for those who are considered "fit to reproduce" (i.e., married, White, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual persons) (Park, 2002, 2005). Voluntarily forgoing childbearing is seen as promoting individualism and family breakdown, and undermining personal, familial, and social well-being (Heitlinger, 1991; Park, 2005). Consequently, most negative social evaluations of childfree people are related to the intentional character of their reproductive status, such as being selfish, cold, irresponsible, immature, materialistic, or too career-oriented (Gillespie, 2000; Graham & Rich, 2012; Letherby, 2002).

Voluntarily childless women are particularly susceptible to stigma because they disrupt dominant constructions of female identity to which maternity is central (Hird & Abshoff, 2003; Shapiro, 2014). Men's experiences (other than as women's partners) have been far less documented. However, research with involuntarily childless men does suggest that the stigma these men encounter also is often informed by assumptions about gendered normality (e.g., Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Throsby & Gill, 2004; cf. Terry & Braun, 2011).

There is also some suggestion of such assumptions in the emerging research on stigma and voluntary childlessness that includes men (Shapiro, 2014; Terry & Braun, 2011).

Negative evaluations of childfree people in general tend to cohere around three common constructions, namely: (a) deficiency (i.e., as lacking in various ways for missing out on having children, leading to loneliness, meaninglessness, and ultimately to regret), (b) psychological damage or deviance (i.e., interpreting voluntary childlessness as related to emotional trauma or the lack of "normal" desires), and (c) selfishness (i.e., focusing on one's own needs and desires rather than the interests of society or the would-be child) (Morison & Macleod, 2015). These negative ascriptions serve to position childfree people outside the realm of normality as "Other" and to maintain the norm of parenthood. Childfree people's experiences of this stigma, including the ways that they respond to or "manage" stigma, have begun to be documented in research, as we discuss next.

Research on Stigma and Voluntary Childlessness

Researchers "have only recently begun examining the different approaches taken by the voluntarily childless to preserve a positive self-identity in the face of prejudice and discrimination" (Shapiro, 2014, p. 9). This has mostly involved qualitative studies of women's and heterosexual couple's accounts of the behavioural or communicative strategies that they make use of in order to avoid, diminish, or challenge social stigma. In these studies (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002; Durham, 2008; Park, 2002; Riessman, 2000; Veevers, 1973), three common ways of responding to stigma have been identified from participants' accounts. These responses also resonate with our own findings, as we shall demonstrate later. The three common responses include: avoiding, minimising, or challenging stigma.

Avoidant responses are centred on forestalling others' adverse reactions or lack of understanding by strategically concealing what Goffman (1963) refers to as a discreditable (not easily visible) stigma. Childfree people report that they conceal their reproductive status

when they anticipate being questioned, criticised, or asked to explain themselves. Others report avoiding situations altogether where questioning might occur (Durham, 2008; Riessman, 2000). When childfree people do encounter negative responses, some have described how they privately reframe and/or ignore the responses (e.g., by attributing them to ignorance or not taking them "seriously") (Riessman, 2000).

A second common strategy involves using explanations or justifications that minimise personal responsibility and difference from the norm. Such explanations may include, for instance, misrepresenting childlessness as related to infertility, complications, or postponement of parenthood (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002; Park, 2002; Riessman, 2000; Veevers, 1973). The implication that one would like to, or still will, have children, downplays childfree people's difference from parents or individuals anticipating having children (Veevers, 1973).

The third common strategy directly challenges stigma, especially the ascriptions of Otherness (as deficient, damaged, deviant, or selfish) discussed above (Park, 2002; Terry & Braun, 2011; Veevers, 1973, 1975). Contrary to the previous strategies, people who challenge stigma emphasise and reconfigure their difference from normative identities; they reframe their status as desirable and even as indicative of superiority. They invert the usual positive positioning of parents and negative positioning of the childfree (Taylor, 2003; Veevers, 1973), in such a way that they "condemn the condemner" (Park, 2002, p. 39) and negotiate alternative, socially desirable, identities.

The Utility of a Feminist Discursive Psychology Framework

The research reviewed above has largely drawn on Goffman's (1963) stigma theory to understand how childfree people manage stigma. Like other research that has used stigma theory, this research has shown how "individuals strategically manage information about

themselves in interactions [and] …control what others know about them by selective

disclosure or concealment" (Riessman, 2000, p. 112). Yet, when considering the findings of

this research, it is possible to see that people do more than just *manage* stigma through

avoidance, concealment, and selective disclosure. They may sometimes also actively *resist* or

reject stigma. As Terry and Braun (2011) reported in their study about pre-emptive

vasectomies, participants were able to challenge or resist pronatalist discourse by articulating

a "counter-normative" script.

      Riessman (2000) argued that work on stigma management often has failed to consider

how strategies that respond to stigma relate to the wider context, especially structural factors

and broader social identities. She suggests that some of these problems can be remedied by

drawing on "the feminist language of resistance … [which] represents the complexity of the

process better than stigma theory's language of interpersonal management strategies" (p.

122). Accordingly, our work is informed by a feminist discursive psychology approach and,

like Riessman (2000), we attempt to explicitly connect people's responses, in which they

avoid, minimise, or challenge stigma, to broader power relations. Our concern is with the

ways that responses to stigmatizing in local contexts may also be understood as forms of

resistance to social norms that reinforce the powerful imperative for people to procreate.

      Discursive psychologists have developed Goffman's (1963) concept of "face-work,"

the micro-politics of self-presentation and impression management. From a discursive

psychology perspective, social identities are constructed and performed in people's talk

through **"**relational manoeuvring" (Bamberg, 2004, p. 221) or rhetorical work, known as

"identity work" (Taylor, 2006, p. 95). A significant part of this identity work is the

re/fashioning of social identities in relation to socially undesirable identities or "identity

trouble" (Taylor, 2006). Identity work is done in order to attain or retain "a positive social

value" (Bamberg, 2004, p. 221). This work is both enabled and restricted by broader social meanings that speakers actively take up, negotiate, and contest (Taylor, 2006).

