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Otherland: Accounts of ordinary Childless/freeness on Mumsnet

Abstract

There has been an increase in the number of individuals who do not have children for various reasons, whether health, choice or circumstance, as well as those who have children later in the life course. Concurrently, there is a moral panic surrounding the decreasing birth rate. A thematic analysis of posts on the parenting forum Mumsnet explores the significance of childless/freeness, in the context of wider relationships. We find that established categories of 'mother' and 'childless/free' are reductive, and are more porous than usually framed. We consider the impact of such categories on women's friendships, finding that they undermine potential solidarities. Drawing on Scott (2019), we conceptualise the absence of children as significant, but not necessarily a deficit, highlighting the potential to understand childless/freeness in the everyday.

Background

Demographic trends are reshaping intimate relations, and have become a focus for scholars of personal life. A declining global birth rate has resulted in increasing numbers of 'childfree' or 'childless' individuals, whether through choice or circumstance. It is speculated that the impacts of COVID-19 and the climate crisis will intensify this (Berrington, 2022; Helm et al, 2021). Additionally, a rising age of first-time births in the UK means a longer childfree proportion of the life course in a way that differs to previous generations. These trends, coupled with extended life-expectancy, contribute to an 'ageing society', identified as one of the United Kingdom's 'grand challenges' (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2021), for economic growth and social policy (notably care needs and pension provision).

Extant research suggests a correlation between happiness and not having children (Glass et al, 2016), yet media attention continues to frame childless/freeness negatively, particularly for women (Nandy, 2017). There is a moral panic in Western contexts (where the decline is sharper than elsewhere) framed as a 'birth rate crisis' with the UK Prime Minister voicing concern for the labour market (Silverman, 2022). During an audience at the Vatican, Pope Francis commented that couples who prefer, or supposedly substitute pets to/with children are selfish, diminishing 'humanity', thus framing women as problematic (Sherwood, 2022). A Times op-ed by the demographer Dr Paul Morland proposed a childless tax (irrespective of circumstance) and suggested a need to raise women's awareness of fertility as declining with age (Morland, 2022). Such matters are of significance to sociologists, particularly in the overlapping fields of personal life and childhood studies. The purpose of this research was to conduct a non-obtrusive study on an Internet forum with a view to understanding perspectives on having and not having children.

Applying Scott's 'nothing' (2018; 2019) which frames absences or events that did not take place as significant, we critique the tendency to present having children or not in absolute terms and construct it as 'everyday'. Drawing on a thematic analysis of posts on the parenting forum *Mumsnet*, we conceptualise childless/freeness as a liminal state (Turner, 1969), located in the context of wider relationships. Our analysis considers the implications for women's friendships as we seek to understand the consequences of remaining childless/free for women's solidarities. We suggest that established categories of 'mother' and 'childless/free' are porous and are potentially reductive. The application of Scott's theoretical framework helps conceptualise the absence of children as significant.

‘Childless’ or ‘childfree’?

We begin with a consideration of terminology. Those who do not have children are labelled ‘childfree’ or ‘childless’ synonymously, interchangeably and deliberately, with the terms applied to different circumstances. It is difficult to draw consensus over a single term: childfree can be liberating, and the ‘-less’ suffix - which implies a deficit - is resisted (especially compared with others) (Cosslett, 2022). ‘Childless’ confines children solely to parents: many who don’t have biological offspring count children in their intimate networks: nieces, nephews, godchildren, stepchildren, school pupils and so on. Others may have had children but are bereaved, estranged or have ‘empty nests’. Conversely, childfree does not capture the grief endured through loss or infertility, nor does it convey any lack of choice (Archetti, 2020; Blackstone, 2014a). Both terms overlook circumstance or ambivalence which mean that some individuals merely did not ‘end up’ having children (Letherby, 2015) and that to suggest a conscious, fixed choice is simplistic. Instead, Letherby (2002) proposes a ‘continuum’, while Archetti (2020) suggests childfree or childless ‘practices’, rather than a static entity. The very requirement to define this identity is itself problematic because it frames having children as the default and is more readily applied to women than men. Nevertheless, we concede that normative constructions persist in privileging a lifecourse which includes children (Roseneil et al, 2020). Throughout this paper, we utilise childfree/less for inclusivity and thus, incorporate a host of circumstances. We draw on literature that utilises ‘childfree’ and ‘childless’ but acknowledge the limitations of a broad, problematic concept. We refer specifically to motherhood to denote the primary focus on women’s experiences due to the sample, and in recognition that ‘parent’ is not necessarily a gender-neutral term given the pervasive, normative pressures on women (Vincent, 2017).

