

1 Lived experiences of childfree lesbians in the UK: A qualitative exploration

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4 Abstract

5 Evidence suggests that most lesbians remain childless, but little is known about the childfree  
6 lesbian experience. The current study qualitatively explores the experiences of five childfree  
7 lesbians. The results show that even for a group for which childlessness is arguably still  
8 presumed, it remains socially difficult to articulate a desire to remain childfree. The women  
9 presented their childfreedom as both essential, and politically and biographically motivated.  
10 Being lesbian and childfree was framed as different from being heterosexual and childfree –  
11 discourses and practices of ‘families of choice’ and ‘co-independence’ in intimate  
12 partnerships provided a way of ‘doing’ family outside of dominant, heteronormative  
13 expectations. Concurrently, the greater visibility of lesbian parenting had resulted in the  
14 unwelcome imposition of heteronormative expectations. The results raise questions about the  
15 normalising effects of the legal recognition of same-sex marriage and queer parenthood on  
16 the lives of lesbian women, and other queers, who choose to remain childfree.

17 Keywords: Family; feminist research; interpretative phenomenological analysis; LGBT  
18 family studies; queer; voluntary childlessness

19 **Introduction**

20 Evidence from the US suggests that most lesbians (in Western contexts) remain  
21 childless (Mezey, 2012) – even in the midst of what has been dubbed a ‘baby boom’ in  
22 lesbian communities – but little is known about the experiences of childfree<sup>1</sup> lesbians (Pelton  
23 & Hertlein, 2011). Childfree lesbians have rarely been a focus for research in either the  
24 voluntary childlessness or LGBT family studies literature.

25 Voluntary childlessness researchers have focused on categorising and defining  
26 different types of childlessness. They have distinguished the involuntary from the voluntary  
27 childless, and different types of the voluntary childless, including ‘early articulators,’ women  
28 who express an intention to remain childless early in life, and ‘perpetual postponers,’ women  
29 who become childless through a series of postponements (e.g. Houseknecht, 1987). At the  
30 same time, researchers have often assumed that certain groups of women, such as single  
31 women and lesbians, are childless by default, rather than through choice (Park, 2002).  
32 Furthermore, a focus on marriage was evident in early voluntary childlessness research and  
33 definitions often reflected an assumption that single women and same-sex couples cannot and  
34 do not make reproductive choices; they are ‘socially infertile’ (Houseknecht, 1987). This  
35 heteronormative sensibility has begun to shift, and single heterosexual women are  
36 increasingly likely to be included in studies of childfree women (e.g. Addie & Brownlow,  
37 2014; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). However, lesbians remain largely overlooked in voluntary  
38 childlessness research, and when they and other queer (e.g. bisexual and other non-  
39 heterosexual) women are rarely included in, typically feminist, research, it has often been  
40 only in small numbers (e.g. two non-heterosexual women in Gillespie, 2003). Furthermore,  
41 their experiences are rarely examined *as* lesbian women, and differences in the experiences of  
42 heterosexual and lesbian women acknowledged and explored (e.g. Bartlett, 1994; Gillespie,  
43 1999, 2000, 2003; Mollen, 2006). Thus, both mainstream and feminist voluntary  
44 childlessness research mostly reflects the heteronormativity of wider culture and expectations  
45 that lesbians remain childfree.

46 There have, however, recently been calls for the inclusion of queer women  
47 (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012) and same-sex couples (Blackstone, 2014) in voluntary  
48 childlessness research, and discussion of any differences between heterosexual and non-  
49 heterosexual experiences (Blackstone, 2014). Furthermore, US research on queer

50 reproductive decision making clearly evidences that queers *do* make reproductive choices,  
51 even those remaining childless (e.g. Mezey, 2012; Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Robinson &  
52 Brewster, 2014). Therefore, it cannot be assumed that queers are childless by default or that  
53 their childlessness is not *meaningful* – that it has consequences for their everyday lives and  
54 identities. In addition, the consequences of choosing to be childfree for queer individuals and  
55 same-sex couples could potentially shed light on the meaning of voluntary childlessness more  
56 broadly.

57         Turning to LGBT family studies research, the focus here has been on predominantly  
58 same-sex, and particularly lesbian, parenting, motivated at least initially by providing  
59 evidence to support child custody claims (e.g. Bos & Hakvoort, 2007; Brewaeys et al., 1997).  
60 However, even research on ‘families of choice’ in queer communities, kin-like networks of  
61 relationships based on friendship and commitments ‘beyond blood’, that are emblematic of  
62 new ways of ‘doing family’ (Morgan, 2011), has focused on *parenting* rather than  
63 childlessness. Two landmark texts – *Families we choose* and *Families of choice* – both  
64 dedicated an entire chapter to parenting, but did not have even a single index entry for  
65 childlessness (Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001; Weston, 1991). Furthermore, research on  
66 queer reproductive decision making is oriented to what motivates people to choose to parent,  
67 rather than what motivates them to remain childfree (e.g. Mezey, 2008). In some research  
68 focused on queer reproductive decision making, the definition of childlessness is so inclusive  
69 that it does not allow for a meaningful exploration of the experiences of queer couples and  
70 individuals who choose to be childfree (e.g. Bergstrom-Lynch, 2015; Mezey, 2008). In  
71 addition, some research on same-sex relationships has addressed childlessness in queer  
72 communities indirectly and rather negatively; childless same-sex couples have been portrayed  
73 as pathological (Kaufman et al., 1984), inferior to same-sex couples with children (Koepke et  
74 al., 1992), and at risk of loneliness and social isolation in old age (e.g. Wilkens, 2015).