Approaching the topic of voluntary childlessness, from the perspective of identity work enables us to extend the focus beyond interpersonal management strategies, and to consider people's active agency in relation to the wider regulatory norms surrounding reproduction (Butler, 1993; Riessman, 2000). Our aim is to consider how the various strategies that are used to repair troubled identities potentially challenge the procreation imperative, and in so doing, broaden the range of reproductive possibilities available to people. We discuss our methods further below, after providing the background to our study.

The Current Study

Online communities—as spaces where people argue, debate, and construct their identities—have been identified as a suitable and useful source of data for discursive studies. Online spaces function as sites for the cultural contestation of meaning, the construction of social phenomena through language, and for the re/production and resistance of discourses (Jowett, 2015). Online childfree communities in particular have been identified as a significant resource for childfree people as a stigmatised group. These online groups can be thought of as "'common condition communities' where individuals who share a certain characteristic come together to communicate" (Moore, 2011, p. 12). There is variation in terms of the stance groups take (e.g., irreverent "child-haters" versus moderate groups), their openness to outsiders, and their identification with the label childfree (Moore, 2014). However, such groups have been noted as significant for providing spaces for resistance and support, especially in contexts where voluntary childlessness is less readily accepted (Basten, 2009).

Using online methods to do research with voluntarily childless people not only allows researchers to access a diverse range of participants, but also allow research to occur in a setting where participants feel relatively secure, have greater control over the level of their participation, and can maintain their anonymity (Markham, 2011). In keeping with these values, we, as researchers, did not attempt to control the flow of conversations once the initial prompts (see below) were posted by us. At times we asked questions to encourage further discussion when there were lulls, to clarify points, and sometimes to probe particular topics. Data generation proceeded until saturation was reached and the final data set comprised 288 discussion forum posts and eight email interviews. We provide a detailed description of the data that were generated in the following section.

Method

Data Generation and Procedures

The discussion posts were made by 98 individuals; some participants were more active in discussions than others and made multiple posts. Participants were engaged via group discussions in forums on three childfree websites. Two of the websites were pre-existing moderate childfree websites; a third website was started for the purposes of this study. Although websites are accessible to people from all over the world, the two pre-existing sites tended to attract European and North American participants. We set up the third website in order to draw participants from other parts of the world who might not know of or visit the other websites.

We publicised our website on social media platforms (e.g., Twitter) to increase visibility of the study and encourage participation. Visitors to our site were invited to take part in discussions on any of the three sites. Our website also contained more detailed information about the study than the pre-existing sites. In addition to discussion pages, we created separate pages that described the study and outlined ethical issues; introduced the

researchers (with our photographs, biographies, and links to our institutional websites); and provided information about voluntary childlessness. We posted the URL for our website on the other two pre-existing sites, so that people could locate the same information. The sites were inter-linked, allowing some uniformity in the information provided and giving participants greater choice in terms of the spaces within which they felt comfortable interacting.

On each website we had several dedicated threads. Each thread, listed below, addressed one of the following specific questions (with probes), which also featured as the post subject heading.

1. Can you tell me your story of how you came to identify as childfree? How important is your childfree identity in relation to other aspects of your life?

2. Can you tell me about joining this online group? What does this group mean to you?

3. How do you describe yourself to others (e.g., colleagues, family, friends, online, partners, strangers)?

4. What sources of support and/or challenges do you encounter in your country? How have you managed/dealt with challenges?

The questions were posted on separate threads in the order listed above; however, the online setting allowed people to visit whichever thread caught their attention, at whatever point in the discussion, and as many times, as they wished.

In addition to invitations posted on the above sites to participate in online discussions, we also provided the option (on all sites) to anyone who wished to take part in email interviews. Our rationale for including email interviews was to include people who might not be comfortable on the websites and/or required greater privacy than the online environment provided. In the end, email interviews were only conducted with four participants who

elected to be interviewed rather than participate online (see discussion below for their demographic particulars). The four participants were each given an initial interview and a follow-up interview, for a total of eight email interviews. The initial interview questions were based on the same four discussion prompts used in the forum discussions. After receiving responses to these questions, we sent a follow-up email with questions for clarity and probing certain issues (e.g., what role their sexuality or culture played in their decision-making).

The data generated through the email interviews and the data from the forum discussions occurred asynchronously, which minimised researcher control and allowed participants to reflect on their responses at their own pace (Jowett, Peel, & Shaw, 2011). However, the interview method allowed for more focused probing of responses (in the follow-up email) than in discussion forums, which participants might not see or could ignore more easily if they wished. In addition, since their responses would not be public, participants who were interviewed might have felt able to disclose more personal information. However, this did not appear to be the case in practice. Email responses were sometimes longer than discussion posts and were also addressed more personally to the researcher, than online discussion posts which were addressed to a more general group. Otherwise, we did not identify a substantive difference in the type or quality of information provided when comparing the two sources of data.

Participants

In addition to describing the sites of data generation, we also tried to capture participants' nationality and, especially, gender, as important contextual factors that shape how the participants construct and negotiate their childfree identities. We asked those who elected to do email interviews about their nationality and gender, but it was more difficult to gain this information for data generated in online communities. The demographic details of website participants were not readily available, unless they volunteered this information or, it

could be inferred by the researchers. Gender was recorded where possible based on stated

self-identification or inferred from identifying details (e.g., names or family relationships)

and grammar used (e.g., gendered pronouns). In instances where this was not possible we

recorded gender as "indeterminate." Information about gender is summarised in Table 1.

Table 2 summarises information about the participants who are quoted in the analysis. Given

the large number of participants, it is not viable, or useful, to do this for all of those who

responded to our questions. Table 2 shows each participant's assigned pseudonym, gender,

the country from which the participant wrote, and the data source; if the information was

available, it is so noted.

