

**“...I am just as normal as
they are.”**

**Reconstructing the definition of
womanhood through the
experiences of voluntary childless
women.**

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Abstract

In this thesis, I am adding a feminist, humanities-based voice to the sociological discourse surrounding voluntary childlessness. I am mapping voluntary childless women's experiences with the societal expectation that all women are, or want to be, mothers. Through a literature study, I show that voluntary childless women are not generally thought of in a very positive way and I highlight a scientific gap which this thesis aims to fill. Voluntary childless women have never before been asked about their experiences of being voluntary childless in a world that places motherhood at the centre of its understanding of womanhood. In my theoretical framework, I show how motherhood is central to people's ideas of what a good woman should be, and I argue that voluntary childless women are therefore being punished by society. Moreover, I argue, through the use of qualitative research by form of feminist interviewing, that voluntary childless women are starting to reconstruct what it means to be a woman. Through my analysis of the interview data, and linking back to my theoretical framework, I am answering my research question, and four sub questions in the concluding remarks.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Abstract.....	3
Table of Contents	5
Introduction	6
Chapter I: Womanhood \neq motherhood	9
1.1 Literature Review	9
1.2 Theoretical Framework	15
1.2.1 Introduction	15
1.2.2 A history of motherhoods' centrality in our definition of womanhood	16
1.2.3 Motherhood as a norm	20
1.2.4 The myth of the centrality of motherhood in womanhood	22
1.3 Method	24
1.3.1 Introducing my method	24
1.3.2 My experience and position as an interviewer	28
Chapter II: Reconstructing womanhood	34
2.1 Introducing the interviewees	34
2.2 Analysis	36
2.2.1 In what way do the societal expectations show themselves, and do the factors of age and gender play a role here?	36
2.2.2 What impact do these societal expectations have on voluntary childless women, and does the factor of age play a role here?	44
2.2.3 How do voluntary childless women deal with these expectations, and does the factor of age play a role here?	52
Conclusion	65
Bibliography	68
Appendix	Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.
Interview #1.....	Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.
Interview #2.....	Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.
Interview #3.....	Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.
Interview #4.....	Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.
Interview #5.....	Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.

Introduction

“You’ll regret it when you’re older.”

“You just haven’t found the right person yet.”

“Choosing this life is selfish.”

“You’ll have a harder time finding someone who wants to be with you.”

“Who’s going to give me grandchildren?”

All of these comments are frequently made to voluntary childless women (Tatum, 2014). In all of these comments, a certain negativity about the woman’s decision to not become a mother can be heard. Many online platforms have lately been publishing articles about voluntary childlessness, where women share their stories and opinions, or where women are addressed and told that they should not feel pressured or guilty for not having children for whatever reason. Tatum (2014), writes in an article on the online platform Everyday Feminism (www.everydayfeminism.com) about five things, named above, that should not be said to voluntary childless women, including explanations for why these comments are harmful. Saying such a thing to someone disregards and undermines their own decision making and does not grant these women the agency over their bodies. The underlying assumption being: *you are a woman, you have a womb, therefore, you shall reproduce.*

I have noticed that the topic of not wanting children, and the reactions that women who do not want to have children receive, is becoming more and more talked about. In a 2016 piece on another online platform, Broadly (broadly.vice.com), Campbell describes the 100-year battle that women have been fighting against the widely-accepted notion that maternal desire is intense and innate to all women. In 1916, an academic article was published by Leta Stetter Hollingworth in the *American Journal of Sociology*, countering the idea that a maternal instinct is something that all women possess. Furthermore, Hollingworth addressed the ways in which society was pressuring women to have (more) children. Campbell (2016), relates Hollingworth’s then 100 year old article to the attitudes to voluntary childless women in 2016, naming some of the ways in which these women are still made to feel incomplete without children. She quotes celebrities addressing the matter, and names multiple articles published in magazines challenging the, still widely believed, idea that all women must want children. Journalistic articles concerning the topic are also being published more and more. For example, Bland (2015) writes in British newspaper *The Guardian* about the pressure on young

women to have children, and the lack of this pressure on their male equivalents. The reason behind this, according to Bland, is political: “It is predicated on the idea that a woman’s happiness is entirely bound up in family, and that she has a social obligation to reproduce even if she is ambivalent about the prospect”.

For me personally, this topic is very relevant. I do not yet know if I will ever want children, and if I had to make the decision right now, I would say that I do not want to. I have voiced that feeling to multiple people and in almost all cases, I was confronted with a puzzled, negative reaction. “You will change your mind”, “You are too young to know right now”, are just some of the things that people have said to me. As this issue interests me on such a personal level, I have been reading about it for a while now.

As Tatum (2014) puts it, “We still live in a world where family and children are deeply associated with women, to the point where women are taught that having children is essential to having a strong sense of self”. In this quote, she captures what may lie beneath the negativity that voluntary childless women have to deal with. More often than not, women are expected to have children and when they show signs of not going along with that expectation, they may get negative reactions, making them feel as though they are not a ‘good’ woman. In this Master’s thesis, I am going to look at the experiences that voluntary childless women have of the societal expectations surrounding women and motherhood. I am going to do this by conducting five in-depth interviews with voluntary childless women, in which I will ask them about their experiences. My specific focus will lie on the experiences of voluntary childless women with the negativity that they may have to deal with, and how they are affected by it. Therefore, the research question that this thesis aims to answer is the following: *How do voluntary childless women experience societal expectations regarding having children?*

In support of my research question, I am asking a number of sub questions. By asking *In what way do these societal expectations show themselves?*, I am getting at ways in which voluntary childless women are confronted with others’ opinions of their voluntary childlessness. This can be anything that they experience, it does not have to be confined to verbal comments. Because I am particularly interested in getting to know what voluntary childless women’s experiences of the reactions that they get are, I am asking the following two sub questions: *What impact do these expectations have on voluntary childless women?; How do voluntary childless women deal with these expectations?*. Here, I am distinguishing between the impact that the reactions have on the women – how it makes them feel, and the

way that they deal with these reactions: how do they react? Do they take action, talk back, or do they not respond? Finally, I am interviewing a group that is diverse in regard to their age, and whether or not they have a male partner. By asking them about their experiences and, if they have one, their male partner's experiences, I am going to answer my final sub question: *Do the factors of gender and age play a role in the experiences of voluntary childless women with regard to these societal expectations?*

The data that I will gather from the five in-depth interviews that I am going to conduct for this research, will be given more meaning through analysing them within a theoretical framework. The theoretical framework I am going to use will consist of three parts: the first of which will deal with showing how being a 'good', or 'normal' woman includes, according to many, having a child wish and becoming a mother. I will draw on Simone De Beauvoir's canonical work *The Second Sex* (2011), first published in 1949. Then, in the second part, I will use the Foucaultian concept of normalization (Foucault, 1975) to talk about the way people will 'punish' others for not confirming to the norm, which is what leads to voluntary childless women receiving negative backlash. In the last part of my framework, I will show, by using Judith Butler's gender performativity theory (Butler, 1999), that gender roles are not something that one is born with, but rather taught, meaning that becoming a mother is not inherent to being a woman and that a voluntary childless woman is also a 'good' and 'normal' woman.

By conducting in-depth interviews with voluntary childless women, from different backgrounds, I am going to give an insight into their experiences concerning the way they face societal expectations regarding having children. This research is conducted between 2017 – 2018, and based in The Netherlands, and the claims that I will make thus need to be read within this context (for more information see section 1.3.2). Before going into detail about my research questions and method of research, I will write about the pressure and negative reactions, stemming from societal expectations, that voluntary childless women face. Then, I will present my theoretical framework, followed by my method at the end of Chapter 1. Chapter 2 will contain my analysis and results, and finally I will end this thesis by presenting my concluding remarks.

Chapter I: Womanhood \neq motherhood

How motherhood is placed at the centre of our understanding of womanhood, why it matters and how it should be different.

In this chapter, I will discuss some relevant academic literature on the societal expectations that voluntary childless women face. Through my discussion of these works, the gap that the current thesis aims to fill will become visible. In section 1.2, I am building my theoretical framework which is the skeleton of this research. Finally, in section 1.3, I will elaborate on the research method that I am using.

1.1 Literature Review

Almost all of the literature in existence on the subject of voluntary childlessness comes from the social sciences. Many of these scholars refer back to the notion of motherhood, and its centrality to the widespread, accepted understanding of womanhood. Because being a mother is considered something natural and inherent to being a woman, women who are voluntarily childless are seen as deviant, and can experience some negative backlash and, in many cases, unwanted reactions from a society that does not view them as ‘normal’ (see for example Calhoun and Selby, 1980; Morell, 1994; Gillespie, 2000; Cannold, 2005; Maher and Saugeres, 2007; Kelly, 2009; Noordhuizen, De Graaf and Sieben, 2010; Merz and Liefbroer, 2012). All studies below found this societal negative attitude toward voluntary childless women. I will now discuss them in short to give an overview of the ways in which this negativity was tested and proved in different settings and situations. Through going over these scholars’ works, the gaps in their research that the present thesis aims to fill, will become clear.

As shown in Gillespie (2000), Kelly (2009) and Merz and Liefbroer (2012), amongst others, more and more women in Western Europe and the United States decide against having children. Specific data is available per country, but is limited to statistics on childless women in general, which means that it also includes involuntary childless women. However, there is no reason to believe that people have higher chances of being biologically infertile now, than before, so many scholars do conclude that voluntary childlessness is on the rise. Basten (2009), for example, compares statistics from 2002, on women, born in 1960, from a number of European countries to that from the early 1930s. The data he presents on The Netherlands show an increase in childlessness from around 11% in the 1930s, to 17,7% in 2002. De Graaf (2008), shows the overall Dutch rates of childless women, by birth year. Of all women born in

1935, around 11% are childless. This grew to childless levels between 18% and 20% for women born in 1980. In 2003, De Graaf (2008) asked childless women in The Netherlands, aged 26- 45, whether or not their childlessness was voluntary. Of all childless women, 55% were biologically able to have children, but voluntarily decided not to.

Rosemary Gillespie (2000) links the increase of childlessness to a need for change of female identity, which she says must, and will, become less entangled with motherhood. She argues that the childless women, whether voluntarily or not, who are dealing with the negative reactions and backlash, are writing a new definition of what it means to be a woman. Voluntary childless women show that womanhood does not necessarily go hand in hand with desiring motherhood, as all childless women believe and demonstrate that their life as a woman is valuable and meaningful, even though they are childless. Maura Kelly (2009) agrees: “voluntary childlessness may serve as one way to actively challenge the centrality of motherhood to feminine identity” (p. 171). Furthermore, Gillespie (2000) argues, and I could not agree more, that research into the topic of voluntary childlessness is necessary, as it will establish a fuller understanding of voluntary childlessness which can “contribute to a more in-depth understanding of femininity and identity” (p. 232).

In a short study by Lawrence Calhoun and James Selby (1980), we see that often, childless couples experience being pressured, by a multitude of sources, toward parenthood. Not giving in to these pressures, the voluntary childless are described by many as selfish, and poorly psychologically adjusted (p. 181). Calhoun and Selby (1980) asked the participants in their study to review folders containing all information needed for a couple to apply for a loan to buy a new car. The fictional, heterosexual couple described was the same in every case, only differing in one aspect: parenthood. The paragraph on parenthood either described the couple as having two children, as being involuntarily childless and wanting children, or as being voluntarily childless. All participants were asked the same set of questions about the couple, regarding their liking of each of the spouses and character traits. The results show that, in the case of the childless couples, the woman was liked significantly less if the childlessness was voluntary. She was also seen as less well- adjusted to society. The participants’ perceptions of the woman differed based on the reason for her childlessness. If she expressed a child wish, she was liked significantly more, than when she was voluntarily childless. The same did not apply to the man in the couple. The participants’ liking to him was not affected by whether he had a child or not (p. 182). Calhoun and Selby (1980) argue that the reason for this lies in widely accepted sex roles and stereotypes. Women, when mothers,

conform to this stereotype and fulfil their expected sex role, whilst when they are voluntarily childless, they go against them and thus are deviants. In Carolyn Morell's book 'Unwomanly Conduct: the challenges of intentional childlessness' (1994), we are presented with a personal account of the experiences of a voluntary childless woman, instead of others' perceptions of her. Morell describes her own struggles with being a woman without a child wish. She summarizes her experience of being voluntarily childless as: "[being childless] means simultaneously to be reminded of your second-rate life and to be ignored" (p. xiv). She talks about the experiences of childless women in the United States, and describes how their lives were seen as a failure, and were not discussed, unless they expressed the intense desire to become mothers, or the regret of never having had a child, in which case they were not voluntary childless. Both Morell's (1994) and Calhoun and Selby's (1980) work was written over 20 years ago, though, so it would be expected that the situation has changed since then. However, as described in more recent work (e.g. Maher and Saugeres, 2007; Kelly, 2009; Noordhuizen et al., 2010; Merz and Liefbroer, 2012), negative attitudes toward voluntary childless women persist.

Kelly (2009) provides some further insights in the negative views that voluntary childless women face. This ranges from experiencing disapproval from family and friends, to being perceived as unfeminine by societal norms (p. 165-166). Overall, Kelly describes voluntary childless women as "managing a deviant and stigmatized identity" (p. 165). Mentioned as the negative views that others may attribute to women who are voluntarily childless are, amongst others, selfishness, living less rewarding lives, being unhappily married, being less happy in general, irresponsibility, and abnormality. Especially calling them selfish is an often-done reaction to voluntary childless women. Kelly (2009) argues that this reaction comes from the widely-accepted notion of mothering as an "essentially selfless act" (p. 167). She describes how some women accept the label of 'selfish', while others reject this perception of themselves. Another reaction that is often reported, is that of "Oh, but you will change your mind". This is being said to pre-menopausal women who voice their wish to remain childless, by friends, family, medical professionals, and others. Kelly (2009) describes how voluntary childless women feel frustrated, patronized and infantilized when they are told that their decision to remain childless is not taken seriously by other people, who tell them that they will change their minds. Later on, post-menopausal, voluntary childless women are often told that they must feel a lot of regret regarding their childlessness. Even pre-menopause, women are being warned that they will regret their decision later on in life, when

it is biologically too late to have a child. Whenever this anticipation of regret is used against them, voluntary childless women feel that they need to defend their choice to show that they do not regret, or will not regret, it.

Kelly (2009) also pays some attention to the perception of voluntary childless women as unfeminine. Most of the women themselves reject this idea. Rather, as was also expressed by Gillespie (2000), voluntary childless women are developing alternative ways of being feminine, not based on being a mother, but on strength and independence (p. 168).

Looking specifically to the Dutch context, as will the present thesis, Noordhuizen et al. (2010) refer to a Cultural Change survey in The Netherlands which indicates that in the 1960s, 20% of the population accepted childlessness, while in the 1990s this grew to about 90% (p. 163). According to Noordhuizen et al., this large change is mainly due to new people being born, and old people dying, as they state in their, rather blunt, conclusion: the change is due to the replacement of those born before 1940 with those born after. This does not give any explanation as to why people born after 1940 are more accepting of childlessness, and Noordhuizen et al. do not speculate on this. Amongst those who remain negative and intolerant of the voluntary childless in the 1990s, are those born before 1940, those with three or more children of their own, the lower educated and those with lower incomes (p. 174). Another, very important, factor is religion. Among religious people who regularly visit church, regularly being at least once a month, voluntary childlessness is significantly less accepted. For religious people who do not visit church, or not as regularly, there was no difference found in their acceptance of voluntary childlessness. Active affiliation to religion, in the case of this example, Catholicism, also influences the chances of one's voluntary childlessness: by 35% in case of women (Llewellyn, 2016, p. 66). Before expanding on the subject of religiosity and voluntary childlessness, an important note must here be made about the interpretation of the findings of Noordhuizen et al. As their study completely relies on a survey in which Dutch citizens were asked if they considered themselves to be accepting of (voluntary) childlessness, no conclusions can be drawn here of how actual voluntary childless women experience this acceptance. It is possible that someone believes themselves to be accepting, yet they still may make comments, or have attitudes towards the voluntary childless that are experienced as them not being accepting at all. In short, Noordhuizen et al.'s findings must be read for what they are: the Dutch see themselves as accepting of voluntary childlessness – this does not allow for conclusions on whether voluntary childless women feel accepted. Furthermore, Noordhuizen et al. make some generalizing statements regarding who

the people are that do not accept voluntary childlessness, which should be treated with caution and the knowledge that not all those who are religious, elderly, lower educated, who have lower income, or three or more children, are unaccepting of voluntary childlessness.

