Chapter 1

Overview

Maybe you’ll marry/ Maybe you won’t/ Maybe you’ll divorce/ Maybe you’ll dance the funky chicken on your 70th wedding anniversary/ Whatever happens, don’t congratulate yourself too much/ Or berate yourself either/ Your choices are half chance/ So are everyone else’s

“Sunscreen,” Quentin Tarva

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis is the outcome of interviews with thirty-five women who do not have children. Unlike the usual participants in much research investigating what is typically termed “voluntary” childlessness, not all the women interviewed were at the end of their fertile years (and so permanently childless). Nor were other standard efforts made to ensure that interviewees were “committed” to their decision to be childless (Housknecht, 1987). Instead, thirty-five women aged from twenty-eight to forty-two were interviewed in an attempt to understand how women of different ages, for whom childbearing is a “live” issue, experienced and understood what is or may be permanent or temporary childlessness. A key area of concern was whether women described the childless road they were
Currently travelling as “chosen” and if so, whether their description of their path was a good “fit” with everyday understandings of choice.

Individualist western cultures like Australia and the United States tend to understand the social world as made up of individuals who make and take responsibility for their choices. In such a world people are conceived of, and conceive of themselves, as products “created by, and emblematic of, the self” (Alexander, Rubinstein, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1992, 619). The need for feminist researchers to give voice to women’s experience, as well as the requirement that women be conceived in public discourse as active moral agents, are two important reasons why choice as a female experience and discursive and political tool must be given high priority in all accounts of women’s reproductive lives (Birke, Himmelweit, & Vines, 1990; Cannold, 1998a, 94-97; Morell, 1994). At the same time, more sophisticated understandings of the advantages of limitations of feminist research practice demand more complex renderings and analyses of women’s experiences and understandings; renderings and analyses that account for the individual resources women muster to make individual choices in the face of common – and constraining – social circumstances (Bulbeck, 1997, 7; Dornbusch & Strober, 1988, 4; Gerson, 1985; McMahon, 1995). The goal of such accounts is the crediting of...

...women (and others) for their survival skills in the face of real social constraints...[While at the same time] moving beyond those constrained choices, to try to create situations where women’s perceptions of themselves as choosers are mirrored more accurately by the
opportunities for real choice within their larger social and political contexts (Gregg, 1995, 144).

My theoretical distrust of unqualified notions of choice were not the only, or indeed the primary, cause of my suspicion about the blanket description of fertile women without children by feminist researchers and “childless by choice” activists as “voluntarily” childless or “childless by choice.” I was also aware of a growing number of demographic studies which link declining fertility to the increased practical and opportunity costs of motherhood for working women.

The current fertility rate in Australia is 1.75 babies and declining rapidly, while the rate in the United States is at the replacement level of 2.1 babies per woman. The Australian Bureau of Statistics recently estimated that more than one in four currently fertile women will remain childless, with the parallel statistic in the United States estimated to be somewhere between 17 and 22 per cent (Ambry, 1992; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999a; Colbatch, 2000a; Crispell, 1993). While infertility is seen to account for approximately 7 per cent of these

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1 Australia’s birthrate dropped sharply during the last decade of the 20th century. From 1.9 in 1990, it moved to 1.8 in the middle of the decade and down to 1.75 at the start of the new millennium (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999a; Chamberlin, 1997; McDonald, 1998a; Spencer, 2000).

2 Although higher than the Australian birthrate, the US birthrate is currently at its lowest point in twenty years. While the US rate reflects the higher rate of fertility of Black and Hispanic women compared to White women, the birthrates of these two groups of women are declining more rapidly than that of the white population.

3 While these statistics are trotted out regularly by researchers and the mainstream media, they are not undisputed. Housknecht, for instance, believes that the static nature of women’s expected fertility suggests that women are delaying motherhood — not foregoing it — and consequently that voluntary childless rates in North America are likely to remain around 7 per cent. Demographer Peter McDonald agrees with the 7 per cent figure as an accurate prediction of future rates of voluntary childlessness in Australia (Housknecht, 1987, 374-75; McDonald, 1998b; Veevers, 1980, 7).
figures, the remainder is uniformly described as “chosen” childlessness (Colbatch, 2000a; McDonald, 1998b).

The accuracy of such a description is doubtful, insofar as it suggests that the childlessness of all fertile women is expected, desired and voluntary (Chesnais, 1996; Housknecht, 1987; McDonald, 1997; McDonald, 1998a; Williams, 1983, 329). Surveys of the childbearing intentions of young Australian and North American women repeatedly reveal the intention of approximately 90 and 92 per cent, respectively, to mother. Most intend and desire to bear at least two children (Callan & Noller, 1987, 9; Caron & Wynn, 1992; McDonald, 1998a; Young, 1996), with only 2 per cent of the Australian public believing that having no children or only one child was ideal (Vandenheuvel, 1991, 11). In countries where attitudinal and institutional policies support working parents to fulfil both their work and domestic responsibilities (most notably the former German Democratic Republic and the Nordic countries), the fertility levels women achieve come closer to the fertility levels they intend, and fertility rates overall remain relatively high. However, in countries with attitudes and practices antagonistic to working women (most notably Italy), fertility is low (Chesnais, 1996; Finzel, 1999; McDonald, 1997; McDonald, 1998a). 4 As First Assistant Secretary, Office of the Status of Women Prue Goward noted recently in

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4 This relationship runs counter to the long accepted demographic generalisation that higher female status equates to lower female fertility rates (Chesnais, 1996, 737-38; Chesnais & Verstraete, 1996). It may also explain the emergence of Australian statistics showing that fertility is dropping more rapidly among women with less education than those with tertiary qualifications (Spencer, 2000).
relation to Australia’s declining rates of fertility, “Force women to choose between a job and a dirty nappy, and many seem to prefer the job” (1998, 15-16).

The statistical suggestion that many fertile women are childless by circumstance rather than choice is supported by the largely unacknowledged findings of the majority of social research conducted since 1975 on this issue (Campbell, 1985; Faux, 1984; Lewis, 1986; Marshall, 1993; Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1980). This observation is particularly startling given the reliance of many researchers on recruitment methods that place advertisements for “voluntarily” childless participants with “childless by choice” or “childfree” support/advocacy groups and then rely on self-selected volunteers to assemble a research sample. It might be expected that the (largely unavoidable) biases inherent in such recruitment methods would increase the likelihood of recruiting childless women who consciously identify with the “voluntarily” childless moniker.

Far from being committed to childlessness, many participants in these studies who were beyond their fertile years revealed how they had wanted, expected and intended to mother. Similarly, those who were still fertile either expressed a desire to have children in the future and/or related a plan for doing so. Indeed, several studies reveal that some “voluntarily” childless research participants go on to have children, either with their current partner or with a new partner
(Marshall, 1993). But even studies where some or all participants are past their fertile years (and so permanently childless) reveal significant numbers of women who are childless by circumstance, not choice. The most common circumstances cited are marriage to a man committed to childlessness and the conflict (particularly for women) between motherhood and other personal and professional responsibilities and aspirations (Bailey, 1984; Campbell, 1985; Morell, 1994). Because many women do regret and/or feel discontent about forgoing motherhood (Alexander et al., 1992) – a recent US poll found 60 per cent of childless women wished they’d had children (DeWitt, 1993) - those who succeed in “coming to terms” with their childlessness and “getting on with their lives” are to be commended (Baruch, Barnett, & Rivers, 1983, 101; Safer, 1996; Ziman Tobin & with Aria, 1998). However, researchers should take care not to treat these women’s psychological health and well being as evidence that their childlessness was chosen.

The major difficulty for nearly all studies into voluntary childlessness has not been the recognition of the circumstantial nature of many women’s childlessness, but the failure of researchers to incorporate this recognition into their categorisation of the childless, and their analysis of their data (Housknecht, 1987). It is possible to speculate on reasons for this failure. The majority of this work has been done by feminist and/or childless researchers and is informed by feminist beliefs that neither the wish nor reality of motherhood is women’s essential and defining characteristic or condition (Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994, 3). These beliefs are informed by early second-wave feminist insistence on the
absence of any biological imperative to mother (i.e. the maternal “instinct”) and simultaneous “naming” of the constraints motherhood placed on women’s personal freedom and capacity for workforce participation. Early second-wave feminists sought, in other words, to establish motherhood as a choice and in many instances to discourage women from choosing it (Badinter, 1981; Kennison & Hirsch, 1996, 8; Lake, 1999; Macintyre, 1976; Polatnick, 1996; Rich, 1976; Roiphe, 1996; Snitow, 1992; Umansky, 1996). Childless women used feminist attacks on the maternal “mandate” to challenge widely held social beliefs that the childless were abnormal, immature, and unhappy (Morell, 1994; Snitow, 1992; Veevers, 1980). While advocates of voluntary childlessness focused on their increased freedom, consumerist capacities and superior marital relations in comparison to those with children (May, 1995, chapter 6; Roiphe, 1996), feminists advocated childlessness as the most realistic way for women to break into and succeed in the public world of work (May, 1995, chapter 6; McKenna, 1997; Movius, 1976). Feminist emphasis on negative conceptions of female reproductive choice – conceptions that focused on removing legal restrictions on women’s freedom to avoid motherhood by accessing contraception or choosing abortion – dovetailed nicely with libertarian notions of choice undergirding the democracies in both Australia and the United States (Gregg, 1995).

It was in this context that feminists may have come to see choice not only as a political goal but a pro-active and positive description of the way women became childless: a description that challenged previous and pejorative social
constructions of the childless as “barren” and pitiable (Campbell, 1985; Veevers, 1980). The choice descriptor may have been seen to “validate” childless women, and even valorise them as feminist “role models” (Morell, 1994, 1). More recently, childless by choice and feminist activists appear influenced by the views of research and counselling psychologists who urge childless women to actively and consciously “choose” their childlessness as a means of securing and advancing their psychological health (Baruch et al., 1983; Safer, 1996; Ziman Tobin & with Aria, 1998).

While women may indeed fare better psychologically armed with an understanding of their childlessness as chosen, this does not mean that the word “choice” accurately describes the empirical reality of how they came to be childless. Women who choose or decide to remain childless are not necessarily feminist role models. The current data affirm previous research findings suggesting that even the true childless by choice (those who express a desire for childlessness early, plan their lives around and rarely waver from this commitment) turn out to be relatively socially conservative (Marshall, 1993; May, 1995). It is imperative that the conclusions of research and practice feminist psychologists (in this instance, that childless women need to see their childlessness as chosen in order to avoid ongoing psychological conflict and regret) are not conflated with the conclusions of feminist researchers investigating the phenomenon of fertile childlessness.
This study differs from the ones preceding it by utilising these insights to classify, analyse and interpret the experiences and understandings of the childless women interviewed. I will not present evidence suggesting the circumstantial nature of the childlessness of many of my participants, yet insist in the analysis of the data and when drawing conclusions on referring to all study participants as “voluntarily” childless or childless by “choice” (Callan & Noller, 1987, 9; Campbell, 1985; Ireland, 1993; Lewis, 1986; Morell, 1994). I will not interpret the childlessness that results from the antagonism of a women’s partner to having children as chosen childless (Campbell, 1985; Lewis, 1986). I will not use women’s psychological health, acceptance or even retrospective happiness with being childless as proof that their childlessness was chosen (Campbell, 1985; Faux, 1984; Ireland, 1993; Lewis, 1986; Morell, 1994, 51; Veevers, 1980). Most importantly, I will not see women’s “ambivalence” and/or “conflicted feelings” about motherhood (ones that often lead to delaying or postponing children) as a personal characteristic (Faux, 1984), a mark of deviance (Wilk, 1986) or a demonstration of the impact of “maternalist” pressures on women who would otherwise give little thought to parenthood and remain childless simply as a consequence of continuing to live “their present lives” (Morell, 1994, 50). Instead, I will seek to understand the complex journey many women make to childlessness as an outcome of the decisions they make in socially constrained circumstances (Baruch et al., 1983; Gerson, 1985; McMahon, 1995).
Social circumstances impact differently on different women. Broadly speaking, childless women in this study can be seen as childless by choice or by circumstance, although women who are childless by circumstance were divided into three sub-categories. Women “childless by relationship” were women with vague imagined futures and identities as mothers whose partners were antagonistic towards or ambivalent about having children. Thwarted mothers had clear and important imagined futures and identities as mothers but struggled or were struggling to partner and/or were battling with (sometimes age-related) infertility. The “waiters and watchers” were ambivalent and undecided about having children, and so particularly responsive to the childbearing desires of partners and/or the experiences of friends and colleagues who were currently bearing and raising children. However, while these categories represent a woman’s baseline or dominant orientation towards childbearing, all the women in the study had some degree of ambivalence or uncertainty about motherhood and childlessness. All, in other words, were able to come up with what they saw as good reasons to become a mother and to remain childless.

The data suggest the existence of three forces constraining women’s freedom to mother. The first was the inability of many women to partner successfully,

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5 Throughout this thesis, I refer at times to “women” rather than “women in the sample.” Such reference is made in the interest of brevity and readability, and should not be understood to reflect a belief that the experiences and understandings of the women in the sample necessarily represent of the population of childless Australian and American women.
partner with the “right” person or with a partner willing to have children. The second is the incompatibility of women’s employment needs and desires with their “good” motherhood ideals and the practical demands of motherhood in Australia and the United States at the close of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The data suggest that women’s good motherhood ideals and their knowledge of the practical demands of motherhood leave them searching for “good” (morally justifiable and socially affirmed) reasons to have children. For many, such reasons appear few and far between in a world where long-standing reasons to have children (to provide social security in old age, to confirm feminine identity) have largely lost their sway, and self-directed libertarian/consumerist values are on the rise. This normative state of flux forms the background against which recent claims by childless by choice activists that parenting is “selfish” and childlessness pro-social are being evaluated (Cannold & Moore, 1999; Childfree Association, 1999; Childless by Choice, 1999; Griffin, 1999; Life Matters, 1999; McIntosh, 1999; No Kidding, 1999). Some women’s consequent belief that motherhood is an irrational choice for them to make constitutes the third constraining force on women’s freedom to mother.

How women felt about having children in the first place determined the impact their partner – or the lack of one – had on their childbearing decisions. The minority of women with an independent commitment to childlessness chose partners on the basis of the partner’s willingness to remain childless. These women preferred to avoid or end relationships rather than compromise their childless choice. However, the childbearing decisions of the majority of the
sample were significantly influenced by the existence of a partner, the woman’s assessment of that partner’s “rightness” for parenthood and the partner’s own childbearing intentions and desires.

As noted by numerous childless researchers and feminist theorists, “good” motherhood standards are socially normative and remain impossibly high in both Australia and The United States. As a consequence of such standards, many mothers experience high levels of guilt and insecurity about their mothering practice (Brown, Lumley, Small, & Astbury, 1994, chapter 7; Cannold, 1998a, chapter 4; Eyer, 1996; Maushart, 1997; Morell, 1994, 65-66; Swigart, 1991). The current study confirms suggestions made elsewhere that such standards not only negatively affect mothers, but may contribute to the anxiety and “ambivalence” experienced by prospective parents (Lovett, 1998; May, 1995, 190).

The data suggest that the normative and practical demands of motherhood clash with women’s employment needs and desires. For many women, particularly those who delay motherhood, work is a significant source of identity, (Crouch, 1993; Frydman, 1987; McKenna, 1997; Walter, 1986) as well as economic independence and security. Indeed, the current data confirm international trends suggesting that paid employment has not only become normalised for women but has become “…a priority, as happened much earlier for men” (Bryson & Warner-Smith, 1998, 3). Some women related their valuing
of work to the importance their mothers placed on financial independence and competence and/or the difficulties they had in achieving it (McDonald, 1997; Probert & Fiona, 1999). Contrary to the widely publicised assertion that mothers seek to disguise the painful conflict between work and motherhood from childless women (Maushart, 1997), the data suggest that working mothers are open about the difficulties they experience balancing their work and family responsibilities, and some childless women attend carefully to the cautions implied by their experiences. However, the data also support the findings of other researchers that suggest many women do not perceive their desires, decisions or behaviour around motherhood and paid employment to be constrained by social factors (Gerson, 1985; Gregg, 1995; McMahon, 1995). Instead, most see themselves as authors and agents of their own lives and the work/motherhood conflict as an individual problem resolvable by good individual management: by having the right attitude and making the right choice at the right time.

Men (and for the two lesbians in the sample, women) – their absence, their adequacy, and their parental desires - also influence the nature and timing of women’s fertility decisions. Women’s increasing economic security gives them the capacity to hold out for Mr/Ms “Right,” although the data suggest that women nearing the end of their fertile years will search and settle for Mr/Ms “Approximate.” Indeed, the data suggest that most women put a high value on a committed monogamous relationship and desire and intend to parent in the context of a stable marital or de facto relationship. It is only when even Mr/Ms
Approximate fails to appear that some women reluctantly considered pursuing motherhood on their own. At the same time, however, many women were eager to stress (using identifiably feminist language) that the value they placed on having a relationship did not mean they felt “desperate,” “incomplete” or unable to “make their own lives.” The desires of women’s partners for children and their capacity or willingness to contribute meaningfully to the hard work of parenthood also factored in – to greater or lesser extents - to women’s childbearing decisions.

The data reveal that the majority of women in the study understand motherhood to be a choice, not a mandate (Faux, 1984; Mackay, 1997, 153-154; Summers & Hogan, 1994, 16; Wilk, 1986; Ziman Tobin & with Aria, 1998). This assumption reflects the profound influence feminist discourse has had on women’s values and attitudes (Lumby, 1997; Marshall & Wetherell, 1989; Wicks & Mishra, 1998). It is also supported by the reality that educated middle-class women no longer need, for social or economic reasons, to marry and become mothers (Chesnais, 1996; Grindstaff, 1996; McDonald, 1997; McDonald, 1998a; Rindfuss, Philip Morgan, & Offutt, 1996b). Because they view motherhood as a choice, some women in the sample felt compelled to come up with “good” or “rational” reasons to choose it. Not only did women find this difficult, they found it easy to proffer socially acceptable reasons to remain childless. Moreover, they were quick to disparage the socially normative reasons for parenting that dominated the last century, like “to avoid loneliness in old age” or “to confirm femininity,” as “bad” reasons for having children.
Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that a number of women viewed motherhood as an “irrational” choice to make, a view that has been echoed by numerous feminist theorists and researchers (McKenna, 1997, 24; Morell, 1994, 63; Movius, 1976). Yet, despite their belief that motherhood was an irrational choice, many still felt a desire to mother and intended to act on that desire. Consequently, many women turned to the sub-rational realms of biology to explain their maternal aspirations. It was their “maternal instincts/drives/hormones” or their “biological clocks” that were behind the existence and timing of their desires regarding children.

Again, however, the data suggest that women take inadequate account of the impact social norms and circumstances – what I call the “social clock” - have on the existence and timing of their desires to mother. The point at which the “alarms” on women’s “clocks” begin “ringing” appears influenced by an interaction between women’s baseline or dominant orientation towards motherhood/childlessness and social factors like the willingness of women’s partners to become parents and help with the work, the availability of extended family support and a woman’s desire to remain “in-step” with her peers. In addition, the existence and timing of women’s desires to mother appears influenced by where they grew up and are currently living (the city or the country), their exposure to a university education and the entrance of their peer group into motherhood.
The “ringing” of the “alarms” on women’s “clocks” produces a sense of urgency around the childbearing question: a sense of “it’s time.” However, while women who were childless by choice felt it was time to re-confirm their own and their partner’s commitment to childlessness, thwarted mothers felt an urgency to implement their plans to mother.

Is the desire to have children at the end of the 20th century irrational? What contributes to women’s desires to mother and the timing of those desires? Are all fertile women’s decisions about having children choices? Are there social constraints on women’s freedom to mother and if so, what are they and how do they operate? Should such constraints be of equal concern to feminists as existing constraints on women’s freedom to avoid motherhood? Having shown women they don’t have to mother, can and should feminists seek to answer the question on the lips of many women in this study: “why should I?” Dornbusch and Strober argue that

too often...problems that are institutional in nature are treated as problems of the individual. Rhetoric for individual action and for change in individual morality is often, in such circumstances, a barrier to effective thinking and social action (1988, 4).

It is with this in mind that this thesis seeks to answer these questions, and to suggest some ways forward.
1.2 CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

In Chapter 2 (Feminist and “Voluntary” Childless Discourses on Motherhood, Childlessness and Choice), I will provide a brief history of choice as it is conceptualised and endorsed in the liberal political ideologies underpinning Australian and North American societies. While libertarian conceptions of choice suffice to oppose restrictions – like those on safe legal abortion – on women’s freedom not to mother, equity or welfare feminist conceptions of choice are necessary to articulate a conception of female reproductive freedom that includes the freedom to avoid and to embrace motherhood. A brief history of second-wave feminist discourses on motherhood and childlessness and a review of voluntary childless discourses from the late 1960s to the present are presented.

Chapter 3 (Fertile Childlessness: Circumstance or Choice?) selectively reviews the two separate bodies of literature relevant to the current study: demographic studies of women’s fertility behaviour and studies of the “voluntarily” childless. This review will suggest that evidence already exists that many fertile women currently assumed to be or described as childless by choice are more accurately described as childless by circumstance.