Theoretical underpinning

Research has documented the psychosocial impact of fertility, infertility and non-normative routes to parenthood, highlighting challenges and stigma (Archetti, 2020; Blackstone, 2014b; Nordqvist, 2021). To consolidate theorizations on childfree/lessness, our work been informed by sociological concepts that extend the field: ‘nothing’ and mundanity.

Nothing

Historically overlooked by sociology, due to a ‘*preoccupation with positively defined objects, actions and identities*’ (Scott, 2018, p.15), Scott argues that ‘nothing’ is imbued with significance and meaning: losing out on a job, the silence between a couple during an argument, declining a social engagement and so forth. Physics is a ‘pivotal’ illustration of the salience of nothing, and the impact of invisible forces (Scott, 2018). ‘Nothing’ can indeed be something.

In ‘The Social Life of Nothing’, Scott deploys childfree/lessness attributed to a range of circumstances as a poignant illustration of the significance of ‘absent’ children for women. Research confirms that non-motherhood, childlessness, infertility, miscarriage and stillbirth are meaningful life course events (Gillespie, 2003; Letherby, 2015). However, reproduction is usually conceptualised as a ‘*series of events*’ – pregnancy, abortion and birth - taking place within women’s bodies. Consequently, such research tends to be located in general sociology journals and those specific to medical sociology and gender (Almeling, 2015). Studies of families, relationships and intimacies have challenged normative constructions of ‘the’ family, extending the parameters to pets and friends (May and Nordqvist, 2019). However, key texts tend not to refer to childfree/lessness (Blackstone, 2014a). While family studies journals are adept at including research on assisted journeys to parenthood, searches on ‘childfree/childless’ generate relatively few results. Scott’s work was the impetus for this

study. The resonance of the concept is two-fold: non-existent children as significant and the need to define individuals according to the absence of a dominant identity which is particularly prevalent with regards to children and motherhood.

The sociology of the mundane

The so-called 'mundane' has gained momentum within what has come to be conceptualised the 'sociology of everyday life' (Holmes and Hall, 2020). Scott asserts that *'day after day we engage in the same mundane activities, at the same times and in the same order, and this routine predictability allows us to take the everyday world for granted'* (2009, p.69). We suggest that while childless/freeness is of course a significant life 'event' for many, particularly in the circumstances described above, it can also be conceptualised as ordinary as the data will illustrate. Mundanity does not denote irrelevance or being 'boring': simply that childfree/less is experienced in the everyday and there is potential to theorise it as such. We suggest this has the capacity to address the stigma experienced by those who do not have children (Harrington, 2019).

Choices through the life course

The life course provides a framework for understanding individual's experiences according to chronological stages, usually along the 'birth to death' trajectory, with women's life courses mapping onto childbearing years. While life stage models suggested by Elder (1994) and Erikson (1980) offer fruitful insights into social life, their cultural significance and eventual 'master narrative', or 'social script', status is problematic. Deviations lead to stigma, for example, being single is more socially acceptable for some stages of life compared with others (Kolehmainen et al, 2022). Being seen to have 'failed' to conform to obligations and stages as guided by age, gender and social class can be a source of anguish (Gelman and Rhames, 2016). It has been theorised that in modernity, increased individual choice has undermined 'standard' biographies that might have previously been dictated by gender, social class, ethnicity, geography and so on and that choice is ever possible, though not without burdens and stress (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Brannen and Nilsen, 2002).

