# WOMEN WITHOUT CHILDREN:

# IDENTITY, CHOICE, RESPONSIBILITY

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

WOMEN WITHOUT CHILDREN:
IDENTITY, CHOICE, RESPONSIBILITY

presented by Candace Korasick,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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To my mother for supporting my “choices”

&

To Eric for sticking with me

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## Chapter I: Introduction and Literature Review

Acceptable roles for women continue to expand. American women are entering and staying in the paid labor force in increasing numbers, and researchers have developed considerable interest in the reproductive choices of Western women and their partners. "As women have challenged their supposed physical, intellectual, spiritual, economic and social inferiority, sexual reproduction has become an increasingly important signifier by which women are differentiated from men" (Hird and Abshoff 2000: 347). It is, therefore, no surprise that there is a growing body of literature about women without children. The literature has grown beyond listing common characteristics, to include issues of stereotyping, discrimination, navigation of medical systems, and identity.

Researchers have been showing greater interest in issues of identity for women without children. Some authors try to assess how women construct feminine identities for themselves in the absence of motherhood (Abshoff 2000; Gillespie 1999; Ireland 1993; Izzard and Borden 2001). Others have focused on particular childless[1] identities (Campbell 1999; Letherby 1994, 1997). These researchers consistently assume that childlessness is a central identity. However, a careful reading of the literature reveals that this may not be so for all of the respondents. Some women seem to be childless by what Madelyn Cain (2001) calls happenstance. If we accept Sheldon Stryker's (1991) premise that the salience of an identity is related to one's commitment to it, then it is plausible that the childless identity is not salient for some childless women.

[1] Childless is used herein to refer to anyone who has not taken up parenthood, regardless of how they came to be in this position.

Studies of women who do not have children generally make distinctions between voluntarily childless women and involuntarily childless women, and the distinction is generally articulated as choice (Abshoff 2000; Bartlett 1994; Campbell 1985; Gillespie 1999; Ireland 1993; Lang 1991; Morell 1994; Veevers 1980). In essence, the language of choice for women without children is an attribution of cause to personal factors, which include ability, exertion and intention (Heider 1958). However, understanding a woman's childlessness to be the result of only personal factors leaves us with unidimensional knowledge. According to Heider (1958), people generally look at environmental factors as well as personal factors to explain behaviors. Certainly, many women do indeed choose not to have children, but "choice" is misleading. Many women point to situational factors (career, marital status, poverty, overpopulation, political unrest) that contribute to this choice (Cain 2001; Ireland 1993; Letherby and Williams 1999; Letherby 2002; Monach 1993; Morell 1994; Ratner 2000; Rothman 2000).

This study is fueled by two sets of concerns. The first is about the inevitability of childlessness as a major component of identity for women without children. Must this be so? The simple answer is no. Most often, the respondents in this body of literature know they are being solicited because they have no children, and they come to the interview prepared to discuss this identity. In contrast, my respondents knew only that I was interested in "identities of contemporary American women." (See Appendix A.) It was left entirely to the respondent how to answer the initial questions about who she thought herself to be. I did not introduce the issue of childlessness at this point in the interview so that it would only emerge if she drew on it in creating her identity.

The second concern is about the use of choice as a means of distinguishing between types of childless women. Women who are perceived as not having made an active choice to abstain from motherhood are labeled involuntarily childless, infertile, sterile, or sometimes even barren. Those who appear to have chosen childlessness may be called voluntarily childless, childless-by-choice, or childfree. This cognitive scheme dominates Western research on both women and men who have no children, but it may not be the most productive. This is not to say that these categories are false; as any sociology student should know, "If [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas [1928] 2003: 81). But these categories are socially constructed, and not all women will fall neatly into them.

Guided by the principles of social constructionism, this research examined the ways in which women without children account for themselves and create viable identities. One of the primary interests of social constructionism is the way people "describe, explain or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live" (Gergen 1985: 266). Language is of particular interest as it is a shared activity through which individuals typify and understand everyday life (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Gergen 1985). Therefore, it is primarily through narrative analysis that I explored the following questions: To what extent is childlessness a key identity for women without children? What other identities may be of more importance to them in organizing their daily lives? How does the discourse of choice impact identity formation? Is there a better conceptual framework for understanding differences among childless women and differences between them and mothers?

**Literature Review**

There are several academic lines of inquiry into childlessness. These include attempts to describe people who have no children, research into the existence of and responses to the stigma of not parenting, and explorations into the reasons for not parenting. Naturally, these are not mutually exclusive areas of research.

A lot of the descriptive research focuses on socially desirable characteristics that seem common among childless women: educational achievement, increased intimacy with their partners, increased participation in charitable organizations (Bartlett 1994; Campbell 1985; Lisle 1996; Morell 1994; Safer 1996). Some research highlights the ways in which women who are not mothers are actually very nurturing by reference to other caring roles (Abshoff 2000; Campbell 1999; Campbell 1985; Gillespie 1999; Ireland 1993; Letherby 1997; Morell 1994; Safter 1996) and the commonalities between mothers and non-mothers—domestic responsibilities, feminine occupations, and presentations of femininity (Gillespie 1999; Ireland 1993; Millenbach 2001).

Despite research extolling these positive characteristics, most studies of childlessness confirm that this is a stigmatized identity in Western society. Denise Polit (1978) was one of the first to explore others' attitudes toward women based on family size. She found that childless women were generally viewed less favorably than mothers, a finding that has been replicated in subsequent research (Jamison, *et al* 1979; Korasick 2000; Mueller and Yoder 1997). These findings mirror the experiences articulated by respondents in qualitative studies of childlessness. Women claim that people perceive them as neurotic, selfish, bitter, damaged, childish, incomplete and unfeminine (Abshoff 2000; Bartlett 1994; Campbell 1999; Campbell 1985; Franklin 1998; Gillespie 1999;

Hird 2003; Ireland 1993; Lang 1991; Letherby 1994, 1997; Letherby and Williams 1999; Lisle 1996; May 1995; Monach 1993; Morell 1994; Safer 1996; Veevers 1980). This is true regardless of a woman's supposed reason for not being a mother. In contrast, men are more likely to report challenges to their masculinity only if they are perceived to be *unable* to have children as opposed to having chosen not to have children (Abshoff 2000; Campbell 1985; Ireland 1993; Lunnenborg 1999; Monach 1993).

The ways in which non-parents try to compensate for this stigma seems to fall into three categories. Some adopt what Abshoff (2000) calls "strategic avoidance." These people avoid revealing their childless status, some even isolate themselves from others as much as possible (Campbell 1999; Letherby 1997; Monach 1993). Others join organizations based on a childless identity or at least cultivate friendships with other childless people as much as possible (Bartlett 1994; Campbell 1985; Letherby 1997; May 1995; Morell 1994; Safer 1996; Veevers 1980). Some, however, tackle the stigma head on, challenging stereotypes, speaking out and defending their status, or recasting people (especially mothers) as jealous of the freedom childlessness affords (Abshoff 2000; Gillespie 1999; Letherby 1997; Lisle 1996; Safer 1996).

As a woman who has no children, I have resorted to all three of these tactics in various situations. However, the more childless women I meet, the more I question whether all childless women feel the need to resort to *any* of these tactics. This line of inquiry never questions the centrality of childlessness to the identities of women who do not have children.

Although the demographic evidence suggests that childlessness is becoming more common (U.S. Census Bureau 2005), it is still a status that is held up to scrutiny (Abshoff

2000; Earle and Letherby 2003a; Gillespie 2000; Hird 2003; Layne 2003; Letherby 2002; Millenbach 2001; Rubin 2001). Hence, there is an extensive literature dealing with the reasons people give for their childlessness, whether or not those reasons are perceived as chosen or not, and this literature is directly tied to stigma management. For the most part, this literature presents categories of reasons people give for their childlessness when questioned (Abshoff 2000; Bartlett 1994; Campbell 1999; Campbell 1985; Franklin 1998; Gillespie 1999; Hird 2003; Ireland 1993; Lang 1991; Letherby 1994, 1997; Letherby and Williams 1999; Lisle 1996; May 1995; Monach 1993; Morell 1994; Safer 1996; Veevers 1980). One problem with this, as noted recently by Kristin Park (2005), is that it seems to imply that there is no motive for childlessness prior to being called on to account for it. More problematic is that we seem to get lost in the task of placing accounts into categories without examining the nuances of narratives.

Prior studies on childlessness rely upon three practices. The first of these is the focus on women. Because motherhood is more closely bound to womanhood than fatherhood is to manhood, most of the research to date has focused on childless women rather than childless men. Second, childless identities are assumed to be important to how these women understand themselves. Again, this is related to the correlation between motherhood and womanhood. The third common practice is that the issue of choice is generally used to make distinctions among childless women, with little, if any, thought given to other ways of understanding differences among these women. Each of these is discussed more fully below; however, there is another commonality of this literature that bears noting.

Research on childlessness is limited by a shared sampling problem, namely that the respondents in these studies are almost exclusively white and middle-class. While researchers acknowledge that this is a shortcoming, they rarely look past the fact that it impedes generalizability. The tacit assumption seems to be that minority women do not face the same pressure to be mothers as white women. This is derived from social policies that are meant to discourage underprivileged women from bearing children (Fraser and Gordon 1996; May 1995; Roberts 1997). But this assumes that pressures to reproduce come only from the dominant culture. It ignores the concerns of some minorities that social policies are akin to eugenics or even genocide (May 1995; Roberts 1997), as well as the pressure these women feel from their families and communities to contribute to the survival of their cultures through reproduction (Collins 1994, 1995). Furthermore, to discuss the ideology of womanhood as motherhood and then to omit minority women runs the risk of suggesting that minority women are not real women. Unfortunately, for reasons discussed in Chapter II, this research does little to rectify this problem, despite considerable effort to do so.

*Woman as Mother*

Motherhood is often assumed to be intrinsic to womanhood (Campbell 1999; Gillespie 2000; Glenn 1994; Hird 2003; Hoffnung 1995; Ireland 1993; Monach 1993; Roberts 1997; Rothman 2000). "[M]others have been seen to be what women *are*, constituting the central core of normal, healthy feminine identity, women's social role and ultimately the meanings of the term *woman*" (Gillespie 2000: 225 emphasis original). This perception is rooted in philosophies about human nature and patriotic obligation, as

well as more modern psychological theories (Gillis [1996] 2002; May 1995; Rothman 2000). The connection between woman and mother is so widely accepted that women who have children are perceived as natural and their motives for doing so are rarely questioned (Campbell 1999; Dalton 2000; Gailey 2000; May 1995; Monach 1993). However, "'Motherhood' like gender itself is culturally constructed, … U.S. cultural views of motherhood [are] contingent on both time and place, rather than absolute or simply 'natural'" (McKee and Stone 2002: 112).

One of the foundations of what Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1994) calls the myth of contemporary motherhood is the belief that all women need to be mothers. As Michele Hoffnung states, "ultimate fulfillment *as a woman* is achieved by becoming a mother" (1995: 167, emphasis original). This belief is bolstered by theories of maternal bonding and psychoanalytical theories. Freudian theories, in particular, have supported the belief that all women need to be mothers in order to resolve their penis envy and adjust to heterosexual adulthood (Chodorow 1978; Ireland 1993; Hird 2003; Kilmartin 2000). Developmental psychology also posits motherhood as an important stage in adult development (Hird 2003; Phoenix, Woollett and Lloyd 1991; Rothman 2000).

Not only do these theories bolster the conflation of motherhood and womanhood, but they also posit an adult masculinity that is not dependent upon parenting behaviors. According to Freudian psychoanalysis, adult masculinity requires distance. Although a boy must learn to channel his sexual energies toward an appropriate object, he need not desire a child to become an adult (Chodorow 1978; Kilmartin 2000). "Independence is a central demand of the traditional masculine gender role" (Kilmartin 2000:263).

The assumption by researchers that most people link adult femininity with motherhood and the correlated assumption that people do not make a similar connection between fatherhood and adult masculinity underlie most research on childlessness. With the onus of procreation falling more heavily on women than on men, most research on childless people relies on studies of women. Indeed, those researchers who attempt to study both men and women find that women are more likely to accede to their requests for interviews (Abshoff 2000; Campbell 1985; Letherby 1997; May 1995; Monach 1993). Furthermore, the men who do participate say that the women in their lives bear the brunt of inquiry, blame and hostility for not having children. That is, the women are assumed to be responsible for childlessness rather than their husbands or partners (Abshoff 2000; Campbell 1985; Lunneborg 1999; Monach 1993).

Many researchers attribute the tendency to identify women as the source of a couple's childlessness to popular versions of these psychological theories. There are, however, more pragmatic reasons why childlessness is attributed to women more often than to men. These stem from the intersections of the structure of paid labor, the ideology of the nuclear family and biology of fertility.

The structure of paid labor in the United States is still premised on a full-time parent in the home. To get ahead in many professions requires long hours at work with little, if any, time devoted to family (Cooper [2000] 2004; Crittendon [2001] 2003). In her study of men working in Silicon Valley, Marianne Cooper found that many men who wanted to be involved fathers were reluctant to tell their bosses that they wanted time off to be with their children for fear of penalties such as poor reviews, less prominent assignments, and teasing. While many employers espoused a gender-equity ideology of

work, they relied on their wives as housekeepers and child rearers, and expected their employees to do the same (Cooper [2000] 2004). Unfortunately, few people can earn a family wage, making the stay-at-home spouse a luxury (Crittendon [2001] 2003; Rubin 1994).

When both parents must work outside of the home, women do much more of the housework and childrearing than men (Crittendon [2001] 2003; Hays 1996; Hoffnung 1995; Rubin [1983] 2004; Steil 1995). This is, not surprisingly, tied to Western ideologies of motherhood as natural for women. That is, women are purported to have innate abilities to nurture and subsequently are expected to do a lot, if not all, of the housework and child rearing (Crittendon [2001] 2003; Deutsch [1999] 2004 ; Rubin [1983] 2004; Steil 1995). Because the burden of this "second shift" (Hochschild 1989) falls to women, women are perceived to be less available to work the above-mentioned long hours required for career advancement. In contrast, a man's primary responsibility as a father is still provider, which is perceived to coincide with long hours at work. Therefore, many people view children as more of a hindrance to a woman's career advancement than to a man's. Indeed, Park found that voluntarily childless women were significantly more likely than men to view childlessness as *necessary* for "career satisfaction and success" (2005: 390).

Another way that work affects women's reproduction is tied to biology. Specifically, women have limited fecundity—the infamous biological clock—whereas a man's fertility is not hindered by age (Boston Women's Health Collective 1998; Franklin 1998; Layne 2003; Monach 1993). This may be problematic for women who hope to enter prestige professions, such as law, medicine and academia, which require extensive

education and long hours (Fox 1995; Jacobs and Winslow 2004; Kaufmann 1995). Again, childbearing is seen as a hindrance to women's career advancement, but the corollary is also evident here. Educational advancement is seen as an impediment to women's procreative goals, but not to men's. Men may delay having children until they finish school without worrying that advanced age will prevent them from parenting later. Regardless of the root cause of a couple's infertility, assisted reproductive technology (ART) furthers this belief in that most of the tests and procedures focus on female patients (Bartholet 1994; Franklin 1998; Letherby 2003; Millenbach 2001; Monach 1993; Rothman 2000; Rubin 2001).

Ideology, institutional practice and biology combine to make childbearing and childlessness women's issues. This is not to say that men do not want to be fathers and that they do not experience childlessness as a stigmatized identity (Lupton and Barclay 1997; Monach 1993), but women tend to bear the brunt of social pressure and blame (Abshoff 2000; Campbell 1985; May 1995; Monach 1993). "Fathers are men first and parents second," whereas "women are first, and foremost, mothers" (LaRossa 1997: 14, 16). Therefore, studies of childlessness that rely on female samples are still appropriate.

*Childless Identities*

Researchers assume that motherhood is a salient identity for women with children, either because these women accept the psychological construction of woman as mother or simply because they are immersed in the work of motherhood. It is therefore not surprising that these researchers also assume that childlessness is a key identity for women without children.

Self and identity have been of significant interest to social psychologists at least since the heyday of the American pragmatists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Biddle 1979; Gecas and Burke 1995; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). The literature on the self is particularly extensive, as theorists have deliberated over the existence of a core self, a malleable self, an evolving self, or multiple selves (Cooley [1902] 1964; Gergen 1991; Goffman 1959; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; James 1890; Lifton 1993; Mead 1934; Strauss 1959; Zurcher 1977). While the self is often posited as the process of reflexivity (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Biddle 1979; Cooley [1902] 1964; Gecas and Burke 1995; Mead 1934; Strauss 1959) and somewhat unknowable (Holstein and Gubrium 2000; James 1890; Zurcher 1977), identity is a more containable concept.

The term identity has been used in discussing self-concept, determining social location, and providing meaning in mass society. Identity may refer to group memberships, social roles, or character traits attributed to an actor on the basis of his or her behavior (Biddle 1979; Gecas and Burke 1995; Goffman [1963]1999; Zerubavel 1991, 1997). Identity, in short, is a designation and "to assign an *identity* to someone means only that we have given him or her a label" (Biddle 1979:90, emphasis original). That said, an individual has multiple identities (Biddle 1979; Gecas and Burke 1995; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Zerubavel 1991). Some of these will be particularistic identities—names, nicknames—unique to an individual (Biddle 1979), but the identities in which social scientists are most interested are collective identities.

These identities do not just occur. They emerge from interaction and are grounded in situational and institutional contexts (Gecas and Burke 1995; Goffman

[1963] 1999; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Ross and Nisbitt 1991; Scott and Lyman 1968). Through behavior and conversation, people signal identities to one another. Mannerisms, pronunciations, and vocabularies are combined with content to help us determine who someone is (Biddle 1979; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Furthermore, people will often try to negotiate an identity through narrative accounts. They may be trying to adopt or distance themselves from a particular identity, or to reshape another person's conception of an identity (Goffman [1963] 1999; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Scott and Lyman 1968). Regardless, this process requires some common understanding of the meaning of the identity under negotiation (Biddle 1979; Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

Social scientists researching the issue of childlessness utilize many labels—childless, childfree; childless-by-choice; voluntarily childless, involuntarily childless; traditional, transitional, transformative; early articulators, postponers; non-mothers; infertile. Each of these designations carries different connotations, and researchers often make distinctions among these labels according to attributions of choice, a problem which will be discussed later. Regardless of what terminology is used, women without children are described in opposition to mothers. Building on Simone DeBeauvoir's ([1949] 1976) theory, Carolyn Morell (1994) notes that there are mothers and others. If mothers are fulfilled, complete and primary, childless women are unfulfilled, incomplete and inferior. Hence, many researchers explore the issue of the stigma of the childless identity. In particular, researchers who explore identities of the so-called involuntarily childless find that people experience the inability to have children as an identity shock (Clarke *et al* 2006: 97; Millenbach 2001; Monach 1993; Rubin 2001). This seems to be

especially true of women, although infertility is a threat to men's virility as well (Clarke *et al* 2006; Monach 1993).

Focus on how childless women cope with or compensate for a stigmatized identity has meant that very few researchers to date have even asked if other identities may be more relevant to the women being interviewed. Part of this is likely to be an artifact of the research process. Identities are situationally bounded (Gecas and Burke 1995; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). In an interview about childlessness, the childless identity is likely to be salient. Certainly, some women emphasized childlessness as a key component of their female identities. Both Madelyn Cain (2001) and Kimberly Abshoff (2000) found that some women understood motherhood as a hindrance to their sexual identity, a vital element of their expression of themselves as women. But reference to other identities is usually only discussed to the extent that these identities are used to mitigate stigma (Abshoff 2000; Safer 1996) or in terms of the sublimation of these identities to the childless identity (Campbell 1999; Letherby 1997, 1999; Millenbach 2001; Monach 1993). The notion that childlessness might not be a salient identity is rarely discussed, although some researchers note that the salience of the childless identity tends to lessen with the advancement of age (Letherby 1999; Safer 1996).

*Choice as Problematic*

The literature on women without children seems to support continued distinctions between "voluntarily" and "involuntarily" childless women. This not only contributes to fragmentation of the literature, but also disguises the common experiences of all women without children.

Language shapes perception (Zerubavel 1997). It forces patterns and typifies experience (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The use of "choice" in studying childless women has made the categories of "voluntarily childless" and "involuntarily childless" seem inevitable to most researchers. Many make the distinction *a priori*, choosing to study a particular type of childless women (Abshoff 2000; Barlett 1994; Campbell 1985; Gillespie 1999; Korasick 2000; Letherby 1997, 2002; Monach 1993; Morell 1994; Safer 1996; Veevers 1980). Even those works that try to be inclusive usually separate these groups out for analysis (Ireland 1993; Lang 1991; May 1995; Polit 1978; Rubin 2001). Other researchers set out to study childless women more generally, but end up categorizing them according to each researcher's perception of the level of choice made by the respondents (Ireland 1993; Lang 1991; May 1995).

By focusing on choice, we have developed a literature in which there are only two (or at most three[2]) childless identities. It encourages us to place women's accounts in particular categories without attending to in-group differences or out-group similarities. Certainly, some researchers acknowledge this problem (Abshoff 2000; Cain 2001; Campbell 1999; Monach 1993) but few do more than mention it. A notable exception is Annily Campbell (1999) who, in *Childfree and Sterilized*, addresses one in-group difference. Campbell argues that women who pursue sterilization prior to giving birth represent a fundamentally different type of childless woman than those who continue to rely on other forms of contraception even though they perceive themselves as having chosen childlessness. This is a thought-provoking foray, but it does not adequately

2 Some researchers conceive of an in-between category of women who did not actively choose not have children so much as they never got around to motherhood.

challenge the notion of choice as a distinguishing characteristic between types of women without children.

Although research on women without children has relied predominantly on interviewing, extolling the richness of the data available through this method, few researchers have attended to the ways they themselves shape the information gathered. The interview is a collaborative process between the researcher and respondent (Ellis and Berger 2002), and the words and discourses the interviewer uses have consequences (Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Linde 1993). There is a fundamental difference in the potential responses between the following questions: Why did you *decide* not to have children? Why don't you have children? The first presupposes choice, introducing this issue into the interview. The second allows the respondent to draw more from environmental factors. The respondent is free to couch her status in whatever terms she feels best reflect her experience.

Of course, researchers did not conjure choice out of thin air. This is the distinction that is commonly made by people who have never read any of this literature. Both researchers and informants have acquired this discursive device from a U.S. culture that is well known for its over-emphasis on individual initiative. When researchers fail to critically examine this use, they reinforce this cultural tendency, as well as the boundaries that divide women who are not mothers. While some researchers have lamented this divide (Abshoff 2000; Cain 2001; Campbell 1999; Monach 1993), the only serious challenge to it came from Gayle Letherby and Catherine Williams (1999). Couched as a dialogue between an "involuntarily childless" woman (Letherby) and a "voluntarily childfree" woman (Williams), the authors explored the extent to which these labels

denied their personal experiences of being non-mothers. They make an excellent contribution to the literature by illuminating the complexity of women's childless narratives and drawing attention to issues of ambivalence and exclusion (1999). This is a key step to demonstrating the commonalities among non-mothers regardless of how they came to be childless.

Letherby and Williams also remind the reader that the so-called choice to remain childless is not necessarily a "determined decision not to have children after a period of deliberation" (Letherby and Williams 1999: 724). Indeed, several researchers have noted that while some voluntarily childless women can point to a clear decision, many of their choice narratives are really quite complex. While some women perceive themselves to have chosen childlessness, others perceived themselves as having never chosen to have children. (Abshoff 2000; Barlett 1994; Morell 1994). In recounting her respondents' narratives, Morell said, "[R]emaining childless was described as an on-going practice and/or an outcome determined by a variety of personal or social circumstances" (1994: 49).

In order to move past a dichotomous understanding of childless women, researchers need to look at both personal and environmental factors that impact women's understanding of their individual experiences. Researchers need to stop looking at choice as a definitive statement of preference at a particular point in time and begin to look at choice as a tool for narrating the process of childlessness. This makes it possible to see past choice as a delimiter. When researchers stop reifying this dichotomy, people can move beyond questioning how and why women choose childlessness and start asking how rhetorics of choice are used by childless women.

## Chapter II: Theoretical Overview and Methodology

Researchers take it for granted that childlessness will constitute a salient identity for childless women. This is partly the nature of language and partly the nature of research. "When we linguistically mark something we are essentially qualifying it as a 'specialized' form that we must distinguish from its more 'generic' form" (Brekhus 1998: 35). Researchers tend to focus on the marked category and, according to Wayne Brekhus (1998), overemphasize both the importance and the distinctiveness of these categories for the research subjects. In the case of women without children, researchers assume that being childless is going to be important and distinct for the women in question without considering how other qualities will impact their identities. "Although every individual possesses a combination of marked and unmarked traits we simply disattend to their unmarked characteristics and generalize as though only their marked ones mattered" (Brekhus 1998: 40).

Another problem in research concerned with marked categories is the tendency to ignore the difference among members of the category (Brekhus 1998). In the case of childless women, there are two marked categories: women who cannot have children and women who will not have children. Both categories are set apart from the category of mothers, but they are also set apart from one another. These concurrent practices obscure not only the potential commonalities among women who are mothers and those who are not, but also among women who have arrived at childlessness via different paths.

The trick, then, is for the researcher to find both a theory and a methodology that will allow her to circumvent these pitfalls while studying a marked population of interest.

Social constructionism is an obvious theoretical platform from which to analyze women's accounts of themselves. For it to work, however, it was necessary to employ a combination of survey and interview methods that allowed my respondents to remain unaware of the true aim of my project. Maintaining the naiveté of my subjects allowed them to tell me about themselves without having the marked category of childlessness imposed upon anyone. Their naiveté was crucial in order to analyze their accounts using the principles of social constructionism.

**Social Constructionism and Choice**

Social constructionism is a platform from which one may question everyday life (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Gergen 1985). "Constructionism asks one to suspend belief that commonly accepted categories or understanding receive their warrant through observation" (Gergen 1985: 267). Social reality is created through interactive processes between individuals and the dialectic relationship between each person and the social world (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Gergen 1985). As such, "*All* social reality is precarious. *All* societies are constructions in the face of chaos" (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 103, emphasis original).

Language is one means by which humans construct reality. It makes the world sensible. Language can be used to construct huge structures of knowledge that seem to transcend everyday life – science, religion, art. But it can also be used to construct symbols that are taken from everyday experiences and then present those symbols as if they have a reality outside of everyday life (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Gergen 1985). Knowledge is created through linguistic renderings and these linguistic renderings are

social practices. "[K]nowledge is not something people possess somewhere in their heads, but rather, something people do together" (Gergen 1985: 270).

People carve the world into chunks with language. Some things are lumped together linguistically to reduce the mental distance between them while other things are split apart in order to widen the gap (Zerubavel 1991, 1997). Eviator Zerubavel (1991) argues that people use this process to create identities, making mental distinctions between themselves and the rest of the world. Some of these identities are largely unmarked, "passively defined as unremarkable, *socially generic*, and profane" (Brekhus 1996: 502 emphasis original). Childlessness is marked and, therefore, subject to valuation. Choice is the concept used to split and lump women into childless identities.

The concept of choice resonates well with Americans and American ideologies of meritocracy and individuality. Individuals are deemed responsible for their lots in life, and behaviors are often attributed to personal rather than environmental factors (Heider 1958; Howard 1995; Ross and Nisbett 1991; Rothman 1993). But the extent to which one can make a purely autonomous choice has been a concern in a lot of the literature about reproduction in general and childlessness in particular (Abshoff 2000; Cain 2001; Franklin and Ragoné 1998; Monach 1993; Morell 1994; Rothman 2000; Sen and Snow 1994).

As noted above, the unexamined use of the concept of choice allows researchers and lay people to attribute a woman's childlessness to personal factors. They can attribute her status to something within her, be it ability, exertion or intention. But, in truth, choice is a complex concept. As Karl Mannheim ([1936] 2002) noted, whether or not a person upholds or challenges the status quo—in this case, having or not having

children—is not strictly an individually reasoned choice. Instead, it is a product of the political, economic, social and historical context (Rousseau 2002).

Choice, like all behavior, is constituted from both personal and environmental factors. While these may seem to be dichotomous sets of factors, it is not clearly so. According to Mannheim, "Strictly speaking it is incorrect to say that the single individual thinks. …He finds himself in an inherited situation with patterns of thought which are appropriate to this situation and attempts to elaborate further the inherited modes of response or to substitute others for them…" ([1936] 2002: 172). In essence, a lot of what people consider to be personal factors are very closely tied to environmental factors. Nonetheless, I have divided the elements impacting reproductive choice into personal and environmental factors, noting where I expect to find interplay between factors.

Fritz Heider (1958) posited that personal factors include ability, intention and exertion. Environmental factors may be understood as everything outside of personal factors (Heider 1958). The use of the word environmental over situational implies factors beyond the immediate time and space. It acknowledges that there are considerations beyond the here-and-now in women's choices related to childlessness. While social psychologists have made great use of the distinction between internal and external determinants of behavior, the literature on childlessness has focused on personal factors, primarily the ability and intention to bear a child. Even those researchers who acknowledge references to environmental factors in their respondents' narratives continue to reconstruct the dichotomy of choice. By examining the interplay of personal and environmental factors, researchers could begin to tease out some of the elements childless women may find relevant as they construct their identities.

