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Fifty shades of freedom. Voluntary childlessness as women's ultimate liberation

Helen Peterson

University of Gothenburg, Department of Sociology and Work Science, Sweden

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SYNOPSIS

Freedom is an often mentioned motive for remaining childfree. However, there is a lack of systematic approaches attempting to disentangle the situated meaning of freedom in voluntary childless women's lives. This article draws on qualitative semi-structured interviews with 21 Swedish childfree women in order to further research how they understand and define freedom. The analysis identifies two different discourses of freedom relevant for the construction of the childfree position. The first discourse includes positive experiences of freedom aspects that the childfree women enjoyed in their everyday lives. This discourse also defines freedom as part of a deep-rooted identity that also involves other life choices, besides rejecting motherhood. The second discourse comprises negative opinions about children as risk, motherhood as time-consuming and parents as “trapped”. The article contextualizes these discourses within the contemporary Swedish welfare society.

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Introduction

American family researcher Margaret Movius argued in an early research article on voluntary childlessness that “the childfree alternative” should be viewed as “women's ultimate liberation” (Movius, 1976: 61). According to Movius, the childfree lifestyle offered a woman advantages including: “[...] enough time to have a life of her own, an equal sex role status to men and a more successful career life” (Movius, 1976: 62). Clearly, changes in the cultural climate as well as social and political reforms have transformed most Western societies since Movius wrote about voluntary childlessness 40 years ago (Mätzke & Ostner, 2010). Welfare policies such as financial support to families with children, long parental leave with high level of economic compensation and public, subsidized childcare have lowered the “opportunity costs” of childbearing for women that participate in the labor force (Haavind & Magnusson, 2005). This kind of welfare system has made life less limited for mothers as it becomes possible for many of them to participate more actively in society outside the home (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2010). Freedom, referring to social and financial independence and personal fulfillment – before only

available for childless women, according to Movius – now seems obtainable also for (working) mothers. However, more recent research on voluntary childlessness persists to report on how women describe the attraction of remaining childless in terms of freedom, signifying increased opportunities, autonomy and wider choices (Gillespie, 2003).

This article sets out to explore what “freedom” means in voluntary childless women's lives. Is voluntary childlessness still perceived as “women's ultimate liberation”, regardless of social, cultural and political changes? Inspired by a discourse analytical perspective the article uncovers how a group of voluntarily childless Swedish women understand, explain and give meaning to their childfree lifestyle by way of reference to freedom. Freedom was not an a priori theme in the interviews, generated from an already agreed on definition. Instead, freedom emerged as a prominent theme induced from the empirical data. Consequently, the article provides an empirically grounded analysis of what freedom means in these women's lives. The more specific research questions that the article addresses are: How do Swedish voluntary childless women define their needs of freedom? In what ways do they consider that a childfree lifestyle fulfills these needs, while having children would threaten them?

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The article is structured as follows. The next section introduces previous research on voluntary childlessness and the theoretical framework. The subsequent section presents the methodological considerations and describes the empirical material. After that the findings and analysis are outlined. The article ends with a concluding discussion of the most relevant results and proposals for future lines of research.

Theoretical and empirical framework

Previous research on voluntary childlessness

One of the main areas of research in previous studies on voluntary childlessness is the reason behind the decision to forgo parenthood (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). Studies using a qualitative approach have identified a wide range of different motivators for women, such as; lack of “maternal instinct”; dislike of, or disinterest in, children; fear of painful childbirth; humanitarian concerns about population growth; career orientation, and; a more satisfactory marriage (Callan, 1986; Park, 2005; Peterson & Engwall, 2013; Somers, 1993; Veevers, 1980). The most frequently mentioned benefit of remaining childless is the feeling of freedom it affords (Houseknecht, 1987). The repeated references to freedom can partly be explained by the fact that freedom is used to refer to a multitude of different aspects, such as; greater opportunities for self-fulfillment; improved financial position; decreased domestic responsibilities; wider opportunities to be spontaneously mobile and trying new experiences; greater opportunities to socialize, entertain friends and build and sustain social networks (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Morell, 1994; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008; Wood & Newton, 2006).

