Exploring constructions of motherhood in young women in higher education

Martha Rose Mackenzie

Supervised by: Julia Robinson          March 2013
Exploring Constructions of Motherhood in Young Women in Higher Education

ABSTRACT

We live in a pronatalist society. Discourses construct motherhood as an institution within our society and having children as an essential part of a woman’s life. Neoliberal notions of individualism reinforce these ideas. Feminists contest this viewpoint, arguing that societal norms create an expectation of motherhood.

There is evidence to suggest that women who pursue higher education and professional careers are less likely to have children.

This study looked at how young women in higher education construct their ideologies of motherhood, how they attach this to adulthood and femininity and how this affects their motivations and plans.

Six semi-structured interviews were carried out with female non-mother students and analysed using a constructionist thematic analysis. Themes were developed within a feminist context to gain an understanding of how knowledge of motherhood is structured.

The emerging themes showed how neoliberalism and feminism interact, and how this creates contradictions and dilemmas for young women.

KEY WORDS: MOTHERHOOD, FEMINISM, NEOLIBERALISM, SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS, CONSTRUCTIONS
Introduction

It is widely accepted that we live in a pronatalist society. Pronatalism is defined as ‘The policy or practice of encouraging the bearing of children.’ Research into this area lies largely in the Feminist Psychology and Women’s Studies forums, with Gillespie (1999, 2000) and Letherby and Williams (1999) emerging as key writers.

Pronatalist ideologies have passed into popular discourse and have come to be constructed as ‘fact,’ ultimately informing cultural understandings (Gillespie, 1999). Thus, the encouragement of childbearing becomes misconstrued as a biological need to bear children. Rich, 1980 (p.261), claimed that women are defined either as mothers or non-mothers. Even if they do not have children, they remain defined by one or other of these appellations. Femininity is conflated with motherhood in discourse (Gillespie, 2000). The idea that “woman” equals “mother” which equals “adult,” influences medical, political and public discourses (Letherby & Williams, 1999). Our lives are as they are because some of us have children and some of us do not (Dowrick & Grundberg, 1980, p.9). Crawford and Unger (2004, p.318) argue that motherhood is an institution, a part of society that seems most natural, and would therefore benefit from critical examination.

The language used to construct motherhood and non-motherhood must be considered before going further. Within this text, I will use the term ‘childless.’ However, this word implies that there is something missing (Letherby & Williams, 1999). The National Organisation for Non-Parents developed the word ‘childfree’ as a way of differentiating between those who choose not to have children and those who desire, but cannot have, children (Tesarolo, 2006). However, Letherby and Williams argue that while ‘childfree’ implies a positive choice not to have children, it also has associations with ‘carefree,’ implying a childlike state. Thus, women who do not have children have no responsibilities and are considered to be like children themselves.

The number of childless couples around the world has increased in recent decades (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). In 2000 in the USA, nearly 19% of women in their early 40s and 29% in their early 30s were childless (National Center for Health Statistics, 2002). It was estimated that up to 25% of women born in 1973 will not have children (Social Trends, 2000), while 45% of women born in 1970 were childless aged 29 (McAllister & Clarke, 1998). Some women forgo children because their occupational pursuits are their priority (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007), whilst education, employment and financial security are seen by an increasing number as more central to a happy life than motherhood (Lee & Gramotnev, 2006). Interestingly, it is the more highly educated women who remain childless (Joshi, 1989, p.175). Gillespie’s 2000 study found that 75% of the voluntarily childless women had achieved A levels or university degrees, in comparison to the 48% of women who had had children. Furthermore, while 30% of the childless were employed in managerial or professional occupations,
only 13% of mothers were, supporting the notion that women who pursue further education and professional jobs are less likely to have children. I raised this issue with my participants, who are all in higher education, asking them of their plans, whether motherhood is included in this and why.

While the desire for motherhood is seen as inevitable and unquestioned by many (Erikson, 1964, p.590), Crawford and Unger (2004, p.320) ask why there are so many powerful socialisation forces directed at instilling these “instincts” in girls? For instance, from a young age girls are encouraged to mother dolls. This study was interested to examine whether young women construct the desire to become a mother for biological or social reasons.