75           There is, therefore, a degree of pronatalism or a ‘parental imperative’ (Wilson, 2013)  
76 underlying the LGBT family studies literature, arguably reflecting a growth of pronatalism in  
77 queer communities (Morrell, 2000). Nancy Polikoff in 1987 asked “Who is talking about the  
78 women who don’t ever want to be mothers?” Her answer was “No one,” and 30 years later  
79 this by-and-large still appears to be the case. Thus, we know virtually nothing about the  
80 meaning and experience of being childfree for a population of which the majority remains  
81 childless and where many may, somewhat invisibly, identify as childfree (Mezey, 2012).  
82 Furthermore, the legal recognition of same-sex relationships and parents in the last decade or  
83 so in many Western countries raises interesting questions about the impact of relational and  
84 familial equality on the meaning of being childfree for non-heterosexuals that warrant  
85 exploration (Shaw, 2011).

#### 86 **Research on Childfree Lesbians**

87           There is only a small body of literature that directly addresses the childfree lesbian  
88 experience. Rowlands and Lee (2006) examined perceptions of women choosing to have  
89 children and choosing to be childfree among psychology students and the public. They found  
90 that lesbians not wanting children were perceived more negatively than any other group in the  
91 study – both heterosexual women not wanting children and lesbians planning to have  
92 children. Two US studies of queer reproductive decision making have examined reasons for  
93 remaining childless. Bergstrom-Lynch’s (2015) study included broadly defined ‘childfree’  
94 same-sex couples and found that reasons for remaining childfree, at that moment,  
95 encompassed: focusing on the partner relationship and a fear that children would disrupt their  
96 relational dynamic; fear of loss of ‘independent-togetherness’ (a queer relational practice that  
97 combines both a long-term commitment to a partner and a greater sense of independence and  
98 [geographic, sexual, emotional] distance [e.g. living apart, engaging in consensual non-  
99 monogamy] than is typical in heteronormative relationships, see Weeks et al., 2001), which

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100 suggests being childfree affords the freedom to live apart; concerns about their compatibility  
101 as parents, and how childcare labour would be divided, with neither partner wanting to be the  
102 primary parent; lack of momentum/desire from one or both partners (e.g. choosing to stay  
103 with a partner who does not want children); and what can be categorised as ‘perpetual  
104 postponement.’ Furthermore, some participants who described themselves as happy to be  
105 childfree, experienced fleeting urges to have a child (‘temporary baby fever’), and  
106 relationships with nieces and nephews and children of friends providing a ‘kid fix.’

107         Mezey (2008) focused specifically on *lesbians*’ mothering decisions and desires, and  
108 of the, again broadly defined, ‘childfree’ women included in the study, many developed a  
109 strong desire early in their lives to remain childfree. Mezey argued that early childfree desires  
110 are more salient for lesbian women than heterosexual women, because lesbians have more  
111 control over, and are thus more intentional in, their reproductive choices because of their  
112 greater control over becoming pregnant, and their rejection of dominant gender norms,  
113 allowing them to actively pursue their reproductive desires (see also Carlisle, 1982). Mezey  
114 found that reasons for remaining childfree, at that moment, centred on: a negative  
115 understanding of motherhood, including the participants’ accounts of their mothers’  
116 experiences of parenting – centring on self-sacrifice and oppression; a desire for personal and  
117 economic freedom (the latter was especially important for working class lesbians); early  
118 experiences with childcare and an understanding of childrearing as a burden; internalised  
119 homophobia; racial discrimination (for black lesbians); a critique of lesbian motherhood –  
120 some childfree participants echoed lesbian feminist arguments in the 1970s and 1980s that  
121 lesbians enter into motherhood to gain heterosexual privilege without fully considering the  
122 consequences and responsibilities, and a view that lesbian mothers are no different from  
123 heterosexual mothers; a belief that the world is too harsh for children; the influence of  
124 intimate partnership (although for some, their partner was not an influence); and the

125 constraints and rewards of work. Mezey found that some women felt there was respect for  
126 women's varied reproductive choices in lesbian communities, but others experienced  
127 pressure to have children or to remain childfree.

128 Feminist studies of women's experiences of being childfree that have included small  
129 numbers of lesbian and bisexual participants also provide some minor insights into the  
130 childfree lesbian experience. For example, Mollen (2006) found that childfree lesbians and  
131 bisexual women who can conceal their sexuality by 'passing' as straight are potentially  
132 subject to the same pressures toward parenthood as heterosexual women (see also Gillespie,  
133 2000). Bartlett (1994) reported that the lesbian and bisexual participants in her study  
134 appreciated having lots of childfree queer friends, and they experienced no shortage of  
135 childfree lesbian role models. Furthermore, Bartlett argued that a lack of parenting desire  
136 enabled women to take a more flexible approach to sexuality and move more freely between  
137 sexual partners. The lesbian participants in Gillespie's study reported that their parents and  
138 family members assumed their childlessness was related to their sexuality and they did not  
139 perceive their relationships with nieces and nephews as substitutes for mothering (Gillespie,  
140 1999).