To expand a bit on the relationship between religion and voluntary childlessness, I look at Dawn Llewellyn (2016) who conducted both one on one interviews and focus groups with, amongst other groups, childless, practising Christian women in the United Kingdom, between 2011 and 2013. Llewellyn argues that there is a ‘maternal silence’ in Christian communities, which “painfully marginalizes women’s experiences of motherhood and voluntary childlessness” (p. 66). This maternal silence, she argues, stems from the Christian institution of motherhood: the maternal expectation that is created in Christian discourses. For voluntary childless Christian women, this can result in feelings of rejection, as they are constantly reminded that a Christian woman’s role is to have and nurture children. The ‘maternal silence’, here, can be understood as exclusion from church liturgies and Christian discourses. Llewellyn’s voluntary childless interviewees describe their negative experiences of the maternal silence as being provoked by Christian sources. They report being made to feel ashamed, or guilty, for having made the choice to remain childless (p. 73-74). Of course, this research particularly focussed on the Christian community, and therefore it does not say anything about other religious groups. I am referring to Llewellyn here to show in what way religion may influence a woman’s experience of her voluntary childlessness.

Apart from voluntary childless women’s lives being regarded in a negative way, Campbell (1999), writes about women without children, who want to get sterilized. For the women, who do not wish to ever have children, sterilization is a more convenient, more secure choice than other forms of contraception. Campbell interviewed twenty-three sterilized women, from the United Kingdom, who all share their stories dealing with the struggles they experienced when they were trying to find a medical professional who would perform the sterilization on them. This proved to be a rather difficult process, where the women were confronted with doctors not willing to perform such a permanent operation. The reasons that they gave all had to do with them questioning the woman’s choice, saying that she would probably, or maybe, change her mind (Campbell, 1999). One of the interviewees remarked how odd it is, when thought through, that doctors questioned her ability to make the permanent choice to get sterilized, while when women visit their doctors because they want to have a child and need help, that, just as permanent, decision to have a child is not being questioned. This shows how normalized it is for women to want children. Other findings in

Campbell's (1999) research discuss how all her sterilized interviewees had to, somehow, prove to medical professionals that they wanted to remain childless. Again, in order for someone to have a child, they are not requested to prove that they want to become a parent. Practices like this show that, in 1999, becoming a mother is still considered a natural, expected thing to do for women, while voluntary childlessness is questioned. This overlaps with findings in Maher and Saugeres (2007), who did research among 100 women in Australia, both with and without children. When asked about the decision that they had made about either becoming, or not becoming, a mother, the women who did have a child did not refer to a specific decision. Women without children, however, did. This shows how indeed, being a woman and being a mother was by then still thought of as natural and normal. The women with children said they made decisions about when to have their child, but not about whether to have it in the first place. They had always just assumed that they would. The women without children describe their decision as being central to the life they lead (p. 15). Thus, it appears that "the decision *not to* mother is not the equivalent of the decision *to* mother" (p. 166; her emphasis). Some generalizing statements in Kelly's (2009) findings should be treated with caution: we cannot claim that all mothers did not make a specific decision regarding having their child(ren) because they had always simply assumed to have them. For some women, it may have been a conscious decision, on which they spent a certain amount of time deliberating.

In all the research discussed throughout this section, the focus lies on the acceptance of voluntary childless women and the negative reactions they receive and negative perceptions of them. There is no specific attention paid to the effect that these reactions and perceptions have on the voluntary childless women themselves. There is no attention paid to how they feel, or how they are dealing with these reactions and societal expectations regarding motherhood. I aim to start closing this gap in this field of research, by giving a voice to voluntary childless women. I am going to ask my interviewees about their experiences. Since all the research dealing with the topic of voluntary childless women is mostly social science based, there is a lack of focus on the women's experiences. I want to add a feminist, humanities-based perspective which focuses on what women are experiencing and how they are dealing with their experiences.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

1.2.1 Introduction

Before analysing my interview data in Chapter 2, I will now draw up the theoretical framework that I am using to approach the interviews and answer my research question. In order to understand and interpret the data of my interviews, it is necessary to situate the societal expectations that voluntary childless women face, specifically in the Netherlands, within a theoretical framework. I will do this by drawing mostly on three theorists, those being Simone De Beauvoir, Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. In short, what my theoretical framework will do is show how motherhood is tightly entangled with the widespread understanding of what ‘normal’ femininity is, and how it is understood to be at the core of what it means to be a ‘good’ woman (De Beauvoir, 2011). Then, through the use of other theories, I will debunk the previous statement by showing that gender roles are not something that one is born with, but rather they are taught, meaning that becoming a mother is not inherent to being a woman and that a voluntary childless woman can and should also be understood as being a ‘good’ and ‘normal’ woman (Butler, 1999). Through these theories, it becomes possible to understand where societal expectations regarding having children come from. Foucault’s ideas around ‘normalization’ (Foucault, 1975) will be then connected to the Western societal expectation that dictates that women, in order to be ‘good’ and ‘normal’, should become mothers. I am going to talk about the way people will ‘punish’ (Foucault, 1975) others for not conforming to the norm, which is what leads to voluntary childless women receiving negative backlash. In this thesis, I am adding a feminist, humanities-based voice to the sociological discourse surrounding voluntary childlessness. I am doing this by relating the societal expectations that voluntary childless women face to norms and normalization, and to the role that motherhood plays in the widespread understanding of femininity.

“But first, what is a woman? ‘Tota mulier in utero: she is a womb,’ some say” (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 3). It is true that the presence of a womb in a body is, amongst some other biological details, one of the biggest differences that set apart the normative female body from the normative male body. I say ‘normative’ here, because I am speaking of what society expects a female body to be in biological terms. Of course, some female bodies lack a womb, as a result of illness or biological errors. It may also happen that a female body houses more than one womb, all of which occurrences do not make the body any less female. Why is the womb deemed so important in setting women apart from men? Because the normative male

body does not carry a womb. Because it comes with the promise of bearing life. The promise of creating life and giving the female body the ability to procreate. Those born with the reproductive organ normatively coded as “male” cannot and will never possess that same ability. The opposite of being biologically male is understood in normative biological ideas about sex as being biologically female, and it can thus make sense to, in some situations, use the womb as a distinctive feature of female-ness. Here, I want to pause and say that in all given situations, only the person themselves can say and know what gender they are, if any. Before diving into the current part of this thesis, it is important to note and to be aware that some people with wombs are gender neutral, some are men, and some are non-female in any other way. Equally, some people without wombs are women. Part of the literature that I am using in this section (De Beauvoir, 2011; Foucault, 1975), will only speak of ‘women’ and ‘men’, in which ‘women’ are those with wombs, and ‘men’ those without. I want to be clear and state that, while I am using these authors’ definitions here, I do not agree that gender is as binary as some of the literature may make it seem.

1.2.2 A history of motherhoods’ centrality in our definition of womanhood

In what is perhaps the most famous feminist classic, *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir (2011) tells us that she does not want to be a mother, as she wants, instead, to be a philosopher. Motherhood would interfere with her work as a thinker, she claims. This personal account against being a mother comes in the conclusion of her book, after she has already shined her light on motherhood in general, a few chapters before. In ‘Chapter 6: The Mother’, De Beauvoir shares her thoughts regarding the position of motherhood in a woman’s life and in society. De Beauvoir is very aware of the way in which motherhood is placed at the centre of womanhood, and of the negative effects this may have on women. She describes how women, after a lifetime of being told motherhood will fulfil them and make them feel whole, do in fact not experience the fulfilment that was promised to them (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 565 – 580). *The Second Sex* was first published in France, in 1949¹, and although this means that newer insights in motherhood may have arisen since then, it also means that it is a great source to use when looking at the history of motherhood, and the history of societal pressures regarding motherhood.

Going back to the Middle Ages, as De Beauvoir does on pages 138-139, gives a good introduction to the idea that good, normal womanhood always includes motherhood. For most

¹ I have used an English translation from 2011, see De Beauvoir (2011).

women during that time, becoming a mother was their only purpose. They were tasked with bearing child after child, until it was physically no longer possible to go through pregnancy and birth again. Because women in the Middle Ages were either pregnant, or caring for a new-born, after which they were highly likely to become pregnant again, they were unable to perform any other tasks than that of the mother. This has largely contributed to the inequality of the sexes: while women were confined, by their biology, to life as a mother, men were out in the world, exploring and inventing (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 582). In the eyes of men, De Beauvoir writes, those pursuits were more essential than bearing life and caring for children (p. 582). The vicious cycle of pregnancy, caring for the baby, pregnancy again, etcetera, finally started to break, when contraceptives became available, and safe abortion options emerged, in the 19th century (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 141).

Although women were, after the late 19th century, able to, to a certain extent, control their biological functions in order not to go through pregnancy after pregnancy, and to have the ability to not ‘just’ be a mother, the idea that a woman is put on earth to give birth still prevailed. Not only was the general consensus that becoming a mother was a woman’s main reason for living, it was also thought that she was somehow not complete before she had borne a child. Becoming a mother is the “ultimate step in a woman’s development”, writes De Beauvoir (p. 536). It is these sorts of views that stand, still nowadays to an extent, at the root of the belief that motherhood is a necessary factor in being a good, normal woman. Another example of this, as given in *The Second Sex* (p. 558), is the following: “Justified by the presence within her of another, she finally fully enjoys being herself.” What is being said here is that a woman, before transforming into a mother, is not yet complete, she is not yet finished, she *is* not yet. She can only *become* herself, a woman, through becoming a mother. When a woman is alone, without child, she is not a full person. The presence of her child gives her, for the first time, the right to be this complete person. The woman can, therefore, never truly be an individual, as she is only considered complete in relation to another: her child. In the final words of ‘Chapter 5: The Married Woman’, De Beauvoir summarizes nicely:

“According to tradition, it is the child who should assure the wife a concrete autonomy that dispenses her from devoting herself to any other aim. If she is not a complete individual as a wife, she becomes it as a mother: the child is her joy and justification. She reaches sexual and social self-realisation through

him; it is thus through him that the institution of marriage has meaning and reaches its aim.” (p. 536).

De Beauvoir considers this the sacrifice that a woman must make: she gives up the ability to ever become an individual by giving maternal love and devoting all her time to birth and care for her child(ren). What she gets in return for these gifts, or rather, what she justifies them with, is her freedom (p. 570). This freedom, of course, could be considered subjective. Not all women may experience being mothers as freeing. Some may feel restricted in their role as a mother. De Beauvoir herself saw freedom in rejecting motherhood and instead devoting her time to her thinking. However, women are, in the western world still in contemporary times to a large extent, not only taught from childhood onward that motherhood lies in their future, but that this is a great privilege, that motherhood is to be desired. “Woman is repeatedly told she is made to bear children, and the praises of motherhood are sung” (p. 545), says De Beauvoir. Keeping this conditioning of the female, from a young age onward, in mind, it is understandable that she experiences motherhood as a gained freedom: freedom in finally having reached her full potential, which she has been told she has to feel excited about since birth.

But, as we see in De Beauvoir’s account of women’s lives once they are mothers, it is not always true that motherhood fulfils a woman (p. 579). De Beauvoir quotes other authors, women she has spoken with, or women others have spoken with throughout her work. As some women share, their lives, confined to motherhood, are boring. Their children do bring joy, but are “absolutely not enough to give meaning to an existence worn down by boredom” (p. 579). Where at first, the promise of motherhood would justify uncomfortable experiences such as menstruation, the arrival of motherhood, through pregnancy, now seems to be even worse than the things the very idea of it once concealed. The woman’s body changes, it aches, she becomes fearful, in some cases she does not even feel like herself anymore. “As the meaning of pregnancy is thus ambiguous, it is natural for the woman’s attitude to be ambivalent as well” (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 554). And thus, De Beauvoir shares in *The Second Sex* several women’s negative experiences of being pregnant. Of course, there are also women who love being pregnant, but in De Beauvoir’s work, the negative tone prevails (p. 595-560). What reading this chapter in *The Second Sex* does for me, is to show that there have always been women who stood up to the idea that a woman equals a mother, and that reproducing it is everything that women should want to do. Granted, they may still have liked becoming mothers after having hated pregnancy, but they were vocal about disliking

pregnancy, thereby paving the way for the idea that maybe, motherhood is not for every woman.

Moving from discussing pregnancy to discussing motherhood, De Beauvoir writes that the new mother “must” take pleasure in her new role and in performing motherly tasks (p. 570). In my reading of De Beauvoir, she opted for the use of the term “must” here, to show that this is a societal expectation of a woman turned mother, rather than an inherent feeling that all women will experience once they are mothers. Later, De Beauvoir again discusses the positive effects associated with motherhood (as mentioned throughout this section: freedom, happiness, fulfilment). Women who truly, for intrinsic reasons, want to become mothers, will feel happiness and freedom, and find the performing of motherly tasks to be fulfilling. Therefore, it is arguable, following de Beauvoir, that motherhood can only mean these positive things to a woman, if she has freely chosen motherhood, if she truly desired it (p. 580). When I flip this argument around, it shows that conditioning women to become mothers, telling them that it is what they should aspire to be, will result in a negative experience. The woman will not experience the freedom, happiness and fulfilment that was promised to her. Moreover, for a woman to enjoy pregnancy and motherhood, and to be good at it, it is important that this is not her only purpose in life. In this regard, de Beauvoir writes:

“A woman who works – farmer, chemist or writer - has the easiest pregnancy because she is not centred on her own person; it is the woman who has the richest personal life who will give the most to her child and who will ask for the least, she who acquires real human values through effort and struggle will be the most fit to bring up children.” (p. 582-583).

A woman who is her own being, who does and enjoys more than only motherhood, can be a great mother; the greatest mother, even, as argued by De Beauvoir. And thus, it seems, that we have come back to the point that motherhood does not suffice for a woman’s life. It can be a beautiful part of her life, if voluntarily chosen, but it will not make her happy, or give her freedom in its own. Still though, years and years of women being allowed nothing else but to be mothers, being told that motherhood was what they should desire - what would give them freedom, and what was their sole reason for being put on earth - has left a legacy of social norms. Social norms which do not allow the woman to procreate as she pleases, which try to confine her to motherhood still today. De Beauvoir expresses the hope that one day, voluntary motherhood will be socially accepted. She wishes for women to actively choose motherhood themselves, on their own terms, and not because they were forced into it by a society that

believes that this is natural. As an example, De Beauvoir discusses artificial insemination, which allows women to realize their child wish even without a (male) partner (p. 752). I want to add to her wish, and say that I hope that one day, now that women are allowed to actively make a decision, *not* choosing motherhood will be socially accepted. This is one of the points this thesis aims to argue for.

1.2.3 Motherhood as a norm

Of course, one might say that women are now, in our Western society, allowed to either choose whether to be a mother or not. However, as I have shown in my analysis of de Beauvoir's book, as an exemplary study of patriarchal society, those women who choose not to be mothers can expect a plethora of negativity to come their way. Being voluntary childless is not (yet) accepted in society, as motherhood still remains the norm. In the following section, I am going to show how the process of normalization works as a basis for societal surveillance, and how it can lead to those who are 'deviant' to the socially accepted norms being punished.

My reading of Michel Foucault's work on bio-power and normalization in his 1975's work *Discipline and Punish* is that society produces certain social categories in which people may/should fall. These categories are regulated, again, by society, with the result that those who deviate from these categories are noticed and hence punished. This punishment is a disciplinary act: by punishing deviant behaviour, the dominant groups try to eliminate deviant behaviours. Some questions need to be answered here, then, when applying this knowledge to the current issue of voluntary childless women.