A discursive look at British press representations of voluntary childlessness found that two subthemes dominated articles: firstly, voluntary childlessness as a lifestyle choice and secondly, motherhood as a biological imperative (Giles, Shaw & Morgan, 2009). There is a general conviction that childlessness is the deviant choice (Gillespie, 2000). Pronatalist societies perceive women's ambivalence towards motherhood negatively and deny its being a normal and justifiable response to life conditions (Letherby & Williams, 1999). Those who choose not to have children have been largely stigmatised in society (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). However, with childlessness clearly on the rise, there 'should be a radical change in the ways in which it is viewed and the ways in which we conceptualise the family’ (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008).

Research into ideas of pronatalism tends to come from a feminist background, because feminists have an interest in the ways in which mothers and non-mothers are constructed differently to fathers and non–fathers. Once a woman becomes a mother, she will largely be defined through that role in a way that men are not defined by fatherhood (Crawford & Unger, 2004, p.331). Thus, motherhood is viewed as an integral part of the female gender role, while fatherhood does not hold a position of equivalent importance within the male gender role (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). The view that the mother should be responsible for the upbringing of the children within a family, while masculine success is most often dependent upon occupational achievements (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008), creates a patriarchal relationship within the family. Lorber (1993, p.170) argued that the social order that elevates men over women is legitimised by women’s devotion to childcare, it also defuses their consciousness of this oppression. Agrillo and Nelini (2008) found that within childless couples, the women experienced more pronatalist pressure than the men did. However, in recent years increasing numbers of women may be rejecting what has historically been considered the essence of feminine identity, that of motherhood, and a schism is now emerging between traditional understandings of women’s social roles and experiences (Gillespie, 1999). De Beauvoir described woman as the ‘other’ and man as the ‘norm’ (1953). Letherby (1999) argued that a childless woman falls into the category of ‘other,’ with mothers as the norm. This status or experience could mean that an individual will acquiesce to social expectations (Smith, 2007, p.34). Thus, women, who do not particularly desire having children, will feel the social expectation for them to do so, and will duly comply.
Voluntary Childlessness has been viewed as a social trend, which signifies rampant individualism and selfish indulgence (Giles, Shaw & Morgan, 2009). Within the topic of motherhood, it is clear to see how feminist ideas intertwine with Neoliberal ideas. Neoliberalism ‘does not seek to govern through ‘society,’ but through the regulated choices of individual citizens,’ who are ‘subjects of choice,’ thus meaning that individuals are ‘governed through their freedom’ (Rose, 1996, p.41). It is within this discursive construct, with its imperative on constructing the self, that young women come to imagine and live out their lives (Dalley-Trim, 2012). However, autonomous choices means that discourse constructs individuals as fully responsible for their ‘life biography’ regardless of how this places constraints upon their lives (Walkerdine et al., 2001). With the nurturance of children historically seen to be what women do and mothers seen to be what women are; motherhood becomes the central core of normal healthy feminine identity (Gillespie, 2000). Therefore, despite the fact that equal opportunity is now viewed as the norm, it is still considered that different things are ‘normal’ for women and for men (Yates & McLeod, 2007, p.57). Under neoliberalism ‘the agents of individualism are also its victims’ (Beck et al., 2003, p.24), because while it provides new chances for women, it also brings about new uncertainties, conflicts and pressures (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.23). This means that ‘even in the light of heightened international awareness of these gender issues, it is a disturbing reality that no country has yet managed to eliminate the gender gap’ (Lopez-Claros & Zahidi, 2005, p. 1).

Reflexivity is important within qualitative research, as it ensures that the research process as a whole is scrutinised throughout and that the researcher continuously reviews his or her own role within the research, discouraging impositions of meaning by the researcher and promoting validity (Willig, 2009, p.16). As a feminist piece of research, the paradigm used emphasises the centrality of personal experience. Research is an expression of personal interests and derived from personal concerns (Wilkinson, 1988). We use ourselves as our own sources (Callaway, 1981). It is therefore ‘important to consider how the researcher’s identity as a woman will influence her research. The committed feminist researcher should continuously monitor how her research fulfils feminist objectives’ (Wilkinson, 1988).