Changes in roles and responsibilities have tipped the balance from familial obligations towards an intimate life based on choice (Giddens, 1991). Women's increased participation in the labour market and education have constructed life courses that extend social roles beyond motherhood. Thus, the element of choice has been emphasised, though this has perhaps been overstated. Key markers of Western adulthood – including parenthood – have been deferred as a result of low incomes, job insecurity, rising costs of living (Arnett, 2004). Additionally, motherhood remains a dominant identity marker and key division for women (Thomson, 2014), and this is also the case for men and fatherhood too (Hadley, 2021). Being childfree/less is considered the outlier for all. This concept of choice biography facilitates an examination of the construction of having children as a choice, and where this is applicable in the data.

Friendship

We focus on women's friendships as a context for childless/freeness because friendships are popularly understood as enduring relationships which accommodate shifts in circumstances and identities. We explore the regulatory aspects of friendships, whereby women are pressured to conform to peer group norms around parenthood (Cronin, 2015). Norms within a friendship group may impact on an individual's 'choice biography', as detailed above. The 'procreative norm', developed by Roseneil et al (2020) in their work on intimate citizenship, identifies the ways in which social ties such as friendship are structured around a naturalized notion of a procreative imperative. In this context having children can be either a point of either conflict or solidarity for women's

friendships. However, we also consider how dividing women into mothers or childless/free may undermine potential commonalities and solidarities.

The shift in sociology from a focus on family to personal life (Smart, 2007) has led to recognition that friendship is an important bond. However, research has tended to reflect contemporary ideals of friendship, based on free choice, care (Allan, 2008; Budgeon 2006; Davies and Heaphy, 2011; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Spencer and Pahl, 2006), mutuality and reciprocity (Brownlie; 2014; Pahl and Spencer 2006). More recently, researchers have examined the ambivalences and difficulties of close friendships, (Eramian and Mallory 2020; Heaphy and Davies, 2012; Smart et. al, 2012; Aeby and van Hooff, 2019; Lahad and van Hoff, 2022). Unlike other intimates, friends can be relied on to be *'there to pick up the pieces'* (Roseneil, 2004: 413), during critical life events, when friendship is expected to take on exceptional emotional intensity (Ketovkivi, 2012; Rebughini, 2011; Roseneil, 2004). During difficult moments, or 'existential trials' the true strength of a friendship is proven based on a friend's ability to relate and listen to one's problems (Rebughini, 2011). Idealised expectations of the amount of support friends will be able or willing to provide in times of crisis may leave individuals socially isolated following a relationship breakdown (Ketovkivi, 2012; Aeby and van Hooff, 2019).

While friendship occupies a certain idealised form, the sexual couple is still presumed to take precedence within personal networks within the normative 'hierarchy of intimacy' (Budgeon, 2006). Based on qualitative research into friendship and couple practices, Cronin (2015) argues that the couple is the pivot around which most people organize their lives and value other relationships, with intimacy framed as a finite resource to be distributed based on scarcity. Female participants described how the arrival of children - their own or their friends - was the determining factor in altering friendship patterns and practices. Women's friendships are a key site for the 'procreative norm', identified by Roseneil et al (2020) in their development of the concept of intimate citizenship. The procreative norm demands that personal life be driven by, and structured around, a naturalized notion of a primary, fundamental, procreative imperative actively shaping intimate desires, possibilities and practices. This norm operates in multifaceted ways: politically, through regulation and social policy; socially, via social institutions, everyday practices and relationships; and culturally in expectations and representations of the good and desirable. In relation to compulsory coupledness, friendship relations often work to reinforce normative expectations (Wilkinson, 2012). For women in their 20s, 30s and 40s, motherhood has the single greatest impact on friendships (Cronin, 2015).

Consequently, tensions exist between the ideal couple relationship and the demands of friendship with the former usually taking priority. This is confirmed by earlier research (O'Connor, 1992) that suggests a tendency for women to select friendships that support their relationships, more recently evidenced by Cronin's (2015) exploration of friendship and motherhood. In our analysis, we highlight these aspects of friendship in the context of childless/freeness.