First of all, it is important to clarify who those who do the punishing, those in power, are according to Foucault. Many of his examples revolve around the state as the institution that carries the power to observe and control. In the era of bio-power², in which we are now living according to Foucault (Rabinow, 1984, p. 262), this power is also maintained by other institutions, such as the family, the army, schools, the police, medicine, and the administration of collective bodies (p. 263). All of these institutions have the power to observe, through surveillance, and punish. In the case of voluntary childless women – as I showed in the literature review and in the first part of the theoretical framework - it is society as a whole, in

² Bio-power being the power over other bodies, described in Rabinow (1984, p. 262) as “the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life ... (the) explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations.”

Foucaultian terms “the administration of collective bodies”, that participates in punitive action.

Deviant behaviour is thus punished, through disciplinary punishment (which will be explained later in this section), by those institutions that hold the power to observe and control. But what exactly is deviant behaviour? In the words of Foucault, it is “that which does not measure up to the rule, that departs from it. The whole indefinite domain of non-confirming is punishable” (Foucault, 1975, p. 178-179). Whereas in the past, death was always used as a punishment, this changed in Foucault’s disciplinary society. In order to take power over other bodies, continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms are used:

“It is no longer a matter of bringing death into play in the field of sovereignty, but of distributing the living in the domain of value and utility. Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendour; it does not have to draw the line that separates the enemies of the sovereign from his obedient subjects; it effects distributions around the norm.” (Rabinow, p. 266).

So, individuals will be distributed around this norm, in what Foucault calls a “normalizing society” (Rabinow, p. 266). And, if they deviate from this norm, they will be punished. What, then, is this norm? It can be defined as a “range of degrees of normality indicating membership of a homogenous social body, also playing a part in classification, hierarchization, and the distribution of rank” (Foucault, p. 184). Normalization, as the practise of exercising power in order to make all individuals conform to certain norms, enforces homogeneity on a society. All individuals are allowed to be their own, individual person, as long as they fall inside the norm. If society is the institution in charge of this normalization, society as a whole possesses a “normalizing gaze” (Rabinow, p. 197). This is the observant, surveilling eye that notices differences, and that qualifies, classifies, and punishes. All are seen by this surveillance, and all are judged. These technologies of normalization create, classify, and control deviants in the social body. This act of control is being carried out through punishments. Punishment of deviants can have one of these two goals: either to isolate the deviant, or to normalize the deviant (Rabinow, p. 21). In its extreme form, this normalizing power takes the shape of the prison, in which all inmates are controlled and disciplined to reach the goal of them all behaving the same way, according to the rules; according to the norm. Reading Foucault, his accounts of the prison can be taken either literally, or as a metaphor for society. In the case of this thesis, the latter is the case. Societal

norms are the prison in which individuals live, and they exercise the power of normalization (Foucault, p. 170). To get back to the topic of this research, it is the norm of societal expectations for women, and motherhoods' centrality in those expectations, that leads to the punishment of voluntary childless women.

The final question we must answer then is the following: what exactly is this punishment? I am arguing that voluntary childless women are being punished for deviating from the norm, which is to (want to) have children. But, in fact, nowadays, in the context analysed in this thesis, voluntary childless women are not in prison. They are not getting fines or have other legal action taken against them. Their punishment is not of this kind. Any mechanism that makes it possible to repress, to prevent, to exclude, or/and to eliminate behaviour, can be used as a punitive method, according to Foucault (Rabinow, p. 172). 'Any' mechanism, here, thus includes mechanisms which do not make use of explicit violence or legality practices. The 'softer'³ mechanisms, which I had already established above, are what is being used towards voluntary childless women, and they involve confinement or correction. Confinement and correction as punishments serve the purpose of making the deviant feel as though they are, indeed, different and/or wrong, and do not belong to the group. I will elaborate further, in my analysis, with life narratives and examples, what I mean with practices of confinement and correction.

1.2.4 The myth of the centrality of motherhood in womanhood

De Beauvoir (2011), in her chapter on "The Mother," provides several examples of women's experiences that show that the famous 'maternal instinct' does not exist (p. 567). Women are often assumed to possess a maternal instinct, an instinct which drives them towards motherhood, which makes of them great mothers, and which makes them absolutely adore their role as mothers. What De Beauvoir argues is that, while some women may indeed feel a natural pull toward motherhood, and be happy as mothers, this has nothing to do with a universal 'instinct' that is present in all women. Instead, the woman's attitude towards her role as a mother, once having had a child, completely depends on her personal situation. In a similar way, I can debunk the statement that motherhood is central to our definition of womanhood. Firstly, by looking back to the beginning of this theoretical framework. We can conclude, that motherhood only became central to the idea of what it means to be a woman because women, in history, were not able to control their fertility the way we can now.

³ This is my term.

Women in the Middle Ages went through pregnancy after pregnancy, making it completely impossible for them to spend time on any other activities than caring for their children. This is no longer true for the women of today: contraception has made it possible to choose if, when, and how many times, one gets pregnant. Yet, the idea that motherhood is still a condition of normal womanhood prevails. Now, to take a further step, I will argue, through a discussion of the social construction of gender norms, that motherhood *is* not a condition of ‘normal’ womanhood; rather, it has been *made* into a condition of normal womanhood, which is why people *think* that it is, when in fact, it *is* not. I will do so through Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity.

Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity was first worked out in her 1988’s essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*. In this essay, Butler successfully argues that gender is not a biological given: it is not something that one is born with. Rather, it is embodied and continuously performed, through acts such as bodily gestures, movements, and enactments (p. 519). Most people will go through life unaware that they are actually performing their gender; following gender norms that are taught to them by society, rather than it being naturally inherent to them. Moreover, Butler highlights the importance in noting that gender is not an individual act: everyone is doing it, which is also contributing to why this performance feels so real and natural. Butler explains how the acting out of gender is an ongoing performance. People have been participating in it for so long, that it is invisible to the individual actors. Once we are born, we are a part of it. We imitate those around us, who are imitating those around them, etcetera:

“As a public action and a performative act, gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual. The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes. But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies. Actors are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance.” (Butler, 1988, p. 526).

In this quote, which I love, Butler highlights once again that the performing of one’s gender is not a choice – it is not even done consciously most of the time. It is neither something that one is just born to do, nor is it something that others actively tell you to do. Similar to what the previous part of the theoretical framework discussed, like Foucault, Butler speaks of certain sanctions and proscriptions that the actors must follow and keep in mind (p. 525). If the actor fails to follow these proscriptions, they are performing their gender in a way that is

thought of as being ‘wrong’. When found guilty of this, the actor will be punished (Butler, 1988, p. 528). However, what Butler shows us is that these gender norms, to which we hold others, are not ‘real’.

“Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed.” (p. 527).

Now, if gender and gender roles are not real, but rather only socially constructed, they can be reconstructed. Gender could be constituted differently (Butler, 1988, p. 520). This means, that a different understanding of womanhood could be constructed; one in which motherhood is not accepted as something that all women, who perform their gender in the ‘right’ way, should aspire to. If the female gender role was to be reconstructed in this way, women who are voluntarily childless would not be accused of being ‘abnormal’, or ‘wrong’, and they would not be punished.

In Chapter 2 of this thesis, I will speak to voluntary childless women and use their voices to show what punishment does to them, and how they are just as much women as every other female identifying person. Before going there, though, I am elaborating on my research method in the next, and final, section of Chapter 1.

1.3 Method

1.3.1 Introducing my method

“It is because the conditions of women’s lives are worse than their brothers’ in so many cases, that women’s lives provide better places from which to start asking questions about a social order that tolerates, and in so many respects even values highly, the bad conditions for women’s lives” (Harding, 1993, p. 59-60). It is through this quote, that my intentions for this thesis research become clear. Sandra Harding, an American philosopher who writes on methodology and epistemology from a feminist, post colonialist point of view in her book *Rethinking Feminist Standpoint Epistemology*, shows why it is important to let those who are oppressed, marginalized or otherwise less privileged speak and to take them seriously. In the case of this thesis, that means listening to voluntary childless women sharing their experiences with societal expectations regarding having children. In the first section of Chapter 1, I highlighted the gap that lies within the existing literature about this topic. I argued that what is missing are the direct voices of women’s experiences: women’s stories of how societal expectations regarding having children have affected their voluntary childless lives. I strongly agree with Sandra Harding (1993), in her piece on feminist standpoint

epistemology, that listening to the lived experiences of those who are marginalized or oppressed will bring the knowledge that can lead to social change.

I am therefore situating myself within feminist standpoint theory, which focuses on the importance of the experiences of women, and other oppressed groups (Harding, 2004). Feminist Standpoint theory⁴ emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, to oppose the overly present patriarchal, male point of view in science. Feminist standpoint theory can be used not only as a theory, but also as a method, or, as in this thesis, a theory of method. It is often used to empower the oppressed, as a means of listening to and giving value to their lived experiences. The following quote from Harding's piece (1993) further explains my definition of standpoint theory: "Standpoint theories argue for "starting off thought" from the lives of marginalized peoples; beginning in those determinate, objective locations in any social order will generate illuminating critical questions that do not arise in thought that begins from dominant group lives" (p. 56). What this means within this thesis, is that I am focussing only on voluntary childless women's lived experiences of societal expectations which automatically link womanhood to motherhood, as I have shown in the previous sections. The dominant group in this particular situation, is, I argue, the group of people that believe having children is the natural thing to do. Literature that started off from their point of view, such as for example Noordhuizen et al. (2010) which I discussed in the literature review, completely ignores the voices of the marginalized voluntary childless women – only paying attention to how the dominant group feels about the marginalized group.

In order to answer my research question, *how do voluntary childless women experience societal expectations regarding having children?*, I am going to start mapping out their lived experiences. Therefore, my methodology consists of practicing feminist interviewing. Since I am producing data and knowledge about people's lives, feminist interviewing is the way to achieve the active involvement of those people; the active involvement of the people researched. Doing interviews allows me, as a researcher, to not talk about phenomena, experiences and knowledges in my own words, but in the words of the people that are involved in these phenomena, experiences and knowledges (Reinharz, 1992). Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (2007) explains what sets feminist interviewing apart from simply interviewing. The 'feminist' aspect lies in the types of questions that are being asked: "Research that gets at an understanding of women's lives and those of other oppressed

⁴ For more information on feminist standpoint theory and the academic debates around it, see also Harding (2004); Hartsock (1998); Smith (2005).

groups, research that promotes social justice and social change, and research that is mindful of the researcher-researched relationship and the power and authority imbued in the researcher's role as some of the issues that engage the feminist researcher" (p. 117). Here, Hesse-Biber talks about not only the research question, which in the case of my thesis research is in line with her first statement of "getting at an understanding of women's lives", but also the practice of reflexivity. I, as a researcher, will continue to be mindful of my own position in the research and in the interviews. A more elaborate account of what this means in this particular thesis will follow in section 1.3.2.

My interviews will be semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Reinharz, 1992; Hesse-Biber, 2007), where I come prepared with a set of questions, all related to my research question or any of the sub questions: *In what way do these societal expectations show themselves?; Do the factors of gender and age play a role in the experiences of voluntary childless women with regard to these societal expectations?; What impact do these expectations have on voluntary childless women?; How do voluntary childless women deal with these expectations?.* In in-depth interviews, the focus lies on a particular issue, and the researcher is seeking to understand the lived experience of their interviewees, with regard to this particular issue (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 117-118). Thus, in-depth interviewing is ideal for a research like this that does not intend to see how many instances exist of something and to make generalizations (i.e.: a quantitative approach), but to understand how individuals experience a certain phenomenon.

The questions I will ask will all be open-ended, and the structure of the interview will be such that I will let my interviewee answer, and I will then decide to do a follow-up question based on their answer, or to continue with my next, prepared, question. Doing open-ended interviews allows my interviewees to speak freely, and for as long as they like. The questions that I prepare beforehand all need to be covered in the interview, but I am also open to asking new questions as the conversation flows. Ideally, says Sharlene Hesse-Biber (2007), the natural flow of the conversation would not be disrupted by the prepared questions. Instead, they would be asked when a space opens up in the conversation. (add first name) Reinharz (1992) considers semi-structured, open-ended interviewing a very appealing, principal feminist research method. The open-ended nature of the questions allows for explorations of the interviewee's lived experience, while the semi-structured questions allow for free interaction between the interviewer and the interviewees. Hesse-Biber (2007), furthermore, names semi-structured interviewing as the preferred research method for a

project which aims at an exploratory data gathering and in-depth understanding of the research topic (p. 117), which is the goal for my thesis research.

The open-ended interview questions that I have prepared are all derived from my research question and sub questions. They are the following:

- As a conversation starter and one last check: **Would you consider yourself a voluntary childless woman?**
- **What does your voluntary childlessness mean to you?**
- **How have you, throughout your life, communicated your voluntary childlessness to your surroundings?**
- **What were their reactions?**
- For post-menopausal women: **Have the reactions changed over the course of time? And if so, how have they changed?**
- **Have you experienced any reactions that you have gotten in a negative way?**
- **If you have experienced any negative reactions, what was being said or done that made you feel like the people were negative about your voluntary childlessness?**
- For women with a partner: **Do you know, or think, that your partner has the same experience of their voluntary childlessness and reactions to it? If yes, how so? If no, how so?**
- **How do/did negativity surrounding voluntary childlessness and people's reactions affect you? How did it make you feel? How have you, in turn, reacted to that? How have you coped?**
- For post-menopausal women: **Has your way of dealing with negative reactions changed over time?**

Three of the above questions will not be asked to all interviewees, as two are only meant for post-menopausal women, and one only for women with a partner. I will gather this information by letting my interviewees fill in a short personal details form, asking about their age, place of residence, religion, ethnicity, occupation, highest obtained education level, sexual orientation, whether they have been through menopause and whether they have a partner. This form will be filled in before the start of each interview, and at this time I will also let my interviewee decide on a name that I will use to refer to them throughout my thesis.

I am using Windows' built-in audio recorder programme to audio-record all interviews with a computer and the transcribing programme SoundScriber to aid me in the

transcription process. After conducting and transcribing my interviews, I am going to analyse them. For the ones that are conducted in Dutch, I will only translate into English the parts that I am quoting in my thesis. The full interviews can be found in the Appendix.

I will use the full transcriptions of my interviews when analysing the data. Doing so will allow me to answer my research questions. To start the analysis, I will read through the transcriptions thoroughly and highlight any relevant information. Then, I will categorize every useful quote. In order to do this, I have made the following categories, based on my sub questions:

1. Quotes to do with reactions that the interviewee has received pertaining to her voluntary childlessness.
2. Quotes to do with the feelings and/or thoughts of the interviewee pertaining to the reactions referred to in category number 1.
3. Quotes to do with the way the interviewee deals, or has dealt, with the reactions and subsequent feelings and thoughts referred to in categories number 1 and 2.
4. Quotes to do with the way in which age and gender influence the reactions referred to in category number 1.

After categorizing, I will write down all my findings per category, connect them, and see where my interviewee's answers overlap and where they differ. I will analyse the data from each category through the concepts presented in the theoretical framework. For example, if an interviewee mentions feeling left out because of her voluntary childlessness, this can be connected to Foucault's theorizing on punishment (1975).

1.3.2 My experience and position as an interviewer

I have conducted a total of 5 interviews. My selection process was based on only two hard criteria, namely that my interviewees needed to identify as a voluntary childless woman and needed to reside in The Netherlands at the time of the interview, as I had restricted my research to this geographical area. This did not mean that they had to be, or speak, Dutch – the interviews could be conducted in either English or Dutch. The reasoning behind choosing to limit my interviewees to those inside The Netherlands was purely logistical: I could not afford, both time and money wise, to travel outside of the country to conduct my interviews. I do need to note here, that this means that the claims that I make based on the interview data, are claims specific to the time in which I conducted this research (2017 - 2018) and the place (The Netherlands).

