

**Exploring the reasons white middle-class women remain childfree in  
the South African context: A feminist social constructionist study**

**by**

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## Abstract

In this study I qualitatively explore how women who choose not to have children account for this choice in the South African context. I consider the reasons for women to remain childfree and the changing discourses of femininity that enable women to make the choice not to have children. I am also concerned with the possible implications of this choice for women's interpersonal relationships. This study is conducted from a feminist social constructionist framework.

Dominant discourses of femininity revolve around motherhood, which is considered to be the most important role. Motherhood is believed to be a "natural" identity. Mothers are highly regarded in most societies; they are perceived to be devoted to the care of others and to be self-sacrificing. Although most societies consider motherhood to be an essential feature of femininity, it can also cause ambivalent feelings and not all women wish to take on the role of motherhood. The number of women who choose to remain childfree is growing in various societies. Women increasingly have the power to choose whether they want to remain childfree. Through resisting discourses that meld femininity with motherhood, childfree women create alternative discourses that have the potential to change constructions of femininity.

I used feminist social constructionism to endeavour to understand the ways in which women's realities inform their decision not to have children. I also explore how society serves to either problematise or promote this decision. Finally, I attempt to gain a deeper understanding of how being female and childfree impacts on women's beliefs about themselves.

Interview data from semi-structured interviews conducted with women who choose to remain childfree are analysed using thematic analysis. The women interviewed were white and middle class and were found via convenience and snowball sampling. The women participating in the study report various reasons for remaining childfree. Freedom from childcare responsibility and the resulting greater opportunity for self-

fulfilment is shown to be one of the strongest reasons for remaining childfree. Other important reasons include unequal labour division in the family, concerns about the physical aspects of childbirth and recovery, life partners' acceptance of the choice to remain childfree as well as early socialising experiences. Other reasons cited less frequently include the negative impact of childrearing on women's emotional well-being, concerns regarding the overpopulation of the planet and a general dislike of children.

Two of the themes identified in the text are not evident in the existing literature. The first of these relates to the fact that the women participating in the study do not regard motherhood as the central feature of femininity. Instead, they tend to associate femininity with the act of nurturing, rather than with the act of mothering. These women are able to strongly identify with the female role, as they do not believe that choosing to remain childfree conflicts with their female gender role. The second theme relates to the belief that the world is an evil or unsafe place and that it is therefore better to remain childfree. This belief appears to be context dependent and is based on the women's perceptions of the crime situation in South Africa.

This study contributes to the expansion of the existing literature concerning childfree women, specifically within the South African context. The findings of the research support the findings of previous studies and offer a fresh perspective through the identification of new themes. By exploring reasons women cite for remaining childfree, I argue that some women refute motherhood. The challenging of the dominant discourse that "all women are mothers" is aimed at changing the dialogue about women and thus altering existing dominant discourses.

**Keywords:** childfree; femininity; motherhood; discourse; gender role; gender identity; feminist social constructionism; thematic analysis.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Motherhood can be seen as a historically constructed ideology that provides a gendered model of behaviour for all women, including those women who have not yet given birth (Reger, 2001). Women's gender identity is reinforced through motherhood (Arendell, 2001). Various societies regard motherhood and femininity as being intrinsically intertwined. Many societies assume that women have an innate yearning to become mothers and that "this desire is situated within the ideology of the 'perfect mother'" (Johnson & Shelton, 2006, p. 316).

Although motherhood is desired in many societies, recent literature suggests that an increasing proportion of women are rejecting motherhood and choosing to be childfree (Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 2002). Women enjoy certain freedoms and choices previously denied to them (Gillespie, 2000). Women have more control over their own fertility (Gillespie, 2000; Park, 2005). Women's roles have changed in regards to relationships and a greater participation of women in the work force has also impacted on women's decision to remain childfree (Gillespie, 2000). As women take on a number of new roles, expectations towards women change.

Despite the increasing number of women who choose to remain childfree, women who are not mothers are often subjected to harsh societal criticism (Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 2002). Women choosing to remain childfree are often considered to be immature (Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 2002).

A limited number of studies have been conducted with the aim of exploring the choice to remain childfree among women in the South African context. This research study qualitatively explores how women who choose not to have children account for their choice. In the context of this study the term "childfree" refers to women who are able to have children, but choose not to become mothers (Park, 2005).

## 1.2 Aim of the research

Cultural discourses of femininity have historically been constructed around motherhood (Arendell, 2000; Gillespie, 2000; Park, 2005). Motherhood is still considered the most important role assumed by women (Arendell, 2000; Letherby, 2002). Motherhood is regarded as a “natural” identity and women are perceived as waiting and wanting to fulfil their biological and maternal instincts (Letherby, 2002; Mitchell & Green, 2002). Motherhood is associated with selfless and sacrificial behaviour (Shaw, 2008) and women who choose to remain childfree are typically regarded as being “different” from “normal” women and are often labelled selfish or desperate (Arendell, 2000; Letherby, 2002). In addition, women who choose to remain childfree are often met with disregard and are ostracised by members of society (Gillespie, 2000).

Although motherhood is regarded as a central feature of femininity it also has the potential to cause ambivalent feelings (Mitchell & Green, 2002). In addition, not all women wish to become mothers (Gillespie, 2000; Park, 2005). The number of women choosing to remain childfree is increasing in various societies (Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 2002). Increasingly, women have the power to choose whether they want children, and “through rejecting and resisting discourses that conflate femininity with motherhood, childless women create new discourses that can subvert and transform constructions of femininity” (Gillespie, 2000, p. 223). The main objective of this study is to explore how women who choose not to have children account for this choice. This research thus explores changing discourses of femininity. The research also investigates the possible impact of such a choice on interpersonal relationships, as well as the ways in which the choice to remain childfree influences women’s intimate relationships.

There is a paucity of international literature concerning the reasons for women remaining childfree (Park, 2005). In addition, little research has been conducted investigating this issue within the South African context. The main objective of this study is thus to contribute to the expansion of the existing literature, specifically focusing on the South African context. Although the sample of the study is not representative it is

hoped that the research will stimulate debate and consequently lead to further exploration of this phenomenon.

### **1.3 Outline of the study**

#### **1.3.1 Research methodology**

The research is conducted from a feminist social constructionist framework and utilises a qualitative methodological approach. The text analysed consists of semi-structured interviews conducted with women who choose to remain childfree in South Africa. Five interviews were conducted that lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes each. The text produced during the interviews was analysed through the use of thematic analysis.

#### **1.3.2 Research outline**

The study is introduced in **Chapter One**, while the ontological claims of feminist social constructionist theory are discussed in **Chapter Two**. In **Chapter Three** I define the terms “childfree”, “motherhood” and “femininity”. I also provide a review of existing literature concerning the reasons why women choose to remain childfree. **Chapter Four** provides a discussion of the epistemological claims that inform the research process. I describe the snowball-sampling method and the semi-structured interview research instrument. Finally, I discuss thematic analysis as the method of analysis for the purpose of this study. **Chapter Five** presents my data analysis and elaborates on the various themes that emerged from the text, linking these themes to the literature review when possible. **Chapter Six** concludes the study by summarising the research findings and providing a reflective account of the research process. It also provides a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 2: Theory

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I endeavour to explain the central ontological claims of feminist social constructionist theory, which is the paradigm chosen for the purpose of the study. Ontology is defined as the branch of metaphysics dedicated to the study of the nature of existence or the essence of things (Colman, 2001). This definition includes the distinction between reality and appearance, and introduces the question of whether reality actually exists outside of people's minds (Colman, 2001).

My discussion of the ontological principles underlying feminist social constructionism serves the following aims:

- To understand how women's realities inform their decision not to have children;
- To explore how society serves to either problematise (for a lack of a better word) or promote such a decision; and
- To gain a deeper understanding of how being female, together with a decision to remain childfree, impacts on women's beliefs about themselves.

To reach these aims, I first seek to explore the social constructionist understanding of gender. Through this exploration I attempt to show how this understanding of the "nature" of gender interplays with gendered behaviour, such as mothering. Social constructionism is a critique of essentialism and the discussion in this chapter therefore contrasts to the essentialist perspective (Dietz, 2003). I also discuss the ways in which societal constructs reinforce or invalidate the discourse that it is natural for women to want children. Finally, I explicate how dominant discourses of gender impact on women's identities.

### 2.2 Essentialist and social constructionist perspectives on sex and gender

Essentialists believe that human behaviour is predetermined by genetic, biological or physical mechanisms that are crystallised and unable to change (Potgieter, 1997). The essentialist perspective holds that human behaviours are similar across time and culture and are a result of human drives or instincts (Potgieter, 1997). Essentialists thus argue

that physical experiences determine gender identity (Man, 2000). In term of gender this perspective believes that gender stems from sex classifications, and that individuals are thus confined to a category of gender that is determined by their sex. Thus, essentialist thinking postulates that biological sex determines gender. However, essentialism actually nullifies the concept of gender, as the question arises: “if sex determines gender what is the point of the concept of gender? If gender is always collapsing back onto sex why not just talk about sex?” (Hood-Williams, 1999, p. 861).

In contrast, social constructionists argue that we order our perceptions by applying a cultural framework. The disentanglement of gender from that of biological sex, concepts that were previously regarded as synonymous, emerged as a result of second-wave feminist philosophy. This disentanglement stemmed from the formulation that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (De Beauvoir, 1949/1988, p. 295).

Social constructionists strongly contest biological essentialism and instead posit that physical experiences do not create gendered individuals. According to social constructionists female identity is informed by the social regulatory ideals through which female bodies are trained and formed (Man, 2000). There is thus a clear distinction between sex and gender. Biological difference is not regarded as synonymous with gender and social constructionism allows for gender performances that are at odds with biological categorisation (Payne, Swami & Stanistreet, 2008). However, if gender is a social construction, “what would gender be about if it flew off and left sex behind? Where would be the maleness of masculinity?” (Hood-Williams, 1999, p. 861).

Social constructionists assert that gender is something that is “done”, whereas biological sex is ascribed at birth by virtue of physical appearance (Payne et al., 2008). Francis (2002) states that young children rapidly come to understand their lived world and the people in it as being divided into distinct male and female categories. Children then realise that the assumption of gender roles is vital for their social competence. Children subsequently conform to certain behaviours and dress codes in order to delineate these gender roles clearly. Thus, according to Francis (2002) gender is wholly

socially constructed, but is originally derived from the sex that has been assigned to the child. Gender is enacted, it is something that is done concurrently in relationship to others (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Butler (1990) argues that “gender is instituted through the stylisation of the body” (p. 519). This stylisation occurs through the repetition of bodily gestures, movements, and various kinds of enactments. She asserts that “gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as real” (Butler, 1990, p. 5). The term “enactment” refers to a repetition of a set of meanings that are already socially established. These actions are also made public (Butler, 1990). According to Butler (1990), these acts are internally discontinuous, but the repetition of these acts constructs an identity. This identity is then assumed by an individual and ascribed to the individual by others. Through performing gender in relation to others, gender becomes something that is assessed by others and through this process certain aspects of gender are normalised (Payne et al., 2008). Payne et al. (2008) note that “as men and women do gender in various ways, this defines them as gendered beings, while contributing to social conventions of gender. In addition, the accountability of doing gender encourages conformity to dominant norms of masculinity and femininity” (p. 26).

People are socialised into their gendered caste (Gergen, 2001). Girls grow up to become wives and mothers and are more oriented towards reproductive and familial relations. Boys are oriented to the marketplace in order to earn money and gain public recognition (Gergen, 2001). Constructions of femininity and women’s social roles have thus historically and traditionally centred on the practices and virtues of mothering (Gillespie, 2000). Traditionally motherhood has been perceived as being a natural process for women and is seen as desired and inevitable. Motherhood is thus central to the construction of “normal” femininity, and it is considered uncharacteristic to deviate from this norm (Gillespie, 2000; Park, 2005; Reger, 2001). According to Arendell (2000), motherhood remains more powerful than marital status or occupation in relation to women’s identities. Motherhood is sometimes viewed as “compulsory” for women. Women that ascribe to the idea of compulsory motherhood pursue motherhood not only because of the activities involved with childrearing, but also because they seek to

further feminise themselves and believe that they are viewed as more mature if they have children (Letherby, 2002; Wharton, 2004).

### **2.3 Essentialist and social constructionist perspectives on the “woman”/ “women” debate**

The notion of compulsory motherhood, which can be described as a “set of cultural beliefs prescribing that women should find total fulfilment in having children and taking care of them” (Wharton, 2004, p. 139), is idealistic in the sense that not all women wish to be mothers, not all mothers enjoy total fulfilment in childrearing, and not all women are in heterosexual relationships that create a context for this description of womanhood (Gillespie, 2000; Park, 2005). Women who fail to “do” gender (such as women who choose not to have children) are at risk of punishment for their subversion (Butler, 1990). This punishment may include being regarded as “abnormal”, less feminine and being ascribed traditionally masculine qualities (Butler, 1990).

These differences between women underscore the importance of the inclusion of difference among women in the theoretical approach to this study. The construct of “woman” as opposed to “women” is a much debated concept in feminist theory (Dietz, 2003). According to the essentialist perspective all women share a common “womanhood” and the concept of “women” is thus appropriated as an unproblematic universal (Dietz, 2003). By accepting that all women share a common “womanhood” the decision and consequent behaviour of women who deviate from the norm, such as women who choose not to have children, is problematised.

Social constructionist theory acknowledges the individual realities and differences that exist between women (Hill & Thomas, 2000). One woman’s experience of mothering and what it is like to be a woman may differ from the experience of another woman. Femininity is inherently related to society and social relationships, as social relationships significantly shape the human experience and understanding of femininity (Potgieter, 1997). To this effect, Shefer (1999) asserts the following:



I find myself questioning the notion that it is possible to ever be anything but 'other' to the participants of one's research. There are so many lines of difference in the social realm, it is virtually impossible to define a group that is not 'different' to oneself in at least one dimension of subjectivity. (p.158)

It is therefore possible to suggest that there is no universal gender experience, as social relationships and broader societal relations differ from each other in various ways (Shefer, 2004; Smith, 2003). However, in addition to the acceptance of individual realities and differences, social constructionists also argue for commonalities in people's experiences as individual realities are interconnected to the prevailing discourses in society (Hill & Thomas, 2000). Hill and Thomas (2000) caution against an anti-essentialist stance, stating that just as it would be fallacious to presume that women's experiences of femininity do not differ at all, it would be equally fallacious to expect that their identities would differ in all ways. The theoretical approach that I use in the present study acknowledges that women's experiences are diverse and that a shared identity of womanhood is problematic, but also takes cognisance of the shared meanings that women might draw on in constructing their experiences of femininity.

#### **2.4 Discourse, knowledge and power: How do we acquire our gender identities?**

Social constructionism challenges the "taken for granted" ways of understanding the world (Burr, 1996). Social constructionists posit that all forms of knowledge are historically and culturally bound and thus the notion of "truth" becomes problematic. There is no concept that is simply an "objective fact" (Burr, 1996). Consequently, from a social constructionist perspective the "fact" that all woman want children is historically and culturally specific (Potgieter, 1997). Terms such as "femininity" and "motherhood", and the way in which these concepts interact with each other, are constructed by culture and history (Willig, 2001). Terms employed in different cultures are not objective, universally accepted truths but are instead socio-cultural attempts to organise human experience (Potgieter, 1997).

Language is vital in social constructionist thought. The way in which language is structured provides individuals with the basis for their notions of the self (Burr, 1996; Gergen, 2001). Language is ordered into various discourses, and the significance that is assigned to any unit of meaning (such as a word) depends on the context of the discourse in which it is used. Discourse can be defined as “a system of statements which constructs an object” (Parker, 1992, p. 5). However, Burr (1996) argues that no definition for discourse is entirely sufficient. She adds to Parker’s (1992), definition by stating that discourse refers to “a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events” (Burr, 1996, p. 64).

Language allows us to create certain categories such as “female” and “male” and to ascribe various attributes and behaviours to these categories. The female/male distinction is a powerful component of everyday life and a basic building block of our current language (Gergen, 2001). According to Gergen (2001) “within many languages, every word is marked by gender” (p.73). The dichotomies that are created in language by virtue of these major categories inform the way in which we shape our worlds. Gergen (2001) continues:

Almost without exception, people are socialised into their gendered caste. Boys are turned into men who are expected to live very different lives from girls who are turned into women. The prime cultural difference is the expectation that girls will grow up to become wives and mothers and thus more oriented to reproductive and familial relations and that boys will be oriented to the market place. (p. 73)

“The varied and multiple ways in which knowledge is constructed lends itself to different forms of action from the particular society” (Potgieter, 1997, p. 23). Individuals in a particular society internalise the dominant discourses surrounding gender and gender behaviour. In western society we thus believe that it is natural for girls to grow up to

become mothers and for boys to grow up to provide for their families, and individuals thus act according to these beliefs.