**Accounts**

Women without children report that people feel entitled to an explanation for why they have no children (Abshoff 2000; Campbell 1985; Campbell 1999; Gillespie 2000; Letherby 1997, 2002; Letherby and Williams 1999; Mackey [1999] 2000). "An account is a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry" (Scott and Lyman 1968: 46). They are a means by which people attempt to restore equilibrium to a social situation after unusual behavior; they are not required of people who engage in everyday, expected behaviors (Scott and Lyman 1968). Childlessness is neither everyday nor expected for most women.

Marvin Scott and Stafford Lyman (1968) proposed two varieties of accounts: excuses and justifications. Excuses are employed when a person acknowledges that the behavior is unacceptable, but denies responsibility. For instance, "I had a flat tire" is an excuse for tardiness. A person employs a justification when she accepts responsibility for a behavior, but denies that that behavior is problematic. "Nothing ever gets done before 10 o'clock" is a justification for tardiness.

The language of choice divides women into those who have an excuse ("I cannot bear children.") and those who have a justification ("I will not bear children."). While this is not a useless understanding, reliance on choice as *the* concept around which women construct their accounts has limited the types of childless identities that researchers recognize. More specifically, the literature is limited to exploration of personal factors—ability or intention—to explain a woman's parental status. When the issue of control is introduced into understandings of excuses and justifications, environmental factors are admitted into consideration.

Accounts are not only a means of negotiating identities in social situations (Scott and Lyman 1968), but they are also a means by which people evince a sense of control and understanding of their environments (Orbuch 1997). It has been argued that when a person feels she has lost control of a situation, she will look to regain some control (Weiner 1980). This may be particularly relevant to American women as they live in a society that values individual responsibility. Furthermore, in some of the earliest social-psychological research on control, Julian Rotter (1966) asserted that people tend to believe they can affect the environment through their own behavior. According to this theoretical trajectory, women without children may utilize personal and environmental factors available to them to craft identities with varying degrees of control over themselves and their world. Life chances may be particularly relevant to understandings of oneself as in control.

Degrees of responsibility are meted out based on determinations of personal and impersonal causality, controllability and uncontrollability, negligence and intent. When people encounter a person with a marked identity, such as a woman without children, they search for the possibility of responsibility (Weiner 1995). If the root cause is deemed uncontrollable, pity is usually elicited. However, if cause is considered to be controllable, the person being judged may meet with disdain or even anger.

I contend that it is not whether or not women have chosen childlessness, but the level of control they perceive themselves to exercise over their childlessness that shapes their understandings of themselves. One woman may consider consulting a fertility specialist to be taking control of her body, whereas another may perceive that action to be giving control over to another. One woman may continue with conventional

contraception because keeping her options open is experienced as maintaining reproductive control, whereas another woman will interpret the failure rate of conventional contraception as potential loss of control over her body.

Of course, it would be folly to limit one's understanding of control to use or disuse of reproductive technology. To do so would simply be substituting the word control for the word choice. A full understanding of control must incorporate environmental factors. These may include career opportunities, marital status and quality, and family relationships. Any of these issues could be either a barrier or portal to reproduction. Furthermore, a broad understanding of control allows fate to be considered, which allows a woman to view her childlessness as beyond both her choice and her control. When focus shifts to control rather than choice, the multitude of accounts at a woman's disposal to craft a childless identity emerge.

Despite what one might think, truth has very little to do with whether or not an account will be honored, and people do offer accounts that are misleading or even untrue. "In interacting with others, the socialized person learns a repertoire of background expectations that are appropriate for a variety of others. Hence the 'normal' individual will change his account for different role others" (Scott and Lyman 1968: 53). This is not problematic, as people tend to assume different identities in different situations (Biddle 1979; Goffman 1959; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Ross and Nisbitt 1991; Scott and Lyman 1968). It is through accounts that women without children attempt to negotiate different identities for themselves as well as to mitigate stigma (Abshoff 2000; Gillespie 2000; Lang 1991; Letherby and Williams 1999).

Because reproductive control is tied to so many factors, childless women may construct a variety of accounts. Women may emphasize certain components while downplaying others in order to present a specific childless identity in a particular situation. This does not mean that there is one true childless identity for each childless woman. All identities are partial (Haraway 1991), and so all accounts, despite their different effects, may be true. Of course, the possibility that childless women may give false or misleading accounts cannot be precluded. Some women may utilize factors that were not important in their own cases, but that they believe will allow them to construct an account, and an identity, that others will honor.

**Methods**

I explored identity construction by childless women utilizing both a survey and an interview component. The survey utilized Manford Kuhn's and Thomas McPartland's (1954) Twenty-Statements Test (TST) while the interviews were semi-structured and in-depth. Each component was intended to elicit women's own words, to see what terms they use to communicate themselves to others.

Like many researchers before me, I chose to focus exclusively on women for both components. This is not because childless men do not sometimes experience childlessness as a significant identity. However, men are not called on to account for their condition as often as women are (Abshoff 2000; Campbell 1985; Lunneborg 1999; Monach 1993). People tend to assume that childlessness is a characteristic of the woman in a couple (Abshoff 2000; Campbell 1985; Millenbach 2001; Monach 1993); therefore women receive the brunt of inquiry. As I am interested in the use of accounts in identity

construction and women are more often expected to account for this particular status, a sample of women is fitting.

*Twenty-Statements Test*

The TST was developed in the 1950s as a means to assess self-attitudes and is based on the premise that a person can be an object to herself. Respondents are given a sheet of paper with 20 numbered blanks and asked to fill the blanks with answers to the question "Who am I?" Respondents are told to answer the question in the order in which they occur without concerning themselves with issues of logic or importance, or even with consideration of people other than themselves (Kuhn and McPartland 1954).

The respondents answer the question "Who am I?" as they see fit, without any suggestion from the researcher of the true aim of the study. This allows the researcher to elicit a wide variety of identities. More importantly, the TST allows respondents to use their own terms to describe themselves. This is very important in this study as so many labels have been employed in past research to describe women without children.

Although the depth of information available through the TST is limited, it offers several other benefits. First, it is quick and easy to administer. Respondents are expected to spend no more than 12 minutes compiling their lists. The ease of administration makes it amenable to being administered to several people at one time. Second, because a large sample is possible, more variables can be considered. It can be used to compare terms utilized by different categories of women.

A final advantage to using the TST is that it can approximate salience through ranking. Kuhn and McPartland did this by assigning a value of twenty to the first identity

on an individual's list, working their way down to a value of one for the twentieth item. Any identity of interest to the researcher which does not appear on the list is assigned a value of zero. This assumes of course that important identities will come to mind more quickly than less central identities (Kuhn and McPartland 1954). However, salience and importance are not synonymous. Recognizing this, some researchers advocate asking respondents to go back over their completed lists to rank the identities by importance (Rentsch and Heffner 1992).

Once the respondents finished their TSTs, including ranking identities by importance, they were asked to fill out a brief, demographic questionnaire. Obviously, some demographic characteristics are of interest. These include, but are not limited to, marital status, race, age, class, occupation, religion and educational attainment. More importantly, I could not assume that all respondents would include parental status in their 20 answers; it seemed likely that some women would list neither "mother" nor "childless."

I did not assess motherhood in the typical, straightforward manner of asking how many children a woman had. Instead, I asked women to check which of the following categories applied to them.

- I am rearing/have reared my own children (biological or adopted).
- I am rearing/have reared children of a friend or relative (informal adoption).
- I am rearing/have reared foster children.
- I am rearing/have reared stepchildren.
- I have stepchildren, but I do/did not rear them.
- I have never reared a child.

My criterion for determining parental status was not whether or not a woman had borne a child, but if she had done the work of rearing any children. Women who have adopted

children, formally or informally, or who have become foster parents, are engaged in the work of mothering and deserve recognition as such. Therefore, these women were counted as mothers, as were women who indicated that they were rearing their stepchildren.

Finally, respondents were asked if they would be interested in participating in a more in-depth interview about identity. It was important that respondents felt that the information they gave would be kept confidential. Therefore, contact information was requested on a separate, detachable sheet, which was stored separately from the rest of the questionnaire. (See Appendix B for full questionnaire.)

**Sampling.** For this portion of the study, I pursued a broad and large sample. Although my research is concerned with identities of women without children, I did not limit my sample by parental status, which enabled me to examine some of the key presumptions of the existing literature. I was particularly interested in whether or not parental status was a key identity for both mothers and non-mothers. Furthermore, I was able to compare how mothers and non-mothers use other identities (occupation, religion, gender, race, etc.) in constructing their identities.

I distributed the TST primarily[1] to several women's organizations in three municipal areas: a large metropolitan statistical area (Metro City), a city of under 100,000 (State City) and a small town (Townsville)[2]. These particular municipal areas were chosen because they are within driving distance of one another and because I had sufficient contacts in each. This made me confident that I could both distribute enough of

[1] A handful of questionnaires were distributed through personal contacts. This will be discussed under the interview section as these women were targeted because they met my interview criteria.
[2] Of course, these are pseudonyms, as are any organizational names.

the questionnaires in each area and easily coordinate future interviews.

The organizations surveyed varied in purpose and included professional, political, community service, religious and recreational organizations. Initial contact was through a letter of explanation (email or post) addressed to an official contact. The letter stated that the research was about identities of contemporary American women and indicated that I would contact the official by telephone at a date specified in the letter to discuss the possibility of distributing the questionnaire to members of the organization. For the most part, professional and political organizations were amenable to participating, and these were some of the first organizations surveyed. This included some African American sororities in Metro City and State City. (There were no African American sororities in Townsville.)

In an effort to broaden my sample over those of previous researchers, I also contacted some Jewish and Muslim organizations as well as a couple of organizations that serve at-risk populations of women. Only one of those organizations, a Jewish Woman's organization in Metro City responded to my inquiries. After discussing my proposal with members, the president informed me that the members declined to participate as the members "already feel too 'bombarded' by emails and surveys, and we really don't want to antagonize [anyone] by asking them to participate in something that is not directly related to our mission." I suspect that this was a common sentiment in the other organizations with which I was unable to follow up. In the case of organizations that serve poor and other at-risk populations, including Muslim women's organizations in a post-9/11 political climate, I found it difficult to fault organization leaders for not wanting to participate in research that did not directly benefit the population served.

It became obvious very quickly that, like previous samples, my respondents were primarily white and middle-class. While the leadership of African American sororities were very accommodating, the members were simply not returning the questionnaires in the numbers for which I had hoped. I was advised to contact some African American churches as well as to try to survey hospital employees. The rationale behind surveying hospital employees was that hospital occupations range from the very prestigious to the very lowly, and racial minorities tend to be overrepresented in service occupations. Both suggestions seemed promising. Indeed, some pastors were quite helpful and did distribute the questionnaire to their female parishioners. The hospitals proved problematic. The contact persons at the hospitals in both Metro City and Townsville were unresponsive to all my inquiries. I did at least receive responses from both hospitals I contacted in State City. One summarily dismissed my request and the other declined after some consideration.

I also noted early that the mean age for my respondents was older than I hoped. This trend prompted me to contact recreational organizations. I had the most luck with State City Community Recreation, distributing more questionnaires through this organization than any other. I attribute this largely to my acquaintance with the league director through our personal athletic activities. She was familiar with and supportive of the true purpose of this research. She was willing to let me distribute the TST to the women participating in all active league sports as long as I would do so in person before or after games, having contacted each team captain in advance. This stipulation made it unnecessary for her to divulge any contact information that was not already public information and also allowed me to demonstrate that this project had her support.

Unfortunately, I did not get a similar level of support from recreational organizations in either Metro City or Townsville, despite having contacts in both.

Because the contact with State City Community Recreation proved fruitful, I also tried contacting gyms and fitness centers that had exclusively female clientele. I received no response to my requests to franchises of a popular chain located in all three regions. However, the manager of a women-only fitness center in State City was interested enough to obtain approval from the owner to make my questionnaire available to members. Furthermore, after overhearing me complain to a friend about my sampling woes, the owner of the gym to which I belonged offered to distribute the TST to other female members. I accepted.

Despite soliciting organizations that serve various minorities, my sample remained largely Caucasian, largely Protestant Christian and largely middle-class. This research, therefore, does little to address issues of race and ethnicity, religion and class that have so far remained veiled.

**Dissemination.** I wanted to administer the questionnaire in person to ensure that the time limits were followed. However, this did not suit most of the organizations that agreed to participate in my research. I had to tailor the dissemination method to each organization and trust that the respondents would spend no more than 12 minutes completing their lists.

Many of the organization leaders requested that I come to a meeting or other function and give a brief presentation to members after which those who were interested in participating could take a questionnaire to complete later. At some of these, members asked for additional copies to give to members not in attendance or to friends and family

members, which I was happy to provide.

Other leaders preferred that I merely provide them with a certain number of questionnaires, which they then distributed to the members themselves, usually in person. One Metro City chapter of a national political organization mailed the questionnaire to members from their office with another routine mailing.[1] One professional organization preferred that I mail the questionnaire directly to members myself. Many of the organizations put out a call for research participants and left it to interested members to contact me for more information. Because I did not always have face-to-face contact with the members, a brief explanation indicating that I was conducting research on identities of contemporary American women was attached as a part of the questionnaire. (See Appendix C.)

Only one organization requested that I both disseminate and collect the questionnaires in person. I was invited to conduct my research at a banquet for several Metro City chapters of a national women's organization. My contact suggested that I hold a raffle to encourage participation. This was the only time an incentive was offered to survey participants. Before the meal, I gave a brief presentation which included assurances that members need not complete the questionnaire to be eligible for the raffle. The questionnaires were completed and collected before the meal.

Regardless of the dissemination method, all potential subjects were assured that accepting a questionnaire in no way bound them to complete it. Furthermore, they were informed that the last page, which requested contact information, should only be filled out if they were interested in participating in the interview portion of the project. When

[1] My offer to assist with the cost of postage was declined.

the questionnaires were not collected in person, I provided a pre-addressed, stamped envelope for the respondents to use to return the survey.

*In-Depth Interviews*

For the second phase of research I utilized narrative interviewing. This approach is concerned with how people make sense of themselves and their lives. This position is built on the works of pragmatists and symbolic interactionists and might best be articulated by James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (2000) who argue that people talk themselves into being, creating identities through narration. A more holistic approach such as this gives respondents room to elaborate the many factors that have contributed to who they have come to be. Furthermore, this method allowed me to ask direct questions about how the women viewed themselves as women and the extent to which their parenting status impacted their identities.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the respondents, although some demographic data were collected at the onset of the interview. The open-ended questions were intended to elicit the variety of accounts they used to communicate their identities to others. The initial questions were about who they felt themselves to be and who they thought others perceived them to be. It was very important that I not introduce the issue of childlessness until other identities had been explored. If however, a respondent brought this identity up early in the interview, attention could be given to it. It was my hope to avoid imposing childlessness as an identity connected to other identities while allowing the respondents to make these connections of their own accord.

In the second part of the interview, I inquired specifically about not having

children. At the beginning of this section, I asked each respondent to tell me the story of why she had no children. This allowed each woman to say as much, or as little, about the personal and environmental factors that contributed to her understandings of herself as childless. The remaining questions were intended to draw out information about how they dealt with and presented themselves to others. (See Appendix C for a list of the interview questions.)

Once all of the open-ended questions were explored, I asked the respondents to fill out a final questionnaire which consisted of reasons that people give for childbearing decisions. It was partially based on the Reason for Parenthood Scale (RPS), developed by Heather Rubin (2001). Rubin's RPS was limited to reasons people give for having children. This was only tangential to my research. Instead of focusing on the reasons why women have children, I was more interested in women's perceptions of socially acceptable accounts for avoiding child rearing. I was also interested in their perceptions of socially acceptable reasons to pursue or refuse assisted reproductive technology (ART). I also hoped that this list might prompt discussion of some topics that had not been covered yet.

In order to obtain data more appropriate to my research questions, I expanded on Heather Rubin's RPS in two ways. First, I developed three lists: reasons not to have children, reasons to pursue ART, and reasons not to pursue ART. Many of Rubin's items were included on the list of reasons for pursing ART, whereas the other two lists were derived primarily from existing literature on childlessness and my own list of factors that women may utilize in constructing childless identities. The other difference between the two questionnaires is in the type of evaluations women were asked to make. Rubin's

respondents were asked to indicate if each reason for having children was "not a reason," "a reason, but not an important one" or "an important reason" in each woman's own "decision to try and have or not have a child" (2001:203). In addition to this, my respondents were asked to indicate, on a five-point Likert scale, the degree to which they believed each reason was a good one. This questionnaire provided me with some data about each woman's beliefs about the acceptability of certain accounts, regardless of whether or not she considered a reason to be applicable in her own case. (See Appendix C for this questionnaire.)

Before each interview, respondents were asked to read and sign an informed consent statement. Once signed, I checked to see if the subject had any questions about the informed consent statement, and pointed out that they could choose to skip any question or stop the interview altogether without penalty. The offer to skip any question or stop the interview was repeated prior to the second section of the interview.

At the end of each interview, respondents were told the specific intent of this project. I explained that I was investigating the extent to which childless identities were inevitable for women who had no children and what other identities might be more salient. At this point, respondents were invited to tell me anything they felt I, as a researcher in this area, ought to know. They were also invited to ask me any questions about my research or my own experiences as a woman without children. All of my respondents seemed pleased by my intention to let them talk about themselves as childless women, or not talk about themselves as such, without me leading them toward childlessness before they would wish to discuss it.

**Sampling**. My initial interview subjects were taken from the pool of willing questionnaire respondents, all of whom had been offered a $10 incentive if they were interviewed. Women who met my criteria were contacted by either email or telephone to arrange a time and location for an interview.[1] These criteria included age, marital status and parental status.

The women interviewed were between 33 and 55 at the time of the interview. I chose this age range because it represents the end of fecundity and fertility for most women. In fact, 35 is considered "advanced age" by many fertility clinics, but is not thought to be too late to begin (Centers for Disease Control 2004). As for the upper limit of 55, studies of both voluntarily and involuntarily childless women suggest that as women age out of what are thought of as normal child-bearing years, the childless identity becomes less salient and that they are less frequently called on to account for this status (Letherby 1997, 2002; Millenbach 2001; Safer 1996). However, assisted reproductive technology (artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, etc.) has given the general public the impression that childbearing past the age of 45 is a possibility for many women.

Only women who were currently married, had been married, or who were in a committed heterosexual relationship were eligible for interviews. This was done primarily to avoid dead-end answers to questions about parental status . Although there seems to be tolerance of single motherhood in the United States, prominent ideologies still hold that childrearing is best left to married couples (Boston Women's Health

[1] Women who did not meet the interview criteria were sent a letter stating this and thanking them for their participation. (See Appendix A.)

Collective 1998; Cain 2001; Dunne 2000; Rothman 2000; Stacey 1996). My own analysis of General Social Survey data also indicated that marriage is a significant variable for predicting whether or not a woman will bear children (Korasick 1998). Marriage also presumes heterosexuality, and lesbian women were excluded from this research. This was not an easy decision as lesbians can and do bear and rear children. However, Cain (2001) found that her lesbian respondents were particularly likely to cite either lesbianism or singleness as the cause of their childlessness.

Determining who qualifies as a childless woman was more difficult than it may seem. Motherhood is both a biological and a social relationship. In the United States, biological relationships are privileged over adoptive ones (Dalton 2000; Gailey 2000; Rothman 2000). In fact, ART is predicated on the preference for children of "one's own" (Franklin and Ragone 1998; Rothman 2000). However, as noted previously, the social relationship is more important to me. Any woman who had done the *work* of mothering was considered ineligible to be interviewed.

The women who were eligible for an interview included more than women who had never borne a child. Women who have given a child up for adoption and never reared a child were eligible to participate as they have not engaged in the practice of childrearing, as were women who had experienced pregnancy loss (miscarriage, still birth, etc.), but who had not been able to engage in the work of mothering. This is a potentially controversial decision, as many of these women feel that they are entitled to the identity of mother (Layne 2003). However, some of them do not consider themselves mothers and, more importantly, many of their friends and family members do not consider them to be mothers (Layne 2003). It is the denial of the *social* designation that

makes them suitable respondents for this study.

While many of the women who completed the questionnaire were willing to participate in the next phase of the research, most of them did not meet my criteria. Therefore, I enlisted the help of some of my interview subjects, as well as some personal contacts, to recruit more women for interviews. Snowball sampling has been used in this area before, particularly in some of the earlier research on "voluntarily" childless women (Ireland 1993; Morell 1994; Campbell 1985), as most childless women know other childless women. The most obvious problem with snowball sampling is that it is not generalizable, therefore any conclusions derived are also not generalizable. This is a concession I was willing to make.

All of the interview subjects whom I asked for help were willing to solicit participation from other childless women. Indeed, a couple of them were quite anxious to recruit their friends. Because of their debriefing, my respondents fully grasped the importance of naïve subjects in this study and readily consented to withhold the focus of my research from the women they recruited. My personal contacts were also very well acquainted with the reasons for withholding this information and consented to do so. (I was able to confirm that the subjects were naïve prior to each referral interview.) In these cases, rather than give me contact information, my conspirators were given questionnaires with pre-addressed, stamped return envelopes which they then gave to presumably qualified women whom they believed would consent to the interview.

**Analysis**. The interviews were analyzed with an eye toward the two sets of concerns discussed in Chapter I. I wanted to see if all of the women had childless identities, as well as if and how those childless identities informed the women's other

identities. I was also interested in whether or not the women perceived their childlessness as chosen and how they utilized the word "choice" in their accounts.

As noted previously, respondents were asked only general questions about whom they believed themselves to be in the first part of the interview. Any unprompted mention of childlessness was noted. In particular, I assessed how soon a woman's parenting status appeared in the account and its relationship to other identities. Of course, I also looked for how soon and in what detail each woman mentioned her other identities. In short, I simply listened to and read the transcripts of the interviews in search of the identities that were given primacy and most clearly articulated. I did not expect all of the women interviewed to express a childless identity prior to being asked specifically about their parental status.

Assessing a woman's sense of choice in her childlessness was a more complicated matter. For this task, I relied heavily upon the second part of the interview as it included questions intended to elicit if and how the women accounted for their childlessness to others. *How* respondents crafted accounts of their parental status was key to understanding whether or not they perceived themselves to have chosen not to have children. The clearest evidence of this would be if a woman could identify a specific moment at which she decided that she would not become a mother. I also considered if, when and how a woman used the word "choice" in her account regardless of the presence of a concrete point in time at which childlessness was assured. Of course, a full exploration of my respondents' understandings of their parental status required me to consider more than just "choice" as it is commonly articulated.

One of the criteria by which I analyzed these accounts was locus of control. I

scrutinized women's stories for suggestions and outright declarations that they believed their childlessness to be a result of personal (internal) factors or environmental (external) factors. In other words, I looked to see how choice, if present, was juxtaposed with constraint. After all, social psychologists have long understood choices as constrained (Mannheim [1936] 2002; Rotter 1966; Rousseau 2002). Another consideration was the extent to which parts of an individual woman's account fit into Heider's (1958) typology of personal factors: ability, effort and intention. Could she have children? Did she try to have children? Did she want to have children?

A final key to analyzing the interview data was Scott and Lyman's (1968) distinction between excuses and justifications. As discussed earlier in this chapter, an excuse allows an actor to escape blame for her behavior, whereas a justification allows an actor to accept responsibility for it. I expected most of the women to use a combination of excuses and justifications, depending upon the audience for an account. In other words, I searched for the conditions under which my respondents might employ an excuse and those under which they might employ a justification.

**Summary**

To date, the literature on women who have no children assumes that the marked category of childlessness is central to identity formation for these women, failing to explore the unmarked categories which may be more important to some women. Furthermore, researchers' focus on not only the markedness of childlessness but on the issue of choice within the category has allowed us to overlook commonalities between mothers and non-mothers and among different types of non-mothers. In order to avoid

these pitfalls, I applied the principles of social constructionism to data collected while maintaining the naïveté of my research subjects. This gave me a better vantage point from which to assess the degree to which childlessness is a salient identity for women without children and to see what other identities might be as important, or even more so. Furthermore, it allowed me to investigate how the language of choice is utilized by women regardless of how they came to be childless.

## Chapter III: Women's Identities

In total, 21 organizations allowed me to distribute the questionnaire to their members. The heaviest distribution was in State City where 662 questionnaires were distributed through 13 organizations. Six Metro City organizations received a total of 249 questionnaires, and two Townsville organizations received 76 questionnaires. In addition, a handful of questionnaires were distributed through personal referrals: 10 in State City, 17 in Metro City and 6 in Townsville.

Two factors probably account for the high distribution rate in State City. In the first place, a major university is located in State City. This predisposes residents to be familiar with academic surveys. Secondly, State City is my city of residence. As a result, I have more contacts in State City who were in a position to vouch for me with organizational leaders.

### Description of Sample

Of the 1,020 questionnaires distributed, 406 were returned (39.8 percent response rate). Of those, nine were discarded. One respondent skipped the TST and provided only demographic data. Seven wrote out narratives rather than lists. One respondent provided a list of major events in her life in chronological order, which, while quite fascinating, is not very helpful for this research. This left me with 397 respondents (38.9 percent useable responses). Of these, 260 were from State City (38.7 percent useable responses), 95 were from Metro City (35.7 percent useable responses), and 42 were from Townsville

(51.2 percent useable responses). (A more complete list of distribution and response rates is provided in Appendix D.)

My sample was not nearly as diverse as I had tried to achieve. (See Appendix E for more demographic details.) Nearly, 85 percent of my sample identified as European American. Only 17, or 4.3 percent, of my respondents claimed to be African American, despite 72 surveys being distributed through specifically African American organizations. Just over 7 percent did not identify a racial category for themselves.

The majority of my respondents (81.9 percent) identified themselves as Christians. Using Nancy Tatom Ammerman's (2005) denominational structure, respondents were grouped into religious families. Affiliation with a mainline Protestant denomination (Presbyterian, Methodist, etc.) was most common (26.7 percent), and 23.9 percent claimed to be Christian but did not specify any denomination. Twelve percent of my respondents identified with conservative Protestant denominations (Assemblies of God, most branches of Baptist, etc.), and 16 percent identified as Catholic or Orthodox. One percent belonged to sectarian groups (Latter-Day Saints, Jehovah's Witness) and 2.3 percent claimed affiliation with African American Protestant denominations (National Baptist Convention, AME). Only 2.3 percent of the respondents were Jewish, none claimed to be Muslim, and 4.1 percent identified with other religious traditions, including Buddhism and Hinduism. No religious affiliation at all was claimed by 11.7 percent of respondents.

Most of my respondents, 56.2 percent, were currently living with a spouse, with only 17.6 percent having never been married. Two-thirds of the women were currently in the paid labor force, with the majority of those who were not being retired. Most of those who were or ever had been in the paid labor force were in professional or management

occupations. There were a lot of nurses and teachers. My sample was also highly educated: 124 had at least a bachelor's degree, but no graduate degree; 162 had a master's degree; 10 held professional degrees; 26 had completed a PhD. Not surprisingly, most of them also claimed to be middle-class or upper middle-class.

The only purely demographic variable on which I managed to obtain a high level of diversity was age. My respondents ranged in age from 19 to 90. Fifteen percent of my respondents were under the age of 35. Another 44.3 percent were between 35 and 55 years old, putting just over 40 percent of my sample in the over 55 category. This, I assume, accounts for the substantial number of women who claimed to be out of the workforce due to retirement.

As discussed in Chapter II, any woman who indicated that she had ever reared a child was counted as a mother. I determined that my sample contained 122 non-mothers and 270 mothers. (Five respondents failed to check any of the categories, and so were counted as missing.) As is made clear by Table III-1, 65.6 percent of the women who completed this section of the questionnaire had reared their own children.

***Table III-1: Frequencies for Parental Status (N=392)***

| **By Category*** | **N** | **Percent** |
|---|---|---|
| I am rearing/have reared my own children (biological or adopted). | 257 | 65.6 |
| I am rearing/have reared children of a friend or relative (informal adoption). | 14 | 3.6 |
| I am rearing/have reared foster children. | 9 | 2.3 |
| I am rearing/have reared stepchildren. | 20 | 5.1 |
| I have stepchildren, but I do/did not rear them. | 12 | 3.0 |
| I have never reared a child | 119 | 30.0 |
| **Ever reared a child** | | |
| Women indicating they had never reared a child.** | 122 | 31.1 |
| Women indicating they had reared a child. | 270 | 68.9 |

*Respondents were asked to check all answers that applied, therefore, the total exceeds 392 by category.
**Three respondents indicated that they had stepchildren whom they did not rear, but checked no other boxes. These women were counted as having never reared a child.

The only significant differences between mothers and non-mothers were not surprising. Age was positively correlated with having reared a child ($r$=.415, p<.001) as was having ever been married. Whereas 97.0 percent of mothers indicated that they had been married at some time in their lives, only 47.9 percent of non-mothers had ever married ($t$=-14.3, df=386, p<.001). In other words, younger women and women who had never married were less likely to be mothers.

Occupationally, women who had never reared a child were significantly more likely to be in the paid labor force at the time of the survey ($t$=-8.97, df=387, p<.001). However, there was no significant difference between non-mothers and mothers with respect to having *ever* participated in the paid labor force. Furthermore, child rearing had no bearing on the types of occupations women held. Both non-mothers and mothers were overwhelmingly employed in management and professional occupations (See Appendix E.)

There were no significant differences between the two categories of respondents in race, education, religion, or subjective class status.

**Mothering and Non-mothering Identities**

Most of the women, 56.7 percent, provided exactly 20 terms on the TST. Just over 7 percent provided more than 20 statements, with one respondent giving the maximum of 27 answers. Of the women who listed fewer than 20 statements, 18.1 percent listed 15 to 19 terms (inclusive); 11.1 percent listed 11 to 14 terms; and 6.8 percent of respondents provided 10 or fewer terms. The average number of terms for the entire sample was 17.89. The mean for women who have never reared a child was 18.14.