Since my topic can be quite delicate, private and emotionally charged, I found it important to let potential interviewees come to me, instead of me approaching them. If I were to approach a childless woman to ask her if she would like to participate, I might be tapping in to a very painful aspect of her life if she is not voluntarily childless. For this reason, I decided to maintain a strategy of snowball sampling (Sturgis, 1993). This particular sampling strategy allows for interviewees to self-select. I spread the word about my research and my search for interviewees, along with my contact details, in groups for (voluntary) childless parents, such as www.kinderloosleven.nl, Facebook groups, and amongst my own social network and asked family and friends to spread the word. Anyone interested and available for an interview in either May or June 2017 could then contact me. As through snowball sampling, I was relying on possible interviewees to self-select, it was difficult to account for diversity amongst my interviewees. I have highlighted that participants from different ages, educational backgrounds, ethnicities, religious groups and sexualities were encouraged to apply, yet have not been able to secure diversity amongst my interviewees in all of those facets. Out of the 5 interviewees that I had, only one did not attend a university or HBO (higher vocational education), and all of them identified as heterosexual. This means that my results need to be seen in this particular context. I will not be able to say anything about women who do not identify as heterosexual. I did, however, manage to find a range of different ages, my youngest interviewee being 23 and the oldest 58. I have also found interviewees of different religious backgrounds, with one being a practising Muslim and one a practising member of the Dutch Reformed Church. The other three were either atheists, or non-practising Christian. While the majority of my interviewees were white Dutch, one of them was Portuguese and one Indonesian.

I have let my interviewees choose the location where the interview would take place, as I thought it was important that they were in a space where they felt safe and comfortable speaking about this topic. I also told them that I was available for doing the interview over Skype, if they preferred. However, I did prefer face-to-face interviewing, to avoid any internet connection errors disrupting the conversation and because, in my experience, this is more personal and intimate. All of my interviewees agreed to meet face-to-face. Two of them invited me into their home, one I interviewed in the shop that she owns after closing time, and the other two interviewees opted for more public areas: a café and a library. Before commencing the interview, I asked my interviewees to fill in a short form on their personal details. This included their age, place of residence, religion (if any), ethnicity, occupation,

highest obtained education level, sexual orientation, whether they have been through menopause, whether they have a partner, and a name that they could choose which I have used to refer to them in my transcriptions, and will use in this thesis, in order for them to remain anonymous.

I am immensely grateful to all 5 of my interviewees, for allowing me to get a glimpse of their private lives, their thoughts, feelings and emotions, and for being brave enough to open up to a complete stranger. As a feminist interviewer, I was constantly aware of my relationship to my interviewee. Being the researcher, and them being the research subject, may in some cases result in an uneven power structure where I am seen as the person who holds authority over the situation. In Hesse-Biber's (2007) words, "research that is mindful of the researcher-researched relationship and the power and authority imbued in the researcher's role are some of the issues that engage the feminist researcher. Feminist researchers practice reflexivity throughout the research process. This practice keeps the researcher mindful of his or her personal positionality and hat of the respondent" (p. 117). I did not desire my interviewees to feel as though I was holding authority over the interview setting, because I wanted them to feel free and to be able to say as much as they wanted to say without feeling restrained by me. This is why I had decided to be open about my own ideas of motherhood and childlessness⁵. I am not yet certain if I will ever want to have children, and I have been voicing that feeling for a couple of years now. My own child/childlessness wish was discussed in every interview I conducted. In some cases I brought it up myself, either at the start of the interview to break the ice if needed, or later in the conversation when I felt that it was necessary. In one of my interviews, for example, I could see and feel that my interviewee was not at ease expressing herself. She was talking about not understanding people's need to have a child, but she was holding back her opinion. I decided to then tell her about my own hesitance with ever becoming a mother, and this made her open up. She told me it made her feel comfortable, knowing that she was not somehow offending me. In other interviews, where I did not bring it up myself, my interviewees asked me how I felt about having children. This usually happened at the end or the beginning of the conversation, and I could feel that my interviewees were a bit unsure of whether I would share this personal detail about myself with them. Doing so made the interview setting and my relationship to the interviewees more equal. Furthermore, as I have been vocal about my own hesitance

⁵ For more texts on interviewers sharing some personal information with their interviewee in order to overcome notions of power and authority in the interview setting, see page 128 in Hesse-Biber (2007).

regarding having children, I myself also have experience with the reactions that this might cause. One that I have heard often is the one where I am told that I “just don’t know yet”, that I will “change my mind”, or that my “biological clock will start ticking at some point”. This is usually followed by some comment or question that makes me feel like I need to justify (the possibility of) my wish to remain childless. In my experience, this is a reaction that is often given to voluntary childless people, and it is not a nice feeling. Because I did not want to make my interviewees feel as though I, too, needed an explanation from them, I refrained from asking them any questions that had to do with the reason behind their voluntary childlessness. I wanted them to be sure that I did not judge them based on their decision and that I did not need any justifications. In most interviews, my interviewees shared their reason(s) for being voluntary childless anyway, because they wanted to.

Hesse-Biber (2007) describes, in an account of her own experiences of conducting feminist interviews in research, that she was often aware of her position in an interview as both an insider, and an outsider to her interviewee’s world (p. 114). The same was true for me: I, like my interviewees, am a woman, and as soon as I shared my own hesitance regarding having children, I was an insider. But I am also still a researcher, and they are the researched. One of my interviewees had also conducted academic interview research in the past, the other four had not. This meant that I was an outsider in the way that they could not relate to my experience as an academic researcher sitting across from them. Moreover, I was an outsider in that I did not share most of my interviewees’ social worlds, in which they encountered reactions to their voluntary childlessness. Only one of my interviewees had a similar social setting to mine: she lived in Amsterdam, as do I, and is also a white, Dutch atheist in her mid-twenties who has a Master’s degree. This changed the interview setting somewhat, compared to the other four interviews. The fact that I shared the same living conditions with this interviewee, made me feel like I was chatting to a friend, rather than a stranger. Of course, I still did not know her very well, but I felt that I could relate to her more than to my other interviewees.

I am very happy with the way my interviews turned out. I enjoyed conducting them, and feel blessed to have been trusted with the life stories of these five women: Jennifer, Anne, Mim, Amina and Annelot (all names are fictional). All five of them opened up to me and, as the conversation progressed, gave me a lot of information. Situations where I felt that they were holding back, as described earlier in this section, were resolved after I shared some personal information of my own, or told them that I recognized and understood what they

were saying, regarding the topic. Other than these instances, most of the time the interviews were comfortable, flowing conversations.

In two of the interviews I did encounter some difficult situations. Mim had just been through an emotionally difficult week as her husband had passed away exactly a year prior. When we were speaking about her love for children, even though not wanting them herself, she spoke of her nephews and nieces who had been supporting her immensely in dealing with the loss of her partner. She started to cry while she told me this, which I did not immediately know how to react to. Mim had been put in contact with me through one of her friends, who happened to be one of my friends' mother. I had been notified of the quite recent loss Mim had suffered, and thus I had already anticipated the possibility of her being emotional. It happened later on in the interview, and although it made me feel uncomfortable a little, it did not disrupt the conversation. I found this difficult because I could do absolutely nothing to make her loss go away, and because I did not know if she would like to be hugged, or otherwise comforted. Instead of physically comforting her, I told her how beautiful I thought her stories of her nieces and nephews were and agreed that she was lucky to have them.

Later on in my interview with Mim, another uncomfortable situation occurred. Mim had asked me about my own wish for having children, and after sharing with her that I actually recognized some of the experiences and feelings that she had described, she said the following: "Yes! And then they ask you these crazy questions: are you a lesbian?". Her tone of voice while she said this, and the expressions on her face were such that I understood her to mean *the fact that I do not want children, does not mean that I am a lesbian, and people asking me if I am are offending me because being a lesbian would be crazy!* Of course I am not one hundred percent sure that this is what she meant to say, but I am quite sure that it was not a very positive comment about homosexuality. At the beginning of the interview, when I asked her about her sexuality as part of the personal details form, she had answered "Normal, um, what is it called? Just normal. Heterosexual". These comments made me feel uncomfortable, because in any other situation I would have engaged and asked her what exactly would be so crazy about being a lesbian. Now, however, I did not engage, in order to maintain the feeling of the safe space of the interview for Mim. I felt that if I chose to speak up, she might have felt attacked which would damage the interview setting I had created, in which she felt comfortable sharing personal stories with me.

The other interview that was difficult for me to conduct was the one with Annelot. She had very kindly emailed me after hearing about my research, saying that she would be willing

to participate. During the interview, I found that she would oftentimes elaborate on things and topics that were not relevant to my research. However, because I did not want to interrupt her too much, I was having difficulties staying on topic and getting her to answer all of the questions I had prepared. When I arrived in the shop that she owns, where the interview would take place, I had told her about my research and the research question that I was going to be asking. Even though I was not focusing on the reason behind her chosen childlessness, Annelot seemed to want to talk about that a lot. I listened and talked about it with her, then kept on following the questions that I wanted to ask. This proved to be difficult at times though, because Annelot was constantly circling back to stories of other women, who she knew, who were unhappy mothers; who were involuntary childless; who had children with illnesses; whose child wish had gotten them into disagreements and fights with their partners, etcetera. Because I did want to provide Annelot with the space to say whatever she wanted, I did not interrupt her very much and I listened to her. The analysis of her interview will differ from the others somewhat, in the sense that I did not get as much information as I would have liked, or not as much information that was really about her own experiences with being voluntary childless.

More elaborate accounts of- and quotes from all five interviews will be given in Chapter 2, in which I am going to analyze my interview data and formulate answers to the sub questions that I have asked at the beginning of this thesis.

Chapter II: Reconstructing womanhood

Listening, sharing experiences, reconstructing.

This chapter will be structured in the following way: the first section will introduce my interviewees one by one and the subsequent sections will feature quotes from the interviews, each section dealing with one of the sub questions to my main research question: *How do voluntary childless women experience societal expectations regarding having children?*

2.1 Introducing the interviewees

Starting my analysis, I will first give a short introduction of each interviewee, before going into detail about comparisons and differences between them. Each interview was conducted face-to-face, at a location chosen by the interviewee, and audio recorded. The length of the interviews ranges from 45 minutes to 60 minutes, depending on how much information my interviewee was giving and the number of follow-up questions I asked accordingly. For writing up this analysis, I have transcribed each interview entirely. The complete transcriptions can be found in the appendices.

Before starting the interview, I had my interviewees fill in a little form on their personal details. Additionally, all interviewees, in order to remain anonymous, chose a ‘new’, fictional name for themselves. This is the name that I am using in my transcription and analysis. Their real names are not published in this thesis.

Interview #1: Jennifer

I met with Jennifer (23) in a café over coffee. She is an atheist, a university student, living in Bussum, NL, with a Dutch and Portuguese background. Jennifer explained to me how she has never had the feeling that she would enjoy being a mother. For her, wanting to remain childless is not something that she considers a ‘choice’ per se, it was more something that she had always known, and thus something that she does not have to think about very often today. Her voluntary childlessness takes away many worries for her. Jennifer does, however, notice that her voluntary childlessness seems to be a big deal to others. “I always have an answer ready that explains why I don’t want kids”, she says, “because people will always ask me why”. Being single, she says she worries about finding a male partner who will share her wish to remain childless. She feels that, often, men do not consider the choice to have a child or not as central to the lives they lead, as the arrival of a baby does not change much in the daily setup of their lives.

Interview #2: Annelot

Annelot (51), Dutch, is an entrepreneur who owns her own furniture shop in Blaricum, NL, where she also lives. I spoke to her in her shop, after closing time. The post-menopausal Annelot, who practices the Dutch reformed faith, grew up in a small village in rural Twente, which she left for the Western part of the country in order to study at an HBO (an Applied Sciences School). She married a man who, due to his struggle with mental illness, did not consider himself suitable for the parent role and Annelot decided to follow his choice. After he passed away, she remained confident in her decision to remain childless, and is currently in a relationship with a man who already had two children out of a previous marriage, and who, as a result, did not have the burning desire to have another child with Annelot and left the choice to her. To her, her voluntary childlessness gives her a certain freedom, and it saves her the worries that come with having children.

Interview #3: Anne

Anne (26) welcomed me into her home in Amsterdam. She has a university degree and is currently working her first job as a project manager at a big telecom company. She is Dutch, white, an atheist, and had been dating a man for a while when I met her, although the relationship was not official yet. She hates the term 'voluntary childless woman', because through that term, it already becomes evident that something is missing that should be there. She does not like being labelled voluntary childless, because it makes her feel like people pity her. Her voluntary childlessness comes up often, not because Anne finds it a big deal, but because she spends every day in an office together with a lot of people who are new parents. Talking about their enthusiasm and love for their kids is something Anne enjoys, but that it oftentimes leads to her having to explain the absence of her own child wish, is annoying.

Interview #4: Amina

My interview with Amina (40) was my only English-spoken interview, as she does not speak Dutch. We met in the public library in Heerlen, the municipality where she has been living since she moved to The Netherlands from Java, Indonesia, in her early twenties. Her origin lies there, on Java, which means that she is a person of colour, as well as a practising Muslim. She married a Dutch man, and obtained her Master's degree here in The Netherlands. Especially during her studies here, in anthropology, Amina was bothered by negative reactions regarding her voluntary childlessness that she received from people that she was working with. Amina has had to overcome some challenges, one of which being depression, and now tries to keep her private life separate from her public life.

Interview #5: Mim

Mim (58) was going through an emotional week when I spoke to her, in the comfort of her own home in the little village of De Kwakel. Her husband, who she had been with since she was only 19 years old, had passed away exactly one year prior. Mim is a white, Dutch, social worker at a care centre for the disabled. She enjoyed an MBO education (intermediate vocational education which prepares trainees for jobs that are based on manual or practical activities, traditionally non-academic, and totally related to a specific trade, occupation, or vocation). She has always been very direct about her voluntary childlessness, even when that meant giving her partner the choice to leave her, if he desired ever becoming a father. She received strong reactions to giving him this ultimatum, in her twenties, but not from him. He chose being with her over having kids. Now, almost forty years later, Mim has learnt how to better deal with negativity regarding her voluntary childlessness, although it still surprises her that people react in certain ways.

2.2 Analysis

The sub questions to my main research question are the guideline for my analysis. The analysis is sectioned into parts, each concerned with one of the sub questions. It will feature quotes taken directly from the transcriptions of the interviews, along with my interpretation and explanation. In some cases, a link to the literature from the theoretical framework will be made. All quotes presented in the text are in English. In case the interview was held in Dutch, I have translated the quote into English, and will provide the original Dutch text in a footnote. I have kept incomplete words or incorrect sentences intact, meaning that any mistakes in the quotes are not errors made by me.

2.2.1 In what way do the societal expectations show themselves, and do the factors of age and gender play a role here?

Throughout Chapter 1 of this thesis, I have established that there is a certain societal expectation that comes with being born with a uterus: society expects you to want to use that uterus to have at least one baby. How do voluntary childless women notice the existence of this societal expectation? By answering this question, I am one step closer to being able to answer my main research question.

On normalisation...

Listening to the stories of the five women I have interviewed, it becomes painfully clear that yes, people still expect women to want babies. Both Amina and Annelot have told me that

people are surprised when they tell them that they do not have children. People seem to just assume that, once you are a bit older and a woman, there are kids in your life. Annelot owns a shop in Blaricum, and customers regularly ask her if they might have seen her, or will see her, on the local school playground. Anne, who had been dating the same man for a while when I spoke to her, often heard “Oh, with his age, you’ll get married soon, have kids...”⁶ Her boyfriend is 33 years old, and Anne herself suggested that could be the reason why comments like this one have been made when people see them together. Amina, who is in her early forties, has not gone through menopause yet, and people seem to still assume that she will have children soon: “When they ask oh yeah you still... you don’t have kids yet, you know?” (Amina). The fact that Amina may not have any kids at all does not come to mind unless she tells people herself.

Before they have said anything about the reason behind them not having kids, Mim and Annelot have said that very often, the person they have in front of them is quick to assume that there is a biological reason to them not having children:

“People... do think it’s scary, like... ‘uh... are you not able to? Or?’”⁷ (Mim)

What people find scary that she is referring to, is asking if there is a biological problem. However, they do often find the courage to ask her. Annelot, who is, like Mim, post-menopause, shares the same experience:

“People think like, ‘Oh, it didn’t work?’”⁸ (Annelot)

What these reactions show is that it does not even occur to people that a woman without a child might not have a child because she does not want to. The assumption is that of course, she wants to, but she might just not have been biologically able to. The idea that motherhood will fulfil a woman, as described in De Beauvoir (2011), can be seen in the following example given by Amina, who has a history of depression and was told that she might be happier with kids: “...during that time I got so many question of womanhood, about my... you know pursuing children and “perhaps you will be more happy if you”, you know...” (Amina).