Online Ethics

Online research presents qualitative researchers with a different range of ethical issues

from those encountered in offline research (Roberts, 2015). Given that childfree people face

potential stigma both online and offline, we were mindful of respecting groups' boundaries

and privacy. We endeavoured to grant the same ethical considerations regarding privacy and

anonymity as we would in offline research, including informed consent (See Markham &

Buchanan, 2012.). There is, however, a limit to these considerations on open sites (such as

those used for this study), because non-members are allowed to access all content (except

locked threads). Forum discussions therefore occur more or less in the public domain. This is

highlighted by the forum rules (which were prominently displayed on each website, usually

on the login page) and would be known to those participating in discussions. Nevertheless,

we took a number of steps to ensure that we respected members' privacy and that they were

fully informed about the nature of their participation in discussions: (a) We registered and

obtained consent from administrators of the sites to start the discussion threads; (b) all

researchers fully disclosed their online presence, affiliations, and intentions to online

community members before the research started and while it was underway[ii]; (c) no materials

posted prior to the research commencing, or in online contexts other than those initiated as a part of this study, were included in the analysis; and (d) to protect participants' identities as far as possible we omitted website names, nicknames, avatars or other identifying details, and assigned pseudonyms in writing about the study[iii].

In order to be clear about our identities as researchers and our research agenda, especially since some of the groups were open websites, we posted our threads only in spaces specifically designated for research. In addition, each thread was accompanied by a statement reminding users that the poster was a researcher, a summary of our research aims, and a link to our weblog for additional information about the study and the researchers. Part of the information supplied on the weblog was a profile of each researcher in which her own reproductive background was disclosed. The researchers identified themselves as follows: Tracy as childfree; Catriona and Ingrid as parents; Magda as "not necessarily childfree, but strongly supportive of sexual and reproductive rights;" and Seemanthini as wanting to "learn more about being childfree." The researchers involved in data generation (Tracy, Magda, and Seemanthini) openly disclosed this information in forum discussions and email interviews. This disclosure of our own identities was also part of a feminist ethical stance and our overall view of research as a collaborative two-way process of data generation, rather than data collection or appropriation (Moore, 2014).

Data Analysis

The data generated in online discussions were analysed using the narrative-discursive approach (as presented by Reynolds & Taylor, 2005; Taylor, 2006; Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Growing out of critical discursive psychology, researchers using the narrative-discursive approach concentrate on language usage in interactions and how such usage is orientated toward the performance of identities and toward achieving specific discursive purposes (e.g., blaming, justifying). In addition to attending to situated identity performances, narrative-

discursive analysts also examine how the wider socio-cultural environment enables and restricts identity construction, as the context makes particular discursive resources available to narrators. Narrative-discursive analysts examine how the broader context may also be transformed by such performances as norms are gradually altered (Edley, 2001; Morison & Macleod, 2013).

According to Taylor and Littleton (2006), the narrative-discursive method allows researchers to identify commonalities in participants' accounts, which occur as a result of shared, available meanings (or discursive resources) present within speakers' contexts. Researchers explore how these "meanings are taken up or resisted and (re-)negotiated thereby resourcing the construction of a personal identity" (p. 23). The mobilising of discursive resources to construct particular kinds of identities is known as "identity work." Identity work is often done in order to avoid negatively valued or "troubled" identities (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). The key analytic concepts which were important for our analysis are further explained below.

First, discursive resources can be defined as sets "of meanings that exist prior to an instance of talk and [are] detectable within it" (Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2007, p. 335). Discursive resources represent "relatively coherent way[s] ... of talking about objects and events in the world" (Edley, 2001, p. 198). One particular kind of discursive resource is the interpretative repertoire (e.g., Edley, 2001), also known as a script (e.g., Morison & Macleod, 2015). An example would be the repertoire (or script) that of singleness as a personal deficit (Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2007).

Another kind of discursive resource is the canonical narrative (e.g., Bruner, 1987). An example is the well-known "coupledom" narrative in which a life moves sequentially through stages associated with the heterosexual family, including love, marriage, and

parenthood (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005). The analysts search for patterns in the use of these discursive resources within individual accounts and across the data set.

The second significant analytical concept relevant to our analysis is that of troubled identities. Troubled identities are "negatively valued and [require] 'repair' by a speaker in the course of ordinary talk" (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005, p. 210). Trouble and repair are explored through positioning analysis, which involves examining the ways that speakers make use of available discursive resources to reject particular social identities or to fashion others (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Thus, "trouble" is evident in an account when speakers occupy undesirable, negatively valued positions (Taylor, 2006), such as those we alluded to earlier that label voluntarily childless people as deficient, damaged, or self-centered.

Repair of troubled identities is achieved through various rhetorical strategies used to negotiate negative positions, by rejecting these and/or creating alternate, positive positions. For example, we shall show how participants constructed a voluntary childless person as selfless instead of selfish. Such repair work signifies the mobilisation of particular discursive resources, in this case choice scripts, in order to re/construct socially desirable, non-stigmatised identities within particular contexts and interactions. Repair work can be achieved in such a way as to leave dominant norms intact, or to resist and even transform them, as a speaker either aligns with or rejects accepted ideologies (Morison & Macleod, 2013).

In terms of the analytical procedure, this method involves two main iterative tasks. The first involves identifying discursive resources (e.g., scripts) within and across accounts. Researchers inductively search for and code patterns that occur across interviews and within the same interview. This process may be guided by previous findings, researchers' awareness as cultural insiders, and similarities to culturally dominant ways of understanding (e.g., psychological, legal, or institutional ways of speaking) (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005).

Researchers next explore the operation and negotiation of the discursive resources within particular contextual constraints, including attention to positioning and the rhetorical work (in the form of particular rhetorical strategies) associated with trouble and repair. To do so, the researcher considers each discursive resource in the context of its usage (i.e., a particular utterance and a specific time in an account). This helps the researcher to identify the discursive work that is accomplished by employing a particular resource (e.g., blaming, justifying), and also the possible trouble to which it may give rise (Morison & Macleod, 2013).

Results

Our analysis highlights two central scripts that cohere around the broader discursive resource of choice. We attend to the ways that scripts were used to counter the negative associations of an identity as a childfree woman or man, through their identity work. We show how each script was mobilised in particular discursive rhetorical strategies that respond to stigma.