The study

Data collection

We deployed an online methodology, drawing on analysis of Internet forum discussions on the website *Mumsnet*. Established in 2000 to primarily address parenting issues, it currently has 7 million unique visitors per month with 100 million page views (Mumsnet, 2021), and threads covering a variety of topics and issues. As Orgad and Higgins (2021:6) state *'Mumsnet is a lively communicative space where gendered subjectivities come into public visibility, and in this process are negotiated, contested, regulated, and shaped by hegemonic configurations of power and gendered*

narratives'. Indeed, newspapers regularly mine the site for stories to publish for 'clickbait' (Pedersen, 2020). Mumsnet is organised into special interest sections and general topics.

The internet is fertile ground for accessing everyday concerns that may be difficult to uncover, due to their everydayness, taboo nature or their state of flux. Online methodologies, such as forum analysis have been used in the field of family studies (Lahad and May 2021; Mackenzie and Zhao, 2021). Part of Mumsnet's appeal as a sample is its functionality which allows and encourages posters to change usernames regularly, requests for threads to be deleted (with ease) and sections where threads automatically disappear after 30 or 90 days. This anonymity gives rise to perspectives that might be taboo in society generally or within individuals' own social circles, as is arguably the case for being childfree/less.

A unique feature of this sample is the inclusion of threads from boards with varying foci, as we analysed data allocated to general topics, facilitating an insight into the perspectives of a cross-section of posters who may or may not be parents. For the purposes of this study, we focused on threads posted on a number of boards relating to the theme of childfree-ness or childless-ness. As discussed above, while we generally use the term childfree/less, we acknowledge the limitations of this term and problematic associations of 'childless' and 'childfree'. However, both terms are used widely on Mumsnet.

Sample

We conducted two key-word searches: 'Mumsnet + childfree' and 'Mumsnet + childless'. For Internet forums, key-word searches prove more useful and relevant than time periods as a sampling method. This approach generated a number of 'threads' (threads being an individual discussion hosted on a particular board) discussing the themes of being childfree/less. This enabled us to capture data from those on specialist boards, for example, Infertility, likely to be populated by those who may be actively pursuing parenthood and struggling, as well as more general topics such as *Chat* or *AIBU (Am I Being Unreasonable?)* which may attract a broader range of users. These discussions may elicit board-specific responses, for example, *TTC (Trying to Conceive)* usually offers peer support and advice, whereas *AIBU* invokes debate and post titles are often framed as a question (in 2019, a vote feature was added, though is not compulsory). This cross-board analysis comprises a vital methodological consideration, since it facilitates an exploration of the views of those who might be ambivalent or occupy a changing position on a topic which tends to be framed as a binary (Harrington, 2019).

On Mumsnet, 'Opening Posters' start a thread in a chosen section inviting responses from other users. In total, 69 threads, ranging with responses from 5 to 367, with an average of 118 replies were analysed. Data were selected in November 2021 and included threads dating from 2004-21 (though threads remain active in the sense that they are not closed -unless they reach 1000 posts – but it is considered poor etiquette to resurrect an old – or 'zombie' thread (Newport, 2020)).

Demographic information about users is difficult to ascertain, as personal information is not available and the most widely available information dates back to 2009. Nevertheless, it is suggested that users self-identify predominantly as women (98%), mothers (95%), white (84%) and as living in the UK (95%) (Mumsnet, 2009). Socio economic characteristics are not revealed in user's profiles, although the general 'tone' of the discussions are heteronormative (Mackenzie and Zhao, 2021), and the normative Mumsnet identity is middle-class and female (Pederson and Smithson, 2013). Even without specific demographic detail, Internet forums are a useful lens for understanding how

cultural meanings are produced and challenged, rather than capturing the social identities of the forum users themselves (Lahad and May, 2021).