A researcher should make his or her position within the research- their ‘positionality,’- explicit. Reflecting upon aspects of my values and beliefs that may influence the conduct of the study, (Runswick-Cole, 2011, p.91), I have felt strongly from a young age that I would like to have children. However, as a feminist, I do not believe that a woman should be viewed as a mother before she is judged for who she is herself, taking issue with parenthood being constructed as something wholly feminine rather than masculine as well.

Most research in this area has involved women looking retrospectively on their experiences as mothers or non-mothers. I was interested to see how young women, my peers, construct their ideas of motherhood looking forward and how important they felt their role as a mother would be, alongside implications they felt the role would have upon their lives. This study is built upon the assumption that there is an ‘illusion of choice’ for women (Budds et al., 2012) and that the
expectation to have children remains. It aimed to unpick the ways in which young women in higher education construct motherhood, by looking at the discourse they used to describe their goals for the future, motivations towards motherhood and how their education would affect this. I was less interested in what participants said, but in the ways in which they said it and what this suggested. Thematically, I linked the participants’ beliefs to structures of knowledge portrayed about motherhood.

Method

Design

This study takes the epistemological standpoint that human experience is mediated culturally and historically, arguing that what we perceive and experience is never a direct reflection of environmental conditions, but should be understood as a specific reading of such conditions. Thus, by identifying the various ways in which social reality is constructed within a culture, we can explore the conditions of their use and understand the implications they have for human experience and social practice (Willig, 2009, p.7).

If looking to find out how ordinary people construct meaning about a particular topic, such as motherhood, semi-structured interviews should be used (Willig, 2009, p.114). Six semi-structured interviews were carried out, transcribed and analysed using a thematic analysis.

Participants

The influence that education had on constructions was important. Because of this, the study asked undergraduate female students about their future plans. Because the study involved discussion of future plans to have children, a further condition of the participant group was that they did not yet have any children. There were no age restrictions, but all participants were aged 20-22. Participants were opportunity sampled as personal contacts of the researcher. This type of sampling was deemed appropriate because I was interested in how my personal constructions varied from those of my peers.

Data Collection Method

Semi-structured interviews within this study were shaped by a set of topic headings with possible questions. This interview schedule was informed by literature discussed in the introduction. Using this schedule rather than a strict set of predetermined questions meant that it was possible to incorporate the interviewee’s own terms and concepts into questions so as to make them more appropriate and relevant to the interviewee (Willig, 2009, p. 25).

It is important to consider interviewer effects because how the interviewer is dressed and presents themselves (Fontana & Frey, 2001, p.655) and class, ethnicity, age and the status of the ‘academic’ researcher all influence the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee (McLaughlin et al.,2008). However, it was determined that, as participants were personal contacts of the
researcher and shared the social status of undergraduate students; this would ameliorate such interviewer effects.

Interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone, taking place in a comfortable setting such as a coffee shop or the participant’s own home. Interviews were then transcribed using notation developed from the Jefferson system (1984) and King and Horrocks (2011, pp.144-146). Transcription is ‘a key phase of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology’ (Bird, 2005, p.227), which also allows the researcher to reflect on their role as interviewer (Runswick-Cole, 2011, p.96).