Choice as a Central Discursive Resource

Choice was an overarching discursive resource for repairing troubled identities and ultimately countering pronatalism. In this section, we explore the participants' use of choice rhetoric as a means of resisting stigma. We quote from the data for illustration. As mentioned earlier, choice rhetoric was evident in two contradictory scripts: (a) the "childfree-by-choice script" and (b) the "disavowal of choice script". In the first script, choice is used to actively claim the positive identity of a rights-bearing, rational, responsible, and reflective subject who makes wise lifestyle choices. In the second script, choice is actively disavowed and voluntary childlessness is seen as a non-choice, owing either to a childfree person's intrinsic characteristics or to the untenable costs associated with parenthood. The latter claim (non-

choice) serves to reduce participants' culpability for their status as non-reproductive social subjects.

The "Childfree-by-choice Script"

In this first section of our analysis, we focus on participants' use of the "childfree-by-choice script" to actively claim a positive social identity. Participants capitalised on the power afforded by choice as a sanctioned cultural discursive resource, as well as the opportunities it provides to resist stigma. They do so first by negotiating alternative positive positions for themselves, and, second, by calling into question the social desirability of parenthood, through repositioning those who procreate in various less desirable ways. Many of the participants' accounts emphasised rationality, reasonableness, reflexivity, and responsibility as they positioned themselves as active, reflexive choosers. This was evident in two common rhetorical strategies. First was the construction of non/procreation as a legitimate lifestyle option or preference. Second was the positive self-positioning through the inversion of stigmatising attributions, including childfree people as rational, active decision-makers. We shall discuss each of these rhetorical strategies, using the above extract and other quotes to illuminate the analytical points.

Strategy 1: Non/reproduction as an individual lifestyle choice. Taylor (2003) asserted that, "Utilizing this rhetoric of choice, the childfree argue that their choice not to have children, as well as the other choices they make, ought to be just as respected as the choice to have children" (p. 56). This is evident in the appeals to neutrality, as illustrated in the excerpts below.

> Extract 1: The counsellor was the turning-point for me to stop feeling guilty for what was my life's choice- she told me I had a made a wise decision for my personality type. No one around me saw the wisdom of 'my' not having a child; and that caused me to second-guess myself. The stress came from fighting with my own self; Instead

of telling them that it was my right to choose … As it turned out, consulting the psychologist was probably the best decision we made under the circumstances. There was nothing wrong with my choice nor there was anything wrong with the ppl [people] who choose to be parents; it was simply a matter of one's individual preference. No one can/should influence you in either case; no one knows it better than you yourself if this is what you want. (Sumaya, India, female)

Extract 2: I don't owe anyone an explanation about why I don't want kids any more than I owe the person an explanation about why I play tennis. It's just what I want out of life, nothing more nothing less. (C, U.S., gender indeterminate)

In extract 1 Sumaya recounts the story of how she and her male partner sought professional help from a psychologist in making a choice not to have children. In this extract being childfree and parenthood are rendered equally legitimate options, based on "individual preference," "personality type," and "what you want." Each is construed as an equally viable alternative that can be weighed against the other in order to ascertain what is best ("wise") for the individual.

A similar appeal to neutrality is evident in C's response, which is a reply to a question about how childfree people "explain" their reproductive status to others. This answer illustrates the way in which reproductive status was ascribed to a lifestyle choice. The response was often evident in participants' equating their reproductive status with just another aspect of their lives, usually in order to reject childlessness as a defining or important feature of their identity. This claim, and others like it, can be read as a refusal to be rendered curious or positioned as "Other." The strategy is to deny difference (Veevers, 1973). Furthermore, this strategy also invokes the notion of individual rights, as in Sumaya's overt reference above to her "right to choose." Such rights talk "allows each person to be left alone in an autonomous exercise of personal values, in a pursuit of the good–whether that good is a

child or a boat" (Taylor, 2003, p. 65). Constructing parenthood and non-parenthood as equally viable choices, to some extent undermines the cultural privilege and status granted to reproduction.

Strategy 2: Inverting stigmatising attributions. Choice rhetoric also offered a resource for resistance that allowed participants to rework their difference in positive ways (Veevers, 1973) or, as Terry and Braun (2011) put it, "to put a positive spin on these features using neoliberal discourses of choice and personal responsibility" (p. 1). This often enabled speakers to construct "a superior moral identity as reflective decision makers" (Park, 2005, p. 382). Speakers positioned themselves as making rational, active, decisions based on good information. For example, at the centre of Sumaya's story above is a rational actor who makes informed and healthy choices with careful thought and professional guidance. Consulting a psychologist is in itself described as "the best decision we made" since this allowed her to see the "wisdom" of her choice. This self-positioning as a responsible, careful, and active decision-maker is elaborated on in the following extract.

> Extract 3: I was trying v[ery] hard to see the "stupidity" in my unwillingness to conceive a baby, and when I couldn't see it i began to doubt my own wisdom and sanity. … however much i tried, I just couldn't bring myself to commit to an innocent human-being (the unwanted child) for next 18 years … If you are unsure of yourself it is always better to first figure it out with a little help from a professionally qualified psychologist and then take any decision. Choosing to give birth or not are both life-altering decisions in one way or other they have some impact over how you'd live the rest of your life. You and the child are the only stakeholders here who directly face the long-term consequences of your choice; for the sake of both, you owe it to yourself to choose wisely. (Sumaya, India, female)

This extract demonstrates how the social desirability of the position of active decision-maker was reinforced by articulating the choice not to have children in a child-centred way. This rhetorical strategy capitalises on contemporary understandings of childhood and the powerful discursive resource of "children's needs," which holds so much cultural sway, that it has been described as an "unchallengeable discourse" (Adenæs, 2005, p. 219). This child-centred rhetoric is implied by the positioning of the future "unwanted child" as an "innocent human-being" who should be considered in decision-making, as supported by the moral of her story ("for the sake of both, you owe it to yourself to choose wisely"). Several other participants also described voluntary childlessness as a sacrifice made in the interests of children and broader society.