The study’s methodology was chosen to minimise expected tensions between women’s perception of their lives as the product of their choices, and the shared patterns of meaning that arise from their reproductive behaviour and decisions.
Chapter 1
Overview

(Bulbeck, 1997; Gerson, 1985; Gregg, 1995; McMahon, 1995). In Chapter 4 (Methodology and Basic Information About Participants), the reason for this choice and the specifics of the methodology used in this study are discussed. Issues around recruitment of women to the study and their “fit” with the usual characteristics of self-selected participants in “voluntary” childless studies will be discussed. Basic demographic and background information on the 35 women who participated in the study is provided.

In Chapter 5 (Childless by Choice, Childless By Relationship, Thwarted Mothers, Waiters and Watchers), I discuss and defend the categorisations used in this thesis to distinguish between the baseline orientations different women have towards motherhood. Broadly speaking, women are described as either childless by choice or childless by circumstance. However, circumstantially childless women are further categorised into the “childless by relationship,” “thwarted mothers” and the ambivalent and undecided “waiters and watchers.” These classifications take in the role motherhood/childlessness plays in women’s imagined futures and identities and the woman’s behavioural and attitudinal commitment to motherhood/childlessness. Some examples are provided to give a feel for how women with different baselines negotiate with the social attitudes and circumstances around childbearing they encounter and make decisions about motherhood.
While overall, childless by choice women gave and endorsed more reasons to avoid motherhood and to remain childless, and thwarted mothers gave and endorsed more reasons to avoid childlessness and embrace motherhood, all the women in the study cited reasons for and against childbearing. Chapter 6 (Wanting Children/Not Wanting Children: Women’s Assumptions and Explanations) provides an overview of these reasons, and the sometimes unrecognised assumptions that undergird them.

In Chapter 7 (Good Motherhood Requirements and Women’s Fertility Decisions and Outcomes) childless women’s understandings of the requirements of “good” motherhood are set out. The data confirm the arguments of previous researchers that such standards are little changed from the 1970s. The majority of women accepted the time-honoured requirement that “good” mothers consistently provide unconditional love and are patient, nurturing and responsible. Women’s rejection or acceptance of the traditional requirement that “good” mothers put their young children’s needs first and constantly attend them had implications for the childbearing decisions and their acceptance of non-maternal care. Childless women also expanded the list to include the demands that a “good” mother had children in the context of a stable relationship, was financially and emotionally stable, had her children at the “right” age with the “right” man and at the “right” point in their relationship. Childless women also believed a “good” mother should be enthusiastic about having and raising a child, and make a conscious and serious decision to become a mother.
In Chapter 8 (The Conflict Between Paid Employment and Motherhood), I examine what work means to women and how childless women’s assumptions, values and aspirations around work constrain their freedom to pursue motherhood. While women assumed they would work and saw work as a critical part of their identities and their sense of themselves as autonomous and independent people, this study replicates Gordon’s (1990) finding that while women say “yes” to work, they say “no” to career. Most of the women in this study rejected the identity of a “career women.” For them, “career woman” was shorthand for a selfish, self-centred person with a single-minded and unbalanced devotion to work. Thus, many women in the study deemed it unacceptable to reject motherhood because of a devotion to career, though becoming a career woman was seen as an acceptable and logical outcome for some once an independent decision not to mother had been made.

In Chapter 9 (The Search for Mr or Ms “Right”), I explore what women want in the relationships they seek, and value about the relationships they have. I also explore the impact women’s relationships with Mr/Ms “Right” or Mr/Ms “Approximate” 6- or their failure to find him or her - have on their childbearing decisions and outcomes. While most women desired a stable long-term

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6 For the sake of readability, I will omit quotation marks around the words “Right” and “Approximate” for the remainder of this thesis.
relationship, many were resistant to being seen either as “desperate” or unable to “make their own lives.”

In Chapter 10 (Maternal Instincts, Ticking Clocks and Good Reasons to Mother: The Irrationality of Motherhood and The Social Clock), I demonstrate the belief of the vast majority of the women in the study that the existence and timing of their desire for motherhood is biologically motivated. However, while most women found it easy to name “bad” reasons to have children, few could come up with “good” or “rational” reasons to become a mother. Many women rejected long-standing normative reasons to mother such as the desire to stay “in-step” with peers, despite the fact that this desire appeared to contribute to their decision to pursue motherhood. The rejection of traditional normative reasons to mother and the inconsistency of the requirements of parenthood with increasingly dominant libertarian/consumerist values may contribute to some women’s belief that their desire for motherhood is irrational, and thus grounded in the sub-rational realms of their biology.

Chapter 11 (Conclusion: The Freedom To Choose Motherhood and Childlessness) summarises the evidence presented in support of the major contention of this thesis: that the childlessness of many fertile women is circumstantial, not chosen. Numerous arguments in favour of feminist recognition of the phenomenon of circumstantial childlessness are canvassed.
Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin openers... choose DIY and wondering who the fuck you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pissing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, fucked-up brats you spawned to replace yourself. Choose your future. Choose Life ...

From the movie *Trainspotting*, 1996

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Choice. Australian and North American societies fantasise about and idealise it. TV commercials entice us to choose one car over another. Politicians urge us to exercise it when considering our phone company and schools for our children. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argue that one of the defining elements of the individualism that characterises emerging post-industrial societies is the removal of biographies from “…the traditional precepts and certainties, from external control and general moral laws” (1995, p. 5). Instead biographies have become more

...open and dependent on decision-making and are assigned as a task for each individual. The proportion of possibilities in life that do not involve decision-making is diminishing and the proportion of biography open to
decision-making and individual initiative is increasing. Standard biography is transformed into "choice biography" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 5).

The idea of choice - and the freedom to make it - has also captured the imagination of feminists. Indeed, Naomi Wolf argues that the very meaning of feminism is "choice and self-definition" (Wolf, 1993, 78).

Choice discourse has its roots in Western liberal political theory, dating back to John Stuart Mill. Mill's articulation of choice was libertarian, focusing on the absence of governmental constraints on individual freedom, rather than the need for governments to ensure the opportunities and resources necessary for all citizens to have and exercise their choices. Mill's focus on constraining government was based in his desire to protect the autonomy of the individual, whose expression in a free society is in the exercise of his or her individual choices:

> Deliberation and the exercise of choice are the essence of what it means to be human and...therefore governments should interfere with individual choices as little as possible" (Mill, (1859) 1987).

In Australia and the United States, Mill's theories have contributed to political ideologies and economic systems that value individuals and the choices these individuals make. In such individualistic cultures the person is, "conceived of as a product that is created by, and emblematic of, the self" (Alexander et al., 1992, 619). Inherent in the concept of self-determination is the belief that, "...responsibility for the self and the course of one’s own life falls on the
individual. Hence, a perception of absolute volitional action pervades” (Alexander et al., 1992, 619). Consequently, both Australians and North Americans tend to see themselves as the authors and agents of lives conceived of as consistent and coherent narratives. Their perception of themselves as autonomous individuals making choices about and in control of their lives is accompanied by a sense of responsibility for the outcome of their choices. Women have been shown to experience a particularly profound sense of responsibility for their reproductive choices (Cannold, 1998a; Gilligan, 1984; Gregg, 1995). This acceptance of responsibility, and the accompanying emotion of guilt, accompanies even those reproductive choices over which women exercise little control. For example, Gregg reports that women feel responsible for miscarriages as well as abortions of wanted but seriously damaged fetuses (1995, 120).

One of the most well known and important second-wave feminist claims is that women have a right to bodily self-determination or, to use the vernacular, to “control their bodies”. The contention that women have a right to control their bodies not only grounds feminist claims that women have a right to choose abortion, but to control – or choose – other aspects of their reproductive lives. Thus, some feminists have used the claims of bodily self-determination and the language of rights and choice both to argue against coercive abortion and
sterilisation, and in favour of women’s access to a variety of procreative technologies (Reproductive Freedom News, 1999).\textsuperscript{7}

While liberal feminists all focus on the need for women to have a variety of reproductive choices (or options) and the freedom to choose between them, they differ in their emphasis. Libertarian feminists follow Mill in their focus on removing governmental and institutional constraints on women’s freedom to choose. Egalitarian or welfare feminists, on the other hand, recognise that governmental interference is not the impediment to women’s reproductive freedom. Sex role socialisation, institutional sexism and discrimination and the inequitable distribution of economic and social resources (Gregg, 1995) impact both on the availability of choices, and women’s freedom to select between them. Thus while libertarian feminists define liberty negatively, as the “ability to make choices free from governmental barriers,” egalitarian feminists define liberty in positive terms, as the “freedom to make, and the resources to actually exercise choices” (Gregg, 1995, 12).

The presence of legal impediments or prohibitions on women’s capacity to choose temporary or permanent childlessness through the decision to abort a

\textsuperscript{7} Some contend that while feminists have defended women’s freedom to use interventions (like abortion and contraceptives) to help them avoid reproducing, they have been reluctant to defend their freedom to access interventions (like IVF) that help them to become mothers (Parkes, 1999, 89).
pregnancy supports feminist assertions that many women lack the freedom to choose not to mother. Contrariwise, the absence of similar legal restrictions on women’s freedom to choose motherhood may have inhibited feminist recognition that Australian and North American women are not free (in welfare feminist terms) to choose motherhood. That this is the case, and thus that much of the childlessness fertile women experience is circumstantial rather than chosen, is the central contention of this thesis.

This contention must be made carefully. Care must be taken to balance recognition of the attitudinal and social constraints on women’s freedom to choose motherhood with a respect for women’s moral agency, and women’s perception of themselves as choosers. Without such a respect for women’s agency, women are rendered as victims of “false consciousness” whose accounts of and desires for their lives are easily dismissed by feminist researchers and theorists who “know better” (Birke et al., 1990; Bulbeck, 1997, 7). Some feminists opposed to reproductive technologies fall into this trap when they contend that infertile women who desire motherhood, and the technologies necessary for them to achieve it, have been duped by the “motherhood mandate” (Rowland, 1993). Indeed, it could be argued that what radical feminists like Rowland have in common with today’s post-modern feminists is their shared commitment to exposing the tension between feminist commitments to women’s experience (exemplified in the consciousness raising efforts of the 1960s and early 1970s) and feminism’s “most important recognition: that one’s desire may not be one’s own” (Weed, 1989, xv). Like the
radicals and Marxists before them, post-modern feminists (see, for example, Albury, 1999; Scott, 1992) may seek to resolve these tensions by proposing a (more theoretically complex and seductive) version of the “patriarchal brainwashing” theory to explain aspects of women’s experience that undermine or contradict longstanding and/or valued feminist beliefs and strategies (Cannold, 1999a).

The reality, however, is that all human understandings and desires have input from the social. Knowing this does not change how deeply women experience their desires, nor does it make the choices they make based on those desires any less worthy of respect (Birke et al., 1990; Cannold, 1998a). While it is naïve, as Rowland (1993) notes, to deny the operation of power in shaping what women want, and feel they lack, it is equally naïve to ignore the ability women have to use their “imagination, critical resistance and humour” to negotiate with and at times resist this power (Lumby, 1997, 9). The point is that women in general, and particularly feminist-inspired women, don’t see themselves as “victims” who lack the capacity to make decisions about their lives and – by doing so - to “choose” their futures (Bail, 1996; Bulbeck, 1997, 221; Denfield, 1995; Gerson, 1985; Hoff Sommers, 1994; Lumby, 1997; McMahon, 1995; Roiphe, 1993; Wolf, 1993). Consequently, feminist researchers and theorists must take care to respect women’s desires and experience in our accounts of their lives, or risk betraying and alienating them. Moreover, we must do so in order to foster and support women’s moral agency: their self-perception as choosers (Cannold, 1998a).
As Midgley and Hughes note, the

…whole idea that most people are entitled to make or are capable of making real decisions which actually affect the way things go is, in Western culture, recent and severely limited (Midgley & Hughes, 1983, 37).

Demographic and sociological studies regularly demonstrate the significant impact that social attitudes and structures have on human behaviour. The challenge for feminist researchers and theorists is to account for the impact of the social, demonstrated in the common experiences and understandings of the women they study, without damaging women’s sense of themselves as choosers, nor undermining the real impact of women’s individual choices, however constrained. For McMahon (1995), this meant accounting for the fact that while each woman she interviewed experienced her choice to mother as individual, personal and private, their experiences of motherhood and the route they took to that experience followed similar patterns. In this thesis, it means reflecting the sense of those who participated in this research that the fact of their childlessness, and their feelings about it, were the outcome of their personal choices. At the same time, by knitting together the threads that run through many women’s experiences and understandings, the similarity of women’s expectations of themselves as mothers, and the clash of these expectations with their direct and indirect experience of both the demands of work and relationships and social norms, can be revealed. This revelation of childless women’s common experiences and understandings is necessary to
obtain a fuller picture of the childless journey. It is also required to redress the propensity in individualistic societies to assume individual action (in the absence of constraining legislation) is the outcome of individual choice. Liberal feminist beliefs that all and any female choice, regardless of its nature, is a positive expression of female autonomy and thus a good in itself (Birke et al., 1990; Cannold, 1998a, 27-28; Dunne, 1990; Petchesky, 1985) has made women’s behaviour particularly vulnerable to this assumption. Thus, in the vociferous population debate currently taking place in Australia, declining birthrates are assumed to be an expression of women’s choices either to remain childless or to have only one child, and immigration viewed as the only remedy for population (Australia Talks Back, 2000b; Brunton, 1998; Cannold, 2000a; Colbatch, 2000b; Kennett, 1999; Shanahan, 2000). If declining rates of fertility were not primarily understood as the outcome of women’s choices, but as an expression of the operation in women’s lives of conflicting concrete and attitudinal expectations around motherhood, social action to remedy this conflict might be seen as both relevant and appropriate. Such action can bring us to a place where we can:

Credit women...for their survival skills in the face of real social constraints, whether those constraints are concrete, ideological or both. At the same time, we need to move beyond those constrained choices, to try to create situations where women’s perceptions of themselves as choosers are mirrored more accurately by the opportunities for real choices within their larger social and political contexts (Gregg, 1995, 144).
2.2 CHOICE AND MOTHERHOOD IN SECOND-WAVE FEMINIST DISCOURSE: 1968-1990

In the early days of second-wave feminism, women were seen to lack the freedom to be other than mothers. Feminists believed that inadequate contraception, the illegality of abortion and the widespread belief in the existence of the maternal instinct (and thus the inevitability of motherhood for normal women) exerted coercive pressures on women to mother. Thus, they sought to expand women’s access to contraception, establish a woman’s legal right to choose abortion and to question the biological and social equation of womanhood and motherhood. By identifying the social origins of the maternal instinct, they made possible the conceptualisation of women who did not mother (as a result of infertility, circumstance or choice) as “normal” and “natural” (Kaplan, 1996, 41-42; Macintyre, 1976; Rich, 1976; Snitow, 1990, 1). By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, use of the contraceptive pill was widespread, and abortion rights legislation and/or judicial rulings enabled most women to access safe termination services (Cannold, 1998a; NHMRC, 1996). The removal of legal constraints on women’s freedom to choose abortion coincided with the early tracts of the feminist movement, the vast majority of which were anti-motherhood and pro-childlessness (Umansky, 1996). Thus, from the early days of the women’s movement, feminists combined their

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8 While all efforts were made to discuss Australian feminist events and discourse around motherhood, childlessness and choice, little research exists about the Australian women’s movement. What is available does not discuss the voluntary childlessness movement at all, and spends minimal energy on discussing early feminist discourse around motherhood and its relationship to discourses around choice. See (Lake, 1999) and (Kaplan, 1996). Consequently and of necessity, most of the discussion of these topics in this chapter, except where specifically noted, focus on the North American experience.
contention that women ought have the freedom to choose for or against motherhood with arguments about why they ought to choose childlessness.

The hostility of early feminists of most stripes to the institution of motherhood, and to women who were mothers, prevailed until the mid-1970s (Albury, 1999, 134; Ribbens, 1994, chapter 2; Roiphe, 1996; Umansky, 1996). Hewlett and West (1998) argue this antagonism was sourced in libertarian antipathy to constraints in the social sphere that inhibited individuals from achieving their potential and feminist beliefs that the other-directed energy devoted by women to their families barred them from exercising free choice and achieving self-realisation. Positive claims for the benefits of childlessness were rarely made directly. Instead, they were implied by the negative assertions and claims made about motherhood. Motherhood was described as the locus of female oppression and a barrier to women’s individual fulfilment and participation in the world of paid work (Movius, 1976; Polatnick, 1983). It was also condemned as the most potent example of how gender-role divisions, assumed to be biologically based and therefore natural, contributed to women’s social oppression (Kaplan, 1996, 42). If motherhood stood in the way of women’s individual growth, fulfilment and freedom, then childlessness was the state necessary for women to explore their “creative freedom”, take in a “late-night poetry reading or catch a train to some political event” (Kennison & Hirsch, 1996 5). If motherhood forced women to leave the workforce, or participate in a minimal or menial capacity, than childlessness was the means by which women could participate on more equal footing with men, in a man’s world. Women
were repeatedly warned that motherhood and career were a contradiction in terms: that they couldn’t expect to “have it all” (McKenna, 1997, 24; Morell, 1994, 63). Movius was one of the few who put childless argument in positive terms:

Rather than being viewed as an indication of maladjustment…the child-free alternative may be more realistically considered woman’s ultimate liberation. In view of the current status of women, the increasing competition for employment, and the speed with which knowledge expands in all fields, it would behoove women to begin thinking in terms of doing only one job well (Movius, 1976, 61).

Neither mothers nor childless women had difficulty reading the anti-maternal and pro “childfree” bent of much feminist rhetoric. Childless women felt little doubt about the negative status conferred on mothers, while feminist mothers felt compelled to justify their status with their political orientation, and fight for recognition from their feminist sisters (Gordon, 1990). Polatnick recounts how as a young woman in the late 1960s she, “internalized an attitude from my radical feminist circles that becoming a mother meant getting mired in women’s oppression. I associated motherhood with being confined, curtailed, and diminished” (Polatnick, 1996, 683). Ordinary women with children felt ridiculed by and alienated from a woman’s movement which they believed had turned their roles as wives and mothers into the derogatory “just housewives” (Campbell, 1985; Hewlett, 1986; Luker, 1984; Ribbens, 1994, 27; Roiphe, 1996, 13; Umansky, 1996). Many women active in the early days of the movement recount a serious divide between mothers and non-mothers (Lake, 1999; Roiphe, 1996, 13; Umansky, 1996, 35). One feminist told how unwelcome she
was made to feel at a woman’s liberation meeting in Melbourne in the early 1970s because of, among other things, her maternity:

…I’ll never forget the humiliation I felt when I took my two kids to the centre, because I had nobody to leave them with, and two of my sisters sat only inches away from me discussing how much they disliked kids (Lake, 1999, 237).

Teaching at a one of the foremost women’s colleges in the US, Professor and mother of two Sylvia Hewlett recounts having to battle with feminists on the faculty to establish a modest maternity policy:

Barnard college was and is a national bastion of women’s rights…In our naïve way we thought that all this emphasis on women’s rights and feminist values had to translate into concrete support for the working mothers on the faculty. It did not. Many of my feminist colleagues did not have children and were less than enthusiastic about families. Indeed, one of them publicly accused me of trying to get a “free ride” when I spoke out at a meeting for a college maternity policy (Hewlett, 1986, 31-32).

By the middle of the 1970s, however, feminist discourse on motherhood has begun to change. By the 1980s “difference” or “cultural” feminism dominated both political and academic feminist circles. Cultural feminists re-inscribed essentialist notions of men and women, but elevated the female side of gender-based dichotomies: “female” qualities like nurture and mutuality were praised while “male” characteristics like aggression and dominance denigrated. The rise of the “mothering literature” in this period - Choderow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* and Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking* – saw women conceptualised once again as naturally/essentially maternal (Segal,
1988). Socially, rather than biologically, mothering was seen to beget mothering, closing down the possibility that properly mothered women were free to choose to mother, or remain childless (Chodorow, 1978; Dinnerstein, 1976). The moral values of care and responsibility were associated with being female (Gilligan, 1984; Ruddick, 1989), while “maternal” virtues like responsiveness, protection, cooperativeness were seen as the basis for pro-social behaviour like non-violence and pacifism (Griffin, 1981; Ruddick, 1989).

In the United States, this emphasis on sexual difference and motherhood was designed both to soften the public face of feminism in regard to motherhood, and to smooth over political tensions in the movement between black and white feminists. Black feminists had always viewed motherhood as a communal experience and source of “female strength and solidarity” and were as much preoccupied – in the face of forced sterilisation at the hands of the white medical profession – with their right to have children as their right to obtain an abortion (Morell, 1994, 125; Polatnick, 1996; Umansky, 1996, 99). It was in the hope of building a broader-based inter-racial women’s movement that North American feminists sought to conceptualise motherhood as the universal – and thus a unifying - female experience.

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9 Lake argues that similar histories and their resulting priorities drove a wedge between white and Aboriginal feminists in Australia during this period. However, she contends that rather than modify feminist views that motherhood was a “handicap to be overcome, a hindrance in the way of equality with men,” White Australian feminists continued to, “reach out” to Aboriginal women, and to fail to comprehend why their overtures were rebuffed (Lake, 1999, 257, 270-1).
But as Umansky points out, motherhood could only remain a “universal” experience in the most unexamined sense. And it was the material tenuousness of this false universal that led many white radical feminists “further and further into essentialist and symbolic renderings of motherhood” (Umansky, 1996, 101). Thus, while feminists romanticised the values and practice of motherhood, they paid little attention to the concrete experiences and difficulties of real mothers.