### 141 **Aims of the Current Study**

142 The current study is one of the first, if not the first, to focus solely and specifically on  
143 the *experiences* of lesbian women who self-identify as having made an active choice to  
144 remain childfree. The aim of the study is to explore how lesbian women make meaning of  
145 their pathways to childfreedom, and how they experience and make sense of 'living out' the  
146 childfree choice *as* lesbians. More broadly, the research aims to contribute to feminist  
147 phenomenological research on the lived experience of being childfree (e.g. Doyle et al., 2012;  
148 Shaw, 2011).

### 149 **Method**

150           The data for this analysis were drawn from a wider qualitative study of the  
151 experiences of childfree women living in the UK (see Authors, 2017). The research received  
152 ethical approval from the first and second authors' Faculty Research Ethics Committee. The  
153 focus here is on the five women in the study who identified as lesbian or queer. Because this  
154 research aimed to identify common themes across the experiences of a small group of  
155 relatively homogenous women, while also capture and 'give voice' to the unique aspects of  
156 their individual experience, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was identified as  
157 an appropriate methodology (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is a phenomenologically oriented  
158 approach to qualitative research with a focus on 'persons-in-context' and 'being in the world'  
159 (Larkin et al., 2006); it was developed by the psychologist Jonathan Smith in the 1990s (e.g.  
160 Smith, 1994) and has subsequently become widely used in the UK and elsewhere (including  
161 most recently North America, e.g. Chmielewski & Yost, 2013). IPA assumes a self-reflective,  
162 self-interpretive mode of being, while also acknowledging that a researcher cannot access a  
163 participant's world directly. Thus, IPA involves a 'double hermeneutic' (Smith et al., 2009);  
164 the researcher attempts to make sense of how the participant makes sense of their world  
165 (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA combines both thematic (cross-case) and idiographic  
166 (individual and specific) analysis and thus (smaller) samples of 3-6 (relatively homogenous)  
167 participants are common (e.g. Shaw's [2011] IPA study of women's journeys toward  
168 childlessness included 3 women). IPA is distinct from other phenomenological approaches in  
169 its combination of the 'double hermeneutic,' and inductive and idiographic interpretation  
170 (Gill, 2014); indeed "IPA's idiographic nature separates it from most other phenomenological  
171 methodologies" (Gill, 2014: 126). IPA has been used previously in voluntary childlessness  
172 research (Shaw, 2011) and identity and sexuality are important intersecting themes in IPA  
173 work to-date (Smith et al., 2009).

174           The use of IPA in this study is broadly experiential in the sense that language is  
175 treated as a tool for communicating thoughts, feelings and experiences (Braun & Clarke,  
176 2013) and underpinned by a critical realist ontology (Madill et al., 2000). This critical realist  
177 ontology allows for the exploration of the meanings, experiences, and material implications  
178 of childfree lesbian lives, while locating these within particular cultural contexts (e.g.  
179 pronatalist, heteronormative) (Ussher, 1999). Thus, the current approach to IPA is  
180 underpinned by a more socially contextualised account of experience than is perhaps typical  
181 of much published IPA research. It is also explicitly informed by feminist and queer  
182 perspectives on the family (e.g. Allen, 2016; Wilson, 2013), and the sociological  
183 conceptualisation of family as something that we ‘do’ (Morgan, 2011) and a corresponding  
184 concern with the ways families are created, made, and remade through everyday practices of  
185 sharing resources, care and intimacy (Gabb & Fink, 2015).

## 186 **Participants and Recruitment**

187           Participants were recruited in various ways, including posting calls for participants on  
188 childfree online forums, and advertising the study on online and local LGBT groups, in the  
189 comments section of a newspaper article on childfree women, and via social media (e.g.  
190 *Facebook*). Inclusion criteria included self-identifying as having made an active choice to be  
191 childfree and being aged 35 years or older. The participants were aged 43-65 (mean 51  
192 years), and were privileged in multiple ways– they were all white, middle class, and educated  
193 to at least degree level. Three were single or separated and two were cohabiting with a  
194 partner (none of the participants were in a relationship with another participant). The  
195 participants were asked to select five words to describe their social, political and religious  
196 affiliations. The words they chose indicated broadly left-leaning political affiliations – left,  
197 feminist, socialist, atheist, pagan, green.

## 198 **Interviews**

199           The women participated in semi-structured interviews, each lasting for around an hour  
200 and conducted by the second, third and fourth authors in the spring and summer of 2015.  
201 Interviews are regarded as an ideal method for IPA because of the in-depth focus on  
202 individual accounts of experience (Gill, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). A semi-structured  
203 interview guide was developed based on a review of the literature and the aims of the  
204 research. The guide began with broad questions about participants' childfree backgrounds  
205 before moving to more specific questions. Topics included the women's relationships with  
206 others, social marginalisation, experiences of children, and the impact of being childfree. The  
207 interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed orthographically for the purposes of analysis  
208 by the fourth author (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participants were invited to select a pseudonym  
209 to be included in research reports.