Gergen (2001) cites narratives as the central means through which people give meaning to their lived experiences over time. Gergen (2001) argues that as people are exposed to popular narratives (discourses) within the culture, they learn how to “know” themselves, how to convey themselves to others, and how to behave. According to Butler (1993) language always precedes biological sex. Language predetermines the classification of material bodies into fixed categories, and these categories are sustained and strengthened by taken-for-granted discourses on sex and sexuality. Dominant discourses circulating in culture thus construct the body so that it is understood as a biological given (Man, 2000). Social constructionist thought posits that the influence of these discourses are not total and the individual has some autonomy in relation to the discourses (Young, 1997). There are multiple, competing discourses through which the individual may organise her experiences and incorporate them into her behaviour (Young, 1997). Discourse thus allows for certain subject positions and prescribes certain actions that are available to individuals taking up those subject positions. However, the relationship is a dialectical one and individuals are able to choose between competing subject positions made available by differing discourses (Willig, 2001).

Bruce (2001) elaborates on the manner in which individuals take up different subject positions within discourses by stating that the self consists of a multiplicity of identities that are structured through role relationships. These identities are ordered into a salience hierarchy and some identities become more salient to a person’s innermost sense of self than others (Bruce, 2001). When a person assumes the role of being female or male, gender is used to organise and interpret additional information about that individual. This information is used to shape expectations and behaviours (Wharton, 2004). People learn to apply the labels “male” and “female” based on characteristics associated with the different gender groups, which consequently leads to gender stereotyping (Wharton, 2004). Assigning characteristics to men and women

guides individual preferences and expectations of others. Individual commitment to being male or female becomes a commitment to an identity and thus underlies individual choices or decisions (Bruce, 2001). Motherhood is associated with being female, and is thus regarded as something to aspire to if a person identifies herself as female (Reger, 2001). Motherhood is seen as a central characteristic of being female and women who chose not to have children may be regarded as being “less feminine” than those who choose to bear children. The degree to which individuals embrace this stereotyping is largely dependent on the way in which they were raised during their childhood (Wharton, 2004). Children who conform strongly to gender stereotypes are encouraged to do so through the behaviour of their parents (Jacobs & Bleeker, 2004; Wharton, 2004). For example, parents may encourage the child to play with gender specific toys. The encouragement may also be more subtle, for example the mother may be a homemaker that engages in stereotypically “female” activities and the father the more aggressive breadwinner, and the child then learns to imitate this behaviour.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

Feminist social constructionist theory challenges the notion that sex and gender are identical. Instead, feminist social constructionists argue that while sex is derived from biological characteristics, gender is “done”; it is enacted in relation to other individuals. Once a person assumes a gender, dominant discourses inform gendered behaviour. Dominant discourses in society determine which characteristics are associated with being “male” and “female”. Women who ascribe to the idea of compulsory motherhood pursue motherhood not only because of the activities involved with childrearing, but also because they seek to further feminise their identity and gain approval from others in their society (Letherby, 2002; Wharton, 2004).

Despite the fact that motherhood is still regarded as an activity that is strongly desired and undertaken by most women, a growing number of women are choosing to remain childfree (Letherby, 2002). This research investigates why women choose to act differently from the idealised norm of motherhood. Feminist social constructionist theory posits that:

- Dominant discourses are not static, but subject to change. The increasing number of women choosing to remain childfree may thus signify changing discourses. Important questions in this regard include: Is it becoming more acceptable for women to remain childfree? Is the activity of raising children thus becoming less associated with femininity?
- Various discourses compete with each other, and it is up to the individual to choose the most salient discourses for him or her. Thus, some women may choose not to ascribe to the discourse that “it is natural for women to be mothers” and instead may internalise other discourses such as “it is normal to be in a heterosexual relationship”.
- An individual’s upbringing may impact on the decision to remain childfree. Women who grew up in families where their parents did not enact clearly delineated gender roles may not identify as strongly with certain gendered behaviours, such as child-rearing.

The idea of women choosing to remain childfree challenges multiple societal values that take for granted life paths, gender roles and definitions of femininity and masculinity (Todorova & Kotzeva, 2003). In the next chapter, the body of literature describing women’s reasons for remaining childfree is discussed.

## Chapter 3: Literature review

### 3.1 Introduction

In chapter two, I discussed the theoretical underpinnings of feminist social constructionism. The theory suggests that dominant discourses in society inform an individual's gender identity and gendered behaviour. In various cultures, motherhood is regarded as one of the central themes of femininity and most women are socialised to become mothers. However, discourses are always subject to change. In recent times it has become increasingly acceptable for women to have children later on in life, or to remain childfree. Research suggests that there are increasing numbers of women choosing to remain childfree in contemporary western society (Letherby, 2002).

In this chapter, I first discuss the concept of "childfree" women and normative notions of motherhood. This is followed by a discussion of the body of literature detailing women's reasons for remaining childfree.

The research was conducted during 2007 and recent literature on this specific issue cannot be obtained in order to verify whether the same trend occurs.

### 3.2 Defining "childfree" women

Childfree women are women who choose not to have children. The term "childfree" is a positive term and is not synonymous with the term "childless". Being "childfree" implies a decision on the part of healthy, biologically intact women not to have children, whereas "childless" is a term used to describe women who are unable to have children and women who want to have children in the future (Park, 2005). In the literature there is considerable confusion concerning the difference between women who choose to be childfree, women who intend to have children later on in life, and women who are unable to have children. It is important to distinguish between these categories of women without children and the failure to do so reflects social scientists' disbelief and disregard of the fact that some women actually choose to remain childfree (Gillepsie, 2000).

### **3.3 Motherhood and childfree women**

Most women take motherhood for granted and see it as a part of their female identity (Arendell, 2000; Gillespie, 2000; Todorova & Kotzeva, 2003). Constructions of femininity and women's social roles have historically and traditionally centred on the practices and virtues of mothering (Gillespie, 2000). Motherhood has principally been perceived as natural to women and as both a desired and inevitable process. Motherhood is regarded as being central to the construction of "normal" femininity and it has been considered uncharacteristic to deviate from this norm (Gillespie, 2000; Park, 2005; Reger, 2001). According to Arendell (2000), motherhood remains a more powerful identifier for women than either marital status or occupation, thus it is appropriate to consider motherhood in this research as the reasons for remaining childfree are located within the cultural, social and economic circumstances of childbearing.

Although motherhood is enmeshed in the social construction of femininity, there seems to be an emerging trend among women to remain childfree. Increasingly, women in contemporary western society are choosing to remain childfree (Letherby, 2002). Gillespie (2000) argues that the trend of "childfreeness" is largely due to second wave feminism. This feminist approach argues that gender differences are not rooted in biology, but are artificial constructs that serve to reinforce women's oppression (Cudd & Andreasen, 2005). Second wave feminism resulted in the availability of new opportunities for women, and certain freedoms and choices previously denied to women have become available to them (Gillespie, 2000). Specifically, increased reproductive choice has allowed women the possibility of remaining childfree. Contraception and reproductive technologies have also enabled women to exert more control over their own fertility in terms of when and in what context they want children (Gillespie, 2000; Park, 2005). In addition, the ever-diversifying nature of family configuration, the changing nature of relationships, and the greater participation of women in the work force have contributed to the larger numbers of women choosing to remain childfree (Gillespie, 2000). As women take on a number of roles previously denied to them, social discourses about what is regarded as being feminine, expectations towards

women, and women's identities change. Gillespie (2000) argues that as women's lives transform pronatalist discourses will gradually become outdated and grow weaker.

### **3.4 How women account for choosing to remain childfree**

This section contains a review of literature exploring reasons why women choose to remain childfree. The research reviewed was chiefly conducted in western countries involving middle-class white women.

#### ***3.4.1 Psychological well being***

Callan (1986) reports that childfree women are aware that there are psychological benefits related to childrearing, but they do not necessarily view these benefits as being very important. Childfree women often feel that the costs of childrearing outweigh the benefits (Callan, 1986). According to Callan (1986), childfree women believe that women may have selfish reasons for having children, such as gaining feelings of purpose or achievement.

According to Arendell (2000), motherhood is often negatively associated with psychological distress. Distress is a common experience among mothers and distressed individuals often display symptoms such as a lack of happiness, depression and anxiety (Goldman, 2001). When they become mothers women face new tasks in terms of the maternal role. Mothering brings about dramatic change, new demands and structural demands that often cause stress in general as well as postpartum stress (Hung, 2005). The three defining aspects of postpartum stress are concerns about maternal role attainment, concerns about negative body changes, and the concern about having inadequate social support (Hung, 2005). Childfree women are particularly concerned about the potential lack of social support available to them were they to become mothers (Park, 2005).

Mothering involves a great deal of emotional labour. Mothers' emotions vary and are dependent on the behaviour of their children and the time, space, and services available to the particular woman (Arendell, 2000; Reger, 2001). Mothers with insufficient



emotional support and financial resources are twice as likely to experience depression when compared to mothers who have access to the appropriate resources (Arendell, 2000).

### ***3.4.2 Freedom from childcare responsibility and greater opportunity for self-fulfilment***

Park's (2005) study found that being childfree enables the continuation of an adult-centred lifestyle. Women who prefer to remain childfree often report that they enjoy their current lifestyle and do not wish to change this lifestyle (Park, 2005).

Liamputtong and Naksook (2002) report that childfree women believe that mothers have to put their children first and that mothers are constantly worried about their children. Childfree women thus believe that motherhood takes away a woman's freedom and is restrictive as mothers have others to worry about (Liamputtong & Naksook, 2002). In a survey conducted by Callan (1986) most of the childfree women in the study reported that general lifestyle costs and the restrictions and disruptions brought about by children were major considerations for not having children. Childfree individuals often wish to develop their valued leisure identities further. Childfree women are not willing to make sacrifices and to take on these responsibilities that are associated with child-rearing (Park, 2005).

Women who choose to remain childfree form a social group that has been negatively stereotyped and subsequently stigmatised (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). Childfree women are regarded as violating a strong social norm and are frequently described as selfish, childish, irresponsible, and hedonistic (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Letherby, 2002). The word "childfree" has been associated with the term "carefree", which implies that women who do not have children are in a sense childlike themselves, as they have no parenting commitments or responsibilities (Letherby, 2002).

### **3.4.3 Life partners are accepting of women's choices to remain childfree**

Women who choose to remain childfree often choose partners with similar life expectations and goals. Callan (1986) indicates that a single woman who has decided to remain childfree but still wants to marry or cohabit is influenced by a different set of expectations about a possible partner and her relationship with him than a woman who expects to marry and have children. Childfree women's descriptions of the ideal male partner differ from those of single women who wish to become mothers. Childfree women want to be involved with partners who are well-educated (Callan, 1989). Conversely, women who desire motherhood are likely to seek a partner with whom they can experience a strong degree of commitment, mutual trust and disclosure in a relationship. According to Bram (1984), childfree couples are less traditional in sex role orientation. Bram (1984) conducted in-depth interviews with 83 couples, and found that individuals who decided to remain childfree were more likely to have attained a professional or doctoral degree, more likely to have a professional career, and more likely to be employed full-time.

Agrillo and Nelini (2008) state:

Compared to women, the role played by men in childfree couples is still unclear. The childfree decision is expected to have particular importance for women, because in many societies motherhood is viewed as an integral part of the female gender role. In contrast, fatherhood does not hold a position of equivalent importance for the male gender role, and masculine success is most often dependent upon occupational achievement rather than children. (p. 357)

In a small number of cases, the husband is seen to be responsible for the decision to remain childfree. However, in most instances childfree couples report that the woman is primarily responsible for the decision (Cooper et al., 1978).

#### **3.4.4 General dislike for children**

In the study conducted by Park (2005), which involved semi-structured interviews with 13 women and eight men, almost half of the childfree participants expressed a general dislike towards children or appeared to be disinterested in children. Many women who choose to remain childfree appeal to biological drives to explain their choice. These women often report that they have a lack of “maternal instinct”, and present the lack of this maternal instinct as the central reason for remaining childfree (Park, 2005).

#### **3.4.5 Early socialisation experiences**

In the study conducted by Park (2005), the female respondents acknowledged the influence of various parenting models on their decision to remain childfree. Different parents and other adults that these women encountered throughout their lives had a significant impact on the way in which these women perceive childrearing. Experiences of family life while growing up also play an important role in the decision to remain childfree. Women who experience their parents negatively are often afraid of making the same mistakes, and choose to remain childfree in order to avoid hurting a child in the same way. However, Park (2005) asserts that this is not always the case, as several of the participants in her study indicated that they were from loving, nurturing families.

#### **3.4.6 Personality and parenting skills**

Childfree women are often regarded as less well adjusted, less nurturing and more independent than women with children (Park, 2005). In a study conducted by Arendell (2000) many childfree women reported that they do not believe that they would be good parents, as their personality characteristics are different to those characteristics typically associated with good parents (Liamputtong & Naksook, 2002). These personality traits include a tendency to be anxious, sensitivity, being impatient, and being perfectionistic (Park, 2005). In contrast, mothers are traditionally portrayed as being devoted to the care of others, self-sacrificing, and willing to put aside their own interests and needs. Therefore, childfree women often do not believe that they possess these qualities (Arendell, 2000).

### **3.4.7 Concern about physical aspects of childbirth and recovery**

Despite advanced medical treatment there is still a strong association between pain and childbirth (Cronje & Grobler, 2003). According to Parker (2005) many childfree women are afraid of the extreme pain associated with childbirth. Childbirth can be an exhausting and even a traumatic experience (Hung, 2004). In addition, new mothers often complain about fatigue (Liamputtong & Naksook, 2002).

Childbirth also influences the sexual lives of women. Olsson, Lundqvist, Faxelid, and Nissen (2005) state that new parents do not reach the same frequency of sexual intercourse they had prior to the birth of their child until after the child is one year old. This may be partly due to fatigue on the part of the new mothers as well as biological change in women due to motherhood. Approximately 75% of all women who give birth naturally suffer from vaginal lacerations. Although some women heal naturally, others need to be treated for lacerations (Olsson et al., 2005). Some women report that they have difficulty in coping with the bodily changes brought about by childbirth (Olsson et al., 2005). Women often resort to plastic surgery in an attempt to alter unwanted bodily changes (Olsson et al., 2005). In addition, women also report a loss in sexual excitement when being caressed on their breasts as they experience difficulties in combining the functions of breasts as sexual organ and as a source of feeding for their children (Olsson et al., 2005).

Motherhood is biologically restrictive to women as women's bodies only allow them to give birth up until a certain age (Hagestad & Call, 2007). Women thus only have a limited time span in which to decide whether they would like to have biological children of their own. Women should ideally give birth before the age of 38, as conception after that age has been negatively associated with congenital abnormalities such as Down's syndrome in children (Bahado-Singh, Choi & Cheng, 2004).

### **3.4.8 Labour division and family**

In the past, a woman's primary role was to care for her children and her husband. Callan (1986) states: "An ideal woman centred her life on love of husband and children,

a love expressed mainly through emotions and piety, not through practical action” (p. 16). From this perspective women, specifically mothers, were seen as passive, fragile creatures who incapable of functioning without children or husbands and are unable to determine their own life’s worth and take action towards achieving self-determined goals. More recently, Arendell (2000) states that paid work and motherhood continue to be seen as two different spheres.

Wharton (2004) argues that people hold taken-for-granted beliefs about the family as a social institution. These beliefs represent a set of cultural assumptions about how families should be. When people use the term “family” they are referring to a modern, nuclear entity consisting of a wife, a husband, and children (Wharton, 2004). Heterosexuality and reproduction are thus the main features underlying the commonly used term “family”. Within families the sexual division of labour is most evident in the division of child-rearing responsibilities (Wharton, 2004). Women give birth (a biological fact) and are also primarily responsible for taking care of the children. Wharton (2004) argues that this gender difference in childcare roles is an important component of family as a gendered institution and has an impact on women’s family lives and careers.

According to Wharton (2004), gender, work and family are inextricably intertwined and there are different ways in which motherhood impacts on a woman’s career. Changes in work and family thus ultimately affect gender relationships. Conversely, changes in gender relationships lead to changes in family and work. It is thus inevitable that work and family will change as women’s role as homemaker at home is losing value in South Africa and there is a greater need for women’s participation in the economic environment (Du Toit, 1993; Knowls, 2008).

Most societies differentiate labour on the basis of sex (Wharton, 2004). This differentiation is based on the fact that women are viewed as having the primary responsibility for the care of children. Riekert (2005) acknowledges that despite the changing nature of families it remains difficult for women to both nurture a family and pursue a successful career. The type of labour women perform depends on children’s

dependence on their mother's care (Wharton, 2004). Women may lose work experience and seniority when having children (Wharton, 2004). Women may also change their jobs to fill more child-friendly vacancies or so that they can spend less time at work, both of which impact negatively on their income. Employers may also discriminate against mothers, as they may believe that mothers are less productive than childfree women. This results in employers paying mothers less than childfree women, and promoting women that choose to remain childfree more readily than mothers. Wharton (2004) found that childfree women generally earn 4% more than mothers. Park (2005) reports that childfree women are more likely than mothers to hold managerial and professional occupations. According to Gillespie (2000) pursuing a career is often offered as a reason for being childfree. This is associated with the stereotype of hard, ruthless, unfeminine career women.