Ethical considerations

Mumsnet is a public forum and can therefore be freely accessed. The public visibility of internet forums does not negate ethical considerations. This study was reviewed and approved by the Manchester Metropolitan University ethics committee. Users of Internet forums such as Mumsnet can '*reasonably expect to be observed by strangers*' (British Psychological Society, 2013). Site Terms and Conditions remind users that it is public and to take care with sharing details. Nevertheless, to preserve user privacy, pseudonyms, usernames and identifying details are omitted (British Psychological Society, 2013). In the discussion below, we present short quotations in the text, but do not focus on individual users and their personal stories across conversation threads. Instead, we privilege the content and dialogue, as we seek to interrogate the collective narratives collaboratively developed by posters themselves. We refer to the individuals commenting on these Internet forums as posters rather than members, as they do not necessarily form a community, with many only commenting once on a thread. We also do not assume that users build online friendships with other users (though they may do), but explore the way that forums are used to discuss offline friendships and use it to make sense of their navigation of these relationships. Indeed, after an intimate relationship breakdown, there may be no interested party available for advice within an individual's existing personal network.

Analysis

Both authors carried out analysis drawing on the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The dataset, comprising the 69 threads, were divided in two and analysed independently by each author, and then collaboratively. This entailed organisation of the threads into particular themes, and then a detailed analysis of the text, which were then agreed by both authors.

The data reveal the positioning of having children and not having children as binaries. This is culturally a well-trodden path insofar as the tendency to pit mothers and those who are childfree/less against one another. However, our analysis contributes a deeper exploration of this within what might be considered the preserve of parents and would-be parents (because it is a parenting forum) and the freedom to explore this anonymously – and from a multitude of perspectives. The analysis provides insight into the circumstances by which posters came to be childfree/less or have children. We begin by examining childfree/lessness as a choice, before exploring childfree/lessness as mundane. We then illuminate the significance of women's friendships with relation to these identities followed by their experiences of living within these categories. The data show that motherhood and childfree/less identities are fluid and porous, suggesting a need to incorporate flexibility into their construction.

Childfree/less and choice

Having children or not is considered to be a significant life 'choice' for women, and the Mumsnet boards detail the meaning attached to having and not having children – by both those who had children and those who did not. Our analysis categorised 17 threads as related to identity, the significance of having children and whether or not to have children. The below thread titles served as provocations to posters, either to make sense of their own life choices, or to speculate on the lives of others:

- *AIBU to think that being childless will end up being a very lonely choice?*

- *Am I making a mistake not having children?*
- *Do you ever wonder why people don't have children?*

Motherhood continues to be presented as the norm, in spite of the demographic changes previously reported. The stigmatisation of non-mothers in this particular space (a parenting forum) was met with resistance:

We don't need wondering about why we don't fit 'the norm', we need to be accepted as a normal part of society.

While Beck's choice biography thesis posits the wealth of opportunities when it comes to life choices, agency remains 'bounded' in the sense that there are restrictions (and this is before considering biological limitations). Such impositions have been applied to young people and women (Coffey and Farrugia, 2013; Duncan, 2015). Resistance to dominant discourses including pro-creative norms remains constrained by gender, culture, faith, social class, material resources and so forth. Meanwhile, Donath (2015) suggests that 'tragedy' narratives of infertility are used to discipline women in pro-natal society, positioning motherhood as the ideal. As the data show, comments were explicitly gendered, with users reflecting normative views that equate a 'realized' (Archetti, 2020) woman with a mother:

I have had comments such as "I wish I'd been more selfish and not had kids" from mothers (it's always from women btw, men don't seem interested)...They've tried to embarrass me, publicly in some cases.

Why does no one ever ask why a woman DID have children? Or why a man did/didn't have children? Why is it automatically assumed that the default for women is children and any woman who deviates from this must be some tragic figure bravely smiling through her tears and pain while she tries to carve out a meaning to her empty life?