It is possible to see, therefore, how self-positioning as a rational, reflexive, active, decision-maker, who makes a wise lifestyle choice, also dovetails with a morally superior self-positioning. This morally superior positioning also allowed for the inversion of attributions of selfishness. Resisting being positioned as selfish themselves, participants instead ascribed self-serving motives to those who want/have children, sometimes describing them as interested only in their own offspring, rather than society at large. Participants employed "the same discursive resources as statements typically used to 'vilify' the childfree" (Terry & Braun, 2011, p. 10) and thereby inverted these discourses.

This "condemning the condemners" tactic (Park, 2002) was also evident in other less desirable depictions of parents, notably the derogatory term "breeders," widely used on childfree sites. Participants frequently depicted parenthood as a "non-meaningful traditional action undertaken to fulfil norms and without serious consideration" (Park, 2005, p. 382). Terry and Braun (2011) referred to this as a "rhetoric of rebellion" (p. 16) that relies "heavily on a neoliberal (individualized) discourse of choice" (p. 14); voluntary childlessness is

construed as enabled by choices that the majority of people are unable to make themselves or even to understand.

This rhetoric allowed for the positioning of parents as unreflexive and ultimately selfish. We saw it in renditions of parents as dupes who are "brainwashed" (Rajesh, male, India) into having children or uncritically following the idealised heteronormative "life script" (Rajesh) set out by society—what Natasha (South Africa, female) referred to as "a kind of 'automatic pilot' state." The participants thus invoke the norm of automatic childbearing: the common view that having children is a natural progression of the adult life-course and thus an inevitable "next step" within heterosexual unions (Morison & Macleod, 2015). This norm is promoted by pronatalist discourse and discourages reflection and communication about procreation. It is supported by an array of alternative, potentially conflicting, socio-cultural values centred on emotion and spontaneity, which the participants in the current study actively opposed (See also, Fennell, 2006).

In contradistinction to these negative portrayals, participants were able to negotiate positive positions for themselves as childfree people and to lend force to their arguments. Negative descriptions of parents as "breeders" were juxtaposed with those of childfree people as enlightened, selfless, open-minded, evolved, active, choosers. Participants depicted themselves as defying "centuries of saccharine propaganda" (M, unknown location, female) or able to "'call bullshit' on commonly held beliefs of my society" (Sally, U.S., female). This sort of talk was often referred to as "ranting" and has been identified as a critical part of identity work. Ranting allows "childfree people to continually re-inscribe themselves against parents and children" (Moore, 2011, p. 51).

Thus far we have reviewed how the "childfree-by-choice script" was drawn on to emphasise agency, rationality, and autonomy, constructing being childfree as a legitimate lifestyle option that should be respected as a personal preference or as a wise decision. These

rhetorical strategies are also used by the broader childfree movement, as Taylor (2003) noted. It is interesting that participants also often drew on a "disavowal of choice script", as we discuss in the next analysis section.

The "Disavowal of Choice Script"

The "disavowal of choice script" can be understood as a means of countering the stigma associated with the voluntary character of being childfree (Park, 2005). The script resources two major rhetorical strategies, outlined below. In the first strategy, participants positioned themselves as naturally childfree (either by virtue of biology or personality), and in the second, the untenable costs of parenthood rendered parenting a non-choice.

Strategy 1: "Naturally childfree". The first rhetorical strategy co-opts the naturalising argument ordinarily used to support pronatalist arguments, especially in relation to motherhood. Voluntary childlessness was constructed as fixed at birth, immutable, and, for the most part, biologically-determined. Like Park's (2002) participants, the participants in the current study connected voluntary childlessness to inherent factors. The participants often described themselves as "always" having been childfree and as never having desired or felt the urge to procreate. Some, especially women, attributed voluntary childlessness to biological factors; for instance they claimed they lacked a "maternal instinct" (Jade, South African, female), the correct "hormones" (Adrianna, Poland, female), or a "parental predisposition" (Julita, Poland, female). They also described child-freedom as "a natural state" (Kaja, Poland, female) that is fixed at birth; they positioned themselves as "naturally childfree" (Kaja, Poland, female) and as having been "born like this [i.e., childfree]" (Lidia, Poland, female). Others cited their psychological make-up as a reason for their choice, making reference to their "temperament" (Julita, Poland, female), "personality" (Sumaya, India, female), or "disposition" (G, unknown country, gender indeterminate). The use of these naturalising arguments is illustrated in the following quotes.

Extract 4: I've always been childfree. I have never liked children […] I have the right to have children or not, but I do not consider my child-freedom to be a choice. Not liking kids is just the way I am. If I did have children, I'd just be going against my nature. I would say it affects every aspect of my life because it's not simply something I identify with. It's a core aspect of who I am. (D, USA, gender indeterminate)

Extract 5: From the statements here it seems that very different people, brought up in various conditions, with different views on a number of matters, have however, some IDENTICAL construction concerning children and reproduction. … it starts to look as though we are not childfree "by choice" but naturally childfree . . . (Kaja, Poland, female)

The explicit rejection of choice is clearly illustrated in the extracts from posts by D (extract 4) and Kaja (extract 5). D's response shows how respondents naturalised their childfree status. As we see in Kaja's statement, social or contextual factors (like upbringing) were dismissed in favour of being "naturally childfree." Further reinforcing this construction of being "childfree by nature" was the common trope of "self-discovery." For instance Sumaya (India, female) maintained that one "reach[es] an awareness" that one *is* childfree, as opposed to a realisation that one does not want to have children. This trope echoes the established "born that way" narrative used to counter the view of homosexuality as merely a lifestyle choice (Sullivan-Blum, 2006). Such arguments 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 (Park, 2002; Veevers, 1973).

Naturalising arguments may serve a further function for childfree people—such arguments may enable them to contradict others' dismissive and disbelieving responses that are based on the common idea that people will inevitably change their minds about not

having children (Gillespie, 2000). Many participants reported that this was worse for those who are female and/or younger heterosexuals, especially after marriage.