The gender stereotype of women primarily being responsible for mothering is thus in conflict with the notion of women pursuing and being successful in their careers. Women may thus choose to remain childfree in order to maintain a successful career.

#### ***3.4.9. Reasons relating to the decision to remain child-free in South Africa***

There exists a dearth of literature on women's decisions to remain childfree in the South African context. There could, however, be context-specific reasons for remaining childfree.

The prevalence of HIV/AIDS could be seen as a possible reason for remaining childfree. According to the UNAIDS report on the Global AIDS epidemic (2010) Sub-Saharan Africa still comprises an inordinate share of the global HIV burden. The report indicates that although the rate of new HIV infections has decreased, the number of people living with HIV continues to rise.

The decision to remain childfree could be influenced by women's situatedness in history; Childbearing within South Africa is deeply imbricated in the Apartheid government's policy of family planning, which was clearly racialised (Burgard, 2004).. This has particular bearing on the use of reproductive technologies as well as women's feelings regarding family planning and reproduction (Burgard, 2004).

The SAPS Annual Report (2009) indicates that of the approximately 2.1 million serious crime cases reported in South Africa during 2008/2009, 32,7% were attributable to contact crimes, 26,3% of cases were other serious crimes, 25,4% of reported cases pertained to property-related crimes and 8,9% and 6,7% were crimes dependent on police action for detection and contact-related crimes respectively. Contact crime, or violent crime, consists of seven categories of serious crime against victims. These crimes include murder, attempted murder, sexual offences, assault with the intent to inflict grievous bodily harm, common assault, aggravated robbery, and other robbery. These crimes involve physical contact that is usually of a violent or coercive nature between the perpetrators and their victims. According to the SAPS Annual Report (2009), contact crime frequently causes extremely serious and often permanent or even fatal physical, psychological, and material damage to victims, leaving lasting scars on the psyche of those affected by such crimes. The possibility of children being exposed to such contact crimes could serve as a deterrent to having children.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

There is a growing tendency for women to remain childfree due to certain advantages, such as the pursuit of an adult-centred life style and a fulfilling career. Although women may choose to remain childfree, they remain part of a society that subscribes to certain ideas about motherhood and femininity. Women choosing to remain childfree are often disregarded and many of the people they interact with do not believe that they should have the choice to remain childfree. These women are also often regarded as selfish, immature, and ruthless by members of the society within which they live.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

In chapter three I provided an overview of the existing literature regarding the reasons women choose to remain childfree. In this chapter I discuss the epistemological claims of the feminist social constructionist approach, which shapes the methodology employed in this study. Wickramasinghe (2006) argues that the ontology of gender becomes an epistemology when conducting research. According to Beethamand and Demetriades (2007), no one single method or combination of methods constitutes “feminist” research. Instead, it is the research approach itself that informs the methods employed. In this chapter I discuss the methodology used to explore the reasons as to why women remain childfree in the South African context. The recruitment of participants, data collection, interviewing as a research instrument and analysis of the data are also addressed.

### 4.2 Theoretical considerations that shaped the research process

In this section, I discuss some of the central principles of feminist social constructionist theory. These principles inform the way in which the research is conducted.

#### ***4.2.1 Knowledge is steeped in language, culture and history***

Social constructionism posits that human experience is mediated historically, culturally and linguistically (Willig, 2001). Thus, what we experience is never a direct reflection of environmental conditions but is rather a understanding of these conditions (Willig, 2001). Social constructionism does not argue that one can never really know anything; rather, it suggests that there are ‘knowledges’ rather than ‘knowledge’ (Willig, 2001).

Burr (1996) states that language plays a critical role in how we construct our realities; knowledge is generated through interactions between people in the course of social life. This statement links language to the social context. The social context is considered important as it is believed that the meaning of a social action is dependent on the specific context. Consequently, a social action could mean something entirely different in different social contexts (Dlamini, 2002).



As knowledge is socially constructed through language, knowledge is then only meaningful in the historical period or culture in which it is produced (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2004). Thus femininity may mean something entirely different for one culture in a specific point in time than to another.

Social constructionist theory posits that the researcher cannot position herself outside of the research, as the researcher is inescapably related to and implicated in the subject matter (Willig, 2001). When conducting research from a feminist social constructionist point of departure, the researcher acknowledges that she herself is part of the web of social construction (Avis et al., 1999; Burr, 1996; Willig, 2001). Consequently, the researcher brings her own perception and understanding to the research setting, which is based on her language, her situatedness in her culture and her history (Burr, 1996; Willig in Smith, 2003; Willig, 2001). The researcher adopting a feminist social constructionist approach appreciates the notion that meaning is negotiated between the researcher and the participant, and that both the participant and the researcher may account differently for the meaning that originates from the conversation between them (Burr, 1996; Willig, 2001). Willig (2001) states:

Research from a social constructionist perspective is concerned with identifying various ways of constructing social reality that are available in culture, to explore the conditions of their use and to trace their implications for human experience and social practice. (p.7)

As knowledge is constructed through language during social interaction, knowledge could differ from one setting to another. The exact same research conducted by a different researcher in a different social context could yield very different results. Also, the knowledge generated between myself and one participant may be very different to the knowledge constructed with another participant.

The reasons for remaining childfree may be dependent on the participants' culture and history; femininity and motherhood are social constructs that may hold different meanings in different cultures situated in different histories.

#### **4.2.2 Power and positionality**

When conducting research from a feminist perspective, the researcher has to be acutely aware of the participant's social context and of the way in which the researcher is positioned towards the participant and her social context. Thus, the researcher has to take cognisance of the situational and interpersonal dynamics that form part of the research process. "Feminist research is designed to seek social justice, to enhance women's voice and influence in society, and to explore alternative ways of understanding the world through women's experiences" (Gergen, 2008, p. 280). Feminist research is political in nature and strives to address the exploitation and oppression of women (Mies, 1991). The researcher is often confronted with power imbalances within the research relationship that undermine the purpose of feminist research (Jenkins, 2008), which is to give power back to the women.

In feminist research the researcher has to be aware of issues of power and positionality and should strive to reduce the impact of power inequalities between herself and the participants (Jenkins, 2008). Mies (1991) adopts a somewhat different approach to existing inequalities between the researcher and the research. She argues that:

...the problem is not that some women have more power and some less, but rather how to most positively employ in the struggle against women's exploitation and oppression the qualitatively and quantitatively different power potentials of women involved in the research process. (Mies, 1991, p. 70)

Mies (1991) therefore recognises that although there may be existing inequalities amongst the parties in the research process, the researcher should use these "power potentials" to address the exploitation and oppression of women.

### **4.2.3 Personal reflexivity**

In this research I endeavour to address the issue of positionality as adding to power inequality through self-reflexivity (Golombisky, 2006). Reflexivity is the process whereby a researcher draws on self-knowledge in order to gain a deeper understanding of the individuals she is endeavouring to study (Steier, 1991). Self-reflexivity entails acknowledging and embracing who you are as a researcher, being aware of your individuality and values, and understanding how such self-knowledge contributes to and possibly impacts on the study. The researcher brings her own situatedness in history, language and culture to the research process and it is impossible to separate the self from the study. In the context of feminist research reflexivity means that the researcher should relate herself to the other women she seeks to understand (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Feminist social constructionist research focuses on the relationship between the researcher and the participant and looks at intersubjectivity instead of objectivity and dialogue rather than monologues (Gilbert, 1993). Thus, the research relationship is about more than a researcher simply studying a subject (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), the researcher must be defined by her role as a member of the research process and not as someone who merely gathers information. The feminist social constructionist approach consequently views research differently to more traditional views, in that what the researcher studies and seeks to describe is by no means apart from her involvement in the research. In this way, the subject matter is not viewed as being “out there” (Steier, 1991).

The researcher not only influences the research setting, but the research itself may develop and challenge the researcher as an individual (Dlamini, 2002). The topic of this study appealed to me, as I am a woman in a long-term supportive relationship. I realised that my partner valued my individuality and person to such an extent that I have an option concerning whether I would want children in the future. I have two young brothers (aged 11 and 14) and have experienced and witnessed the difficulties of child-rearing, and this made me question whether I truly desired motherhood. Although I have not gained finality with regards to whether or not I want children in the future, I thought

that it would be of academic interest to uncover the reasons why some women choose not to have children. In addition, I felt that this would challenge the common perception in Western society that women are born to become mothers.

Feminist social constructionist theory advocates for different “knowledges” (Burr, 1996). Feminist research is particularly concerned with enhancing women’s voice and influence in society, thus the participants’ accounts of their experiences of their lived worlds are valued. Within this perspective there is no such thing as a universal truth, instead knowledge is understood to be bound to a specific culture and social relationships, and may change in different contexts (Willig, 2001). The researcher and participant co-produce the linguistic creation called research (Golombisky, 2006). Through engaging in dialogue with each other an intersubjective exchange occurs as we touch on each other’s lives and worlds, and thus gain limited access to an understanding of each other’s lived experiences (Dé Ishtar, 2005). The process of the co-production of knowledge between the researcher and the participant is made possible through making the research relationship more reciprocal (Sprague, 2005). Oakley (1981) argues for the development of “sisterly bonds” between the researcher and the participants in order to enhance the participant’s trust and the researcher’s empathy. These bonds result in the production of richer data. The researcher discloses her own thoughts and feelings to participants during the research process instead of acting as a disinterested party who objectively takes notes of the participants’ accounts. Although spoken language is one source of meaning, knowledge creation between the researcher and participant often transcends spoken words (Dé Ishtar, 2005; Reinharz, 1992). “There are contexts where language is inappropriate, or not used, or where utterances are barely offered. To reach this meaning, the feminist researcher draws on the language of the body” (Dé Ishtar, 2005, p. 363). In this study, I not only had to rely on verbal expression to come to a deeper understanding as to why these women chose to remain childfree, I also had to consider and interpret the unsaid things that I experienced while conducting the interview. These included things such as body language, inappropriate laughter, and silences that occurred during the interviews.

However, the researcher's self-disclosure brings its own set of challenges to the research. Reinharz (1992) asserts that "researchers who self-disclose are reformulating the researcher's role in a way that maximises engagement of the self, but also increases the researcher's vulnerability to criticism, both for what is revealed and for the very act of self-disclosure" (p. 34). Steier (1991) notes:

It is important to recognise that there are domains where self-reflexivity has been seen as legitimated by the possibilities expressed within the domain- most noticeably in areas of artistic expression... Here the artist is allowed, or even encouraged, to acknowledge the 'product' as a personal one. This personality is, however, traditionally banned from 'research'. Interestingly, it is an objection to this exclusion of personality, in the form of personal passion, or emotion, or even institution, that marks a starting point for (reflexivity). (p. 4)

Steier (1991) argues that research should be made autobiographical in order to make research more reflective. In this study, I embrace the notion of autobiographical research and the study is therefore written in the first person. This mode of expression allows me to bring myself closer to the study, thus enhancing the practice of self-reflexivity.

Another obstacle that I had to overcome in this research was the question of whether it is possible to overcome our differences if we are not the same. The second wave feminist movement argued against the treatment and conceptualisation of women as "others" in relation to the male norm (Archer, 2004). During this period feminist thinking increasingly became concerned with the power differences and inequalities that exist between women (Archer, 2004). This increased emphasis of the differences between women became unsustainable, and feminists began to adopt a more postmodern outlook concerning feminist research. Postmodern feminist theory "argues for the fragmented identity of women and the multiplicity of difference" (Nencel & Pels, 1991, p. 118). Although there are differences amongst women, it is also possible to achieve a

sense of solidarity through working towards a common goal (Archer, 2004). This viewpoint allowed me to highlight the differences in the lived experiences of the women participating in the study (including myself), while still focusing on similar experiences in order to draw parallels.

#### **4.3 Instrument: Semi-structured interviews**

The semi-structured interview was selected as the research instrument for the purposes of this study. Semi-structured interviews are used in order to understand the beliefs, perceptions and accounts of participants concerning a specific topic (Strydom et al., 2002). This is particularly important in women studies because “this way of learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for women” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). This method differs from ethnography (which is often employed in feminist research) as it does not require the researcher to spend long periods of time participating in the life of the research respondent (Reinharz, 1992). It is also more desirable than survey research, as it provides opportunities for clarification and facilitates discussion (Reinharz, 1992). The reader may refer to the interview schedule presented as an addendum.

Interviewing is widely used in feminist research as it allows for the re-dressing of power relations within the research setting (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994; Pinni, 2002). According to Pinni (2002):

- Interviewing shifts the task of giving meaning to lived experiences from the researcher to the participant, and thus gives value to the voice of women;
- The face-to-face interaction between the researcher and the participant, and the consequent reciprocity and rapport existing between the research parties, allows for more equitable research relationships than other more traditional research methods; and
- Interviewing is regarded as a “flexible and responsive method which allows the researcher the opportunity to contextualise approaches to address particular situations or individuals” (Pinni, 2002, p. 341) thereby tailor-making the study to suit the women participating in the research.

The researcher's serves as a guide within the interview, but the participant has an equal amount of power in determining the direction in which the interview proceeds (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In feminist research, the researcher does not simply allow the participants to speak during interviews and it is not possible for researchers to simply stand outside (Golombisky, 2006).

Herod (1993) states that "gender relations are an important dynamic shaping the interview process which can significantly influence the sorts of data obtained" (p. 304). Reinharz (1992) argues that in order for a woman to be understood in a research project, it may be necessary for her to be interviewed by a woman. According to Reinharz (1992), this situation represents women-to-women talk. Golombisky (2006) suggests that same-gender interviewing may be preferable as it has the potential of improving rapport due to "natural" affinity. There is a two-pronged argument concerning the effectiveness of women-to-women talk. On the one hand literature suggests that women are better interviewers as their feminine communication styles make them better listeners. However, on the other hand, the effectiveness of women-to-women talk may be compromised in the research setting as the researcher gains "honorary male status" due to her authority in the interview. The notion of "women" is paradoxical in feminist research. Gergen (2008) posits that the aim of feminist research is to enhance women's voice and power in society. This suggests that there is a collective "women", and that there are certain traits and experiences that women share. However, there is also a shared belief amongst feminist theorists that it is important to be sensitive to the differences that exist between women (Dietz, 2003). Thus, although I may not ascribe to the essentialist perspective of women being "better listeners", it important to consider that fact that my status as a woman may have influenced the dynamics of the interviewing process.

In a semi-structured interview, the researcher follows an interview guide that addresses certain topics and issues (Whitley, 2002). The interview guide may also include specific questions that the researcher may or may not choose to ask during the interview



(Whitley, 2002). A major advantage of the semi-structured interview is that it enables the researcher to be flexible in terms of the degree to which she can ask questions within the conversation that do not appear on the interview guide (Whitley, 2002). Thus, the data gathered by the researcher can be very rich.

To traditional social science researchers the disadvantage of a semi-structured interview is that it reduces the comparability of responses because the interviewer may choose to skip some of the topics on the interview guide or ask unstandardised questions (Whitley, 2002). According to Whitley (2002), it may be difficult to organise data if the researcher chooses not to include certain topics in some of the interviews and asks questions to some respondents that were not asked in the other interviews. Whitley (2002) argues that a major drawback of semi-structured interviews is that the researcher and the participant negotiate regarding what is considered to be true. However, the co-construction of truth need not be regarded negatively as the interviews are by implication conversations, which implies that discussions take place and certain meanings and attitudes arise from these discussions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

#### **4.4 The interview-guide**

An interview guide is used to aid the researcher in engaging the participant and designating the appropriate boundaries of questioning (Strydom et al., 2002). For this study I identified appropriate questions and concerns relevant to the topic at hand. These questions moved from broad to specific in order to allow the participant to become comfortable with the interview process. Strydom et al. (2002) suggest that the researcher should refrain from asking value-laden or leading questions, and that she should ask open-ended questions in order to allow the participants the opportunity to express themselves freely and with their own words.

#### **4.5 Sample and sample selection**

For this research study semi-structured interviews were conducted with five women. These participants were selected through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a procedure in which the researcher identifies participants who meet the criteria for the



inclusion in the study, and then asks these participants to nominate other potential participants that may be willing to participate in the study (Willig, 2001). Snowball sampling is often used when the sample of the study belongs to a hard to access population (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In this study, the sample was difficult to access as most women still see motherhood as desirable (Gillespie, 2000).

Women between the ages of 28 and 35 who expressed the desire to remain childfree were considered for the study. Only women in heterosexual relationships were interviewed. These selection criteria were based on the assumption that the women complying with the criteria and their partners had explored the option of having children and had decided to remain childfree. All of the women participating in the study had some form of tertiary education and indicated that they considered their careers to be important. All of the women participating in the study were white. This racial demographic was due to the fact that I was not able to find women from other racial groups who were interested in participating in the study. My inability to find participants of other races caused me to wonder about whether choosing to be childfree is not as common amongst other racial groups in South Africa or perhaps is considered to be a greater taboo for black women in South Africa. It is also possible that my own identity as a white woman prevented me from accessing potential participants from other racial groups.

Women fluent in Afrikaans and English were chosen to participate in the study. The interviews were conducted in the language that the women felt most comfortable expressing themselves in and this allowed for the gathering of rich information. I deliberately included women with similar traits, as I wanted to consider the diverse opinions and feelings as well as common threads from women that shared various characteristics.