2.3 CHOICE AND MOTHERHOOD IN POPULAR AND ACADEMIC FEMINISM TODAY: 1991-2000

During the 1980s and 1990s some younger women began asserting their disinterest in following in childless footsteps of the feminist vanguard (Bulbeck, 1997, 127; Friedan, 1981; Schwartz, 1993, 32). The early feminists began to be seen, complained Anne Summers, as “ageing radicals pitied by a new generation of women as a `a bunch of sad and lonely people who lived only for their jobs and their politics’” (Summers, 1993). Polls throughout the 1990s suggested that while women were “fed up” with trying to do it all, they largely rejected the alternatives – childlessness and a return to the kitchen (Denfield, 1995; Watson, 1999). What they wanted, according to one Roper Poll (1999), was “something else.” While the precise reason for many younger women’s alienation from the feminist movement is unclear (Bail, 1996; Denfield, 1995; Faludi, 1991; Hoff Sommers, 1994; Roiphe, 1993; Stewart, 1999), it is possible that one cause is the perceived failure of the movement to pay attention to and envision a solution to the distress of working mothers and working mothers-to-be.
be. Young Australian researcher Fiona Stewart, for instance, contends that motherhood is the “flash point for debate about the success and failures of feminism”:

[For the women of] Generation X ...(those born post 1962)...life is not as they thought it would be. The contradiction between what we were told we could achieve, and the reality of our working and family lives, is something which this generation of women is only now starting to voice...when the issue of children arises, these tensions are heightened further (Stewart, 1999, 22)

Concurs North American political feminist Rene Denfield:

...The movement for the most part has taken a radical change in direction. It has become bogged down in an extremist moral and spiritual crusade that has little to do with women’s lives...What women of all ages want out of organized women’s movement (sic) is simple: They want it to champion political reforms and social change that will address their needs and put them on an equal footing with men...Asked to select the most important goal for the women’s movement...women [in a 1989 Time poll] chose “helping women balance work and family” as number one. Second was “getting government funding for programs such as child care and maternity leave” (Denfield, 1995, 5, 17).

But Denfield and Stewart are virtually on their own in their concern for the anxieties and disillusionment of young women who already are or are intending to become mothers. In her best-selling book The Mask of Motherhood: how mothering changes everything and why we pretend it doesn’t, West Australian feminist Susan Maushart (1997) blames mothering women’s difficulties on their lack of awareness of the schism between motherhood’s promise and its reality, rather than the schism itself. Thus, for Maushart, it is women’s collective
unwillingness to share with one another their knowledge that motherhood “changes everything” that must be redressed, rather than the social attitudes and structures that make motherhood so problematic.

Indeed, the seeming assumption of most younger political feminists that motherhood is a woman’s choice, conjoined with their embrace of libertarian feminist principles, leaves many with little to say about women’s widespread disillusionment with modern-day motherhood. The thinking seems to be that if motherhood is an individual choice that all women are equally free to choose, then any and all repercussions of this choice are the rightful responsibility of individual mothers: end of story. Certainly, this is the attitude of Christine Hoff Summers. While largely ignoring the issues surrounding working motherhood in her book *Who Stole Feminism*, Hoff Summers does suggest that the 18 cents wage gap between men and women aged 25 through 34 is justified because women work less hours, and thereby gain less work experience, than men (Hoff Sommers, 1994, 241). The libertarian feminist assumptions from which this conclusion flows is that motherhood is a choice, and those women who choose it are individually responsible for whatever inequities that choice delivers. Only “victim” feminists would dare to say otherwise. Kathy Bail (1996) gives equally

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10 Several recent studies have found that the non-mother/mother wage gap puts the gender wage gap to shame. A Rand Corporation study showed that a first child lowers a woman’s lifetime earnings by 13 percent, while a second child lowers earnings by 19 percent (Hewlett, 2000). Similarly, a Columbia academic has found that while the hourly wages of women without children are roughly 90 percent of men’s, the comparable figure for women with children is 70 percent (Chait Barnett & Rivers, 2000).
short and inadequate shrift to experiences of working mothers in her 1996 edited collection *DIY Feminism*. Bail defends the views of most of her teenage and twenty-something interviewees that gender-based discrimination, and therefore feminism, is old-fashioned. Because women are free to chose their lives, the women in *DIY feminism* describe those who seek to lay responsibility for any of women’s difficulties at the door of men, or society as a whole, as guilty of “self-pity and the worst kind of passivity” (Bail, 1996, 14). In places, however, Bail’s own interviews undermine her attempt to make her book a first person refutation of the “victim” credo. In a chapter on corporate warriors, for example, Bail describes her five interviewees as “optimistic about their futures” (Bail, 1996, 113). What the interview makes clear, however, is that all the young women, but particularly the one young mother amongst them, feel profoundly discriminated against in corporate Australia. So too do they express a belief that a social, rather than a personal solution, is required to ameliorate the work/motherhood dilemma. Julie for instance, declares the impossibility of breaking into the upper echelons of her firm while working a part-time “mummy track” job. She feels she’ll be lucky if she manages just to “hold on” until her kids get older (Bail, 1996, 115-16). In the same way, all the women agree that the thing standing between women and equality in the workplace is childcare.
In the same way that Hoff Summers and Bail are largely disinterested in motherhood, so too is Trioli’s (1996) *Generation f: sex, power & the young feminist* and Lumby’s (1997) *Bad Girls*. Both Trioli and Lumby, however, take a different approach to the question of women’s freedoms around motherhood. For Trioli (1996), victim feminist diatribes are meaningless in the face of numerous reliable indicators of women’s oppression in higher educational institutions and in the business world. The decision to become a mother, which Trioli rightly assumes is a decision most women will make, is often behind women’s difficulties:

> When a woman projects into the future of her working life, she can learn the miserable truth that after twelve years of equal opportunity laws in this country, women still only represent five per cent of company directors in Australia. Those businesses apparently enlightened enough to allow women employees to work flexible, part-time hours so they can care for their children, offer these same employees radically narrowed job opportunities with promotion possibilities all but removed (Trioli, 1996, 53).

Lumby (1997) seeks to straddle the approach taken by Bail and the “anti-victim” perspective of Trioli with arguments that emphasise the active negotiation women do with social forces and influences. For Lumby, each individual woman receives and processes such forces and influences in an individual way, making it impossible to make blanket statements about their impact on women’s psyches and behaviour. A post-modernist thinker, Lumby recognises the divergent range of forces and influences at play in women’s lives, and the importance of respecting differences between women. But while she recognises the constraining capacities of such forces and influences, she doesn’t see them
acting upon women’s inert bodies or minds. Rather, she sees women as free to make sense of and negotiate these forces and influences in line with their individual desires, resources and capacities.

In the academy, interest in preserving differences between women while retaining the category “woman” for use by feminist researchers and theorists in the face of post-modernist onslaughts has largely displaced the equality/difference debate. However, while post-modernism undercuts the importance of the individual and the possibility of objective knowledge (upon which informed choice is seen to rely), it also envisions a world of:

radical freedom in which existential choices extend not just to the external circumstances of one’s life, but to the nature of one’s subjectivity itself. The postmodern person is not faced with a socially patterned telos to which he or she is subject…Instead he or she has to choose – to choose radically, not merely the content and direction of his or her life but the framework itself, the context of and the conditions for judgement. The post-modern person is thus “contingent” (Komesaroff, 1995, 10).

Numerous researchers and theorists contend that the nature of post-modern existence has heightened the value for men and women of intimate relationships, as well as changing the nature of intimacy that characterises them (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992; Mackay, 1997). It is unclear what impact such changes may have on the nature of motherhood and/or women’s desire to pursue it. While postmodern authors believe motherhood is a woman’s choice (not her fate), numerous studies prove the impediment children
pose to “confluent love” (or pure-type relationships) and women’s advancement at work (Giddens, 1992; Smart, 1997). The suggestion from authors like Giddens (1992) is that while women are free to choose motherhood, it is unclear given their values and life plans why they would. Instead Giddens speculates that women’s increasing equality will lead them to a more focused pursuit of pure-type relationships. The suggestion is that this pursuit, once coupled with the demands of work, will leave motherhood on the shelf. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), on the other hand, believe that in our post-modern world of serial monogamy, in which individuals stay together only as long as both are satisfied, motherhood may become highly attractive because a relationship with a child:

…is of a quite different kind than that to another adult…The child really is intimately related to one, not just acquired through the coincidences of biography, and the bond is all-encompassing, lasting, unbreachable, in a sense superior to other liaisons in our barter and throw-away culture (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 76).

2.4 “VOLUNTARY” CHILDLess DISCOURSE AND CHOICE

Unsurprisingly, many women who did not want children were enlivened by the questioning of the motherhood mandate that was a critical part of early feminist discourse (Morell, 1994), and began speaking out about the benefits of the childless “lifestyle.” Like feminists in the early days of the women’s movement, childless writers and speakers tended to merge the question of whether they were free to choose childlessness with arguments in favour of being “childfree.”
These arguments sought to establish both the advantages of the childfree lifestyle, and the normality and harmlessness of those individuals and couples without children. In 1969, Stephanie Mills announced her intention to remain childless in her valedictorian speech to Mills College. Ellen Peck’s popular *The Baby Trap* was published in 1971, while Gail Greene spoke out in *New York Magazine* in 1972 (Roiphe, 1996, 21; Schwartz, 1993). Peck cited the stresses children place on marriage as their main reasons for avoiding motherhood:

> Take your pick. One or the other. Housework and children – or the glamour, involvement and excitement of a free life...The girls I’ve talked to who don’t have children are, almost without exception, prettier more conversational more aware, more alive, more exciting, more satisfied. They have...better marriages and happier husbands than those wives who do have children (May, 1995, 188).

Greene concurred, while also asserting the harmlessness of the childless choice:

> I see many of our friends, some of them with children they hadn’t necessarily planned on, bitter, frustrated, vacillating between devotion and despair, screaming at their youngsters, tearing into each other...Whom do I hurt by not having children? (quoted in Roiphe, 1996, 20-21)

During this period *People Without Children* and the *National Organization for Non-Parents*, which later changed its name to the *National Alliance for Optional Parenthood* before dissolving in the early 1980s, formed (May, 1995, 189; National Alliance for Optional Parenthood, 1998; Roiphe, 1996, 20). Roiphe, who offers one of the only accounts of these early meetings, argues that young women’s attendance at these meetings, and by implication the phenomenon of
childlessness, was an angry reaction by women to centuries of oppression and degradation:

In New York City an organization was formed called People Without Children. They met at the Plaza at regular intervals in order to confirm one another in their desire to be unburdened, not to contribute to population overload, to enjoy the fruits of their labors for themselves...Many of them were so young they didn’t hear their biological clocks ticking. Many of them were so angry at the way society had demeaned their female minds, bodies, or opportunities that they jumped up and down like children in a tantrum, no, no, no (Roiphe, 1996, 20).

In the 1990s, several other “childfree” advocacy organisations formed in the United States. Childless by Choice began in 1992, and the Childfree Network formed in 1993. In Australia, Child-Free Zone was established in 1999 (Moore & Moore, 2000).

Unlike the sharp changes in perspective and focus that have characterised the feminist position on motherhood, childlessness and choice, the content and tenor of childless by choice arguments about childlessness have changed little since the early 1970s. In interviews, narratives and activist discourse throughout the 1980s and 1990s, childless individuals and couples cite reasons for forgoing parenthood that support, rather than challenge, the prevailing economic and interpersonal status quo. For many of the childless, children simply get in the way of current spending patterns and future spending ambitions (McIntosh, 1999; Summers & Hogan, 1994). For example, one woman gives her reasons for childlessness as follows: “I like going where I want, doing what I want,
having light-coloured carpets and art in the living room. I hate drinking out of Tupperware” (May, 1995, 195).

For others, motherhood was the highest calling, but one to be heeded only by those willing and able to be a traditional “good” mother. In 1979, the director of the National Alliance for Optional Parenthood Organization scoffed at the idea of part-time mothers providing adequate care for their children: “the super woman image is a myth. You can’t program tender loving care between 7 and 8 at night when you’re home…it’s an injustice” (May, 1995, 190). For many childless, only those capable of answering the following questions affirmatively ought to choose to have children:

Can I be giving on demand, for as long as I am needed?
Will I resent those demands so much that I hurt my child?
Will I lose the very things I most value about myself – my peace and radiance and joy? Will I go crazy with the unending responsibility?” [May, 1995 #85, 190.

The view that raising children well is demanding and should only be undertaken by those who feel they will be “good” mothers and fathers is revised by the editor of a 1992 anthology of childless women’s writings as an explanation for childlessness. “Perhaps childless women are some of the women who might have made the best mothers”, Irene Reti notes, “for many of us are fully cognizant of what a responsibility motherhood is” (Reti, 1992, introduction).
Childless women throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s also cite their valuing of the economic independence, personal freedom and emotional sexual intimacy currently available in their partnership. Many fear the intrusion of children into their highly valued sexually and emotional intimate relationships. Says self-proclaimed feminist Louise Hanson, “Me, I’m partial to romance” (May, 1995, 187). Notes one married woman, “we were selfish in that we really did not care to have others (children) interfere in our relationship, i.e., to have to share ourselves with them” (May, 1995). According to Jeanne Safer (1996), childless marriages often have an unconventional element to them. The wife frequently makes more money than her partner, the marriage mixes ethnic or social class, or there are large age disparities. Some childless couples are inseparable, while others rarely see one another. What these women share is the belief that their “exclusive, mutual bond with their husband provides something they have always wanted” (Safer, 1996, 122, 123).

For some childless women, consumerist concerns are tied up with the valuing of intimate relationships. Childlessness gives women the freedom to spend more time with their partners at restaurants, and overseas, for example:

As we see our friend’s teens total Dad’s car, we quietly enjoy our new car. As they drag off to Disneyland with 3 whining little ones, we hop a plane to the Caribbean for snorkeling. As they struggle with the din of cranky kids at the dinner hour, I’m returning from a ride on my horse to come home to peace and quiet and a relaxing night with my husband (May, 1995, 197).
A 40 year-old married childless woman agreed:

We had discussed not having children. I said, “I’m not maternal, I don’t want to have kids. I’m very selfish, want to earn my own money, do my own thing and travel”, and he felt just the same…I still have my own interests and I think he is more interested in me because I might be doing different things, and it stimulates the relationship. But we also love doing things together…there’s plenty of space for each other…the good times are every weekend we spend together. It doesn’t matter what we do. I’m lucky to be in such a good relationship (Heath, 1994).

For many women, the terror of pregnancy and of losing one’s shape were connected to concerns about their status and identity both within and outside their intimate relationships. As Safer (1996) notes, childless women see motherhood as unsexy. Said one childless woman, “I want to keep my hour-glass figure instead of sacrificing it for someone who probably won’t appreciate me anyway!”(May, 1995, 198; Summers & Hogan, 1994, 16). Judith Schwartz, author of The Mother Puzzle, explained the impediment the body/identity nexus poses to motherhood this way:

Maybe [I’m] not the most perfect of physical specimens, but I’ve worked on [my] body, chiseled it down to tolerable size. Evolving as an independent person meant taking control of my physical self… how could I give over that control to nature’s whim? Pregnancy will put on weight, make me fat. Motherhood will tie me to the kitchen, a dangerous place. For me, this is less a matter of vanity than of terror. Slimness, control, independence and self-worth are too tightly interwoven for me to pretend to any rationality about it (Schwartz, 1993, 17).

Women’s own career, personal and creative ambitions, largely unremarked in 1970s, became more salient in women’s reasons for childlessness in the 1990s.
This may demonstrate both the influence of feminist discourse on motherhood and childlessness, and the more widespread acceptance of such reasons by the general public. Noted one woman:

I’ve never had a strong desire to have children…I find my job very satisfying…I want to pack in so much. There are courses I want to do, things I want to research, things I want to teach. I feel sorry for people who don’t have a job they enjoy. But I feel very lucky I chose a career that I like and that I’m still in 20 years later (McIntosh, 1999, 8).

A childless psychologist doing a graduate diploma of management with plans to do an MBA and become a consultant agreed:

We feel it would be an injustice to bring a child into the world where their parents don’t have time for them…I think if I were at home raising a child I would be forever wondering what else I could have achieved in my life, what other potential I would have been giving up. Ever since I was young, my father told me I had a lot of potential. He insisted I was going to be Australia’s first female prime minister and he’s come up with other top jobs he thought I would achieve…I’ve worked with women who juggle careers ad family and, while they talk about the satisfying elements with a smile, the sacrifices they make are enormous (McIntosh, 1999, 9).

As Reti notes about the childless contributors to her feminist anthology, “for many women the choice not to have children is integrally connected with artistic expression. We do not have illusions about the difficulty of continuing to lead a creative life while raising babies” (Reti, 1992, introduction).
Overpopulation, from the 1960s through the 1990s, remains a tried a true reason given by the childless for avoiding motherhood. From Paul Erlich’s (1968) influential *The Population Bomb* through to Reti’s (1992) feminist anthology, the childless have always cited concern about the impact overpopulation has on the health of world ecology. In “Saving the Earth One Less Baby at a Time” Michele Patenaude writes, “You can compost, recycle, carpool and put bricks in your toilet tank until the cows come home, and it won’t compare to the environmental benefits of bringing one less child into the world” (Reti, 1992, introduction). Another childless woman concurs: “Western children are very expensive for the world and if I don’t have children…there’s more room for people from other parts of the world to come here” (McIntosh, 1999, 7).

However, a number of women admit that while concerns about over-population sound a noble justification for childlessness, such concerns are not really behind their desire for childlessness. A woman who deprecates the “spawning of people who are cursed by poverty” admits she really chose childlessness because she didn’t want to share her life with anyone other than the man with whom she lives (May, 1995, 202). Similarly, a woman who cited population-based reasons for avoiding childbearing admits such reasons are the justification, not the reason, for her childlessness:

I don’t want to sound as though I’m noble and doing it for the world. I’m not enough of an idealist to say that if I wanted children I wouldn’t have them because of the population problem. It just fits with my philosophies (McIntosh, 1999, 7).
However, some of the early linkages between overpopulation and childlessness still exist. “Links” between population and “childfree” sites on the Internet are common, while Zero Population Growth lists “Childfree Organizations” before “Population Focused Organizations” on its website contacts page. Such organisations typically provide support for their membership and “facts” for the media and public to dispel “myths” about childlessness. Their main focus, however, is advocacy for the rights of the childless. The three main organisations in the United States (Childless by Choice, the ChildFree Network and the Childfree Association) as well as the Canadian-based No Kidding!, strive for what Childless by Choice describes as a, “neutral rather than pronatalist stance by government, media, and business” (Childless by Choice, 1999). Amongst the numerous informational pamphlets produced by Childless by Choice is one entitled “It’s not fair!” in which numerous essays deplore “inequities” in taxation and at work faced by those without children in comparison to parents. Childless by Choice (1999) also publishes a newsletter that includes articles pondering whether the childless are unfairly “taking up the slack for parents.” The ChildFree Network and No Kidding! grous about workplace inequities suffered by the childfree, oppose tax breaks for families with children and/or demand tax concessions to reimburse the childfree for the schools and health services overused by the “child-burdened” (Fost, 1996; Life Matters, 1999). The Childfree Network is also opposed to insurers covering the cost of infertility treatments like IVF. “Why am I subsidizing somebody who wants to have kids?” enquires Leslie Lafayette, the group’s founder (Fost, 1996). The basis of the new economic militancy of many childless by choice
activists is their assumption that parents own their children, and benefit exclusively from them, and that parents are equally free to choose or to choose to avoid parenthood. Consequently, those who make an individual choice to have children must accept the moral and financial responsibilities that accompany this choice.

2.5 MOTHERHOOD AS A CHOICE

The stigma surrounding fertile childlessness has lessened over the past thirty years. The harsh middle-class judgements of selfishness and deviance with which the childless were lacerated in the 1960s and 1970s have softened, with acceptance of parenthood as an individual choice, and greatly increased tolerance of those who choose childlessness (Gerson, 1985, 17; Marshall, 1993; Secombe, 1991, 191). Women know that the price of motherhood is “simply too high to be entered into without a great deal of soul searching and consideration of the options and possibilities” (Kappelman & Ackerman, 1980, 4; Summers & Hogan, 1994, 18). The interviewers of approximately 40 Australian women on the topic of women’s lives today noted with astonishment:

How tolerant each of the women was about the choices the others had made. There was none of the condemnation of women, the shrill accusations of “selfishness” for not having children, which used to be such a feature of Australian life…two decades ago…Women today…are far less judgmental, far more compassionate…there seems to exist a new realism; women especially have few illusions these days…[they know] that life is about making choices and decisions and then living with those decisions (Summers & Hogan, 1994, 16).
Thus, it appears that for women in the 1990s, it is making the choice whether to have children, rather than motherhood itself, that is the new female rite of passage (Faux, 1984; Mackay, 1997, 153-154; Wilk, 1986; Ziman Tobin & with Aria, 1998). That motherhood is a choice – and childlessness a valid option - is simply taken for granted by younger women. Notes Amanda Dunn in a recent feature article on the Opinion page of The Age:

My dear grandmother has recently taken to telling me that at 26, reproductive time is running out...And then, just to show what a hip, up-to-the-minute kind of nan she is, she adds that I needn’t feel I have to get married, as long as I have a good solid bloke by my side. She says these things because in her youth having family was the key to social acceptance and she wants that same security for me (Dunn, 2000).