For mothers, the mean was 17.91. A two-tailed t-test indicated that this difference between the means was not significant at the conventional level of $p \leq .05$.

As mentioned in Chapter II, the TST is presumed to measure salience of self-concepts, with the most salient terms being those at the top of a person's list. Salience, however, is not synonymous with importance, so respondents were asked to also indicate which five terms were most important, with "1" being the most important. Nearly 60 percent of the respondents indicated which terms they considered to be important, 77 non-mothers and 157 mothers.

Existing literature on women who have no children assumes that childlessness is a key to how these women perceive themselves. This is partially based on the assumption that mothers identify as mothers. In other words, because mothers are presumed to think of themselves as mothers, non-mothers are presumed to think of themselves as non-mothers. If this is the case, respondents who have children should list mothering terms on their TSTs while women who have no children should list non-mothering terms. These presumptions did not hold true in my sample, as is clearly indicated by the frequencies in Table III-2.

Although most mothers listed at least one mothering term, most non-mothers made no reference to their parental status on the TST. As mothering terms, I counted "mother," "mom," "mommy," "soccer mom," etc. as well as statements about impending motherhood ("pregnant"). I did not include variants of stepmother. I made this decision

***Table III-2: Number of Parenting Statements by Parental Status***

| | **Mother** | | **Parent** | | **Non-mother** | | **N** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Respondent has reared a child | 235 | 87.4% | 246 | 91.1% | 0 | 0.0% | 270 |
| Respondent has not reared a child | 3 | 2.5% | 4 | 3.2% | 5 | 4.1% | 122 |

based on Shannon Weaver's and Marilyn Coleman's (2005) research suggesting that many, if not most, stepmothers do not think of themselves as mothers to their stepchildren. Nearly 88 percent of mothers listed at least one mothering term. This increases to 91 percent for parenting terms, which included the aforementioned mothering terms as well as "step-mother," "parent," "father" (which was listed on one TST), and statements such as "I have 2 children." There was a strong, significant correlation between having reared a child and listing a form of mother on the TST ($r$=.813, p<.001). The average number of mothering terms was .93, suggesting that most mothers list only one term.

Of the 122 non-mothers in this study, only 5 listed a non-mothering term. Two of those were indications that the respondent wanted to be a mother. These respondents were both in their 20s. Of the three remaining, one listed the word "childless," one listed "childless by choice" and the third listed "childfree." Three of the non-mothers listed a mothering term. One, who indicated elsewhere that she was expecting her first child, included "mother" on her list and another woman listed "pregnant." The third woman listed "birthmother."

Although it seems that women who had children thought of themselves as mothers, as a general rule, women who were not mothers did not necessarily think of themselves as childless; and if they did, they did not consider it salient or important. Of the five women who listed non-mothering terms, only one listed such a term in the top half of her list. That respondent wrote "I am childfree" in the third position. None of the women who listed a non-mothering term indicated that it was important. In comparison, mothering terms tended to be both salient and important for mothers. Of the women who

listed a mothering term, 92.1 percent listed it somewhere in the first five positions. On a scale of 1-20, where a low score indicates a more salient identity, the mean salience score for these respondents was 2.71. Furthermore, only 16 of these women did not consider the mothering identity to be one of the most important (11 percent of those who remembered to indicate importance). Nearly 36 percent of them indicated that it was their most important identity, while 23.4 percent indicated it was their second most important identity, and 20 percent indicated it was third.

The finding that the majority of women in my sample who did not have children did not think of themselves in terms of parental status is a direct contradiction to the literature on childless women. If childlessness were truly central to how most women without children think of themselves, more than five of the women who had no children would have included a non-mothering term on their TSTs. Furthermore, if the desire to mother were an integral part of all women's psychological make up, more than two of the non-mothers would have expressed this desire on their TSTs. Neither mothering nor non-mothering were on the minds of most of the respondents who had no children. The literature suggesting that childlessness is central to a childless woman's sense of self is simply wrong. Childlessness was not a salient identity for most of the women who participated in this survey. In fact, childless identities were nearly non-existent on the TSTs.

**Other Identities**

If women who do not have children do not think of themselves in non-mothering terms, the obvious question is in what terms do they think of themselves? Allowing

women to use whatever terms they wanted, with no guidance from me, resulted in a variety not only of terms but also of categories. I sorted the remaining individual terms that women listed into 15 categories. As noted in Chapter I, literature on childless women suggested some terms that would be of interest (occupational and familial terms, for example). However, most of the categories arose out of the coding process. The final 15 categories were occupational terms, familial relationships, non-familial relationships, personal characteristics (positive/neutral), personal characteristics (negative), race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, assertive terms, political terms, class/financial terms, activities, educational terms, religious/spiritual terms, organizational terms and biological sex. A handful of residual terms were left uncategorized and unanalyzed. Table III-3 gives examples of some of the terms that were included in the above-mentioned categories, including some of the residual terms.

*Categories*

**Occupational terms.** Occupational terms were fairly easy to identify. The majority of these terms were either an occupation or a reference to one's authority (or lack thereof) at their workplace. Some terms, however, had the potential to be something else. For example, some respondents listed "gardener" or "teacher" on their TST. In cases such as this, I looked to the respondent's job title to see if this was indeed the respondent's occupation. If this was not the respondent's occupation, the term was categorized as either an activity or a non-familial relationship. The terms co-worker and colleague were problematic to code. While they do make reference to labor force participation, they draw more attention to the respondents' relationships to other people

| *Table III-3: Sample Terms from Twenty-Statements Tests by 15 Categories* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Occupational | | | |
| Nurse | Retired | Boss | Employee |
| Familial | | | |
| Wife | Daughter | Mother-in-law | Widow |
| Ex-wife | Homemaker | Godparent | Step-mother |
| Non-familial Relationship | | | |
| Friend | Lover | Caregiver | Co-worker |
| Personal Characteristics (Positive/Neutral) | | | |
| Intelligent | Happy | Funny | Athletic |
| Blonde | Old | Confident | Survivor |
| Personal Characteristics (Negative) | | | |
| Tired | Lonely | Ugly | Fat |
| Race/Ethnicity | | | |
| Black | African American | White | German |
| Sexual Orientation[1] | | | |
| Gay | Lesbian | Bisexual | Queer |
| Assertive[2] | | | |
| Bitch | Dyke | | |
| Political | | | |
| Voter | Environmentalist | Democrat | Feminist |
| Class/Financial | | | |
| Middle class | Affluent | In debt | Homeowner |
| Activities | | | |
| Gardener | Reader | I like to shop | I play softball |
| Football fan | Traveler | I play piano | Knitter |
| Educational | | | |
| Student | College graduate | Alumna of -------- | I have a PhD |
| Religious/Spiritual | | | |
| Catholic | Jewish | Child of God | Spiritual |
| Organizational | | | |
| Member of ------ | President of -------- | Active in -------- | Participant in ------- |
| Biological Sex[2] | | | |
| Woman | Female | | |
| Residual Terms | | | |
| Consumer | Driver | Homo sapiens | (Location) resident |

As thousands of terms were generated through the 397 valid TSTs, this list is far from exhaustive.
[1]No one listed an explicitly heterosexual term. [2]This category is comprised of only these two terms.

than to their work. Therefore, these terms were categorized as non-familial relationships rather than as occupational.

Conventional wisdom asserts that childless women are more likely to be hardened career women than mothers. As noted in Chapter I, this stereotype is tied to the conflicts between traditional mothering obligations and the structure of paid labor in the United States. If this is the case, occupational terms should be significantly more common, more salient and more important on the TSTs of non-mothers.

**Familial relationships.** There is room for a great deal of debate about what constitutes a family. For the most part, familial terms were limited to those that are broadly recognized. These were primarily legal and/or genetic definitions of family (spouse, daughter-in-law, sister, grandmother). I also included terms that referred to past or non-existent familial relationships (divorced, widowed, single). Despite my personal belief that cohabitating couples (regardless of sexual orientation) should be considered family, this is not the common understanding of family. Therefore I did not include them in this category. This category also included terms that referred to unpaid work undertaken on behalf of the family (e.g. homemaker).

Women without children, particularly those perceived to be voluntarily childless, often report that people accuse them as being selfish. (See Chapter I.) For some women, this includes the accusation that they care nothing for family (Abshoff 2000; Campbell 1999; Ireland 1993; Morell 1994; Safer 1996). The assumption is that if these women were at all family-oriented, they would continue the family line. If childless women are not family-oriented, then non-mothers should list fewer familial terms, as well as consider them less salient and less important.

**Non-familial relationships.** The primary criteria in categorizing a term as a non-familial relationship was that it referred to the respondent in respect to other people. Terms that were not clearly occupational or familial (e.g. partner) were included here.

Very little appears in the literature about non-familial relationships for women without children. However, if the conventional wisdom that childless women are selfish and self-absorbed is followed, then one would expect the differences between mothers and non-mothers to be similar to those between familial relationships. For non-mothers, these terms should be fewer, less salient and less important.

**Personal characteristics**. Personal characteristics included both physical and mental descriptors. This was done for two reasons. The first is that in some cases a term could have easily been either: "strong," "ugly," etc. One respondent described herself as "beautiful inside and out." More importantly, people attach meanings to physical characteristics (Connell 1999; Shilling 1993). They infer internal characteristics from knowing that someone is tall, blonde, or beautiful. Indeed, two of my interview subjects mentioned that people found their height to be intimidating, which increased their self-confidence in many situations. Either way, these are terms that are considered to be tied to the individual. For that reason, I also included self-referential terms such as "me" or a given name in this category.

The conventional wisdom is that women who have no children are more self-absorbed than mothers. A charitable person may attribute this to the lack of familial responsibility. That is, a woman may have more time to think about herself because she has no children to otherwise occupy her thoughts. However, as noted in Chapter I, most childless women report that people perceive them to be childless because they are self-

absorbed. Women without children are too self-absorbed to have children. This is also tied to the image of the hardened career woman in that childless women are too involved in their own advancement to consider their obligation to bear children. Whether the impetus behind the association is kind or not, if childless women are indeed more self-absorbed, then non-mothers should list more positive and neutral personal characteristics, as well as indicate that those characteristics are more salient and more important.

Despite declining family size, motherhood is still seen as the ultimate, most assured path to happiness and fulfillment for women. Non-mothers are perceived as neurotic, bitter and incomplete. If motherhood engenders such psychological well-being, then non-mothers should list more negative personal characteristics and indicate that they are more salient and more important.

**Racial/ethnic terms and sexual orientation.** Two categories of terms that might be considered personal characteristics were held separate from other characteristics. These were racial/ethnic terms and sexual orientation terms. These terms are socially marked and well-known to be tied to social position. As such, "black" and "lesbian" have social implications that set them apart from other characteristics.

There is very little literature about women of color who have no children. What is available makes note of the difficulties African American women have securing treatment for infertility (Franklin and Ragoné 1998; Roberts 1997). Regardless of the lack of literature, it seems unlikely that parental status would have any bearing on racial/ethnic identities.

The literature and conventional wisdom has more to say about the relationship between sexual orientation and parental status. Women who do not have children are

perceived to be unfeminine (Chapter I), which may swell into an accusation that a woman is a lesbian. Despite the absurdity of this assumption, we would expect a correlation between sexual orientation and parental status. This is primarily because many lesbians perceive that being gay precludes them from parenting, or at least socially-condoned parenting, because they cannot establish the requisite two-parent, heterosexual household (Cain 2001). Therefore, since no one in my sample listed a heterosexual term on her TST, it should be no surprise if non-mothers are more likely to list sexual orientation terms and indicate that they are more salient and more important.

**Assertive terms.** Only two terms were included in the category of assertive terms: "bitch" and "dyke." Although neither was common on the TSTs, it was important to hold them separate from other personal characteristics. Both of these words are commonly hurled at women as insults, however, some women are trying to reclaim these slurs as words of empowerment. Obviously, "dyke" is also a statement about sexual orientation. However, it is qualitatively different from the term "lesbian." Furthermore, both women who used the word "dyke" included other terms on their TST to indicate that they were homosexual.

Motherhood is the hallmark of traditional femininity. The reclamation of these two words (and some even less polite terms) is far from traditional and may even be considered unfeminine. As such, conventional wisdom holds that mothers would be less likely to apply these terms to themselves. Furthermore, as childless women are stereotyped as being more assertive than mothers, these terms should be more common, more salient and more important on the TSTs of non-mothers.

**Political terms.** Political terms included terms that refer to politics, activism and community service. The common thread in these terms is a belief in the connection between the individual and the society. A person votes or volunteers or recycles because she thinks her actions have a larger impact. Terms that expressed a political worldview (Socialist, Republican, feminist) were included in this category as well.

As discussed in Chapter I, many supposedly voluntarily childless women cite environmental and political concerns as contributing factors to their childlessness. There is also a presumption that women who have actively chosen childlessness or who have postponed childbearing are politically liberal, if not out-and-out feminist. However, political terms were not limited to those that would be considered liberal. Therefore, I did not assume there would be any significant differences in political terms between mothers and non-mothers.

**Class/financial terms.** Any terms that referred to a respondent's financial well-being or position in society were categorized as class/financial terms. For the most part, they were references to income, indebtedness, and home ownership. Few people referred to actual class position. As with racial/ethnic and sexual orientation terms, these terms carry some indication of social position and of characteristics beyond the purely personal.

Research on childlessness has focused on the middle class. Although infertility is more common among the poor, middle-class couples are more likely to seek and receive medical treatment and more likely to be the subjects of research on infertility (Collins 1994; Franklin and Ragoné 1998; Monach 1993; Rubin 2001). Furthermore, research on voluntarily childless women asserts that these women are more likely to be middle-class as well. However, neither the literature nor conventional wisdom makes any assertion

about the importance or salience of class identities of women without children. As such, I did not expect to find any significant differences between mothers and non-mothers.

**Activities.** The activity category primarily included hobbies such as gardening, traveling, reading. This category also included items that were phrased as preferences: "sci-fi fan," "I like to cook," "sports enthusiast." The defining characteristic of these terms were that they indicated something that the respondent either did or enjoyed doing.

An offshoot of the stereotype of childless women as selfish is that these women prefer the freedom to pursue their own interests to the responsibility of childrearing (Bartlett 1994; Ireland 1993; Lisle 1996; Safer 1996). Furthermore, there is an assumption that involuntarily childless women will need to find other activities in order to fill the void left by not rearing children. If these two assumptions are correct, then non-mothers should list significantly more activities on their TSTs and indicate that they are more salient and more important.

**Educational terms.** Any reference to educational attainment was categorized as an educational term, whether the respondent was currently pursuing or had completed her studies. Both the literature on childlessness and common knowledge acknowledge a correlation between educational attainment and childbearing. As noted in Chapter I, women who pursue graduate and professional degrees are often in school during their prime child-bearing years. Having dedicated more time to educational attainment, non-mothers might be expected to list more educational terms than mothers. However, as noted previously, there was no significant difference in educational achievement between mothers and non-mothers in this sample. Therefore, it would be unreasonable to expect to find any significant differences in the number, salience or importance of educational terms.

**Religious/spiritual terms.** A term was coded as religious or spiritual if it made any reference to a woman's religious participation, affiliation or inclination. This category also included membership in a particular congregation.

Demographically, most of my respondents considered themselves to be Christians. Judeo-Christian tradition holds that reproduction is a religious obligation. In fact, some childless women have found their faith questioned. If their childlessness is perceived to be chosen, it is considered proof of their lack of commitment to God. If their childlessness is thought to be involuntary, it is sometimes considered proof of God's displeasure (Ratner 2000). Finally, the presence of children in the household is often connected to church attendance. With all of this in mind, non-mothers should list fewer religious/spiritual terms, indicating that they are less salient and less important.

**Organizational terms.** Many respondents referred to membership in specific organizations. Many of these were social (PEO, Red Hat Society) or recreational (sports leagues). Others were tied to parenting roles (PTAs, LaLeche League). Neither conventional wisdom nor the literature makes any predictions about women's participation in organizations based on their parental status. Furthermore, since nearly all of my respondents were contacted through formal organizations, any significant differences between mothers and non-mothers seemed unlikely.

**Biological sex.** Early in the coding process, I considered woman and female to be residual terms. However, these terms appeared on 114 (28.7 percent) of the TSTs, too often to be considered residual. In retrospect, the frequency with which these terms were listed makes sense. Several authors have noted that women must always be aware of

their biological sex in a way that men are not (Beauvior [1949] 1976; Simmel [1911] 1984; Smith 1987).

Conventional wisdom holds that motherhood is the marker of womanhood. This can be used to support the increased presence of "woman" on TSTs of mothers or on those of women who have no children. On the one hand, if motherhood equals womanhood, then mothers could be expected to list "woman" or "female" on their TSTs. On the other hand, asserting that one is a woman would be unnecessary for women who have already listed mother. In light of this, I had no expectations about the presence or direction of any significant differences between mothers and non-mothers for this category.

*Differences in Other Identities*

In order to see how mothers and non-mothers used these categories of terms, I compared the mean number of terms, mean position (as a proxy for salience) and mean importance scores by running independent sample t-tests and two-tailed tests of statistical significance. The means for the 15 categories are presented in Table III-4. Terms that appeared more frequently on the TSTs have higher number scores. A lower salience score indicates that a category of terms was more salient. A higher score for importance indicates more important identities. While all valid TSTs were used to determine the mean scores for the frequency of each term, when calculating the means for salience and importance, only those TSTs on which the term being analyzed appeared were used. For example, N for occupational salience for non-mothers is 84 rather than 122 because only 84 of non-mothers listed an occupational term. Furthermore, TSTs for which the

***Table III-4: Comparisons of Means of Mothers and Non-mothers for Number, Salience and Importance of Terms on Twenty-Statements Tests***

| | | Non-Mothers | | Mothers | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Identity Category | Measure | Mean | N | Mean | N | t-score |
| Occupational | Number | 1.02 | 122 | 1.52 | 270 | -3.699*** |
| | Salience[1] | 4.40 | 84 | 5.49 | 214 | -2.351* |
| | Importance[2] | 1.43 | 55 | 1.23 | 126 | 0.705 |
| Familial | Number | 2.02 | 122 | 2.68 | 270 | -3.345* |
| | Salience | 4.85 | 94 | 3.29 | 247 | 4.019*** |
| | Importance | 2.38 | 60 | 3.22 | 146 | -2.959** |
| Non-familial relationships | Number | 1.16 | 122 | 1.16 | 270 | 0.037 |
| | Salience | 7.65 | 82 | 8.11 | 187 | -0.749 |
| | Importance | 2.29 | 52 | 1.06 | 117 | 4.057*** |
| Personal Characteristics (pos/neut) | Number | 7.18 | 122 | 4.81 | 270 | 5.125*** |
| | Salience | 4.91 | 116 | 6.95 | 244 | -3.883*** |
| | Importance | 3.07 | 75 | 1.74 | 146 | 4.773*** |
| Personal Characteristics (neg) | Number | 0.86 | 122 | 0.40 | 270 | 3.554*** |
| | Salience | 9.40 | 47 | 11.38 | 58 | -1.949 |
| | Importance | 0.85 | 35 | 0.13 | 30 | 2.360* |
| Race/Ethnicity | Number | 0.15 | 122 | 0.06 | 270 | 2.585* |
| | Salience | 6.2 | 15 | 5.77 | 13 | 0.196 |
| | Importance | 0.50 | 10 | 0.60 | 10 | -0.142 |
| Sexual Orientation | Number | 0.08 | 122 | 0.02 | 270 | 3.671*** |
| | Salience | 5.80 | 10 | 9.00 | 3 | -0.834 |
| | Importance | 1.50 | 6 | ---- | 1 | ---- |
| Assertive | Number | 0.02 | 122 | 0.01 | 270 | 0.113 |
| | Salience | 11.00 | 2 | 8.75 | 4 | 0.498 |
| | Importance | ---- | 0 | ---- | 0 | ---- |
| Political | Number | 0.83 | 122 | 0.66 | 270 | 1.224 |
| | Salience | 10.91 | 47 | 10.06 | 108 | 0.967 |
| | Importance | 0.87 | 30 | 0.68 | 69 | 0.541 |
| Class/Financial | Number | 0.06 | 122 | 0.03 | 270 | 1.325 |
| | Salience | 11.57 | 7 | 14.13 | 8 | -0.927 |
| | Importance | 1.00 | 5 | 0.20 | 5 | 0.784 |
| Activity | Number | 2.66 | 122 | 3.40 | 270 | -2.388** |
| | Salience | 9.63 | 100 | 8.71 | 228 | 1.649 |
| | Importance | 0.80 | 65 | 0.37 | 128 | 2.578** |
| Educational | Number | 0.22 | 122 | 0.18 | 270 | 0.791 |
| | Salience | 9.13 | 24 | 9.45 | 42 | -0.212 |
| | Importance | 0.77 | 13 | 0.55 | 22 | 0.453 |
| Religious/Spiritual | Number | 0.40 | 122 | 0.77 | 270 | -4.365*** |
| | Salience | 8.64 | 45 | 8.57 | 158 | 0.079 |
| | Importance | 2.94 | 31 | 2.37 | 99 | 1.272 |
| Organizational | Number | 0.11 | 122 | 0.38 | 270 | -2.646*** |
| | Salience | 10.82 | 11 | 10.45 | 53 | 0.272 |
| | Importance | 0.20 | 5 | 0.09 | 23 | 0.543 |
| Woman/Female | Number | 0.44 | 122 | 0.21 | 270 | 4.742*** |
| | Salience | 2.67 | 54 | 2.76 | 58 | -0.129 |
| | Importance | 0.97 | 36 | 1.51 | 45 | -0.954 |

[1] Lower scores indicate a more salient identity; [2] Higher scores indicate a more important identity; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

respondent neglected to rank the five most important terms were excluded from analyses of the mean differences in importance.

There were no significant differences in the means for any of the measures for four categories. These categories were assertive terms, political terms, class/financial terms, or educational terms. In essence, mothers and non-mothers in my sample used these terms with similar frequency, and neither group was significantly more likely to designate any of these terms as salient or important. For three of these categories (political, class/financial, and educational), this lack of difference was no surprise.

The lack of significant difference in assertive terms was somewhat unexpected, but is probably attributable to the small number of women who actually used the terms. Among these few, non-mothers were more likely to include an assertive term, but mothers tended to list them as more salient. None of the respondents who used these terms indicated which terms on their lists were important to them, making analysis of this variable impossible.

The remaining mean differences between mothers and non-mothers were not always as expected. While occupational terms tended to be more salient for non-mothers, they were not significantly more important. Furthermore, mothers tended to list more occupational terms than non-mothers. Non-mothers did tend to list significantly fewer familial terms, indicating also that they were less salient and less important. There were no significant differences between mothers and non-mothers in the number or salience of non-familial relationships; however, childless women were more likely to indicate that these relationships were important.

The differences between the number, salience and importance of personal characteristics seemed to be in keeping with stereotypical knowledge of childless women. Generally speaking, non-mothers listed more personal characteristics on their TSTs and were more likely to indicate that these terms were important. However, only positive and neutral characteristics were significantly more salient for non-mothers. There was no significant difference in salience of the negative characteristics, although the direction of the difference was the same as for positive and neutral characteristics.

Unexpectedly, non-mothers were significantly more likely than mothers to include racial/ethnic terms on their lists. However, there were no significant differences in salience or importance. To some extent, this pattern was repeated with sexual orientation terms. As expected, non-mothers were more likely to reference their sexual orientation than mothers. However, there was no significant difference in salience of these terms. The significance of the mean difference in importance could not be determined for these terms as none of the mothers indicated that this constituted an important identity for them.

Contrary to stereotypes, mothers listed significantly more activities on their TSTs than childless women. Consistent with stereotypes, however, non-mothers listed activities as more important, although not more salient, than mothers. Mothers were significantly more likely to list religious/spiritual terms than non-mothers were; however, the differences in salience and importance of these terms were not significant. Mothers were also more likely to list organizational terms, which was contrary to my expectations, although the differences in salience and importance of these terms were not significant.

*Accounting for Differences*

According to my data, conventional wisdom about childless women is incorrect at several points. The first indication of this was the finding that non-mothers did not experience childlessness as a salient or important identity. Because conventional wisdom proved to be an unreliable predictor of so many differences between mothers and non-mothers, the differences it did predict warrant closer examination. That is, childlessness itself simply may not be enough to explain all of the differences between the identities of mothers and non-mothers. As noted earlier, mothers and non-mothers in my sample differed significantly in age and marital status. It stands to reason that age and marital status may be more important for explaining differences between these groups than parental status.

**Occupational identities.** The structure of paid labor in the United States and the expectations for American mothers are not complementary. As noted in Chapter I, in order to get ahead in the workforce, most workers are expected to devote themselves to their jobs, but being a good mother requires devotion to child rearing, which is itself labor-intensive and time-consuming. It is not surprising, then, that women often feel forced to choose between the two. Childless women are presumed to have chosen a career in lieu of having children and would, therefore, be expected to identify more strongly with their occupations than mothers do. As such, we would expect occupational terms to be more numerous, more salient and more important for non-mothers than for mothers.

My data did not support this presumption. The mean number of occupational terms was slightly but significantly higher for *mothers* than for women who had no children.

Occupational scores were more salient for women who had no children compared to mothers, but there was no significant difference in importance of occupational terms for mothers and non-mothers. In short, although women who did not have children were likely to place occupational identities higher on their lists than mothers did, they were no more likely to think that those identities were important.

The mean difference in number of occupational terms is contrary to conventional wisdom. In fact, it defies the logic that women choose between occupation and motherhood. A simple explanation would be that younger women were both less likely to be mothers (as noted above) and less likely to have started their careers. Indeed, age and the number of occupational terms a woman listed were positively correlated ($r$=0.153, p<.01). In linear regressions using each variable as the only independent variables, both parental status and age were significant predictors of the number of work terms used. In fact, women averaged 0.131 more work terms for each year in her age. However, regressing both parental status and age on the number of occupational terms, parental status remained a significant predictor of the number of occupational terms while age did not. (See Table III-5.) In other words, while older women were more likely to use more occupational terms, when parental status was considered, the effect of age became insignificant.

***Table III-5: OLS Regression Results (Standardized β) Showing Effects of Parental Status and Age on Number of Occupational Terms***

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Parental Status<br>(0= non-mother; 1=mother) | 0.188*** | | 0.162** |
| Age | | 0.131** | 0.064 |
| Adjusted R-square | 0.033*** | 0.015** | 0.034*** |
| N | 388 | 388 | 388 |

**p<.01, ***p<.001

The analyses indicated that parental status was a significant predictor of the number of occupational terms mothers listed, regardless of that mother's age. However, the relationship is contrary to stereotypes about childless women. An easy and plausible explanation can be found in the literature on women in the paid labor force. In the first place, all women must put forth extra effort to be taken seriously and receive their due rewards in the paid labor force, particularly those who work in male-dominated fields. This is even more pressing for women who have children. Mothers are expected to work the same hours men do at the job, despite the extra obligations they have at home. While more companies have "family-friendly" policies, women who take advantage of them are considered undedicated (Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Roth 2006; Stone 2007). Furthermore, many women struggle to have their occupational identities taken seriously at home. Despite the growing necessity for two incomes to support a family, men tend to consider their wives' income as "help" rather than a requirement (Deutsch [1994] 2004; Roth 2006; Rubin 1994). With mothers putting in so much time and effort to simply be recognized for their participation in the paid labor force, it is not surprising that they would list more occupational terms on their TSTs.

How, then, can one account for the difference in salience of occupational terms between women who had children and those who had none? The answer seems almost too simple. Mothers had a term available to them that non-mothers did not when crafting their lists: "mother." Table III-6 shows that the mere presence of a mothering term on a woman's list rendered parental status insignificant as a predictor of the salience of occupational terms.

***Table III-6: OLS Regression Results (Standardized β) Showing Effects of Parental Status and Presence of Mothering Terms on Salience of Occupational Terms***

| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Parental Status<br>(0= non-mother; 1=mother) | 0.135** | 0.081 |
| Mothering term listed<br>(0=no; 1= yes) | | 0.063 |
| Adjusted R-square | 0.015** | 0.013* |
| N | 297 | 297 |

**p<.01, ***p<.001

**Familial identities.** As noted the differences in number, salience and importance of familial terms seem to support conventional wisdom about non-mothers as selfish and uninterested in family. However, review of the demographic differences between non-mothers and mothers provided a more likely explanation: marital status. Marriage provides access to familial identities other than "wife" and "spouse." The obvious examples are "daughter-in-law" and "stepmother." Likewise, as people age, they are more likely to acquire more familial roles such as "aunt" and "grandmother." A quick check of correlations (Table III-7) indicated that while marital status was significantly correlated with measures of familial terms, age was not. That is, women who had ever been married were more likely to list more familial terms, list them sooner and indicate that they were important than women who had never married. Age, however, was not significantly related to number, salience and importance of familial terms.