However, it was precisely the abundance of choice that exaggerated the challenges of being childfree/less because of the lack of associated social scripts, i.e. the narratives we live by (Goodson, 2016). These scripts are particularly influential when it comes to gender, sexuality and relationships (Nordqvist, 2021) and reinforced by culture. Research has identified an absence of scripts for those who are single where 'there are no ready-made answers regarding what to bind oneself to in everyday life or when one is thinking about one's future' (Kohlemainen et al, 2022, p.12) and among those who use a donor to conceive a child (Nordqvist, 2021). Our research revealed that posters who reported not having children identified a paucity of social scripts for being childfree/less, as Hadley (2021) has also identified:

Not having children does mean that you don't have the rest of your life partly mapped out for you. I kind of felt I had to work out what to DO with the next 20 years instead of raising kids.

Indeed, the analysis suggests that spaces such as Mumsnet provide a valuable resource for those considering whether or not to have children. Posters actively sought insights into what life might be like without children, with later phases of the life course a particular concern. This suggests a need for greater exploration and visibility of other life choices. This breadth of knowledge has much to offer those who are struggling with infertility, as one responding poster stated:

In some ways I wish I'd been as wise as you when I was going through the ivf horror-journey. I just couldn't see any other life than with kids. Much as I love mine now, of course, when I look back I wish I'd known a lot more about each way of living your life and being happy.

A responding poster on the thread 'AIBU to ask – if you could go back in time would you still decide to have children?' found it a valuable resource: it 'helps me realise that having children isn't always wonderful. I've TTC 11 yrs, 3 losses, 2 rounds of IVF...It helps me put things into perspective, because my chances of ever having my own children are so minimal'. It is clear that there is a need for a broad range of narratives to be prominent.

Ordinary childfree/lessness

Having children and not having children are each simultaneously remarkable and mundane. Both may be of significance to individuals but experienced en masse, and in the everyday. Sociology has drawn attention to the significance of that which is regarded as 'mundane' and everyday (Holmes and Hall, 2020). Discourses of having children and of not, frame both as exceptional. Having children is a life changing event (Shea et al, 2016); so too is not having children (Gillespie, 2003). Equally, there may also be ambivalence encountered as the desire is subject to change over the life course (Letherby, 2002). There is thus potential to theorise women's accounts of childfree/lessness applying mundanity as a lens to an often emotive, but also ordinary topic. In response to threads inquiring why people don't have children, these posters equated having children with mundane, everyday choices:

I don't want children in the same way I didn't want the fish cakes when I went out for dinner last week. I don't like fish so I simply skipped past that menu option and had a nice bit of belly pork instead. I just don't want children. No angst, no handwringing, no biological clock. Just wanted not to have them.

I have never wanted children and it wasn't a massive significant life changing decision either, it just never appealed to me. A bit like Centre Parcs...I can see the attraction, but not interested enough to make a booking.

Cultural representations of childfree/lessness denote a requirement for a meaningful substitute to children (Blackstone, 2014b). Posters were cognisant of this and sought to emphasise that a childfree/less life need not be out of the ordinary:

One thing I've really noticed in general culture and many of these posts is the idea that if you don't have children your life can still have meaning if you do something spectacular...I feel like most childless lives must be ordinary ones, but you tend to hear about the spectacular ones, as if that's the only 'acceptable' way to not have children - like you need a really, really good excuse.

All the childfree women who have careers, or travel, or have amazing hobbies. Nope. Some of us just sit around eating biscuits.

What is this obsession with women without children bloody volunteering? I shall ask my male child free friends if anyone has ever suggested to them that they should volunteer.

These excerpts add volume to the call for multitude of social scripts as they indicate that existing narratives require a justification not to have children, underplaying the ordinary-ness of their daily lives, and pointing towards gender dynamics.

Friendships

While having or not having children is usually presented as a couple matter (Twamley, 2021), our findings suggest that it has a significant impact on friendships, which formed the focus of the majority of the posts. Of the 69 threads analysed, 52 centred around friendship in some form, whether that was managing specific friendships, grief over loss of friendships, or the isolation experienced when children did or did not arrive, or arrived at different points to friends. Motherhood is often discussed in relation to friends, in terms of comparison, or the impact of becoming a mother or remaining childless/free on friendships. We find in our analysis that friendship is an important context for the 'choice' of motherhood, as peer group norms have a significant impact on user's identities and choices.