**Data Analysis Method**

This study’s epistemology assumes that language should be conceptualised as productive, suggesting that we construct social objects through language (Willig, 2009, pp. 92-94). It is important to make any assumptions clear (Holloway & Todres, 2003), together with an explanation as to why and how analysis was carried out (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Thematic analysis was carried out using Braun and Clarke’s 2006 paper as a guide. This paper asserts that thematic analysis can be used in a constructionist way by examining ‘the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society.’ Constructionist thematic analysis is analyst-driven because the analyst’s theoretical interests within the area drive it. An analysis at the latent level, such as this, seeks to identify or examine underlying ideas that theoretically shape or inform the semantic content of the data. It is important to avoid concentrating on individual psychologies within the texts, but rather to theorise the socio-cultural contexts and structures that lead to the individual accounts provided. There are clear similarities between this type of thematic analysis and discourse analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first step of analysis involved reading through all interviews, taking notes. These notes were organised into five separate themes. The texts were then reread and coded using these initial themes, within which contradictory ideas became clear. Themes were organised into two thematic maps with quotes to substantiate each of them. These maps displayed the perceived positives and negatives of motherhood respectively. They organised two large themes with several sub-themes within each. However, on review, and being mindful of the importance of moving the data along, structuring the themes in this polarised way was deemed too simplistic to be representative of the epistemological stance of the study. Sub-themes were reorganised into three key themes, which are all interrelated. The contradictory nature of the data is evident within each theme and across all three.

**Ethical Considerations**

This study involved ‘delving into people’s private lives with the intention of placing their accounts in the public arena’ (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p.62). Thus, it was important to consider how dissemination would affect participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were key ethical concerns. All participant’s names were changed at transcription along with any another names mentioned in the interview. All
interviews were read thoroughly and it was decided that none of the information shared threatened anonymity.

Explanation to the participants as to why the interview was recorded and how it was to be used is important. Participants should also be offered a copy of the transcript of their interview if they so desire it (Willig, 2009, p.26). It can compromise the study if participants are not made aware of the way in which their data is to be analysed (Runswick-Cole, 2011, p.96). Thus, all participants were briefed on the recording, transcription and intended analysis of their data. They were also informed that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time, up to the date of the researcher’s final submission. It was important to reassure participants that despite the fact that they were personal contacts of the researcher, their data would remain confidential and any discussion of information they disclosed would be strictly confined to the research. Following briefing, participants gave their fully informed consent before getting involved.

Refer to appendices for Ethics Forms, participant briefing and consent, interview schedule, transcription notation, interview transcriptions and theme development.

Analysis and Discussion

Analysis looked to understand how participants constructed their views of motherhood, considering the language they used and the structures of knowledge this produced. Based on the analysis below, it is proposed that the young women participating in this study positioned themselves as autonomous individuals ‘responsible for conducting themselves in the business of life’ (Kelly, 2006) while also privileging the ideal of women as mothers. While constructing themselves as independent agents making free choices, participants nevertheless placed the responsibility of child rearing with women. The three themes found were; i) Biology, ii) Acceptability of Explanations, iii) Optimism, which highlighted a set of contradictory ideas around the construction of motherhood. This analysis supported the critique of a ‘universal, one-dimensional’ girl (Harris, 2004), giving insight to the complexities and nuances of young women’s identity constructions (Jacques & Radtke, 2012).

Biology

All six participants discussed the biological aspects of motherhood, describing it as a ‘woman’s job’ (Laura, line 90). While these were sentiments echoed by all participants, Sarah was an outlier investing much more in these ideas than the others. Motherhood was constructed as something that women are ‘geared up for biologically’ (Laura, line 148), having children as the ‘natural course of how things are’ (Polly, line 53). This was the case because biologically, it is down to women to have children.

‘...If I got to 30 and found out that I couldn’t have kids, I’d be like ‘well why have I had periods for so long then?!’ Children, not make it worthwhile and stuff, but yeah kind of. Whereas, men don’t have that sort of, yeah biological, I don’t know actually.’ (Rosie, lines 142-145)
Suggesting that children make periods worthwhile, constructs having children as a woman’s end goal. Suggesting that men do not experience children in this way infers that having children is more important to women than it is to men. There is a general belief that women only develop ‘healthy personalities’ if they have children, so choosing not to connotes a deficit in their lives (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007). The notion that children are a woman’s end goal reinforces literature suggesting that “woman” equals “mother” (Letherby & Williams, 1999). Women who choose not to have children are seen to be ‘unnatural,’ and are pitied and vilified (Gillespie, 2000) and women feel more pronatalist pressure than men in childless couples (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008).