#### 210 **Data analysis**

211           The analytic process – conducted by the first author, and reviewed and discussed with  
212 the other authors – followed the procedures detailed by Smith et al. (2009) and first involved  
213 close attention to each individual interview, identifying portions of the interview that were  
214 particularly pertinent to the childfree *lesbian* experience. The transcripts were read and re-  
215 read and reflective notes made about the meaning of relevant data excerpts. Analysis then  
216 progressed to more formalised coding and theme development for each individual participant,  
217 before, finally, producing synthesised themes for the whole participant group. The initial –  
218 inductive – analytic focus was on 'staying close' to the women's sense-making, but as the  
219 analysis progressed and became more interpretive, the theoretical lenses of feminism and  
220 queer theory, and sociological conceptions of family practices, previously noted, more  
221 explicitly informed the interpretation of the women's accounts, and the development of the  
222 final 3 superordinate themes.

223 This research is ‘Big Q’ qualitative, that is, located within a qualitative paradigm  
224 (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Kidder & Fine, 1987), and as such strategies for ensuring quality  
225 centre on – often challenging to evidence – practices such as sensitivity to context,  
226 reflexivity, depth of engagement, rigor and theoretical coherence (Yardley, 2015), rather than  
227 positivist conceptions of coding reliability. Although the reader is the ultimate judge of the  
228 quality and transferability to other contexts of qualitative findings, the researcher is  
229 responsible for presenting their research in a way that facilitates such judgements – including  
230 providing appropriate contextualisation of the study and direct quotations from the data  
231 (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This paper has been prepared accordingly.

232 Three superordinate themes capture the specific experiences of childfree lesbian/queer  
233 women: 1) Essentially childfree? (But I like children of course!); 2) Being childfree is (or  
234 was) different for lesbians; and 3) Doing family differently. Each of these themes is now  
235 discussed in turn. The data excerpts have been edited to aid readability and comprehension  
236 (i.e. removing some of the disfluencies of the spoken word, including hesitation, false starts,  
237 and repetition of words, and adding punctuation). Transcription notation includes underlining  
238 to indicate emphasis on a particular word and inverted commas to indicate reported speech or  
239 thoughts.

## 240 Results

### 241 **Essentially Childfree? (But I Like Children Of Course!)**

242 This theme demonstrates the continuing social difficulty of articulating a choice to  
243 remain childfree, even for a group of women that is arguably still expected to be childless. It  
244 captures the complex and often contradictory ways the women made sense of their  
245 childlessness, both as something not chosen, *and* as something biographically and politically  
246 motivated. They described their childlessness as both essential and innate (signalled by  
247 expressions of a lack of maternal or parental desire), *and* the result of a rejection of

248 motherhood and being a wife (rather than a rejection of children). They often related their  
249 rejection of motherhood to early experiences of ‘forced’ parental responsibilities for younger  
250 siblings. The following quotations illustrate some of these tensions:

251 “it’s not an identity for me, it’s just something I never ever wanted... I’ve never had a  
252 maternal urge to have a child at all... I don’t dislike children at all, I’ve got nephews  
253 and nieces, friends have got children” (Debbie).

254 “I don’t know if I could say it was a really active decision, it was just something that I  
255 didn’t really want... realising that I was gay, and it was like, ‘oh I’m probably not  
256 going to have kids and I’m probably not going to get married’... I don’t dislike kids at  
257 all” (Rosa Marvin).

258 All of the women could be classified as ‘early articulators,’ as making a decision early  
259 in life to remain childfree. However, this was often framed as something that was not chosen  
260 or decided, but simply articulated, they were essentially or innately childfree, they did not  
261 have any maternal or parental desire (Mezey, 2008). In our wider study, the theme of freedom  
262 (from parental responsibilities) was predominant, but for Rosa Marvin, a sense of freedom  
263 was equated with making an active choice not to parent: “it didn’t feel so much an active  
264 choice that I could really appreciate I’ve not done this thing.” Such a framing underscored the  
265 lack of choice in her childlessness; it just was. For some, their acknowledgement of their  
266 essential childfreedom (at a young age) was related to or was an expression of their non-  
267 heterosexuality – being queer equated to being childfree, although they later discovered that  
268 lesbians can and do have children, but this did not necessarily impact on their non-choice to  
269 remain childfree. Others did not see any link between their sexuality and being childfree.

270 At the same time as discussing their lack of parental desire, the women took pains to  
271 emphasise that they liked children, and often did so without any prompting from the  
272 interviewer, and often within a few lines of articulating their essential childfreedom. A couple

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273 of the women positioned themselves as “selfish and childish and irresponsible” as Debbie put  
274 it, but even when they did this, it was always with humour and self-parody. The women, even  
275 those who presented themselves as selfish, evidenced their liking of children by talking about  
276 their relationships with nieces and nephews and friends’ children, and about working with  
277 children in their professional lives.