Feminist writers have also suggested that motherhood restricts women's freedom in a more symbolic and normative way (Letherby, 1999). Motherhood, as manifested in our society, has been condemned as part of the suppression and control of women and as preventing women to develop subjectivity (Veevers, 1979). Practices and symbols associated with biological and cultural motherhood have been understood as constituting: “the central core of normal, healthy feminine identity, women's social role and ultimately the meanings of the term *woman*” (Gillespie, 2000: 225, emphasis in original). From this follows that voluntary childlessness could be interpreted as an expression of women's ability to challenge suppressive feminine norms and create identities independent of motherhood (Wood & Newton, 2006). Empirical results from studies on voluntary childlessness support the idea of non-motherhood as positive and liberating for a feminine identity. The British childfree women Rosemary Gillespie (2003) interviewed associated motherhood not with fulfillment of their identity but with loss of identity, something Gillespie interprets as a manifestation of the emergence of a positive feminine identity separate from “the hegemonic ideal of motherhood” (Gillespie, 2003: 134).

Most studies on voluntary childlessness depict it as a growing phenomenon in Western societies and predict that the voluntary childless population will continue to increase due to social, cultural and economic changes (Albertini & Mencarini, 2014; Abma & Martinez, 2006; Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Mulder, 2003). It is not possible to differentiate between voluntarily

and involuntarily childless status in demographic statistics but because childlessness has increased it is assumed that the number of voluntarily childless individuals have increased proportionally (Roy, Schumm, & Britt, 2014). Generally, the proportion of voluntary childless women is estimated to be between 4 and 7% of the 1960 cohort in Western, industrialized countries such as Sweden, Italy, the U.S. (Persson, 2010; Tanaka & Johnson, 2014; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008).¹ The distinction between voluntary childless, involuntary childless and so called postponers is not easy to make in qualitative research either (Hoffman & Levant, 1985). The definition of a voluntary childless person as a person presently without biological children, who expects none in the future, and has an intention or choice not to have children might seem straightforward, but can refer to a very diverse and multifaceted set of life circumstances (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007). Some women make an early and permanent decision to be childless, others simply postpone having children until age, careers, education and established lifestyle significantly reduces the possibility of having children (Heaton, Jacobson, & Holland, 1999; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003).

The individualization thesis

Research on voluntary childlessness resonates with the individualization thesis that recently has become a dominant theme in contemporary family research (Brannen & Nilson, 2005; Smart & Shipman, 2004). The individualization thesis suggests that our lives are gradually more dependent on individual decisions and choices, particularly with regard to family formation (Bauman, 2002; Giddens, 1992). Demographic trends such as the postponement of childbearing and marriage, increased divorce rates and cohabitation, have been interpreted as manifestations of the increasing individualization in late modern society and a postmaterialist era (Beck-Gernsheim, 2011; Tanaka & Johnson, 2014). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 127) also forecast that in highly industrialized and individualized societies: “the news of falling birthrates will be with us as the stuff of everyday lives”. Increasing individualization entails that having children ceases to be the one supreme goal and life accomplishment and instead becomes: “the object of conscious planning and calculation, hopes and fears” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 126). This historical shift towards “post-materialist” values implies that children stand in the way of individual fulfillment and liberty (Esping-Andersen, 2011; Tanaka & Johnson, 2014). Becoming a parent is no longer a self-evident part of life but rather a choice that needs to be made, after careful considerations of the occupational, financial and existential risks associated with parenting in our society (Maher & Saugeres, 2007; Mcquillan, Greil, Shreffler, & Tihenor, 2008).

For women, increased individualization means that they are no longer defined as much as they used to be in terms of family life. The contraceptive revolution has provided a “stepping stone for female emancipation for all women” (Te Velde, 2011: 6). With today's widespread birth-control facilities the freedom of choice for women has grown considerably and they have gained a greater right to autonomy over their own body and over their own life and future perspectives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The consequence for women is a shift away

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