Sarah’s beliefs were extreme, she felt that ‘if you’re not reproducing, then there’s not much point’ (line 161). She believed that men and women’s roles existed due to nature, and that this is why such roles persist.

‘...if you look at every other species- the male is always the dominant one. Like lions or something, it’s the female that looks after the cubs and then the male protects them and guides the cub so they can become the leader of the pack.’ (Sarah, lines 78-80)

‘...in nature, the male is usually the dominant one... and the woman is maternal.’ (Sarah, lines 72-74)

The discourse created here places being female as maternal, while being dominant is male. Thus, the female role is subordinate to the male dominant. This in turn means that the maternal role, which is seen as only female, is constructed as less important than the male role. Comparing women to their dominant male counterparts, defines them in terms of how they stand in relation to men rather than as beings in their own rights (O’Grady, 2005, p.1). Sarah’s animalistic depiction casts the female role as bound-up in caring for the offspring, while the male role involves other aspects. This links to the idea that motherhood is an integral part of the female gender role (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008), with mothers largely defined through that role in a way that men and fathers are not (Crawford and Unger, 2004, p.331).

Emily agrees that women should have children.

‘... I think maybe there is a small thing within you- like programmed into you biologically that you should procreate.’ (Emily, lines 80-81)

This discourse establishes a dilemma. By suggesting that women are biologically ‘programmed,’ Emily is suggesting that women do not have a choice in the matter. She goes on to claim that such programming means that you ‘should procreate,’ regardless of whether you want to, implying that women who do not want to have children are facing an internal battle with their natural programming. Pronatalist ideologies, which have become constructed as ‘fact’ (Gillespie, 1999), reinforce the idea that motherhood is what women are programmed for. Consequently, it becomes a woman’s biological ‘duty’ to procreate (Giles, Shaw & Morgan, 2009).
By suggesting that it is a woman’s duty to have children, the theme of biology claims that womanhood and motherhood are inherently associated. Establishing motherhood as an integral part of the female gender role leads to implications for the responsibility of childcare. If being a woman means being a mother, childcare becomes a woman’s job (Hays, 1996).

**Acceptability of Explanations**

Different explanations for not having children were given. Participants placed these explanations in a hierarchy of acceptability. An explanation was essential to understand why a woman had chosen not to have children. Explanations given which were out of the woman’s control were constructed as more acceptable.

‘... You question it, you think ‘oh that is different, that is wrong.’ But if you understand why, then it’s not wrong... But there’s always a reason why, and I think that as long as you know that reason, then it’s okay. But for a couple just to say ‘oh, we don’t want kids,’ then I think that is a bit unusual because there does have to be a reason.’ (Sarah, lines 278-285)

‘...if there were biological reasons, then that’s completely valid.’ (Becky, lines 153)

Childless women are expected to provide a rationale (Shaw, Giles & Morgan, 2009). Only when their reason is understood does the decision not to have children stop being ‘wrong.’ Becky’s construction of biological reasons as ‘valid’ implies that other reasons are less acceptable, or not as ‘valid.’ Women who deviate from the standard model of motherhood run the risk of being labelled defective (Arendell, 2000).

Women who simply do not want to have children offer the least acceptable explanations.

‘...It can’t just be oh we just don’t want to be parents. It has to be something other than having the kids to be a problem.’ (Sarah, lines 212-213)

‘...people find it weird that she’s a woman and she’s chosen not to have children.’ (Emily, lines 37-38)

Not wanting children is not recognised as an acceptable explanation. Emily’s statement implies that being a woman should mean that you automatically want to have children and deciding not to makes you ‘weird.’ This links to ideas discussed earlier conflating womanhood with motherhood. A woman’s ambivalence about having children is perceived negatively rather than as an acceptable response to her life conditions (Letherby & Williams, 1999), while remaining childless is the ‘deviant choice’ (Gillespie, 2000). Essentially, a childless woman faces negativity because she is violating the norm of parenthood that characterises most societies (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007, p. 1277).