278         How is it possible to make sense of this emphasis on liking children, and the fact that  
279 the women clearly felt they could not express a lack of desire for children without following  
280 this with reassuring statements about liking or loving children? Arguably, this speaks to the  
281 social difficulty, even for lesbians (a group who might still arguably be expected to be  
282 childfree, although this may be changing), of articulating the choice to be childfree. It appears  
283 not to be socially acceptable, even stigmatised, to express dislike for children; this can only  
284 be done through comedy, self-parody and exaggeration, and through taking ownership of the  
285 label ‘selfish’ (see also Terry & Braun, 2012). This tension in the women’s accounts also  
286 perhaps reflects that fact that the lesbian women, like many of the heterosexual women in the  
287 wider study (Authors, 2017), viewed themselves as rejecting motherhood in a patriarchal  
288 society, and dominant notions of womanhood and femininity, rather than rejecting children,  
289 and often framed this in terms of a feminist critique of patriarchy. The lesbian women also  
290 saw themselves as rejecting the idea of being a (man’s) wife: “I never wanted to be a wife for  
291 obvious reasons” (Debbie). In the view of the participants, although mothers generally have a  
292 higher status than childfree women in the wider society, the costs of being a mother are great  
293 – responsibility for childcare, selflessness, being blamed when things go wrong, being  
294 subservient, restricted, and having to bask in others’ achievements rather than your own.

295         Relatedly, and in contradiction to their self-presentation as essentially childfree, the  
296 women discussed biographical and psychological justifications for their lack of parental  
297 desire, related to their own experiences of being poorly parented. This included having

298 parents who “weren’t a great model” (Joanne), and having parental responsibilities for  
299 siblings early in life, and not having a choice in this. As the oldest child in her family, Debbie  
300 “had to go to the role of being the other adult.” The women feared parenting like their parents  
301 did or like *they* themselves did – resentfully – when compelled to parent their siblings  
302 (Mollen, 2006; Mezey, 2008). Debbie watched her mother struggle as a single parent: “the  
303 woman just had no life... I seem to remember her miserable all the time... do that you really  
304 get something out of this, because you’re just constantly stressed and short of money...  
305 pulled one way and another.” She felt her mother was not able to “emotionally engage” with  
306 her and her siblings. The women also spoke of ‘losing’ siblings in ways that were traumatic –  
307 through death or care orders, and in their professional lives working with “really fucked up  
308 families” (Rosa Marvin).

309       To summarise, for these women their childfreedom was framed both as something  
310 innate and essential and as part and parcel of a political rejection of motherhood and  
311 dominant notions of womanhood in a patriarchal society, and their first-hand experiences of  
312 poor parenting and the struggles of motherhood.

### 313 **Being Childfree Is (Or Was) Different For Lesbians**

314       This theme captures the way in which the women framed being childfree as in many  
315 ways inextricably linked to being lesbian, and as both in some ways easier and in others more  
316 difficult for lesbians, while at the same time also acknowledging that the context for being a  
317 childfree lesbian was changing. These changes included the greater recognition and visibility  
318 of same-sex marriage and lesbian parenting in the larger socio-cultural context, which could  
319 lead to the unwelcome imposition of heteronormative expectations such as that being in a  
320 relationship would inevitably point to desire to have children.

321       All of the women viewed being childfree as to a greater or lesser extent different for  
322 lesbians than for heterosexual women. As noted in relation to the previous theme, some of the

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323 women spoke about the fact that they associated being lesbian with childlessness when  
324 younger: “I came out at such an early age, it was a time when it wasn’t considered even an  
325 option that people were even aware that you could go and make a baby” (Debbie). And, for  
326 some, this association remained: “it intersects I think in the nature of the community” (Jane).

327         The women reflected on the fact that even they conform to wider assumptions that  
328 equate lesbianism and childlessness. Debbie spoke of a female friend – heterosexual and  
329 married – and the fact that she had always wondered why this friend (Judy) does not have  
330 children:

331             “and yet [my friend Laura] is a lesbian and is married to [Jenny] and has been with  
332 her twenty-five years, and they’ve no children, and it doesn’t even cross my mind to  
333 think why they’ve not got children... I’d not even thought about it ‘til I read the  
334 information sheet [for the study] and I thought ‘oh yeah maybe it’s because they’re  
335 lesbians,’ I didn’t even question it, whereas with [my heterosexual friend Judy] it does  
336 strike me as unusual.”

337         For these women, being childfree was ‘normal’ among their lesbian friends, they were  
338 in the majority – “most of them don’t have children” (Joanne). This sometimes meant they do  
339 not have much contact with children – a source of feelings of loss for Joanne. For Louise, one  
340 of the freedoms of childlessness was the opportunity to spend time with other lesbians (the  
341 women felt they would have spent more time with heterosexual women if they themselves  
342 had had children (see also Bartlett, 1994).

343         Rosa Marvin felt that the same pressures and expectations that straight women  
344 experience in everyday life can also be experienced by queer women, especially if they do  
345 not look obviously queer or are not ‘out’: “there’s something about kind of being my age and  
346 you know ‘well you’ve got long hair so you’re probably straight’” (see also Gillespie, 2000;

347 Mollen, 2006). However, pressures and expectations (from family members) can stop when  
348 you come out – “when I came out then I think my parents probably would have thought ‘oh  
349 that’s it then, Rosa’s not going to have any children’” (see also Gillespie, 1999).

350 There was also an acknowledgement that things had changed (or were changing) in  
351 lesbian communities, that having children was “the next fashionable thing to do” (Jane).