All of the friendships discussed in the threads were between women. Parenthood proved a challenge, as a life course transition that can either strengthen or undermine the importance of kinship and non-kinship links in personal networks (Jamieson et al, 2006). The following poster notes the impact of parenthood on wider relationships:

Having a baby is a major life event that changes all your relationships forever for better or worse. The only comparable experience I've been through is bereavement.

Intimate loss associated with becoming a mother is rarely articulated, yet formed a key theme of the posts. For most it fundamentally altered their friendships and left them isolated:

I'm 23 with a 3 year old and I have absolutely zero friends. None. I have my partner and my family/his family but I have no actual friends. I'm lonelier now than I've ever been, just let those life stage friends go. You will end up with a handful of people who regardless of the stage of life they are in and whether it matches yours who will be your good friends.

The distinction made here between 'life stage friends' and authentic friends was a theme of the threads, with posters who are 'out of sync' struggling to maintain their friendships. For this poster, becoming a mother in her early 20s proved insurmountable to her friendships. This reversed as posters enter their 30s, as childfree/less posters articulated a sense of being left behind and excluded from the experiences of their friends with children:

I've lost so many friends to the Baby Black Hole. I get - I really really do - that their lives have changed immeasurably, probably far more than they'd ever expected but I am incredibly frustrated at how even the tiniest amount of effort can't be made. Would it be so hard, when we meet and we're chatting, to ask me how my life is going too?

Feeling 'left behind' was a common complaint of childfree/less posters, even when they had elected not to have children. The message that in order to be a successful adult, a woman should become a mother remains prominent:

I don't want kids but it's still a lonely place to be, and there's a feeling of being 'left behind'. I have a few childfree friends left and I have to admit that that I'm keeping my fingers crossed that they stay childfree...

We identify having children as one of Rebughini's (2011) 'existential trials of friendship'. It is worth noting that friendship works as a 'catch-all' category when, in practice, individuals experience different types of friendship varying in commitment and expectations (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Friendship is practised alongside and across all our other intimacies (Budgeon, 2006), and as such is a historically and socially contingent bond that has relational connections to families, couples and

society more generally. As motherhood remains so fundamental to women's identities, it is inevitable that it will prove to be a stressor for friendships. By studying individuals' transitions to motherhood and how this impacts on social networks, we illuminate the multiple ways that categories of personal life blur and intersect in practice (Jamieson et al, 2006). Thus, the framing of mothers and non-mothers in opposition to each other damages and undermines friendships and solidarity between women, at points of tension over the lifecourse.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has explored conceptualisations of childfree/lessness, revisiting some hitherto explored issues in the context of contemporary developments and using online methodologies. The posts on Mumsnet reveal that women are routinely organised into fixed identities of 'mother' and 'non-mothers' and as having or not having children, which have consequences beyond the family as they impact on friendships between women. Yet these categories can be fluid and mundane. Furthermore, motherhood is often presented as an individual or relational decision from a couple point of view, the posts show the contribution of friends and online spaces (Archetti, 2020; Madge and O'Connor, 2005).