***Table III-7: Correlations (Pearson, two-tailed) of Measures of Familial Terms with Marital Status***

| | Number | Salience[1] | Importance[2] |
|---|---|---|---|
| Marital Status<br>(0=never married; 1=ever married) | 0.192** | -0.232** | 0.180** |
| Age | 0.020 | -0.061 | 0.042 |

[1] Lower scores indicate a more salient identity; [2] Higher scores indicate a more important identity; **p<.01

Based on these correlations, I regressed parental status and marital status on measures of familial terms. (See Table III-8.) In the first model for each measure, being a mother had a significant effect on each measure of familial terms. Mothers listed more familial terms, placed these terms higher on their lists, and were more likely to indicate that these terms were important. However, as indicated in the second model, marital status mitigated these effects. When I controlled for marriage, parental status ceased to be a significant predictor of the number, salience or importance of familial terms for women. In fact, marital status was itself a significant predictor of both the number and salience of familial terms. Women who were or had been married listed significantly more familial terms and indicated that they were significantly more salient. These regressions indicated that the mean differences on measures of familial terms between women who had children and those who had no children is a product of the marital status of the women rather than of motherhood itself.

**Non-familial relationship identities.** If women who had no children were truly selfish, then they should have used fewer non-familial relationship terms as well. These

***Table III-8: OLS Regression Results (Standardized β) Showing Effects of Parental Status and Marital Status on Measures of Familial Terms***

| | **Number** | | **Salience[1]** | | **Importance[2]** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| Parental Status (0=non-mother; 1=mother) | 0.160*** | 0.072 | -0.198*** | -0.101 | 0.197** | 0.143 |
| Marital Status (0=never married; 1=ever married) | | 0.150* | | -0.177** | | 0.109 |
| Adjusted R-square | 0.023** | 0.035*** | 0.036*** | 0.055*** | 0.034** | 0.038** |
| N | 387 | 387 | 337 | 337 | 203 | 203 |

[1] Lower scores indicate a more salient identity; [2] Higher scores indicate a more important identity; *p<.05; **p<.01, ***p<.001

terms also should have been less salient and less important. However, the only significant difference was that non-mothers were more likely than mothers to indicate that non-familial relationships were important. This is not surprising. Pat O'Connor argued, "With marriage being less stable, and with the number of children falling, peer relationships potentially become increasingly important" (1998: 118). It stands to reason, then, that women who have not assumed the roles of spouse and mother would find their friendships to be important.

Not only was there a significant difference in how important mothers and non-mothers indicated their friendships to be, marital status was significantly and negatively correlated with the importance of non-familial relationship identities ($r$= -0.289, p<0.01). The correlation between age and the importance of these identities was not significant. Based on this correlation, I regressed parental status and marital status on importance of non-familial relationship identities (Table III-9). Although parental status remained a significant predictor of the importance of non-familial relationship identities, the effect was smaller and less significant when controlling for marital status. Marital status itself was also a significant predictor of the importance of these relationships. Spouses and

***Table III-9: OLS Regression Results (Standardized β) Showing Effects of Parental Status and Marital Status on Importance of Non-Familial Relationship Terms***

| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Parental Status<br>(0= non-mother; 1=mother) | -0.304*** | -0.209** |
| Marital Status<br>(0=never married; 1=ever married) | | -0.174* |
| Adjusted R-square | 0.087*** | 0.102*** |
| N | 164 | 164 |

*p<.05; **p<.01, ***p<.001

mothers were less likely to indicate that their non-familial relationships were important than women who were not mothers and women who had never married, lending credence to O'Connor's (1998) argument.

**Personal characteristics.** Personal characteristics figured more prominently in the TSTs for non-mothers than for mothers. If conventional wisdom is to be believed, this is a product of the self-involvement (perhaps even selfishness) of women who have no children. However, it is possible that these women are not so much self-involved as they are self-reflective.

In 1954, Kuhn and McPartland noted that, as a general rule, respondents to the TST do not list subjective personal identifiers (terms tied to mood, habit or taste) until they have exhausted their list of social roles. Furthermore, most people exhibited social selves. That is, they understood their identities as tied to the structure of society. However, Louis Zurcher (1977) reported that in the 1970s researchers noticed a shift in the types of answers undergraduates were providing on TSTs. More specifically, there was a trend away from objective social roles toward subjective personal characteristics, away from social selves and toward reflective selves.

As age was positively correlated with being a mother in this sample, it seems possible that the difference in the means is in part a cohort effect. Age was correlated with only some of the personal characteristics. (See Table III-10.) Older women tended to list significantly fewer personal characteristics (both positive/neutral and negative) than younger women. Older women were also significantly less likely to present salient positive personal characteristics.

***Table III-10: Correlations (Pearson, two-tailed) of Measures of Personal Characteristics with Age***

| | Pos/Neut Personal Characteristics | | | Negative Personal Characteristics | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Number** | **Salience[1]** | **Importance[2]** | **Number** | **Salience[1]** | **Importance[2]** |
| Age | -0.404** | 0.168** | -0.061 | -0.208** | 0.145 | -0.027 |

[1] Lower scores indicate a more salient identity; [2] Higher scores indicate a more important identity; **p<.01

Regression of parental status and age on these terms indicated that while age mitigated the differences in personal characteristics across parental statuses, it did not make those differences insignificant. (See Table III-11.) Age was the larger and more significant predictor of the number of personal characteristics that a woman listed on her TST, although parental status remained significant. Furthermore, although there was a significant correlation between age and salience of positive/neutral personal characteristics when parental status was controlled, age was not a significant predictor of the salience of those characteristics.

The differences between mothers and non-mothers in listing personal characteristics are more than a simple cohort effect, but they do not necessarily indicate self-involvement. When I coded their TSTs, each respondent was classified according to

***Table III-11: OLS Regression Results (Standardized β) Showing Effects of Parental Status and Age on Some Measures of Personal Characteristics***

| | Number of Pos/Neut Characteristics | | Number of Negative Characteristics | | Salience[1] of Pos/Neut Characteristics | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| Parental Status (0=non-mother; 1=mother) | -0.257*** | -0.115* | -0.177*** | -0.111* | 0.205*** | 0.182** |
| Age | | -0.343*** | | -0.157** | | 0.052 |
| Adjusted R-square | 0.064*** | 0.159*** | 0.029*** | 0.047*** | 0.039*** | 0.039*** |
| N | 388 | 388 | 388 | 388 | 388 | 388 |

[1] Lower scores indicate a more salient identity; *p<.05; **p<.01, ***p<.001

McPartland's (1965) typology as having one of four types of selves: A-, B-, C-, or D-mode. Zurcher (1977) renames these physical, social, reflective and oceanic selves, respectively. A person has a physical (A-mode) self if she identifies herself primarily in terms of physical attributes. Social (B-mode) selves present primarily social positions. A person who uses subjective, situation-free terms has reflective (C-mode) selves. A person who presents an oceanic (D-mode) self presents answers that indicate nothing unique about the individual ("I am a human being").

Pearson, two-tailed correlations show that parental status was significantly correlated with having either a social or a reflective self. Specifically, being a mother was positively correlated with having a social self ($r = 0.266$, $p<.01$) and negatively correlated with having a reflective self ($r = -0.260$, $p<.01$). There were no significant relationships between parental status and either a physical or oceanic self, probably due to the small number of respondents who were categorized as such. (See Table III-12.) The frequencies illustrate the differences more clearly. The B-mode or social self was the most commonly expressed self for both mothers and non-mothers, 83 percent of mothers had a social self, compared to about 58 percent of non-mothers. A two-tailed t-test indicated this difference was significant ($t= -5.443$, df=390, $p<.001$). Just over 16 percent of mothers had reflective selves, compared to 40.2 percent of non-mothers. This difference was also significant ($t=5.312$, df=390; $p<.001$).

***Table III-12: Type of Self by Parental Status***

| | **Physical** | | **Social** | | **Reflective** | | **Oceanic** | | **N** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mothers | 2 | 00.7% | 224 | 83.0% | 44 | 16.3% | 0 | 00.0% | 270 |
| Non-mothers | 1 | 00.8% | 71 | 58.2% | 49 | 40.2% | 1* | 00.8% | 122 |

*An oceanic self was attributed to the respondent whose single statement was "no one special."

According to Zurcher, reflective self-concepts are "fairly fluid among external social roles, each of which is evaluated rather continually," as opposed to social selves, which are "relatively static, and [are] wholly based on an accumulation of external roles and their syntheses" (1977: 176). "The C mode self-concept … can lead to increased self-determination and stimulate the juices for insight, creativity, and initiative" (205).

This type of self is not necessarily pleasant for the person who has it. It is possible that people with these selves feel alienated from society. "[T]he C mode self-concept brings anxiety, but also provides the individual with the opportunity to experience the processual aspects of the self as well as the objective aspects of the self" (Zurcher 1977: 204-205). In other words, people with these selves, because they do not define themselves in terms of social roles, may be distanced from traditional society, but, by virtue of this distance, may also be in a position to enact social change. That non-mothers were significantly more likely than mothers to have reflective selves and less likely to have social selves suggests that, while non-mothers may have experienced some social alienation, they were self aware and not wed to socially prescribed roles. Rather than self-involved, a substantial proportion of non-mothers were evaluative of both themselves and of society. Their self-concepts were not as rigidly defined by external roles as mothers' self-concepts were.

**Racial/ethnic identities.** The difference in the number of racial and ethnic terms was a surprise. Although some women who have no children face accusations of race suicide, an equally plausible explanation for this difference is that infertility is more prevalent among racial and ethnic minorities, who are also more likely to be aware of their socially marked racial designations. However, without data that distinguishes why these

respondents had no children and a more racially diverse sample, which of these theories is correct (if either) remains a mystery.

**Sexual orientation as identity.** As predicted, non-mothers were significantly more likely to include a sexual orientation term on their TSTs. Since this category contained no explicitly heterosexual terms, it is no surprise that sexual orientation was negatively correlated with having ever been married ($r$=-0.359, p<0.01). Non-heterosexuals are simply less likely to marry, primarily because they are barred from doing so, and I have previously established that marital status is a solid predictor of parental status.

**Activity-oriented identities.** Conventional wisdom and the literature on childless women suggest that women who have no children are inclined to pursue other activities. However, mothers in this sample listed significantly more activity terms than non-mothers, although non-mothers rated their activities as significantly more important than mothers did. These results seemed enigmatic at first. However, explanations soon suggested themselves. Upon considering which variables are correlated to parental status, it occurred to me that age might have a significant effect on number of activities. After all, the longer one lives, the more time she has to take up new activities.

After confirming a significant positive correlation between age and number of activity terms ($r$=0.241, p<0.01), I regressed parental status and age on the number of activity terms (Table III-13). When I controlled for age, parental status was no longer a significant predictor of the number of activity terms. In fact, age was a much larger and more significant predictor than parental status. For each year older a woman was, the

***Table III-13: OLS Regression Results (Standardized β) Showing Effects of Parental Status and Age on Number of Activity Terms***

| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Parental Status<br>(0= non-mother; 1=mother) | 0.118* | 0.022 |
| Age | | 0.232*** |
| Adjusted R-square | 0.011* | 0.054*** |
| N | 388 | 388 |

*p<.05; **p<.01, ***p<.001

number of terms increased by 0.232. In other words, another activity term was used for every 4 to 5 years of age.

The question of why non-mothers rated their activities more important than mothers rated theirs remained to be answered. Obviously, the answer was not that they used their childfree time to engage in more activities. An alternative explanation is suggested by the finding, presented earlier in this chapter, that non-mothers were more likely than mothers to consider their non-familial relationships important. Activity-oriented identities could be more important to non-mothers than they are to mothers because those identities are enacted with friends. It is also possible, however, that the impact of parental status on importance of activity-related identities is due to the age or marital status differences between non-mothers and mothers. In order to explore these possibilities, I calculated the correlations between ratings of importance of activities with both age and marital status. These calculations revealed that importance ratings were positively correlated with age ($r$=0.213, p<0.01) and negatively correlated with marital status ($r$=-0.176, p<0.05) among my respondents.

Although the first of these correlations could not explain the finding that non-mothers (who were younger) valued their activities more than mothers (who were older), it is consistent with the conclusion that as women age they not only acquire more activity-

oriented identities, but they also have more commitment to some of their activities. As a result, activity terms were more important for older respondents. On the other hand, marital status may decrease the importance of activity terms because of women's increased time with their husbands as well as the increased number of familial identities to which they assign importance.

To investigate the interrelationships among these findings for age and marital status with those for parental status, I regressed all three variables on the importance of activity terms. Table III-14 shows the results of these analyses. Each of the three variables had a significant, independent impact on the importance of activity terms to my respondents. In fact, controlling for age and marital status produced a larger and more significant effect for parental status. Simply put, childless women valued their activity-oriented identities more than mothers did, independently of age and marital status.

**Religious/spiritual identities.** In accordance with conventional wisdom, mothers did list significantly more religious/spiritual terms than non-mothers listed. However, there were no significant differences in the salience or importance of these terms for mothers and non-mothers. In consideration of how frequently age and marital status have significantly influenced other identities, I checked for correlations between those

***Table III-14: OLS Regression Results (Standardized β) Showing Effects of Parental Status, Age and Marital Status on Importance of Activity Terms***

| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Parental Status | -0.183** | -.254*** |
| (0= non-mother; 1=mother) | | |
| Age | | 0.381*** |
| Marital Status | | -0.170*** |
| (0=never married; 1=ever married) | | |
| Adjusted R-square | 0.029** | 0.135*** |
| N | 192 | 192 |

**p<.01, ***p<.001

variables and the number of religious/spiritual terms a woman included in her list, but I found none. This was no surprise. As a general rule, people tend to "revive" church attendance when they begin to rear children (Becker and Hofmeister 2001; Firebaugh and Harley 1991; Greeley 1989). In consideration of this and the fact that non-mothers' religious/spiritual identities were as salient and important to them as mothers' religious/spiritual identities, the assumption that non-mothers are less faithful or less spiritual is not supported. It is more likely that mothers had religious identities because they had children than it is that non-mothers eschewed having children because they were not religious.

**Organizational identities.** I did not expect to find any significant differences between mothers and non-mothers with regard to organizational terms. As noted previously, most of my respondents were contacted through formal organizations and neither conventional wisdom nor the childless literature makes any prediction about women's participation in organizations. Therefore, I was initially surprised to see that mothers listed significantly more organizational terms than non-mothers. However, following the same reasoning I employed in explaining the differences in activity-oriented identities, it seemed possible that age would be a mitigating factor for organizational participation as well. Namely, that the older a woman was, the more organizations she would have the opportunity to join. The number of organizational terms a woman listed on her TSTs was, indeed, correlated with her age ($r$=0.341, p<0.01). Table III-15 indicates that, similar to the relationship between parenting and number of activity terms, controlling for age when regressing parental status on the number of organization terms renders parental status insignificant.

***Table III-15: OLS Regression Results (Standardized β) Showing Effects of Parental Status and Age on Number of Organizational Terms***

| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Parental Status<br>(0= non-mother; 1=mother) | 0.100** | 0.011 |
| Age | | 0.297*** |
| Adjusted R-square | 0.016** | 0.087*** |
| N | 388 | 388 |

*p<.05; **p<.01, ***p<.001

**Biological sex as identity.** The extent to which motherhood is still considered a prerequisite for womanhood was thoroughly discussed in Chapter I. However, the presumed connection between motherhood and womanhood can lead to two entirely different hypotheses about the use of biological sex as identity on the TSTs. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, mothers, as "real" women, may be more likely to list their biological sex. Contrarily, mothers may consider "woman" redundant.

The latter seems to be the case. Women who had no children were significantly more likely to include biological sex on their TSTs. Indeed, listing "mother" was negatively correlated with listing either "woman" or "female." Although small, this correlation was significant ($r$=-0.158, p<0.01). From the point of view of some women who have no children, their increased tendency to list the word "woman" might have been a response to their perception that the larger society forces them to assert their womanhood rather than simply conferring it upon them.

## Conclusions

According to my data, the differences between identities for women who have children and those who do not are not as vast as they are presumed to be and some are

contrary to common knowledge. In fact, most of the differences between mothers and non-mothers in my sample were mitigated, if not eliminated, by other variables, particularly age or marital status. These included identities based on familial relationships, sexual orientation, activities, and organizational participation.

For the most part, women without children did not identify as "women without children." Only five of the 122 non-mothers indicated that parenting status was relevant to their self-concepts. None of them indicated that non-mothering identities were important, nor were they salient. This is contrary to the existing literature on women without children. The presumption has been that mothers identify as mothers; therefore non-mothers identify as non-mothers. This is simply not the case. While the mothers in my sample generally did list mothering terms on their TSTs, indicating that this identity was both salient and important, the corollary was simply incorrect. "Childless" was simply not an identity that came to mind when most non-mothers were asked to provide 20 answers to "Who am I?"

As noted in Chapter I, identities arise from interaction. Mothering is an emotionally intensive, time-consuming endeavor that is subject to public scrutiny (Hays 1996). Mothers spend a great deal of time interacting not only with their children but also with other adults as mothers. It is not surprising, therefore, that they identify as mothers. While women without children may come under some scrutiny for not rearing children, it is unlikely that they are called on to interact with other people as childless women the way mothers interact as mothers.

The differences, or lack thereof, between how mothers and non-mothers used occupational terms are also very important to note. Non-mothers are often presumed to

have placed their occupations ahead of rearing children. In other words, their careers are too important to defer in order to have children. Not only were non-mothers no more likely than mothers to indicate that occupational identities were important, they listed fewer occupational terms on their TSTs. Mothers who are in the paid labor force often have their identities as career women contested (Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Roth 2006; Stone 2007). As such, they have to assert their occupational identities more forcefully than women who have no maternal obligation. Mothers in my sample seemed to do this through repetition.

Similarly, women who did not have children were more likely to include biological sex on their lists. For non-mothers, this is a contested identity. If one feels that society refuses to confer adult female status upon you because you are not a mother, it becomes necessary to demand recognition of that status by asserting that one is a "woman."

Non-mothers were more likely to indicate that non-familial relationships and activity-based identities were important to them. This might not be surprising when one considers that friendships are becoming more important to people as more marriages dissolve and as people delay childbearing, and friendships are often organized around activities. Indeed, marital status was significant in reducing the importance of both non-familial relationships and activity-based identities, likely associated with those relationships, but it did not eliminate the significance of parental status. Although age was not significantly correlated with the importance of non-familial relationships, it was a significant predictor of the importance of activities, a finding that suggests that the importance of activities may reflect commitments over time for older respondents rather

than the link between activities and friendship more common among unmarried women and non-mothers. Given Stryker's (1991) assertion that salience is a measure of commitment, it is noteworthy that age was significantly correlated with the salience of activity ($r=-0.135$, $p<.05$) while parental status was not. For parental status, rather than age, however, the data suggest non-mothers were not the selfish and self-involved women they are purported to be; their non-familial, affective relationships were important to them.

Mothers were more likely than non-mothers to list religious/spiritual identities on their TSTs. This difference is probably a function of people's tendency to resume attending worship services when they have children in the home, especially in light of the lack of significant differences in the salience or importance of these identities between mothers and non-mothers.

The use of personal characteristics on the TSTs further challenges the general belief that non-mothers are self-absorbed. Certainly, non-mothers listed more personal characteristics on their TSTs than mothers did, but this does not necessarily mean they are self-absorbed or selfish. When Zurcher's typology of selves is considered, non-mothers were significantly more likely than mothers to have reflective selves whereas mothers were significantly more likely than non-mothers to have social selves. In other words, while mothers defined themselves in terms of social roles, non-mothers were more likely to see themselves as individuals who stand apart. The reflective self is not necessarily self-absorbed or selfish, although she may feel alienated from society. Instead, it seems likely that women who perceive themselves this way are contesting the definitions that society assigns to them based on their social locations and the roles they occupy.

## Chapter IV: Identities and Non-Identities of Childless Women

The results of the Twenty-Statements Test illustrate that women who do not have children do not necessarily consider their childlessness important, or even pertinent, when telling someone who they believe themselves to be. Although the women who were mothers usually included parental status in their lists, non-mothers rarely mentioned that they had no children. In order to more fully explore the extent to which childlessness impacted identities of women without children, I interviewed several childless women. It was very important to me that my subjects not know they were being interviewed because they had no children. As noted earlier, I believe that coming into the interview expecting to speak about this issue may falsely inflate the salience of childless identities.

Of the 27 women who met my interview criteria (never reared a child; aged 33-55; had been in a committed heterosexual relationship) and were willing to participate in an in-depth interview, two had to be excluded from this part of my study. One gave birth to her first child in the interim between filling out the questionnaire and being contacted for an interview. The other was eliminated because she and I know one another. As she is familiar with my work, she could not have been a naïve subject. I did speak with both of these women informally, however. While our conversations are not part of my data, they did help me organize some of my thoughts. Of the remaining 25 women, three did not respond to my efforts to contact them. All of the women interviewed were from either Metro City (12) or State City (10). Unfortunately, none of the women from Townsville who met the interview criteria were willing to participate in the interview.

In many respects, the women were more homogenous than I had hoped. This is

hardly surprising considering the homogeneity of the larger sample from which they were drawn. The interview subjects were all white and most were firmly ensconced in the middle class. They were all high school graduates; and 19 had bachelor's degrees. Eight had earned master's degrees, but nothing higher. One had tried law school twice, but never finished, and three held doctorates. (One of those women had a degree in veterinary medicine, as well.)

The women were not employed in a broad range of careers. Six of my subjects were nurses, with one of those being a professor of nursing. Two other respondents were also college professors. Two of the women were self-employed; and two were employed in politics, one as an elected official and the other as a political aide. Among the other women there were two clerical workers, a dental assistant, a police officer and a writer.

Interviews were conducted in the respondents' cities of residence. Most of the Metro City interviews were conducted in relative privacy in either a public library or a university library. One interview took place in the respondent's office. Because I live in State City, I could offer those respondents more options for an interview setting. Two interviews took place in my office, and three took place in the respondents' homes. The remaining five interviews were conducted in the respondents' offices.

**Childless Women vs. Just Women**

Before I began the interviews, I asked each woman to go over some demographic data, including their age, race, marital status, education, and occupation. At this point I also asked how many children they had. This was done partly so that if I had miscoded a respondent, I could end the interview before the questions dealing specifically with

childlessness. But I was also interested in how they responded to the question of parenting if it were differently phrased.

I thought that, faced with a direct question about children, some of the women might feel the need to defend their parenting status. Respondents in previous studies have often noted that they feel they must be on the defensive. However, most of my respondents answered with a simple "none" or "zero." One respondent, a 54-year-old elected official, said "I had one lost in crib death." The only other respondent who said anything more was Rachel. The 35-year-old entrepreneur said, "Zero," then laughed, knocked on the wooden table, and added, "We're not planning on having any. That's my decision." I paused expectantly, but she did not add anything further. At this stage of the interview, although two women were compelled to explain why they had no children, none of them saw a need to expand on the fact.

My initial inquiry, once the demographics were out of the way, was to ask each woman to tell me who she is. They were asked to say as little or as much about who they felt themselves to be, "free of any constraints of time or structure." As noted in Chapter I, and based on the results of the TST, I expected that childlessness would not be a primary identity for many of my subjects. However, I was surprised at how few drew on parental status to tell me about themselves.

Only one respondent mentioned that she did not have children. Anne, a 50-year-old professor, said:

> "To kind of put this in context…I was married when I was 20, divorced when I was 30. And I was single for eighteen years. And um, since I have never had children, um, I think a lot of women will talk about themselves in relationship to family and identify with family, and even during my early marriage, that was never the case. I always identified myself in

> relationship to what I was doing professionally…. So, I guess the primary identifying element for me would be educator—faculty member—professional."

While Anne did mention not having children in response to this inquiry, she noted that she always identified in relationship to her profession. She was not identifying as childless, but pointing out that not having children allowed her to identify as something other than mother.

Other than Anne, only six women mentioned the fact that they did not have children anywhere in the first section of the interview. When asked if there was anything they wanted to do but had not yet achieved, Beth and Valerie both mentioned that they would like to have children, as did Tammy, a 39-year-old police officer. Valerie added, "But I don't think that's going to work out." After a lengthy discussion of how she would like to maintain her goal weight for more than 18 months, Laura, a 50-year-old nurse, added, "20 years ago I would have told you children but um, I kind of figured that out pretty quickly, kind of sat down and decided that I never really wanted to raise children. But, I wanted to have a baby." Diane, a 50-year-old nurse, brought the subject up when asked how she would like the world to remember her. She prefaced her answer by saying that since she had no children, she expected to leave an individual mark, primarily by making a difference in the lives of her patients.

The only other woman to mention her parenting status prior to the second section of the interview was Kelly, a 46-year-old computer consultant. When I asked her how she thought her family perceived her, she said they thought she was "uppity" and "didn't know her place" because "I do not follow everyone else's rule of what my life should be like. And, boy, are there some rules out there." When pressed for the rules, she said,

"Oh, get married. Have children. Probably have children would be the biggest one. You know, don't reinvent yourself. Don't change. Don't look for new things. Stay where you are. That's kind of their perception."

Left to their own devices, most of the women simply did not mention being childless at this point in the interview. It was not salient for them. In truth, it would not be correct to say that all 22 women are childless. Four of the respondents hoped to be mothers, if the circumstances were right, and one was open to the possibility, although not really interested. And by some research standards, three of the women were mothers: Cathy, who mentioned losing her child to crib death, Diane, who in the second section of the interview told me that she had given a daughter up for adoption, and Valerie, a 35-year-old dental assistant who gave birth to twin girls who died at the hospital.

Nonetheless, most of the women interviewed were never going to do the work of mothering. Whether or not they perceived it as a conscious decision or a product of circumstance, these women knew that they would never be mothers. Contrary to the literature, childless identities were not paramount for any of my respondents. Instead these women tended to present at least one of four types of identities: occupational, familial, non-familial relationship or reflective. By reflective identities, I mean that in telling me who they were, these women drew on personal characteristics, relying on adjectives rather than nouns. Naturally, since we all have multiple identities, these categories are not mutually exclusive. Neither are these categories exhaustive.

*Occupational Identities*

Of the 22 women I interviewed, 12 mentioned their occupations as a primary

reference. Olivia, a 37-year-old adjunct professor, stated quite simply, "I define myself by my career." Similarly, Sally, 48, said, "My work sort of defines me." She worked as a nurse in both a hospital and for the National Guard, which she said supports her need for adventure and travel. Sally was not the only respondent who practices her trade on multiple fronts. Nancy, 50, wrote articles for a Metro City literary journal, a state travel magazine, as well as "anything else anybody will pay me to write." She also taught college courses on creative writing and composition. "I'd rather read and write than breathe," she said.

On the surface, this seems to be in keeping with the stereotype of childless women as hardened career women, but this is not the case. While some of the respondents were certainly driven by their careers, few of them perceived themselves to be unusually so. In fact, most seemed to assume that occupational identities would be typical. My youngest respondent, 33-year-old municipal employee Beth, said "I think that is probably how it is for a lot of people. You identify with your career." However, 37-year-old Fran seemed surprised to discover this about herself. When asked who she was, she answered, "Oh, gosh! It's really funny. I've never thought of being, identifying myself by the kind of job that I do, but I do, I do so identify myself as a nurse."

Occupational identities did not necessarily appear in the women's initial descriptions of themselves. Rachel, for instance, spoke of herself initially in familial terms. However, when I asked her about her goals and legacy, she spoke very effusively about wanting to own her own companies (plural) and about her commitment to becoming a success in the field of mergers and acquisitions, which, she told me, is particularly difficult for women.

Men have long been expected to think of themselves in terms of their occupations (Gerson [1993] 2003; Kilmartin 2000; Kimmel 2006; Rubin 1994). "From the assembly line worker to the chief executive officer, most men in the western world define themselves according to their jobs" (Kilmartin 2000: 190). Women, on the other hand, historically have been expected to define themselves as mothers (Ireland 1993; Rothman 2000). However, with more women (mothers and non-mothers alike) entering the paid labor force, it should not be surprising that women identify with their careers. Women often have to work harder for recognition in the workplace than men do; therefore, women who have careers would be expected to identify strongly in occupational terms. After all, women without children are women, and as such, they are likely to have to defend their careers, making occupational identities salient for them.

The notion that non-mothers are career oriented to the exclusion of all else is tied to the conflicting expectations of paid labor and of motherhood. Indeed, many of my respondents cited career as an impediment to motherhood or, conversely, cited childrearing as an impediment to career advancement, a topic that will be revisited in Chapter V. However, just more than half of the women interviewed presented some sort of occupational identity to me. As noted in Chapter III, the stereotype of non-mothers as patently more involved in their careers than mothers is unrealistic. Although occupational identities were more salient for non-mothers than they were for mothers, mothers listed more occupational terms. If non-mothers as a category of people were single-mindedly focused on their careers, more of my interviewees should have presented occupational identities. None of my respondents presented themselves as focused on their jobs to the exclusion of all other identities.

*Familial Identities*

It may seem counterintuitive that familial identities were prominent in the interviews. After all, the survey data revealed that women without children listed fewer familial terms on their TSTs. Familial terms were also less salient and less important to non-mothers than to mothers. However, as illustrated in Chapter III, this difference was a function of marital status more than of parental status. As all of the women I interviewed had been in a long-term, heterosexual relationship, we should not be surprised that familial identities are important to them.

In the fervor to define womanhood as motherhood, people seem to overlook that women occupy other positions in their families. Twelve respondents provided familial answers in telling me who they were. Iris, a 39-year-old political aide, gave a somewhat typical list: "I'm a wife and I'm a feminist and I am a sister and a daughter, of course." Sister and daughter were the most frequently used familial terms, followed by wife or spouse. Beth, who identified with her career, added, "better than that…that's being a sister and a daughter and a friend."