Moving further, to where they have shared that they are voluntarily childless, Annelot, Mim and Amina have all had people say to them that they thought their voluntary

⁶ Original Dutch text: “En die is wat ouder en daarvan zeggen mensen ook wel eens van joh, jullie gaan toch gewoon, met zijn leeftijd, jullie gaan toch binnenkort trouwen, kinderen...”

⁷ Original Dutch text: “Maar mensen... vinden toch inderdaad dan eng, zo van... uh... kan je het niet? Of?”

⁸ Original Dutch text: “Nou mensen die denken dan meteen van oh lukte het niet?”

childlessness is weird. One example, given by Jennifer, was especially shocking to me. When she was in high school, only 15 years old, she was smoking outside with a couple of classmates. She does not remember why or how it came up, but she told them about not wanting to have kids. They then told her that she was a “cunt”⁹. Jennifer’s own analysis of this situation is that people will immediately link not wanting to have kids, to hating kids and she thinks that her classmates reacted so strongly because they thought that she was saying that she hated all children. Moreover, people come up with things that must have happened or that must be going on for women not to want children:

“...people assume that something must have happened for me to make this decision, but that’s not the case at all. ... They think that maybe I have had a terrible childhood myself or something, or that I’ve had really horrible parents and that I don’t want to do that to someone else.”¹⁰ (Jennifer)

“...often, the assumption is that people say “oh yeah but you don’t like kids”. ...for example if a friend of mine gets pregnant, we’ve talked about this, and then she says “yeah but when that happens you will have to see the child a lot!”...”¹¹ (Anne)

In this last quote by Anne, the words her friend had said to her were meant as a sort of warning. Anne expressed them to mean ‘when I have a child, you will be around my child a lot and there is nothing you can do about it even though you do not like kids’. However, Anne told me, she *does* like kids. The assumption that she does not is solely built on her voluntary childlessness and it is incorrect. Jennifer has also had experiences of people assuming that she does not like children. People have taken this assumption even further with her, she says: “It’s like people immediately link having a maternal instinct to all the love you are able to give, like you immediately are a cold-hearted person when you don’t want kids.”¹² (Jennifer). Both Annelot and Anne told me that they have had people think that they did not want children because they wanted good careers.

⁹ Original Dutch text: “Kutwijf”.

¹⁰ Original Dutch text: “...mensen gaan er wel van uit dat er iets gebeurd moet zijn dat ik die beslissing maakte, maar nee dat is het helemaal niet. ... dat ze denken dat ik misschien een hele erge jeugd heb gehad ofzo of dat ik hele slechte ouders heb gehad dat ik daarom iemand anders dat niet aan wil doen.”

¹¹ Original Dutch text: “...de aanname is wel vaak dat mensen zeggen oja maar jij houdt niet van kinderen. ...stel nou dat een vriendinnetje van mij zwanger wordt, daar hebben we het dus ook over gehad, dan zegt ze ja maar dan ga je dat kind wel vaak zien!”

¹² Original Dutch text: “Alsof mensen moederinstinct meteen koppelen aan alle liefde die je kan geven, dat je meteen een koud persoon bent als je geen kinderen wil.”

“...they look at you more like ‘she wants to make a career for herself’. That’s immediately associated with yeah but she does...”¹³ (Annelot)

The ‘that’ in this quote refers to being a voluntary childless woman. What this shows, in my interpretation, is not only that there must always be a reason behind women not wanting a child, but also that some people are not very progressive regarding women in the labour force. Not wanting a child is linked to wanting a good career, which for me feels like the person making comments like this does not believe that it is possible for a woman to both work and be a mother.

My interpretation of the assumptions mentioned in the quotes above is that people, when confronted with a woman who is voluntarily childless, immediately start looking for reasons why. It cannot just be a choice; something must be going on for this choice to have been made. Even though, as Jennifer counters this train of thought, mothers are never asked why they wanted children:

“The reason why I always have the same old story ready about why I don’t want kids is that people will always ask “oh why not?” Even though I think like yeah, no one, when someone is pregnant and wants children, there’s never anyone that is going to ask “oh why do you want kids?” No. Because that’s so natural and obvious that we all want that so badly, a mini-me.”¹⁴ (Jennifer)

Jennifer was the first of the five women that I interviewed, and in the quote above, she says that people always ask why she does not want children. All other interviewees shared the same experiences:

“It’s like I have to justify it.”¹⁵ (Jennifer)

“You know it’s a question and I have had people like... “why do you not have children?””¹⁶ (Annelot)

¹³ Original Dutch text: “...maar dan word je meer aangekeken van die wil carrière maken. Dat wordt meteen geassocieerd van ja maar die doet een...”

¹⁴ Original Dutch text: “De reden dat ik altijd echt zo’n riedeltje klaar heb waarom ik dat niet wil is dat mensen toch altijd vragen oh waarom dan? Terwijl ik denk van ja niemand gaat als iemand zwanger is en kinderen wil dan is er nooit iemand die gaat vragen oh waarom wil je kinderen? Nee. Want zo onwijs vanzelfsprekend dat we dat allemaal zo graag willen, een mini-me.”

¹⁵ Original Dutch text: Mara: “...dan voel je je dus een soort van verplicht om daar een reden over te delen?” Jennifer: “Ja om het te moeten rechtvaardigen ofzo.”

¹⁶ Original Dutch text: “Weetje het is wel een vraag en ik heb mensen soms ook wel zo van... “waarom heb je nou geen kinderen?””

“The first reaction in people is like, you kind of notice that ‘oh. Huh?!’ And then they go “Why not?””¹⁷ (Anne)

“...every time I need to explain...” (Amina)

“It’s not always that you need to justify it. Some people are genuinely interested in why not, so it’s not always... but with the older generation, my mother’s generation, they pressure you to justify.”¹⁸ (Mim)

Being unsure if I will ever want children myself, and being vocal about it, I was not surprised to hear so many accounts of my interviewees getting the ‘why not’ question. I have been asked the same countless times. I now look back to Jennifer’s quote earlier, where she compares being asked why she does not want kids to asking a pregnant woman why she does want them. The latter question is rarely asked, while the ‘why not’ question seems to be very common for these five voluntary childless women and myself. The way I interpret this, also thinking of Foucault’s normalization that I discussed previously (Foucault, 1975) is that being voluntarily childless is not seen as the norm. The norm is for women to want or to have a child. Therefore, when women do not conform to this norm, by expressing their voluntary childlessness, they are seen as deviants, abnormal. People who do live according to this norm do not understand the ‘deviants’ and thus ask for an explanation, or, in some cases, a justification. “You can ask why not, but it is always very judgmentally asked”¹⁹ (Mim). Asking for a justification in this way, I argue, can already feel like punishment (Foucault, 1975), as it gives the voluntary childless woman the feeling that they are not understood, that they are the odd one out, and that they need to provide a pretty good reason for being voluntary childless if they want to be accepted. What is interesting to note here, is that my interviewees all have examples of voluntary childless men in their lives, who do not get the same ‘why not’ questions. Two are below.

“I do hear like a good friend of mine who doesn’t want kids and hasn’t had them, he is in his forties already, he also says that they have always noticed that his wife always had to answer the questions and then he would be sitting

¹⁷ Original Dutch text: “In eerste instantie dat mensen wel, je merkt wel die soort van meer die ‘oh. Huh?!’, “Hoezo niet dan?””

¹⁸ Original Dutch text: “Het is niet altijd verantwoording. Bij sommigen is het ook gewoon belangstelling van waarom dan niet he, dus het is niet altijd... je wordt op het matje geroepen, dat heb je wel bij de oudere generatie, dan he, mijn moeders generatie.”

¹⁹ Original Dutch text: “Je kunt vragen waarom, maar het is altijd erg oordelend.”

next to her like ‘hello I made the same decision right?! Why aren’t you asking me?’”²⁰ (Jennifer)

“He only got that before... mostly when he is with me. But when he is alone, with friends, or with co-workers, you know with all the men, they have totally different conversations.” (Amina)

Jennifer has an idea of why this is the case: “if a man says ‘I don’t want children’... fine that’s his choice. But with us women, it’s suddenly a big deal. Then it’s like ‘oh we’re not doing our biological function’ all of a sudden.”²¹ She is hitting the nail on the head with this observation: it is an idea that goes way back, like I have illustrated using De Beauvoir’s work (2011). Women used to have child after child, making it so that they did not have any time to do anything else than be mothers. A history that has left a legacy. “A woman is a womb”, wrote De Beauvoir (p. 3), and this idea still prevails.

Once people know about the woman’s voluntary childlessness, some of my interviewees have told me that others try to convince them to change their minds. Amina, for example, has had the following happen to her because she likes to play with the children of her friends and family members:

“But I love to play. So I play with the children. And then they tell me “oh you will regret your decision! You don’t know how good you are with children!” So that, that’s what I found... people think that they know what we think and that we don’t know what we think. You know?” (Amina)

Just like Amina, Annelot has also had people try to convince her that she would like being a mother.

“...I had people say that it was a shame that I didn’t... “I think you’re a motherly type, I think you would have been a really great mother”, etcetera.”²² (Annelot)

²⁰ Original Dutch text: “Maar ik hoor inderdaad ook wel een hele goede vriend van me die ook geen kinderen wil en ook geen kinderen heeft gehad, hij is al in de 40, die zegt inderdaad ook dat zij altijd hebben gemerkt dat zijn vrouw moest altijd de vragen beantwoorden en dan zat hij ernaast van hallo ik heb die beslissing toch ook gemaakt? Waarom vraag je het niet aan mij?”

²¹ Original Dutch text: “als een man zegt ik wil geen kinderen... moet hij lekker zelf weten. Maar wij als vrouw dan is het in een keer een big deal. Dan is het in een keer van oh wij doen onze biologische functie niet ofzo.”

²² Original Dutch text: “...mensen die zeiden van wat jammer dat dat niet... “Ik vind je wel een moeder type, volgens mij was je een hele leuke moeder geweest”, dit en dat...”

Anne has shared similar experiences where people told her that they thought it was a shame if she were to never have children. Trying to convince voluntary childless women to have children by telling them these sorts of things is, as I see it, a form of trying to normalize them. It shows that the people making these comments see voluntary childlessness as being deviant and puts pressure on the women. How my interviewees experience these encounters described in the quotes throughout this chapter will be discussed in section 2.2.2 and 2.2.3.

The following quote makes it even more clear how deeply rooted the normalization of motherhood as a part of femininity is in our society. Mim and Anne have both caught themselves being victims of this normalizing thought too.

“...even though you don’t have it yourself, you do realize that somewhere you do have that picture in your head of others. ... unconsciously I do the same thing. And if someone gets married sometimes you say “kids soon!” and I do say that too, even though I myself don’t necessarily want that for myself. So that’s very... I myself am as much a part of it.”²³ (Anne)

Even though she knows that wanting children is not inherent to being a woman, as she herself does not want them, she still makes a comment like this without thinking. On this note, during my interview with Jennifer, I noticed that she referred to her reasons for not wanting children as “selfish”, see the quote below:

“I mean there are also some more selfish reasons, ...”²⁴ (Jennifer)

Intrigued about her choosing the word selfish here, which to me has a negative connotation, I asked her why she called it that.

“Yes, I don’t know. I actually don’t know why. I don’t know. Yes, maybe that idea just sort of crept up on me or something.”²⁵ (Jennifer)

I consider calling a voluntary childless woman selfish for choosing not to have children, the ultimate example of people believing that women are put on earth to have babies. When they choose not to do so, they are not fulfilling their destiny – to create new life and then spend all

²³ Original Dutch text: “...op de een of andere manier ondanks dat je dat zelf niet hebt, dat je toch bewust van wordt dat ergens heb je dat plaatje bij anderen dus wel. ... onbewust doe ik dat zelf dus ook. ... En dat ik ook als iemand gaat trouwen dan zeg je toch ook weleens van “nou he binnen kinderen he” dat zeg ik dan ook zo, terwijl ik dat zelf helemaal niet persé hoef. Dus dat is heel... dus ik doe er zelf net zo goed aan mee.”

²⁴ Original Dutch text: “Ik bedoel er zijn ook wel iets meer egocentrische redenen, ...”

²⁵ Original Dutch text: “Ja, ik weet niet. Dat weet ik eigenlijk niet, waarom. Ik weer niet. Ja, dat is misschien toch een beetje er in geslopen ofzo.”

of their time caring for this new life. Women choosing to dedicate their time to things other than being a mother, will only be considered to be selfish if it is believed that women are alive solely to procreate. The fact that even women who do not want to have children, like Jennifer, call it selfish shows how deeply rooted our ideas about motherhood being central to the lives of women are.

On not being taken seriously...

One last thing that I am highlighting, is something else that all five interviewees brought up, and something that I have experienced myself as well: when I told people I might not want to have children, they did not take me seriously. Jennifer, Annelot, Anne, Amina and Mim all have a plethora of examples of this happening to them.

“Yeah somewhere, still, I do have the idea that they still... yeah, don’t really believe that it’s true. You know?”²⁶ (Anne)

‘It’ here refers to her not wanting kids, and ‘they’ refers to people she tells this to.

“They say “you just wait...” You’re not being taken seriously! “It will come, it will come””²⁷ (Mim)

In this quote, Mim was talking about the time when she was 23 years old. The ‘it’ that people told her would come, refers to wanting a child. When the young Mim told people that she did not want a child, she felt like they did not take her seriously because they would say these things to her. Jennifer, who was 23 at the time of the interview, said the same thing:

“I notice that a lot of people, outside of my group of friends, will immediately... That people think like ‘oh but that will come, when you’re older or when you find a man’ or whatever. They are truly convinced that I will then come to my senses, so to speak.”²⁸ (Jennifer)

What these examples show is that people not only very much believe in the existence of a ‘maternal instinct’, as we already saw in De Beauvoir (2011), they also think that this instinct is stronger than the woman herself. She may think that she does not want to become a mother,

²⁶ Original Dutch text: “Ja en toch ja, ergens heb ik ook wel het idee dat ze toch... ja nog niet helemaal geloven dat het zo is. Weet je wel?”

²⁷ Original Dutch text: “Want dan zeggen ze “wacht maar...” Je wordt niet serieus genomen! “Komt wel, komt wel.””

²⁸ Original Dutch text: “Ik merk wel dat heel veel mensen meteen, buiten mijn vriendenkring, dat mensen meer zoiets hebben van ‘oh maar dat komt dan nog wel, als je ouder bent of als je een man vindt’ of whatever. Die zijn er echt van overtuigd dat ik dan tot mijn zinnen kom zeg maar.”

but her life's purpose will catch up to her and she will succumb to the 'maternal instinct' inherent to her. People are so deeply invested in the idea that all women want to mother, and they believe this to be true so much so, that they simply do not believe a woman who says that she does not want to. The factor of age does play a role here that is worth noting, as both Anne and Jennifer were currently bothered by the 'why not'-questions and the cases where they felt like people did not believe them. Looking at what my older interviewees have said, this changes with age. Especially for Annelot and Mim, who have gone through menopause, the 'why not'-question is not asked as much anymore.

Now that I have let my interviewees tell stories of how they encountered the societal expectation that all women want to have children, it is time to listen to them say how this makes them feel.

2.2.2 What impact do these societal expectations have on voluntary childless women, and does the factor of age play a role here?

How do my interviewees feel when they are confronted with the societal expectation that all women either want or have children? It depends, is what I gathered from the interviews. It depends on the woman, it depends on the situation, and it depends on what is being said or done and by whom.

“Sometimes it hurts. It depends on how I, how was I at the time and depends on how close our relationship is. You know, some people cannot bother you but it depends...” (Amina)

Something that almost all of my interviewees brought up, was their mothers telling them that they would have liked to have grandchildren, or in Annelot's case, her sister telling her that she would have liked for her own kids to have cousins. This bothered them more than when other people would make the same comments:

“Well, that bothers me more than when someone... you know, when someone else kind of says those things”²⁹ (Anne)

In all of my interviewee's cases, they were very close to the family member who had told them that they thought it was a shame that the woman did not have kids. I believe that this is the reason why Anne, in the quote above, is bothered by her mother's comments more than

²⁹ Original Dutch text: “Nou dat vind ik wel vervelender dan wanneer iemand aan me... weetjewel, wanneer iemand anders dat soort van zegt”.

when someone else would have made them. In Jennifer's case, however, this is different. Her mother made the same comment as Anne's, about wanting to have grandchildren, but Jennifer said the following:

“Yeah my mother... it's a different story because it's my mother. And I can understand that she doesn't like it...”³⁰ (Jennifer)

In this case, Jennifer is able to move past the comments because she is close to her mother. With this example I illustrated how each woman, and each situation, can have a different effect on the childless woman's feelings. Below, I will give an account of all the different emotions that my interviewees told me that they felt.