**Table 1.1: Overview of participants' characteristics**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Profession</b>
Paula	28	English	Market researcher
Nancy	28	Afrikaans	Research psychologist
Natalie	33	Afrikaans	Lawyer
Bianca	29	English	Media strategist
Angie	31	Afrikaans	Somatologist

#### **4.6 Data recording and transcription**

I conducted the interviews at places where the participants felt most comfortable. Most interviews were conducted at the participants' homes or at my home. The interviews were audio taped with the participants' permission in order to allow me to pay full attention to participants' responses. This also allowed me to follow up on specifically interesting issues that emerged from the interviews (Strydom et al., 2002). The recording of data was necessary because it would not have been possible for me to remember the exact details of the conversations, such as pauses and further explanations provided by participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). I then transcribed the audio-taped interviews verbatim so as to prevent data loss if the tapes were damaged in any way.

The audio-tapes and transcripts serve as a public record that can be made available to the scientific community. In addition, the audio-tapes can be replayed in order to improve the initial transcript (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

#### **4.7 Data analysis**

I used thematic analysis to explore the meanings in the participants' experiences. The particular method used was McCracken's (1998) 5-step method of analysis. McCracken's (1998) analytic method presumes that the researcher has used a theoretical framework to guide her in the research question in addition to having conducted a comprehensive literature review.

The 5-step process can be described as follows:

- During the **first step**, the researcher reads and reviews each of the interview transcripts twice, the first time in order to gain an understanding of the content, and the second time for the identification of possible useful comments, which are noted as observations (McCracken, 1998).
- The **second step** involves the development of preliminary descriptive and interpretative categories based on information obtained in the transcripts, the literature review, and the theoretical framework adopted by the researcher for the specific research (McCracken, 1998).
- The **third step** is the meticulous examination of these preliminary categories in order to identify different connections and to develop pattern codes (McCracken, 1998).
- The **fourth step** pertains to the identification of basic themes by examining clusters of comments made by participants as well as memos made by the researcher (McCracken, 1998).
- During the **final step** themes from all interviews are examined in order to distinguish the dominant themes arising from the data. These themes are used to answer the research question/s, and serve as the basis for writing up the discussion of the data (McCracken, 1998).

#### 4.8 Validity

It is not possible to conduct a truly valid study from a feminist social constructionist approach, as this approach advocates for different “knowledges” (Burr, 1996). Instead, the researcher should be concerned with giving accurate accounts of the participants’ lived experience as disclosed to the researcher (Burr, 1996). Giving accurate accounts of participants’ lived experiences enhances the quality and credibility of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Patton (2001) proposes a set of criteria based on social constructionist thought that can be used to judge the credibility of a qualitative study. The criteria include trustworthiness, authenticity, triangulation, subjectivity acknowledged, reflexivity, contributions to dialogue, particularity and praxis. I use this set of criteria to enhance my

study as well as evaluate the research. Some of these criteria are intertwined and are merged in this study. I also incorporate other criteria considered important when conducting qualitative research. These criteria were identified during a closer inspection of literature pertaining to quality and rigour in qualitative research.

#### **4.8.1 Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to the way in which the researcher conducts a study in order to meet the criteria of credibility (Harrison, MacGibbon & Morton, 2001). Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson and Spiers (2002) propose that the researcher conducting a qualitative study should employ verification strategies throughout the research process in order to enhance the credibility of the research. Morse et al. (2002) describe verification as “the process of checking, confirming, making sure, and being certain” (p. 17). The following verification strategies are suggested by Morse et al. (2002):

- **Methodological coherence/ praxis:** This strategy involves ensuring that the research question matches the method employed, which matches the data and the analytical procedures (Morse et al., 2002). This is also referred to as epistemological reflexivity and is concerned with the question of whether the ontological claims, together with both the epistemological framework and the methodological approach, facilitate the researcher in achieving the aims of the research (Willig, 2001). The research question is exploring the reasons for white middle class childfree women's choice to remain childfree. The research question necessitates a qualitative study in which women can express their thoughts and emotions and share their realities. Thematic analysis conducted from a feminist social constructionist framework allows for in-depth exploration of childfree women's experiences and realities and acknowledges different experiences and realities.
- **The sample must be appropriate:** The sample must consist of participants who best represent or have knowledge of the research topic. Sample adequacy allows for saturation and replication. “By definition, saturating data ensures replication in categories, replication verifies, and ensures comprehension and completeness” (Morse et al., 2002, p.18). The women interviewed were all between the ages of 28

and 35, were white and middle class. Certain characteristics shared by the women allowed for the identification of similar themes; conversely these common traits also accentuated differences amongst individuals.

- ***Collecting and analysing data concurrently:*** Morse et al. (2002) assert that data already obtained guides the researcher with regards to what she needs to know, which further enhances the quality of the data. I used data already obtained to enhance the quality of other interviews. As a 27-year-old childfree, white and middle-class woman, I had my own preconceived ideas as to what the participants of my study would say. I was also very sensitive to the fact that some participants would not reveal certain reasons for remaining childfree. Childfree women's feelings surrounding breastfeeding is an example of how I used the data collection process to guide further research. Personally, one of the reasons I have for remaining childfree is that I do not like the idea of breast feeding. To my surprise, the first woman I interviewed was quite open about the fact that she also felt that breastfeeding was "animal-like". Discussing this issue with her and realising that we both felt strongly about this issue enhanced my approach to the subsequent interviews. Sometimes the women I interviewed would offer their feelings regarding breastfeeding freely, other times I would probe them with regards to their feelings about breastfeeding. Furthermore, I listened to the audiotapes after the interviews and at times identified certain statements made by the participants which I did not follow up on or explore adequately. In such instances I assessed whether giving the participant's statement more consideration would have enhanced the quality of the data. If that was the case, I would follow up on the issue telephonically or by e-mail. If the participant made an interesting comment I would consider that statement as a point of discussion for future interviews. I also relied on field notes to augment the interviews I had with other participants.
- ***Thinking theoretically:*** "Ideas emerging from data are reconfirmed in new data, this gives rise to new ideas that, in turn must be verified in data already collected" (Morse et al., 2002, p.18). Feminist social constructionist theory informs the data collecting process and my interpretation of the data.

- **Theory development:** Instead of merely using theory as a framework to analyse data, the researcher should seek to contribute to the theory. Some of the themes that were not evident in the literature
- e review but which arose from the data complemented the chosen theory. For example, the women participating in the study report that they strongly ascribed to dominant discourses of femininity but that they rather view themselves as nurturers instead of mothers. This finding supports the feminist social constructionist notion that dominant discourses such as "all women are mothers" are fluid and can change.

#### **4.8.2 Authenticity and particularity**

Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) argue that particularity and authenticity are interlinked. Authenticity refers to the practice through which the research findings reflect the meanings and experiences that are lived by the participants of the study (Sandelowski, 1986). Authenticity "is proposed as being consistent with the relativist view that research accounts do no more than represent a sophisticated but temporary consensus of view about what is considered to be true" (Seale, 1999, p. 468). Particularity could be achieved in this study by asking participants to elaborate on ideas and by clarifying what participants meant when I feel that I either do not understand certain statements made or if I believe that certain statements are ambiguous. Particularity refers to the ability to acknowledge and show the differences in the way in which the participants in the study experience and account for their realities (Patton, 2001). Authenticity is indicated if the researcher can demonstrate that she has represented a range of different realities. In this research, particularity is achieved by demonstrating that although there are some common threads regarding women's reasons to remain childfree, women often have different experiences or do not share same opinions. This is done by quoting participants frequently in the results and discussion chapter.

#### **4.8.3 Triangulation**

According to Patton (2001), triangulation addresses the issue of internal validity in qualitative research. Triangulation refers to the process through which the researcher uses more than one method of data collection in order to corroborate the findings. Thus, interviews could be combined with focus groups or observational fieldwork. Due to the limited nature of this study, triangulation was not possible.

#### **4.8.4 Subjectivity acknowledged**

Acknowledging that the researcher is not objective and has preconceived notions concerning the subject matter allows the researcher to think critically about her own perceptions and ideas. Through acknowledging my subjectivity I was able to think about the ways in which my perceptions and ideas impact on the manner in which I conduct the study, how I interact with the respondents and the way in which I interpret the data.

#### **4.8.5 Personal reflexivity**

An in-depth discussion of personal reflexivity is provided in Section 4.2.3, and is a pivotal theoretical consideration for the study.

#### **4.8.6 Contributions to dialogue as well as enhanced and deeper understanding**

It is important that I as a researcher acknowledge that I am aware of the research process and that I cannot stand apart from the phenomenon I wish to study. Knowledge is generated within the research setting and the researcher is very much part of the research process (Willig, 2001; Smith, 2003). "Through judicious use of self-disclosure, interviews become conversations and richer data are possible" (Harrison et al., 2001, p. 323). Conversations also allow for enhanced and deeper understanding of the experiences of participants.

#### **4.7.8 Reliability**

Within qualitative research reliability is considered to be less important than validity (Gcabo, 2003). Reliability refers to the degree to which a study can be replicated (Colman, 2001). It is difficult to replicate a qualitative study, as every qualitative

research process is unique in that each participant's account of her experiences is unique. It is thus not possible that different studies will yield the same interpretation. The interpretation is also dependent on the context in which the research process takes place and on the situatedness of the participants in language, history, and culture (Gcabo, 2003).

#### **4.9 Ethical considerations**

According to Silverman (2005) all ethical guidelines stress the importance of informed consent of the participant. Informed consent can be seen as the key norm that governs the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Kimmel, 1988). The researcher should provide participants with sufficient information about the research that is relevant to their decision to participate. It is pivotal that the researcher ensures that participants understand the information that is provided to them. Participation is voluntary and the researcher may not coerce the participant into participating (Silverman, 2005). The researcher will provide the participants with information regarding the research and will answer the questions posed by the research participants in order to make sure that they fully understand the nature of the research. The participants will also be asked to sign a consent form in which they demonstrate their understanding of the conditions involved in the research should they agree to participate. Should the chosen participants decide not to be part of the study, the researcher will respect such a decision.

The principles of informed consent and voluntary participation give participants the right to withdraw consent after the commencement of the interviews (Whitley, 2001). Thus, research participants may choose to withdraw from the interviews at any time, and will not be coerced by the researcher to continue participating.

Confidentiality is another key ethical consideration that the researcher has to take in consideration when conducting research. Confidentiality pertains to the agreement reached between the researcher and the participant with regards to how accessible the information obtained during the interview will be made to others (Kimmel, 1988). The



participants will remain anonymous and will be given aliases, and the researcher will take care not to make available personal details that could be used to identify participants. Transcription and analysis will be performed on computer files. The researcher acknowledges that computer files are not totally secure, and will implement the necessary security measures such as using a password to access the files and will install the appropriate security programs, although these may still prove to be vulnerable to threat (Whitley, 2001). In order to safeguard the information provided by the participants, the researcher will store video footage and transcriptions in a safe place known only to the researcher; the footage as well as the transcripts will be kept for a period of 15 years time, after which it will be destroyed.

According to Whitley (2001) even the best-planned research may have negative effects on the participants. Due to the sensitive and personal nature of the research question, it may be possible that the conversation arising between the participants and the researcher may awake negative emotions in the participants. The participants may refuse to answer any questions that the researcher may ask if it makes them uncomfortable or upsets them in any way.

The research may be beneficial to the participants: as meaning is co-created between the participant and the researcher, the participant may gain certain insights as to why she or other women choose to remain childfree, and participants are also given the space to voice their feelings, which may bring forth the feeling of being empowered.

#### **4.10 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed the epistemological tenets of the feminist social constructionist paradigm and considered the ways in which these assumptions influence my data collection, analysis and interpretation. The main concern of feminist research is empowering women and the research methods adopted for this study therefore place the participants at the centre of the study. I attempt to gain deeper insights into the participants' lived experiences, and portray these experiences in a manner that reflects their accounts as accurately as possible. Social constructionism argues for different

knowledges and experiences of realities, and I am thus sensitive to the fact that my interpretation of the participants' accounts of their lived worlds, and their experiences of motherhood and being childfree, impact on the study. Reflexivity is thus a central practice in the research process.

## Chapter 5: Results and discussion

### 5.1 Introduction

The research findings are presented in this chapter. Both the results and the discussion of the results are presented in this chapter as it is difficult to present the results without providing explanation and contextualisation in relation to previous research.

The research is concerned with exploring the reasons that white middle-class women cite for remaining childfree. The analysis was based on consistent themes that emerged from the transcripts of the interviews conducted with the research participants. I was able to identify relevant themes by reading each of the transcribed interviews twice and then developing preliminary categories based on the transcripts, the literature review and the theoretical framework (McCracken, 1998). I then proceeded to examine these preliminary categories in order to develop pattern codes. The identification of preliminary themes enabled me to recognise basic themes. Themes from all the interviews were examined in order to determine the dominant themes that emerged from the text (McCracken, 1998).

During analysis 40 preliminary categories were identified and clustered into 11 basic themes (as depicted in table 1.2). These themes were ranked according to their prevalence in the text. The preliminary categories, the basic themes and the ranking of the themes are indicated in table 1.2. The dominant themes (i.e. the themes with the highest rankings) receive the most consideration in this chapter. The less prevalent themes are also discussed as the sample size is not representative of the population and thus every reason cited by childfree women for remaining childfree is considered. The study is not only concerned with identifying common threads of experiences among all women who choose to remain childfree. The study also aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the reasons that white middle-class childfree women participating in the study cite for remaining childfree.

**Table 1.2: Themes identified during the analysis**

Theme associated with the decision to remain childfree	Preliminary categories	Participants					Number of responses per theme	Ranking of theme
		1	2	3	4	5		
Freedom from childcare responsibility and greater opportunity for self-fulfilment	Participant enjoys the personal freedom associated with an adult-centred lifestyle	*	*	*	*	*	5	1
	Children are a lifelong commitment		*	*	*	*		
	Childrearing dominates all other activities as children need constant attention		*	*	*	*		
	Children could be a financial burden			*		*		
	Unable to provide for children financially		*					
	Current economic climate is undesirable				*			
Unequal labour division in the family	Women have to give up all their career ambitions to take care of children	*	*	*	*	*	5	1
	Mothers take most responsibility for childrearing	*	*	*		*		
	Women with children are more likely to be disadvantaged at work		*	*	*	*		
	Women have a limited social network to share childrearing responsibilities		*					
	Women are expected to fulfil too many roles which may cause emotional distress					*		

Theme associated with the decision to remain childfree	Preliminary categories	Participants					Number of responses per theme	Ranking of theme
		1	2	3	4	5		
Concerns about the physical aspects of childbirth and recovery	Pain associated with childbirth	*	*	*		*	5	1
	Negative associations with breastfeeding	*	*	*		*		
	Factors associated with childbirth that negatively impact on physical appearance	*		*	*	*		
	Childbirth as a humiliating experience			*	*	*		
	Pregnancy and childbirth have a negative impact on women's health		*	*	*			
	Women's bodies are subservient to someone else or restricted during pregnancy				*	*		
	Childbirth affects the sexual lives of women					*		
Life partners are accepting of women's choice to remain childfree	Women and their partners have reached a compromise about not having children	*	*	*	*	*	5	1
	The decision to remain childfree has had a positive impact on the relationship	*		*	*	*		
	The decision to remain childfree may have a negative impact on the relationship in future	*	*	*				

Theme associated with the decision to remain childfree	Preliminary categories	Participants					Number of responses per theme	Ranking of theme
		1	2	3	4	5		
Early socialising experiences impacted on the decision to remain childfree	Experiences of family life when growing up	*	*	*	*	*	5	1
	Influence of various parenting models		*	*	*			
Motherhood and femininity are not necessarily linked	Nurturing is part of a woman's nature, but can be channelled into other relationships	*	*	*	*	*	5	1
	You can be feminine and not be a mother		*	*	*	*		
The world as an unsafe or evil place	Crime		*	*	*	*	5	1
	Negative interpersonal relationships that hurt children	*	*			*		
	Previous abusive romantic relationships had an impact on the decision			*		*		

Theme associated with the decision to remain childfree	Preliminary categories	Participants					Number of responses per theme	Ranking of theme
		1	2	3	4	5		
Negative emotional impact of childbirth and childrearing on women's psychological well-being	Need to be a mother may be selfish		*		*	*	5	2
	Childrearing is stressful			*		*		
	Postpartum depression				*			
	Motherhood could have a negative impact on a woman's self-esteem					*		
	Emotional distress caused by the empty nest syndrome					*		
	Children give one a sense of identity					*		
	Children may prevent women from developing emotionally					*		
Concerns of overpopulation of the planet	The planet is already overpopulated		*		*		3	2
	Rather adopt an orphan				*	*		
Past experiences contributed to the decision to remain childfree	Witnessing other people raise children	*		*		*	3	3
	Negative personal experiences with children as an adult			*		*		

Theme associated with the decision to remain childfree	Preliminary categories	Participants					Number of responses per theme	Ranking of theme
		1	2	3	4	5		
Personality and parenting skills	Women believe they do not possess the characteristics of a good mother		*		*	*	3	3



The discussion of themes in this chapter begins by focusing on the themes that were also identified in the literature review. The themes that were not encountered in the body of existing literature are then discussed. In each of the sections the themes are discussed according to prevalence; each theme is assigned a ranking according to its salience. The following table illustrates the structure of the discussion of themes.