The belief that a woman should have a child is further reinforced by the idea that if she didn’t, she would need something in its place.
‘... some women live full and happy lives, and they don’t ever feel like they want to have children. But on the other hand, you know, they will have something in its place. Like a cat or a dog, or a partner even, that they want to baby.’ (Laura, lines 63-65)

A woman needs to ‘baby’ something, even if she does not have children. Having something or someone to look after makes it more acceptable for a woman not to have had children. Because standard scripts place children as central, those without children must find alternative sources of fulfilment to fill the void (Giles, Shaw & Morgan, 2009). Laura’s statement further highlights the idea that motherhood is naturally expected of women. Having something in place of a child provides an explanation, which makes it more acceptable.

Hierarchies of acceptability also exist when discussing a woman’s choice to return to work after having children.

‘... If the dad stays at home with the kids, that’s looked at as odd. A bit like what’s wrong with the mum? Why isn’t she staying at home with the kids? ...She doesn’t want to be around the kids... but then if they say that the mum is more work driven and the man wants to stay at home, then I think that’s fine. But you’d still think it’s a bit odd, a bit unusual. (Sarah, lines 99-112)’

‘...if the mum went out to work, the dad could do an adequate job.’ (Becky, lines 264-265)

A woman’s rejection of the traditional roles is constructed as ‘odd’ and ‘unusual.’ It is taken for granted that the mother will care for the children (Nentwich, 2008), so if a woman doesn’t give up her job, this signifies that she does not want to be around her children. Intensive parenting beliefs, that the female parent can parent children better than the male parent (Shirani et al., 2012), are central to the constant reproduction of gendered inequalities that undermine feminist ideals of shared parenthood (Sevon, 2012). Women tend to have more discontinuous career patterns, to accommodate the needs of their families (Johnstone et al., 2011). This highlights the contradiction between the freedoms that women may perceive themselves to have and the lives that they will ultimately live (Jacques & Radtke, 2012). While providing an explanation for her return to work after having children makes it acceptable, a woman’s behaviour is still constructed as ‘odd.’ Becky’s comment reinforces the idea that the woman’s place is at home. Her description of the dad’s parenting as ‘adequate’ suggests that the mother would do a better job, further bolstering the ideals of intensive parenting.

Koropeckyj-Cox and Pendell (2007) argued that while an endorsement of childlessness is not apparent, the prevailing attitude is that of acceptance. While participants corroborated this research by claiming acceptance, the discourses that they presented revealed their underlying discontent with such ideas. Furthermore, situating women as the parent who should care for children over men undermines the participants’ supposed ideals of gender equality. These findings support the idea that women face an ‘illusion of choice’ (Budds et al., 2012) concerning motherhood.
**Optimism**

Across the texts a naïve optimism was apparent, which assumed that equality existed between men and women. This emerged from a comparison of traditional ideas to the belief of current social acceptance that women can continue work or men can be stay-at-home dads.

‘...Because women have more opportunities now so it's not necessarily the man who earns more money. And, so obviously if it's the woman who earns more money it makes more sense for her to keep working.’ (Emily, lines 161-163)

‘...Now that women can work and fathers can stay at home, I feel like its way more balanced.’ (Becky, lines 255-256)

‘... the stereotype is that the men go to work and the women stay at home... Well I've seen a lot of families recently where that's not how it works.’ (Polly, lines 81-86)

Using terms such as ‘obviously’ and ‘makes more sense’ constructs the possibilities of such situations as the norm or entirely accepted. Becky suggests that because women ‘can’ work and men ‘can’ stay at home, things are balanced. However, claiming that women ‘can’ work does not mean that they should. These constructions work in direct opposition to ideas developed within the theme of Acceptability of Explanations. Such opposing ideas serve to reinforce societal and moral concerns and reproduce gender inequality, because there are contradictory cultural pressures on women to pursue personal success within a career, while still dedicating themselves to raising children (Hays, 1996). By accepting that there is a stereotype in place, but that she has observed different family dynamics, Polly positions herself within an optimism signifying low levels of work-family conflict. Reported levels of work-family conflicts are lower in Nordic-Scandinavian countries than in other Western European countries (Crompton & Lyonette, 2006). Scandinavian countries are reputable for policies that promote gender equality, providing more services and benefits and enabling fathers to share parental leave with mothers (Bekeny, 2013). This has meant that companies have come to expect parental leave irrespective of gender, leading to higher women's paycheques, and lower divorce rates (Bennhold, 2010). However, despite a strong overall increase in parental leave usage amongst men (Geisler & Kreyenfeld, 2012), those with higher levels of education are the most likely to utilise such leave (Lappegard, 2008). Krapf corroborated this idea, finding that those with high incomes were more likely to have children (2009). This raises questions around whether parental leave policies serve everyone or only really cater for the middle-classes.