352 Debbie also reflected on the changes in lesbian communities:

353 “something that I never thought would be expected once I came out as lesbian, [it’s]  
354 very different now, lots of younger couples you know choosing to have children,  
355 whereas when I came out I was sort of sixteen...lesbian women I had contact with  
356 that had children had been in relationships with men before, so it wasn’t even  
357 something that I felt any kind of social pressure, having come out so very early on,  
358 there was never any expectation from family or friends that you would have a child.”

359 The women thought that the lesbian ‘baby boom’ reflected or resulted from a  
360 softening of the more political and more policed norms in lesbian communities in the 1970s  
361 and 1980s; as Jane wryly observed, lesbians in the 1970s and 1980s had cats not children.

362 Even though the women thought things had changed, and lesbian parenting was more  
363 socially recognised and visible, on the whole they felt there was still less pressure on lesbians  
364 to have children, and it was often still assumed that lesbians are childfree: “I definitely think  
365 it’s more usual for people who aren’t straight to not have kids, so I think often that’s kind of  
366 what people will assume, yeah almost like it goes hand in hand” (Rosa Marvin). The women  
367 certainly felt it was easier to be childfree among other lesbians (but perhaps more difficult  
368 with [heterosexual] acquaintances; see below): “because of the overlap between feminism  
369 and lesbianism there’s quite a lot of respect for women making decisions like that [to be  
370 childfree] partly because it’s a fairly common position to be in” (Louise). Consequentially,  
371 lesbians having children did not necessarily create pressure on childfree lesbians to consider

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372 parenting, because lesbian communities respected women's choices: "I was in several kind of  
373 feminist lesbian type groups, because a lot of lesbians were mothers, you know, and still are,  
374 but it wasn't like an issue about, you know, the rest of us thinking 'now are we going to have  
375 children or are we not'" (Joanne).

376         Whereas many of the women in relationships with men in the wider study spoke about  
377 experiencing a sense of pressure to at least contemplate having children when their  
378 (heterosexual) friends started to have children, for the lesbian women the same pressures did  
379 not arise. For Jane, lots of her lesbian friends having children encouraged her to reflect on  
380 what she wanted and take stock (but there was no pressure): "I was quite clear that I didn't  
381 want children."

382         Although the women felt that on balance there was still less pressure on (out/visible)  
383 lesbians, social change meant questions were sometimes asked. Debbie recounted an  
384 experience of a male colleague asking her:

385         "oh when you and [partner] have got married will you have children?', and I just  
386 looked at him and thought 'what you think civil partnership's only just come in in the  
387 last sort of eighteen months, we're sort of hanging around waiting for it to become  
388 legal just so that we could have children, you know, within the nuclear legal nuclear  
389 family'... I was really shocked he asked if we would have children, because why  
390 would we do that."

391         This question was not experienced by Debbie as pronatalist pressure but as  
392 heteronormativity; the imposition of a heterosexual life narrative onto lesbians. The women  
393 also felt that being a lesbian and childfree was a 'double whammy' of difference, that made it  
394 harder to relate to (heterosexual) others, or for (heterosexual) others to relate to them, in  
395 everyday life. From being unintelligible to others on overseas holidays because of not having  
396 a husband or children to creating dilemmas in social interaction (how to connect with new

397 people). At the same time, Rosa Marvin would come out about her partner's legal  
398 guardianship of a child in order to "shatter people's stereotypes" and challenge heterosexist  
399 assumptions, "that if you're gay you can't have children."

#### 400 **Doing Family Differently**

401 This final theme captures the ways in which the women made meaning of family,  
402 drawing on conceptualisations of family and intimate relationships that departed from  
403 traditional, heteronormative values and rhetoric. The women often had close relationships  
404 with adults and children for which they felt there was no language to describe the nature of  
405 the relationship, especially to heterosexual others. The women viewed their childfreedom as  
406 part and parcel of 'doing family differently,' but at the same time, most of them were not  
407 lacking relationships with children. Furthermore, an ethic of 'co-independence' (a queer  
408 relational ethic centred on independence and equality, rather the 'interdependence,' and  
409 prioritisation of 'the couple' as the exclusive focus of sexual and emotional intimacy,  
410 associated with heteronormative relationships, see Heaphy, 2015; Weeks et al., 2001) in  
411 lesbian relationships appeared to underpin the women's, and their current and former  
412 partners', reproductive decision making.

413 Blackstone (2014) argued that non-human animals such as pets play a significant role  
414 in the relationships and families of the childfree (and pets may fill the role of dependants) and  
415 urged voluntary childlessness researchers to consider the role pets play in the lives of the  
416 childfree. Recent British research on long term couples – that included both non-heterosexual  
417 and childless couples – found that pets are important to childless couples (and couples  
418 without children living at home) (Gabb & Fink, 2015). For this reason, we asked the women  
419 in the wider study about pet ownership and most were reluctant to subscribe to the notion that  
420 pets are child substitutes in anything other than a 'humorous' way: "I'll talk to the cats and  
421 I'll kind of do a cat voice back how strange is that? So, gosh are they being a substitute child,

422 god knows, or am I just insane?” (Jane). For lesbian participants, making sense of their  
423 relationship with pets had also been shaped by the “mad lesbian cat lady” (Debbie) “classic  
424 lesbian stereotype” (Jane), and indeed the notion that lesbians have ‘cats not kids.’ Indeed,  
425 three participants had one or more cats (one had a cat not out of choice – the cat was left by a  
426 former partner), one co-owned a dog and one wanted a dog. Pets were seen as ‘sort of’ child  
427 substitutes but our participants were as reluctant as the heterosexual women in the wider  
428 study to fully embrace that concept: If they did not completely dismiss it, they engaged with  
429 it in a humorous way as Jane did above. Rosa Marvin was very dismissive of the notion that  
430 pets are child substitutes and contrasted her desire for a dog with her lack of desire for a  
431 child; she wanted a dog precisely because it is a dog and not a child, and therefore not a child  
432 substitute. In general, pets were seen as easier than children (financially, emotionally,  
433 practically): “some responsibility but not nearly as much” (Jane).