I can group the emotions into the following: annoyance, fear, insecurity, discomfort, hurt and difficulty. On the next few pages, I will highlight some examples of these by providing quotes from the interviewees.

Annoyance

For Jennifer and Anne especially, it is annoying when people do not take their voluntary childlessness seriously.

“...what does annoy me is that people always assume or say ‘oh it will come later on!’ Like I'm in a phase or something. That I still need to go through this phase. That it's hormones – like late puberty and that all of it isn't, that it cannot be a serious choice so to speak. That annoys me.”³¹ (Jennifer)

“That is also very annoying, that I get the feeling that people are thinking for me.”³² (Anne)

Jennifer, in this quote, was talking about situations that often occurred, where she does not feel taken seriously, as people disregard her voluntary childlessness as something that will change soon. They tell her that her maternal instinct will catch up with her once she gets a bit older, for example. Anne, also in her twenties, was talking about the same conversations when she told me that it is especially annoying to her because it gives her the feeling that others are

³⁰ Original Dutch text: “Maar ja mijn moeder... is wel een verhaal apart want het is mijn moeder. En ik snap het ook wel dat zij dat dan niet leuk vind...”

³¹ Original Dutch text: “...wat me wel irriteert is dat mensen altijd ervan uit gaan of zeggen oh dat komt later wel! Alsof ik in een soort van in een fase zit. Dat ik nog ergens doorheen moet. Dat het verlate puber hormonen zijn en dat het allemaal niet, dat het geen serieuze beslissing kan zijn zeg maar. Dat vind ik wel irritant.”

³² Original Dutch text: “Dat vind ik ook heel irritant, dat ik het idee heb dat mensen voor mij aan het denken zijn.”

thinking for her, instead of letting her think for herself. By telling her that she will want kids in a few years, that she does have a maternal instinct but just does not feel it yet, and other comments with the same meaning, Anne gets the feeling that others think that they know what is going on inside her head and in her life, better than she does. This is a feeling that Amina has also described as very annoying.

Fear

Both Anne and Jennifer also experience fear as a result of the societal expectation that all women want children. Anne was in a relationship when I spoke to her, and already knew that her boyfriend was interested in having children.

“The question is, of course, if it will become an issue. He did speak about it with his last girlfriend.”³³ (Anne)

She worries if her choice to remain childless will become an issue for her partner later in life. Jennifer expressed the same concerns. She was single when I interviewed her, but was worried that she would not be able to find a likeminded partner.

“Because I think it would be absolutely horrible to end up with someone who does want kids and then you have to sort of take that away from him, that must be so awful. That is not what I want. That’s the only thing that I worry about, you do need to find a likeminded partner.”³⁴ (Jennifer)

Hearing these two young women say these things made me realize that even for people who are voluntarily childless, wanting children is the norm. They expect it to be difficult to find a lover who also does not want children. They expect this to be difficult because all they have been told as girls, is that people want kids.

Another fear that Jennifer shared is the following:

“But somewhere I am afraid that when I am 40/50 years old and I don’t know, I may think differently? I very much fear that. I don’t think it will happen,

³³ Original Dutch text: “Maar ja kijk de vraag is natuurlijk, of dat ooit een issue wordt. Hij heeft het wel eens met zijn vorige vriendin daarover gehad.”

³⁴ Original Dutch text: “Want het lijkt me echt helemaal vreselijk om met iemand te eindigen die wel kinderen wil en dan dat je dat een soort van moet wegnemen, dat lijkt me echt heel erg. Dat wil ik nou ook weer niet. Dat is het enige waar ik me zorgen over maak, je moet wel een gelijkgestemd iemand vinden daarin.”

and I hope it won't, but yeah I do think like 'hmmm I hope when I'm 40 I won't think like oh I should have just done that'."³⁵ (Jennifer)

'That' in her last sentence refers to having children. Talking to Jennifer for over an hour, it became very clear to me that she did indeed not want to have any children. She said that she was very sure in this decision, too. However, something had somehow made her feel like she might still change her mind suddenly when she was 40/50 years old. I interpret this as people telling her that her maternal instinct would somehow start to kick in later, having had this effect on her. People telling her this had made her doubt herself, had made her doubt her own decision making. Thus, she was made to feel insecure by the societal expectation that all women want children.

Insecurity

The feeling of insecurity is something that peeked through in more of my interviews. Very rarely did my interviewees tell me that they felt insecure, but through other comments I did get that impression. Annelot, all throughout the interview, kept making comments where she expressed not feeling bad about her decision not to have kids. Not once did I ask her if she felt either good or bad about her decision, or if she had ever regretted it. Still, Annelot told me numerous times that she did not feel bad and that she did not regret it. My interpretation of this is that somehow, society did actually make an impact on her and that is why she kept giving me this confirmation. Maybe the confirmation was also for herself. In my interpretation of my interview with her, society's expectation that all women want children may have made Annelot feel insecure about her voluntary childlessness. Her way of dealing with this insecurity may be telling me, and herself, and possibly others, that she never regretted her decision and loves her life as a childless woman.

With Jennifer, I could also detect her feeling insecure. "So it indeed isn't nonsense"³⁶, she said in a relieved voice when I told her that I recognized many of the things she was saying. My interpretation of what she said here is that societal expectations did somehow make her feel like her feelings and experiences were nonsense. Further on, she also said the following:

³⁵ Original Dutch text: "Maar ik ben ergens wel bang dat ik straks 40/50 ben en er dan weet ik veel er misschien anders over ga nadenken? Daar ben ik echt heel erg bang voor. Ik denk het niet, en ik hoop het ook niet, maar dat is ergens dat ik wel denk van hmm ik hoop niet dat ik straks op mijn 40e denk van ohja ik had dat eigenlijk toch maar wel moeten doen gewoon."

³⁶ Original Dutch text: "Dus het is inderdaad geen onzin."

“...it sounds really stupid but I really feel like I need to really accomplish something if I don’t have children. That I need to do something else then, so I can justify like okay I did not have kids but this is what I did with my life instead. I really need to do something with my life because if I don’t, they will say I have not done anything at all. Like Bob from the neighbourhood may also not have done anything with his life, but at least he’s brought a child into the world. Like that, it sounds stupid but I do have that feeling. That I’m like yeah I need to accomplish something else, instead of raising a kid. That I do need to compensate it. If I don’t manage to do that, then I will feel really shitty, if I didn’t do anything at all. But that’s a problem for later later later.”³⁷
(Jennifer)

Jennifer feels that she needs to do something big and important with her life, in order to justify not having had and raised children. This feeling puts a pressure on her. She is afraid that if she would not succeed in doing this, she would feel horrible about herself. She feels this way because she feels she needs to justify not having children.

Mim was telling me about people who kept asking her why she did not want to have children, and when I asked her how this made her feel, this was the answer:

“No you, you’re starting to have doubts like ‘eh... is my thinking so odd?’
But yeah, are you sad or angry... but, yes... there is doubts. ‘But I do have...
but I am allowed to make that decision myself, right?’”³⁸ (Mim)

The comments that people made regarding her voluntary childlessness made her doubt herself and her normalcy. Others made her feel like she is odd and, again, like she is not able to make her own decisions. The difference between Mim and Jennifer and Anne in this case, is that Mim is no longer insecure because of what others say. This has changed over time, and as she got older, she was able to not let others affect her feelings as much.

³⁷ Original Dutch text: “het klinkt heel dom maar ik heb echt zoiets van ik moet wel echt iets neerzetten als ik geen kinderen neem. Dan moet ik iets anders doen, dat ik een soort van kan rechtvaardigen van oke ik heb dus geen kinderen genomen maar dit heb ik dan met mijn leven gedaan. Ik moet wel echt iets gaan doen met mijn leven want anders dan heb ik zogenaamd helemaal niks gedaan. Jan van de achterstraat die heeft misschien ook niks gedaan met z’n leven maar die heeft tenminste nog een kind op de wereld gezet. Zoiets zeg maar, klinkt heel suf maar dat heb ik wel. Dat ik echt zo zit van ja ik moet een andere prestatie leveren, dan een kind opvoeden. Dat ik het wel moet compenseren. Als dat me niet lukt, dan ga ik me wel echt heel kut voelen, als ik het allemaal niet heb gedaan. Maar goed dat zijn echt problemen voor later later later.”

³⁸ Original Dutch text: “Nee je gaat, je gaat twijfelen van eh... denk ik dan zo raar? Maarja, ben je dan verdrietig of boos... maar, ja... er is wel twijfel. ‘Maar ik heb toch... maar ik mag dat toch zelf beslissen?’”

Discomfort

Most stories that my interviewees have told me about them experiencing feelings of discomfort were of situations in which they felt like they did not belong in a society that expects all women to want children. Amina moved to The Netherlands when she was in her twenties, around twenty years before I interviewed her. This is what she told me struck her when she moved:

“This is what I find very funny, the first year I came to the Netherlands, I saw many girls with you know the dolls with buggy. We don’t have that in our country. I felt like ‘what?!’ ... ‘You’re very, you’re very young and you already know that you want to have children?!’ You know? ... So sometimes I consciously.. you also look at yourself, ‘am I doing it wrong?’ Although I have felt like this all my life. But at the same time that the brainwash that has been going on, you know like the dolls, like what do you watch on the television about how a good.. just look American movies. It’s really... I was like ‘what?!’ This is the perfect mother you know juggling with everything and the father drinking beer watching television. So sometimes you know that you made life decision, but many things around you, people don’t even have to talk to you, just watching that! And then you realize that you will not be in this category. You are outside.” (Amina)

Watching society revolve around the idea that all women are mothers makes her feel uncomfortable, like an outsider. The phenomena that Amina names here, like the little girls playing with dolls in buggies and gender stereotyping in movies, are prime examples of how children are taught gender roles. They imitate those around them, who imitate those around them, etcetera (Butler, 1988). De Beauvoir (2011) mentions a similar phenomenon: “We have seen that in childhood and adolescence woman goes through several phases in connection with motherhood. When she is a little girl, it is a miracle and a game: she sees in the doll and she feels in the future child an object to possess and dominate” (p. 547). In this way, being presented with baby dolls as toys, which little girls will see as a possession as told by De Beauvoir, girls are taught to think of a real baby as something to desire to possess.

While most feelings of discomfort among my interviewees stemmed from situations like the one Amina described where she felt like an outsider for not wanting to have children, they have also shared some cases in which they felt uncomfortable because of the questions others asked them. Anne told me that when she tells people she does not want to have

children, and they have asked her why not, she has been asked another, uncomfortable, follow-up question multiple times. A passage from my conversation with her:

Anne: “And what people also often ask, I just thought of this, is that they ask, ‘but what if you were pregnant right now? Would you have it removed?’ A lot of people ask that. That makes me feel very uncomfortable.” Mara: “Yeah that’s a violation of your privacy.” Anne: “Yes. Still, I have kind of gotten used to that question, but it is quite a private question. But then I do say like ‘yes, there is quite a big chance that I would get it removed.’ And that’s... there you see a sort of... ‘Oh. Okay.’ Like, I, that’s uncomfortable for people to hear. Well, don’t ask me then. Because you’re kind of... to me it feels like you’re trying to provoke me to say that I do... even though I don’t.”³⁹ (Anne)

People will ask Anne, when she has made it clear that she does not want children, if she would get an abortion if she were to get pregnant right now. People want to provoke a reaction in her where they hope, or expect, that she will end up saying that she would not get an abortion, which will then make these people feel like they were right after all in thinking that Anne could not possibly *not* want any children. My interpretation of this is that people, when confronted with a voluntarily childless woman like Anne, are fascinated by her because she does not conform to the norm that all women want to be mothers. This fascination and her deviance make others feel like they have the right to poke in her private life. She has become an ‘attraction’ of sorts, the deviant among the normal people.

Hurt and difficulty

All of these things can, of course, also hurt and be difficult for voluntary childless women.

“It is actually already traumatic with all the questions about why, and how do you live like this? And you know many other things. Always questions about your lifestyle.” (Amina)

³⁹ Original Dutch text: Anne: “En wat ook vaak mensen vragen trouwens bedenkt ik me net, is dat ze ook vragen, maar stel nou dat je nu zwanger zou zijn? Zou je het dan weg laten halen? Dat vragen veel mensen. Dat vind ik heel ongemakkelijk.” Mara: “Ja dat is ook echt een soort van inbreuk op jouw privacy.” Anne: “Ja. Nog steeds ik ben die vraag wel een beetje gewend, maar het is best wel een privé vraag. Maar dan zeg ik wel zo van ja er is best wel een grote kans dat ik het weg zou laten halen. En dat is... daar zie je dan wel een bepaalde... oh. Oke. Nouja, ik, dat vinden mensen dan wel ongemakkelijk om te horen. Dan denk ik dan moet je het niet vragen. Want je bent mij een soort van, dat voelt voor mij een beetje alsof je mij uit de tent aan het lokken bent om toch toe te geven dat... terwijl ik dat niet heb.”

Amina described the ongoing questions about why she does not want to have children as being ‘traumatic’. She feels hurt by always having to justify, plus it is a tiring experience. Other hurtful situations occur when my interviewees encounter people who think that they do not want children because they do not like children. In Anne’s case, for example, this is not true at all. She does like children, and she enjoys it when colleagues show her photos of their children. However, when they make the assumption that she does not like children, that really bothers her: “Because a child-hater, look not wanting kids is one thing, but a child-hater ... That bothers me. That bothers me.”⁴⁰ This also brings about a fear in Anne, where she is afraid that others will not believe her when she tells them that she thinks their child is cute for example. She is afraid that they will not believe her, because she does not want children herself. What this means, in my analysis, is that people just cannot accept that some women just do not want children. There must always be a reason behind it, because simply not wanting kids is not possible. Therefore, people make assumptions, one of them being that the woman must not like children. Anne has been in this situation enough times for her to develop a mechanism that will make her feel afraid that people will not believe her if she says anything nice about children. Another effect of people needing a reason behind why a woman does not want children, is that the voluntary childless are very often asked why.

“But yeah it was uh sometimes difficult and emotionally draining to explain every time to the people.” (Amina)

Having to explain to people over and over again that she just simply does not want kids, even though she loves playing with children of friends and family, took a strain on Amina. My explanation of why she experiences this as difficult and emotionally draining, is that through this questioning, people are once again, indirectly telling her that they do not understand her and that she is different.

All of these emotions described by my interviewees are, I argue, the punishment that they receive from a society in which they are deviants for being voluntary childless. How do they deal with this punishment? I will illustrate the answer to this question on the next section.

⁴⁰ Original Dutch text: “Want een kindhater, kijk dat je geen kinderen wil is één ding, maar een kindhater ... Dat vind ik wel vervelend. Dat vind ik wel vervelend.”

2.2.3 How do voluntary childless women deal with these expectations, and does the factor of age play a role here?

In this next section, I will show how my interviewees deal with the reactions they get and the feelings they experience. I will also incorporate how the factor of age plays in to this. This section will be structured slightly different than the previous ones, as I will go about explaining one interviewee at a time. I am doing it this way because every woman's way of dealing with her experiences is different, though there are similarities as well which I will point out.

At the end of my theoretical framework, I have argued that it would be possible to construct a different understanding of womanhood and femininity. One that does not automatically link being a woman to wanting to be, or being, a mother. In this section I will show how my interviewees are, through how they deal with the societal expectation that all women want to mother, already redefining womanhood.