Both feminists and the voluntary childless have enthusiastically embraced the idea that woman are, and ought to be, free to choose motherhood or childlessness. Having observed the incapacity of women to choose it all, and then have it all, a small number of feminists in the 1990s have begun to question the adequacy of libertarian notions of choice to either explain or propose solutions to women’s lived experience of the work/motherhood conflict. However, in their hurried retreat from “victim” feminism, the remainder of younger political Australian and North American feminists have turned a blind eye to motherhood, and the complex question of women’s freedom – in the face of attitudinal and social constraints – to choose it. Because childlessness leads women to experience less conflict between their choices, voluntary childless advocates have embraced libertarian notions of choice, and followed them through to their logical conclusion. In opposing tax breaks for families with
children, or on-the-job assistance and understanding for parents, childfree advocates express their belief that individuals are free to choose to have, or not to have, children. Having made the personal and individual choice to have children, parents must accept as personal and individual the responsibilities that come with that choice, and neither ask for nor expect assistance from others.

Feminist and fertile childless discourses have seen choice used both as a description of how women arrive at motherhood or childlessness and as a term of validation for the fertile childless. In Australia and the United States, those who choose are seen as active, rational, conscious, self-determining, in control and free, while those who see their lives as determined by outside forces are passive victims. Consequently, labelling a woman’s childlessness as chosen is seen to affirm that woman’s moral agency, and to validate her childless experience. After noting her long journey to her realisation that she wanted to remain childless, and documenting her sadness about not leaving a biological legacy, childless psychologist Jeanne Safer concludes:

> It’s important for me to remember that I am childless by choice, not by default. This gives me a sense of pride and self-acceptance even as I acknowledge what I am missing (Safer, 1996, 41).

Feminists, in particular, apply the description “chosen” to women’s experiences in order to “empower” them, sometimes in contradiction of the facts. In the preface to Unwomanly Conduct, self-described feminist and childless researcher Carolyn Morell expresses indignation that a story about childless
couples in the local newspaper did not, “empower [her] as a woman without children” (Morell, 1994, xiv). Among the last Women Out Loud broadcasts on ABC radio (1998) was entitled, “Women who have chosen not to live with their children”. The vast majority of women interviewed for the program, however, had been forced to leave their children in the family home in order to escape their husbands’ violence. Similarly, Lewis’s (1986) No Children by Choice comprises 13 interviews with women and men who had chosen childlessness, or had found themselves childless as a result of infertility or failing to find the right partner or any partner at all. In her description of her book’s contents, Lewis uses choice as a description of the reason for and the process of becoming childless, a confirmation of the “normality” of the childless existence, and a term of validation and empowerment for a childless person or outcome:

The interviews I finally included seemed in their candidness and diverse authenticity, to be those most likely to convey to the greatest numbers of people some positive examples to support a decision not to have children. The choice to be childless is one which many people are now confronting, yet few people have examples to follow, or a tradition or context which validates their choice. The search for this is the issue at the heart of this book. Thirteen women and men talk about exercising their choice not to be parents, up to this point in their lives. The book also becomes an investigation of the degree to which they feel parenting or non-parenting is a choice over which they have any real power (Lewis, 1986, xiv).

The irony is that despite wider social acceptance of motherhood and childlessness as choices of equal social validity, some voluntary childless women still feel embattled. When Phyllis Tobin, author of Motherhood Optional, did the rounds of North American chat shows arguing that maternal desires are
socially rather than instinctually driven, thousands of childless women wrote her to express their relief at discovering they, “were normal” (Laurence, 1998).

During recruitment for her study of childless women, Safer noted the sense of stigma experienced by her volunteering participants:

“Finally a strike for our side!” this usually reserved woman exclaimed, echoing what I soon discovered was a widespread reaction of relief and delight many of my subjects felt at discussing what had often seemed to them— as it had at times to me – a shameful secret they could share with no one (Safer, 1996, 45).

A recent title by Laurie Lisle (1996) on voluntary childlessness is subtitled “challenging the stigma of childlessness.”

The ongoing sense of stigma experienced by some childless women may have three sources. The first is what Kaplan describes as a “backlash” against the success of 1970s and 1980s feminism in demonstrating the social nature of male privilege. This backlash has led social conservatives, evolutionary biologists and other biological determinists to successfully re-assert their long-held belief that given the human “drive” to procreate, motherhood is “natural” (Kaplan & Rogers, 1994).

The second is the older age of many of those writing about the “stigma” or “difficulty” of being childlessness. Lisle, Safer, Veevers, Morell, Campbell are all leading-edge Baby Boomers doing research on other leading-edge Baby
Boomers. These women, as Dunn (2000) notes (see above), were young women choosing childlessness at a time when motherhood was still seen as a woman’s only role.

Social forces may also contribute to many childless women’s sense that they are under attack. Despite an increase in the number of fertile women remaining childless, the majority of women still intend to mother, and most will fulfil this intention (Caron & Wynn, 1992; Wicks & Mishra, 1998). Childlessness, in other words, remains a minority experience. In addition, the media regularly covers the experience of the involuntarily childless and the sexy high-tech alternatives available to “treat” their infertility. Feminist historians and researchers pay scant attention to the experiences and issues of the voluntarily childless. As a consequence, voluntary childlessness not only is a minority experience, it often acutely feels like one. Observes Jeanne Safer, childless women, “like everyone who elects to live outside the norm,” must find their own way of coping with “the palpable proof that [they are] different from the majority” (Safer, 1996, 154).

Baruch et al (1983) concur with Safer that when women feel they are “defying the dictates of society” they experience self-doubt and a threatened sense of self-esteem. However, she believes that most modern-day women - not just those who are childless – are vulnerable to “out-of-step” anxiety:

Never-married women can feel out of step because they are not married; divorced women can feel that way
because they aren’t married any longer. Childless women often feel different because they don’t have children, and employed women who do have children often feel anxious because they have departed from the “proper” role they were socialized to play. And the one group of women that did follow the expected route of marrying, staying home, and raising children now find that rules have changed - suddenly, society is questioning the value of what they are doing (Baruch et al., 1983, 41).

Concludes Baruch, “it’s nearly impossible to be a woman today and not feel out of step” (Baruch et al., 1983, 41). The prevalence of “out of step” anxiety may be testament to the fast-growing social acceptability of a wide range of family formation options.

### 2.6 CONCLUSION

Libertarian feminist understandings of choice dominate feminist reproductive discourse and may inhibit feminist recognition that Australian and North American women are not free (in welfare feminist terms) to choose motherhood. Individualistic cultures like Australia and North America also encourage women to see themselves as the authors and agents of their own lives. This thesis seeks to emulate other feminist research that has sought to balance recognition of the attitudinal and social constraints on women’s freedom to choose motherhood with a respect for women’s moral agency and women’s self-perception as choosers.
In their eagerness to lessen the stigma of childlessness and to establish motherhood as a choice, early second-wave feminists were hostile to motherhood. However, by the 1980s both academic and political feminists were recuperating largely essentialist and symbolic rendering of motherhood. During the last decade many younger political feminists have evinced little interest in motherhood, seemingly influenced by libertarian choice discourse and “victim” feminist critiques that render the motherhood choice as free and uncomplicated.

Unlike feminist discourse, the approach and arguments of the voluntarily childless have changed little since the early 1970s. The exception to this is the upsurge in concern among the childless that they are being conscripted, at work and through the tax system, to support those who choose to have children. However, despite evidence that many women do perceive motherhood as a choice, many childless women still feel stigmatised. The rising fortunes of biological determinism in recent years, the older age of many of the childless women writing about their experience of childlessness and the minority status of childless women may all contribute to this experience. However, it may also be the case that the rapid decline of the marriage and motherhood “mandate” in recent years has left many modern day women feeling “out of step.”

The prevalence of out of step anxiety, however, does not lessen its painfulness for childless women. The use of choice in feminist and childfree discourses as a description of the nature of parenting (and so the “naturalness” of those not...
“driven” to procreate), a description of the reasons for and the process of becoming childlessness, and as an affirmation of the control the childless exercise over their lives (and thus a term of validation) may in part be intended to reduce that stress. But is choice an accurate description of how all fertile childless women come to be childless? In the next chapter, I will explore how existing demographic and smaller-scale psychological and sociological studies have approached and sought to answer this question.
Chapter 3

Fertile Childlessness: Circumstance or Choice

Isabelle: When I first met Graham he already had two children from his first marriage and wasn’t keen to father any more. And that was fine. But then I went through this phase of desperately wanting a child. I was unhappy, depressed, even hysterical. The breakthrough came when I realised that what was happening to me wasn’t psychological, it was physiological. Oh, women have a deep animal instinct to propagate the race, but it can be controlled. I had to realise that underneath my hormones I was basically happy after all.

Sue: What she said was so sad. Just like Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre. Sartre told Simone she was irrational and she believed him. Marriage, monogamy, a family were all bourgeois, he said. But underneath all that French intellectual crap he was a sexist shit. And she was a feminist sucker. Just like Isabelle, she never had any children. Just like us.

From the ABC TV mini-series Simone de Beauvoir's Babies, 1997

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will discuss what is already known about women’s childbearing decisions and behaviour. Two types of literature will be examined: demographic studies of women’s fertility patterns and micro-level psychological and sociological studies of “voluntarily” childless women or couples. The first set of literature assumes that human behaviour can best be understood in social terms. It asks how declining birth rates in Western societies like Australia and the United States can be explained, and looks to attitudinal and structural factors in each country to provide such explanations. In such studies, women’s
reproductive behaviour is not primarily seen as the outcome of their free individual choices, but as decisions made in constrained social circumstances.

Social research in the psychological tradition focuses on the decision-making process and rationale and couples. The assumptions of the second body of literature differ radically from the first. Individuals, rather than social forces, are largely seen to drive and explain human behaviour and social arrangements. Women, either implicitly or explicitly, are characterised as individual decision-makers whose reproductive behaviour is best explained by an exposition of their individual situations and motives. This is not to say that the researchers conducting these studies altogether dismissed the capacity of social forces to influence women’s behaviour. Pro-natalist social attitudes are nearly always acknowledged as exerting powerful coercive pressures on childless women to have children, although social attitudes were rarely seen to push women away from motherhood. However, the influence of structural forces and constraints on women’s reproductive decisions and behaviour are rarely, if ever, discussed. Said one such researcher:

I wanted to know how couples became childless, how the desire emerged and was translated into action; my interest was in situations and motives and not in the structural conditions so many sociologists of fertility had seen as determining reproductive behaviour. Mine was a humanistic approach… (Campbell, 1985, x).

Sociologists have done a far better job in exploring the impact on women’s lives of social attitudes and structures. Recently, some feminist sociologists have
understood women’s fertility outcomes as the result of the decisions they make under socially constrained circumstances, and have adopted methodologies that reflect this understanding. In these accounts, women’s lives are seen to be shaped by structural arrangements that constrain the options both from which they are free to choose, and their freedom to choose between them. At the same time, however, women are seen to actively process or negotiate with such arrangements to individual, albeit less than fully free, decisions (Gerson, 1985; McMahon, 1995). Of particular relevance to the current study is the work of Kathleen Gerson. In *Hard Choices*, Gerson (1985) demonstrates how social structures constrain women’s freedom to implement the choices they always thought they would make and/or wanted to make in relation to work and motherhood. At the same time, however, Gerson records how such constraints in turn re-shape women’s desires, goals and subsequent choices. Gerson’s goal is to show how social and attitudinal factors constrain women’s choices, without dismissing the individuality of the decisions they make within such constraints.

At the close of this chapter, I will briefly review the scant data available on men’s reproductive desires and their contribution to women decisions.

3.2 DEMOGRAPHIC STUDIES: EXPLAINING DECLINING FERTILITY

There is little doubt that for women in Australia, the United States and many other western countries, the financial and opportunity costs of bearing children
is high (Chesnais, 1996; Faux, 1984; Grindstaff, 1996; McDonald, 1997; McDonald, 1998a; Painter, 1998; Secombe, 1991; Stein, 1998). Dramatic declines in fertility in most western countries result both from some women having no children, and some having fewer children than they might otherwise have had (Colbatch, 2000a; McDonald, 1997). Demographers have long argued that increased education for women leads to lower fertility rates. While this relationship pertains in developing countries recent evidence suggests it may not in the developed world. In both Europe and Australia, higher levels of education do not lead women to decrease their expectations that they will bear children, nor reduce the number of children women intend to bear. Young Australian women aged twenty to twenty-four, for instance, expect to have an average of 2.33 children (an amount greater than the 2.1 children per woman needed to maintain fertility at replacement levels), while women without secondary school qualifications desired on average only 1.96 children (McDonald, 1998a; van de Kaa, 1998). But higher education does lead these Australian and North American women to delay marriage and childbearing and as well-educated women age, the number of children they expect and their actual completed family size plummets (Camberlin, 1997; Carlton, 1997, 1999; Cox, 1999; Kilmartin, 1997; McDonald, 1998a; Rindfuss et al., 1996b; van de Kaa, 1998). This is in contrast to the achieved family size of less educated women, which more closely matches their expectations. However, recent figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics suggest the closer relationship between the number of children less educated women desire and achieve may be set to change. These show that while the fertility levels of all Australian
women continue to decline, those of less educated women are falling most quickly (Kilmartin, 2000; Spencer, 2000).

The growing gulf between better-educated women’s expected and achieved family size is due to a number of factors. Firstly, women who begin their families later are more likely to bear no children, or fewer than they intend, because of age-related infertility and/or conception delays. Moreover, as women gain direct experience of the work/motherhood clash, they revise or further delay their plans to have a child or enlarge their current family size (Rindfuss et al., 1996b, 286-287). In addition, the rapid decline in achieved fertility rates of less educated women can be explained by the rising costs of childcare and general lack of social support in Australian society for working parents (Carson, 1999; Spencer, 2000).

Why is education related to women’s delay of marriage and childbearing? One reason is that getting an education takes time (Rindfuss et al., 1996b). The second is that women who seek and obtain more educational qualifications aspire to more professional and lucrative jobs. The direct and opportunity costs of early childbearing for women who pursue such careers is high, regardless of whether they seek to take time off from work or simply rein in exorbitant hours (McDonald, 1997; Rindfuss et al., 1996b). Chesnais’ description of the expectations and aspirations of average young Italian women regarding careers
also holds for Australian and North American women (Bryson & Warner-Smith, 1998; Rindfuss, Brewster, & Kavee, 1996a; Wicks & Mishra, 1998):

Educated along the same lines and performing similarly or better than their male partners in the labour force, women have altered their self-image as well as their outlook on marriage and family. They seek a social status based on jobs they themselves hold and on the related financial rewards such jobs provide. Education has made them conscious of their own capability: they want a just return for their years of schooling; and they wish to be considered as autonomous individuals. Access by one’s own right to money through a credit card or a checkbook is both a symbol of and a key to independence in a consumer society (Chesnais, 1996).

But as Chesnais and McDonald demonstrate, the reality of work for women need not clash with motherhood. Women’s educational and career aspirations and achievement lead them to delay and defer childbearing – and consequently to contribute to falling birthrates – only in societies that demonstrate the low value they place on children through their lack of attitudinal and structural support for working parents. In societies where working parents are supported, the birth rates of highly educated women are relatively high.\(^{11}\) This contrasts to societies in which the breadwinner model of the family still prevails. In such societies, childbearing is considered the personal choice – and so the private responsibility – of individual parents. Those responsibilities are seen to divide along gender lines: the man provides for and protects his family (and so is paid a “family” wage), and the woman is the carer and reproducer (McDonald, 1997,

\(^{11}\) Chesnais refers to this as the “paradoxe feministe” (Chesnais & Verstraete, 1996).
4). The problem is that while women are neither educated to be nor (at least in theory) paid as though they are primarily carers and reproducers, the assumed institutional form of the family remains the male breadwinner model (McDonald, 1997; McDonald, 1998a). The values of the corporate world, in other words, are still founded on the supposition that employees are free from family and other commitments that are unrelated to the workplace (Wolcott, 1995). In Australia, for instance, mothers are still assumed to be available to care for their children during the numerous two week holiday breaks that take place throughout the year, as well as the longer summer break. School holiday programs are inadequate both in number and quality. Neither Australian nor North American women have a legal entitlement to paid maternity leave. Instead, workplaces provide it – usually to better educated and better paid women – at their own discretion (Adamson, 2000; Reuters, 2000). In 1998, the last date for which figures are available, only 23 per cent of Australian firms offered paid maternity leave, up from 14 per cent in 1994 (Osborne Associates, 2000). Professional women who seek part-time work, or a regulated 40 hour full-time week, find their careers stalled (Cannold, 1999b). The cost of childcare, out-of-hours school care and pre-school programs is also on the rise (Button, 1998; Horin, 1998). From 1992 to 1999, childcare costs in Australia have increased 56 per cent, but government subsidies have gone up only 29 per cent (Carson, 1999). At the same time as government shrugs off any role in supporting parents to care for their children, it enacts policies that restrict individual men’s and women’s freedom to delay and forgo parenthood. Contraception is expensive in Australia and some forms of it, under the new goods and services tax to be
introduced in June 2000, will be taxed (Wright, 1999). Abortion, still strictly illegal in most States, remains an expensive and stigmatised choice (NHMRC, 1996).

This situation contrasts strongly with that faced by women in the former GDR and the Nordic countries. It is in these countries where the positive impact on birthrates of institutional support for working parents can be demonstrated (Chesnais, 1996; Finzel, 1999; McDonald, 1997). Sweden, for example, assumes a gender equity model of family organisation. In this model, there is income earning work, household maintenance work, and caring nurturing work. Neither gender is seen to have sole responsibility for any particular work category, nor is the couple seen to be solely responsible. Both men and women are seen to have the right to work, and it is assumed that both need and want to do so. Sweden also has a long history of below replacement level fertility. Since the 1930s, the government has been seen to bear some responsibility in rectifying this problem. Consequently, it has instituted social policy that removes obstacles to and provides positive support for working parenthood. Couples have the right to contraception, abortion and access to subsidised family planning services. The Swedes devote a significant percentage of per capita public spending on children, and have kept stable the purchasing power of family allowances introduced in the 1930s. Childcare is universally accessible, high quality and heavily subsidised. Parents are largely free to decide how to divide their parental leave, paid at 85 per cent of current salary, although recent legislation has mandated that fathers take at least one month of the twelve
months allowed. The high representation of women in government, and in important cabinet positions, has ensured that parents’ and childrens’ interests are asserted and protected. Unlike other western countries, there is no wage gap between mothers and non-mothers (Chait Barnett & Rivers, 2000). As a consequence, Sweden’s fertility rate has remained relatively stable and high in comparison to other countries in Western Europe (Chesnais, 1996, 732-733; McDonald, 1997).

The demographic literature suggests that those countries that assist women and men to balance their work and family responsibilities (or, to use McDonald’s phraseology, that “achieve gender equity in their economic and social institutions”) have higher fertility rates (McDonald, 1997, 1). High fertility rates reflect men and women’s freedom to choose (in welfare feminist terms) to combine work and parenthood and by so doing, to achieve their desired family size. Low fertility rates, in contrast, are the outcome of forcing women to choose between “a job and a dirty nappy” (Goward, 1998, 15-16). They reflect the gap between women’s desired family size, and the number of children they feel able to have in constrained social circumstances. Thus, while demographers contend that Western nations can reverse declining fertility levels, their studies indicate that such reversals will not come about as a result of changes in individual women’s situations and motives. They will occur only in response to a change in the social circumstances that impact on women’s capacities to realise their childbearing expectations.
3.3 PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDIES OF “VOLUNTARILY” CHILDLESS WOMEN

As the following literature review will demonstrate, psychological studies of “voluntarily” childless women are imbued with libertarian feminist assumptions about choice. This body of work assumes, for example, that the lack of legal constraints on women’s reproductive freedom leaves them at liberty to choose motherhood or childlessness. Contradictorily, most psychological researchers into childlessness also assert that the stigma attached to childlessness in “pro-natalist” countries like Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States severely constrains women’s freedom to choose childlessness.

The intent of these studies is to chart the individual motives, desires and decision-making of “voluntarily” childless women, and the way such decision-making is impeded and misinterpreted by a society in which motherhood is a “mandate.” Despite this, most of these studies confirm – often despite themselves – that no explanation of fertile childlessness is complete without an explication of the attitudinal and structural conditions that constrain women’s capacity to choose motherhood. They confirm, in other words, that many women even in highly selective samples are childless by circumstance, not by choice.