The daughter identity was quite prominent for Quinn, who was 54 and retired from a job in medical insurance. When I asked her to tell me who she was, free of the constrainsts of the TST, she said:

> I'm Aaron Wilson's daughter, which for me is a very big thing. Always has been because my father was a [politician and judge]. And, so, I was always Aaron Wilson's daughter. … He was very, a very prominent [State City resident], you know, for a lot of years.

Once respondents had finished telling me who they were, I asked them how they thought various others saw them. It was through this line of inquiry that a lot of the

familial identities were fleshed out. The stereotype of women without children as having poor relationships with their mothers (Hird and Abshoff 2000; Ireland 1993; Safer 1996) was not borne out by my sample. Most of the women reported good, if complicated, relationships with their mothers. Only two women reported having had antagonistic relationships.

Some of the women seemed to experience ambivalence about their identities as daughters. They were torn between love and respect for the women who reared them and frustration that their mothers still saw them as children. The childless literature asserts that women without children are often treated as children within their families because they never become mothers (Abshoff 2000; Earle and Letherby 2003b; Rothman 2000; Safer 1996). However, most of the women who expressed some exasperation at this tied it to their career trajectories. Pam, a 47-year-old administrative assistant, said of her parents "Sometimes they still think of what I did when I was 13." But she seemed to attribute this to the fact that "I'm still looking to see where my niche or calling really is."

At one point in the interview, Nancy said that she did not have a real job. When I prompted her with "Writing isn't a real job?" She replied, "No, not according to my mother." Nancy explained that she left a good-paying corporate job several years ago because she was unhappy, so "She worries about me." While other people may view Nancy's mother's mothering as excessive and infantilizing—Nancy cannot visit her mother without being sent home with a cooler full of food—Nancy explained that her mother "believes in feeding people" and behaved this way with her brother (who is married and has a son) as well as with her neighbors. Nancy's attitude was that if this makes her mother happy, then she saw no harm in fulfilling this role.

Mother is not the only nurturing role in families. Nancy proclaimed herself to be "a great aunt." Her nephew got frequent phone calls and gifts—always a book—from her. In many of the phone calls, she impersonated her guinea pigs for him. "He's just the apple of my eye. … I even went to his baseball [game] when I was there in May. And for me to go outside and spend any time at all tells me a lot."

Rachel, who had just knocked on wood because she wanted no children, gave her initial answer in familial terms. In fact, she gave one of the most effusive, and nearly motherly answers I received. "Well," she said, "I think the biggest thing, I just became an aunt. I think right now I'm really associating with being more of a role model and mentor, you know, really making sure my life is in… in proper perspective for this new child that's coming up." In her later discussion of goals, she mentioned that she hoped her nephew would inherit the company she had just founded. Cathy viewed her role in her family as maternal. When asked about her relationship with her siblings she said, "Well, now I'm their mother. My mother has been gone since I was 28. So, I've been their mother for many years."

Sally, whose work defined her, identified strongly with her siblings as well, even though they "are not really close." "I'm kind of the rock of the group," she explained. Her brothers and sister knew that when a crisis arose, she would drop everything to help. She was the sibling to whom the others turned, and the one who wielded the most decision-making power. "I don't think my personality is that overpowering…some of them are pretty strong-willed. … [I]t is more or less that somebody else is here to take care of it and you don't have to worry about that kind of thing."

The interview data reinforce the finding in Chapter III, namely that a perceived

lower commitment to familial identities is not strictly a function of parental status. Women who do not mother can and do assume other familial identities. Most of my respondents reported loving and supportive, or at least amiable, relationships with their parents, siblings and other relatives. Although she did not say so specifically, it seems that Sally's childless status allowed her to focus on the problem at hand, giving her a unique identity among her siblings. In the face of accusations that they are not family-oriented, non-mothers may feel called upon to defend their roles in their families. As such, familial identities would be well-rehearsed and readily called upon when these women begin to tell others about themselves.

*Non-Familial Relationship Identities*

Analysis of the survey data illustrated that non-familial relationships were more important to non-mothers than to mothers. The importance of these relationships was reinforced through the interviews. Fifteen of the women interviewed mentioned friendships or other relationships in their descriptions of themselves. Six of them specifically listed "a friend" when I asked them to tell me who they were. Others described themselves in terms such as "leader," "neighbor," or "community activist." However, a couple of respondents described themselves in terms of personal characteristics that imply relationship to others. Kelly, for instance, said she was "A compassionate, empathetic, good person." Hannah described herself as a person who responds to others' needs, and Nancy responded "I have a big heart."

Some of the women interviewed tied their occupational identities to more than the performance of job duties or career advancement. Cathy, a public official, cited her

desire to nurture relationships, and especially to help women advance in society, as the reason for her political career. "I like to help people," she said. Iris, the 39-year-old political aide, claimed she did not identify with her job as much as other people do: "I feel like I'm a personal assistant, both in my [professional] life and my private life. … I do things behind the scenes that help other people be successful." A preponderance of my respondents were health care professionals. Many of them saw their occupations as part and parcel of their caring nature and not merely as a profession. For example, Fran, who was amused by the extent to which she identified as a nurse, later explained that she chose to work with at-risk populations because, "I pretty much identify myself as somebody who is looking out for the good of the many rather than the good of the few."

The importance of non-familial relationships to others is most clear, however, in terms of how these women hoped to be remembered. Some respondents spoke in terms of immediate friendships. Emily, the 55-year-old nurse, said, "I'm sure this sounds really trite … I would like to feel that with work and with friends, whatever my interaction … that people's lives were fuller or maybe more enjoyed," and Kelly said that she wanted to be remembered because "I made people happy."

When asked specifically how they would like to be remembered, many of these women echoed Hannah's sentiment. She hoped people would think, "She tried to make a difference in a positive way." Some of the respondents' hopes were small scale. Valerie said, "I would like the world to remember that I cared about my patients and my family and my friends. And that, if somebody asked me for something, I did it to the best of my ability." However, Iris said, "I would love the world to remember me as a woman who fought for other women's rights," even though she also described herself as someone who

works behind the scenes.

In Chapter III, I asserted that if childless women were truly self-centered, non-familial relationships would not be important to them. The survey data revealed that this was not the case. Women without children were more likely than mothers to indicate that their non-familial relationships were important. The extent to which my respondents eschewed constructions of themselves as selfish and valued connectedness to others is illustrated by Laura's comment about leaving a mark on the world:

> I don't think I've left mine yet. That's so weird, I don't know. [pause] I never thought I was important, that like the whole world knew my name, you know, but I should be a Kennedy or I should be… [pause] that's never been important to me. … I guess I would like to know, while I'm here, that I've made some sort of a difference. I don't really care [what]. Isn't that weird? But, you know, once I am gone, I don't know if it's going to make any difference who I was unless somebody learned something good from me.

*Reflective Identities*

Most of the women interviewed presented identities in terms of social roles—nurse, educator, sister, daughter, etc. In terms of the TST, these are considered indicative of a person with a social self (Zurcher 1977). Seven of the women, however, drew on personal characteristics to tell me who they were. The terms they used are typical of those associated with a reflective self; they are terms of introspection, evaluation and reflection.

The stereotypical characteristics assigned to childless women are generally negative and include selfish, unfulfilled, bitter, unfeminine, aggressive and pitiable (Barlett 1994; Letherby 2002; Lisle 1996; May 1995). While some of my respondents believed that others may perceive them in these terms, most of them saw themselves in primarily positive terms. Only two of the reflective identities were not decidedly

positive. Mary, who described herself primarily as easy-going and nice, did express some concern that she has not been able to live up to her potential. This was not at all tied to the fact that she has no children:

> My mother tells me that I could have done better than my sisters who went to college and they graduated *magna cum laude* or whatever that is, but um, I didn't get a chance to go to college. But, every job I have ever done, I've been able to do it and I've excelled at it and I've ended up being a trainer or whatever for those jobs. Um, but I don't think I really got a good chance. … It upsets me.

Pam seemed to have a searching identity. In fact, she described herself as "a work in progress. … Because I am looking to see what else I can do or what else I can be." At 47, she said "I never decided what it is I wanted to do. I didn't have that, you know, that focus that everybody else had."

Tammy, the police officer, would probably most closely fit the negative stereotypes associated with childless women, however, she very clearly did not share this evaluation of her personality. When asked who she was, she said:

> [V]ery competitive. Very self-motivated. Strong work ethic. Um, committed to my profession. Uh, family-oriented. Love challenges. I like to do things that people haven't done before or that females haven't done before. I like to be first…in things. I like to do things that are unexpected, that people don't think, you know, I can do. Um, and mainly it's I challenge myself. I'm not competing with any males. I don't have to. I compete against myself. Hard worker.

But she also described herself as very open and friendly. She saw these characteristics as advantages in her male-dominated occupation. She was the first woman in the State City police department to reach the rank of captain. However, because she hoped to have children, she did not see these characteristics as antithetic to motherhood or typical of non-mothers.

The other reflective identities presented by respondents more obviously differed from the stereotypical characteristics of childless women. Hannah, 51, described herself as "an influencer." This manager of a non-profit organization said she was someone who "strives to be very ethical and fair and amiable." Kelly said, "I am a compassionate, empathetic, good person." After mentioning that she was hormonal, Laura said, "I'm trustworthy. I'm honest. I'm funny. I'm energetic. Not as energetic as I used to be and that's part of the hormonal thing. Um, I'm musical. [pause] I'm responsible."

Wendy described herself as a conundrum. She was a 47-year-old who worked in the field of disaster contingency planning. She believed her typical "all-American" upbringing in a small town during the period of the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement meant that "I always thought beyond the space of where I immediately was." She was intensely aware that geography ("I thank God I was born a Western woman"), history and class position allowed her opportunities that many women do not have. These opportunities allowed her to be a "thinking woman," a "critical thinker," and "very spiritual."

As noted in Chapter III, non-mothers were more likely to be classified as having Zurcher's (1977) reflective self than mothers were, so it is no surprise that reflective identities emerged from several interviews. Zurcher noted that "Individuals who manifested [reflective] self-definitions tended to be more situation-free" (1977:58) and noted that these identities tended to be more "transitional and uncomfortable" (1977: 179). Certainly this last description would fit Mary and Pam, but the other women who presented these identities seemed to be very confident and comfortable in their understandings of who they were. However, situation-free is certainly accurate. These

women tended to use these same descriptions of themselves when discussing a variety of relationships. Obviously, each of these women had given a great deal of thought to understanding and explaining the person she truly believed herself to be.

In short, when asked who they are, women who did not have children did not typically speak of themselves as childless. Instead, most of them drew on occupational, familial and non-familial relationship references. That is, they talked in terms of the work they did in the paid labor force, the work they did in their families, and their connectedness to others. As noted in Chapter III, while mothers listed more occupational terms on their TSTs than non-mothers, occupational terms were more salient for women who had no children, but only because non-mothers did not include mothering terms on their lists. Furthermore, recent research indicates that working identities are becoming increasingly important for women (Hochschild 1997; McQuillan *et al* 2003; Stone 2007). Therefore, it should not be surprising that more than half of the women I interviewed drew upon occupational identities to describe themselves.

The familial identities may seem a bit unusual at first glace. After all, conventional wisdom holds that women who have no children are not family oriented. However, as noted in Chapter III, the differences between how mothers and non-mothers used familial identities on their TSTs was a function of marital status rather than of motherhood. These interviews reinforced that women who had no children did indeed value family. These roles were a primary way in which twelve of the women thought of themselves.

Only two of the women interviewed did not draw at all from their relationships with people outside of their families in telling me who they were. While the women I

interviewed did not talk about a variety of relationships with others, the importance was clear. In keeping with the findings in Chapter III about the importance of non-familial relationships, many of my interviewees valued being a positive influence in the lives of others.

Finally, nearly one third of the women interviewed drew heavily on descriptive terms when talking about themselves. These reflective identities correspond to the personal characteristics that were used by non-mothers on their TSTs. The interviews clearly demonstrated that these reflective identities are complex and even questing, confirming the findings from Chapter III. These women were not vain; they were introspective.

**Childless Non-Identities**

It is one thing that my respondents did not present childless identities when simply asked who they are. It is quite another that many of them did not present childless identities when asked direct questions about themselves as non-mothers. Nonetheless, this was true of many of my respondents. In fact, many of them did not really seem to have childless identities, or at least, they did not find them to be relevant to their understanding of themselves, even when I asked them about that aspect of their lives. The most frequent answer to my inquiries about why each woman didn't have children was a variation on "I just never felt the urge."

Eleven of the women articulated some version of this, including Hannah, who by many standards would qualify as involuntarily childless. She was diagnosed with cervical cancer at the age of 27 and had a hysterectomy.

> I never really had this burning desire to be a mother… I've always been around children and had my share of all that, diapers, the whole bit. So, I don't feel like I really missed out on anything except the pain of labor. And, I don't think that is such a wonderful thing. I can't imagine that I've missed out on that much. And, yeah, I haven't really, I never really was that way growing up. My dolls weren't necessarily playing mommy and feeding. My dolls were out doing things, you know?

Five of my respondents cited bad marriages as the primary reason for not having children, and one of them cited having married rather late in life. Only four of the women cited career advancement as a reason for not having had children yet, and two of those women also admitted to not having an overwhelming desire to have children. Olivia, a 37-year-old adjunct professor said, "I'm not one of those women that's got the hunger to be a mother. I would be happy if it happened. I would be happy if it didn't."

Three of the women appeared to be unable to conceive with their partners. Only two of them sought medical intervention. Pam tried fertility treatments for a while. "Then the marriage started, you know, disintegrating, and I thought, 'This is really stupid… It's not the right time to pull a child into something like that." Valerie was the only one of my respondents to try extensive treatments. According to her, she and her husband "are below a zero percent chance of ever naturally conceiving."

For the most part, these women seemed to view childlessness as a pathway to various identities, and not as a salient identity in and of itself. Many of them stated that not having children afforded them opportunities and freedoms that other women did not have. Cathy, whose son died in infancy said:

> It has given me opportunities. I guess I took the fact that I didn't have children to my advantage. You know, when my son died, you know, there's a reason for everything. I live my life that way. I just know sometimes we don't understand why, but we have to accept that. That's the way it is. And, so, rather than dwell on it, I just took advantage of the

fact that I didn't have children.

And when I asked Hannah, who described her life as "so full and creative," how she got to this point in her life without having children, she answered, "How did I get to this point in my life without children? I got to this point of my life without children."

**Childless Identities**

Of course, some of my respondents did have childless identities. But only five of them really seemed to experience them as particularly strong or salient in and of themselves. Obviously, one of these is Rachel, who knocked on wood. When asked about why she did not have children, she counter balanced her lack of urge to have children with her need to fulfill her career goals. She had just formed her own mergers and acquisitions firm. "I really wanted to do that before I ever thought I would endeavor on that type of, you know, boat. So, I haven't felt the need even yet because I still haven't fulfilled my dreams. … I don't know I can give something to somebody else if I haven't been fulfilled enough." But this was not her only reason for not having children. When reassured of the confidentiality of the interview, she added

> Unless you are a slender woman, it is very hard in the corporate world and everything that you do. And, I've had to struggle with that all my life….I'm not passing that on to another girl… I know that sounds stupid and that sounds selfish, but that's really the reason. Along with the fact now that I'm 35 and I still haven't, I guess, not realized every dream, but the most important one that I really wanted to try and realize and I just, I feel if I don't get it, I will feel a little bitter and I don't want to pass that bitterness on to a child either.

Rachel also reported that a lot people questioned her about having children: "I get it every day….They try to tell me that I'm going to miss out on the best parts of my life

and everything else. Well, I don't know what to say to that." Furthermore, her parents simply did not accept that she was not going to have children.

Another woman with a strong childless identity was Gail, a 55-year-old medical technician. When asked about why she had no children, the first thing she said was "It was a conscious decision," a line she repeated three times. As a teenager, she had been in a car accident. Her lower vertebrae were crushed. She was not expected to walk again, but she did. She was told, however, that a pregnancy would probably result in paralysis. In 1970, as a 21-year-old single woman, Gail sought and obtained a tubal ligation. "It took me six months of fighting and kicking." Even though she was able to convince a physician to perform the surgery, her parents never accepted her decision, much less approved of it.

Two other women claimed to have made the decision not to have children. This was the case for Kelly who said that when people asked if she has children: "I will say no and I will follow it up immediately with 'And that's my choice.'" For her this seemed to be a pre-emptive strike against further questioning: "Because people start to think that maybe you couldn't have children and then they get upset, so I just cut them off by saying: and that's my choice." You may recall that Kelly mentioned early in her interview that her family members believed she should have children. When I asked specifically how her siblings felt about her lack of children, she said, "My siblings are very upset about this. They think, literally, they think something is wrong with me. And I am 46 years old and only now have they begun to just give up on the 'you really need to have kids.'" When I asked why they thought that she needed to have kids, she shrugged and said, "I don't know, but that's the words they use: you need to have kids. Something

is wrong with you."

Of the women who would generally be considered voluntarily childless, only Iris ever really thought she would have children. When I told her that the second half of the interview would focus on the "not mother" part of her life, she said, "This will be interesting because as a woman who has chosen not to have kids, it's an interesting path to take…. I thought I was going to be a mother before I got married… But then when it actually came time to do it, I was like, 'You know what? I think I'm not doing this for the right reasons.'" When I asked if she would tell me the story of why she had no children, she said she would love to.

> I feel like people have a limited amount of energy, you know, to do something properly anyway. … I've been very active in the community and very active in women's issues and …fighting for women's rights. And I have taken my energy and kind of worked on that. And then, to think about having kids. It made me think … 'How am I going to do all of this? How am I going to work and still do the community work that I want to do plus be a good mother and a good wife and all those other things?'

Iris said her parents had finally accepted this and stopped pressuring her to have children, but her mother-in-law was particularly unhappy. "She does still kind of… gets [sic] these jabs in every so often." When I asked for an example, Iris said her mother-in-law implied "that we were missing out on like, you know, the best thing that ever happened to her or blah, blah, blah, you know, and she made it sound like it was like, my decision solely. And, the truth of the matter is, it was both of us that decided that. … so I just felt like he needed to talk to her because I don't want her to think that I have like, swayed him this direction because we both, it was a joint decision."

Of the women with salient childless identities, only Valerie might be considered

involuntarily childless. She went through several rounds of artificial insemination in the attempt to have a child. When she and her husband were initially trying to conceive, "We got tons of advice from people, like my boss, who told me we were just doing it wrong." She made the decision to stop treatments when she found herself yelling at a UPS employee over a lost specimen. "I was a lunatic. I was crazy. … I looked at my husband when I got off the phone, I'm like, oh my god. I just became that customer, that person that I never wanted to have to deal with. I never want people to talk to me that way. I was just like, that's it. I'm done." Although her parents had been very supportive, they still hoped she and her husband would become parents through adoption. But she also recognized that she was "getting to that age in my life where I really enjoy being able to go on trips whenever I want and to do whatever I want and I don't have to rush home. I don't have to change diapers. And…and that's probably one of the reasons why I didn't look into adoption." Despite having made such an earnest attempt to have children, Valerie also said she never really identified herself as a woman who wanted children. "If it didn't work out, I always thought I'd be okay with that."

**Accounting for Childless Identities**

Previous research has assumed that childless women have childless identities. My findings contradict this assumption and lead to an obvious question. Why do some women without children have childless identities while others do not? It is not because of any differences in motives for remaining childless. Most of my respondents described themselves as simply not having a strong urge to have children. Nor is it a matter of how the women came to be childless. What sets these groups of women apart from one

another can be found in interaction and narration.

Most of my respondents reported that they were rarely called upon to explain why they had no children. Many of the women noted that they had very supportive and accepting family and friends, so inquiries and explanations were kept to a minimum. Any questions they did face were often shrugged off. Diane, for example, considered such questions rude, and she simply did not answer rude questions. The women who had no childless identities were the women who rarely, if ever, gave accounts of their childlessness.

Women who had childless identities did address questions about their parenting status, or at least thought about them. In essence, these women had childless identities because they *did* childlessness. Furthermore, they all had well-rehearsed and well-articulated narratives of their childlessness at hand in case someone contested their childlessness. Rachel told of the need to be fulfilled in other ways before even thinking about having children. Gail spoke of her accident and the threat pregnancy posed to her independence. Iris had her theory of limited energy. Valerie could tell of the effort put forth to conceive. Even Kelly, who would only explain her childlessness to me by saying she never had a desire to have children, had a standard story, however brief: "And that's my choice."

This point is further supported by Olivia, whose childless identity was situationally bounded. Among her friends and at work, the fact that she had no children was never discussed. However, among her extended family, she expected the issue to come up. And as she was planning to see many of them within a couple of weeks, she said, "I'll have to have something prepared." In essence, Olivia felt the need to do

childlessness in the presence of her family, where its validity was contested, but rarely anywhere else.

As noted in Chapter II, we talk ourselves into being. Childless identities, like all identities, are formed through narrative and interaction. Without the childless narrative, there is no childless identity. More to the point, these women have had to fight for their childless identities. Much in the same way that working women must fight for their occupational identities, and non-mothers may have their devotion to family contested, these five women had to defend their identities.

This is not to say that the existing literature on childless women is entirely wrong, but it is lacking and it is misleading. Prior research on childless women has relied on samples of women who think of themselves as childless women and who come into the interview prepared to share their childless narratives. When all of the subjects are doing childlessness prior to the interview (perhaps even in preparation for the interview), the active creation of this identity escapes notice.

In contrast, only five of my respondents, just over 20 percent, had well-developed childless identities. Most of the women simply did not experience childlessness as a salient identity. Those who did have childless identities were the ones who had accounted for their parenting status frequently enough to have a childless narrative at hand. These women had talked their childlessness into being. When the childless identity is neither questioned nor contested, it does not develop.

## Chapter V: Choice and Responsibility

In 1994, Carolyn Morell fired one of the first volleys against choice as applied to motherhood in American society. She questioned whether any woman could truly choose to mother if women who chose not to mother were always stigmatized. Sadly, no one has really followed through on Morell's suggestion to bring mothers and non-mothers together. In fact, most researchers not only steadfastly reproduce the divisions between mothers and non-mothers, but they have used choice to splinter women without children into multiple categories.

The literature on childless women makes a distinction between those who are voluntarily childless and those who are involuntarily so. Nonetheless, this literature also acknowledges that many women who are considered voluntarily childless did not actually choose not to have children (Abshoff 2000, Cain 2001, Campbell 1985, Ireland 1993, Lisle 1996, Morell 1994, Veevers 1980). Those researchers who acknowledge that choice is problematic as a tool of analysis do little to address the issue. Some even exacerbate the problem by splintering women without children into more subgroups. For example, Campbell (1999) asserts that women who pursue sterilization are a distinct subset of voluntarily childless women with a unique voice. Although I accept her argument, I believe it only serves to further alienate childless women from one another and overlooks the commonalities among them.

Very few researchers have made progress toward mending the rifts they have created among women without children. In a joint autobiographical article, Letherby and Williams (1999) illustrated how voluntarily and involuntarily childless women may both

experience ambivalence about not parenting. This work challenges most of the literature which tends to assume that voluntarily childless women are pleased about not having children, where involuntarily childless women are not. While this article takes a step in the right direction by highlighting commonalities among what are thought to be distinct types of women, Letherby and Williams do not take their argument past descriptions of their common experiences.

The focus on identifying whether or not a woman has chosen not to bear children has led researchers to overlook the constraints that contribute to some women's reproductive decisions or how other decisions have constrained their childbearing. Of the 22 women interviewed for this research, 21 made some reference to a choice or decision that led them away from childbearing, but few of them could reasonably be considered to have chosen not to have children. Likewise, 21 made explicit reference to constraints that made childbearing difficult for them to envision for themselves, but only a handful would be considered involuntarily childless by the standard of the research literature. Furthermore, many of the women pointed out other environmental factors which made childlessness possible for them. These women wove both personal factors and environmental factors together. Although they used the language of choice to construct narratives that make sense of their lives, their utilization of choice was not in keeping with the existing literature.

**Rhetorics of Choice**

As mentioned in Chapter II, the concept of choice fits well with American notions of individuality and meritocracy. In fact, individualism is often considered *the* defining

characteristic of Americans (Bellah *et al* 1985; Gans 1988; Grabb *et al* 1999; Hewitt 1989; Lipset 1963). Lipset (1963) rooted this individualism in the American Revolution. While some historians challenge this assertion, the idea that individualism has thrived in the United States since its founding is widespread (Grabb *et al* 1999). Thomson argues that although the degree to which individualism is considered favorable fluctuated throughout the 20th Century, American society remains "fundamentally individualist" in that the individual has primacy over the group or community because individuals are perceived to be able to leave a group (1997: 652). Or as Hewitt asserted, "Americans assume as a matter of course that they may choose whether and when and how to identify with others" (1989: 135).

In 1950, Erikson argued that choice is key to American identity formation. "The individual must be able to convince himself that the next step is up to him and that no matter where he is staying or going he always has the choice of leaving or turning in the opposite direction if he chooses to do so" (357).

Furthermore, choice is a dear concept to many feminists. The predominant form of feminism in the United States is liberal feminism (Andersen 2000). According to the tenets of liberal feminism "the ideal gender arrangement is one in which each individual chooses the lifestyle most suitable to her or him and has that choice accepted and respected," (Lengermann and Niebrugge 1996: 545). Liberal feminists are committed to working for legislative reform that will remove barriers to choice, as evidence by the visibility of choice rhetorics in repoductive politics (Andersen 2000; Freeman 1995; Ramazanoglu 1989). In fact, the language of choice is so prominent among American

feminists that Americans who are in favor of abortion access call themselves "Pro-Choice."

The concepts of choice and individualism have in some ways hindered women's struggles for equity with men. Feminists' focus on choice has given rise to a more subtle form of sexism than the blatant chauvinism that dominated years past. Adherents to modern sexism assume that women have the same freedom of choice as men, denying the structural constraints that are peculiar to women (Swim *et al* 1995). This type of individualistic thinking "encourages men who don't think or behave in overtly sexists ways…to conclude that sexism has nothing to do with them, that it's just a problem for 'bad' men" (Johnson 2006: 77). Johnson notes that both women and men fail to note that sexism is a system that consistently forces women to make choices that men rarely face.

In studies of women who are balancing work and family, and especially in studies of why women leave the work force, women assert that they have *chosen* the work-family structure in which they find themselves. Rarely do women fault the structure of labor directly, even when they reference environmental factors that push them away from their careers (Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Stone 2007). In fact, women often describe themselves as privileged because they can choose to leave a career in order to be a full-time parent, as opposed to other women who must continue to work in order to make ends meet (Stone 2007). By asserting their choices over the structural constraints, they are, as Erikson (1950) argued, asserting their right to determine their identities. But focusing on women's choices allows us to ignore that the structure hinders a worker from being both a devoted parent and a devoted employee (Cooper [2000] 2004; Gerson

[1993] 2003; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Stone 2007) and that it values men's work over women's work (Cooper [2000] 2004; Crittendon [2001] 2003). Women become the logical stay-at-home parents not because they are more nurturing than men but because the system makes it harder to live on a woman's pay alone than on a man's.

One of the problems with Americans' love affair with individualism and the language of choice is that it makes it easy for us to blame others for their lots in life. One of the most obvious examples of this can be seen in the dominant understanding of poverty in the United States. The poor are thought to be lazy and undeserving—if they would only work harder, if they would not *choose* to be dependent on the government, they would not be poor (Gans 1995; Gilbert 2003; Johnson 2006). "Ironically … others who are subsidized by government without adding something to the economy are not so labeled. Students with government fellowships, home owners who receive federal tax and mortgage interest deductions, corporations that receive subsidies to stay in existence, as well as unproductive civil servants and the workers on superfluous military bases kept open to prevent the elimination of jobs, are not thought of as being dependent" (Gans 1995: 70). Somehow, only the poor are perceived to have chosen to be government dependents, even though very few of the poor are chronically so. Most individuals who receive means tested welfare eventually move off of the welfare rolls, although most do still remain poor (Gans 1995; Gilbert 2003).

Choice often presumes equality of opportunity. It presumes that alternatives are not only available and are recognized, but that people have access to the same choices. In the case of childbearing, it assumes that different women's reproductive behaviors are not differentially influenced by social structure—that the opportunities available to a poor

woman are the same as those available to a middle-class woman. Furthermore, liberal feminism's focus on women's rights to freedom of choice ignores that women often face choices that men do not. In the case of reproduction, men rarely feel compelled to choose between fatherhood and a career, a choice working women are presumed to have made regardless of their parenting status (Gerson [1993] 2003, Gerson 1985; Stone 2007).

Most of the women I interviewed drew from rhetorics of choice in telling about themselves as childless women. What constitutes choice, however, is not always clear. Even the recent literature on women's reproductive choices assumes that choice is a self-explanatory concept (Baker 2007; Hertz 2006; Stone 2007). Even when authors contend that choice is inadequate for describing women's experiences, they do not define choice. For the most part, choice is presented as little more than a preference. In the case of childbearing, it is a preference of great consequence, but a preference nonetheless. Women who have "chosen" not to bear children are presented as having a preference for a career or for their freedom. By thinking of childlessness as chosen or not and focusing on the presence or absence of "choice" in the narrative rather than the various ways choice is wielded, we overlook how women draw on both personal and environmental factors to craft identities for themselves.