**Table 1.3: An outline of the discussion of themes identified during the analysis**

<b>Themes identified in the literature review</b>	Freedom from childcare responsibility and greater opportunity for self-fulfilment
	Unequal labour division in the family
	Concerns about the physical aspects of childbirth and recovery
	Early socialising experiences impacted on the decision to remain childfree
	Life partners are accepting of women's choice to remain childfree
	Negative emotional impact of childbirth and childrearing on women's psychological well-being
	Past parent/child experiences contributed to the decision to remain childfree
	Personality and parenting skills
	Concerns of overpopulation of the planet
<b>New themes discussed during the interviews</b>	Motherhood and femininity are not necessarily linked
	The world as an unsafe or evil place

The presentation of the findings is augmented by quotations drawn from the interview texts. Quotations provide proof that the text did in fact produce the themes that the researcher is reporting and also preserve the language and voices of the participants (Gcabo, 2003). All of the interviews were conducted in the language that the women felt most comfortable expressing themselves in, which was mostly Afrikaans. In order to facilitate reading by a broader audience, the quotations are translated from Afrikaans to

English. During the translation process I was mindful of retaining the same meaning of the text and used the Afrikaans expressions if appropriate English substitutes did not exist. Pseudonyms were given to participants in order to protect their anonymity.

## **5.2 Section A: A discussion of themes that appeared in the literature**

### ***5.2.1 Freedom from childcare responsibility and a greater opportunity for self-fulfilment***

Literature suggests that childfree women are not willing to make the sacrifices and to take on the responsibilities associated with raising children (Park, 2005). The majority of women interviewed in this study asserted that motherhood is a life-long responsibility and they were not prepared to take on such a great responsibility. All of the participants stated that they enjoyed the personal freedom associated with an adult-centred lifestyle and they were not willing to forfeit the freedom they currently enjoy. One participant reported:

*No matter what people say, you actually lose all your freedom, because your life now revolves around this little person and actually for the rest of their lives, (your life) revolves around it. And that's even what one psychologist told me, she, like, loves her children a lot, but it is a prison, even though it is a prison of love.*  
(Nancy)

Another participant stated:

*Children just generally for me, I don't know, have a negative connotation, because you as woman always remain the mother, the husband may leave you, he can get out of there, he can take his stuff and leave, you're stuck with the kids.* (Angie)

Women who choose to remain childfree believe that mothers always have to put their children first and that mothers are continuously worried about their children (Liamputtong & Nasook, 2002). Childfree women are discouraged from becoming

mothers due to the fact that children require constant care and attention and thus dominate adult-centred activities. One participant noted:

*The children come first and you can't just travel nor do what you want, work where you want to, it's about the children and what they need and naturally they need stability. So you lose your personal freedom, you lose it to a large degree.*  
(Nancy)

Another participant argued:

*...It would be a complete lifestyle change. You know, things you look forward to, I know it sounds petty to some extent, but things like sleeping late, going on holiday, being spontaneous. All of that you give away.* (Bianca)

Another participant stated:

*I think if you have children you won't be able to travel. I think, my husband and I, we both love travelling...I don't think that (having children) suits our lifestyle. And also, when we come home from work then we want to go to the gym and cook and after that, you know, watch a bit of television, sometimes I watch television, or I read. He plays a bit of X-box or he watches television... And you know, there is no time in our routine (to raise children) and we don't really want to make space in our schedule to change it.* (Natalie)

The same participant expressed her concerns in terms of how children may impact on her interpersonal relationships by using her relationship with her sister, who has children, as an example:

*They take your attention away (from other people). I have noticed when I speak to (my sister) I am not always sure that she is actually busy giving me attention, because the children are always busy running around and she has to tell them the whole time 'No, don't do that. Stop doing that. Come sit still. Do you want that. Okay, I know you're hungry, I will feed you just now'.* (Natalie)

Another participant also reflected on how motherhood impacts negatively on interpersonal relationships:

*The moment that the baby is there, the friendship goes down the tube. For the simple reason that before, you would invite them to go eat or something like that. Now you have to eat at the Spur. Or the dad stays at home and the mother goes out and they take turns. Things like that. Conversations are never finished, because in the middle of the conversation it is always: 'Pietie! Stop that! Don't pull his hair!' And when they come back to the conversation, the conversation is over. Moment's over. So this I often experience. Or if you go to your friends it is always: 'Wait, I am just going to put my children to bed, I will be with you in a moment'. Then you have this monologue with yourself for about an hour, then the mother resurfaces and comes back and then the moment is over as well. So it changes friendships. I also think that my friends with children search for other friends that have children. (Angie)*

Childfree women also choose not to have children due to the financial benefits of remaining childfree (Callan, 1986). The majority of the women who participated in the study cited general lifestyle costs associated with raising children as one of the reasons for remaining childfree. These women regarded children as a financial burden and asserted that children would impact negatively on their current lifestyles. The motivation not to have children due to the financial implications was strengthened by the world economic crisis and its effect on the South African economy at the time of the interviews. One participant noted:

*The current state of South Africa doesn't really provide for people to have a lifestyle that you feel comfortable in, that you know that you can just send your children to school, for example, and still be able to pay the bills and to buy food at the end of the month. (Paula)*

Choosing an adult-centred lifestyle over having children may hold negative consequences for childfree women. Those who choose to remain childfree form a separate social group that has been negatively stereotyped and subsequently

stigmatised (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). Childfree women are regarded as violating a strong social norm and are subsequently described as selfish, childish, irresponsible, and hedonistic (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). Women who choose to remain childfree often cite jealousy as a reason for people in their social networks' negative responses to their decision to remain childfree. One participant stated:

*I think my sister is a bit jealous now and then. I think that sometimes she wishes she had that freedom that I have. I sometimes think she feels trapped a bit, but I know she wouldn't trade her children for the world, but I do think it has an impact on our relationship. (Natalie)*

Another participant remarked:

*I often feel as if they are jealous of you, because you have done something right. To a certain extent, you have that freedom, you still have your body, and you don't have that worry. (Paula)*

Women who remain childfree in order to pursue an adult-centred lifestyle may experience inner conflict. Agrillo and Nelini (2008) argue that women who choose to remain childfree are less traditional in sex role orientation than their counterparts who have children. Although this may be the case, these women still function in a society in which men and women are divided into different sexual casts and have to act accordingly (Gergen, 2001). Although childfree women may be independent in terms of their thinking about gender they may still have brought up in accordance with traditional values. Childfree women may thus still assign certain negative labels to themselves despite their more liberal views and may struggle with feelings of guilt due to the fact that they prefer the freedom associated with an adult-centred lifestyle. When asked how society reacts to women who choose to remain childfree, one participant reflected:

*First of all, they think there is something wrong. When I was in my twenties, everyone said: 'Oh, you will see, it's going to come, you will change your mind'. And that was kind of irritating, but then I just told them 'Yes' and then I went on. Then I hit the thirties and the older I become the less I look forward to having children, I think that perhaps I am becoming more clever, perhaps more stupid, I*

*don't know. Perhaps more selfish I feel, the older I become, but no I don't know.*  
(Angie)

Another participant offered:

*What has always concerned me about this concept (of motherhood), is that you actually have to put some other human being before yourself... You know, for the rest of your life basically. And that concept scares me, and you know, I question whether I also have the ability to do that. You know, to be so unselfish.* (Bianca)

Childfree women often experience negative reactions from society. The choice to remain childfree may also impact negatively on these women's self-perceptions. However, despite these negative consequences, childfree women still feel that the positives associated with remaining childfree outweigh the positives associated with having children. One of the major concerns childfree women express in regards to motherhood is that it is a lifelong commitment and that childrearing dominates all other activities. These women enjoy the personal freedom that their decision to remain childfree affords them and indicate that such personal freedom is very important to them.

### **5.2.2 Unequal labour division in families**

Societal expectations that state that girls will grow up to become wives and mothers and boys will be oriented to the market place (Gergen, 2001) still persist, and have an impact on women's decision to remain childfree. All of the research participants cited unequal labour division in the family as one of their primary concerns with regards to having children. Unequal labour division in families is a contentious issue because the traditional view of a woman's role being at home is losing value in South Africa. Instead, there is a growing need for women to participate in the working sector (Du Toit, 1993; Knowls, 2008). However, it is difficult for women to nurture a family while simultaneously pursuing a successful career, despite the changing roles in families (Riekert, 2005). Within families the sexual division of labour is most evident in the division of childrearing responsibilities, which remain primarily delegated to women (Wharton, 2004). This

division of responsibilities bears heavily on women's performance in the workplace (Wharton, 2004). Women deciding to remain childfree often struggle to negotiate competing societal roles and expectations. To this effect, one participant stated:

*I don't think that men, I have a wonderful husband, but I don't think that men understand such things, because if that child gets sick at school, mommy is called, not dad. And mommy has to leave her things and jump in the car and drive to school and take that child for stitches because he fell on his head.*(Angie)

Another participant was particularly severe in her account of her perception of unequal labour division in families:

*(Motherhood) is an unbelievably demanding role... And the pressure that is placed on you, because usually if something goes wrong with that child, or if that child turns out bad, they will usually blame the mother. Because you are actually, even today, as things change, you are the primary person responsible for that person's moral senses and their education. Everything actually. Actually everything comes down on you if you're the mother.* (Nancy)

It should be noted that the extent to which women experience unequal labour division in the family may be dependent on the culture to which they belong. The meanings of motherhood and mothering practices are historically and culturally bound (Potgieter, 1997). Various cultures thus support mothers and share in childrearing activities in different ways. In many African cultures childrearing is regarded as a collective responsibility and children are looked after by various members of the parents' social networks. One of the participants contrasted childrearing in the by white South Africans to childrearing by South Africans of Indian descent:

*It is a problem, I think in the western culture that we are so alone, because I know for instance in the Indian culture, you have so many people that you can turn to when you are struggling. There are plenty of people that can babysit, there are many people that are going to help you or listen to your problems. You have aunts, uncles and cousins. But we are so, basically, on our own.* (Nancy)



The analysis shows that South African women feel that they are faced with an unforgiving working environment when they compare working conditions in South Africa to that of other countries. The difficult working conditions consequently make it increasingly challenging for mothers to excel in the work place. When I asked one respondent what her main reasons for choosing to remain childfree were, she indicated that having children would stop her from achieving her career goals. When I asked her in what domains of her life having children would prevent her from attaining her goals, she responded:

*Definitely career-wise, I mean about what media say, what feminists say I don't think that you can have a completely fulfilling career and be a mother at the same time. One or both is going to suffer. (Bianca)*

When I asked her why she thought this was the case, she remarked:

*Because of the way things are structured, specifically in this country. I know in the UK, they have three day working weeks, four day working weeks to accommodate mothers. And you know crèches are at a lot of the workplaces, but here you often get the situation, you know job interviews, especially the ones I've been at they ask you if you plan to have children in the next twelve months and if you say yes, that's significant, you know, it sets you back... I just don't think the working environment caters for mothers. (Bianca)*

Women may lose work experience and seniority due to having children (Wharton, 2004). Childfree women feel that employers discriminate against mothers because they believe that mothers are less productive than childfree women. This results in mothers receiving lower salaries. Childfree women are also promoted more readily than mothers (Wharton, 2004). One participant said:

*I see we live in a new era, but every day I see women that are disadvantaged by having children, because the thing is especially when the child is still young their immune system is still developing, so they get sick often. And you know even though the boss, she doesn't have children, she sees this and she thinks that this*



*person isn't really dedicated, they are always with their children. And it influences your work, it influences whether you will get a promotion. (Nancy)*

Childfree women are aware of the conflicting interests that mothers encounter in the working environment. One participant summed up the conflict between work and familial responsibility:

*One or both is going to suffer. (Bianca)*

These women therefore gravitate towards their careers and are less interested in raising children as they already experience personal fulfilment in their working environment.

One participant commented:

*I have my own life, I am busy, I am busy building up a career and I just feel like, I don't have time for children. And I like my work and I am not prepared to give up my career to raise children, and yes. I think that is another major reason why I won't have children. (Natalie)*

According to gender stereotyping women who choose their career over raising children are often constructed as hard, ruthless, and unfeminine. During the interview Natalie came across as a dynamic person in her working environment and also stated that her career was very important to her. However, she clarified this statement:

*...At work I have really had the perception that I am, excuse the word, a bitch. You know, because I don't have children and I am dedicated to my career and so often times I think, you know, people think I am cold? And yes, that I am a bitch, if I can use that word. (Natalie)*

These societal perceptions are incompatible with the ways in which women who choose their careers over childrearing think about themselves. Natalie did not agree with the way in which she is perceived at work and stated:

*...I am not at all, I am not at all a bitch, but I still don't want children.  
(Natalie)*

Another participant argued:

*You have to be this career woman, which is almost more manly, which is revolting to me because, I feel women must not become manly or become sexual to get somewhere in their careers. We have to use our strengths and our sixth sense to get somewhere . (Angie)*

Societal ideals that women are primarily mothers and that men are mostly concerned with generating an income persist (Gergen, 2001). This results in women assuming most of the responsibility for child-rearing activities despite the fact that women's role in the family is losing value and there is an increased need in South Africa for women to participate in the work environment. Thus, the gender stereotype of women primarily being responsible for mothering is in conflict with the notion of women pursuing and being successful in their careers. South African women feel that they are faced with an unforgiving working environment in comparison to international work environments. Women who have children are often not regarded as hardworking and consequently childfree women receive salary increases more frequently and are promoted more readily. Women who choose to remain childfree thus believe that it is difficult to excel at work and be a good mother simultaneously, and subsequently choose their careers over motherhood.

### **5.2.3 Concerns of physical aspects of pregnancy and childbirth and recovery**

The essentialist premise that human behaviour is predetermined by unchanging genetic, biological, or physical mechanisms is challenged by the findings of this study. The women in this study still resist the idea of motherhood, despite the fact that they have the biological and physical ability to become mothers. For many childfree women it is precisely the physical aspects associated with childbirth and recovery that impact on their decision to remain childfree. There are various physical aspects that may deter women from having children; these aspects are discussed separately in order to enhance the readability of this section.

### ***Fear of the physical pain associated with childbirth***

Despite advanced medical treatment childbirth is still associated with pain (Cronje & Grobler, 2003). Childfree women are afraid of the pain associated with giving birth and the pain serves as a deterrent to having children (Parker, 2005). One participant offered:

*The whole idea of natural child birth freaks me out. Completely. They make it seem like, oh you know it's like in old times, you go outside, you squat and you go inside and you go back to work, but you know the stories I've heard is you tear and there's lots of blood, you know, you need stitches. Horrific things.*  
(Bianca)

A growing number of women are opting to have a Caesarean section instead of giving birth naturally in order to avoid the pain. About 70% of births in private hospitals are done by Caesarean section (Keeton, 2010). Despite the option to have a Caesarean section, women who choose to remain childfree still associate pain with the operation and may subsequently choose to remain childfree in order to avoid the pain associated with childbirth. One participant stated:

*I think, it doesn't matter if you have a C-section or give birth naturally. I think it is a very painful, terrible experience- especially if my mother, who loves us very much says it is very special to her to have children, but says giving birth was one of the worst things she experienced. And she says that actually the second pregnancy was worse to her, because she knew what to expect.* (Nancy)

Another participant recalled an experience of a close friend:

*Recently Janice\* gave birth on the first of Jan and she decided, she actually opted for a Caesarean because she saw some horror, well heard and saw some horror stories about natural birth and I mean like she told me and I was like 'Ugh!', no. And she opted for a C-section and she said it was excruciatingly painful. One of her friends is a nurse and said 'don't worry about it, it won't be sore' and after, soon after she gave birth, it was about an hour, she saw her friend and she lashed out at her saying 'why didn't you tell me it was this painful?' (Paula)*

Childfree women are not only concerned about the physical pain associated with childbirth, but also regard childbirth as stressful and traumatic (Hung, 2004). One participant reflected on a conversation she had with her partner:

*Peter says it's just one day of bad pain you have to live through and then you have a child, so what does it matter? But it is easy for him to say, because he won't be going through that. So I think it must be a very traumatic thing to go through and very stressful. (Nancy)*

### **Negative connotations to breastfeeding**

Negative feelings pertaining to breastfeeding was a reason women in the study provided for remaining childfree. The women participating in the study stated that the idea of breastfeeding caused them emotional distress, although in various ways. Olsson et al. (2005) state that women who have children report a loss in sexual excitement when caressed on their breasts as they find it difficult to combine the functions of breasts as sexual organ and as a source of feeding for their children. One participant indicated that it was difficult for her to unite the idea of breasts as a sexual symbol and as a source of nourishment for children. She said:

*I mean even like the whole breastfeeding aspect, I don't know if I would be very comfortable with that, you know, imagine if I have a son, and I know he's going to be big one day and to know that – no. To know that he was on my boob and now he's a grown man! It just doesn't go well with me really.(Paula)*

The other women participating in the study also had negative connotations in relation to breastfeeding. One participant commented:

*No, I don't like such organic things. I don't want someone to suck on me. (Nancy)*

Another participant exclaimed:

*Ek gril my morsdood! (I feel repulsed by it!). (Natalie)*

Another participant described breastfeeding as being “very animal like” (Angie).