Psychological researchers typically divide their “voluntarily” childless samples into only two groups: the “early articulators” and the “postponers.” Not only do
these distinctions fail to capture the social rather than individual nature of many women’s fertility delays, they challenge the use of choice as a description of all their participants and the way they came to be childless. Postponers include women whose partners refuse to have a child, women whose biological clocks ran out before they were able to re-partner after a failed marriage and women whose need to work or career ambitions conflict with the often unequal realities of motherhood. Failing to attend to which partner makes the decision to remain childless, emphasising women’s retrospective happiness or contentment with being childless and viewing women’s hesitation to mother in structurally hostile and unequal circumstances as personal deviance are all strategies employed by psychological researchers to bolster their contentions that all the fertile childless people in their studies have chosen childlessness. To challenge this contention would undermine one of the most insistent claims made in some of this literature: that women who are childless by choice are “feminist heroes” – “resistors” of the parenting status quo.

A 1987 review of the “voluntarily” childless literature criticised the failure of both quantitative and qualitative researchers to distinguish among the various types of childlessness:

It is the combination of choice and permanence that serves to distinguish voluntary childlessness from childlessness that is due to impaired fecundity, delayed childbearing or uncertainty. Although researchers [doing aggregate level surveys], in general, recognize the distinctions, they frequently lump the various types of childlessness together...[Moreover] a number of
microlevel studies have also failed to distinguish among
the various types of childlessness (Housknecht, 1987,
370).

The following review of “micro-level” research done since Housknecht’s 1987
publication suggests few have heeded Houseknecht’s advice to distinguish – in
their sample selection and/or analysis - between different types of
childlessness. This failure may have contributed to the pervasive assumption
found in specialist and mainstream discussions of childlessness that all fertile
childlessness is chosen (Brunton, 1998; Cannold, 2000a; Cannold, 1999c;
Colbatch, 2000a; Kennett, 1999).

In this chapter I selectively review the significant psychological and sociological
studies conducted since Housknecht’s 1987 review. The one exception to this
rule will be the inclusion of the work of Jean Veevers (1980). Veevers work is
considered the seminal study in the area of “voluntary” childlessness and will be
used as a basis for comparison with other studies and the current one. The
other studies to be included are Marian Faux’s 1984 Childless By Choice:
choosing childlessness in the eighties, Elaine Campbell’s 1985 study The
Childless Marriage: an exploratory study of couples who do not want children,
Mardy Ireland’s 1993 Reconceiving Women: Separating Motherhood From
Female Identity and Helen Marshall’s Not Having Children of the same year. I
also examine Carolyn Morell’s 1994 Unwomanly Conduct: the challenges of
intentional childlessness and Elaine Tyler May’s 1995 Barren in the Promised
Land: childless Americans and the pursuit of happiness. Where relevant,
several smaller papers on the intentions and experiences of the childless will be cited. I have not methodically reviewed Jeanne Safer’s (1996) *Beyond Motherhood: Choosing a life without children* because Safer provides no information about her methodology or participants. However, in this chapter and elsewhere in this thesis I have quoted some of Safer’s insights on childlessness gained through her experience as a childless woman and a therapist.

My review has focused on three areas. Firstly, the methodology of each study is discussed, how participants were recruited, data collected and the theoretical perspective that guides its analyses. Secondly, I look at how individual or couple-based decisions regarding childlessness are made, and by whom. Thirdly, I explore how researchers solicit and/or analyse evidence regarding a woman’s current attitude towards childlessness. These areas should suffice to demonstrate my central claim that some of the childlessness found in even highly selective samples of “voluntary” childless women is circumstantial.

3.4 JEAN VEEVERS’ *CHILDLESS BY CHOICE* (1980)

3.4.1 Methodology

Veevers interviewed 156 Canadian couples, recruited by word-of-mouth and newspaper accounts and advertisements, who were “definitely and unambiguously voluntarily childless and almost certain to remain so” (Veevers, 1980, 173). With this aim in mind, Veevers only admitted to the study self-
selected couples who had been married for at least five years,\textsuperscript{12} were fertile and had never parented. Confident that these criteria ensured her sample were “childless by choice,” Veevers turned her eye to discerning common features in the backgrounds of the “deliberately” childless, and the reasons such couples make their “choice.” As will be argued in the next section, interview data that undercut Veevers assumption of choice was disregarded in her analysis and categorisation of her data.

3.4.2 How are decisions made, and by whom?

Veevers argues that couples, rather than individuals, have reasons that lead them to voluntary childlessness. In one third of the married couples, one partner decided prior to marriage that the marriage was to be a childless one. In two thirds of marriages, childlessness was the outcome of a series of decisions to postpone having children. “Early articulators” tended to “reach their decision not to have children at a young age, and to verbalize their opinions as well” (Veevers, 1980, 18). According to Veevers, an early articulator of childlessness is always, and a postponer is sometimes, a childless “independent”: someone who makes their decision not to parent independently of the attitudes of their spouse (Veevers, 1980, 29). Undercutting her thesis that childlessness is a couple-based commitment, Veevers contends that childlessness is an

\textsuperscript{12} Two couples selected for the study did not meet this requirement. In one the female partner was over forty and so deemed permanently childless because she was considered too old to bear. In the other, the wife was sterilised, indicating her “irrevocable commitment to permanent childlessness” (Veevers, 1980, 174).
immutable characteristic of the early articulator/independent, and thus a firm condition of marriage (Veevers, 1980, 18, 29). Potential spouses not willing to commit to childlessness are avoided, and if an unplanned pregnancy occurs once married, the solutions are limited. As one “independent” man put it:

[If she became pregnant] my wife could have three choices. One, she could have an abortion. I hope she would do that, but I guess I couldn’t make her do it. If not, two, she could have the baby and place it for adoption. Or three, she could have a divorce (Veevers, 1980, 29).

In Veevers sample, fifty per cent of couples mutually agreed they did not want children. This figure presumably represents the one third of couples in which one partner is an early articulator who made childlessness a precondition of marriage and an additional seventeen per cent of couples, some of whom are presumably couples in which one partner is an “independent” postponer. One quarter of the remaining fifty per cent of couples said it was the husband who rejected children, and one quarter said it was the wife (Veevers, 1980, 28-29). As Veevers notes, her sample under-represents couples for whom childlessness is a source of unresolved discord, or the reason for divorce:

Among our respondents, all couples had achieved consensus on the desirability of not having children. However, it must be remembered that our respondents had all been married for at least five years. Presumably, some couples who could not achieve consensus may have agreed to disagree, and gone their separate ways after less than five years of marriage (Veevers, 1980, 27).
Veevers notes that only children and first-born children are disproportionately represented in her sample (Veevers, 1980, 60). She hypothesises that because only children never saw their parents look after siblings, they express considerable concern about their ability to care for children, indicating that because of their lack of either models or experiences they are uncertain what to do with children, or how to act towards them, and therefore feel uncomfortable in their presence (Veevers, 1980, 60).

The older children in large families, in contrast, have spent much of their childhood caring for younger siblings, often witnessing their own mothers become “increasingly worn down by a rapid succession of pregnancies (most of which were unplanned if not also unwanted)” (Veevers, 1980, 60). Veevers argues that unlike little girls from small families who play with dolls and unrealistically “idealize” and “glamorize” motherhood, such “little mothers” are more realistic about “what it means to be a mother” and consequently become “permanently disillusioned with the motherhood mystique” at an early age (Veevers, 1980, 60-61).

In contrast to early articulators, postponers typically have “no strong feelings either for or against parenthood,” but simply assume they will follow social norms and one day have children (Veevers, 1980, 20). During the first stage of their childless “career” postponing couples practice birth control and plan for children in the future: after she has finished her education, or he has advanced further in his job, for example. During stage two, couples postpone “the blessed
event” indefinitely (Veevers, 1980, 22). Veevers gives an example of an immigrant couple who entered stage two because they had

...experienced a rapid series of changes in country of residence, in cities within Canada, and in occupations, some of which were terminated involuntarily and some of which were terminated because they were unsatisfactory. They had very limited savings and felt that, without any family in Canada, there was no one whom they could rely in an emergency (Veevers, 1980, 22).

The assumption of the preponderance of couples that the woman must quit work once a child is born, and the lack of “readiness” many women felt to do so, also led many couples to postpone childbearing indefinitely (Veevers, 1980, 22).

Stage three sees a continuation of indefinite postponement, with couples openly acknowledging that they may remain permanently childless. For some couples, financial concerns and career and educational plans are reasons for further delay. Although childlessness was not pursued for this reason, some couples postpone indefinitely because they are enjoying the freedom and benefits afforded them by childlessness (Veevers, 1980, 89). For some, their increasing unwillingness to have children is motivated by a reluctance to sacrifice a standard of living made possible by childlessness; a reluctance Veevers explains using the concept of relative deprivation:

The principle of relative deprivation is firmly established and extensively documented in sociology. Its import in decision-making about childbearing is aptly illustrated with reference to the question of money. Many people could have been quite content on incomes substantially lower
than the ones they now possess, as long as they never become accustomed to greater affluence. However, once a high standard of living is achieved, they are much less content to forego it (Veevers, 1980, 89).

Assuming that once a woman becomes a mother she gives up her job, Veevers contends that people become parents because they haven’t experienced the monetary advantages of childlessness:

The parental couple who follow the usual patterns of having children almost immediately after marriage very early become accustomed to dividing the husband’s salary among three or more people; in contrast, the couple who postpone having children have the opportunity to become accustomed to dividing two incomes between two people. In considering children, they must also consider the prospect of a marked drop in standard of living (Veevers, 1980, 89).

For many couples, delay breeds its own decision-making inertia. This is because for those wary of commitment and uncomfortable with uncertainty, parenthood becomes increasingly difficult to choose once consciously considered:

When considered carefully and rationally in terms of probable consequences, the decision to become a parent is perhaps more difficult than the decision to become a husband or wife...A number of forms of trial marriage are available for the couple who are attracted toward marriage...but who are hesitant about a final commitment. For parenthood, there are no comparable forms of trial reproduction...In deciding to become a parent, there is no opportunity to assess the characteristics of the prospective child...The parent must be reconciled to whatever kind of child fate sends (Veevers, 1980, 24).
In Veevers’ view, the reproductive intentions of most couples would be similarly paralysed if they considered parenthood in the measured and clear-eyed manner of the childless:

Most couples who follow the normal moral career of parenthood cope with these questions in part by keeping them below the level of awareness. They do not have to decide to become parents because they have never questioned the inevitability of parenthood, or if they have questioned it, they have remained committed to the idealized and romanticized notions of what it will be like (Veevers, 1980, 23).

Finally, couples accept that their childlessness is permanent. Veevers argues that it is at stage four that couples are finally able to “acknowledge” their past “implicit” decision to remain childless. The female respondent she cites to prove this contention, however, suggests that it was her partner’s forceful rejection of parenthood that led her to acquiesce to his decision—rather than choose herself—to remain childlessness:

If he had really wanted to have a family, I’d go along with it wholeheartedly. Of the two of us, I’m the wishy-washy one. I would do it just because it wouldn’t destroy preconceived ideas I had about being married: you know, you get married and have children – that was already set. This is more of an unfamiliar terrain at this point, to say you are not going to. He was the one who made the decision…(Veevers, 1980, 26).

Moreover, as Veevers acknowledges, some women may accept permanent childlessness as a necessary price for refusing either to relinquish their careers or the prospect of further career advancement:
A successful professional woman may have initially intended to dabble in a career before settling down to marriage and motherhood. The experience of success in the career may later make her reluctant to give it up – or to suspend it – to have a child (Veevers, 1980, 90).

Because of her determination to depict childlessness as a couple-based personal choice, Veevers dismisses in one sentence the possibility that the assumption that childcare is women’s work, and the lack of support for working mothers is the basis for many women’s decisions to remain childless. According to her, normally clear-eyed rational childless women become deviants when assessing the possibility of advancing or maintaining their careers in the face of motherhood; stuck in an either/or way of thinking that prohibits their understanding of the true nature of the childbearing “choice”:

For most persons, having children is something which is done in addition to doing other things. Childrearing can be defined in ways commensurate with the resources available for their care. Men presumably find fatherhood to be less disruptive than women find motherhood, but most persons of either sex can usually manage to have and to raise children without making permanent or drastic alterations of their other priorities. In contrast, childless couples tend to define having children as something which can only be done instead of other things. For women, the choice is often defined not so much as “Do you or do you not want to be a mother?” but “Do you or do you not want to be only a mother?” (Veevers, 1980, 49).

Thus, even amongst the small fraction of the population that fit Veevers’ criteria for participation in the study, there is evidence of circumstantial childlessness. Circumstances like the security of one’s employment, whom one marries and the on-going incompatibility for women in Western countries like Canada of motherhood and career. However, while Veevers’ interviews reflect the
circumstantial nature of the childlessness of some of her participants, she fails to integrate into either her understanding of childlessness, or her categories of childless couples, these realities. Childlessness remains a choice couples make voluntarily on the basis of their individual needs and desires.

### 3.4.3 Willingness, contentment, happiness: is it choice?

Veevers assumes that the contentment of her respondents with childlessness is chosen. Thus a woman who assumed she’d have children but married a man adamantly opposed to parenthood, is described as a “convert” to “voluntary childlessness.” Before they married, this woman’s husband made her agree not to have a baby, but agreed to her one day adopting a child. Veevers attempts to show the chosen nature of this woman’s childlessness by reporting on her panic after an unplanned pregnancy three years into her marriage, her subsequent sterilisation and her expressions of “satisfaction with the childless state.” Similarly, a man who always assumed he’d father but married an “early articulator” wife is seen to have chosen childlessness because he reports, “considerable satisfaction with their childlessness, their relationship and their general way of life” (Veevers, 1980, 28-29).

However, as Veevers herself makes clear, violation of a pre-marital commitment not to have children is grounds for an “independent” childless partner to terminate the marriage. This, rather than an independent choice to remain childless, could easily explain the panic of the woman who found herself
unexpectedly pregnant and subsequently sought sterilisation. That this woman, or the man married to the female independent are satisfied, content or happy with their childless life is not proof that they chose this life. Rather, it could simply demonstrate that these partners understood the conditions of their marriage and were willing to accept those conditions. It is also unclear whether the childless converts had always felt as sanguine about their childlessness as they did on the day Veevers interviewed them. That they had achieved resolution about their childlessness is no proof they always had that resolution. Women and men can and most often do resolve whatever feelings of regret and/or unhappiness they feel about an aspect of their life they did not choose, and for this they deserve recognition and support. Without this capacity they would be unable to move on and to enjoy the positive benefits of the life they were living. In their study comparing married and unmarried mothers and non-mothers Baruch, Barnett and Rivers found that for childless women

...the more satisfying life was without children...the higher her well-being. This was true not only of women who made a decision to remain childless, but also of those who wanted to have children but couldn’t, or who just “drifted” past the childbearing years. Many of the women who now feel very good told of going through a difficult period in which they wondered if their chances for happiness were being lost, or if they would regret not having children in later years. However, some women do suffer diminished well-being because of being childless — those who have not come to terms with it. The woman who feels that she is not a “real” woman because she hasn’t borne children, or who deeply longs to be a mother years after the time is past, is the one whose well-being is diminished. It is not so much the fact of childlessness that’s important, but how a woman feels about it that makes the difference (Baruch et al., 1983, 95).
It is clear that Veevers’ participants had come to terms with their spouse-instigated childlessness. While this fact demonstrates their mental health and well being, it does not prove their childlessness was chosen.

### 3.5 MARIAN FAUX’S CHILDLESS BY CHOICE: CHOOSING CHILDLESSNESS IN THE EIGHTIES (1984)

#### 3.5.1 Methodology

Faux bases her book on “scarce” available research on childlessness and in-depth interviews with forty-three women who were “…either highly ambivalent about having children or who had already decided in favour of childlessness.” She also interviewed 6 women who were “ambivalent mothers,” received response to questionnaires from twenty more women and spoke informally with many friends, acquaintances, and colleagues about childlessness (Faux, 1984, ix).

#### 3.5.2 How are decisions made, and by whom?

Faux’s definition of choice is circular. If women do not have children, then they must (either consciously or unconsciously) have chosen not to have them. That they choose not to have children is the reason that they are childless. Moreover, like Campbell, Faux sees the origins of such choice embedded in women’s individual desires: the desire not to have children because “one did not really want them” (Faux, 1984, 4). In fact, Faux is so enraptured by such circular
notions of choice that she comes close to suggesting that all childless women – even those who are infertile – are childless by choice:

Of the women prior to the 1970s who chose childlessness (and statistics indicate that there always have been such women, since the number of women who do not have children is frequently higher than the number of women who cannot physically bear children), they were hardly vocal about their decisions. But many women who were not technically sterile probably were only aware of their reluctance to mother on a subconscious level. That their childlessness might be rooted in some form of deep-seated maternal ambivalence was generally unapparent even to the women themselves...because people were a good deal less psychologically aware then than they are today, the notions of not having children because one did not really want them largely went unrecognized. Yet therapists have long been aware that a woman's ability to conceive depends in part on her psychological willingness to do so. Everyone knows...of a couple who upon discovering they could not have children, adopted a child, only to find themselves bearing a child within a couple of years (Faux, 1984, 3-4).

Faux's endorsement of the individualistic psychological dictum that the behaviour of individuals is totally and only reflective of their conscious or unconscious individual desires or choices leads her to characterise women's “ambivalence” about childbearing as a sign of individual deviance. Thus, while she extensively documents the structural squeeze mothers experience on their careers and relationships, Faux directs women to their own unresolved psyches for the solution to these problems. The problem, in other words, is not the
structural antagonism faced by working mothers, but women’s failure to “come to grips” with such givens, and to make up their minds about motherhood.\footnote{Wilk also contends that women who are unable to make up their minds about childbearing are deviant (Wilk, 1986).}

…maternal ambivalence is always difficult to come to grips with, even in a time such as the present when women can talk freely about their feelings. Many women fail to see that, despite the difficulties inherent in confronting this issue, it is nonetheless something that they must come to grips with. Left unacknowledged…maternal ambivalence can take an unhealthy and highly destructive turn that will have consequences for the woman, as well as for her child. A woman grappling with maternal ambivalence has several courses of action open to her. The first step, of course, is to acknowledge the ambivalence. The next step is to attempt to examine it in its many contexts in order to figure out whether childlessness or motherhood is the best solution…Resolving the ambivalence is never easy, and many women never manage to tie up the loose ends…More often than in the past, though, women today are attempting to think through the issues so they can make a decision (Faux, 1984, 7).

Thus for Faux, “choosing” childlessness resolves the maternal ambivalence that, not properly addressed, poses psychological health risks for women. As already noted, similar conclusions about the need for women to see their childbearing decision as a choice in order to successfully “resolve” the issue and “move on” have been drawn by other research and counselling psychologists.
3.5.3 Willingness, contentment, happiness: is it choice?

Faux’s “proves” her contention that much infertility can be explained by women’s subconscious desires to avoid motherhood by showing the contentment and happiness some older childless women feel about their childless life. Says a “typical” eighty-six year-old widow:

> When I married my husband, we tired very hard to have children. Of course, we didn’t know anything about birth control in those days, so I never did anything to protect myself. We just never had any children. I don’t remember feeling especially bad about it though…we were able to travel a lot. I worked for a business publisher. We had lovely friends. We were very popular. …I never had what you might call a “career” but my boss liked me a lot. I was given more and more responsibility…But children? Oh, yes, we wanted them. We just never had any (Faux, 1984, 4-5).

Against the repeated assertions of the older women she interviews that they wanted but were unable to bear children, Faux contends that such older women are unable to “perceive” and “admit” that their childlessness was the outcome of “a hidden psychological agenda not to have children” (Faux, 1984, 4). Proof of this hidden psychological agenda and the “chosen” nature of their childlessness is the “fullness” of the lives of many of these older childless women:

> In talking with women in their late forties, fifties and older who just “happened” to be childless, one cannot help but be struck by the fullness of their lives despite the absence of children in an era when a couple truly became a family only after they had children. In an age when the accepted role of women was largely that of homemaker, many of these women worked at jobs they thoroughly enjoyed; many had active social lives; and many of their marriages retained a special vitality and closeness that sociologists
have come to associate with the marriages of childless couples (Faux, 1984, 5).

Again, it must be simply asserted that the fact that many older childless women didn’t fall in a heap upon the discovery that they were unable to bear children, while testament to their mental health and fortitude, in no way proves their childlessness was – either consciously or unconsciously – chosen.

3.6 ELAINE CAMPBELL’S THE CHILDLESS MARRIAGE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF COUPLES WHO DO NOT WANT CHILDREN (1985)

3.6.1 Methodology

Campbell interviews seventy-eight Scots: forty-four women and thirty-four men representing forty-four marriages. Self-selected volunteers were recruited from family planning clinics located in a Scottish city. When wives expressed to their health practitioner “the intention of remaining childless,” they were informed of the study. Only those marriages in which the husband agreed with the wife’s commitment to childlessness were interviews conducted. In the end, however, ten husbands failed to participate in the research. Their reasons were as follows:

Three could see little point in their participation since they had all along abrogated reproductive responsibility to their wives; two...were not prepared to discuss their “private affairs” with anyone; of the remaining five, two had been lost to the study after separating from their wives, the other three simply refused giving no reason. Information
about all these men was gained from their wives…
(Campbell, 1985, 146)

Unlike Veevers, Campbell was unconcerned to ensure couples had been married for a minimum period, were fertile or have not experienced parenthood. But like Veevers, she was interested in exploring the “voluntarily childless marriage,” rather than voluntarily childless individuals. Thus, her focus in choosing her couples was on “intention and agreement” in the marriage. She excluded from the study couples who, “remain childless but do so either in a state of disagreement, or unintentionally on the part of one partner unaware (sic) of the other’s unilateral commitment” (Campbell, 1985, 144).