**Choice in the Childless Literature**

Whether they realize it or not, researchers have drawn on Heider's typology to define choice in childbearing. Those who lack the ability to bear children are defined as involuntarily childless. When we say a woman has chosen not to have children, we are voicing our assumption that a woman is physically able to bear children. We do not

question the fertility of a woman who has not tried to conceive. Furthermore, if a woman cannot bear children, we consider the issue of her preference moot. The advent of assisted reproductive technology (ART) has complicated this stance. Women who have not put enough effort into trying to reproduce, who have not pursued ART vigorously, may be deemed to have chosen their childlessness. Those who have not put forth enough effort to bear children are usually considered voluntarily childless along with women who express an intention not to bear children. Most of my respondents incorporated more than one of these personal characteristics in their narratives.

*Ability*

The literature on childlessness generally defines a woman as involuntarily childless if either she or her partner is medically infertile. This requires at a minimum a medical diagnosis if not intervention. Only two women in my sample met this standard. Pam was diagnosed with endometriosis and put on a course of fertility drugs although she said, "I never found out exactly the problem." Valerie and her husband had "below a 0 percent chance of ever naturally conceiving" due to her irregular ovulation and his low sperm count.

Furthermore, medical conditions other than infertility can prevent a woman from bearing children. For instance, Hannah had a hysterectomy in her early 30s. "Hey carcinoma diagnosis one year after we were married. … doc said it couldn't wait." Similarly, Quinn, who intended to have children, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in her early 30s. She explained that it "used to be you went into the hospital and had some fairly heavy duty drugs," which precipitated menopause. In both of these cases,

although infertility *per se* was not the root cause of childlessness, the patient was not perceived to be at fault for the condition that precipitated her childlessness.

While these women fit the social criteria to be involuntarily childless, they did not necessarily perceive themselves to be so. All of these women spoke of reproductive choices within their power, namely the choice to pursue medical intervention or the choice to adopt. These women indicated that their continued childlessness was the result of decisions they had made. Even Valerie, the most likely candidate for being considered involuntarily childless, perceived herself to have choices, and at the time of the interview, she still hoped to become a mother.

*Effort*

But medical conditions are not always so clearly recognized. As Letherby and Williams (1999) point out, some women just never get pregnant. But unless they consult a medical professional about this, they may not be entitled to be excused from mothering. That is, unless they have pursued treatment, their childlessness may not be perceived as wholly beyond their control (Parsons 1975). This was the case for three more of my respondents. Sally and Nancy both noted that while they never actively pursued pregnancy, they both went through periods in which they did not actively try to prevent conception, either. Similarly, after the birth of her first child, Cathy simply never got pregnant again.

A diagnosis of infertility is socially significant. It is a medical condition and presumably not the fault of the patient. Certainly one cannot think that Sally, Nancy and Cathy chose their childlessness. None of them took deliberate actions in order to ensure

that they would not become mothers. However, their apparent nonchalance is contrary to the traditional association between motherhood and womanhood. In terms of Heider's (1958) typology, they may be perceived to have not put enough effort into becoming pregnant, and may therefore be held responsible for their parental status. Indeed, these women think of themselves as responsible for their childlessness. Not only do they perceive themselves to owe an explanation for their status (accountability), but they present themselves as actors who are liable—to blame, to use the pejorative—for not having children.

*Intention*

Following the criteria established in prior research, only seven of the women interviewed had narratives that fit within the established rhetoric of chosen childlessness. Of these, five indicated that they simply never had any urge to have children. But, as noted in Chapter IV, there were more than five women who expressed this position. The lack of desire to become a mother, while often presented as a choice in the existing literature, can only tenuously be considered so. It seems improper to attribute choice to a woman if she has not considered the issue. Not choosing to mother is not the same as choosing not to mother. What set these seven women apart from the others whom I interviewed were their clear assertions that they had made a decision that children were not to be part of their lives. At some point, they expressed an intention not to mother.

Of these women, only three presented negative imagery of childrearing. Anne's mother worked full-time while taking care of the household. "I think she was a bit frustrated…by her responsibility as mother and career person. …[T]hat always came

across as having children was such a burden." Similiarly, as the youngest of five, Wendy saw all the work her stay-at-home mother put into rearing her children while "Dad got to go off to this magical place called 'the office' and come home. There'd be a drink and dinner on the table. … When you're five you're like 'Man, he's got the better gig.'" Kelly did not mention anything from her childhood that would lead her to view motherhood as a burden. Like most of my respondents, she said she simply never had the urge to have children. However, in discussing how insistent her siblings are that she should have children, Kelly volunteered her belief that her siblings envied her happiness.

Of the remaining four, Gail was exceptionally fierce in her assertion that she was voluntarily childless. As noted in Chapter IV, "It was a conscious decision" was repeated throughout her narrative even though the threat of paralysis was a contributing factor in that decision. Likewise, Iris, who had a hypothesis that people have a limited amount of energy was adamant that she had made a definitive decision against becoming a mother. Jill, a 54-year-old professor, and Rachel, the woman starting her own mergers and acquisitions firm, both stated that they made an early, definitive decision not to have children for career concerns.

These women make clear assertions of choice and decision-making in their narratives. Although five of the women expressed a sentiment of indifference to childbearing, that indifference was considered as a factor in their choices. That is, the women considered their lack of a strong desire to become mothers as an indicator that they may not be suited for motherhood. Based on their lack of inclination, these women took deliberate steps to avoid becoming mothers.

If these seven women had been the only respondents to utilize choice in their narratives about their childlessness, then the customary division of childless women according to this criterion could withstand the critiques leveled by both researchers and childless women. However, as noted earlier in this chapter, all but one of my respondents utilized choice rhetorics in their narratives. Even Valerie, whose attempt to conceive through artificial insemination is recounted in Chapter IV, drew on choice in discussing why she was not a mother. She asserted her *choice* not to continue with treatments that were, according to her, making her crazy as well as her *choice* not to adopt. Like mothers who leave the work force, my respondents referenced environmental factors that either prohibited childbearing or facilitated childlessness, but they emphasized the choices available to them within the structures of society.

**Constraints on Choice**

Social psychological theories, particularly attribution theories, tend to posit constraint as the opposite of choice. In evaluating behaviors, people tend to look at the perceived locus of control. That is, to what extent are the circumstances beyond the control of the actor? (Rotter 1966; Weiner, 1974, 1980). In the literature on childlessness, only one category of constraint has been consistently applied to evaluate a woman's status as voluntarily or involuntarily childless: physical constraints. Only women who are deemed physically incapable of bearing children are considered to be involuntarily childless. In doing this, researchers consistently reinforce childlessness as a personal behavior, even when it is not actively chosen.

When environmental factors are considered, it becomes obvious that choice is more than mere preference or inclination. Not every woman had the same choices, and every choice was influenced by environmental factors. Even those women who were disinclined to have children reported that their careers and personal relationships as well as other factors contributed to their childlessness. But while my respondents easily acknowledged many of the environmental factors that steered them toward non-mothering, they were loath to give up the notion of choice.

*Institutional Factors*

Institutional factors are those barriers and gateways that stand as part of the social structure. In general, institutions are the established ways of meeting societal needs. They include, but are not limited to, economy, family, religion and polity. Many institutions tend to uphold the status quo, in this case, women becoming mothers. However, depending on a woman's position relative to an institution, she may be led away from motherhood and toward childlessness. The institutional factors that most commonly appeared in my respondents' narratives were the paid labor force and marriage, although religion and the Women's movement were also present. In some cases, the factors work as barriers to motherhood. At other times, they are gateways to childlessness.

**Paid Labor**. By far the most common institutional factor discussed in the literature is the paid labor force. As discussed in Chapter III, despite policies that look family-friendly on paper, most companies expect their workers to conform to the breadwinner role (Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Roth 2006; Stone 2007). Women often feel

forced to choose between career and family, a choice, Gerson ([1993] 2003) notes, that many women resent having to make.

If a woman is perceived to have chosen a career in lieu of childbearing, she is considered voluntarily childless. She is perceived to have chosen not to have children. Rachel exemplified this stereotype. She posited her career aspirations as a contributing factor for not having children, but she was adamant that she has chosen not to have children. When a woman is this certain, what seems to escape notice is that women report being forced to make a choice. How can we speak of freedom of choice when women feel *forced* to choose? But even Rachel admitted that the business world poses problems for women that men do not face. "A lot of men have had mentors," she said. "They are taught how to do these things. Other men help them. It's not so easy for women to try and figure this out."

Tammy and Olivia both felt that it was necessary to achieve certain career goals before having children. Olivia saw children as a possibility, but she was ambivalent about becoming a mother. "I would be happy if it happened. I would be happy if it didn't." Tammy definitely wanted to have children, but said, "[I]t just never seemed like the right time."

Both of these women explicitly mentioned career as an impediment to childbearing. Olivia, the 37-year-old academic, said, "I think I need to get my career afloat first… and I might be too old to consider [having children] by the time that happens." Tammy was in law enforcement, which she saw as presenting even more barriers for women who want to become mothers.

> You have to be very careful in the law enforcement world. A female basically has to work twice as hard to prove herself in this profession and some, probably a handful, would see a pregnant female as being weak, or, you know, not that strong type [of] person that's needed to be an officer."

Tammy also expressed concern about incurring animosity among her fellow police officers. Departmental policy required a woman to be restricted to desk duty as soon as she announced her pregnancy, and she feared that the male officers might resent women who did this. "I've never heard it verbalized, but I've always wondered if that was the case." As Tammy had lofty career goals, hoping to attain a rank that no woman had ever attained in the city in which she worked, she was very concerned about the impact that being pulled from street duty would have on her career, both in terms of seniority and of relationships with her fellow officers. Now that she had reached her career goals, she and her husband were considering having children. At 39 years old, she said, "But I'm getting old, so I have to move quick." It is important to note that while Rachel saw childbearing as an impediment to her career, Tammy and Olivia both discussed career as a barrier to motherhood.

**Marriage**. Although women's increased participation in the paid labor force is often perceived to be a hindrance to motherhood, it is not strictly a barrier. The increased access to financial resources creates the opportunity to postpone marriage. Some women hold out for an idealized relationship rather than consenting to a marriage that is merely acceptable (Baker 2007; Hertz 2006). Many unmarried middle-class women find that these same financial resources make motherhood accessible without a partner (Hertz 2006; Mannis [1999] 2004).

Nonetheless, marriage is often the precursor to parenthood. For some women, motherhood without a partner, while not out of the realm of possibility, is unacceptable. "I wouldn't have chosen to be a single parent," said Emily. Laura spoke more clearly about the socially appropriate sequence endorsed by many of her friends: "They talk to you about having children the minute you have a boyfriend. … They want you to get married so you can have a baby." Some of her friends seemed very anxious for her to follow the normative pattern of marriage and children that "Some of them set me up with every Y-chromosome they knew."

Even if a woman eschews marriage, she may still view a relationship as a prerequisite. Fran, who said she did not like anything traditional, would not consider parenting alone.

> I would love to be a mother. I would love to have children. Um, but I would only have a child if I had somebody who was as interested in co-parenting a child as I am ... a partnership where both our energies are directed toward a child or children.

Although Fran vehemently refused the normative standard of marriage as necessary for a child's upbringing, she had adopted the standard of two involved parents.

**Religion**. As noted in Chapter III, religion is often thought to be a gateway to childbearing, at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, it can also serve as an impediment. Sometimes this is tied to the norms about marriage discussed above. Cathy noted that bearing a child while unmarried "would not have suited our Catholic religion very well." However, it can also be tied to doctrinal beliefs about reproductive intervention. This may be the case for Tammy, who did not want to have children until she was well-established in her career. At 39 years old, she realized that she might not be

able to conceive without medical intervention. "I'm a traditional Catholic," she said, which meant she would not pursue fertility treatments. She was, however, open to becoming a mother through adoption.

*Interpersonal Factors*

Interpersonal factors are the relationships women have with other individuals that impact their reproductive behaviors. For example, having a partner who is uninterested in becoming a father would surely affect a woman's childbearing decisions. Likewise, a woman's relationship with other family members can serve as either a barrier to motherhood or a gateway to childlessness, especially her relationship with her mother. Finally, friendships can influence a woman's childbearing as well.

**Partner**. Marriage itself was not sufficient for childbearing for some of the women in my sample. Three women cited a bad marriage (or two) as the primary reason they did not have children. "The man I was married to would have been a horrible father," said Beth. She was unhappy in the marriage and thought that having children would have made things worse. "It was just not a good marriage, and that was the main reason why we don't have children."

Mary told me that she had always wanted to have children. So much so, in fact, that she forwent surgery to have a tumor removed from her uterus. Her physician told her that if she wanted to get pregnant, the tumor could not be removed because to do so would compromise the strength of the uterine wall. "I really did want a baby and I think that I would have been a good mom," but both her marriages were unsuitable for rearing children as both were abusive.

Another way in which a partner may be a barrier to motherhood is if he does not want children, or more children. Laura, for example, in addition to having married fairly late in life, married a man who already had a son from a previous relationship. After having a hysterectomy, Hannah considered adoption but her husband was against it. "He did not want to adopt and that was it," she said. He had some trepidation about parenting a child of unknown genetic origins, which is not an uncommon fear. "My husband is the first to say he's a very selfish person," she later added, "I really appreciate his honesty. Better that."

Sometimes, rather than a barrier to motherhood, a partner is a gateway to childlessness in that he supports a woman's decision not to have children. This was the case for Kelly, who told her husband early in their relationship that she wanted no children. "He says I told him on our second date, but I don't remember that." He never tried to dissuade her. For some couples, though, it is a joint decision. Iris and her husband planned to have children, but as time passed and they became comfortable with their life together, they decided that children were not for them. Furthermore, her husband also took the forefront in dealing with family members who thought Iris had "swayed" him.

**Familial Relationships**. As with partners, other familial relationships can serve as either a barrier to motherhood or a gateway to childlessness. This was particularly true of mother-daughter relationships. As noted earlier in this chapter, Wendy and Anne, saw the work their mothers put into rearing their children, and took to heart that mothering was a difficult job with few rewards. Anne particularly recalled that her mother seemed frustrated. She came away with the message that childrearing would be a burden.

Kelly's contentious relationships with her siblings solidified her resolve against parenting. "They want me to be as miserable as they are," she said.

Valerie mentioned a problematic relationship with her adoptive sister as one of the reasons she would not become a mother. Having explored medical interventions in the hope of having children, she admited that cost was not the only thing dissuading her from adoption. She described her sister as being "completely out of control" during their youth. "My sister didn't obviously give us the best scenario of what adoption can be."

Other women found their family to be very supportive of their lives without children. Women whose mothers were not pressuring them to produce grandchildren seemed to find it easier to fall into and accept a life without children. Iris admits to waiting until her sister had a child before telling her parents that she and her husband decided not to have children. Despite Iris' fears, "[My mother] was pretty accepting of it." This was even the case for women who would commonly be considered involuntarily childless. "Sometimes my mother said it was a blessing that my husband and I didn't become parents together," said Hannah. "She just thinks that, A) it would have ruined our marriage, B) we would have been a disaster for our children."

**Non-familial Relationships**. Many of the women I interviewed noted that many of their friends also had no children. "I'm not sure if it is intentional, but it worked out this way," said Kelly. "We associate with people who don't have children." In most cases, friendships seemed to be a gateway to childlessness as opposed to a barrier to motherhood. Iris believed that childless people tend to gravitate toward one another: "I think we end up going to places where there are people without kids. … [P]eople tend to gather with like people."

Although most of the women did not interpret having childless friends as a cause for their own childlessness, some did note that childless friends made the pronatal pressure they felt from society easier to resist. Olivia said, "Most of my closest female friends are lesbians. So, motherhood is not high on their list of priorities." This makes her parental status a "non-issue," as compared to Laura, who, as mentioned earlier, at one time had many friends trying to find the perfect man for her so that she could have children.

The importance of these relationships in helping women maintain or avoid childless identities must not be underestimated. In both Chapters III and IV, we see that women who had no children valued connection to others in and of itself. Clearly, having others in their lives who understood and supported them was important as well.

*Downplaying Constraint*

Most of the women I interviewed discussed environmental constraints that affected their parenting status, but they resisted portraying the constraints as determinants of their childlessness. They continually drew on the language of choice, even when they were referencing things that were not their choices. In general, people prefer to think that they have control over their environment rather than that their environment controls them (Rotter 1966). There was a need among my respondents to assert their agency regardless of the environmental constraints they faced. Even those who acknowledged that they would be mothers now if they could have conceived easily do not like to talk of themselves as lacking choice. Either they spoke of themselves as having chosen not to

pursue alternate paths to motherhood or they spoke of their choices of how to deal with their childlessness.

**Why Choice?**

As noted in Chapter II, childlessness is neither everyday nor expected for adult women. It is, therefore, not uncommon for women who are not mothers to be expected to account for why they have no children. "Choice" is the word they have inherited in order to tell others about themselves, and all but one of the women I interviewed utilized the language of choice at times. This is particularly notable because, as discussed earlier, only seven of my respondents presented themselves as having made a clear, conscious decision not to bear children. Obviously, these women were not using choice to draw the same boundaries as researchers are drawing.

Rotter posited that "related to [the] feeling that one can control the environment is also a feeling that one can control himself" (1966, 21). This harkens back to Erickson's (1950) assertion that choice is central to identity formation. My respondents might have been reluctant to relinquish the language of choice because in doing so they perceived themselves to be relinquishing the right to self-definition. In their zeal to identify types of childless women, researchers have overlooked the possibility that all childless women, voluntarily and involuntarily, are actually drawing on choice rhetorics in order to create identities that may or may not be tied to their parenting status. In other words, researchers have focused on the *presence* of choice as they define it while ignoring how women without children perceive and *utilize* choice.

Not all of the women's use of choice rhetorics can be attributed to unreflective adherence to American or feminist ideologies about individualism and rights. Some of the women admitted to using the language of choice as a means to circumvent pity. People like to think they succeed (and others fail) through ability *and volition* (Nisbett and Ross 1980; Rotter 1966). By asserting that they have chosen not to have children, whether this is true or not, women are asserting their freedom and individualism. Even if they do not think of themselves as having chosen childlessness, they perceive themselves as having chosen *something*. For some of my respondents, this had to do with maintaining some semblance of control over their lives. For others, it was about avoiding pity. Most of them were tailoring an identity in which they were at least partially responsible for their childlessness. While this had the potential to elicit blame and other negative reactions (Weiner 1995), it also gave them control over how they were perceived (Weiner 1980). On the one hand, it seems odd that childless women would put forth narratives of choice when they could craft narratives in which they were not to blame for their parenting status. As Heider noted, "It does not make sense to say a person ought to do something if he cannot do it" (1958: 226). However, if people perceive that their freedom of choice is circumscribed, Weiner (1980) argued that they will take action to take it back. It is important for people to perceive themselves as in control. Loss of control, Weiner (1980) argued, is detrimental to well-being. In light of this, the adoption of choice rhetorics by my respondents was rational. By crafting these narratives, these women were challenging the notion that childlessness, regardless of how one arrives at it, is aberrant or pitiable.

In her study of women who cannot bear children, Letherby (1994) reported that many of her respondents experienced childlessness as a stigmatized identity. Women who feel they have chosen childlessness believe they are called upon to defend their childlessness more frequently and more vigorously than women who are presumed to be unable to have children. The literature focusing on so-called voluntarily childless women suggests that women who experience choice as intention believe they are more stigmatized than those who cannot have children (Campbell 1999; Gillespie 2000; Safer 1996). The reasoning behind this belief is that at least involuntarily childless women want to uphold the status quo; they are pitied rather than blamed for not having children. But as one of Letherby's respondents stated, "Pity demeans you and sees only one aspect" (1999: 363).

When my respondent Hannah told people that she had no children, they sometimes responded with "I'm sorry."

> I know where they're coming from intellectually, but emotionally when someone says "I'm sorry," that means there is something wrong. So, then you're trying to process, oh what was wrong?

Later, Hannah added, "I can't imagine that I've missed out on that much" so she found pity to be inappropriate.

Valerie admitted to intentionally misleading people about her childlessness in her effort to avoid pity.

> I guess the bottom line is it's easier to deal with. You don't have to bring up all of the shit that you've had to deal with. It's just easier to say, "Oh, that's not for me." or "You know kids, they're a pain." You know, you lie about it. You make it seem like kids are evil and [laugh] people don't generally push it.

Rhetorics of choice were also employed as a means of sparing others from the discomfort of experiencing pity. According to Kelly, "[P]eople start to think that maybe you couldn't have children and then they get upset, so I just cut them off by saying, 'and that's my choice.'" Likewise, Valerie prefered to spare people the details of her experience with ART in part because "it tends to make other people more uncomfortable than it makes me uncomfortable."

Regardless of whether these women were trying to spare themselves or others, they felt that they were responsible for how they were perceived in the situation. They seemed to feel obliged to reduce any awkwardness that others might experience in the interaction.

That childlessness serves as a gateway to other opportunities for women who profess to have chosen their childlessness seems obvious. Rachel viewed her childless status as an opportunity, perhaps even a necessity, to establishing her own mergers and acquisitions firm. And Iris felt that by not having children she could do more to serve her community. "I've been very active in the community and very active in women's issues and …fighting for women's rights."

But a woman need not perceive herself to have chosen her childlessness in order to experience it as a means to other possibilities. When I asked Hannah how she got to this point in her life without having children, she replied: "How did I get to this point in my life without children? I *got* to this point in my life *without children*." She described her life as "so full and creative." For Hannah, it seems, not having children made her life possible.

Although Valerie and her husband invested a lot of time and money in fertility

treatments, “I never identified myself as a woman who wanted children in the first place. For me, there are wonderful things about having children, but I, I never… if it didn’t work out I always thought I’d be okay with that.” Although she still thought she would like to be a mother, Valerie also recognized that she was “getting to that age in my life where I really enjoy being able to go on trips whenever I want and to do whatever I want and I don’t have to rush home. I don’t have to change diapers. And…and that’s probably one of the reasons why I didn’t look into adoption.”

Cathy’s only son died in infancy. Of all the women I interviewed, she spoke most explicitly about the opportunities she had because she did not rear any children. “There’s a reason for everything. I live my life that way. … And, so, rather than dwell on it, I just took advantage of the fact that I didn’t have children.” She had been a banker and a business-owner, and she was an elected official at the time of the interview. “I don’t think I would have been able to own a restaurant and lounge and have children.”

There were echoes of fate in Cathy’s “There’s a reason for everything,” Hannah’s “Life happens,” and Valerie’s “I’d like to be a parent, but I’m not sure that that’s going to work out.” Nancy, Sally and Pam also seemed to take the attitude that they were simply not meant to be mothers, and this situation afforded them opportunities other women did not have. In fact, Nancy said, “Now, I think it’s more of a blessing that I don’t [have children]. … It gives me a lot of freedom in my middle age.” Likewise, Pam said, “I had freedom I could see my friends not having.” Sally had a secondary career as a nurse with the National Guard. She could easily be deployed during a national emergency These women may not have chosen to be without children, but they did not perceive themselves as pitiable or as without choices.

Attribution literature asserts that people will react less negatively to someone whose failures are due to a lack of ability rather than effort or intention (Heider 1958; Weiner 1995). Literature on so-called voluntarily childless women consistently argues that women who are perceived to have chosen not to have children are viewed more negatively than women who cannot bear children (Abshoff 2000; Bartlett 1994; Campbell 1999; Campbell 1985; Gillespie 1999; Ireland 1993; Lang 1991; Letherby 1994, 1997; Letherby and Williams 1999; Lisle 1996; May 1995; Morell 1994; Safer 1996; Veevers 1980). In light of this, we might expect women to craft narratives in which their childlessness is beyond their control, whether or not those narratives are true.

Some of my respondents did mention that they might allow someone to assume they could not bear children in certain situations, but for the most part, these women presented themselves as women with choices who were neither embarrassed about nor apologetic for being childless. This was as much the case for women who could easily claim to be unable to bear children as it was for those who adamantly chose not to bear children. Not only were my respondents willing to endure (and in some cases contest) the anger and blame they might face, they assiduously avoided pity. Furthermore, they rarely retreated into excuses to explain why they did not mother. Although nearly all of my respondents pointed to environmental factors that constrained their options, they clearly presented themselves as agents within the social structure rather than victims of the social structure.

Regardless of how they came to be non-mothers, my respondents were fighting a societal expectation that defines women as mothers. This is clear in literature about women who are identified as childless by choice, but it is overlooked in the literature on

women who are identified as infertile. Because researchers decide *a priori* who has and who has not chosen childlessness, the utilization of choice in the narratives of presumably involuntarily childless women go unnoticed and unanalyzed. Researchers have been using definitions of choice as embedded in Heider's typology to carve childless women into smaller and smaller categories. If researchers had paid more attention to the ways in which childless women used the language available to them, choice might have been recognized as a unifying concept. Rhetorics of choice can and are utilized by both "voluntarily" and "involuntarily" childless women to present themselves as valuable without being mothers.

By presenting themselves as having agency in their reproductive outcomes, childless women are presenting themselves as having agency over how society views them. They are willing to risk condemnation in order to avoid pity. While pity may seem the softer of the two reactions, it is less amenable to the actors' control. Furthermore, with pity comes a sense that one is essentially flawed. As noted above, Hannah found the tendency of people to say "I'm sorry," when she told them she had no children as an indication that they thought something was wrong with her. When you allow someone to pity you, you allow her to construct a defective identity for you. In the case of childlessness, a woman who accepts pity may be accepting a construction of herself as sad and unfulfilled.

On the contrary, when a woman presents herself as having choices, she presents herself as master of her own identity. Whether her choices are celebrated or condemned, she has a hand in how others perceive her. If a woman can define herself as having made choices that contributed to her childlessness, she can define herself as challenging the

status quo. In doing this, she can call into question the notion that one must have a child to be fulfilled.

**Accountability and Responsibility**

As noted in Chapter II, Scott and Lyman (1968) posit two categories of accounts people give for untoward behavior: justifications and excuses. They further assert that the difference between these categories is a matter of responsibility. "Justifications are accounts in which one accepts responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it. … Excuses are accounts in which one admits that the act in question is bad, wrong, or inappropriate but denies full responsibility" (Scott and Lyman 1968: 47). Initially, I expected my respondents to use a combination of justifications and excuses in order to craft acceptable self presentations. More specifically, I anticipated that I would be able to distinguish between situations in which women relied on excuses in order to evade blame and situations in which they drew on justifications in order to avoid pity. Throughout this chapter, I have stressed that my respondents utilized rhetorics of choice, eschewing excuses even when they had what would be honored as a legitimate claim to them. Instead, they preferred to present themselves as responsible for their parental status.

Scott and Lyman (1968) rely on vocabularies of justification identified by Sykes and Matza (1957) as techniques of neutralization: denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to other loyalties. Scott and Lyman add to these the categories of the sad tale and self-fulfillment. While all of these categories are present among my sample, only appeals to other loyalties and self-fulfillment were

commonly employed. Reliance upon these two types of justifications more frequently than others allowed women to craft a particular type of identity.

Denial of injury and denial of the victim are closely related. When denying injury, an actor acknowledges the act but claims that no one (or no one important) is being hurt. Most of my respondents were of the opinion that they were not really hurting anyone by not having children. A few of my respondents, like Iris and Kelly, acknowledged that some family members claimed to be hurt by being denied grandchildren or nieces and nephews, but the respondents generally dismissed those claims as irrelevant. A denial of the victim is an account in which the actor contends that the victim deserved what happened to her. This justification requires a victim; most of my respondents acknowledged no victim. Perhaps the closest example of this is Gail's assertion that her parents did not deserve grandchildren:

> My mother was furious with me. … "How could you do this? What are you saying? That I'm a bad mother?"
> "No, you're not a good mother. … But that's beside the point."

Neither of her parents honored her primary account—fear of paralysis. But her assessment that they were bad parents, undeserving of grandchildren, prevented her from feeling any guilt over their anger.

Condemnation of condemners typically refers to justification by claiming that others who commit similar or worse acts "are either not caught, not punished, not condemned, unnoticed or even praised" (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 51). While none of the women in my sample believed other women "get away" with childlessness, some did complain that people who are terrible parents still receive some social approval for being parents.

It could be argued that the sad tale is more of an excuse than a justification. Scott and Lyman define it as "a selected…arrangement of facts that highlight an extremely dismal past" (1968: 52). The sad tale is a reconstruction of the past which can be used to contextualize a particular present. Mary, for example, cited abusive relationships and a uterine tumor in accounting for her childlessness. She could have borne children despite the physical, mental and social risks. Not bearing children within that context, despite her desire to be a mother, allowed her to bring responsibility into her account, thereby making her account a justification rather than an excuse.

*Loyalties and Self-fulfillment*

While each of the seven forms of justifications were utilized by some of my respondents, appeals to other loyalties (broadly conceived) and accounts of self-fulfillment were most common. The combination of these two allowed the women to craft identities that were contrary to "common knowledge" about childless women. By using primarily these two types of justifications women were demonstrating that they were neither selfish nor dissatisfied.

**Loyalties and Commitments**. Historically, the appeal to other loyalties has referred to specific others. Sykes and Matza (1957) developed their categories of neutralizations through research on youthful offenders. They define the appeal to higher loyalties as "sacrificing the demands of the larger society for the demands of the smaller social group to which the delinquent belongs such as the sibling pair, the gang, or the friendship clique" (Sykes and Matza 1957: 669). Although Scott and Lyman expand the justification beyond use by youthful offenders, they still imply that loyalties are to

people. According to Scott and Lyman, a person employs this justification when he claims an action "served the interests of another to *whom* he owes an unbreakable allegiance or affection" (Scott and Lyman 1968: 51, emphasis added). Among my respondents, Hannah best exemplified this. Her husband was not interested in pursuing adoption, and she expressed her appreciation for his honesty. Her allegiance and affection for him overrode societal expectations that she become a mother.