Optimistic ideas created within the texts have a Neoliberal flavour, encouraging Self-actualisation and self-determination (Bordieu, 1998, p.85). However, neoliberalism poses dilemmas of the self, which leads to uncertainty (Bauman, 2008).
‘…I think that the only pressure is that which they have perceived themselves from other people, from their parents or from what they think society is. But really, they don’t need to listen to that pressure.’ (Becky, lines 262-264)

Pressures are constructed as perceived only by the individual, which devalues them. Outside pressures are spoken about in a way that internalises them, making them the responsibility of the woman. This suggests that the pressures a woman feels about becoming a mother should not be considered important. This construction utilises the neoliberal ethos of individual responsibility by encouraging self-policing of pressures to have children. The internalising impulse of such an ethos discourages the contextualisation of experience (O’Grady, 2005, p.18). Furthermore, for a generation of young women, the ‘freedom and choice’ in contemporary culture, while masquerading as empowering, over-emphasises personal agency, which means that they are constrained by their individualism (McRobbie, 2007). By reducing everything down to the individual, it becomes impossible to criticise others and hence to initiate social change (Jacques & Radtke, 2012), and so women become more susceptible to gender inequalities because they do not perceive them. However, neoliberal individualism ideals may be only indicative of class-privileged young women while those with diminished capital may not live under the ‘illusion’ (Bay-Cheung & Eliseo-Arras, 2008) that ‘women can (and must) ‘have it all’’ (Phillips, 2000, p.47).

When discussing ideologies around motherhood versus career, all six participants described situations in a way that did not consider their social contexts.

‘... If I was just someone who wanted to settle down and have kids, I wouldn’t have gone to university... Because that’s just prime child bearing time!’ (Laura, lines 317-320)

‘...if you’re not interested in your job or education then you kind of skip that stage and you’re just like, when you’ve finished high school, there’s not much else apart from building that family bond.’ (Sarah, lines 292-294)

By describing the duration of motherhood as ‘child bearing time,’ Laura glosses over the other aspects that play a part, simplifying the notion of settling down to the act of child bearing. This works to support Letherby and Williams’ argument that in our society ‘woman’ equals ‘wife’ which equals ‘mother’ (1999). This construction makes the assumption again that all women desire marriage and children. With marriage and children as a woman’s end-goal, gender inequalities were highlighted by reiterating the necessity and naturalness of motherhood. However, the context of gender equality and politics were not considered because the focus was on personal responsibility (Jacques & Radtke, 2012). Sarah’s simplification of a woman’s life suggests that if a woman does not wish to pursue education or a career, the only other thing for her to do is to pursue a family. Suggesting that ‘there’s not much else’ for a woman to do further reinforces the idea that it is a woman’s inevitable role to have children.
‘...you could so easily fall into a trap of getting a job, any job, just enough to live and you just get trapped in a place, and then you meet someone and have a kid. I can see it happening so easily.’ (Laura, lines 306-308)

Again, social context has not been considered. Aspects of life such as getting a job, finding somewhere to live and meeting someone with whom to have a child are described as easy. These milestones are sped through in one sentence. Life events, like meeting someone, are constructed in an abstract and romanticised way. The complexities of such situations are not considered; exemplifying the optimism developed around not only the practicalities of life with children, but also the circumstances by which becoming a mother is possible.