3.6.2 How are decisions made, and by whom?

Campbell found most of her respondents had made a post-marital “commitment” to childlessness. Of her seventy-eight participants, twenty-six men and nineteen women had become “voluntarily” childless after marriage (Campbell, 1985 22). Amongst this group were women and men who had fully intended to have children before their marriage, and who either hadn’t been informed of their partner’s reluctance or who had chosen not to believe it (Campbell, 1985, 21, 25). Said one woman:

No, we never discussed it. I thought I would [have children] probably at the time as Ken was good with other people’s children, and it was only when we got married that I realized it was other people’s children. He did not want his own (Campbell, 1985, 25).
Despite her attempt to weed out of her sample all couples in which there were disagreement about childlessness, four women and one man in the sample had to be convinced to “choose” childlessness. While the “converts” accepted childlessness as a condition of that relationship, all acknowledged that if they had or were in the future to become involved in a different relationship, they might well become parents. One male participant, who began his relationship with his “independent’ wife believing she would change her mind about children, noted that “nobody knows what the future holds. If something happened to Sheila and I was left alone, you never know I might get married again. I might want kids” (Campbell, 1985, 22). The vast majority of “conversions”, Campbell admits, are incomplete:

Having to assume a socializing role may leave one partner feeling he/she has pressurized (sic) the other into accepting a role for which he/she had no genuine desire and that acceptance will be subsequently revoked. These fears may persist even where the previously uncommitted become attached to their childless identity and wholeheartedly espouse the childless way of life. So complete a conversion is rarely evident. Agreement may be reached but be accompanied by no more than conditional commitment. Commitment is specific to the present relationship; if this was to break down, parenthood for the converted might become a viable alternative (Campbell, 1985, 22).

Campbell contends that the drift of many postponing couples into childlessness does not undermine her contention that such childlessness is chosen. This is because most couples fail to recognise that their postponing behaviour is evidence of their (unconscious) choice to remain childless:
[Unlike a couple who did realise they were choosing childlessness] most couples did not recognise this degree of choice; according to the popular image, once the period of adjustment is over parenthood falls naturally into place and a harmonious family is created...Couples marry expecting to become parents; they legitimately postpone pregnancy through the use of effective contraception but fail to go on and realize their reproductive intentions (Campbell, 1985, 25, 26).

Even amongst couples in which greater agreement exists about childlessness, there are a number of women whose childlessness “choice” is shaped by their awareness of the social and structural imposts to combining work and motherhood (Campbell, 1985, 70). The difficulties associated with being both a working mother and one that stays at home, according to Helen McDonald, make children an either/or choice that seems irrational upon close examination:

One of the reasons I have some doubts about having a family is that I find it difficult to tie a family into the idea of a career, you know. I presume that if I had a family there would be a gap of a certain number of years...seven years...[My career is] very important [to me]...The trouble is it's much more difficult nowadays in that you do make a decision...if you do think about things...you can turn it into...an insoluble problem...the longer you live with two incomes coming in and freedom and so on the less likely you are to...want to bring this to an end particularly when [staying at home with a child] would mean ...tying me...to a street like this which I hate...[But had I] married to someone who desperately wanted children...I probably would have had children (Campbell, 1985, 71).

Thus, like Veevers, Campbell sees childlessness as a couple-based decision characterised by consensus and choice. Despite selecting a sample that sought to exclude couples in which no consensus existed about childbearing, her study
contains at least five couples in which only one partner chose childlessness, although childlessness is accepted by both.

Throughout her analysis, Campbell asserts that in most marriages, women make the decisions about children. For instance, of thirty-three early articulators who participated in her study, twenty-five are women and only eight men. There were also, in addition to the men who were excluded from or refused to participate in the study because they had abrogated control of the childbearing decision to their wives, some male participants who were following their wives’ lead (Campbell, 1985, 25). For some, this was because it was the woman who was expected to relinquish her job and assume most of the child-raising burden. Jane Archer, for instance, worried about having to give up her job when she has children, and about her inability to “think of anything else” while raising a small child. For her husband, Graham, the negative impact a child would have on Jane’s career – an impact they had already witnessed when their friend Paula had a child – was his main reason for supporting her decision to avoid parenthood:

Paula’s comment was really very worrying when she said that she couldn’t imagine how she’d ever had time to have a job. She was a school-teacher and lived for it and enjoyed it very much. And now she’s probably getting to the stage where perhaps she isn’t even thinking about going back. That’s probably the worst thing that could happen. [What deters me is what a child might do to Jane’s] profession rather than any social upheavals in our social life (Campbell, 1985, 41-42).
However, Campbell’s methodology biased her sample in favour of *female* early articulators because it was a woman’s assertion that she wanted no children that led her – and through her, her husband - to the study. The sparse data available on men’s participation in the childbearing decision is discussed in the next section.

Like Veevers’ work, Campbell’s study demonstrates that even amongst carefully selected participants, the childless decisions of many research participants are strongly influenced by circumstance. Partnering with an “independent,” or in a society that attitudinally and structurally constrains women’s capacity to combine work and motherhood are amongst the most common circumstances that constrain the capacity of some participants to choose to parent. While more research is needed to determine which gender’s desires regarding childbearing is most likely to hold sway, Gerson’s (1993) work and that done by Baber and Dryer (1986) suggest that in at least one quarter of cases, it is men’s opposition to childbearing that lead a couple to decide to remain childless.

### 3.6.3 Willingness, contentment, happiness: is it choice?

Having lived a childless life for a period of years, many childless people find it easy to imagine a childless future. Parenthood, on the other hand, becomes increasingly difficult to visualise. Says one childless man, “There’s no question that if you don’t have children right away then you get into the habit of not having them around…I couldn’t see myself not, I couldn’t for the past few years”
(Campbell, 1985, 57). For many women, the exclamation that they are “too old” to have children, or that they no longer can “see themselves” as parents, indicates the success with which they have reshaped their future plans and identities as non-parents. Yet, while this successful re-imagination of a childless future and identity may demonstrate the mental health and well-being of Campbell’s childless participants (Baruch et al., 1983, 101; Safer, 1996; Ziman Tobin & with Aria, 1998), it does not prove their childlessness was chosen. Carol Thompson, for example tells how difficulties conceiving contributed to her decision to remain childless:

We were going to have children...and nothing happened and I got fed up with all this indecision...I didn't know whether I was coming or going, going to be pregnant or not, so I went back on the pill...Then we decided we'd try again [but we didn't conceive] and I was put on the pill. Then we decided we were quite happy the way we were...We don't talk about it now. I still look in prams and say, “Oh isn't she lovely!”. I think I'll always do that, but it doesn't make me definitely want to have children...I think who wants kids at 32 and Graham's 37. I keep thinking you're nearly 40 and it's far too old (Campbell, 1985, 59-60).

Another thirty-nine year-old was among three women who admitted that if they became pregnant accidentally they’d probably be thrilled, but that such a pregnancy wouldn’t be planned. As Campbell notes, these women had all:

...made substantial changes in their lives since the decision to remain childless had been made and could no longer see themselves in the maternal role. They had returned to full-time education and were now pursuing careers...(Campbell, 1985, 61).
As already noted, while circumstantial or delayed childlessness leads healthy women to realign their life plans and identity, the success of this realignment – and consequent happiness or contentment with the childless life that results - does not prove that childlessness was chosen.

3.7 MARDY IRELAND’S RECONCEIVING WOMEN: SEPARATING MOTHERHOOD FROM FEMALE IDENTITY (1993)

3.7.1 Methodology

Ireland interviewed and administered questionnaires (including a BEM sex role inventory) to 100 women selected from 330 self selected North American volunteers recruited through media advertisement of her study. The women interviewed were selected on the basis that they fit Ireland’s three previously conceived categories: childless by choice (childfree or transformative women), childless by delay (childfree and childless or transitional women) and infertile (traditional women). Ireland’s goal was to analyse her data through the lens of psychological theory in order to achieve her goal of “reconceiving” female identity through the separation of womanhood and motherhood.

3.7.2 How are decisions made, and by whom?

The manner in which a woman arrived at childlessness was determined by women’s initial responses to a screening questionnaire. From that point on, Ireland interprets her interviews using these categories. Thus, women who said in the initial screening that they never wanted children or that children conflicted
with their career goals were placed in the childless by choice (childfree or transformative women) category. Women who said they were childless because they lacked a partner had put off making a decision, or had a husband who didn’t want children were placed in the childless by delay (childless and childfree or transitional women) category. While women who had difficulties conceiving were placed in the infertile (childless or traditional women) category. It is worth noting that the numerous women who had difficulty conceiving in Campbell’s (see above) and Morel’s samples (see below), while classified by these researchers as voluntarily childless, would have been placed by Ireland in the “traditional” woman category.

Ireland’s intention is to invert long-held psychological beliefs that childless women are deviant (psychologically and morally undeveloped and emotionally unfulfilled). In her world, women who imagine themselves as and want to be mothers are deviant, while childfree women - with their focus on “non-maternal creative labor” - are blazing a new definition of what women “should be” but so often aren’t (Ireland, 1993, 70, 71). The childfree woman actively resists and rejects a world that assumes that “all girls must become mothers to fulfil female adulthood” (Ireland, 1993, 1). Instead, these women forge an atypical identity that challenges the womanhood = motherhood equation and in so doing, leads the way to a world in which a woman’s destiny will truly be her own (Ireland, 1993, 1). The conscious and active resistance of motherhood displayed by transformative women demonstrates their deviance, and thus their credentials as “resistors” of the motherhood mandate.
There are a number of problems with Ireland’s project. Firstly, the familiar circularity of proof. Women are defined as childless by choice and transformative simultaneously. The chosen nature of their childlessness is then seen to prove the transformative nature of being childless by choice. That these women are transformed is seen to prove that they chose their childlessness. Thus, instead of interviewing women, discovering the precise nature of their childless experience and identity, and then classifying them and identifying the characteristics of the classification, Ireland’s has classified women into categories with pre-determined meanings according to several flimsy and inconsistent screening methods.

The incoherence of this circular definitional strategy is made worse by the failure of some women’s experience (once heard and fully analysed) to conform to the full range of definitional and ideological expectations with which it was burdened. For instance, several transformative women were reluctant to have children because they lacked a traditional “wife” ie. a partner willing to take on the lion’s share of the childcare and domestic work. A number shied away from motherhood because they were aware of the disruption children cause to egalitarian relationships, particularly those in which the woman assumes she will be responsible for the majority of the caring and domestic load. Said one woman, “I’d always thought I would make a good “father” because I enjoy children, but I’ve never wanted to be “the primary parent.” And most men do not
want to be the primary parent either” (Ireland, 1993, 72). Thus, socially proscribed gender roles, supported both by social attitudes and social structures, make partnering difficult for women who want to “father” instead of “mother.” Women’s expectations that they will have to shoulder most of the burden, and make most of the sacrifices when children come along can derail – often quite early on in the piece – a woman’s intention to mother.

3.7.3 Willingness, contentment, happiness: is it choice?

Judith, a “transformative” photographer, clearly did not choose not to have children although she has healed the pain of childlessness by turning her feelings of social isolation into something positive:

I think I used to be sort of defensive and avoid situations [where people ask, “do you have children”]. And now the thing that comes forth sometimes is envy from other people. That’s one aspect...Another aspect...is that I’m reasonably in what I am, so it isn’t so much of a question of what I’m not now...The word “childless” is focusing on what you are not. So this has been another part of my own healing journey – the shift from what is not, to what is (Ireland, 1993, 83).

As Ireland admits, Judith’s childlessness is “reactive rather than actively conscious” (Ireland, 1993, 83). Despite this realisation, Ireland interprets Judith’s successful resolution of the pain she experienced about being childless as “proof” that she chose to be childfree and is a transformative women. Women who experience similar pain but speak instead of the difficulty they experienced “learning to live” with it, on the other hand, are judged “traditional” (Ireland, 1993, 43, 15). Using retrospective contentment or resolution as proof
of choice is not only invalid, it makes invisible the pain and loss some childless women experience on their journey to resolution about their childlessness. In her book on childlessness, Safer rejects the word childfree because it encapsulates this denial of pain:

I have intentionally avoided using the phrase “childfree,”, which had recently gained currency as a way to destigmatize childlessness, because I strongly believe that to deny that there is a loss involved is the wrong way to go about doing it. In my opinion, any woman who does not have a child – and I include myself – is missing something (Safer, 1996, 4).

While Safer laments this denial because it prevents self-acceptance, my objection is based on my belief that ignorance of the pain some circumstantially childless women experience eliminates an important motivation for pursuing redress for the circumstances that constrain women’s freedom to choose motherhood.

### 3.8 HELEN MARSHALL’S NOT HAVING CHILDREN (1993)

#### 3.8.1 Methodology

Marshall conducts in-depth interviews with eleven married fertile Australian couples who define themselves as not wanting ever to have children. Recruitment of these couples was done via personal contacts. Each couple was interviewed three times over the course of a five-year period. By the end of the study, seven couples had either had children or split up, with one man fathering
a child in his new relationship. She notes that had she followed Housknecht’s recommendation to admit to her study only those couples that either had been married for at least five years or had one partner who was sterilised, two of the couples who later became parents would still have been included in her sample. One such couple had been married for nine years, and the female partner of another had been sterilised. Consequently, Marshall argues that the longitudinal nature of her study reveals, “that the decision to avoid parenthood might not be irrevocable, even though all the participants in the research believed it to be so when they came into the research” (Marshall, 1993, 138). It also bears out the truth of the assertions made by many of those childless by marriage to a person who doesn’t want children: that their childlessness is relationship specific. Different relationship circumstances might lead to different conclusions about the desirability of parenthood. Marshall’s specific research agenda is focused on the “ideology” of parenthood. She defines ideology as the belief that parenthood is natural, entails commitment and responsibility, and requires sacrifices that are rewarded by children (Marshall, 1993, 28). She begins her study contending that the “voluntarily” childless, having “gone a long way towards breaking out of the constraints of social structure by not doing what most people in a similar situation have done,” are ideological “resistors” or “subversives” (Marshall, 1993, 5, 31). By the end of her study, however, she has completely changed her mind.
3.8.2 How are decisions made, and by whom?

Marshall rejects the early articulator/postponer dichotomy because of her belief that most fertile childlessness is not voluntary but circumstantial. The circumstances she nominates that contribute to childless are those relating to partnership choices and to gender. Based on the findings of her study, Marshall concludes that childlessness is not a manifestation of ideological resistance. Instead, she argues that it results from biographical factors and/or in response to the difficult social circumstances parents face in Australia and comparable Western nations: difficulties like the demands of the ideology of parenthood and “structural antinatalism” (Marshall, 1993, 140). These difficulties constrain women’s choices more significantly than they do men’s because gender profoundly affects what each partner assumes about what the parenting role ought and will be, and the realities of parenting in a sexist society:

His [journey] is less difficult; the consequences of having children are less dramatic for him than for her, and the ideology of parenthood lays heavier obligations on her. [Thus while] both men and women are taught in our society to put a high value on independence and freedom…they are taught different things about what parenthood entails. For women, maternity is seen as bringing constraints that paternity does not impose on men… (Marshall, 1993, 67).

Marshall argues that the childless are not ideological resistors because ideological resistance requires consciousness and consistency of commitment, and many of her study participants lacked both. Like Campbell, Marshall found that rather than a conscious, active and committed adversarial stance, childlessness for many of the couples in her study was, “as much a state of
becoming as a state of being, [with]…commitment to the decision tend[ing] to ebb and flow, especially for women” (Marshall, 1993, 138).

Moreover, resistors are those swimming against the dominant tide of pronatalist ideology. Marshall accepts at the start of her research the oft-repeated claim that the childless struggle daily to overcome the disdain and rejection of parents and other “pronatalists” (Faux, 1984; Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1980). Campbell’s description of the hostile nature of the world for a childless woman is typical:

A woman who chooses to remain childless is likely to be censured; she is abnormal, selfish, immature and possibly neurotic. A man will similarly find himself “to some degree anomalous and deviant.” By remaining childless, both sexes are flaunting the basic assumption upon which conventional family life appears to be founded: that once married, all “healthy,” “normal” adults are committed to accepting, eagerly await and are well equipped for the parental role. This is a public image of parenthood epitomized by the young married couple, happy and contented, with toddler on hand and babe in arms. Take the children away and there is no family...Becoming a parent is a foregone conclusion, another example of the take-for-granted routine activity that constitutes much of social life (Campbell, 1985, 1-2).

Marshall’s work, however, bears out the assertion of numerous researchers that parenthood is now considered a choice by most women of childbearing age, and those who choose not to parent are well tolerated, or even envied, by parents (Faux, 1984; Secombe, 1991; Somers, 1993):
The couples I observed are not fighting lonely battles against a pronatalist network and a hostile work, but are given sufficient support by networks which they have manipulated for that purpose to get by fairly comfortably...It is not appropriate to see voluntary childlessness as the “deviant” activity that...[it has been] made out to be...people who decide not to have children should not be seen as...courageous social rebels...(Marshall, 1993, 140).

Marshall also contends that resistors are those who stand outside of the ideology of parenthood, recognise and actively reject it. It is in that active rejection that a space is made for an alternative conception of the meaning and nature of parenthood. The childless, she argues, do not do this:

The childless do not stand outside the ideology of parenthood, seeing it clearly as a social construction and refusing to accept it. They are located within it...they accept it as inevitable that, should they become parents, their commitment would be manifested by sacrifices of time, energy, pleasure and (for women especially) precious elements of identity. Because they accept the sacrifices as what parenthood is rather than what parenthood has been made, they are inside the boundaries of ideology. But they have escaped those boundaries to the extent that they refuse to obey the prescription to have children, even if this refusal eventually changes into agreement (Marshall, 1993, 139).

Thus, Marshall concludes that couples wend their way, often with great uncertainty, towards childlessness. This uncertainty can lead them to reverse their path at any time and accept parenthood, or to become parents if they should separate and remarry. While certain biographical details (like being the oldest or only child) may predispose some to an initially stronger anti-natalist stance, even some “independents” are responsive to the “ideological and structural pushes and pulls” towards and away from childlessness. Despite her
inexplicable decision to continue to refer to such fertile childless couples as “voluntarily childless,” Marshall wisely concludes:

…if we wished to encourage the voluntarily childless into parenthood, we need to focus on the conflict between what the Institute of Family Studies has described as the “ideal of autonomy” and the ideas that I have called the ideology of parenthood. This conflict creates disincentives for some people to become parents, namely those women whose class positions give them the best chance of satisfying, autonomous careers outside family life. The disincentives cluster around the ideal of sacrifice, which flows from the idea of commitment. Thus policies that made it possible for commitment to children to extend beyond the boundaries of the immediate family and eased the sacrifices required would remove some at least of the disincentives (Marshall, 1993, 146-147).

Marshall acknowledges what her data makes clear: that social attitudes and circumstances have a significant impact on the decisions couples make around parenthood. Her recognition of this impact enables her to apprehend that the social attitudes and structures currently constraining women's freedom to mother could be altered to support that choice.

3.8.3 Willingness, contentment, happiness: is it choice?

Marshall does not address this issue.
3.9 CAROLYN MORELL’S UNWOMANLY CONDUCT: THE CHALLENGES OF INTENTIONAL CHILDLESSNESS (1994)

3.9.1 Methodology

Morell believes that “opting to remain childless” is barely imaginable for North American women, and that women without children are rarely conceptualised as having “viable lives without children” (Morell, 1994, 1). The aim of her research is both to “commit to print” and “make visible” the “voices of women who are not mothers,” and to undermine the beliefs that collapse “woman” and “mother” and by so doing “naturalize motherhood” (Morell, 1994, 2). In order to “name” and “theorise” the lives of women who “choose” childlessness she interviews thirty-four North American women aged in their forties through to their seventies. She notes the difficulty she had recruiting married, intentionally childless women from a small low visibility population, and names her eventual methods as advertisements and snowballing. These difficulties eventually led her to reduce her intended interviews from forty to thirty-four, and to interview eight participants over the phone. She made sure women in their forties were, “firmly committed to their childless status” (Morell, 1994, 154).

When older women are interviewed, the researcher is assured that the women interviewed are truly childless.\(^{14}\) As Helen Marshall’s work (see above) makes

\(^{14}\) My belief that retrospective interviewing tends to emphasise the voluntary and narrative elements of a person’s life are drawn from the literature cited here, as well as my experience with this sort of interviewing in the initial stages of the current research (see Chapter 3).
clear, this is no small concern. Retrospective interviewing of older women about their path to childlessness may also advantage researchers (like Morell) who wish to emphasis the chosen nature of women’s childlessness. The tendency of individuals in individualistic societies is to view their lives as narratives of choice for which they bear responsibility is even more pronounced in older people:

The conception of life as a product that is created by and emblematic of the self is particularly salient in old age, and in the context of life reflection. The older person is thought to review the whole trajectory of her life within the framework of such culturally salient notions a fulfilment, achievement and meanings examined in the light of individual incumbency (Alexander et al., 1992, 619).