Extract 6: As the one who will "change" "feel the instinct" and other rubbish. For most of us it was obvious - and the purest instinct suggested it - that no, it won't change. That this is our nature. That childlessness "by choice" is only a symbolic term. We are childfree by nature … from the beginning … we had no choice. (Kaja, Poland, female)

Extract 7: I just never felt the need, the urge or anything. […]I kind of assumed that I will be [a mother] because that's the norm. And I waited and waited and I wanted to want it, but it never came. (Kate, United Kingdom, female)

The quotes from Kate's and Kaja's posts demonstrate the contestation of others' disbelieving or dismissive responses. They show how biological arguments, which render motherhood as an inevitable desire at a certain point in life, were subverted in order to justify their childlessness. Locating the lack of desire to procreate in the realm of biology (instincts and bodily urges) renders non-procreation as natural as parenthood and, it is important to note, beyond personal control. Childfree people, therefore, cannot be required to change, and cannot be held accountable for their "deviance." For example, Kate's passive self-positioning as someone who "wants to want" children, but for whom the desire never materialised, serves to minimise difference through normative self-presentation (Veevers, 1973) and repairs troubled positioning since she cannot be held to account or maligned for something beyond her control. A similar strategy of minimising culpability and potential criticism is also evident in the next rhetorical strategy in which participants construed their "choice" not to have children as a non-choice.

Strategy 2: The untenable costs of parenthood. The second rhetorical strategy involved presenting child-freedom as a non-choice based upon the untenable costs and

burdens associated with parenthood. Talk about the costs of parenthood often took the form of ranting (as mentioned earlier). A central feature of this rhetorical strategy is inverting the glorification of parenthood (Veevers, 1975). The glorification of parenthood, as discussed earlier, involves the juxtaposition of idealised renditions of parenthood with the horrors of childlessness (Meyers, 2001). Instead, participants reversed this and, as the following extracts illustrate, often presented the costs involved in having children as untenable.

> Extract 8: Having a child …is an enormous time commitment and you spend many years doing things that sound highly unpleasant to me… I can't think of any rewards from having children that would make this worth it. You basically give up you[r] life to raise a child that may or may not turn out to be a decent, likeable human being, and that may or may not end up caring about you. I think many people have children because of this romanticized idea and then end up regretting it hugely. And then there is no turning back!! (Selby, South Africa, female)

> Extract 9: My disgust against possible motherhood/pregnancy/delivery is so strong that I would be able to end my life if I was to choose, pregnancy/delivery-death. If I said this among bumpkins I live with -it's not difficult to imagine the reaction. . . . Having a child with my approach would be as death during life. And that's how I define this choice. It is like a choice between beautiful life, full of warmth, love and colors and cold, foul-smelling, dark tomb . . . There is no more important choice . . . (Adrianna, Poland, female)

Selby's and Adrianna's comments show how the emotional value of having children is central to the glorification of parenthood (Zelizer, 1985). These quotes show how participants challenged the construction of parenthood as blissful and rewarding. They emphasised the costs involved in childrearing and questioned the rewards (emotional and material) that children ostensibly bring parents.

This rhetorical strategy was frequently supported by extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986), as seen in Adrianna's assertion, and echoed by several others, that death would be preferable to having children. Such claims not only reinforce how extremely unpleasant and undesirable parenthood is to the speaker, but also rule out having children as a viable option, as illustrated by equating a decision of whether or not to have children with a choice between life and death. Based on the lack of a truly viable alternative, participants asserted that there was not a real "choice" at all, and remaining childfree was rendered as a non-choice.

The inversion of pronatalist arguments, through depicting the horrors of parenthood, reverses the cultural tendency to denigrate non-reproduction by denigrating procreation instead. This was reinforced by the juxtaposition of extremely negative portrayals of parenthood with positive constructions of remaining childfree. Rather than a calculated weighing of costs versus rewards, such claims work to emphasise the intolerable and insupportable possibility of parenthood. Drawing on a neoliberal discourse of choice, resistance is expressed "almost exclusively in terms of individual agency and the limits children place on that agency" (Terry & Braun, 2011, p. 15).

Discussion

In order to extend the investigation of stigma resistance beyond interpersonal management strategies, we have examined constructions of childfree identities using computer-mediated communication and discussions on moderate childfree online communities. Our 98 participants were childfree and from diverse locations. We adopted a feminist discursive psychology approach, which allowed us to identify ways in which active resistance to stigma enables those claiming identities outside of the norm not only to normalise such identities or minimise stigmatising attributions, but also potentially to effect changes in broader power relations that surround normative notions of reproduction.

We identified two central scripts that were underpinned by choice rhetoric. Participants used this rhetoric in contradictory ways in order to manage or resist stigma, namely, the "childfree-by-choice script" and the "disavowal of choice script". Choice rhetoric is also highlighted in Taylor's (2003) analysis of childfree arguments against state and workplace support of parenting. She shows how the notion of "choice" is foundational to childfree people's public dissent. Our participants deployed the notion of choice to repair troubled positions associated with deficiency, damage, or selfishness. They drew on the "childfree-by-choice script" to negotiate alternative positive positions as a rights-bearing, rational, responsible, and morally superior social subject who makes wise lifestyle choices. This was achieved through a strategy of counter-positioning, in which parents and child-anticipating people were depicted as unreflexive, non-rational dupes. The "childfree-by-choice script", combined with rights talk, allows childfree people to position themselves as the ultimate autonomous and responsible subject. Not only are such subjects ideally expected to take responsibility for their lives through self-surveillance, but they are also expected to be "entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating" (Gill, 2008, p. 436).

However, we also found, that dissent or resistance was not exclusively premised on choice; the notion of non-choice was drawn on in strategies of resistance in complex and contradictory ways. This was evident in discursive strategies in which being childfree was presented as predetermined by individual characteristics (nature or biology) or as a non-choice owing to the untenable costs associated with parenthood. The "disavowal of choice script" may allow self-positioning that functions to diminish or eliminate accountability for one's spoiled identity, and consequently, diminish the stigma associated with voluntary childlessness.

There are strategic advantages to the deployment of choice rhetoric in both of these contradictory scripts. Both scripts allowed participants to minimise stigmatising attributions

and to some extent to normalise childfree identities. The question of their transformative potential—their capacity to effect changes in the power relations surrounding normative notions of reproduction—is more complex.