**Implications**

Women still believe the task of raising children is the woman’s responsibility and duty, despite believing that they live in a culture of gender equality. Constructions showed how women perceive such pressures to conform to the social norms of motherhood as natural and internalised. If young women do not recognise the inequalities in parenting, it is crucial to determine and consider other aspects of life within which women do not identify themselves to be disadvantaged. There could be further study around a woman’s relationship status, and if a single woman believes herself to have ‘identity deficits’ (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005). Further subjects for research could be into constructions of rape and victim blaming, linking to women’s looks and how women are judged or defined by the way they look.

It is proposed that policy change surrounding parental leave, state subsidised childcare and flexible working hours, such as those apparent in Scandinavian countries (Bekeny, 2009), could enable men to ‘become noticeably more willing to take an active share in childcare’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, p.127, 2003). This could work to facilitate equality within parenting.

The limitations of this study are discussed in Reflexive Analysis.

**Conclusion**

This study provided an insight into the ways in which young women construct motherhood and what informed those constructions. It has shown how feminist ideas are ‘both articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed’ (McRobbie, 2004) by young women with respect to motherhood. Young women expressed an acceptance of personal choice and a desire for a career, while also professing parenting to be the woman’s job. The themes collated in this study exposed the ways in which young women have taken on neoliberal ideas of personal responsibility and self-policing.

**Reflexive Analysis**

It is important to declare the assumptions made by researchers due to their positionality, because if we do not know what assumptions have influenced their analysis, it is difficult to evaluate the research (Attride-Stirling, 2001).
Personally, I hold feminist views that there is an expectation of women to have children, and that this pressure is something not felt by men. However, I also love children, and have always felt strongly that I would like to have children. This study followed a clear feminist framework, while also borrowing from neoliberal ideas around dilemmas of the self. I struggled to maintain this feminist epistemological stance because, at times, I identified with the participants’ views that motherhood feels like something natural to women.

It is important to consider Intersectionality within this study. That is, that a study cannot analyse and assess a woman’s constructions without considering the way in which her status as a woman interacts with her age, race, class and so on (Yuval-Davies, 2006). Within this study, I made assumptions that young women in higher education would not have children, and that their age and status would have influenced this. This is an assumption that I have made by comparing the participant group to my own experience as a non-mother in higher education. Furthermore, I am approaching this study from a middle-class background and it is important to note that all participants were white females from a middle-class background as well. Thus, the constructions collated in this study are representative only of this privileged group. The concept of womanhood and a woman’s role in the family can differ considerably from one place to another. No study has reported on cross-cultural differences in the role women play in making the decision to be childfree (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). One must also consider that participants were sampled as personal contacts of mine. This may have affected the information that they shared, and my questioning may have been complicit in the internalising of ideas because participants were asked to share personal views. It is interesting to consider what each participant studies and how this might have impacted their beliefs. Laura, Sarah, Becky and Emily to some extent (she studies Psychology), all study subjects with a scientific background (see interview transcripts, appendices 7-12, for participant biographies). This may explain why biology was important within constructions. However, participants who did not have a scientific foundation of knowledge also placed a lot of importance on biology.

I found it challenging to develop suitable themes within this study. This is because the researcher plays an active role in the identification of themes within thematic analysis (Taylor and Ussher, 2001); themes do not ‘reside’ in the data and simply emerge; they reside in our heads from our thinking about the data and creating links as we understand them (Ely et al., 1997, pp.205-206). Because my personal structures of knowledge differed from those of the participants, it took me a while to come to terms with their constructions. Moreover, I found it challenging to get to grips with the discursive and constructionist element of the analysis, due to its abstract nature. While all of the participants constructed motherhood in a similar way, I referred to a few of the interviews more so than the others. This was merely because while all interviews offered similar ideas, they were better conveyed in those select transcribes. I feel that this study represents the ways in which young women construct motherhood in a contradictory way. They feel that they are in control of their own destinies, yet still perceive themselves to fall prey to their biology. In addition, their views of motherhood are uncertain due to the ‘illusions of choice’ that they face.
References