It is possible that when older women present their lives to a researcher interested in intentional childlessness, they will seek to emphasise the narrative element of their lives (to ensure their childlessness seems the logical outcome of decisions and choice made earlier) and the chosen nature of their childlessness. The emphasis on the self as controlling the “path” of one’s life may be essential to women’s sense of self-esteem. Childless psychologist Jeanne Safer believes it important that she remember she is “childless by choice, not by default” because it gives her “a sense of pride and self-acceptance even as [she] acknowledges what [she is] missing” (Safer, 1996, 41). At the same time, however, women’s retrospective accounts of their journey to childlessness is likely to under-emphasise aspects of that journey that do not fit with a woman’s sense of herself as the controlling force in the story of her life. The fact that Morell’s use of this methodology still did not enable her to completely rule out accounts of childlessness that have as their
impetus circumstance rather than choice underscores the important role circumstances plays in many women’s childlessness.

3.9.2 How are decisions made, and by whom?

In an early chapter entitled, “Explaining the Choice” Morell dismisses the validity of the “dominant” early articulator/postponement “rhetoric” and argues that choice is a “confounding interpretive framework” through which to understand childlessness (Morell, 1994, 49-50). Morell’s questioning of the usefulness of choice as an interpretive framework for understanding the experience of childless women does not arise from her belief that social attitudes and structural constraints inhibit women’s freedom to choose motherhood. Rather, Morell contends that what childless women really choose is not to remain childless, but to positively embrace the continuation of their (not-mothering) lives:

Choice is a loaded word. The word suggests the opportunity of selecting freely among alternative possibilities. Yet choice depends on what you think or know is possible. There do have to be options indicated. In most research on intentional non-mothers, and indeed in popular discussion, “voluntary childlessness” is a category built on the concept of choice. The assumption is made that women “choose” not to have children; a decision is made, a determination arrived at after deliberation...Childlessness is not understood by [study participants] as a choice, but rather as a consequence of choosing to live their present lives. Seeing women as “childless by choice” may be accurate at a simple descriptive level. But it misplaces the emphasis and misstates what was chosen. Women are expected to
explain a negative occurrence, a negative choice. The absence of motherhood becomes the point of focus rather than the many prior positive choices. What women do have is outside the focusing lens. “Childless by choice.” The phrase itself signifies lack (Morell, 1994, 49-50).

Thus, Morell contends that those women who described their childlessness as the outcome of circumstantially motivated postponements of childbearing have merely been duped by a system that has failed to “alternatively construct” their “intentional not-mother[hood]” (Morell, 1994, 50):

The dominant rhetoric which constructs remaining childless as a choice would construct the above-quoted statements of not-mothers as evidence of “postponement.” When women do not make a clear and conscious choice against motherhood, but they remain childless, they become “postponers.” Again, the inevitability of motherhood is presumed. It is not surprising that some participants describe themselves with word. After all, it is the only concept available; there is no alternative construction (Morell, 1994, 50).

Morell’s alternative construction of childlessness is of “intentional not-mothers” whose desires for children are so “weak and inconsistent” that they happily live their lives (that just happen not to include children) without giving the whole question of children any further thought (Morell, 1994, 51).

The only problem with this construction, as she herself notes, is that it often fails to fit the experience and understandings of childlessness held by many of her research participants. Many of her interviewees do see themselves as having postponed a decision to have children because of financial constraints, the illness of a spouse or the fear of losing their “economic and emotional autonomy
and self-expansive activities" (Morell, 1994, 51, 49, 62). Other circumstances that lead to childlessness are infertility and marriage to men who refuse to have children (Morell, 1994, 51, 52).

Despite Morell’s concerns about using choice to describe “intentional not-mothers” or “women who choose not to mother,” she consistently employs both the word and the concept to describe women without children and why they are childless (Morell, 1994, 3). She does this despite the evidence provided by her data and her abstract awareness that women’s freedom both to choose motherhood and childlessness is severely constrained:

At the same time that women are being catapulted into the market economy in larger numbers than ever before in history, social policies and practices grounded in traditional gender ideology enforce and reinforce women’s in-home responsibilities and out-of-home inequities. In such a climate, reproductive self-determination is severely constrained. In both directions, choices are in some sense forced (Morell, 1994, 51, 12).

Despite this awareness, Morell continues to use words and concepts like “choice” and “intentionally” to name and describe all the childless women in her sample. By “naming” and “theorising” the lives of childless women in this way, she forfeits the opportunity to use names and descriptions that enable the truth of many women’s experiences and understandings of their childlessness to be seen. Experiences and understandings that focus on circumstance, rather than choice, as a critical factor in many women’s journeys to childlessness.
3.9.3 Willingness, contentment, happiness: is it choice?

For Morell, like many other childless researchers, a woman’s resolution of circumstantial childlessness and/or her happiness with a childless outcome is evidence that she chose to be childless. Thus, an infertile woman who is initially “childless by chance” becomes “childless by choice” because, having accepted that difficulties conceiving in her first marriage, the break-up of that marriage and a later-life remarriage jettisoned her chances to mother, she goes on to enjoy the freedom of her childless second marriage:

[My second husband and I] got married [when] I was thirty-four. There was a pretty strong bond…I was crazy about him. But I wasn’t going to get sucked into anything that was going to make me miserable. I was very cautious…But we were doing conscious thinking and our conscious thinking said “we’re not in a [good financial] position to have kids.” [But] I was as sure as I could be in my mind that I wasn’t going to have kids. But who knows. Did I make that decision because I figured I wouldn’t meet anybody to have kids with? Did I make that decision because I figured when I met Carl I thought, “I don’t think we’re going to be stable soon enough?” [What changed my intense desire to have kids?] My circumstances changed. Absolutely. I still like kids…it was sheer circumstances and I don’t think it was anything else. The circumstances being a lousy first marriage, uncertainty at the beginning of the second. And by the time the uncertainty went away…we decided we were having too damn much fun. If I got pregnant…I think I probably would have [had an abortion]. …by that point it was “I’m too old” (Morell, 1994, 52-53).

That this woman was able to move from a position where she cried every month upon discovering she wasn’t pregnant to a place where she could no longer imagine herself a mother is testament to her resilience and her mental health (Morell, 1994, 52-53). However, describing her as childless by choice obscures
the circumstances put her on a path to childlessness and by so doing, makes invisible her pain at being childlessness as well as her success in re-making her life and identity as a happy childless woman.


3.10.1 Methodology

May’s data are written responses to an author’s query letter sent to newspapers and journals across the United States. The query letter asked “individuals who had experienced childlessness at some point in their lives” to write to the author about their experiences and feelings (May, 1995, 261). May categorises letter writers in a variety of ways, writing separate chapters about those who fall into familiar categories, like those childless as a result of infertility or through their own choice. With one exception (see discussion below), May ignores the experience of women who are childless by circumstance.

It is difficult to know whether women who were childless by circumstance women wrote to May but were ignored because their experiences challenged the researcher’s pre-existing categories for the childless. The methodology she chose also relies on self-selection, and so favours those who are on the extremes of childlessness: the unhappily infertile and the happy childfree. Individuals who felt ambivalent or unresolved about motherhood and/or
childlessness (whether through infertility, circumstance or choice) may have been less likely to send her their views (May, 1995, 263). May’s methodology would also have prevented her from further probing into the degree of choice and control experienced by those who described themselves as “voluntarily” childless. Only in interview are researchers able to establish trust, and encourage a more detailed disclosure of the precise path that takes an individual to childlessness.

3.10.2 How are decisions made, and by whom?

Interestingly, May recognises circumstantial childlessness, but only in relation to Black American women:

The rhetoric of the childfree movement never seemed to catch on among Black women, even among the affluent and highly educated who had high rates of voluntary childlessness. They were more likely to point to economic and cultural factors in their decision (May, 1995, 192).

The shortage of eligible Black men and racism are among the circumstances that lead May to conclude that for the Black women in her study, childlessness “resulted from circumstance than from choice” (May, 1995, 193). For tertiary-educated Black women, notes one single Black journalist, dating means “entering the eligible-black-male lottery: lots of deserving ticket holders, but only so many can win” (May, 1995, 193). A forty year-old married Black executive shied away from the responsibilities of raising children because of the struggle her husband faced in advancing his career, “The black male is under such
tension today just to survive, just to make it, to accomplish something in life, that it (sic) requires all his energies” (May, 1995, 192).

Interestingly, May's recognition of the circumstantial childlessness of the Black women in her study seems predicted on her pre-existing awareness of the different histories of Black women around motherhood (see Chapter 2) and the consequently different political stance of Black feminism. The category of fertile and involuntarily childless seems already to have existed for May, making it easier for her to properly categorise as circumstantial the childlessness of Black women. The “rhetoric” of the (mostly White and middle-class) childfree movement, on the contrary, was seen to accurately canvass the full range of reasons why Whites are childless: infertility and choice. However, despite May’s recognition that Black women can be childless by circumstance, not choice, she persists in referring to all fertile childless women in her study as “childfree,” “childless by choice” or “voluntarily” childless.

3.10.3 Willingness, contentment, happiness: is it choice?

May does not address this issue.

3.11 MEN’S PARTICIPATION IN CHILDBEARING DECISIONS

The mainstream media present two stereotypes of male attitudes and behaviour towards marriage and family: the involved father and the traditional
commitment-shy male. The popularity of Daniel Petre’s *Father Time: Making Time for Your Children* and Steve Biddulph’s *Raising Boys* epitomises the laudatory tone found in many general audience books and popular media taken towards men’s newfound involvement in parenting. Melbourne’s broadsheet *The Age* regularly features articles on admirable men who ask their employers for more flexible hours in order to parent (Brady, 1998b; Junker, 1998; Petre, 1998; Shaw, 1999), and admirable employers who acquiesce to such requests (Brady, 1998a; Petre, 1998). In her discussions with 40 women aged 24 to 45, Anne Summers and Christine Hogan found that men were the driving force behind many women’s decisions to have babies. The women interviewed claimed that it was their men who “get clucky” and “put the pressure on for children, then more children” (Summers & Hogan, 1994).

At the same time, however, the media depicts men as commitment shy louts. In “Baby, I’m outa here,” some men’s hostility to impending fatherhood is documented. The article cites statistics that show that up to 35 per cent of new fathers are either hostile to their partner’s pregnancies, not living with the expectant mother at the time of birth, or simply unrecorded on the child’s birth certificates (Hill, 1998). In “Baby, ready or not,” women involved with reluctant fathers-to-be are advised not to secretly stop taking the pill in the hope that a pregnancy will change his mind. The graphic accompanying the article show a couple with their arms wrapped around one another. Over her head hangs a bubble with a baby, while his bubble features an expensive sports car (Robson-Scott, 1998).
Academic studies suggest both these depictions may be accurate. Amongst her sample of 13,017 North American adults aged 19 and over, Secombe (1991) found men more apt than women to believe that, “it is better to have a child than to remain childless.” Men were less likely than were women (13% as against 19%) to report they did not intend to have children. The authors put these gender differences down to the larger importance women placed on their age when considering children, and the larger concern women had about the stress and worry associated with parenthood. For men, the biggest concern about having children was the impediment they might pose to further major purchasing. Caron and Wynn’s (1992) interviews with 600 mainly white North American college graduates found only eight per cent of respondents were considering a “childfree lifestyle.” Both men and women expressed a similar level of intent to parent, and few gender-based differences emerged between men and women of similar ages.

Baber and Dreyer (1986) looked directly at the influence men have in childbearing decisions. Their interviews with thirty-four childfree and expectant couples all over thirty years of age found remarkable similarities in duration of marriages, levels of marital satisfaction and income levels between the two groups of men. They also found that with only one exception in each category, the expectant men had chosen fatherhood, and the childfree childlessness. The researchers found that because women experience the “biological press” earlier
than men, it was women in both groups who tended to raise childbearing as an issue for discussion and resolution. Their wishes also seemed more likely to prevail. While the women who were pregnant believed they had wanted a child more than their husband, the childless women saw themselves as more strongly committed to childlessness than their husbands. However, while only a handful of expectant men had been the most influential partner in the childbearing decision, twenty-seven per cent of men dominated the childless couples decisions not to have children. In only about one quarter of cases was the decision seen to be mutual. The men’s own perceptions of their influence in the childbearing decision closely matched the perception of the interviewer. While 30 per cent of childfree men felt their feelings about childbearing were stronger than their partners, only sixteen per cent of expectant men felt the same way. In forty-one per cent of cases in each group, wives were seen to feel more strongly about the decision. Mutuality of feeling was perceived by forty-three per cent of expectant and twenty-two per cent of childfree men.

In *The Chosen Lives of Childfree Men*, Lunneborg (1994) interviewed a convenience sample of thirty “childfree” men. She divides the men into three categories: the “early articulators” (half her sample), the “postponers” (less than one third of her sample) and what she calls “acquiescers” (the remainder of her sample). Because childbearing is still seen to be a woman’s choice in both the United States and the United Kingdom, says Lunneborg, this latter group of men adopt a neutral attitude: “they will have kids if she wants them; if she doesn’t, they won’t” (1999, 4).
Gerson’s (1993) study of men’s changing commitments to work and family also supports media depictions of men both in flight from commitment and seriously engaged in fatherhood. Her interviews with 138 North American men from diverse backgrounds found that men fit into one of three radically different categories. Roughly one third of men (36%) define their family and work commitments in term of primary breadwinning (breadwinner). Another third (30%) either opted not to have children or were emotionally and financially estranged from their children after divorce (autonomous), while the final third (33%) had moved toward more rather than less family involvement (involved). Men in this latter group had either already become fathers and were involved in caring for their children, while the others were looking forward to having a child in the near future. While only 13 per cent of these men had “become or planned to become equal or primary caretakers of children, all were – or wished to become - significantly more involved in parenting than men in the other two categories” (Gerson, 1993, 11-12).

Baber and Dreyer’s (1986) finding that approximately twenty-seven per cent of childfree men had strong influence in the childbearing decision accords nicely with Gerson’s work, given the likelihood that at least some autonomous men never find themselves in a stable relationship in which the issue of childbearing must be debated. It also suggests that while women’s wishes to have children will prevail over men more or less neutral about the prospect of fatherhood, they
will not prevail in the slightly more than one quarter of cases in which men are strongly opposed to fatherhood. Baber and Dreyer’s findings also suggest that in the preponderance of cases it is one committed partner who makes the childbearing decision for the couple. The study also suggests that while women are more likely than men to feel strongly about childbearing and more likely to raise the issue for discussion, they may be the ones who wind up feeling more negatively about parenthood than men. This may be the outcome of their increasing realisation that the burdens of parenthood will fall more heavily on their shoulders than on those of their male partners (Secombe, 1991, 193, 197).

McDonald’s finding that as women age, the expected size of their family declines, supports this interpretation. This decline is particularly marked amongst more highly educated women, because they bear the highest opportunity costs for withdrawing from the labour force to bear and raise their families (McDonald, 1998a, 4; Rindfuss et al., 1996a).

3.12 TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH TO FERTILE CHILDLESSNESS: THE WORK OF KATHLEEN GERSON

In *Hard Choices: How women decide about work, career and motherhood*, Kathleen Gerson argues that social attitudes and structures constrain individual agency by limiting the options among which women can choose, and their freedom to make any particular choice. At the same time, however, Gerson sees women as “actors who respond to the social conditions they inherit [and] construct their lives out of the available raw material” (1985, 37). Because her interest is in the linkages between women’s work and family decisions, and how
social change has led to changes in women’s work and childbearing patterns, Gerson is not solely focused on the decision-making pathways of childless women. Rather, she selected her sample from amongst White North American university and community college alumni without regard to their childbearing status, although 49 per cent of the women in her study did not have children. She then sought to understand through interviewing these women what their childhood had taught them to expect and intend in the future regarding work and children.

From an analysis of her interviews, Gerson classified women as having begun their lives with either a domestic orientation (childbearing, child rearing and domesticity) or a nondomestic (work ambitions) orientation. She then sought to understand the forces and choices that led women to either remain on their intended domestic or non-domestic path, or to veer from their baseline domestic or non-domestic orientation. Through this discussion, childlessness emerges both as a fulfilled and unfulfilled intention, as well as an expected and unexpected outcome. Gerson’s work confirms the critical importance of partners – their existence and their attitude towards children – to women’s childbearing decisions. Most women, Gerson concludes, are willing to become mothers, “only in partnership with someone they perceived to be a potentially suitable father” (Gerson, 1985, 73). Said one childless woman who intended to mother:

I considered [having kids]. By that time I was twenty-six...But at the same time, it just wasn’t the time. Our marriage was rocky...so I was beginning to question
whether indeed I would have children. I...[had] to get out of that marriage. I would have gone nuts if I had stayed there...When I was thirty-two or thirty-three I went to a gynecologist and finally found out...what you do to get pregnant. And [then] my father died, and I started thinking about my life and...whether I was happy living it, and I became very dissatisfied...[but I didn't have] the right father for my child. At that time, I was thirty-five years old. And now it’s just too late (Gerson, 1985, 73).

A stable partner’s desire to pursue or avoid childbearing also crucially influences whether women decide to become mothers or remain childless. Says one mother who intended to remain childless:

Jim was the person of primary importance, and he wanted kids. If I had married a man who didn’t want children, fine. I would have gone along with that too. I didn’t think much about it. Motherhood was no big thing to me. I took it very casually. I had no great emotional interest in it. I didn’t fight it or anything. [But I did it] to please my husband (Gerson, 1985, 101).

In the same way, a valued partner’s opposition to childbearing can influence an “ambivalent” woman to forgo children. According to Gerson, such ambivalence is characteristic of all non-domestically oriented women (Gerson, 1985, 144). Says a woman who intended to remain childless:

[The reasons I don’t plan to have children are] circumstantial. If I could have found a man I wanted to father my children, I would have had them. Even now, if I met a man who really wanted some children at this age, I might have them. But I’m happy with the man I have now. I guess I’ve never been driven by the children part...[My present partner] was married very young and raised his children already. I know he doesn’t want more children (Gerson, 1985, 146).
Another uncommitted working woman tilts against childbearing in the face of having to bear the responsibility alone:

Q: If you did have a child, do you think you could depend on Bob for help?

A: Very limited help. I'm sure we'd fight all the time. He's told me over and over again, if I had a child, it would be my responsibility; that's one of his threats (Gerson, 1985, 147).

Even women who seem strongly committed to childlessness betray the strong influence their partners had on that commitment. Says one:

I decided not to have [children] and I stuck to that decision. Ned, of course, is 100 percent with me. He doesn't like children, but it's mostly the responsibility and the noise. I can see some redeeming values in children, and he won't admit any. I didn't think I'd want to have children against his wishes. That would probably be unpleasant. I'm not even sure we'd stay married. I just know we would argue about how to raise the kid in such a way that it would totally undermine our relationship (Gerson, 1985, 144).

But the lack of a stable partnership, or partnership with a man who doesn't want children or want to share in the work of raising them is not the only reason women decide not to have children. The negative impact children have on women's career prospects and economic wellbeing – and women's fears they will regret motherhood as a consequence – also deters them from motherhood. Says one of Gerson's research participants:
I could see that you could get very established and you could have children and work, but you wouldn’t also be working on a certain level, wouldn’t really be a very senior sort of involved person. Although men can be presidents of companies and have children, women can’t (Gerson, 1985, 148).

Often, it is women’s acceptance of conservative ideas about how children ought to be raised, combined with their knowledge that the real disadvantage working mothers suffer in the workforce will force them to prioritise either motherhood or career that tips them in the direction of childlessness:

[I won’t have children because] I’m [not] willing to sacrifice where I’ve gotten in my career, which I’ve done really well for my age and training. That would be quite a sacrifice…[and] I’m not sure I’m willing to do that at this stage…I feel real badly as I hear myself say that. But if I had a kid, I don’t know what I’d do. Somewhere along the line, I would make a decision that family or job mattered more. And since I wouldn’t want to be a goofy mother…I would decide okay, I decided to have a child and that’s my responsibility to do the best I can. If it means only going to level “A” instead of level “C”, then that’s where I am…[but] I think I’d be really upset [about that]. It’s like here I had a chance to fly, and I’m not going to…I don’t want to feel that I educated myself for a career and was started and suspended it, and then never quite got back on the ladder. That would be really hard (Gerson, 1985, 149).

Thus Gerson argues that women begin their adult life expecting and intending to mother or expecting and intending to work. The ambivalence towards childbearing of women who expect and intend to work means motherhood and childlessness are equally likely outcomes. While circumstance may lead some work-oriented women to reverse directions and focus their lives domestically, others will maintain their baseline work orientations. While maintaining a work focus will lead some women to remain childless, others will attempt to combine
work and motherhood. One way of lowering the cost of the combination strategy is to partner with a man who at least professes a willingness to share the domestic responsibilities. Another is to have only one child, while a third is to let go of traditional ideas about how children ought to be raised. Like this woman, who embraced childcare as a necessary and important part of her child raising strategy:

> I felt you had to be home full-time in order to raise a child in terms of what the *child* needs. I don’t think that’s true any more. Before, I felt a mother, to be a good mother, should be home with her children. Not only is it not necessary, but it might not even be best. Besides, those are the terms on which I’m willing to have a family (Gerson, 1985, 177).