434 Louise shared a dog, and was very clear it was not *her* dog, it was shared. We argue  
435 that Louise’s dog sharing was indicative of a different way of thinking about and doing  
436 family and intimate relationships. For some participants, this approximated queer notions of  
437 ‘families of choice,’ kin-like networks of relationships based on friendship and commitments  
438 ‘beyond blood’ (Weeks et al., 2001) and a relational ethic of ‘co-independence,’ combining  
439 individual autonomy with strong reciprocity (egalitarian and democratic relationships)  
440 (Weeks et al., 2001). Their childfreedom was understood as part of this broader ‘doing family  
441 differently’ ethos. As Louise commented:

442 “I have a slightly unusual family in that my brother’s gay as well, so my sisters are  
443 both heterosexual and have children, and my brother and his partner don’t have  
444 children, so we’ve got a normal family, but not one where everybody has children  
445 anyway, but I’ve experienced quite a lot of different forms of family during my life.”

446 Rosa Marvin also rejected the (traditional) concept of family: “I think family is a  
447 really unknown concept for me in some ways... I don’t really get it... family’s always been a  
448 little bit suspect.” For some, their familial relationships were so different from the norm,  
449 “there isn’t a language” (Louise) to easily describe the nature of the relationships, especially  
450 to heterosexual others. Louise had a former partner who wanted to get pregnant; their  
451 relationship ended and the partner got pregnant with another woman, Louise was there for the  
452 birth of the child, and went to live overseas for a year to spend time with them when they  
453 moved. She came back to the UK because she used to share a house with a friend who  
454 adopted a child as a single parent (Louise was the “mad auntie in the attic”) and promised the  
455 child to come back: “so I consider them my family as well... [family is] slightly different I  
456 guess in lesbian relationships.” Louise described these children as her “semi-children,” for  
457 want of a better expression.

458 The women could also be drawn into relationships with children through their female  
459 partners – either because the partner has or wanted children or because their partner wanted  
460 some kind of relationship with other people’s children. Jane’s partner wanted a relationship  
461 with a friend’s child – they were both present for the birth, the child (now an adult) stays with  
462 them. Joanne considered fostering with a female partner at one stage, and spoke about the  
463 fact that had she been with a female partner who really wanted children, it might have  
464 happened. Thus, like childfree heterosexual women, the decision to be childfree for lesbians  
465 is not cast in stone, and reproductive decisions are made in particular relational contexts  
466 (Gillespie, 2003; Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014). Even for these ‘early articulators,’ their choice to  
467 remain childfree was not fixed, when a female partner expressed a desire for children or  
468 developing some kind of relationship with a child, this could prompt reconsideration of the  
469 (non)choice to be childfree (Rosa Marvin).



495 and normative (although this is changing), it remains socially difficult to articulate a desire to  
496 remain childfree. They framed their childfreedom both as essential and innate and as  
497 politically and biographically motivated – a rejection of motherhood and traditional  
498 womanhood (being a wife) in a patriarchal society, informed by their own experiences of  
499 being parented and parenting early in life (Mollen, 2006; Mezey, 2008). Houseknecht (1987)  
500 argued that women and men rationalise their decision to be childfree by drawing on “an  
501 acceptable vocabulary of motives previously established by the historical epoch and the  
502 social structure in which one lives” (p. 316). The notion that one is ‘essentially childfree’  
503 appears to be a currently acceptable framing of being childfree. For example, Morison et al.  
504 (2016) analysed posts to researcher generated online forums and email interviews with 98  
505 childfree women and men. They argued that the fact that some women (and men) position  
506 themselves as ‘naturally childfree’ – through describing their childlessness as innate and  
507 immutable, fixed at birth (‘born that way’) – can be understood as a strategy for managing the  
508 stigma of voluntary childlessness. Through disavowing choice and minimising their  
509 responsibility for their childlessness, it just *is*. Thus, arguably the stigma of being childfree is  
510 such that it shapes even how people explain their ‘decision’ to remain childfree.