Jennifer

Jennifer mostly told me that she, being 23 years old, can get worried about when she is older. She fears that people will not believe her when she then says that her childlessness was voluntary, and that they will think that she is lonely. When I asked her how she deals with this fear, she told me that she does not think about it very often as she is still young. So she does feel it, and realize that this might be a problem for her in the future, but she is able to ignore that worrying feeling by telling herself that she is not that old yet. Another way to calm herself, Jennifer shared, she uses when people react to her in a negative way. "I am clever enough to know that hey, I will not be fantastic at raising that child and it won't make me happy, it probably won't make the child happy either, I just think that it's really smart to think about that it might not be the best choice for everyone"⁴¹. She rationalizes her own decision in this way: she finds strength in knowing that she is smart and making the right decision for herself. De Beauvoir (2011) has already said this and Jennifer confirms it here: it is important that the mother has freely chosen to mother, in order to have a positive experience for both her (De Beauvoir, p. 580) and, as added by Jennifer, her child as well. I would like to add to this and say how important it is to start teaching women from childhood on that they can choose to become mothers, rather than teach them to expect and accept that motherhood is in

⁴¹ Original Dutch text: "Ik ben juist slim genoeg om te weten van hee, ik ga dat kind niet fantastisch opvoeden en ik ga er niet gelukkig van worden, dat kind waarschijnlijk ook niet, ik vind het alleen maar heel slim dat je daarover nadenkt dat het misschien niet de beste keuze is voor iedereen."

their future. By doing this, the definition and perception of what femininity means can start to change.

The overall message that I got from Jennifer, was that she is very selective in who she wants to talk to about her voluntary childlessness.

“...I just don’t feel like talking to people about it when all they do is look at you like you’re saying something weird.”⁴² (Jennifer)

Inside her social circle, people are understanding and some of her friends feel the same way as she does so with them she does talk about it. With people outside of her social circle, she does not like to talk about it when they react in a negative way. Jennifer knows that these people will not accept her standpoint, so she does not want to get into a pointless discussion with them. She, being an atheist, compared this to “talking to a religious person who keeps saying that God is everywhere and that God is the most important thing. I feel like a lot of people think the same way about children. That it should be what you want out of life, that it is the purpose of life. And I can start a conversation with them but yeah, they are never going to accept that I don’t consider it to be the reason we’re alive...”⁴³ Jennifer may not like talking about it to people outside of her social circle, but that does not mean that she does not do it. I asked her how she would react if something similar to what happened to her in high school happened. When she was fifteen, she was cussed at for not wanting children, as I have previously discussed.

“If people today would say ‘what a cunt’ I would just walk away. As if I would put any effort into those people. But if I’m having a drink with a normal person, if they ask me seriously like ‘oh why?’ And blablabla. Somewhere I do think like oh yeah now I have to explain again, but alright... I don’t know I often illustrate the example of like ‘what if a child grows up in a shit environment and stuff then you’d rather have that person not have any children at all right?’”⁴⁴ (Jennifer)

⁴² Original Dutch text: • “... ik heb gewoon nooit zo’n zin om het er met mensen over te hebben die je toch alleen maar aankijken alsof je iets raars zegt.”

⁴³ Original Dutch text: “om even een hele stomme vergelijking te trekken het is gewoon net alsof je met een religieus persoon aan het praten bent en dat blijft zeggen van ja maar god is toch in alles en dat is toch het belangrijkste, ik heb het idee dat heel veel mensen zo ook over kinderen denken. Dat is toch wat je wil in je leven, dat is toch het doel van het leven? En daar kan ik wel mee in gesprek gaan maar ja die gaan toch niet accepteren dat ik het niet het doel van het leven vind

⁴⁴ Original Dutch text: “Als mensen nu nog zouden zeggen wat een kutwif dan zou ik gewoon weg lopen. Alsof ik daar moeite in ga stoppen. Maar als ik gewoon met een normaal persoon een drankje als iemand serieus vraagt

When someone asks about it in a normal, polite way without judging her, she will, although it does annoy her, explain why she does not want kids. She usually does this by using the example of a child growing up in an unhappy situation because of its parent(s). The implication here being that she would not be a great parent because she does not want to be one. She will then ask the person she is talking to if it would not have been better for kids growing up in unhappy environments if their parents had not had kids in the first place. So what Jennifer does here is use the same strategy to explain to others, that she uses to calm her own worries.

Annelot

Where Jennifer was to a large extent able to not talk about her voluntary childlessness, due to her young age, this is not possible for Annelot.

“New people who get to know you will ask “hey do you have children?” Then I’ll say no. Then they’ll look at you like ‘okay... no?’ Because so many... there’s a lot more people with kids than without kids.”⁴⁵ (Annelot)

She has to speak about it, simply because it comes up in conversation as she is at the age where people expect her to have children. In her experience, there are more people at her age, around her, with kids than there are people without. Because she runs a shop in a small village, Annelot meets a lot of new people every day when she helps them in the shop. Her customers, by way of making conversation, often ask if Annelot has kids at the same school as they do: “Do I know you from the schoolyard?” I say ‘well I don’t think so because I only drive past it.’ ‘You don’t have children?’ ‘No.’ ‘Oh? Oh that’s special.’ But in a nice way. So I have to say... only before. When I was 25-35, in that time they thought it was weird. ... It has really changed.”⁴⁶ Annelot notes a change here from the time when she was younger to now. She has experienced negative comments but not recently. Between her 25th and 32nd, she was in a serious relationship with her first husband. This is also the age at which people

van oh en waarom dan en blablabla, ergens denk ik dan van oja dan moet ik het weer gaan uitleggen, maar oke... ik weet niet ik leg vaak dat voorbeeld neer van stel nou dat je inderdaad zo’n kind wat helemaal vercrackt opgroeit enzo dan heb je toch liever dat zo iemand gewon geen kinderen neemt.”

⁴⁵ Original Dutch text: “Nieuwe mensen die je leren kennen dan hebben ze het over van goh heb jij kinderen? Dan zeg ik nee. Dan kijken ze je altijd wel aan van oke... niet? Want zoveel... je hebt veel meer mensen met kinderen dan zonder kinderen”.

⁴⁶ Original Dutch text: “Ken ik je dan van het schoolplein? Ik zeg nou ik denk het niet want uh ja daar rij ik langs. Heb je geen kinderen? Nee. Oh? Oh, wat bijzonder? Maar dan wel o peen aardige manier. Dus ik moet echt toezeggen... alleen vroeger. Toen ik zeg maar 25-35e in die tijd dat ze het raar vonden. ... Het is echt veranderd.”

expect women to get pregnant. These two factors made it so that people would bother Annelot about why she did not get pregnant.

“Uncles and aunts as well, right?! And they would bluntly and harshly ask ‘if something was wrong or something?’ And I would say, ‘why would there be something wrong?’ I would react strongly that way.”⁴⁷ (Annelot)

By reacting like this, Annelot was countering the idea that all women want to be mothers, and that people therefore immediately assume that something must be wrong when a woman does not get pregnant. By asking them why they would assume that something was wrong, Annelot was making them think about their own reasoning. Flipping around what people said to her was something that the young Annelot would do more often:

“If they’d go ‘hmm, that is odd’ then I would ask ‘why is it odd?’ ... People have said to me ‘oh that’s very special’ and then I would say ‘yeah, what is special about it? It’s normal to me.’ ... sometimes they look at you like ‘she doesn’t have children’. And then I would say ‘Yeah, so?’”⁴⁸ (Annelot)

By reacting this way, young Annelot was planting the seeds in people’s minds for a new understanding of womanhood, without motherhood coming naturally into that understanding. She is still planting those seeds today. She told me that some women will ask her what she would do if she could go back in time, to the moment when she was 25 years old. Would she make the same decision regarding having kids? Annelot tells them yes, she would. I think that people ask her this because they realize that, given her age, it is not possible anymore to have kids and they want to know if she regrets it. I wonder why they ask, though. Do they expect she will regret it? Do they hope she will regret it? Both of these options are possible, as Annelot herself has never said anything about regret, so the people who ask, have come up with this idea all by themselves. I consider it to be a product of, yet again, a society that places motherhood at the centre of its definition of femininity.

Even though Annelot was quite detailed in telling me how she reacted to people who were bothering her, I had trouble getting to the core of my questions all through our interview. She would much rather talk about why it was so awesome not having kids, and tell me stories

⁴⁷ Original Dutch text: “maar ook ooms en tantes he? En die vroegen dan gewoon knetterhard is er wat aan de hand ofzo? En dan zei ik, wat moet er aan de hand zijn? Wat dat betreft was ik wel gebekt.”

⁴⁸ Original Dutch text: “Van goh wat raar dan zeg ik waarom is dat raar? ... Mensen zeiden wel eens oh dat is bijzonder. En dan zeg ik van ja, wat is er bijzonder? Ik ben niet anders gewend. ... maar soms werd je aangekeken zo van ja die heeft geen kinderen. En dan zei ik ja, en?”

of women that she knew whose lives had taken a turn for the worse when they tried to get pregnant, or when they became mothers. I interpret this as her way of dealing with the negative ideas surrounding voluntary childlessness. I think that she might be a little bit unsure about her decision, and telling herself, and me, these stories of motherhood gone wrong makes her feel good about her own decision. Of course, this is only my interpretation of the somewhat difficult interview.

Anne.

Like Annelot, Anne is also not afraid to actively go against any negativity that gets thrown her way for her voluntary childlessness. As she is in her twenties, she is often told that her maternal instinct and child wish will come later. This is surprising to her, as these comments give her the feeling that the people making them, do not take her seriously.

“...it is very surprising to me that people link it to age so much. Like ‘that’ll come later’ and then I will say ‘well I don’t know’. ‘Yes, you will get it later’. And then I’m like ‘yeah but what’, and I ask them this sometimes, ‘but what if that isn’t the case? Then that would be okay too, right?’ And then you see them get a bit startled because they realize that they’re pushing me. And then they’re like ‘oh yeah, yes, well, that would also be okay’”⁴⁹ (Anne)

In this way, Anne catches people even before they directly tell her that they think it is not okay, and she pushes them to say that it would be okay. By doing this, she is both protecting herself from negativity, and teaching others that voluntary childlessness is completely normal and that they should be accepting of it. Saying that voluntary childlessness is perfectly okay too, just as choosing to mother is, was the common thread all throughout my interview with Anne. She uses this argument quite a lot and I love it, for its simplicity and for her use of it which both teaches people that voluntary childlessness is, indeed, okay, and shows people that Anne herself is confidently voluntary childless. Because she is confident in her choice, and especially confident in knowing that voluntary childlessness should be more accepted, she does not mind answering the many questions of why she does not want children:

⁴⁹ Original Dutch text: “...maar het verbaast mij gewoon heel erg dat mensen het echt zo erg aan leeftijd koppelen. Van dat komt nog wel en dan zeg ik nou dat weet ik niet. Jawel hoor dat krijg jij nog wel. En dat ik dan zo zit van ja maar wat nou, dat vraag ik ook wel eens, maar wat nou als dat niet zo is? Dan is dat toch ook oke? En dan zie je hun een beetje schrikken omdat ze er dan achter komen dat ze een bepaalde push aan het geven zijn. En dan is het van oja, ja, nouja, dat is ook oke.”

“I actually like it. I explain because I want to make clear to people that I am just as normal as they are. There is nothing wrong with me.”⁵⁰ (Anne)

There is a limit to this however. While Anne does not mind explaining to someone who is open-minded, if people do not listen to her, or she does not like their reaction, she stops explaining.

“If they react differently than I would have... then for me at some point it is like, I don't feel like I need to make a point or something. No. If it isn't going anywhere, then it's not going anywhere. I do often tend to show people that it (voluntary childlessness) really is okay. But if you don't wanna uh... see that, yeah...” Mara: “Then it ends there?” Anne: “Yes.”⁵¹ (Anne)

All throughout her examples, Anne used a very firm tone when imitating how she would normally tell someone that her voluntary childlessness is perfectly okay. Her goal with this within the conversation is to leave the other person no room for further comments:

“You know in this way you are being quite firm. In how you say it. So that's why I don't expect people to react with ‘oh that's sad’. Look I can imagine that if you're a bit more insecure in saying it like ‘well I don't know if I want it’ and things like that then it's... then maybe that'll provide more space. Maybe that's why I say it like that. That I'm quite firm from the start because I don't want people's reactions. ... I do think that with some things, if you're very clear about it yourself, other people don't need to have so many opinions about it.”⁵² (Anne)

However what she is also doing on a larger scale, is teaching people the lesson that voluntary childlessness should be accepted and in this way warming people up to a new understanding of womanhood, where motherhood is not named as a requirement:

⁵⁰ Original Dutch text: “Nee eigenlijk vind ik het heel erg prettig. Ik leg het ook uit omdat ik mensen duidelijk wil maken dat ik net zo normaal ben als zij. Er is niet iets mis met mij.”

⁵¹ Original Dutch text: “‘Als ie daar anders op gereageerd had dan had ik ook wel... dan is het voor mij op een gegeven moment ook wel, ik heb niet het idee dat ik een punt moet maken ofzo. Nee. Als het nergens naartoe gaat, gaat het nergens naartoe. Ik heb wel af en toe de nijging om toch mensen te laten zien van het is echt oke. Maar als je dat niet eh.. wil zien, ja.’” Mara: “dan houdt het op?” Anne: “Ja.”

⁵² Original Dutch text: “Weet je wel dus dan ben je zelf als best wel stellig. Met hoe je het zegt. Dus dat ik daardoor ook niet verwacht dat mensen heel snel zo zouden reageren met oh wat sneu. Kijk ik kan me voorstellen dat als je het een beetje onzekerder zegt van ja naja ik weet niet of ik het wil en dat soort dingen dan is het ook wel... dan geeft dat misschien meer ruimte. Misschien zeg ik het daarom ook wel zo. Dat ik het zelf harder in zet omdat ik ook geen zin heb in reacties van anderen. ... ik denk wel dat met sommigen dingen als je er zelf heel duidelijk in bent, dan hoeft een ander er ook niet zoveel van te vinden.”

“It’s not that I am proving something to myself in that moment, but maybe it’s like, you know, if I am giving a clear explanation then I don’t want the other person to get their own ideas about it. Then it is clear that this is the way that it is. And I think it is important that people are conscious of the existence of other doorways, images to living life, and that those have just as much right to exist as if we would have all been the same. ... I’m always kind of taking my moment, probably consciously, maybe a bit pedantic. I don’t mean it like that. I don’t think that that’s how I come across. So it really just is okay.”⁵³
(Anne)

Another tactic that Anne uses to react to negative comments, because she does not always want to get into a deep conversation about the subject, is to use humour.

“Sometimes I also make a joke and say ‘well maybe it’s better that there aren’t two Anne’s in the world’. Like that, you know. I do notice that I often try to make the conversation very light. ... You know I will think ‘wellllll’ and just laugh it off.”⁵⁴ (Anne)

Looking at section 2.2.2, where my interviewees told me how tiring and annoying some people can be to them, I can imagine that Anne sometimes just does not feel like really talking about the subject, and uses jokes to prevent that from happening.

Lastly, as Anne had told me before, people are quick to assume that she does not like children. This is something that she will always fight, as it simply is not true, and the assumption bothers her. The frequency with which this happens to her, has even led to her developing this technique to prevent it from happening:

“Yes I fight that more. I do actually say, now that you mention it, I do actually say pretty often ‘but it isn’t that I don’t like kids, I just don’t want them myself’.” Mara: “Just to protect yourself before it happens?” Anne: “Yes, yes,

⁵³ Original Dutch text: “Het is niet dat ik mezelf aan het overtuigen ben op dat moment, maar het is misschien ook wel van, weetjewel, als ik het gewoon duidelijk uitleg dan wil ik niet dat diegene daar zijn eigen ideeën bij heeft. Dan is het gewoon duidelijk dat het zo is. En ik vind het gewoon belangrijk dat mensen gewoon bewust zijn van dat er gewoon ook andere deuren, beelden bestaan, en dat dat er net zo goed mag zijn als dat we hetzelfde waren geweest. ... ik ben altijd wel een soort van momentje, dat je misschien heel bewust wil pakken, misschien een beetje belerend, dat kan het ook zijn. Zo bedoel ik het niet. Ik denk niet dat het zo overkomt. Dus het is gewoon wel echt oke.”