The posts conveyed the challenges encountered, for example, the dilemma of whether or not to have children, the binaries women are separated into (Archetti, 2020) and the loneliness experienced. In doing so, they highlight the importance of a plurality of social scripts, and the need to construct a lifecourse of being childfree/less (Bulcroft and Teachman, 2004). Such plurality could enhance social support for all women, including those who do have children and who also experience friendship loss and loneliness (Maher and Saugeres, 2007). Furthermore, broadening social scripts may frame choices as unfolding over the life course. Indeed, individuals spend a large portion of their lives without children, and elements of their childfree/less lives are likely to return. It is prudent to look to Lahad (2019) who proposes that single women's lives are characterised by waiting. This resonates with constructions of children as 'adults in waiting' when they are social actors in their own right (James and Prout, 2015). Similarly, women are assumed to be mothers in waiting, whether or not this is the case. We also query the element of choice when women are constrained by a multitude of factors, which appear to be increasingly prevalent, including, financial constraints (Hall, 2019), biology and access to fertility treatments. It is crucial to resist constructions of being childfree/less as a 'problem identity' (Reynolds and Wetherall, 2003). This would also challenge 'tragedy narratives' of infertility (Archetti, 2020) that compound an already hard experience, i.e. that not only can a woman not have children, she is also precluded from a fulfilling life according to established social scripts. Archetti conceptualises the IVF 'treadmill' and the medicalization of childfree/lessness, promoting the idea that infertility is temporary and asserting a narrative of having to work towards solving childlessness which is to be resisted. There is scope for childfree/lessness to be explored through a lens of mundanity and for research which engages with women's perspectives more directly. This would help shift emphasis from having children as the default and childless/freeness as a deficit, as well as extending existing research on ambivalence towards motherhood (Letherby, 2002).

Online spaces are increasingly where intimacies are negotiated, and this holds true for accounts of not having children (Archetti, 2020). The data suggest sites such as Mumsnet contribute to this, and provide a forum for building female solidarities. This analysis has garnered insights into phenomena that might be felt to be taboo or difficult to share with people they know in real life, for example, jealousy of a friend whose IVF treatment has been successful. The forum provided a useful resource in making choices and freedom to express feelings, as one poster remarked: *'I know being a mum must be really unglamorous and boring and hard at times. As a childless person I don't romanticise it*

thanks mostly to Mumsnet!. This corresponds with previous research which has demonstrated Mumsnet allows women to discuss postnatal depression, frank accounts of the challenges of parenthood and maternal regret (Matley, 2020; Pedersen and Lupton, 2018; Pedersen and Burnett, 2021). What is notable about our study is that the site is unique in offering a space for both those who have and do not have children to be together and to get a window into others' experiences – outside of their social circle - and which might otherwise be more difficult to access. That posters canvass the opinions of strangers when exploring whether or not they want children shows the important contributions these perspectives can make towards a personal decision (Morgan, 2009).

The methodological approach demonstrates the benefits of observing existing digital spaces to explore families and intimacy (Lahad and May, 2021). A research approach seeking human participants, e.g. interviews or focus groups, would likely attract those with fixed identities, making it more difficult to capture those whose identities might be in a state of flux, as is the case here. This has meant it was possible to explore common ground, applying sociological concepts. The study capitalised upon Mumsnet's existing community and accepted etiquette, without having to establish ground rules and manage opposing views (particularly where emotions run high) as would be the case with a focus group.

Women's intimate lives warrant further exploration, particularly from a life course perspective as important forms of support become compromised. While women continue to be defined by motherhood status, the binary between those who have children and those who do not will be reinforced. The concept of liminality has provided useful insights for our analysis. A liminal space can be identified when people are 'betwixt and between' social roles (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1960). This has previously been applied to pregnancy and pregnancy loss (Kuchinskaya and Parker, 2018; Layne, 2014) and resonates with childfree/less women. Being betwixt and between can be seen in the sense that individuals may be childfree for a particular phase in time, e.g. while trying to conceive. In child-centred societies, which marginalises those who do not have children (Hayfield et al 2019; Riessman, 2000), women could be conceptualised as being betwixt and between due to society persistently defining womanhood by child-bearing potential, i.e. that one's womanhood is only fully realised upon the arrival of children (Douglas and Michaels, 2005).

Our analysis demonstrates the enduring relevance of liminality in relation to having children, in the context of the life course and the role of the apparent choice biography in constructing these identities. The data also suggest that presence and absence of children are each significant, particularly alongside women's navigation of friendships. In focusing on these, we contribute to the sociology of families and relationships. We argue for a deeper understanding of the liminal space of between having and not having children, which acknowledges the porous properties of these seemingly rigid categories. As one poster wrote: *'having one child turned me into a "secondary childfree" person. I want to experience being a mum but I'm also really looking forward to having my old life back once she grows up'*.

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