Resistance to the normative character of parenthood proceeds along a number of inter-related lines, which challenge broader power relations to varying degrees. In the first instance, the spoiled identities accorded to people who are childfree (e.g., as deficient, damaged, selfish) may be actively inverted to reverse attributions of Otherness. This was seen in participants' use of the "childfree-by-choice script" to advance positive descriptions of the childfree, juxtaposed with descriptions of parents as selfish and unreflexive. In this manner, the normalisation of parenthood is inverted and denigrated, and refusing procreation is valorised.

In the second instance, the norm of procreation (that childbearing is a natural, desirable, expected stage of normal heterosexual adult development) may be subverted. This was evident in participants' accounts where, through appealing to a "disavowal of choice script", participants attributed child-freedom to an innate biological imperative. This script inverts the notion of procreation as normal and natural, and instead posits that not procreating is biologically predetermined and therefore "natural."

By inverting pronatalist assumptions and challenging the supremacy of parenthood, participants fashioned identities that are premised on a different set of values than those that proceed from the procreation imperative. In some cases, this was consciously expressed as a response to cultural imperatives: "propaganda," social "expectations," and even in two instances explicitly naming this as "pronatalism." The rhetorical strategies that we have highlighted show how participants improvised on existing scripts (about the naturalness of reproduction, for example, or the altruism of those who reproduce), in order to create dissent and contradiction. These improvisations or variations, according to contemporary feminist

understandings of agency, constitute resistance to dominant regulatory norms, such as those

that surround reproduction (Butler, 1993; McNay, 2013). Such resistance represents the slow

bending of norms, so that resistance is not figured as a straightforward act, but a complex,

incremental process that capitalises on the weaknesses and gaps within norms (Morison &

Macleod, 2013). Following Riessman's (2000) definition of resistance to stigma as allowing

people to "press their own claims in relation to others who discriminate against them" (p.

113), it could be said that drawing on choice rhetoric in the ways that the participants in this

study have, might very well allow participants to "press their own claims" at particular times

and in particular spaces.

It is important to note the political limitations of these rhetorical strategies, and their

unintended effects, particularly in terms of expanding available reproductive possibilities.

The first limitation is in relation to the use of essentialist discourses, as evident in the non-

choice script. Claims that the desire to remain childfree is just as natural as the wish to have

children serves to naturalise childfree identities, but may allow for the normative character of

parenthood to continue to dominate. Further, the challenge posed by rhetorical strategies that

disavow choice and individual agency may easily be discounted and allow for different kinds

of stigma to emerge. These strategies allow childfree people to reject the troubled position of

social miscreant, but they may well still be construed as objects of pity (in much the same

way as the involuntarily childless), or as inherently deviant, and even pathologised.

The second limitation pertains to the rhetorical strategies that are underpinned by

discourses of neoliberal choice. These rhetorical strategies may at times acknowledge the

pressure to procreate in social forces and politics, beyond interpersonal pressures. However,

the strategies also potentially gloss over the particularities of how pronatalism comes to bear

on specific people under certain conditions. For example, strategies of coercive pronatalism

have been predicated along heteronormative, classed, and racialized lines, limiting the

reproductive options available to particular people, including the choice to have children (Shapiro, 2014). Likewise, women's ability to make active choices may be compromised by gender inequities, which intersect with other forms of inequity, and underpin intimate partner violence, coercive sex, lack of partner support for contraceptive usage, and so on (Black, Gupta, Rassi, & Kubba, 2010).

Finally, while the inversion of pronatalist discourse, and especially of negative attributions of the childfree, may be strategically useful, this rhetorical strategy also has the effect of pitting parents and "non-parents" against one another. It may reinforce the very stereotypes of parents, and especially mothers, that feminists have worked against. Taylor (2003) made a similar point, that choice rhetoric by childfree advocates may be used to argue against state and workplace support of parenting. She argued that choice rhetoric is unhelpful—and potentially detrimental even to feminist gains in the workplace (e.g., day care, leave policies, flexible schedules)—because it fails in "mitigating the effects of cultural prescriptions to procreate and forging equity in the workplace and in the broader national arena" (p. 49).

In order to address the limitations of the rhetorical strategies employed by participants, it is necessary to utilise rhetorical strategies that move beyond the parameters of individual choice, which often is expressed in binary terms as either individual freedom and agency or individual makeup (related to biology or personality). This requires rhetoric that draws attention to the fundamental, multiple, and complex gendered and racialised issues that underpin reproduction, the normative expectation of parenthood (expressed in pronatalist arguments), and the very assumption itself of uncomplicated agency in exercising choice.

In envisaging such a strategy, Taylor (2003) pointed to potential symmetries between feminist arguments and childfree people's indictments of pronatalist culture. We propose that the feminist language of reproductive freedom and justice might be fruitful. The notion of

reproductive justice was originally developed as a "fresh framework that gives context and perspective to the underlying social injustices and daily obstacles preventing low-income women, women of color, youth, immigrant women, and women with disabilities from seeking necessary reproductive health care" (Gillam, Neustadt, & Gordon, 2009, pp. 244-245). Such a framework expands upon the notions of choice and rights by illuminating contextual constraints. Potentially, a strategy of resistance may emerge that involves digging below the surface of "spoiled" identities and the norm of parenthood to relate them to wider structural, gendered, class- and race-based inequities. Placing arguments within such a social framework, prevents non-adherence to the procreation imperative from being located in individual deviance or pathology; it allows for a critical view of the ways that pronatalist discourses impact on people in different ways, and it potentially helps to spotlight common causes and injustice. Hence, rather than pitting parents and childfree people against one another on the basis of their choices, it would be possible to show how pronatalist discourses constrain the reproductive freedom of a range of people. This would require "explicitly bringing the voices of the childfree into feminism" (Taylor, 2003, p. 72), through engagement and further research that takes advantage of the commonalities between feminist and childfree critiques of pronatalist cultural discourse and commitments to equality (Taylor, 2003).