Although one of the participants did not explicitly express negative feelings or perceptions concerning concept of breastfeeding, she was concerned about what members of her social network would say if she had children and found it difficult to breastfeed:

*If you have a difficult time breastfeeding, you're considered a freak. You know, or being abnormal. (Bianca)*

### ***Childbirth negatively affecting women's physical appearance and health***

Factors associated with childbirth that negatively impact on women's physical appearance is cited as a reason for remaining childfree. Women complain that they have difficulty in coping with the bodily changes resulting from childbirth (Olsson et al., 2005). Women often resort to plastic surgery in an attempt to alter unwanted bodily changes (Olsson et al., 2005). Of the five women interviewed, four of the women indicated that they were concerned about the effects of childbirth on their physical appearance. One participant reported that the physical changes experienced by her mother impacted negatively on her own perceptions of bodily changes:

*...Because of the weight of the pregnancy... She started getting problems with circulation. When she was pregnant with my brother, she started getting bad varicose veins from the, you know, and when I came along that was just the final... It just went like wildfire. And that scares me. It's bad, I mean she's gone for different treatments and... that scares me. (Paula)*

Another participant stated that to her having children meant:

*Varicose veins and stretch marks and things like that. (Angie)*

One participant argued that the physical changes associated with childbirth could impact negatively on a woman's career:

*We live in a society in which the physical body is more important than what is on the inside... So especially when you have a career where your physical appearance is important. Someone with a skinnier, prettier shape would rather*

*get the job than the overweight 'potjierol' with the six children trailing behind.*  
(Angie)

Another participant stated that women with children were often jealous of her physique. She reported that she had lost friends due to the fact that she and her husband chose to remain childfree. When I asked her whether she thought that her friends with children thought that they needed to keep her away from their husbands, she responded:

*Yes, because a lot of them, unfortunately, have put on weight giving birth and their appearance has changed and I think that's also resentment to a great extent.*  
(Bianca)

In addition to concern regarding possible changes to their physical appearance childfree women are also aware of the health-risk associated with motherhood and pregnancy. One participant expressed her fears:

*You know I am rather scared that my body won't recover and I am health-conscious and I eat right and I try to keep my bodily form and I go to the gym and I am also scared that a child will just take that away from you.* (Natalie)

Another participant relayed the experiences of a friend:

*I have a friend who is pregnant and she's just, she has backache the whole time, her legs hurt, she still works fulltime. She's like, she is becoming very sick, because I think it also affects your immune system etcetera, you know, it feels to her as if she is in hell. You know that's what it feels like to her. I know there are women that have easy pregnancies, definitely, but it takes a toll on our body. It takes a lot from your body to, you know, feed another person etcetera. That is why women with a lot of children usually are less healthier etcetera.* (Nancy)

One participant stated:

*Research shows that it takes seven years for your body to actually recover from having a child.* (Bianca)

### ***Loss of control over one's body during birth and accompanying emotions as a deterrent to having children***

In a medical science textbook entitled *Obstetrics in Southern Africa* Cronje and Grobler (2003) state that “even in certain patriarchal societies, giving birth is the one time when women have control; they have status and prestige, which at other times are denied to them” (p. 674). This statement is in stark contrast to the views expressed by the women who participated in this study. Women who choose to remain childfree find the concept of childbirth degrading and humiliating, especially because a woman loses control of her bodily functions. The negative emotions associated with losing control over the body are amplified by the fact that giving birth is not a private matter, but it is performed in public. One participant said:

*It is also to a certain extent humiliating and you know, you lose control of your bodily functions while you give birth. Ugh, that aspect horrifies me. (Bianca)*

A participant added:

*If you have a look at birth as such, it's very undignifying. Any woman will tell you there are usually more than twenty people standing around your bed and you're lying here wide open for the whole world to see. So you are almost very vulnerable and very degraded to a degree. I have a friend who always told me birth to her is just like rape. I think it's a strong analogy, but that is how she experienced it. (Angie)*

Another participant asserted:

*It is so indignant to me, because you kind of see what's happening down there, everyone sees what's happening down there. The doctors and so... (Natalie)*

### ***Women's bodies are subservient to the fetus or restricted during pregnancy***

The women participating in this study also stated that they regarded pregnancy as being restrictive to women's bodies. This concern was not raised in the literature. One participant offered:



*I've got a friend of mine that's currently pregnant, my beauty therapist, and it's bizarre. You know, when I was speaking to her, she said it feels like some alien thing has taken over your body. You know, muscles you didn't know you had suddenly starts aching; you crave things you didn't crave before. You know your body's completely given over to the child, or to the baby. (Bianca)*

Another participant said:

*If I had to become pregnant it would mean, okay I could probably work for seven months but I give massages so I will get to the point where I can't stand and massage. Some of the essential oils that I use, I cannot use when I am pregnant, when I give massages. (Angie)*

### ***Childbirth affects the sexual lives of women***

Childbirth affects the sexual lives of women and this may inform women's decision to not have children. According to Olsson et al. (2005) new parents do not return to the same frequency of sexual intercourse they had prior to the birth of the child until after the child is one year old. This may be partly due to fatigue on the part of the new mothers, as well as biological changes in women due to motherhood. Only one woman participating in the study cited the possibility that childrearing could affect her and her partner's sex life as a reason for remaining childfree. She stated:

*Your sexual schedule in your marriage is determined by the child. How much you sleep at night. (Angie)*

Although only one participant spoke about this consideration it is possible that the other participants had similar concerns but did not feel comfortable discussing them with me. Although I had not met Angie prior to the interview she openly discussed her concern with me. Perhaps Angie felt that she could be open about this concern precisely because I was not a close friend. Therefore, if I had judged her based on what she had said it would not have impacted her badly. There could also have been other reasons why Angie was able to discuss her feelings about sexuality when the other participants did not. It is possible that her age played a role (she was older than



most of the other participants) or that her career impacted her ability to be open about her thoughts.

Despite the fact that most women are physically able to have children not all women wish to be mothers (Wharton, 2004). In many instances, the physical aspects associated with childbirth and recovery impact on the decision to remain childfree. There are various physical aspects that may deter women from having children. Many women are afraid of the pain associated with childbirth and as a result choose to remain childfree.

#### **5.2.4 Life partners are accepting of women's choices to remain childfree**

Childfree women often choose partners with similar life expectations and goals. The role played by men in regards to the decision to remain childfree is unclear (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). All of the participants in the study indicated that they had reached a mutual agreement early in their relationship with their life partners in regards to the decision to remain childfree. One participant said:

*Well, it's a choice that he also makes. That is why I say let him know where he stands with you. The men in my life knew exactly where they stood with me. I laid out the rules very clearly right at the beginning. Basic training. This is right, that is wrong. You've got a choice. So I always say communicate, tell your partner what you think is important, what's not important. And let him also speak. And if you are meant for each other, you will find a compromise somewhere. (Angie)*

Although the participants indicated that their partners were accepting and supportive of the decision to remain childfree, they also indicated that they thought that their significant others would have liked to be parents or possessed a "paternal instinct". When asked how her decision to remain childfree has impacted her relationship with her partner, a participant answered:

*Um, it doesn't really impact much that I've seen. I think (Riaan) does understand how I feel. Maybe he's hoping for a mistake. An unplanned pregnancy. But no, he*

*does understand and I think he's hoping that I will change my mind rather, you know, but yeah. (Paula)*

Another participant offered:

*I think he's got that instinct, again that nurturing aspect, the same as I did. I think we channel it elsewhere. Again, he's also got nieces and nephews, his brothers and sisters have children, so I don't think he's unfulfilled at all. (Nancy)*

One participant remarked:

*It sometimes feels a bit, you know men's territory is greater than ours. Often times he will look at a child and say 'Oh cute!' and things like that, but we don't want children. (Angie)*

One other participant said:

*I think we knew long before we got married, but to do it we must accept each other's quirks and I really think that my husband has the need to have children, but I also think he is quite okay with the fact that I made a decision against it. (Natalie)*

Women may assign more importance to the decision to remain childfree, as fatherhood is historically different for men than motherhood for women. Instead, masculine success is dependent upon occupational achievement rather than children (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). Thus, men do not necessarily ascribe the same importance to having children as women do and are subsequently more supportive of their partner's decision to remain childfree. However, one participant indicated that her partner does in fact want children, and that his desire for children could be detrimental to their relationship in the future. She asserted:

*He does want children one day, so there is always stress in our relationship, because I also don't want to get married. So I don't want to get married and I don't want children, which are traditional outcomes of any relationship. People asked me the other day why I then remain in a relationship? And that is why I actually did not want to be in one, but I met someone wonderful and I accepted that. So... it always*

*causes tension in our relationship, but at the same time he doesn't want to do these things any time soon. So it doesn't affect him at this stage. I expect that our relationship will end when it becomes this becomes a serious issue to him and he really wants to get married and have children etcetera. (Nancy)*

Nancy's statement makes it clear that childfree women may ascribe so much importance to their decision not to have children that they would choose to terminate their romantic relationships in the event of their partners placing pressure on them to have children.

Childfree women indicate that the decision to remain childfree has a positive impact on their romantic relationships and that they expect that motherhood would have the opposite effect. One participant asserted:

*I think it (the decision to remain childfree) bonds us, makes our bond stronger. I think it would be a different case if he did, you know, initially want children or harboured the idea of having children. (Bianca)*

One participant argued that children would add pressure to her relationship with her husband:

*My husband would make a wonderful father, but he has bipolar depression, which is hereditary and it isn't an easy thing to live with. And I almost want to add, that I think it plays a big role. Like if I have to think that I have to sit by my husband, he has wonderful medication that helps a lot, but despite the medication, they have an episode from time to time and then you have to sit with a child and you sit with a husband with bipolar disorder, why do that to yourself? I mean, I am not someone that wants to get divorced. Not at all. (Angie)*

Their partners' acceptance of the decision to remain childfree may place a role in strengthening the participants' decision to remain childfree. While it is not clear to what extent men contribute or impact on the decision, but from the text it becomes apparent

that men are supportive of the decision to remain childfree and are willing to compromise with their partners.

### **5.2.5 Past parent/child experiences contributed to the decision to remain childfree**

In the study conducted by Park (2005), childfree women acknowledged the impact that various parenting models had on their decision not to have children. Three of the five women participating in this study indicated that their relationship with parenting models impacted on their decision to remain childfree. Women who experienced their parenting models negatively often feel that they would rather remain childfree in order to avoid hurting a child in a similar way (Park, 2005). One participant said:

*You know, my dad is not a very nice person and I know it's one of the things, children irritate him. And you know they say that once you have your own children it will be different. It was never different for him. It was just as irritating for him to have us around and I know that I inherited it from him. I also don't like it when there is noise around me. I just want it to be quiet, I don't mind if children sit still and keep quiet and if they are out of my way, but I understand that that is not the way that they function. (Nancy)*

She later said:

*My father never really wanted children; he did it because my mother wanted children. He was a very poor father and he ignored us most of the time and he always wanted to be on his own. Which I also do, I am a lot like that. And my grandmother also didn't want children, but she naturally lived in a time where women didn't have much of a choice and she had five children. She did bad things, for instance one child she took for shock therapy; she didn't like the fact that he had a runny nose. And yes, she hit them until they bled, because she was frustrated with being in this situation where she had five children, but she never really wanted any children... She actually told me that she preferred her cats to her children... Yes, my aunts also don't want children... Yes, it's a family trait, it won't extend to the next generation. (Nancy)*

Later on, I asked her to clarify what she meant by saying that the family trait would not extend to the next generation. She responded by telling me that she doubts whether there will be a next generation.

Another participant offered:

*I definitely think parents impact on how children grow up and we all get hurt and ultimately, I am scared that I would damage a child and that that child will go on to hurt other people in (her) relationships etcetera. And that is scary. (Natalie)*

She later went on to say:

*My mom is very strict and had little grace for me and my sister and had little patience for us. And if you are not raised with these characteristics of patience and love, where do you learn it all of the sudden? And so, I am unbelievably scared that if I have a child one day, that I am going to be the same and I don't want to expose children to such things.*

One participant said:

*I look at my father for instance, who carries a lot of scars of the way he was brought up. And he still carries so many issues from his father; you know I worry about the effect, my raising a child would have on that child. (Bianca)*

Later on in the interview she noted:

*And there are so many articles now, especially girl children, that their self-esteem problems are linked to the relationship with their fathers and those are such long-standing problems. (Bianca)*

Deciding to remain childfree in order to prevent a child from being hurt is a reason women provide for remaining childfree. However, not all women had such negative relationships with parenting models growing up. In fact, the study conducted by

Park (2005) found that several of the women participating in her study were from loving, nurturing family backgrounds.

Although some childfree women may have been exposed to positive parenting models, experiences of family life may have also contributed to their decision to remain childfree. However, these experiences do not manifest in the same way. Most of the women participating in the study indicated that experiences of family life had an impact on their decision not to have children. When asked if she thought whether any familial experiences had contributed to her decision to remain childfree, one participant responded:

*Um, ja. My dad's death. I don't blame him. I'm not blaming him, it's just I saw what my mom had to do for us and that doesn't scare me, but in the current context I can't do this. (Paula)*

When I asked what she meant by the current context, she explained:

*Well, the current state of South Africa doesn't really provide for people to have a lifestyle that you feel comfortable in, that you know that you can just send your children to school, for example, and still be able to pay the bills and to buy food at the end of the month. Or if they want something, you know you can't get it for them. You know, I'm not saying that you have to buy things all the time, but currently the way things are... Are- I can't say going. Are. It's very difficult. Very, very difficult.*

One participant offered:

*My mom and dad, as I have said, fought a lot and... you know, about various issues, for example my mom, she is very clingy and extremely demanding in terms of attention, that resulted in my dad doing nothing on his own anymore and he didn't get space in the relationship and there was a lot of fighting because of that. (Natalie)*

Another participant said:

*An aunt of mine made the decision not to have children and when I see her and her husband's lifestyle, you know they go away very often, they go on holiday to African countries, their relationship seems to be more solidified. (Bianca)*

One participant argued:

*I think your pecking order in the family has a big impact on how you view life... Let me tell you, the older children have a greater sense of responsibility from a young age. Youngest children, I don't know, you always stay the baby of the family and everyone keeps on wanting to spoil you. And especially if you always stayed the baby, it is difficult to be seen as the adult. I don't know if it has an impact, but I think it is an interesting concept. (Angie)*

I then probed by sharing:

*I think it is a very interesting point. I think you are right, I assumed a lot of responsibility and my youngest brother I can see, he is definitely still the baby of the house. Definitely.*

To which she responded:

*I had a hard time getting rid of babyhood, because firstly I am a woman and secondly I was the youngest. So it makes you primarily, according to your parents, more vulnerable in society. And the baby aspect, they try to keep you as young as possible so it did have an impact; I had to rebel a bit to get away from it. And form my own identity.*

Three of the five childfree women who participated in this study acknowledged the impact that their relationships with parenting models had on their decision to remain childfree. Women who experienced their parenting models negatively often feel that they would rather remain childfree in order to avoid hurting a child in a similar way. However, not all childfree women have negative relationships with their parenting models. Many childfree women come from loving, nurturing families. Familial

experiences may contribute to the decision to remain childfree to a greater extent for some women.

### **5.2.6 Negative impact of childbirth and childrearing on women's psychological well being**

Although childfree women are aware of the psychological benefits of childrearing, they do not necessarily view these benefits as being important (Callan, 1986). Childfree women believe that women who choose to have children may have selfish reasons for having children, such as gaining feelings of purpose or achievement (Callan, 1986). One participant offered:

*I think children give parents a sense of, let's say, belonging. Identity. (Angie)*

Another participant argued:

*To me it is, I could be wrong, but it is actually a very narcissistic need, because actually you want to see yourself. Like my mother gets very excited when someone says I look like her, because you want to see yourself in that child. (Bianca)*

Women who choose to remain childfree frequently feel that the costs involved with childrearing outweigh the benefits (Callan, 1986). Childfree women often associate motherhood with psychological distress. One participant stated:

*I think a child could be very pleasing. But I think under most circumstances they could be stressful, because if they turn out bad? (Nancy)*

Emotional distress is a common experience among mothers (Goldman, 2001). Motherhood brings about dramatic change and new demands that not only cause stress in general, but post-partum stress in particular (Hung, 2005). Inadequate social support is one of the main aspects of post-partum stress (Hung, 2005). Park (2005) cites a lack of social support after childbirth as one of the main concerns raised by childfree women. One participant noted:



*I have heard some horror stories for instance, my mother suffered from post-partum depression and I've heard horror stories, the mothers don't bond with their children. And what happens if that happens? Then you are considered a freak.*  
(Bianca)

The concern pertaining to emotional distress extends beyond post-partum depression. One woman stated:

*I look at (some of my friends) and then I think 'What are you going to have when the kids are out of the house?' A lot of people talk about this empty nest syndrome, they live their whole lives for the children and when the children say 'Bye-bye' then it's like – 'So who the hell are you?' (Angie)*

Another participant was particularly concerned about the impact of raising an adolescent on a woman's psychological well-being:

*When adolescence begins to surface and mother and child start to fight, it's very stressful and quite unnecessary. (Natalie)*

Some childfree women also believe that motherhood could have a negative impact on a woman's emotional development. One participant said:

*I think a child holds you back emotionally, because you always worry about something, doesn't matter where you are and you have a responsibility for the rest of your life. (Angie)*

Childfree women are also aware of the impact that raising children could have on their self-esteem. One participant said:

*Mothers always have this effect of: 'I am not a good mother'. I don't understand it, because I don't have children, but every mother who I have encountered personally feel that they are bad mothers. Sad but true. (Angie)*

Childfree women may be aware of the psychological benefits of childrearing. However, they believe that negative psychological impact of having children

outweighs the benefits. Childfree women are especially mindful of negative emotional stressors such as post-partum depression, the impact of children on a woman's self-esteem as well as the empty-nest syndrome.