⁵⁴ Original Dutch text: “Ik zeg ook wel eens voor de grap van nou het is misschien maar goed als er geen twee Anne’s op de wereld zijn weetjewel zo. Ik merk wel dat ik het vaak ook heel luchtig probeer te maken. ... weetjewel dan denk ik nouuuu dan lach ik het gewoon een beetje weg.”

I do that. Yes. Yes. I do that. ... Yeah it's funny, yeah I do that. Not always, but often, that I already mention that.”⁵⁵ (Anne)

In this quote, Anne realized and explained, that she will often already say that she likes kids, before people have even made the assumption that she might not. I thought this was very interesting to hear, especially because she had been doing it unconsciously. She realized that she did that just during our interview. This shows to me how deep the problem lies. It has become so normal for Anne to have to defend herself, that she is unconsciously doing things to prevent herself from getting into hurtful situations.

Amina

Because Amina is suffering from depression, her emotional state can vary greatly from day to day, moment to moment. She explained to me how that also relates to the way she is able to deal with negative reactions to her voluntary childlessness: “Depends on how my emotional situation is at the time. Sometimes I can just don't listen. But sometimes is more difficult.” This also translates to the way Amina deals with the reactions that she gets:

“Sometimes I just say that we have tried.” (Amina)

When she cannot deal with any negative comments about her voluntary childlessness, Amina will not mention it. If people ask her if she has children, she will simply say that she and her husband have tried, but have not been successful. This is something that my other interviewees wanted to avoid: people thinking that they were biologically unable to have children. Amina, however, shows that it can also be used to prevent hurtful situations from occurring to her.

There are also days, though, when Amina feels good enough to tell the truth. This often leads to the famous ‘why not’ - question. Like some of my other interviewees, it depends on the person that Amina has in front of her, if she will give an explanation.

“Depend on who are the public. Some of them perhaps coming from the much more educated background, I'm going to give explanation. And they can accept it, as you know, they know I think through about the decision. But

⁵⁵ Original Dutch text: ““Ja dat verdedig ik wel meer. Ik zeg ook, nu je dat zo zegt, ik zeg ook wel eens vaker maar het is niet dat ik niet van kinderen hou, maar ik wil ze zelf niet.” Mara: “Gewoon om jezelf alvast een beetje in te dikken?” Anne: “Ja, ja, dat doe ik wel ja. Ja. Ja. Dat doe ik wel. ... Ja dat is wel grappig, ja dat doe ik wel. Niet altijd, maar wel vaak, dat ik dat dan wel erbij zeg.”

some people I just told them I still don't get children yet. God didn't give me yet. And it will close the you know, the conversation.” (Amina)

Again, Amina will sometimes abort the conversation by saying that she might still have children in the future. My analysis of my conversation with Amina, is that she says that she does not have kids yet, or that she was not able to get pregnant, because she does not dare to go against the negativity as harshly as my other interviewees do. In the following quote, Amina explained a cultural difference between Java and The Netherlands, and I think that this may be the underlying reason:

“So people ask me, ‘how your mother take your decision?!’ ... Sometimes I'm angry and told them that it's not their business. But saying that is not your business in our country is very rude. You don't say that. ... I learnt to say that but it's very difficult for me, to you know, to just say that. Sometimes I just don't talk to them anymore. So... or, or just try to, you know, to distract and talk about other things.” (Amina)

In order to avoid the topic of having children altogether, Amina keeps her personal life very private to as many people as she can:

“The way I behave already tell them that I am unusual. For most people. Not common, uh... married woman. Sorry... this actually come in one package. To be a good woman, good wife, having children, you know this is not only that you don't have children, but also, I don't want children. And the way I, the way I address my freedom... I travel alone very often, and... we not thinking about what we going to eat tonight and you know that kind of things. I have not exposed my married status to new friends. So they actually do not know that I'm married. So they do not ask questions about children.” (Amina)

She does not tell new people, even friends, that she is married in order to avoid questions about having children. She is herein relying on the idea that people have of a good woman, as she says so herself: a good wife, then a mother. De Beauvoir (2011) also argues that this is what people see as a good woman. The fact that Amina's tactic works, and that indeed, her new friends do not ask her about having children, shows how deeply this idea of what a woman is, is still rooted in people's minds.

So, Amina's new friends simply do not know that much about her personal life, but what about her old ones? Some of them are accepting of her voluntary childlessness, but some of them would not stop questioning her decision and she has cut them out of her life. In an example of this that I will provide here, she talks about old friends that she used to live with for a while as part of her Master thesis in anthropology. Amina researched and lived with a married couple that she had already been friends with. She explained that they were not close friends and would not talk every day, but would always invite each other to birthdays and other celebratory occasions.

“But during the interviews, because I lived with them, it became very intense. I knew them, they knew me. We start to know each other and things involving me that they don't like and things about them that I don't like. Because I cannot lie, I cannot sit with people that constantly judging me because of my views. ... So it was actually um... sort of umm... I start to isolate myself from many people.” (Amina)

“So I can accept that people have these very heteronormative views, but when it comes to your views its wrong. So that's what makes things difficult for me, that I have decided to draw myself out of these communities.” (Amina)

There were also things about these people that Amina did not like, as she says here. Therefore, I cannot conclude that them not being accepting of her voluntary childlessness is the sole reason for her getting out of touch with them, but as she says, it certainly played a big part.

Mim.

Mim, the oldest of my interviewees, noted a lot of differences over time in her own way of coping with negativity regarding her voluntary childlessness. When she was young, she would always play with children, help out at school with taking care of the young ones, and people therefore saw her as the perfect future mother. Because of her love for kids, the assumption was always that she would become a great mum some day.

“In the beginning they think ‘oh that will come, you know, when her friends start to’... so um... in the beginning I did not actively engage in the discussion

because everyone thought I love kids so oh I'll be such a beautiful, uh, such a good little mum you know?"⁵⁶ (Mim)

Mim used to hide behind the assumption that she would become a mother, and not talk about her voluntary childlessness. She started opening up about it when her husband began speaking of having children. She was honest to him and in the end they decided to remain childless together. From that moment onward, also because Mim was getting further in her twenties, it was less easy to avoid the topic and people would make comments about it that hurt Mim. I asked her how she dealt with it then.

"I have held on to the fact that my husband and I had made the choice together. We have made up our minds, we don't want it. ... now it is our choice. Yeah. That's what you hold on to and that's where you find your confidence."⁵⁷ (Mim)

She would find strength in knowing that she and her husband had made this choice together. Not letting the comments of others bother her was a learning process, though.

"In the beginning I was, I didn't feel... I was insecure. You have to learn not to care about what everyone thinks."⁵⁸ (Mim)

If people said hurtful things, it made her feel insecure when she was younger. Today, however, Mim bites back.

"If I would hear that now... 'mind your own business!'"⁵⁹ (Mim)

With learning not to care about other people's opinions, also came building a social network that was accepting. This was a bit challenging at times, Mim told me, as some people she was close to were not initially positive about her voluntary childlessness.

"Yeah then I would say 'well okay, I will make a deal with you. If I get pregnant, you will take the baby for the whole first year and then I want it

⁵⁶ Original Dutch text: "In het begin denken ze ah dat komt wel, weetjewel, als haar vriendinnen enzo wel... dus eh... in het begin ben ik niet bewust die discussie aangegaan want iedereen vond ik ben gek op kinderen dus oh ik ben zo'n mooi, uh, zo'n goed moedertje weetjewel?"

⁵⁷ Original Dutch text: "Ik heb me daar wat dat betreft aan vast gehouden dat mijn man en ik daar gewoon samen uit waren gekomen. Wij zijn erover klaar, wij willen het niet. ... maar nu is dit onze keus. Ja. Daar hou je je aan vast en daar haal je je zekerheid uit."

⁵⁸ Original Dutch text: "In het begin was ik daar, stond ik daar ook niet... was ik ook onzeker. Dat moet je leren dat je je niks van iedereen van alles aan moet trekken."

⁵⁹ Original Dutch text: "als ik het nu zo zou horen... waar bemoei je je mee?!"

back when it is a child and no longer a baby'. Yeah, no, but you talk about it and you work through it.”⁶⁰ (Mim)

One of the main reasons why Mim did not want a child, is that she does not like babies. She used this argument here in a joking way to make clear to people that she was, in fact, not joking. She succeeded in surrounding herself with people who are accepting of her voluntary childlessness, and she succeeded in learning not to care about what anybody else thinks:

“I find it important how people around me, who I chose, react. And if you’re talking about a lack of understanding, you’re going to come across that in all kinds of ways. But what do I care what people on the street think about my childlessness? They don’t know me, they don’t know anything, so... but I mean, so, uh, you will come across negativity. But those are not people... but I don’t need to explain to them.”⁶¹ (Mim)

Learning not to get hurt by other people’s opinions was a long process for Mim, and still today she uses the following tactic when people react negatively.

“Yeah no then, then I would just say like ‘yes I simply did not choose (to have children).’ Done. Um, if people react like that, then to me it isn’t... if they really want to know then they can ask why not. But if they react like that, then it doesn’t matter why not because they don’t care. I won’t defend myself in those cases.”⁶² (Mim)

If possible, Mim will stop the conversation when this happens. The only case in which she will actively engage with strangers who react to her childlessness, is when she sees them feel sad for her.

⁶⁰ Original Dutch text: “Ja dan zei ik ‘nou ja oke, als dan maak ik een deal met je. Dan neem ik eh, of ik nam eh, als ik dan in verwachting raak dan neem jij het eerste jaar, en dan wil ik het terug als kind. Ja. Nee, maargoed, dan praat je erover en dan kom je er wel uit.”

⁶¹ Original Dutch text: “Maar ik vind het belangrijk hoe mensen reageren om mij heen die ik gekozen heb. En als je het hebt over onbegrip dan kom je dat op manieren tegen. Maar wat kan mij nou schelen wat ze op straat vinden van dat ik kinderloos ben? Die kennen me niet, die weten niks dus... maar ik bedoel, dus, eh, negativiteit die kom je ook wel tegen. Maar dat zijn geen mensen... maar daar hoef ik het ook niet aan uit te leggen.”

⁶² Original Dutch text: “• “Ja nee dan, dan zei ik gewoon van ja daar heb ik gewoon niet voor gekozen. Klaar. Ehm, als mensen zo reageren, dan is voor mij niet... als ze het echt willen weten dan kunnen ze het vragen waarom niet. Maar als ze zo reageren, dan maakt het niet uit waarom niet want dat interesseert ze niet. Dan ga ik me ook niet verdedigen.”

“But when I spot confusion in someone, like ‘oh no they’re thinking...’ Then I will say ‘no, voluntarily’. ‘Oh, oh, oh, alright’.”⁶³ (Mim)

By doing this, Mim is also contributing to creating a new understanding of womanhood. She shows people that being involuntarily childless is, indeed, a bad thing and something to be sad about, but that voluntary childlessness is good and not something to be worried about.

Throughout this chapter, I have shown what situations my interviewees have come across, how they experienced those situations, and how they are dealing with them. Especially this last part where they all shared how they deal with negativity or hurtful situations, I found very inspiring and I saw that all of my interviewees are, in their own ways, contributing to creating a new understanding of femininity and what it means to be a woman. This understanding did, and still does, include wanting to be or being a mother, but my interviewees are paving the way for a new definition, one in which being a mother is something that women can *choose*, rather than something that women *must* be.

By looking at the stories that my interviewees have told me, I can draw up the answers to my main research question, and sub questions in the concluding chapter. This conclusion will be a mapping of experiences, an exploration of the experiences that voluntary childless women have regarding the societal expectation that all women want to have children.

⁶³ Original Dutch text: “Maar als ik bij een ander verwarring zie, van ojee die denkt... dan zeg ik nee, bewust. Oh oh oh oke.”

Conclusion

To conclude, the aim of this thesis was to add a feminist, humanities-based voice to the sociological discourse surrounding voluntary childless women. Scholars that have previously been concerned with research into voluntary childlessness among women have mainly looked at two different aspects: either they researched what reasons women may have for remaining childless and how often this occurs, or they looked at how voluntary childless women are perceived by others. Although research that looked into how women are perceived by society shows that people are mainly negative about voluntary childlessness, there was no research done into how voluntary childless women experience this. In this thesis, I have started mapping the experiences of these women. I did this by asking the following research question: *How do voluntary childless women experience societal expectations regarding having children?* All further claims in this conclusion need to be read within the context of this research: based in The Netherlands and conducted between 2017 – 2018.

I have shown how motherhood became central to people's beliefs of what a 'good', 'normal' woman is. As explained by De Beauvoir (2011), in history, women did not have much time to dedicate to anything other than being pregnant and mothering, due to them living through pregnancy after pregnancy. This has left a legacy of societal expectations of what womanhood is, and what women want (De Beauvoir, 2011). 'All women want to have babies, this is normal and natural and inherent to being a woman,' is what society tells us. Societal practices of normalization and punishment (Foucault, 1975) keep this idea intact by penalizing women who do not conform to what society perceives as 'normal'. What this punishment looks like is the answer to my first sub-question: *In what way do the societal expectations show themselves?* Voluntary childless women are not being taken seriously: people do not believe them when they say that they do not have a child wish. A young voluntary childless woman is simply too young; once she gets a little older, she will start to feel that natural pull towards motherhood, and her maternal instinct will kick in, is what my interviewees have been told. Once the woman is older and still does not have a child, biological reasons are assumed to be at play. Moreover, people are not afraid to let my interviewees know that they do not understand them, that they are the odd ones out, the deviants. The most poignant example that I gathered from the interview data is how all of my interviewees constantly have to explain, and oftentimes even justify, not wanting to have children.

The second sub-question that I have answered is the following: *What impact do these societal expectations have on voluntary childless women?* I have shown that my interviewees all have their own personal accounts of how they feel in different situations that they have experienced. How they feel differs per person, and per situation. Oftentimes they have felt annoyance, fear, insecurity, discomfort, hurt and difficulty. All of these emotions are negative, and show how punishment (Foucault, 1975) hits the target. The sociological scholars that have looked into voluntary childlessness among women before, have all failed to mention, or even look into, women's experiences. However, as I have shown through the stories of my interviewees, voluntary childless women may suffer from the societal expectation that all women want to have children. Therefore, I want to make a note here and say that further research into voluntary childlessness among women should *always* consider the voices of the subjects: those who are voluntary childless.

Now, knowing how societal expectations surrounding having children can have an emotional impact on voluntary childless women, I am going to answer my third sub-question: *How do voluntary childless women deal with these expectations?* As gender is something that people perform, rather than something that is naturally inherent to them (Butler, 1988), I have argued that femininity does not *naturally* have to include wanting to be a mother. Moreover, femininity can be reconstructed to mean something different, to *not* include motherhood in its definition. I have argued, by showing the ways in which my interviewees are dealing with the societal expectations that are bothering them, that voluntary childless women are themselves making a start in this reconstruction. Through their reactions, my interviewees teach and show others that not wanting to be a mother does not make them any less 'normal', and that voluntary childlessness can also be a part of womanhood.

All throughout my research into the previous sub-questions, I have looked at the way in which the factors of gender and age play into this. Accordingly, my fourth, and final, sub-question was *Do the factors of gender and age play a role in the experiences of voluntary childless women with regard to these societal expectations?* I have shown that age plays quite a big role, not only with regard to how other people react to the voluntary childless woman, as described above, but also with regard to what impact it has on her and the way that she deals with it. My older interviewees had better learnt how not to care about what others think of them, whereas this was something that my younger interviewees still struggled with. Additionally, my interviewees have the experience that men who are voluntarily childless do not receive the same backlash, and do not share the same experiences as the women do.

Overall, in this thesis I have started mapping the experiences of voluntary childless women with societal expectations regarding having children. The research question, *How do voluntary childless women experience societal expectations regarding having children?* was answered in regard to the five women that I interviewed. The interview data are by no means general statements that can be made about all voluntary childless women. As I have illustrated in this thesis, although there are similarities to a large extent, each experience is personal and thus different. What I would like others to take away from this thesis, is the image of how voluntary childless women are reconstructing our understanding of womanhood. Motherhood should never be a requirement for a woman to be considered ‘good’ or ‘normal’. Rather, it should be a choice that everyone can actively make for themselves. Even those who choose against it.

“There is nothing wrong with me.” (Anne)

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