Research Strengths and Limitations

The feminist discursive approach that we have taken in this study moves beyond a focus on interpersonal stigma management by connecting the ways that people respond to stigma with wider, intersecting relations of power; our results show how such responses may challenge and resist pronatalist social norms. Our study shows how participants exercise agency in fashioning positive social identities as childfree individuals, but also how choice rhetoric can potentially allow for other kinds of stigma, obscure the conditions that delimit

personal choice, and pit various reproductive "choices" (to procreate or refrain from doing so) against one another.

Conducting the study online allowed for a diverse group of participants, albeit those who feel the need to join or participate in online childfree communities and who might be more outspoken than those who do not participate. In this study the voices of men were included. This is significant because men have usually only been included in research on voluntary childlessness as women's partners (Parr, 2010). Contributions could also be made by persons who identify as other than heterosexual. However, the nature of online spaces, and the ethics of confidentiality and privacy, meant that it was difficult to capture the demographics of participants, including their gender or sexual identities. Nevertheless, it does appear that the majority of the participants were women. There remains a need for research that more directly addresses the gaps in the existing literature by explicitly recruiting and focussing on childfree men, as well as sexual minorities. People from both of these groups may be subject to different kinds of hetero-gendered norms, shaping their experiences in different ways to those of heterosexual women. It is worth considering conducting such research in a range of settings, not only in online childfree communities, since queer people and other men may not seek out the same spaces of support or solidarity as childfree women do, if at all.

Practice Implications

Reproductive freedom requires social conditions that support parenthood, but do not make it mandatory (Morell, 2000). The stigma directed at voluntarily childless people is a significant aspect of pronatalism and an impediment to reproductive freedom. Based on our findings, we contend that stigmatisation ought to be addressed at the broad structural level, as well as at the micro-political, interpersonal levels. To do so, non-reproduction needs to be granted legitimacy as a viable option, alongside parenthood. Using the language of justice, in

conjunction with that of "rights" and "choice", advocacy efforts should highlight the ways

that pronatalism shapes social and institutional practices and constrains the reproductive

freedom of a range of people. The voices and experiences of the childfree, which are

marginal both socially and in research, need to be included in research and policy-making in

order to promote inclusive institutional practices.

Researchers working in the areas of families and reproduction should critically assess

the implicit assumptions upon which their work is based to ensure that they do not

inadvertently reiterate pronatalist norms. Existing frameworks of human development and

social policies related to families and reproduction need to incorporate the notion of

reproductive diversity, founded upon reproductive justice principles. (See Gillam et al. (2009)

for an overview of these principles.)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the scripts that we have discussed perform important work in terms of

resisting the stigma that attaches to voluntary childlessness. Nevertheless, we have argued

that a rhetoric of choice (whether in the form of active choice or the disavowal of choice) is

limited in its transformative value. We have suggested that these rhetorical strategies need to

be supplemented with those strategies that expose how troubled identities and the norm of

parenthood are imbricated in wider structural, gendered, class- and race-based inequities.

These inequities underpin both intended and unintended reproduction and non-

reproduction—power relations that are frequently masked by appeals to unfettered choice as

well as disavowals of choice. Such appeals not only potentially restrict possibilities for

reproductive diversity, but may also perpetuate particular gendered power relations.

The notion of reproductive justice—which emerged from grassroots movements and

may well have traction among a range of childfree advocates—illuminates what is so

threatening about deliberately remaining childfree, namely: challenging a particular hetero-

gendered order of which the procreation imperative is a central component. The language of justice shifts accountability from individuals as it points to broader structural arrangements, relations of power, and norms that coalesce around pronatalism. A reproductive justice framework also allows for coalitional politics among a range of groups (e.g., queer parents, people of colour, indigenous peoples, married heterosexuals)—whose reproductive freedom is constrained in various ways—that can make headway toward creating real choices in relation to reproduction, including the possibility of not having children.

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Table 1: Gender of participants

Data source	Female	Male	Indeterminate
Online forum discussions (288 posts)	62	10	27
Email interviews (8)	3	1	0
Total	**65**	**11**	**27**

Table 2: Pseudonym, gender, and location of participants quoted in analysis

Pseudonym	Location	Gender	Data source
Sumaya	India	Female	Discussion forum
Selby	South Africa	Female	Email interview
C	United States	Indeterminate	Discussion forum
Rajesh	India	Male	Discussion forum
Natasha	South Africa	Female	Email interview
M	Unknown	Female	Discussion forum
Jade	South Africa	Female	Discussion forum
Julita	Poland	Female	Discussion forum
Kaja	Poland	Female	Discussion forum
Adrianna	Poland	Female	Discussion forum
Kate	United Kingdom	Female	Discussion forum
D	United States	Indeterminate	Discussion forum
G	Unknown	Indeterminate	Discussion forum
Sally	United States	Female	Discussion forum

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[i] Although, in many contexts, parenthood is increasingly legitimised, the long-standing belief that homosexuality is synonymous with childlessness or non-reproduction generally remains (Murphy, 2013). In addition, there is still wide-spread antipathy toward gay and lesbian parenthood among the general public in most contexts, which frequently dissuades queer people from having children (Rabun & Oswald, 2009).

[ii] For the purpose of informed consent, every thread on every site was accompanied by a footnote identifying the researcher and explaining the purpose of the thread. For example: "I am a childfree South African researcher, part of a team doing a study about The Childfree Choice, focusing on online communities. (Please have a look at our research blog http://thechildfreechoice.wordpress.com/about/ for some more background on the project as well as ethical issues (confidentiality etc.).) Feel free to contact me via the blog or post here, if you have any questions. ☺"

[iii] In order to protect anonymity as far as possible, we assigned pseudonyms to match the gender and nationality of the participant and only initials for participants of unknown gender and/or nationality. Although quotes from publicly accessible communities would still be traceable, we believe that disguising screen names made it more difficult to identify participants. This meant that we lost something of the "character" of the sites and identity construction (e.g., perversely self-identifying as selfish) but this was offset by our ethical responsibility to the participants.