### **5.2.7 Personality and parenting skills**

Literature suggests that childfree women believe that they will not be good parents, as their personality characteristics differ from the characteristics that are usually associated with good parenting (Liamputtong & Nasook, 2002). These personality traits typically include a tendency to be sensitive, anxious, impatient as well as perfectionism (Park, 2005). The majority of women participating in the study indicated that they believed that they would not be good parents because of their personality characteristics. When asked what personality traits she believed a good mother should possess, one participant responded:

*I think you have to be clever. I think you have to be enthusiastic about being a mother. I think, what stood out for me, was; I heard in one interview (at work) that they asked one psychiatrist what he thought, what kind of parents, what kind of mother, you know, causes neurosis in children. Then he said that he actually, he comes across so many broken homes, so many things, he's tried to look at the opposite. So if he meets healthy, happy people, he asks them what type of mother they had? And they usually say a mother that loves life. (Nancy)*

She later goes on to say that the primary reason for her choosing to remain childfree is her outlook on the world:

*I think a mother has to be passionate about life and I often feel that I am very negative about the world and I feel as if the world is an evil place. (Nancy)*

Another participant offered:

*I think you have to be very, I don't know, sometimes you have to be half-ignorant about the world because you bring a child in this life and you expect, okay, there will be bad times, but to a large extent I can also say your life depends on this 'ignorance is bliss'. It depends on this Hollywood dream and*

*that is how it is going to be. I, on the other hand, can see that that is not how it is. (Angie)*

Mothers are frequently portrayed as being devoted to the care of others, self-sacrificing, and willing to put aside their own needs. Many childfree women indicate that they believe that they do not possess these qualities. When I asked another participant what motherhood meant to her, she stated:

*Well, just considering my mother and you know, friends of mine that have given birth, I think you have to be a specific type of person. You know, warm and nurturing. And what has always concerned me about the concept is that you actually have to put some other human being before yourself... You know, for the rest of your life basically. And that concept scares me, and you know, I question whether I also have the ability to do that. You know, to be so unselfish. (Bianca)*

Childfree women often believe that they will not be good parents, as their personality characteristics are different from the characteristics normally associated with good parenting (Liamputtong & Nasook, 2002). In this study most of the participants believe that they will not be good parents as their personality traits differ from the traits usually associated with good parenting.

### **5.2.8 General dislike of children**

The results of the study by Park (2005) indicate that almost half of the participants reported a general dislike of children or were disinterested in children. The women interviewed in this research study reported similar emotions. Three of the women participating in this study expressed a dislike towards children. Two participants stated that they found children irritating. One participant noted:

*I find children rather irritating. I know they also have a right to live and so on, but I don't like noise and I don't like that they are so disorganised and I don't like to be disturbed. And I understand it's part of a child's nature, you can't blame them*

*for that, but I think it is then unfair of me to expose someone to my irritation.*(Nancy)

Another participant offered:

*I don't know, I am just irritated with the small children. You know, it's caring for them and they need all of your attention.* (Natalie)

One other participant stated said:

*I like taking photos of children, but primarily just because they are comfortable in front of the camera, not because I like children.* (Bianca)

Childfree women often state that they feel that they do not have a “maternal instinct”. For these women this lack of maternal instinct impacts negatively on their decision to remain childfree. One participant said:

*I have friends who already have children and I always see, the oldest child, especially if it is a girl, she almost immediately has a mommy instinct or a playful side...I would say that that part of me never really developed.* (Angie)

Three of the women who participated in the study reported that they were either irritated by children or disliked children. Many women who choose to remain childfree appeal to biological drives to explain their choice to not to have children; they often express that they experience a lack of a “maternal instinct” (Park, 2005). One woman participating in the study reported that she lacked such a “maternal instinct”.

### **5.2.9 Concerns of overpopulation of the planet**

Some women choose to remain childfree due to population growth concerns (Park, 2005). One participant offered:

*I know it sounds cliché, but there are so many orphan children and abandoned children and the fact that you're contributing to a global problem seems a bit selfish to me.* (Bianca)

Another participant argued:

*To me it feels as if the world is so full of people, well there are six and a half billion of them so... That is quite a lot. And I feel crowded already, like I wish I could go to places where I could be alone, and you can't really. There are people everywhere. And then you think of places like China, with more than a billion (people) and you think of India with more than a billion (people) and they say that over the next ten to fifteen years we should be ten billion. So it's rather crazy, the poor planet can't really meet the demands that we have, there are way too many of us and we don't stop reproducing. And I just think, to me it feels as if I can't add someone extra to that burden. (Nancy)*

Women who choose to remain childfree often believe that the world is full of suffering and argue that they cannot be sure that they can give another person a good life (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). One participant asked:

*You have to suffer, do you really want to bring someone else in the world to suffer? I once told someone that I think I would rather adopt a child who is already suffering and doesn't have a future, than bring one into the world, if I had to take that step. (Nancy)*

In Park's (2005) study concern regarding an overpopulated planet was not a primary motive for remaining childfree. The respondents in her study did not feel a strong desire to have children, but concerns over global population strengthened their desire to remain childfree. A concern for the planet was one of many motives offered by the childfree women interviewed in this study.

Concern for the overpopulation of the planet influences women's decision to remain childfree. Women who choose to remain childfree tend to believe that the world is full of suffering, and argue that they cannot ensure that they could prevent their own children from suffering.

### 5.3 Section B: A discussion of themes not encountered in the literature

#### 5.3.1 *Motherhood and femininity are not necessarily linked*

The current dominant discourse in western society is that all women are mothers and that all mothers seek and find fulfilment in mothering practices (Arendell, 2000). This dominant discourse made it difficult to find women who were willing to participate in this research. In some cases women who were suggested as potential participants for the study by individuals belonging to their social network refused to participate in the research process. This may be due to the fact that these women did in fact want children and were thus not suited as participants. Alternatively, it is possible that these women did not feel free to discuss their decision to remain childfree with a stranger as this decision is contrary to the dominant discourse (Johnson & Shelton, 2006). Society tends to frown on women who remain childfree (Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 2002). This negative societal reaction to the decision to remain childfree was confirmed by all of the participants in the study. One participant noted:

*They look down on us and think there is something wrong with us, you know, because it is supposed to be natural to want children. (Nancy)*

Another participant remarked:

*It is weird to me how they link being childfree to perhaps being a latent homosexual. You know, that's what I also pick up. That 'actually, they are homosexuals, because they don't want to have children, there is something wrong with them there, that they don't have that motherly instinct'. (Bianca)*

The women participating in the research associated positive characteristics with the word "mother". One participant commented:

*I think a mother has to be extremely strong, not to say she mustn't cry, but she must be very emotionally strong. Quite independent in her thoughts to be able to make decisions for a little child as well. (Paula)*

Another participant offered:

*A mother that loves life and enjoys life and can communicate that to her kids, that is one of the most important things of being a mother. (Nancy)*

However, despite these positive associations the participants still felt that woman could be feminine without being a mother. When asked “*what does femininity mean to you?*” one participant asserted:

*In my mind, that’s distinctly different from motherhood... being feminine is having the characteristics of a woman. You know, soft, I know it sounds silly, but smelling nice, having nice nails, having your hair look nice and the way you interact with people. (Bianca)*

One participant confirmed this notion:

*Femininity to me is definitely not motherhood. I would say for me, it is more of the beauty aspect and the mere fact that you are different to a man. (Angie)*

Another participant stated:

*I think that femininity and motherhood do complement each other, but I think you can be feminine without being a mother. (Natalie)*

The participants in this study thus did not link femininity to motherhood. Instead, they associated femininity with the concept of nurturing. However, the word “nurturing” is very much a concept related to motherhood. The term nurture refers to the act or process of promoting the development of a child or a plant (Sinclair Knight et al., 2003). The fact that childfree women associate more strongly with the word “nurturer” than with the word “mother” supports the argument that gender is something that is “done” rather than simply a natural part of identity (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Women who choose to remain childfree but still strongly identify with the female gender group seem to choose the act of nurturing over the act of mothering. Although the two words sound similar they are actually very different. Childfree women may channel their nurturing energy into various relationships other than with their own children. The statement by one of the participants confirms this argument:

*I think there is a nurturing side to femininity, but you (can be nurturing) in your relationship with your husband, well if you are not married, with your boyfriend, and... You know, with friends and with your pets. (Natalie)*

To the question “Do you think that your husband would make a good father?”, one participant replied:

*Yes, I think he’s got that instinct, again that nurturing aspect, the same as I did. I think we channel that elsewhere. Again, he’s also got nieces and nephews, his brothers and sisters have children. (Bianca)*

Women rejecting motherhood but assuming a nurturing role fortifies the argument that dominant discourses such as “all women want to be mothers” are fluid and may change (Potgieter, 1997). The women in this study challenge the dominant discourse that “all women are mothers” by subscribing to a potentially less restrictive discourse that states that “all women are nurturers”. The discourse that “all women are nurturers” still supports popular notions of femininity, but is less severe than the discourse that “all women are mothers”. However, this new discourse still implies that women have the need to care for something or someone. Thus it maintains the current status quo because if women are seen as more caring than men they then will still be expected to take a day off of work to tend to an ill family member or to take the pet cat to the vet. The discourse that “all women are nurturers” also undermines the differences between women. Women who do not believe that they are nurturers may be marginalised by this discourse.

According to Bruce (2001) the self can be seen as consisting of a multiplicity of identities that are structured into a salience hierarchy where some identities may become more salient than others. For the participants in this study identities such as “I am female” and “I am a nurturer” appear to be more salient than the “I am a mother” identity.



Reproductive technologies, such as oral contraceptives and having a hysterectomy, present women with the opportunity to further affirm their identity as childfree women (Gillespie, 2000; Park, 2005). However, many medical practitioners may still subscribe to the dominant discourse that it is natural for women to have children and subsequently may take certain reproductive choices away from women. One participant reported:

*I already went to a doctor and asked that they give me a hysterectomy. First they ask me 'How old are you?' and 'Do you already have children', and then you tell them (no), then they say: 'No, you are going to change your mind'. So there is a lot of discrimination. You have the right to have an abortion in this country, but you don't have the right to stop it. (Angie)*

Then she said:

*...And it is usually that stereotypical doctor, usually a man, that sits there and says: 'Ag nee wat Hartjie ('Oh no dear'). [Half looking down] 'Ag nee wat Hartjie, you will still see, you are going to change your mind and then you are going to be very angry at me. (Angie)*

Thus, women who wish to make their decision not to have children final and strengthen their identity as childfree women remain subjected to dominant discourses.

Despite the fact that society still ascribes to the dominant discourse that mothering is an integral part of women's lives, and although childfree women assign positive qualities to mothers, childfree women appear to have a strong belief that women can be feminine without being mothers. Although the research participants did not link femininity and motherhood, they did associate femininity with nurturing. Mothering and nurturing are related in the sense that both of the terms relate to taking care of someone, but differ in the sense that nurturing may involve people other than one's own child. Nurturing can thus be seen as a feminine act. Childfree women's preference for nurturing instead of mothering allows them to identify with the female gender despite their choice to remain childfree. These women often channel their nurturing energy into other relationships, such as their romantic relationships or relationships with their siblings' children. The

preference of the act of nurturing over mothering may signal that the dominant discourse that it is natural for women to be mothers is changing to a less extreme discourse that it is natural for women to be nurturers. This movement from one discourse to another strengthens Gillespie's (2000) argument that as women's lives are transforming, pronatalist discourses are likely to grow weaker. However, societal practices still constrict women's identities as childfree women. Access to reproductive technologies are controlled by medical practitioners who subscribe to the dominant discourse that it is natural for women to be mothers, making it difficult for childfree women to exert control over their own bodies.

### **5.3.2 The world as an unsafe or evil place**

The women who participated in this study indicated that they did not want to bring children into this world as they considered the world to be an unsafe or evil place. The incidence of crime in South Africa contributed to the perception that the world is an evil or unsafe place. Most of the participants cited contact crime as a contributing reason for remaining childfree. One participant stated:

*I think a mother has to be passionate about life and I am often negative about the world and I feel that the world is an evil place. Especially when I like hear about things that happen to people, like one of our participants was raped the other day. You know, I don't actually understand how people in this world could keep on choosing to have children if this is the kind of world we live in understand that you probably have to live past it otherwise you won't be able to live, but to me it feels, it is sometimes overwhelmingly evil, there is so much evil in the world. And I cannot think of exposing another person to it. (Nancy)*

Another participant offered:

*Considering the fact that I want to stay in South Africa, how safe would my daughter, I would have like to have a daughter, how she would grow up in a society like South Africa. You know, not being able to walk freely on the streets, the chances of her being raped, unfortunately, would be very great. That*

*contributes to the overall fact that that would not be the wisest decision to have children. (Bianca)*

Another participant said:

*Another reason why I feel that I don't want children is because of the crime in South Africa. I think it's very violent and yes, I don't know, I am scared of raising a child, I don't know, I am scared of raising a child in such a setup and you know it is also things like sex, which children of twelve, thirteen already engage in sexual activities and so on... And what if my child is abducted next to the road and is murdered and so on... I really don't think I would be able to cope with that. Or what if a child stabs my child with a knife at school and so on? I don't know, I am just not willing to raise a child like that. (Natalie)*

In addition to the prevalence of crime, some of the participants reported that their previous relationships also impacted on their perception that the world is an unsafe or evil place. One participant remarked:

*One thing I can say is that I have been in abusive relationships with men and it made me think a bit. You know, you never know, there's no guarantee and do you really want to bring a child into this world who could also be in an abusive relationship? (Angie)*

Another participant stated:

*We hurt each other. I think surely in parental relationships, the child will hurt you, you are going to hurt the child, it's part of human relationships. (Nancy)*

Childfree women often perceive the world as being an unsafe or evil place. The high incidence of crime in South Africa contributes to women's perceptions that the world is an unsafe place. The women in this study indicated that they were not willing to raise children in an unsafe world. Four of the five respondents indicated that they were not prepared to expose children to contact crimes. Three of the five participants disclosed a fear of the possibility of their children being raped were they to choose to become

mothers. Contact crimes such as rape cause extremely serious and often permanent physical, psychological, and material damage to victims. In addition to the high incidence of crime in South Africa the childfree women also cited abusive relationships reason for remaining childfree.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The main aim of this study is to contribute to the expansion of the existing literature on the motives underlying childfree women's decision not to have children as there is currently a lack of research on the topic (Park, 2005), particularly in the South African context.

### **6.2 Summary of findings**

Throughout the research I relied on a feminist social constructionist approach to guide my way of thinking, the data collection and the interpretation of the data. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants in order to access the beliefs, perceptions, and accounts of participants with regards to their decision to remain childfree (Strydom et al., 2002). I employed thematic analysis based on McCracken's (1998) 5-step method of analysis. The following themes were identified:

#### ***6.2.1 Freedom from childcare responsibility and a greater opportunity for self-fulfilment***

Childfree women believe that the advantages associated with remaining childfree are greater than the benefits of bearing and raising children. One of the major concerns childfree women express with regards to motherhood is that it takes precedence over all other activities. The women participating in the study prefer the personal freedom associated with an adult-centred lifestyle. Childfree women may also choose not to have children due to the financial benefits of remaining childfree. The majority of the participants in the study pointed out that general lifestyle costs associated with having children were one of the primary motivations for remaining childfree.

#### ***6.2.2 Unequal labour division in families***

Childrearing responsibilities are primarily delegated to women, despite the fact that there is an increased need in South Africa for women's participation in the work sphere. The gender stereotype of women being the primary party responsible for child-rearing is in conflict with the notion of women pursuing and being successful in their careers.

Child-rearing activities are often demanding, and subsequently impact negatively on women's work performance. Childfree women state that women who have elected to have children are often disadvantaged, as they are not viewed as hardworking. Consequently childfree women are more likely to receive salary increases more frequently and are promoted more readily.