Defining loyalty merely in terms of allegiance to specific others is short-sighted as the common understanding of loyalty is broader. Alvarez (1997) and Waldner, Martin and Capeder (2006) expand the appeal to higher loyalties to include not just significant others but broader categories of people. In his analysis of genocide, Alvarez notes that "the Nazis made it possible for the perpetrators who helped bring about the Final Solution to assert they were doing so for their people and their country" (1997: 165). Waldner and her colleagues stretch the notion of an appeal to higher loyalties by noting how homosexual white supremacists chastised heterosexual whites for racial divisiveness, admonishing other racialists "to heed the higher loyalty of white unity" (2006: 177). Although these researchers have departed from the strict definition of appeal to higher loyalties as it is set out by Sykes and Matza and by Scott and Lyman, they do not stray from loyalty to other people. Nonetheless, this small step away from the original concept is more in keeping with everyday understandings of loyalty, which include allegiance not only to people with whom one is personally acquainted but also to a sovereign, an institution, a cause, or an ideal. Although Alvarez (1997) and Waldner and her colleagues (2006) write specifically about allegiance to categories of people to which their subjects belong, they allude to commitment to belief systems—patriotism and racial

purity respectively. In examining my respondents' narratives, it is obvious that their loyalties were not limited to specific persons either. They maintained spiritual, political and ideological commitments as well.

In this era of medical interventions, Tammy's refusal to pursue assisted reproductive technology because it was against her religious beliefs demonstrated allegiance to spiritual loyalties. In addition, Nancy and Pam both expressed a belief that their childlessness was divinely ordained. Of herself and a cousin who also had no children, Pam said, "God just meant for us not to have children, and that's the way we look at it."

Iris and Gail both mentioned concerns about overpopulation, which suggests a political allegiance. Gail attended college in the early 1970s, and though she cited breaking her back as the primary consideration in her childlessness, so was the political climate on campus. She elaborated:

> [I]n the time that I was going to school, we were talking about overpopulation and deforesting and environmental conditions and food shortages and water shortages and the people in India were, you know, overpopulated and in China and how are we going to feed these people? And what was our responsibility? This is what I grew up with. And so, to me, it didn't seem illogical to not want children. You know, I was *doing my part* because somebody else wasn't. (emphasis added)

Iris echoed this sentiment. "It's not like we have a shortage of people on the planet, you know. … I think some of our biggest problems in society, from a global perspective, have to do with too many people and limited resources."

The results of the survey administered after the interviews further illustrate this quality among my respondents. Of my 22 respondents, 14 women indicated that overpopulation was a valid reason for an individual not to bear children, with 13 saying

that it was a factor in their own childlessness. When asked about the prevalence of unwanted children in the world, 16 women indicated that this was also a valid reason not to have children, although fewer, 10, said that this was a factor for them.

Iris had a second political loyalty in that her lack of maternal responsibility allowed her to be politically active on behalf of women, a loyalty Cathy shared to a lesser extent. Cathy presented her childlessness as providing her the opportunity to be politically active. Rather than foregoing childbearing in order to hold public office, she viewed her work on behalf of women as a more useful and more responsible use of her time than pining over children she apparently could not have. While she and Iris shared the belief that their activism would be curtailed by motherhood, Iris presented herself as someone who had specifically chosen politics over childbearing. As noted in Chapter IV, she identified as a feminist and a champion of women's rights.

These spiritual and political allegiances bridged the gap between loyalties to people and commitments to a cause or ideal. These women were committed to their convictions. For some of my respondents, the allegiance to unknown others is obvious—to God, to women in general, to the rest of the world. However, these particular justifications represent allegiance to broader belief systems as well. These women were committed to religious doctrine, feminist tenets, and global responsibility. In fact, the concerns my respondents expressed about overpopulation and neglected children suggested a belief that childbearing is not an endeavor to be entered into lightly. This sentiment became even clearer when my respondents' comments about mothering were closely examined. Despite having no children of their own, many of my respondents were committed to hegemonic mothering.

In the United States, hegemonic mothering is an intensive endeavor. Mothers are expected to be exceptionally devoted, putting their children's needs above the needs of all others in their lives. Mothering is financially and temporally expensive. Furthermore, women are expected to rely on expert advice in the form of parenting books and magazines, which has standardized mothering. All of this is done out of love (Hays 1996; Hoffnung 1995; Rothman 2000). Furthermore, ideal mothering occurs in a household in which there is also a father.

Many childless women say they feel social pressure to bear children, including some of my respondents. As Nancy said, "You know, we're taught—I was—you grow up, you get married, you have kids." Many women report that family and strangers accuse them of being scornful, of refusing to become mothers because they think so little of motherhood (Bartlett 1994; Campbell 1999; Campbell 1985; Franklin 1998; Gillespie 1999; Hird 2003; Ireland 1993; Lang 1991; Letherby 1997; Lisle 1996; Morell 1994; Safer 1996; Veevers 1980). As such, a recurrent theme in the previous literature is an assumption that women who have no children do not respect motherhood. My data indicates that this perception is terribly skewed. The popular opinion that non-mothers have no appreciation for this, that they simply pooh-pooh mothering as a valid pursuit for a woman, is not supported by my interview data. Many of my respondents accepted the dominant societal expectations of mothers but judged themselves to be unable to meet those standards. In essence, they thought that having children would be an irresponsible action on their part. So rather than being disloyal to motherhood, they were committed to the importance of responsibility, including responsible mothering.

As noted earlier, many of my respondents cited marital concerns as a reason for

not having children. Two of them married late in life. Emily expressed her position on the subject succinctly: "I wouldn't have chosen to be single parent." In her youth, Laura wanted very much to be a mother. She even considered having a child outside of marriage.

> I was in my 30s and I met a man from America when I was in Europe and I decided that it was just going to be a set up thing and was going to go visit him in the states, because that is where he lived. And I was just going to become impregnated and go have his baby and never tell anybody. He was a nice guy, but his genes! He was a doctor; He was an engineer.

But she did not conceive, which she now considered fortunate because she did not think she would have been capable of providing for a child on her own. She concluded, "I was like, my God! What were you thinking?"

The women in this sample viewed motherhood as a responsibility not to be taken lightly. The questionnaire presented after the interview provided more insight into this as well. In addition to evaluating reasons not to mother, the women were asked to evaluate 17 reasons given by childless women for pursuing fertility treatments. Three of the four reasons rated favorably by at least half of my respondents suggest that they believed that motherhood is not a job for those who are not committed to it.[1]

Two reasons were considered good by most of my respondents. Of the 22 women, 21 thought that believing one would be a good parent was a good reason for seeking medical intervention, with 11 of them indicating that it was an excellent reason. Twenty believed that a strong desire to have a child was a good reason to try fertility treatments, with eight indicating that this was also an excellent reason. Finally, 12 of the

[1] The fourth reason my respondents endorsed was that treatments were a way to take control of one's infertility.

women indicated that the desire of one's partner to have children was a good reason to pursue treatment, although none of them ranked it as an excellent reason. Three respondents verbally qualified their evaluations by saying that they assumed the woman in question also wanted to have children. The upshot of these evaluations is that my respondents believed that parenting should be left to those who want the job and who think they are capable of it. It should not be entered into by just anyone.

**Self-fulfillment.** Scott and Lyman's last category of justification, self-fulfillment, was also common among my sample. People who utilize this justification see nothing wrong with their behavior, asserting that it is preferable to be fulfilled as a person than to adhere to norms that make one miserable. According to Scott and Lyman, they often profess "either a desire to be left alone or to enlighten what they considered to be the unenlightened establishment" (1968: 52). Most of my respondents, even those who still hoped to have children someday, considered themselves to be happy and fulfilled. Furthermore, many of the women expressed a wish that others be more accepting of their childlessness.

As noted previously in this chapter, many respondents indicated that childlessness afforded them the opportunity to explore other paths to fulfillment. "I think having children could be wonderful," Emily said. "But, I mean, there's friends, there's career, there's family… There's a lot to life besides having children and that's been very good to me." She went on say that many aspects of her life have been "delightful." Although Beth hoped to have children some day, she echoed this sentiment. "I've thought through all the benefits and things that I can get out of life if I don't have children. … the social

opportunities and the things at work and hobbies and travel and all the million things that you can do."

Perhaps more than any other respondent, Kelly epitomized someone who believed herself to be entitled to self-fulfillment on her own terms.

> People need… to stop assuming that in order to be fulfilled as a person, you must procreate. … I've seen friends go through the in-vitro and just all of it, and it becomes their sole purpose in life and it's really pretty sad.

Mary echoed this sentiment. Even though at one time she really hoped to be a mother, she said, "I've never felt like the fact that I don't have children made me any less of a woman." Anne said simply, "I don't feel unfulfilled," in reference to her childlessness. Furthermore, although Chapter IV does not specifically address the issue of fulfillment, the way most of my respondents spoke of their various identities suggests that they did feel fulfilled. Motherhood was simply not a requirement for fulfillment.

**Conclusion: From Choice to Responsibility**

An account is merely a linguistic device, a story proffered when one's behavior is called into question. Although Scott and Lyman contend that justifications are accounts in which one accepts responsibility for his or her actions, they do not clarify what they mean by responsibility. Upon inspection, it seems that they equate responsibility with choice. But responsibility is also about reliability and obligation. Responsibility recognizes not only that different factors may produce different choices, but that some choices are preferable to others. "[I]t is not what you did, but what you did *given* who you are, that determines which sanctioning rules apply," (Hamilton 1978: 321 emphasis

original). Responsibility, in other words, is laden with "oughts," internal manifestations of social order (Hamilton 1978; Heider 1958). It is about action within the social structure (Hamilton 1978; Heider 1958).

Other types of accounts notwithstanding, it is the combination of these two categories of justification that allowed non-mothers to construct a narrative of themselves as not so different from mothers. After all, mothers are presumed to be both unselfish and self-fulfilled. The appeal to other loyalties illustrated that these non-mothers were not thinking only of themselves. Accounts asserting their happiness demonstrated that they were self-fulfilled. As such, they presented themselves as responsible members of society. They presented themselves as women who did as they "ought" to do within the contexts of their lives.

Consider Gail's "conscious decision." Although she fought for her tubal ligation, and it was the product of careful deliberation, Gail acknowledged that "If I hadn't had my back broken, if things would have been different, maybe I would have changed my mind." In looking for responsibility, we see the ambivalence present in many women's narratives as just that – ambivalence—rather than indecision or regret. By utilizing this term, we move the analysis away from the behavior of the choice (or lack thereof) not to have children as suspended in time and toward the process of becoming childless, a process in which more than personal preferences are considered. Whereas the existing literature portrays non-mothers as women who have chosen to eschew the normative expectations of mothering, this research, with its examination of responsibility, illustrates that many childless women have actually embraced the hegemonic standard of intensive mothering. Despite utilizing rhetorics of choice, my respondents did not choose to

remain childless so much as they exercised reproductive responsibility. These women felt that they had made good decisions, moral decisions, responsible decisions.

## Chapter VI: Summations and Implications

Although academic interest in women who have no children has grown in the last 30 years, some of the underlying assumptions have remained unchanged. Because mother seems to be a salient identity for women who have children, childless is presumed to be salient for women without children. In part, this is based on psychological theories that tie men's identities to their vocations and women's identities to reproduction. Therefore, most research about childless women's identities has focused on the childless identity rather than other possible identities. The presumed salience and importance of childless identities is reinforced by research practices that over-sample the pool of women who *do* regard childlessness as a salient and important identity.

The common explanations for childlessness are infertility and choice with most research focused on women who have "chosen" to remain childless. Although some researchers have pointed out that "choice" is inadequate to fully understand how women come to be without children, they have not offered an alternative. Not only does this skew women's narratives, but it obscures the commonalities among "voluntarily" childless women, "involuntarily" childless women and mothers.

This research called these assumptions into question and paves the way for a richer understanding of not just childless women. My findings suggest that the dominant understanding of motherhood as an essential identity, even for mothers, may be incorrect. A methodological innovation may cause some researchers to rethink how they have approached identity. Replacing choice with responsibility in understanding the narratives of childless women has implications for the broader discourse on reproductive politics.

**Summary of Major Findings**

My findings contradict previous research on childless women in that the vast majority of my respondents did not consider childlessness either salient or important. As noted in Chapter III, although most of the mothers considered "mother" both a salient and important identity, most of the respondents who had no children made no mention of that fact as part of their Twenty-Statements Test. The analyses of interviews presented in Chapter IV reinforce this finding. If a respondent had a childless identity, it was never primary.

The analysis of the quantitative data also revealed that the differences between mothers and non-mothers are not as great as many people perceive them to be. As noted in Chapter III, most of the differences between these two categories of women were mitigated, if not eliminated, by controlling for age and marital status. Use of these controls left only six differences of note. First, mothers tended to list more occupational terms than non-mothers. This is most likely a product of the stereotype of working mothers as less devoted employees. They must assert their occupational identities more frequently than other working women. Second, non-mothers were more likely to have listed "woman" or "female" on the TST. Because motherhood is equated with womanhood in American society, non-mothers in my sample may have felt it necessary to articulate their biological sex. These two types of identities, like all other identities, arise from narration. Non-mothers do not have to defend their commitment to work, so occupational identities did not come across as strongly in their lists as they did on as working mothers' lists. Mothers do not have to assert their womanhood, so they were

less likely to have to put forth an identity based on biological sex than non-mothers were.

Research has established that many people return to regular church attendance once they have children. Therefore, the third notable difference, the tendency of mothers to list more religious/spiritual terms than non-mothers, while significant, is neither surprising nor particularly enlightening.

The remaining differences challenge the assumption that non-mothers are selfish. The fourth and fifth notable differences were that non-mothers were more likely than mothers to indicate that non-familial relationships and activity-oriented identities were important to them. The first of these differences held after controlling for marital status, which could (and did) provide my respondents with more familial terms from which to draw. The fact that non-mothers placed more importance on their non-familial relationships while they were no more nor less likely to value their familial relationships than mothers casts doubt on the presumption that non-mothers think only of themselves. Obviously, the childless women in my sample considered their relationships with others as important components of their identities.

In Chapter III, the fact that non-mothers rated their activity-oriented identities higher in importance than mothers rated these identities was interpreted as a connection between non-familial relationships and activities. Activities are a means through which women can establish non-familial relationships, and non-familial relationships, in turn, are fostered and nurtured through joint activities. This explanation gains additional credibility from the findings that women who had never married, like non-mothers, also assigned greater importance to both their non-familial relationships and activities than married women assigned to theirs. Alternative interpretations are possible, especially

since older women valued activity-based identities, but not non-familial relationships, more than younger women. Unfortunately, the available data do not permit conclusive tests of the argument, advanced in Chapter III, that older women (who tended to be married and mothers) valued activities for different reasons, such as longer and stronger commitments to those activities, than non-mothers.

The final difference between mothers' and non-mothers' TSTs was a difference in the type of self that was elicited. Mothers tended to list roles on the TST, presenting a social self. Non-mothers were more likely to list personal characteristics, particularly subjective descriptors, indicating a more reflective self. People with reflective selves are not necessarily selfish or self-absorbed; they are simply less tied to social roles.

The inevitability of childlessness as an identity is also contradicted by the interview data presented in Chapter IV. Most of the women I interviewed did not mention their childlessness in telling me about themselves until I brought up the topic. Respondents who mentioned their parental status earlier in the interview did so parenthetically to explain why a particular identity was possible. Some of the women seemed to have no childless identity at all. When a woman did have a childless identity, it was situationally bounded, created through interaction and narration. In short, childless identities emerged from talking with others about one's childlessness, from *doing* childlessness.

It is not surprising that the women interviewed utilized the language of choice in their narratives. As discussed in Chapters II and V, choice is a key concept in reproductive politics and feminist discourse in the United States. This is in part due to the connection between choice and the ideology of individualism that permeates

American culture. But as noted frequently throughout this dissertation, choice is often defined as mere preference, free of constraints. This research illustrates that non-mothers' understanding and utilization of choice is not that simple.

My respondents spoke of themselves as women who had made reproductive choices, even if they appeared to be physically unable to bear children. They mentioned environmental factors that affected those choices, such as paid labor and marriage, but in general, they presented themselves as in control of their parental status. Women utilized choice as a means of taking control of their identities regardless of whether researchers or society define them as having chosen childlessness.

By crafting accounts laden with choices despite constraints, non-mothers were able to present themselves as responsible adults who were not merely refusing to accept the mantle of motherhood. Rhetorics of choice allowed my respondents to put forth justifications for their childlessness rather than excuses. Moreover, they used appeals to other loyalties and commitments and narratives of self-fulfillment to make two significant departures from common conceptions of childless women. First, appeals to other loyalties, specifically their commitment to the ideals of hegemonic mothering, allowed them to demonstrate their reproductive responsibility. Many of my respondents characterized mothering as an intensive job, one which they were unsure they could perform adequately. They would rather face the disapproval of a pronatalist society than engage in irresponsible childbearing. Second, combining appeals to other loyalties with narratives of self-fulfillment gave my respondents two qualities that mothers are automatically accorded—selflessness and fulfillment. By exploring childless women's understandings of their choices and examining the ways in which they utilize choice

rhetorics, researchers can assist in reconciling mothers and non-mothers.

## Broader Implications

It is easy to see the implications of my findings for future research on women who do not have children in the United States. Obviously, the lack of importance and salience of childless identities for women who do not mother is groundbreaking. Furthermore, even if future researchers do not use responsibility as a key for analyzing their respondents' narratives, this research illustrates that there are concepts other than choice that can produce meaningful understandings of childless women's lives. But this research also has implications for identity research generally, women's "natures," and reproductive politics.

### *Methodology and Identity Research*

If identities are situationally bounded and constructed through narrative, then the context of the research interview must be taken into account when analyzing people's accounts of themselves. In Chapter II, I speculated that the salience of childless identities in previous research was an artifact of the research process. I suspected that advertising for "childless women" would result in a sample of women for whom childlessness was salient and that they would come to the interview with prepared narratives. To avoid this, I cast a wider net, surveying women generally in order to find a few non-mothers who did not know that they were being interviewed because of their parental status. Furthermore, I did not introduce direct discussion of childlessness until identities had been explored more generally. As a result, the assumption of the centrality of childlessness as an

identity for non-mothers is now compromised, if not demolished.

This has implications for all researchers who are interested in identity construction. The importance and salience of any identity cannot be assessed across a category of people when only people for whom the identity resonates strongly are research subjects. Furthermore, if the respondent prepares in advance to discuss the topic at hand and the researcher limits herself to questions that relate directly to her line of inquiry there is no way for the researcher to know how the identity of interest fits with the subject's other identities. In effect, there is no way of knowing whether the identities at hand are common throughout a category of people or if they exist outside of the context of the research interview. Without naïve subjects and broad questions, researchers cannot be certain to what extent the identities are a product of the research process.

*Being and Doing*

One of the tenets underlying the assumption that women need to be mothers is the gendered understanding of people's natures. In short, men are what they do and women are what they are (Ireland 1993; Kilmartin 2000; LaRossa 1997; Rothman 2000). This mantra can be seen in research about men who lose or leave their jobs and seem to lose their sense of self (Brown [1995] 2001; Rubin 1994). However, in Chapter II, I discussed recent theories about self and identity that propose that we create our selves out of interaction and narration, both of which are situationally bounded. This perspective is supported by this research. Furthermore, interaction and narration can be viewed as doing identity work. Only women who *do* childlessness—think about it, narrate it,

engage the concept—have childless identities. Childless identities are not essential for non-mothers.

As mentioned in Chapter II, mothering is often viewed as something arising from a woman's nature. Yet, not all women are naturally compelled to become mothers. Certainly, most women who are mothers identify as such. My data clearly support this. However, the American ideology about mothering is that it is a lot of work (Hays 1996). Instead of thinking of motherhood as a salient and important identity because women are hard-wired to place motherhood above all other considerations, perhaps it is time to consider that mothering is salient for women because women do the work of mothering and that work is intensive and extensive. Even when both parents work outside of the home, mothers are expected to perform the primary childrearing duties. Perhaps mothers identify as mothers not because they *are* mothers but because they *do* mothering. This means that one of the basic assumptions about the "natural" differences between men and women is simply wrong. In actuality, men are what they do and women are what *they* do.

The definition of mothering as an act of love, intrinsic to a woman's nature, allows society to construct the work of mothering as something for which there should be no monetary compensation. If mothering is important and salient to women because it is essential to womanhood, you cannot put a price on it. But if mothering is important and salient to women because they do mothering work, then it is an occupation. I do not mean to discount or devalue maternal love. I merely point out that what makes a mother's love so special may be, at least in part, the work she puts into it. Recognition of this fact, of the occupational nature of mothering, is a necessary step toward a forceful argument for government and corporate support of child care that will benefit all families.

*Choice, Responsibility and the Fight for Identities*

By looking at *how* women describe their identities and utilize choice rhetorics, it becomes clear that all women are demanding the right to identities that are not tied to their reproductive capacity. This is a battle that contemporary American women are fighting regardless of their parental status. As noted in Chapter III, mothers must fight for occupational identities. Just as mothers are trying to be defined as more than mothers, in Chapter IV we see that childless women are trying to be defined as more than childless. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of loyalties (including commitment to beliefs) and self-fulfillment presented in Chapter V illustrates that non-mothers construct themselves as selfless and self-fulfilled, two qualities that mothers are also presumed to embody. These similarities among women have gone unnoticed because researchers have focused on specific populations of women as determined by the reseachers' definitions of reproductive choice. Instead of using choice as a way of splintering women into more categories, researchers could examine *uses of choice* as a way of finding commonalities among women. Choice rhetorics, rather than choice itself, could serve as a means to pursue Morell's challenge to bring mothers and non-mothers back together.

This reconciliation is in part possible by expanding the definition of appeals to other loyalties from its original conception. In keeping with Sykes and Matza (1957), Scott and Lyman (1968) defined loyalty as allegiance to specific others. However many people understand loyalties to include commitments to larger groups, causes and ideals. Broadening this category of justification allows people to see that non-mothers are not selfish, as is commonly assumed. In fact, some of them are so committed to the

contemporary ideal of intensive mothering that they would rather not mother at all than risk being unable to meet the contemporary standards of mothering. Childlessness is not merely the result of personal preferences; it is the product of carefully considered responsibilities.

Framing childlessness as chosen, or not chosen, as the case may be, maintains a division that is neither accurate nor useful. It divides people according to their beliefs about whether or not all women must mother and does not consider whether or not individual women should mother. The shift from the language of choice to the language of responsibility has serious implications for reproductive politics. As was pointed out in Chapter I, language shapes perception.

**Alternate Explanations**

As with any research, the theoretical underpinnings and methodological tactics employed herein affect the interpretation of the data. This and the composition of my samples open the gate for speculation about alternate explanations of my findings. Among the concerns others might raise are the emphasis on "doing" to determine identities, the limitations of the Twenty-Statements Test, the implication that women who list primarily social roles are less reflexive than those who list more introspective terms, the cross-sectional nature of the samples, and the race and class composition of the samples.

There is a history, particularly in psychology, of defining women's identities as rooted in their essential nature whereas men's identities are defined in terms of what they do. (See Chapter I and Chapter IV.) I adopted a situational approach to identity

formation, positing that identities are created through interaction, through doing the work of constructing an account. I used this approach not only because of its fit with the social constructionist framework, but also because it lends itself to challenging this gendered understanding of identity. Some researchers prefer a more structural approach to identity, suited to emphasizing identities that are tied to social structures. A more biographical-historical approach would reveal identities that are tied to a respondent's life history. Using this approach to analyze the interview data may have given more insights concerning whether and how women's identities have changed over time. In short, different understandings of identity will predispose certain identities to come to the forefront.

The TST provides a researcher with a sense of diversity, salience and importance of the various identities held by respondents, but it does not necessarily give insight into more evaluative assessments. The researcher cannot know for certain how the respondents feel about particular roles or their performance of them unless they provide qualifying terms as well (e.g., loving mother, happily married, disgruntled employee, bad pianist). Furthermore, the presence of social terms is not an indication of the quality of the relationships between the respondents and those with whom they are in those relationships. In other words, women may list several familial and non-familial relationships on their TSTs, but the researcher cannot evaluate how well they enacts those roles, nor if the respondents do indeed value those relationships or if the terms are merely on their lists.

The TST allows the researcher to collect self-referent identities. It helps the researcher assess in what terms her respondents view themselves. Respondents are asked

to answer the question "Who am I?" They are not called upon to tell the researcher who they are not. This raises the question of whether or not it would occur to women who have no children to note that they are not parents. My assumption was that since childlessness is a marked and stigmatized identity, if it were salient to a woman, she would include it on her list. However, some researchers have noted that stigmatized populations did not always include those terms on their TST lists (Chassin *et al* 1981; Karmel 1969). Without a more thorough assessment, one might argue that non-mothers do not include childless terms on their TSTs either because it did not occur to them to tell me who they are not or because they refused to acknowledge a stigmatized identity, rather than because they simply did not have a childless identity.

The relationship between a woman's evaluative self-assessment and given identities is also subject to speculation. Other self-assessment tools, such as the Adjective Checklist (ACL) or Semantic Differential Scale (SDS), can give insight to how positively or negatively a respondent's self-perception is, but they do not tell the researcher what identities a respondent uses to define herself. A more comprehensive approach would be to use the TST in conjunction with either the ACL or the SDS. This would provide the researcher both the list of self-defined terms and a measure of overall self-appraisal, thereby making a more thorough comparison of self-concepts of mothers and non-mothers possible. This would, of course, increase the length of the survey instrument and might require incentives to ensure an adequate response rate.

In 1977, Zurcher argued that a shift in type of selves was evident from TSTs. People were presenting more reflective (C-mode) selves as opposed to the social (B-mode) selves of the past. However, to say people who exhibit primarily social selves are

not at all reflective is an error. People assess their performances of their roles and may derive happiness or sorrow from them (Biddle 1979). This requires them to reflect on those roles. Along with the time spent on what would be considered the actual work of mothering women who listed a mothering term on the TST probably spend a great deal of time reflecting on that role. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that non-mothers were more likely to present C-mode selves is at least in part because they had the luxury of more time than mothers had to think about themselves in the more subjective, situation-free terms that characterize that mode.

Although both quantitative and qualitative techniques were utilized in this research, both samples were snap-shots in time of the respondents. The identities presented through both the TSTs and the interviews were bound to the context in which they were gathered. There was no sense of identity change over time in the TST results, and any changes in identities presented during the interviews were based on memory and reconstitution. This is not to say that my respondents presented false past identities, but that they had the benefit of more life experiences, and the knowledge gained from those experiences, to inform their understandings of their past identities. Furthermore, there is evidence that as women age, the pressure to bear children decreases. The fact that most of my interview respondents were past their prime childbearing years could have contributed to the lack of childless identities among them. If more of my respondents had been between the ages of 30 and 45, perhaps I would have found more childless identities. A longitudinal study would be ideal for understanding how respondents' identities change over time, of course, but the cost of such research is prohibitive. Furthermore, as the survey was conducted anonymously, it is impossible to check back

with those particular respondents. However, more cross-sectional samples, conducted at set intervals, could give some insight into whether the findings reported from the TST were a cohort effect or truly tied to ages, as was reported in Chapter III.

The focus on white, middle-class women in this area of research was noted in Chapter II, along with my attempts to secure a more diverse sample. The fact that I was unable to do so leaves many questions unanswered. We are no closer to knowing in what ways minority women or lower- and working-class women experience childless identities, presuming they experience them at all. Proponents of attribution theory assert that people of color and members of the lower and working classes feel less control over their lives than do whites and members of the middle and upper classes (Nisbett and Ross 1980; Rotter 1966; Weiner, 1974, 1980). That being the case, if my interview sample had been more diverse, choice rhetorics might have been less common. Middle-class women tend to view themselves as having options in their lives, especially in regards to mothering (Gerson 1985; Hays 1996; Hertz 2006; Stone 2007). Obviously, researchers need to continue to try to access the categories of women who have yet to be included in the studies of childless identities.

**Conclusion**

There were several goals of this research. First and foremost was to challenge the assumption that all women without children have a consistently salient childless identity. In addition, I hoped to discover other identities which non-mothers might find more relevant to their daily lives and to demonstrate that differences most people assume to exist between mothers and non-mothers are less important than they are presumed to be.

Another purpose of this research was to search for a concept to replace choice as the pre-eminent means by which we analyze childless narratives and, in doing so, begin to mend the differences that researchers have rent among women by parenting status. Instead, it became obvious that choice is inescapable because it is the language most women use. However, it also became clear that researchers have not paid attention to *how* women utilize choice rhetorics in constructing their identities. My respondents spoke of more than personal preferences. The choices they spoke of and wrestled with were attached to their desires to construct themselves as responsible decision makers.

This research has implications beyond the concerns of women who do not mother. Not only does this research bear on our understanding of who mothers and non-mothers are, it is relevant to the broader identity and reproductive discourses. It casts suspicion on hegemonic beliefs about the essential natures of both men and women. Furthermore, it demonstrates that identity researchers must be careful that they do not construct the identities they are investigating. Surely other researchers will find applications for this research as well.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Letters

### Request to Distribute Questionnaire to an Organization

The following letter was sent via U.S. Postal Service or via email to the contact persons at women's organizations I hoped to survey.

Dear _____,

I am a Ph.D. student in Sociology and Women's and Gender Studies at MU. As part of my dissertation research on identities of contemporary American women, I am surveying members of various women's organizations. I am contacting you about distributing my survey to members of _____.