511         Being lesbian and childfree is in many ways different from being heterosexual and  
512 childfree – childfreedom afforded the women the *freedom* to spend time and form  
513 relationships with other lesbians (similarly to Bartlett, 1994). Furthermore, from our  
514 perspective as researchers, overall, the impression we developed of our lesbian participants is  
515 that they were far less isolated in their childfreedom than the heterosexual woman in the  
516 wider study (Authors, 2017). Friends (especially lesbian friends) having children did not  
517 prompt questioning of their decision and feelings of loss (of the friendship) in the same way  
518 that it did for the heterosexual women in the wider study. There was support for women’s  
519 choices both to parent and to remain childfree in lesbian communities, and the women did not

520 feel pressure to consider parenting when women in their lesbian communities chose to  
521 become parents. Other people (friends and family) did not expect them to have children (once  
522 they came out) (Gillespie, 1999) and they themselves did not question the childlessness of  
523 their lesbian friends. At the same time, there was recognition that the lesbian ‘baby boom’  
524 had resulted in greater visibility and recognition of lesbian parenting, and some participants  
525 had encountered the unwelcome imposition of heteronormative expectations onto their life  
526 narratives. The women also spoke of being lesbian and childfree as a ‘double whammy,’ two  
527 forms of difference that could make it difficult to connect with (heterosexual) people in  
528 mundane situations.

529         Discourses and practices of ‘families of choice’ and ‘co-independence’ in intimate  
530 partnerships (Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991) provided the lesbian women with a way of  
531 ‘doing’ family and childfreedom outside of dominant, heteronormative expectations. This of  
532 course raises questions about the normalising effects of marriage and parenting rights on the  
533 lives of queer people – including childfree lesbians – who live outside of dominant  
534 heteronormative institutions and practices of family (Mitchell et al., 2009). For example,  
535 research on queer youth in the last decade, what might be dubbed a ‘post-equality’ era in  
536 some Western nations, has found strong expectations of parenthood (e.g. D’Augelli, Redina,  
537 Grossman, Sinclair & Grossman, 2008). It may get even more (socially) difficult to be  
538 childfree and lesbian in the future. For this reason, both voluntary childlessness and LGBT  
539 family researchers should put childfree queer lives on the research agenda.

#### 540 **Limitations of the Study**

541         This study provided an in-depth exploration of the experiences of being childfree for a  
542 small group of white, middle class lesbians in midlife. The relative privilege of the  
543 participants should be considered when assessing the applicability of these findings to other  
544 groups of childfree lesbians, and to non-heterosexual populations more broadly. Further

545 research is needed to develop our understanding of the lived experience of being childfree for  
546 lesbians and for other members of queer communities. Research on childfree bisexual and  
547 trans people is particularly limited (research on trans childfree lives is limited to a study of  
548 the reproductive desires of the cis women partners of trans men, Pfeffer, 2012). Bisexual  
549 participants have often been amalgamated with lesbian/gay participants in the limited  
550 literature that includes childless/childfree non-heterosexuals (e.g. Robinson & Brewster,  
551 2014), when wider evidence points to important differences in bisexual and gay/lesbian  
552 experience, and the importance of disaggregating bisexual and lesbian/gay experiences to  
553 fully understand the former (Barker et al., 2012). Future research should examine how the  
554 experiences of childfree lesbians, and other childfree queers, are shaped by factors such as  
555 race and ethnicity, religion, social class and ability, and how both the stigmatisations of  
556 childlessness in strongly pronatalist cultures and communities and coercive pronatalism (the  
557 stratification of pressures to reproduce, and the active discouragement of reproduction, based  
558 on factors such as class, race, ability etc, Morison et al., 2016) shape queer experiences of  
559 choosing and living out childfreedom.

### 560 **Conclusions**

561 LGBT family research has begun to examine queer reproductive decision making (e.g.  
562 Riskind & Patterson, 2010), but to-date this has been predominantly oriented to the choice to  
563 parent, rather than the choice to remain childfree. In understanding queer family lives, it is  
564 equally important to consider pathways to childlessness/childfreedom as well as to  
565 parenthood, and to decentre pronatalist definitions of the family in LGBT family studies. The  
566 voluntary childlessness literature has begun to move away from its early preoccupation with  
567 pathways to childlessness to explore the texture and substance of childfree lives. Most  
568 recently, researchers have engaged with notions of the childfree family and sought to  
569 challenge assumptions, underpinned by pronatalist definitions of family, that childfree people

570 do not ‘do’ family (e.g. Blackstone, 2014; Blackstone & Greenleaf, 2015). Indeed, the choice  
571 not to have children has been described as “one of the most remarkable changes in the  
572 modern family during the last few decades” (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008, p. 347). However, even  
573 though increased childlessness is often cited as evidence of family change, it has until  
574 recently been rarely addressed in the family studies literature. Blackstone (2014) argues that  
575 (heterosexual) childfree couples fulfil many of the functions of family, including  
576 companionship, intimacy and social reproduction (the work needed to help children develop  
577 into productive adults). To avoid reproducing the heteronormativity of earlier voluntary  
578 childlessness research and to fully understand what it means to ‘do’ family without being a  
579 parent, it is important that same-sex couples are included in future research on childfree  
580 families.

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<sup>1</sup> This nomenclature is not without debate. Feminist literature on voluntary childlessness has criticised deficit orientated language (e.g. *childless* or *non-mother*) (e.g. Gillespie, 1999). Adding complexity, some scholars have argued that the term 'childfree' risks glorifying non-motherhood, and note some women prefer to simply state that they do not want to have children (Moore, 2014). In this paper, we use both *childless* and *childfree* to reflect the context of the research under discussion. However, wherever appropriate we use the term 'childfree' as a *voluntary* status based on the comments of women in our own and other recent research (e.g. Peterson, 2015) which suggest that this is the least disliked term.