### ***6.2.3 Concerns of physical aspects of pregnancy and childbirth and recovery***

The essentialist notion that human behaviour is determined by unchangeable biological mechanisms is challenged by the findings of this study. Women resist motherhood despite the physical mechanisms in place that enable them to have children. Various physical aspects discourage women from having children. Childfree women report that pregnancy is restrictive to women's movements and lifestyles. Despite medical treatment childbirth is still associated with pain and this deters women from having children. Childfree women also consider childbirth to be a stressful, degrading, humiliating and traumatic experience. Negative feelings pertaining to breast-feeding may further inform their decision to remain childfree. Factors associated with childbirth that negatively impact on women's physical appearance negatively influence the decision to remain childfree. Childfree women are also concerned about the health risks mothers may be subjected to and this impacts on their decision to remain childfree. Childfree women are also concerned about the effects of childbirth on the sexual lives of women.

### ***6.2.4 Life partners are accepting of women's choices to remain childfree***

Childfree women often choose partners with similar life expectations and goals, which subsequently makes the decision not to have children easier. Childfree women often reach a mutual agreement with their life partners with regards to the decision to remain childfree early in their relationships. Most of the childfree women participating in the research indicate that the decision to remain childfree has a positive effect on their romantic relationships and they expect that motherhood would have the opposite effect.

### ***6.2.5 Past parent/child experiences contributed to the decision to remain childfree***

The majority of women participating in this study indicated that their relationship with parenting models impacted on their decision to remain childfree. However, not all childfree women report such negative relationships with parenting models growing up. In fact, some childfree women indicated that they were exposed to positive parenting models, but that experiences of family life may have resulted in the decision to remain childfree.

### ***6.2.6 Negative impact of childbirth and childrearing on women's psychological well being***

Women who choose to remain childfree frequently feel that the emotional disadvantages involved with childrearing outweigh the benefits. Women who choose to remain childfree are aware of the fact that mothering brings about dramatic emotional adjustment which may lead to emotional distress. Childfree women are concerned about the lack of social support that mothers receive after childbirth. Women opting to not have children often negatively perceive the impact of raising adolescents on women's psychological well-being. Childfree women are also mindful of the empty nest syndrome.

### ***6.2.7 Personality and parenting skills***

The majority of childfree women participating in the study felt that they would not be good mothers based on their personality characteristics. Most of the women possessed a high regard for mothers but often indicate that they believe that they do not possess these qualities.

### ***6.2.8 General dislike of children***

Most of the women interviewed in this research expressed a dislike of children, or noted that they were often irritated by children. Women who choose to remain childfree indicate that they believe that they do not have a "maternal instinct", and cite the lack of maternal instinct as a reason for remaining childfree.

### **6.2.9 Concerns of overpopulation of the planet**

Childfree women report a concern for the overburdening of the planet as a reason to remain childfree. Women who choose to remain childfree also believe that the world is full of suffering and say that they cannot ensure that they could prevent their own children from suffering.

### **6.2.10 Motherhood and femininity are not necessarily linked**

The women who participated in this study did not report an inviolable link between femininity and motherhood, but instead strongly associate femininity with nurturing. Although mothering and nurturing are similar in the sense that both of the terms pertain to taking care of another person or thing, they differ in that nurturing may involve caring deeply for other people or things and not only one's own child. Nurturing can be seen as a feminine act. Childfree women's preference for nurturing instead of motherhood signals that these women identify with the female gender role even though they choose not to have children. The discourse that "all women are nurturers" allows women to choose not to be mothers. This discourse is still restrictive as it ignores the differences existing between women and it also implies that women are still considered to be more caring than men.

### **6.2.11 The world as an unsafe or evil place**

The women who participated in the study indicated that they considered the world to be an unsafe or evil place, and argued that they did not want to expose children to this world. The high incidence of crime in South Africa was a major contributor to the perception that the world is an unsafe place. The possibility of children being exposed to contact crimes such as murder, sexual offences, assault and robbery serves as a deterrent to having children.



## 6.3 Evaluation of the research

### 6.3.1 *The quality of the study*

The guidelines suggested by Patton (2001) for increasing the quality of the research were discussed in chapter four and are used to evaluate the analysis in the present study.

#### 6.3.1.1 *Trustworthiness*

The following verification strategies are suggested by Morse et al. (2002):

- ***Methodological coherence/ praxis:*** The research question of this study matches the method employed, which also matched the data and the analytical procedures. The ontological as well as epistemological claims of feminist social constructionist theory, together with the methodological approach of qualitative research and specifically thematic analysis helped to achieve the aims of the research.
- ***Appropriateness of the sample:*** The women participating in this study suited the criteria for the sample. All of the women interviewed were in heterosexual romantic relationships, above the age of 28 and did not desire children.
- ***Collecting and analysing data concurrently:*** The data I already obtained guided me to what I needed to know, which subsequently enhanced the quality of the data that I collected. Although I waited for all the interviews to be transcribed before conducting the actual thematic analysis, I made field notes while conducting interviews. These field notes contained themes that I could possibly explore when conducting other interviews. I also listened to the audio-tapes after the interviews and made observations that guided me while collecting more data.
- ***Thinking theoretically:*** Ideas that emerged from data were confirmed in new data, which gave rise to new ideas, which in turn were verified in data that had already been collected. This process enhanced the formulation of themes.
- ***Theory development:*** Instead of merely using theory as a framework to analyse data, I endeavoured to contribute to feminist social constructionist theory by highlighting how the findings in the study were in accordance with or

differed from feminist social constructionist thought. For example, this study supports the feminist social constructionist argument that dominant discourses are fluid and subject to change. In this study the majority of the participants believed that it is possible to be feminine without being a mother. Instead, the participants associated nurturing with femininity, thus allowing women the possibility of being nurturing towards people and things other than their own children. The notion that dominant discourses are subject to change is in accordance with feminist social constructionist thought.

#### ***6.3.1.2 Authenticity and particularity***

Authenticity refers to the practice in which the research findings reflect the meanings and experiences that are lived by the participants of the study (Sandelowski, 1986). In the research, I considered the importance of accurately conveying the experiences of the participants. Authenticity was enhanced by engaging in dialogue with the participants and asking further questions if I did not understand what the participants were saying or if their statements were ambiguous. Particularity refers to the ability to acknowledge and show the differences in the way in which the participants in the study experience and account for their realities (Patton, 2001). Research participants were quoted frequently in the results chapter in order to accurately demonstrate the experiences of the participants. The similarities and differences in the experiences of the participants were also highlighted by making use of quotes.

#### ***6.3.1.3 Triangulation***

Triangulation addresses the issue of internal validity in qualitative research and refers to the process in which the researcher uses more than one method of data collection. Due to the limited nature of this study, triangulation was not possible.

#### ***6.3.1.4 Subjectivity acknowledged***

Acknowledging that I had preconceived notions of the phenomenon under investigation enabled me to think critically about the ways in which my perceptions and ideas

impacted on how I conducted the study, how I interacted with the respondents, and how I interpreted the data.

#### **6.3.1.5 Personal reflexivity**

This study was conducted from a feminist social constructionist approach and I therefore subscribed to the notion that the researcher is not removed from the research process, but rather that her thoughts, feelings, memories, and experiences contribute to the research process. I had to consider my personal history as well as my thoughts and feelings concerning the decision to have children or to remain childfree. Being interested in feminist research and given the fact that motherhood plays such an important role in the South African society, I became increasingly interested in reasons as to why childfree women choose remain childfree.

The researcher influences the research setting, but the research itself may also develop and challenge the researcher as an individual (Dlamini, 2002). The study appealed to me, as being a woman in a long-term supportive relationship, I realised that my partner valued my individuality and person to such an extent that I am able to choose whether or not to have children in the future. The notion of motherhood is not particularly appealing to me. I have two young brothers (aged 11 and 14) and have experienced and witnessed the difficulties of childrearing. I also appreciate the fact that at the age of 27, I can enjoy the freedom associated with remaining childfree; I can sleep when I want to, eat what I want to, go to the movies when I feel like it, and travel if I desire to do so, without having to worry about taking care of children. Although I have not gained finality with regards to whether I want children in the future or not, I thought that it would be of academic interest to gain an understanding of regarding childfree women's reasons for remain childfree.

I had to address the power inequality that is typically inherent to a quantitative research setting. The researcher is often portrayed as the expert conducting research, whereas the participant is seen as the "subject" being researched. The first step I took to address the inequalities of the research process was to change the language of research. Thus,

the women that I interviewed were not “subjects”, but became “participants” in the study. For women to benefit from research it has to be conducted with them, and has to belong to them; research needs to proceed under the direction of the women who are studied and should fit within the parameters of their “knowledge” and the ways in which they experience their world (Dé Ishtar, 2005). Participants were therefore considered to be experts of their own experiences. By facilitating the interviews and by engaging in dialogue, the participants and I co-created knowledge. Through engaging in dialogue with each other, there was an intersubjective exchange as we touched on each other’s worlds, and thus gained limited access to an understanding of each other’s lived experiences (Dé Ishtar, 2005). This exchange of experiences took place through verbal discussion and non-verbal communication.

I was aware of the fact that I had more power than my participants in the sense that I defined the parameters of the study, and that I had engaged intensively with feminist theory. In addition, I would also interpret the data that they had provided, which gave me added power. However, to say that I was the only party that yielded power in the research process would be incorrect. The childfree women participating in the research chose to participate, which already gave them some power in the research process. The participants guided the information flow; although I asked certain questions, they chose which statements to elaborate on and which questions to answer comprehensively. The research participants were also the gatekeepers of their own experiences; only they could decide if they would truthfully reveal their experiences of their social world.

Four of the participants have research or academic backgrounds, which resulted in them feeling fairly comfortable with the research process. One participant was a beauty therapist and I purposefully indicated that I would be willing to interview her at her privately owned salon after she had given me a beauty treatment. She preferred the interview to be conducted at her salon. This aided in the addressing of power inequalities; the participant participated in my study in a context in which she was not only comfortable, but also the expert.

Sprague (2005) argues that researchers talking about themselves limit the opportunities for participants to talk about themselves. This may create the perception that the researcher is not interested in what the interviewee has to say. According to Sprague (2005), this may lead to the participant feeling as though there is a violation of the research agreement, which assumes that the researcher listens passively while the participant talks. I explained to the research participants at the beginning of the research process that from an epistemological point of reference, dialogue between us would be pivotal to knowledge creation, and that I considered myself to be a part of the research process. This helped to clarify the participants' expectations. Furthermore, self-disclosure on the part of the researcher may lead to social desirability bias (Sprague, 2005). As the researcher discloses her values, thoughts and opinions to the participant, the participant may incorporate these into her own account of her experiences in an attempt to please the researcher. The possibility of desirability bias undermines the notion that the researcher should "believe the participant", a decidedly feminist approach to research (Reinharz, 1992). However, Reinharz (1992) suggests that the feminist researcher should commence with the research project intending to believe the interviewee, and should question the interviewee if she begins not to believe her or has doubt over the veracity of the interviewee's statements. Thus, I had the freedom to explore whether participants were in fact "telling me what they thought I wanted to hear" by probing further. Self-disclosure had a further benefit, once I disclosed sensitive information to participants, they seemed to relax and report similar experiences. I encouraged the participants to ask me questions, which ultimately resulted in them responding to my answers, which added value to the research process. One area that I chose not to explore was the impact of motherhood on women's sex lives. I may have neglected to do so because I was uncomfortable with a discussion pertaining to sex. I certainly felt that my participants would be sensitive to disclosing their thoughts on the matter. Conversely, the fact that I did not ask the women how they thought motherhood impacted on women's sex lives may have caused the women participating in the research to feel that I was uncomfortable with the issue.

An obstacle that I had to overcome in this research was the question of whether if we are not the same it is possible to overcome our differences. The second wave feminist movement argued against the treatment and conceptualisation of women as “others” in relation to the male norm (Archer, 2004). During this era feminist thinking increasingly became concerned with the power differences and inequalities that exist between women (Archer, 2004). The increased focus on the differences between women was unsustainable, and feminists began to adopt a more postmodern outlook of feminist research. Postmodern feminist theory “argues for the fragmented identity of women and the multiplicity of difference” (Nencel & Pels, 1991, p. 118). However, despite differences amongst women, women can still achieve solidarity based on a common goal (Archer, 2004). This viewpoint allowed me to highlight the differences in lived experiences between the women participating in the study (which included myself), while still focusing on similar experiences to draw certain parallels in the study.

#### ***6.3.1.6 Contributions to dialogue as well as enhanced and deeper understanding***

I was aware of the fact that when conducting research from a feminist social constructionist approach, my role was not that of an objective researcher studying the “subject”. Instead, I was very much a part of a dynamic research process. During the research process knowledge is being co-created between the researcher and participants within the research setting (Smith, 2003; Willig, 2001). Through self-disclosure, interviews become conversations. Responding to participants’ insights by sharing my own thoughts and feelings stimulated discussion and consequently I obtained richer data. Conversations also allowed for enhanced and deeper understanding of the experiences of participants. My self-disclosure also served to put the participants at ease, which resulted in some women feeling comfortable enough to ask me for my own thoughts on the topic at hand. This gave me an indication of how far I could push personal barriers. It also allowed me a natural opportunity to ask the participants the very same questions, which often resulted in richer data. Furthermore, I noted questions asked by participants and incorporated them into the interview guide in later interviews.

## **6.4 Limitations of the study**

The limited nature of the research made it possible for me to interview only five participants. It was therefore not possible for me to attribute differences in the participants' accounts to their socio-economic status, race, culture, or age.

Due to the qualitative nature of the enquiry, as well as a small sample size, the research findings and theoretical implications are only applicable to the specific cases under investigation. Although I identified commonly held experiences, thoughts and feelings of participants it was not possible to make generalisations.

Triangulation is a method that could enhance the quality of a study. Due to time constraints, I was not able to make use of other research methods, such as focus groups, which could have resulted in greater trustworthiness of the data.

The reflexive nature of this research leads me to conclude that another researcher conducting a similar research project could formulate different themes. The researcher brings herself to the study. The way in which the researcher approaches the study, thinks about the subject matter, positions herself towards the participants, and interprets the data are dependent on her historical, cultural, and linguistic background.

## **6.5 Strengths of the study**

### ***6.5.1 Credibility***

In evaluating the credibility or quality of the findings of the study, it is possible to describe this study as credible. The research satisfied criteria for credibility by being trustworthy as well as authentic. The credibility of the study was further enhanced by my acknowledgement that I was subjective in my approach to the subject matter, that I was reflexive, that I contributed to dialogue during the research process, and that I achieved a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied.

## 6.6 Suggestions for future research

As indicated in the discussion of the limitation of the findings, it would be useful to consider whether socio-economic status, culture, and race impact on the decision to remain childfree. It is possible that socio-economic status in particular might have implications for women's agency in deciding to remain childfree. Access to reproductive health services and the ability to assert oneself in one's relationship may be factors that are potentially diminished when women are not economically privileged or are financially dependent on their partner. These aspects were not fully explored in this study and future research can benefit from considering how women from varied socio-economic groupings construct meaning around either remaining childfree or choosing to become mothers.

It would also be beneficial to consider whether age impacts on the decision to remain childfree. It is possible that older women may provide different accounts for remaining childfree than younger women. Childfree women's decision to remain childfree is often met with disregard; members of their social networks often say that they will change their minds in the future.

It could be interesting to compare the experiences of single women who choose to remain childfree to the experiences of childfree women in heterosexual relationships. In the current study, only women who were in heterosexual romantic relationships were interviewed. It would be useful to consider how the decision to remain childfree impacts on potential romantic relationships and whether childfree women in heterosexual relationships are more readily accepted in their societal networks, as compared to their single counterparts.

A study in which the researcher makes use of various qualitative research methods could yield rich data. Combining interviews with focus groups, narrative enquiry as well as the analysis of diary entries, could allow a collaborative approach to research.



There is a lack of both quantitative and qualitative research pertaining to childfree women. A combination of qualitative and quantitative research may provide greater insights into the characteristics of childfree women as well as the reasons why women choose to remain childfree.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

In conclusion, motherhood is still considered socially desirable. This study indicates that some women refute the dominant discourse that girls grow up to become mothers. The childfree women participating in this study believe that the disadvantages of childrearing outweigh the benefits of remaining childfree. Further research is required to expand upon the limited body of literature pertaining to the decision to remain childfree in the South African context.

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## Addendum

1. How do you view motherhood?
2. What does it mean to you to be “feminine”?
3. Why do you not want to have children?
4. Do you think that this decision may change in the future?
5. What do you think are the positives of having children?
6. Were there any relationships in your past that informed your decision not to have children?
7. If so, could you please describe these relationships?
8. Were there any experiences in your past that made you decide not to have children?
9. If so, could you please discuss these experiences?
10. Are there other reasons why you choose not to have children?
11. What is the impact of the decision to remain childfree on your relationship with your partner?
12. What is the impact of the decision to remain childfree on your relationship with your family and friends?
13. How do you think society in general responds to women that choose to remain childfree?