The information collected in this questionnaire will allow me to assess how women see themselves, and may be used in publications. All identifying information will be kept confidential, and nothing will be linked back to individuals.

The benefit of this research is that it will contribute to the literature on diversity among women, especially our understanding of the identities that they are now assuming. The risks are that some of the items may make the women feel uncomfortable. But anyone should feel free to skip any item that they do not wish to answer. And, of course, no individual will be under any obligation to fill out the questionnaire at all. Many of the women who have already completed the questionnaire have reported that they enjoyed it . If you'd like, I can show you the questionnaire before you make a decision. (I can send it via e-mail or fax, or I can bring a copy to you in person.)

As part of the questionnaire, members will be asked if they would like to participate in an interview as well. This is completely voluntary, and they will not have to submit any contact information if they only want to participate in the survey. All contact information will be stored separately from the questionnaires to maintain confidentiality. The interview does pose a little more risk in that a tape recording of the interview will exist, but I will take all the necessary precautions to maintain members' confidentiality. And, as with the questionnaire, anyone can refuse to answer any question.

I will contact you again on _____ to see if you have any questions or concerns before making a decision. Please feel free to contact me at an earlier time if that is more convenient for you. I have provided contact information for myself, my advisor and the campus review board below. If you choose to participate, we can decide on a distribution method that will best suit your members.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Candace Korasick

Contact Information for Research on Identities of Contemporary Women

Candace Korasick
PhD. Candidate
320 Middlebush Hall
MU Dept. of Sociology
Columbia MO 65211
573-489-1761
cak307@mizzou.edu

Barbara J. Bank
Professor Emerita
328 Middlebush Hall
MU Dept. of Sociology
Columbia MO 65211
573-882-9174
bankb@missouri.edu

If you have questions about members' rights as research subjects, you should contact:

Campus Institutional Review Board
438 McReynolds Hall
University of Missouri
Columbia, MO 65211
573-882-9585

**Letter of Explanation**

The following letter was sent to contact persons who requested to see the questionnaire before agreeing to allow me to survey the members.

Dear _____

In accordance with our correspondence (conversation), I have enclosed a copy of the questionnaire I am using for the survey portion of my research. Most women complete it in less than 20 minutes.

You will notice that the last page asks for contact information if the respondent is interested in being interviewed for the second wave of the research project. Respondents who are not interested in granting me an interview do not have to provide any of that information. However, because the request for an interview is part of the survey, the Institutional Review Board does require that I have written permission from an organization before I distribute the questionnaire.

If you have any further questions or concerns, please contact me by phone at 573-489-1761 or by email at cak307@mizzou.edu. If the _____ decides to participate, we can work out a distribution method that best suits your members.

Sincerely,

Candace Korasick
Ph.D. Candidate

**Email/Letter to Recruit Respondents**

Some organizations forwarded the following email to their members via listserves. Members then contacted me directly for a copy of the questionnaire.

My name is Candace Korasick, and I am studying identities of contemporary American women as part of my dissertation research at the University of Missouri-Columbia. The benefit of this research is that it will contribute to the literature on diversity among women, especially our understanding of the identities that they are now assuming. The only risk is that some of the items may make you feel uncomfortable. It is not my intent to make you uncomfortable, but to get as complete a picture of as many women as is possible.

If you are interested in participating, please email your name and mailing address to me. I will mail the survey to you along with a pre-addressed, stamped return envelope. The questionnaire should take no more than 30 minutes of you time, and you may fill it out at your leisure.

If you have any questions about this project please contact me or my advisor.

**Candace Korasick**
PhD. Candidate
320 Middlebush Hall
MU Dept. of Sociology
Columbia MO 65211
573-489-1761
cak307@mizzou.edu

**Barbara J. Bank**
Professor Emerita
328 Middlebush Hall
MU Dept. of Sociology
Columbia MO 65211
573-882-9174
bankb@missouri.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you should contact:

**Campus Institutional Review Board**
438 McReynolds Hall
University of Missouri
Columbia, MO 65211
573-882-9585

**Letter to Respondents Who Were Not Interviewed**

The following letter was sent to each questionnaire respondent who indicated she was willing to participate in an interview, but did not meet the interview criteria.

Dear _____,

Thank you for your interest in being interviewed for my research on identities of contemporary American women. At this time, I do not plan to interview you. If that changes, I will contact you via telephone or email.

I cannot thank you enough for the help you have given me so far. I assure you that your contribution through the survey portion of my research is invaluable to me and that a successful dissertation would have been impossible without the generosity of women such as yourself.

Sincerely,

Candace Korasick
Ph.D. Candidate.

## Appendix B: Questionnaire (Twenty-Statements Test)

My name is Candace Korasick, and I am studying identities of contemporary American women as part of my dissertation research at the University of Missouri-Columbia. The information collected in this questionnaire will allow me to assess how women see themselves, and may be used in publications. All identifying information will be kept confidential, and nothing you reveal will be linked back to you in publication.

I am requesting that you fill out the following questionnaire completely. The benefit of this research is that it will contribute to the literature on diversity among women, especially our understanding of the identities that they are now assuming. The only risk is that some of the items may make you feel uncomfortable. However, if you are uncomfortable with any item, feel free to skip it. It is not my intent to make you uncomfortable, but to get as complete a picture of you as is possible. If you have any questions about any of the items, please ask me about them.

If you have any questions about this project please contact me or my advisor.

**Candace Korasick**
PhD. Candidate
320 Middlebush Hall
MU Dept. of Sociology
Columbia MO 65211
573-489-1761
cak307@mizzou.edu

**Barbara J. Bank**
Professor Emerita
328 Middlebush Hall
MU Dept. of Sociology
Columbia MO 65211
573-882-9174
bankb@missouri.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you should contact:

**Campus Institutional Review Board**
438 McReynolds Hall
University of Missouri
Columbia, MO 65211
573-882-9585

There are 20 blanks on the page below. Please write 20 answers to the question "Who am I?" in the blanks. Just give 20 different answers to this question. Answer as if you were giving the answers to yourself, not to somebody else. Write the answers in the order that they occur to you. Don't worry about logic or "importance." **You should spend no more than 12 minutes on this portion of the survey**, so please go along fairly quickly. If you do not finish in 12 minutes, please stop where you are and continue to the next section.

_____

_____

_____

_____

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_____

_____

**Now that you have finished your list, please go back over your answers and mark the five which you feel are most important, with 1 being the most important.**

In order to fully describe the participants in this survey, I need to collect some other information about you. This information will be kept confidential. Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. If you are uncomfortable with any question, you may skip it.

1)How old are you? _____

2)What race/ethnicity do you consider yourself? (Check all that apply.)

- ❑ African American
- ❑ Asian American
- ❑ Middle Eastern American
- ❑ American Indian/Eskimo
- ❑ European American
- ❑ Hispanic American
- ❑ Other (please specify) _____

3)Which best describes your marital status?

- ❑ Married, living with spouse
- ❑ Married, not living with spouse
- ❑ Divorced
- ❑ Widowed
- ❑ Single/never married

If you are not currently living with a spouse, are you in a committed relationship with someone of the opposite sex? □ Yes □ No

4)Which of the following describes your parenting status? (Check all that apply.)

❑I am rearing/have reared my own children (biological or adopted).

❑I am rearing/have reared children of a friend or relative (informal adoption).

❑I am rearing/have reared foster children.

❑I am rearing/have reared stepchildren.

❑I have stepchildren, but I do/did not rear them.

❑I have never reared a child.

5a)What is your religion? (Check one.)

- ❑ Christianity (Please specify denomination: _____)
- ❑ Judaism ❑ Islam
- ❑ Buddhism ❑ Hindu ❑ Pagan
- ❑ Other _____ ❑ None

5b) How often do you attend religious services? (Check one.)

- ❑ Once a week or more ❑ Once a month
- ❑ 2-3 times a month, but not every week ❑ Less than once a month

6a)Do you work in the paid labor force at the present time? □ Yes □ No

*If you are currently in the paid labor force*, what best describes your primary occupation? (Check one.)

- ❑ Management/professional ❑ Sales/office ❑ Construction/maintenance
- ❑ Service ❑ Farming/fishing/forestry ❑ Production/transportation

What is your job title? _____

How many people do you supervise in your position? (if none, write "0") _____

*If you are not currently in the paid labor force, please answer the following questions.*

6b)Which of the following best describes your current situation? (Check one.)

- ❑ Full-time homemaker/mother ❑ Retired
- ❑ Unemployed ❑ Student

Have you ever participated in the paid labor force? □ Yes □ No

If yes, which best describes your primary occupation at that time? (Check one.)

- ❑ Management/professional
- ❑ Sales/office
- ❑ Construction/maintenance
- ❑ Service
- ❑ Farming/fishing/forestry
- ❑ Production/transportation

What is your job title? _____

How many people, if any, did you supervise in your position?_____

7) What is the highest level of formal education that you have completed? (Check one.)

- ❑ No formal education
- ❑ Some college
- ❑ Master's degree
- ❑ Elementary/grade school
- ❑ Associate's degree
- ❑ Professional degree (MD, DVM, DDS, JD)
- ❑ Some high school
- ❑ Bachelor's degree
- ❑ Ph. D
- ❑ High school diploma/GED
- ❑ Some graduate school
- ❑ Other (specify) _____

8a)Think back to when you were growing up. What was your family's social class for most of that time? (Check one.)

- ❑ Lower class
- ❑ Lower-middle class
- ❑ Upper-middle class
- ❑ Working class
- ❑ Mid-middle class
- ❑ Upper class/affluent

8b)What is your current social class? (Check one)

- ❑ Lower class
- ❑ Lower-middle class
- ❑ Upper-middle class
- ❑ Working class
- ❑ Mid-middle class
- ❑ Upper class/affluent

It is impossible to get a full picture of how women understand themselves from a brief survey. Therefore, I will also be conducting in-depth interviews with some women. These interviews will take about an hour. Ideally, I would like to interview women who have participated in the first part of this research. This will give me much richer and more complete information to analyze than if I interview women who have not completed this questionnaire. Unfortunately, funding for my dissertation research is limited. I realize that your time is very valuable, but I can offer little compensation for your continued participation (approximately $10.00 plus my eternal gratitude). With so little to offer, I am appealing to your generosity.

*If you are willing to participate in the interview portion* of this study, please fill out and detach this page. This information will be stored separately from your questionnaire in order to maintain confidentiality. I may not be able to interview everyone who expresses interest in continuing in this research project. Everyone who is willing to be interviewed will be contacted to let you know if I plan to interview you. If you are interviewed, you need to be aware that a tape recording will exist of the interview. This tape will also be kept confidential, and no one outside of myself, my advisor and my assistants will hear it. You may find some of the questions uncomfortable, but this is unlikely. You will not be required to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable.

*If you are not willing to be interviewed*, there is no need to provide any further information. Please detach this page and turn it in blank.

Name: _____

Phone number: _____

Email address: _____

Mailing address: _____

City, State, Zip: _____

## Appendix C: Forms Related to Interview

### Consent to Be Interviewed in the Study of Identities of Contemporary Women

1. I hereby consent to take part in dissertation research directed by Candace Korasick under the supervision of Dr. Barbara J. Bank of the Sociology Department at the University of Missouri-Columbia. In understand that other persons may assist Ms. Korasick or be associated with her.

2. I understand that:

    a. This research is to investigate identities of contemporary American women.

    b. This will be my part of the research: I will be interviewed about myself, including my background, how I would describe myself to others, my interests, concerns and problems, and my interview will be tape-recorded.

    c. Participation in the study will take about an hour

    d. Participation is voluntary. I am free to stop participation at any time. If I do not wish to participate, I am free to leave. If I do not want to answer a particular question, I am free to say so.

    e. My participation will expose me to the following risks: I may find it difficult or stressful to answer some of the interview questions. A tape-recording of my interview will exist.

    f. There is no other satisfactory way to get the information needed for this research.

    g. The following steps will be taken to protect the confidentiality of my identity and the data I have contributed: The taped interview will not have my name or position title on it. Only Ms. Korasick will know whose interview it is. Only Ms. Korasick, her assistants, and her advisor will hear my interview. Only Ms. Korasick, her assistants, and her advisor will have access to the typed transcript of my interview. No one else will hear my taped interview, have access to the transcript of that interview, or be able to link my name or position to what I have said.

    h. The results of this research will be published, but I will not be identified in any such publication.

i. I will receive $10.00 for research participation as compensation for my time and inconvenience in completing the interview.

3. My questions about this research have been answered. If I have further questions, I am to contact Candace Korasick, Department of Sociology, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211 (573-489-1761), or Dr. Barbara J. Bank, Department of Sociology, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211 (573-882-9174).

4. I agree to allow Ms. Korasick to perform the procedures referred to above, to report her research findings to government agencies, funding agencies, or scientific bodies, and to publish her findings.

**Inteview Questions**

*Section I:*

I want to begin with some demographic questions, just to make sure that I have keyed the information correctly in my files, and to be sure that the tape recorder is working properly.

- How old are you?
- How would you describe your race?
- What is your marital status?
- What is your occupation?
- What is the highest level of education you have obtained?
- How many children do you have?
- As I am sure you recall, the twenty-statements test asks you to answer the question "Who Am I?" But it is pretty limited, both by the time allotted and the space on the page. Now, with those constraints out of the way, if I were to ask you to describe yourself, what would you say?
- Who do you want your parents to know that you are? What would you say?
- … to your spouse/partner?
- … to your siblings?
- … to your friends?
- … to a new acquaintance?
- … to a co-worker?
- … to your employer?
- Is there information about yourself that you would withhold from any of those

people? What? Why?
- What qualities do you value most in yourself?
- What qualities do you value most in your parents?
- … in your spouse/partner?
- … in your siblings?
- … in friends?
- … in co-workers?
- … in your employer?
- It has been said that everyone leaves a mark on the world. How do want the world to remember you?
- Is there anything you have not accomplished yet that you really want to do?

*Section II*

One of the things I am interested in studying in detail is how women think of themselves as mothers or non-mothers. So the rest of the interview is going to be about this part of your life. If you find any question too uncomfortable to deal with, let me know and we can take a break or go on to a different question.

- *Original version*: How did you get to this point in your life without having children? *Later version*: Tell me the story of why you don't have children.

A lot of people seem to think that a woman who doesn't have children is a fair target for questions. The next few questions are about how you deal with inquiries from different people.

- What did/do you tell your parents? How did/do they respond?
- What did/do you tell your siblings? How did/do they respond?
- What did/do you say to your friends? How did/do they respond?
- … co-workers?
- … your employer?
- … new acquaintances?
- Have you ever misled someone about why you don't have children? Why? Please tell me about that. Did it work?
- Have you ever tried to avoid telling someone that you don't have children? Why? Please tell me about that. Did it work?
- Do you ever feel pressure to account for not having children? From whom? How do

they pressure you?
- Do you ever feel pressure to have children? From whom? How do they pressure you?

*Debriefing*

Thank you for your time. As you can tell, I am quite interested in women who don't have children. Most of the literature about childless women assumes that this is a major component of their self-identity and that there is one "true" account of why they have no children. I am trying to test that idea by interviewing childless women without telling them upfront that this will be the focus of the interview.

- Now that you know the purpose of my research, is there anything you would want to say about yourself and a woman who doesn't have children or any answers you want to elaborate on?

- I'm also very interested in how childless women present themselves to other people and how that presentation may change by situation. Do you ever give different accounts of your childless to people or emphasize a different factor with different people? To whom do you tell what? Why?

I have one last questionnaire. It should only take a few minutes for you to fill it out. It is a list of reasons that people give for having children and for not having children. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree that a reason is a good one, *and* whether or not it contributed to your own status. If you have any questions or want to comment about any of these reasons, I'd be happy to discuss them with you.

## Final Questionnaire

| Reasons *not* to have children | Quality of Reason | | | | | Importance to own status | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Excellent | Very Good | Good | Poor | Very Poor | Very | Somewhat | Not at all |
| A woman's spouse/partner does not want children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman wants to focus on her career | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| The world is already overpopulated | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman does have enough money to rear children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman thinks she would not be a good parent | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman wants freedom from responsibility of child rearing | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman has no desire to have children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman's friends do not have children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman's life is full without children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| There are too many unwanted children in the world | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman does not like children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman's ability to work with children is increased if she has none of her own | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A medical condition makes it difficult for a woman to bear children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A medical condition makes it difficult for a woman to rear children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman is not married | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman does not have a male partner. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman is a lesbian. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| It is easier to advance in a career if you do not have children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman/couple is infertile | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Not having children allows a woman to make other contributions to society | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Having children requires losing control over many aspects of a woman's life | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |

| **Reasons to try fertility treatments** | **Quality of Reason** | | | | | **Importance to own status** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Excellent** | **Very Good** | **Good** | **Poor** | **Very Poor** | **Very** | **Somewhat** | **Not at all** |
| Having children is the reason people marry | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman's spouse/partner wants children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Children carry on the family name | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Children inherit wealth/heirlooms | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Children are important for happy marriage | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Prove you are able to bear a child | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Life is incomplete without children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Parents pressure people to have children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Friends pressure people to have children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman thinks she would be a good parent | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman's friends have children | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Childless women are selfish | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Women feel useless without a child | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| All woman should experience pregnancy and birth | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A woman has a strong desire to have a child | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Children will care for their parents in their old age | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Treatments are a way to take control of infertility | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |

| Reasons to *not* try fertility treatments | Quality of Reason | | | | | Importance to own status | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Excellent | Very Good | Good | Poor | Very Poor | Very | Somewhat | Not at all |
| Treatments are not covered by insurance | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| If a woman is meant to have a child, she will without treatment | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Treatments are too expensive | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Success rates are too low | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Long-term effects of treatments are unknown | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Assisted reproductive technology is unnatural | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| It is against a woman's religious beliefs to pursue artificial (medical) treatments to become pregnant. | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Fertility treatments require turning control of a woman's life over to medical professionals | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 |

## Appendix D: Questionnaire Distribution and Response Rates

Below are the numbers of questionnaires distributed to various organizations and by referral (sorted by location and organization type), along with the numbers and percentages of valid questionnaires returned.

| ***Organization*** | | ***Questionnaires*** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Distributed | Returned (Valid) | Valid % |
| State City | | | | |
| *Code* | *Type* | | | |
| SC2 | Professional | 32 | 14 | 43.8 |
| SC3 | Professional | 20 | 15 | 75.0 |
| SC4 | Professional | 28 | 11 | 39.3 |
| SC11 | Professional | 204 | 92 | 45.1 |
| SC1 | Civic | 18 | 17 | 94.4 |
| SC5 | Civic (Minority) | 15 | 7 | 46.7 |
| SC6 | Civic | 20 | 4 | 20.0 |
| SC7 | Civic | 7 | 7 | 100.0 |
| SC13 | Civic (Minority) | 1 | 0 | 0.0 |
| SC8 | Religious (Minority) | 6 | 5 | 83.3 |
| SC9 | Athletic/Recreational | 65 | 14 | 21.5 |
| SC10 | Athletic/Recreational | 235 | 58 | 24.8 |
| SC12 | Athletic/Recreational | 50 | 12 | 24.0 |
| SCPR | Personal referral | 10 | 4 | 40.0 |
| | *Totals for State City* | *672* | *260* | *38.7* |
| Metro City | | | | |
| *Code* | *Type* | | | |
| MC3 | Professional | 25 | 4 | 16.0 |
| MC5 | Professional | 20 | 0 | 0.0 |
| MC8 | Professional | 92 | 56 | 60.9 |
| MC1 | Civic (Minority) | 50 | 6 | 12.0 |
| MC2 | Civic | 7 | 2 | 28.6 |
| MC4 | Civic | 55 | 20 | 36.4 |
| MCPR | Personal referral | 17 | 7 | 41.2 |
| | *Totals for Metro City* | *266* | *95* | *35.7* |

| ***Organization*** | | ***Questionnaires*** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Distributed | Returned (Valid) | Valid % |
| Townsville | | | | |
| *Code* | *Type* | | | |
| TV1 | Professional | 25 | 2 | 8.0 |
| TV2 | Civic | 51 | 39 | 76.5 |
| TVPR | Personal referral | 6 | 1 | 16.6 |
| | *Totals for Townsville* | *82* | *42* | *51.2* |
| ***Total Number of Surveys*** | | ***1,020*** | ***397*** | ***38.9*** |

## Appendix E: Selected Descriptive Demographics of Survey Respondents

***Table E-1: Racial Composition of Survey Respondents***

| | All Respondents | | Mothers | | Non-Mothers | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Number | Valid %[1] | Number | Valid % | Number | Valid % |
| European American | 336 | 91.1 | 230 | 90.9 | 106 | 91.4 |
| African American | 17 | 4.6 | 12 | 4.7 | 5 | 4.3 |
| Asian American | 1 | 0.3 | 1 | 0.4 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Middle Eastern American | 6 | 1.6 | 5 | 2.0 | 1 | 0.9 |
| American Indian/Eskimo | 1 | 0.3 | 1 | 0.4 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Hispanic American | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Multiple Races | 5 | 1.3 | 2 | 0.8 | 3 | 2.6 |
| Other | 3 | 0.8 | 2 | 0.8 | 1 | 0.9 |
| Missing | 28 | | 17 | | 6 | |
| N | 397 | | 270 | | 122 | |

[1] Valid percent excludes missing cases. Due to rounding, valid percent may not add up to 100%.

***Table E-2: Marital Status of Survey Respondents***

| | All Respondents | | Mothers | | Non-Mothers | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Number | Valid %[1] | Number | Valid % | Number | Valid % |
| Never Married | 70 | 18.0 | 8 | 3.0 | 62 | 52.1 |
| Married, living w/spouse | 226 | 58.2 | 185 | 68.8 | 41 | 34.5 |
| Married, not living w/spouse | 4 | 1.0 | 4 | 1.5 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Divorced | 49 | 12.6 | 35 | 13.0 | 14 | 11.8 |
| Widowed | 39 | 10.1 | 37 | 13.8 | 2 | 1.6 |
| Missing | 9 | | 1 | | 3 | |
| N | 397 | | 270 | | 122 | |

[1] Valid percent excludes missing cases. Due to rounding, valid percent may not add up to 100%.

***Table E-3: Religious Designation[1] of Survey Respondents***

| | All Respondents | | Mothers | | Non-Mothers | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Number | Valid %[2] | Number | Valid % | Number | Valid % |
| Mainline Protestant | 105 | 26.7 | 83 | 30.7 | 21 | 17.6 |
| Conservative Protestant | 47 | 12.0 | 33 | 12.2 | 13 | 10.9 |
| Catholic | 63 | 16.0 | 44 | 16.3 | 19 | 16.0 |
| Unspecified Christian | 94 | 23.9 | 67 | 24.8 | 26 | 21.8 |
| African American Protestant | 9 | 2.3 | 7 | 2.6 | 2 | 1.7 |
| Sectarian | 4 | 1.0 | 3 | 1.1 | 1 | 0.8 |
| Judaism | 9 | 2.3 | 4 | 1.5 | 5 | 4.2 |
| Other | 16 | 4.1 | 7 | 2.7 | 7 | 6.6 |
| Islam | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 |
| None | 46 | 11.7 | 21 | 7.8 | 24 | 20.2 |
| Missing | 4 | | 0 | | 3 | |
| N | 397 | | 270 | | 122 | |

[1] Respondents' religious designations were coded according to Ammerman's (2005) typology.
[2] Valid percent excludes missing cases. Due to rounding, valid percent may not add up to 100%.

***Table E-4: Educational Attainment of Survey Respondents***

| | All Respondents | | Mothers | | Non-Mothers | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Number | Valid %[1] | Number | Valid % | Number | Valid % |
| Less than High School | 1 | 0.3 | 1 | 0.4 | 0 | 0.0 |
| High School | 13 | 3.3 | 8 | 3.0 | 5 | 4.1 |
| Vocational School | 8 | 2.0 | 7 | 2.6 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Some College | 27 | 6.9 | 22 | 8.2 | 5 | 4.1 |
| Associate's Degree | 21 | 5.3 | 17 | 6.3 | 4 | 3.3 |
| Bachelor's Degree | 89 | 22.6 | 51 | 18.9 | 38 | 31.4 |
| Some Grad School | 36 | 9.1 | 21 | 7.8 | 14 | 11.6 |
| Master's Degree | 162 | 41.1 | 116 | 43.3 | 44 | 36.4 |
| Professional Degree | 10 | 2.5 | 6 | 2.2 | 3 | 2.5 |
| Doctorate | 26 | 6.6 | 18 | 6.7 | 8 | 6.6 |
| Missing | 4 | | 3 | | 2 | |
| N | 397 | | 270 | | 122 | |

[1] Valid percent excludes missing cases. Due to rounding, valid percent may not add up to 100%.

| ***Table E-5: Class Composition of Survey Respondents*** | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | All Respondents | | Mothers | | Non-Mothers | |
| | Number | Valid %[1] | Number | Valid % | Number | Valid % |
| *Self-Identified Social Class* | | | | | | |
| Lower | 3 | 0.8 | 0 | 0.0 | 3 | 2.5 |
| Working | 17 | 4.4 | 8 | 3.0 | 8 | 6.7 |
| Lower Middle | 43 | 11.0 | 18 | 6.8 | 25 | 20.8 |
| Middle Middle | 167 | 42.8 | 108 | 40.6 | 56 | 46.7 |
| Upper Middle | 142 | 36.4 | 118 | 44.4 | 24 | 20.0 |
| Affluent | 18 | 4.6 | 14 | 5.3 | 4 | 3.3 |
| Missing | 7 | | 4 | | 2 | |
| N | 397 | | 270 | | 122 | |
| *Self-Identified Social Class of Family of Origin* | | | | | | |
| Lower | 10 | 2.6 | 6 | 2.3 | 4 | 3.3 |
| Working | 67 | 17.2 | 49 | 18.5 | 17 | 14.0 |
| Lower Middle | 87 | 22.3 | 56 | 21.1 | 30 | 24.8 |
| Middle Middle | 167 | 42.8 | 110 | 41.5 | 56 | 46.3 |
| Upper Middle | 58 | 14.9 | 44 | 16.6 | 13 | 10.7 |
| Affluent | 1 | 0.3 | 0 | 0.0 | 1 | 0.8 |
| Missing | 7 | | 5 | | 1 | |
| N | 397 | | 270 | | 122 | |

[1] Valid percent excludes missing cases. Due to rounding, valid percent may not add up to 100%.

| ***Table E-6: Age Distribution of Survey Respondents*** | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | All Respondents | | Mothers | | Non-Mothers | |
| | Number | Valid %[1] | Number | Valid % | Number | Valid % |
| 19-25 | 14 | 3.6 | 0 | 0.0 | 14 | 11.5 |
| 26-35 | 45 | 11.6 | 12 | 4.5 | 33 | 27.0 |
| 36-45 | 66 | 17.0 | 46 | 17.2 | 20 | 16.4 |
| 46-55 | 98 | 25.2 | 66 | 24.7 | 32 | 26.2 |
| 56-65 | 78 | 20.1 | 66 | 24.7 | 12 | 9.9 |
| 66-75 | 44 | 11.3 | 38 | 14.2 | 6 | 4.8 |
| 76-90 | 44 | 11.3 | 39 | 14.6 | 5 | 4.1 |
| Missing | 8 | | 3 | | 0 | |
| N | 397 | | 270 | | 122 | |

[1] Valid percent excludes missing cases. Due to rounding, valid percent may not add up to 100%.

| ***Table E-7: Paid Labor Force Participation Rates of Survey Respondents*** | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | All Respondents | | Mothers | | Non-Mothers | |
| | Number | Valid %[1] | Number | Valid % | Number | Valid % |
| ***Ever*** *in Paid Labor Force* | | | | | | |
| Yes | 396 | 99.7 | 269 | 99.6 | 122 | 100.0 |
| No[2] | 1 | 0.3 | 1 | 0.4 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Missing | 0 | | 0 | | 0 | |
| N | 397 | | 270 | | 122 | |
| *Occupational Category of Participants Who Were Ever in Paid Labor Force* | | | | | | |
| Management/ Professional | 328 | 83.0 | 222 | 82.5 | 102 | 83.6 |
| Sales/Office | 36 | 9.1 | 24 | 8.9 | 12 | 9.8 |
| Service | 27 | 6.8 | 19 | 7.1 | 7 | 5.7 |
| Production/ Transportation | 3 | 0.8 | 3 | 1.1 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Farming/Fishing/ Forestry | 1 | 0.3 | 0 | 0.0 | 1 | 0.8 |
| Missing | 1 | | 1 | | 0 | |
| N | 396 | | 269 | | 122 | |
| *Currently in Paid Labor Force* | | | | | | |
| Yes | 267 | 67.3 | 165 | 61.1 | 99 | 81.1 |
| No | 130 | 32.7 | 105 | 38.9 | 23 | 18.9 |
| Missing | 0 | | 0 | | 0 | |
| N | 397 | | 270 | | 122 | |
| *Reason Not Currently in Paid Labor Force* | | | | | | |
| Homemaker/Mother | 12 | 9.6 | 12 | 12.0 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Unemployed | 14 | 11.2 | 9 | 9.0 | 5 | 21.7 |
| Retired | 94 | 75.2 | 78 | 78.0 | 14 | 60.1 |
| Student | 5 | 4.0 | 1 | 1.0 | 4 | 17.4 |
| Missing[2] | 5 | | 5 | | 0 | |
| N | 130 | | 105 | | 23 | |

[1] Valid percent excludes missing cases. Due to rounding, valid percent may not add up to 100%.

[2] The only respondent who indicated that she had never participated in the paid labor force did not indicate why she had not.

# VITA

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