In every case, women’s decisions will be strongly influenced by the options that are available to them, and the freedom they have – and perceive themselves to have – to choose between them.

Gerson’s sample was comprised of North American women, while the current study focuses on (mostly) Australian women without children. The initial goal of the current study was to comprehend how women experience and understand childlessness, rather than to formally identify women’s decision-making strategies around work, career and motherhood. However, prior to conducting the research I was aware of the tensions Gerson, and following her McMahon (1995), notes can arise in such work: tensions between the need to acknowledge common female behaviour patterns but also to respect women’s
view of themselves as choosers, and the real and divergent impact the individual choices they make in constrained circumstances have on their life paths. Once the data had been collected, it became clear that Gerson’s approach (viewing women’s lives as the outcome of the decisions they make from different baselines and in constrained social circumstances) offered the best way of making sense of women’s childless journeys.

It should be noted, however, that the emphasis in the current study is slightly different to the one taken by Gerson. Gerson’s work speaks directly to the emphasis in sociology at that time on understanding women’s lives as the outcome of structural coercion. She was also interested in questioning the tendency of academic feminists to see women and men as separate analytical categories, but women as an undifferentiated group. Gerson argued that both these approaches did not enable individual motivation (“what women want and why they want it”) to occupy an “independent causal role” in analysis of women’s life paths.

In contrast, the bulk of studies that discuss “voluntary” childless are conducted by social psychologists, some of whom explicitly rejects any analyses that focuses on the impact of social structure on women’s fertility decisions (Baruch et al., 1983; Campbell, 1985; Faux, 1984; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994). In addition, numerous texts on childlessness have been written from a psychological perspective by counselling psychologists (Safer, 1996; Ziman
Thus, while the current study recognises the role women’s individual motivations play in shaping their lives, the primary focus is on illuminating the constraints structural factors place on women’s decision-making freedom and thus the shape of their lives.

### 3.13 CONCLUSION

Demographic data and that available from small-scale research into the experiences and understandings of the “voluntary” childless suggest that some childlessness, even in highly selective samples, is circumstantial. The data suggest that circumstances surrounding partnering and a partner’s childbearing desires and willingness to actively participate in the hard work of parenting impact on women’s childbearing decisions. In addition, women’s fertility decisions are also affected by their knowledge that they will bear the bulk of the childcare and domestic burden, with little assistance from either their partners or the State.

Despite this evidence, many researchers in the area persist in understanding most childless women’s decisions as active, conscious – indeed sometimes radical – choices to remain childless. This understanding is reflected in their labelling of such women as “childless by choice,” “childfree” and/or “voluntarily” childless. In contrast, researchers who attend more carefully to the content and implications of their data tend to reject claims that the childless are ideological resisters (Marshall, 1993). They also propose decision-making frameworks that
account for the myriad of social attitudes and forces – both pro- and anti-natalist
– that shape and constrain women’s fertility decision-making and outcomes
(Gerson, 1985).

In the next chapter, I will discuss the current study’s methodology and provide
some basic information about participants.
Chapter 4
Methodology and Basic Information About Participants

4.1 INTRODUCTION

As noted in Chapter 1, this study’s methodology was selected to minimise the tensions between women’s perception of their lives as the product of their choices, and the shared patterns of meaning that arise from their reproductive behaviour and decisions (Gerson, 1985; Gregg, 1995; McMahon, 1995). Rather than being problem oriented - investigating only areas of concern in women’s lives - the research took a more holistic approach: asking women about the pleasures and rewards in their lives and how these are part of their total life experience (Baruch et al., 1983; Stewart, 1997). The objective of the research was to explore how fertile women experienced and understood fertile childlessness\textsuperscript{15} at different points in their reproductive years and to investigate how these experiences and understandings fit with everyday understandings of choice. Thus, the issue of childlessness was approached neutrally and as part of an overall exploration of how women experienced and understood their lives.

\textsuperscript{15} The language used to describe people and behaviour around sensitive topics is always contentious. As seen in Chapters 1 and 2, one recent convention in discussions and research about the fertile childless is to use the description “childfree”. With few exceptions, however, the women in my study rejected this phrase for similar reasons as those given by Safer (see Chapter 2). Thus, I will not use this phrase in the current research, although I will respect the usage of other authors who have made a different choice. I will instead use the phrase fertile childless or place the descriptions of other researchers into quotation marks (ie. “voluntarily” childless or “childless by choice”).
Women were thus given an opportunity to construct their own definition and experience of childlessness, and to place this experience in the overall context of their lives.

4.2 LIFE HISTORY AND SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Life history interviews were conducted to explore how women of different ages experienced and understood their childlessness. The life history method was chosen because it is one of the qualitative research tools that safeguards “the subjective point of view” (Schutz, 1970). The life history approach shares with other pragmatist philosophies the belief that “experience is the mediator of the ‘truth’ and is a necessary condition of knowledge” (Eyles & Perri, 1993, 106). Underlying this approach is also a belief that, “reality rests neither in the experiencing mind nor in the world of sense objects, but in the interplay of the two” (Jackson, 1984, 72). Gerson argues that the life history analysis “…offers an ideal method for examining the interplay between social constraints, psychological motivation, and the developing actor” (Gerson, 1985, 38).

The symbolic interactionist perspective understands human behaviour, including that associated with gender, as constructed from (and thereby controlled by) a “…process of human interaction based on language and the human capacity to understand it” (Deegan & Hill, 1987, 4). The approach had its genesis in Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s, where it was developed by social
scientists eager to understand and explain the considerable social change taking place at that time. Interestingly, symbolic interactionism has been understood both as the psychological underpinning to life history methodology (Eyles & Perri, 1993) and as a research methodology in its own right (McMahon, 1995). This confusion may be due to what some researchers see as the fundamental affinity between the central tenets of symbolic interactionism and the life history method (Minichiello, 1990, 151-52). Symbolic interactionism and life history methodology share three theoretical assumptions: “(1) life is viewed as concrete experience; (2) life is regarded as an ever-emerging relativistic perspective; and (3) life is viewed as inherently marginal and ambiguous” (Minichiello, 1990, 152).

Symbolic interactionism argues against the emphasis of Freudian and developmental psychologists on early childhood, or primary socialisation, as the main determinant of adult behaviour. Instead, symbolic interactionists believe that:

(1) “secondary” or adult socialization is vital, (2) adolescents and adults can act in ways different from those established by their early socialization, (3) people tend to maintain learned ways of behaviour, and (4) most of our ideas about gender and early socialization are learned and are not “determined” biological constraints (Deegan & Hill, 1987, 7).

Symbolic interactionism proposes that the psychological mechanisms generated by human interaction can create and then establish different patterns
of individual and group behaviour. Human beings experience reality through their definition of it, and consequently act on the “basis of meanings that things have for them” (Eyles & Perri, 1993, 107). According to Blumer, these meanings:

...are the product of social interaction in human society and are modified and handled through an interpretative process. Thus meanings are worked out in encounters, and while these are tentatively agreed upon they are never fixed. From this viewpoint, the social order and individual lives are open and negotiable (as discussed in Eyles, 1993, 107).

The implication of this view is that the access human beings have to the “objective world” is mediated by their “precariously negotiated subjective views” of the world (Minichiello, 1990, 152). Consequently, the most “central and fundamental source of personal knowledge is…the life history which elicits `the sense of reality' that human beings hold about their own worlds” (Minichiello, 1990, 153).

Life history interviews guided by the symbolic interactionist perspective assist researchers to explain large-scale social change through the decisions and behaviour of individuals. Moreover, this methodology allows researchers to uphold the moral agency of decision-making individuals, as well as account for “...variation among women as a group and change over time in the lives of individual women” (Gerson, 1985, 38).
4.3 RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

Initially, the target group for interview were fertile childless women aged thirty-eight to forty-two. While the study was initially expected to comprise only Australian women, I seized the opportunity to interview a small number of North American women when an unexpected chance to visit the United States arose during the data collection phase. This age range was selected because I knew women of this age were at the end stage of their biological fertility. Although fertility declines after age forty, up to one third of women are able to conceive unassisted until their mid forties, and women in this age range are accepted into assisted fertility programs (Clubb & Knight, 1987, 1992, 109-10; Trounson, 1998).

Medical beliefs about and/or understandings of female biology do not necessarily shape women’s beliefs about and/or understandings of their bodies (Martin, 1987). However, there was some evidence that at least some women’s views about the possibility of motherhood accorded with current medical understandings of the biological limits of female fertility. A wide range of self-help manuals exist to assist women with and inform them about the parenting decision, and “older” motherhood (Armstrong, 1996; Berryman, Thorpe, & Windridge, 1995; Blackfield Cohen, 1985; Bostock & Jones, 1987; Frydman, 1987; Jones, 1996; Kappelman & Ackerman, 1980; Kitzinger, 1994; McCauley, 1996).

16 One woman was so eager to be part of the study that she was admitted despite the fact that she was one month past her 42nd birthday.
1976; Sforza, 1978). While these books varied greatly in the way they defined an “older mother”, the trend seemed to be upwards. In general, the more recent books saw age thirty-five or even forty as the starting point for “older motherhood” (Armstrong, 1996; Berryman et al., 1995; Frydman, 1987; Jones, 1996). This trend makes sense given that 30 is the average age of first-time mothers in some States in Australia, with women over thirty-five making up fifteen per cent of all births nation-wide (Maguire, 1999). In addition, much of the mainstream media assumes that women in their mid thirties have plenty of time to have children (New Woman, 1998; New York Times, 1999). The editors of a recent special issue of the “New York Times Magazine” on women, for instance, had this to say about female fertility at the end of the twentieth century:

…35 today is younger than ever. A thousand years ago, a 35-year-old woman would be just shy of menopause and only 20 or so years from death. Now, 35 is not even halfway there; years of fertility remain, and the highest-earning period probably lies ahead (New York Times, 1999, 116).

However, after conducting five interviews I realised that women’s own construction of the endpoint of their fertility accorded only loosely with the official word on their biological limits. Despite the fact that some of the women aged thirty-eight to forty-two may have been able to conceive a child, all felt they had made their decision to remain or to come to terms with their childlessness at an earlier age. In all these interviews the women made it clear that in their lives, it had been the years between ages thirty-five and thirty-eight that had been critical in the re-shaping of their self-definition from “future mother” to “childless woman.” Thus, by the time I interviewed them, these
women felt they had “gone past” the possibility of motherhood. Having resolved this situation in their own minds between one (for those aged thirty-nine) and four years (for those aged forty-two) earlier, these women were eager to emphasise their enjoyment of the childless life, and to relate their life as a narrative in which childlessness was a chosen outcome. They were less interested – although not completely unwilling – to focus on the period several years prior to their 39th year when many felt they lacked control over and/or were less resolved about being childless; a period several had flagged during our initial phone contact. As already noted in Chapters 1 and 2, the ideology of individualism that prevails in Western cultures shapes women’s understandings of their lives as “products created by, and emblematic of the self,” in which a “perception of absolute volitional action” prevails (Alexander et al., 1992, 619). Retrospective review and evaluation of one’s life may only enhance this culturally specific desire to see oneself as in charge and responsible for one’s life, rather than a “victim” of circumstance.

In my first phone contact with Janine, for example, she asked me if I realised that not all people are childless by choice. She wanted children, she explained, but couldn’t have them because she was a lesbian. However, during the course of our interview several weeks later, Janine was at pains to emphasise her satisfaction with, and control over, her “choice” to remain childless:

Janine: [My partner] doesn’t want to be a parent, and she said to me, "If you do choose to have a child, you need to know that the responsibility would be all yours... You need
to go in thinking that it's your decision, it's your child. And if we ever split up…” She's forty-three, she says she's too old now. She likes her sleep and likes her lifestyle, and children would be a major inconvenience. And also she sees things from a planet perspective and she says...there are enough children in the world.

Q: Do those reasons also hold for you?

Janine: At an intellectual level [but] I wonder...when I'm menopausal, if I'll regret never having children...[But] I don't want you to think [that] I'm a lesbian and [that’s] why I don't have children today. That's not the case at all...When you are childless, people might see it perhaps as, “well, really it's because she's a lesbian and she's dissatisfied with her lifestyle, and she's frustrated”. But it's not about that at all. It's about being totally happy in my relationship now and making a choice not to bring a... child into [the] world.

As already noted in Chapter 1, Western women are culturally encouraged and supported to view themselves as “choosers.” Moreover, “coming to terms” with childlessness that may not have been chosen is necessary for women to experience a sense of well-being in their lives (Baruch et al., 1983, 101; Faux, 1984; Safer, 1996; Ziman Tobin & with Aria, 1998). For these reasons, I felt it would be unethical to push women to deconstruct and re-hash for the purpose of the interview the narrative construction of their childless life as chosen. At the same time, however, I was conscious (largely through pre-interview discussions and asides dropped during interview) that important parts of the story of these women’s childlessness were not being told.
The difficulty of getting this older age range of women to expound on the un-chosen aspects of their childlessness was compounded by the overall difficulty I was having recruiting women to the study who were less comfortable with being, and talking about being, childless. While numerous social/psychological researchers complain of the difficulty of finding “voluntarily” childless research participants (Campbell, 1985; Marshall, 1993; Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1980), my personal network yielded numerous women who had either chosen childlessness and/or were happy living a childless life. The key to this success was the high level of comfort my contacts felt approaching the women they knew who fit this description. This ease contrasted sharply with the steadfast refusal of those in my personal network to even mention the study to fertile childless women they knew or believed were not childless by choice and/or who were unresolved or unhappy about being childless. One very good friend of mine had over twenty fertile childless female friends of the right age, but refused to mention the study to any of them for fear of causing offence. Calling attention to her friends’ ages and childless status, she explained to me, would make her look cruel and insensitive because she knew how “raw” and often “unresolved” their feelings were about childlessness. The few personal acquaintances that did push past the social awkwardness posed by my recruitment requirements were rarely rewarded with success. Nearly all the women they approached refused to participate on the grounds that talking about “it” would make them, to quote one, “cry hysterically.” One acquaintance did pass along the name of one woman with the warning that this woman was very unsure about participating because the issue was so “raw.” When I contacted this woman, she told me
how unhappy she was about being childless, but how she refused to give up hope. “I know of one woman who had a child when she was forty-three,” she told me, “I collect these stories like trophies because they give me hope.” This woman refused to be interviewed, however, on the grounds that she “would cry through the whole thing.” She agreed to let me ring her in a few months to see if she felt any differently about participation. Several months down the track her refusal, and reasons for it, remained unchanged.

I responded to these difficulties in two ways: by lowering the targeted age range for participating and by supplementing my snowball recruitment strategy with a direct advertisement in several women’s health newsletters and at a Melbourne inner-city suburban gym. By lowering the target age range to women aged 28 to 38, I hoped to recruit women to the study for whom the parenting decision was still active, and the outcome still open. This would enable me to understand how women saw choice functioning in their decisions and childless outcome at the time, rather than after the fact. Focusing on the point prior to or at which women make their decisions, in other words, would make circumstantial childlessness (when and if it existed) easier to recognise.

I advertised in “Instinct,” the newsletter of Absolutely Women’s Health, and in several women’s health newsletters with rural bases and a largely rural readership (“WelComing Women’s Health Service” and “Natural Fertility Management”). The ads appeared immediately prior to my departure to the
United States to conduct interviews in that country and informed women to leave a message at my department which I would return as soon as possible. While in the US I conducted four interviews with North American women, all of which were organised through my family’s personal, employment and recreation networks.

When I returned to Australia three weeks later, a number of women had rung to express interest in participating in the study. A gym member had referred one woman to the study, while the remainder had seen the advertisement in “Instinct.” I arranged interviews with all but one. The 37 year-old woman who refused to be interviewed was furious that it had taken me just over three weeks to return her call, and seemed reluctant to accept my explanation that I was overseas. But in the middle of her rampage, she burst into tears, “I was all prepared to ring you and talk and now I don’t know if I’m prepared any more,” she sobbed. Discussing her childlessness made her feel vulnerable, she explained, and making the initial phone contact had been a big decision. She refused to allow me to phone her again; either to discuss the issue over the phone or to make an interview time. She said she would ring me if she felt prepared to participate, but never got back in touch.

Eventually, through the gym advertisement and through snowball referral by a study participant, I was able to interview two women for whom childlessness was an extremely sensitive issue. The latter woman only agreed to speak with
me after her friend reported that her interview experience had been both “enjoyable and affirming.” While I feel extremely fortunate and grateful that these women were willing to share their experience with me, I regret that such women were - judging by my recruitment experience – severely under-represented in this study.

Most of the usual and/or recommended screening criteria for the “voluntarily” childless were not employed in the current study. Housknecht (1987) recommends that researchers interested in recruiting only those who are truly voluntarily childless rule out participants with biological and genetic reasons for childlessness, those who say they are “extremely likely to change their minds,” those who have been married less than five years and women who are more than a “few years” out from their “final reproductive years” (Housknecht, 1987, 371-72). As indicated in Chapter 2, even researchers who largely adhere to such guidelines may wind up with substantial numbers of participants who are circumstantially rather than voluntarily childless. However, because this study sought to explore how choice functioned in women’s decisions about parenthood, the criteria for participation were less restrictive than those suggested by such guidelines. The intention, in other words, was to establish guidelines that made it as easy for women to participate whose decisions could easily be characterised as “chosen” as for women whose decisions would be more accurately described as circumstantial. Women were eligible for the study if, as far as they knew, they were fertile and were between the ages of 28 and 38 (although the five women interviewed before I lowered the target recruitment
age remained part of the sample). They could not have given birth to a child, nor be significantly involved in the parenting of a dependent child or children. My extremely limited operating budget for conducting the research also meant all participants needed to speak and read English fluently, although I was able to find funds to travel outside Melbourne to interview several women from rural Victoria.

All prospective participants in the study were asked, “Are you, to the best of your knowledge, fertile?” All had answered this question affirmatively before being accepted into the study. I was consequently staggered to discover (usually halfway through an interview) that conception difficulties were a critical or important reason for the childlessness of three of the women. When I raised this with the women, they explained that it would only be when all their attempts to become pregnant were exhausted that they would consider themselves infertile. Two of the women, Brenna and Hilary, had only recently begun investigations into their fertility status, and neither had undergone any treatment. The third woman, Peta, saw herself as fertile because the retention of one of her ovaries meant she could use In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) techniques to achieve a pregnancy. In retrospect, I believe I would have successfully screened these women out of the study had I followed Veevers’ (1980) screening protocol and asked the women not only about their perception of their own fertility, but about their contraceptive use. This is because, at the time of interview, none of these women were using contraception and this disclosure would likely have revealed their fertility difficulties.
The ten year age span was chosen in order to explore how women of different ages experienced and understood childlessness and choice. Thirty-eight was chosen as the endpoint of the age range because of the numerous women who had indicated in the early stages of interviewing that it was at this age that they had considered the question of motherhood closed. Infertile women were excluded because both demographers and psychological/social researchers already rightly distinguish between women who are childless for this reason, and women who are childless by choice. As already noted in Chapter 2, this is not the case for the fertile childless, all of whom are considered by the vast majority of researchers to be childless by choice. Unmarried women were included in the study because of the desire to maximise the potential of interviewing circumstantially childless women (the inability to find a partner is a common circumstance leading to childlessness). They were also included because I could find no acceptable justification anywhere in the literature for their exclusion. Quite fantastically, neither Housknecht (1987), nor any of the psychological/sociological researchers reviewed in Chapter 2, formally justify their exclusion of unmarried women from their samples of the “voluntarily” childless. Presumably, the exclusion is based on the antiquated belief that only married women are capable of becoming mothers, and are therefore able to choose childlessness. The significant number of lower income women who become mothers outside the context of stable de facto relationships or marriage, and the small but rising number of women who are using artificial
insemination to become mothers gives lie to this outmoded presumption (Birrell & Rapson, 1998; Crispell, 1993; McIntosh, 1998; Rowlinson, 1998).

The social and economic status (SES) or social class of research participants is a traditional and valid concern of social researchers. Existing data suggest that social class influences women’s experience and understanding of their bodies, their health and their social roles (Birns & Hay, 1988; Gilding, 1991, 90-3; Martin, 1987; Phoenix, 1991). However, the specific impact of women’s SES on their childbearing decisions and outcomes remains unclear. Australian and United States data suggest that the fertility rates of low SES women are lower than high SES women (McDonald, 1998a; National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), 1999), that racial minorities and indigenous populations have higher fertility than the non-indigenous majorities (National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), 1999; Skinner, 1997) and that achieved fertility levels of less educated women may come closer to desired fertility levels than do the achieved fertility levels of more highly educated women. However, recent Australian data suggest that the fertility levels of less educated and under- or unemployed women are declining more rapidly than the fertility levels of highly educated in full-time jobs (Spencer, 2000). While disagreement exists on the explanation for such findings (Kilmartin, 2000), one interpretation is that the high cost of childcare and other structural imposts to childbearing are more prohibitive for less employed and less educated women (Spencer, 2000).
Unlike most small-scale social research that relies on self-selected participants, the current study is not predominantly comprised of middle-class women. As detailed below, 40 per cent of study participants had no tertiary qualifications, while 46 per cent had income levels around or below the Australian and North American average. However, while this diversity was sought and welcomed, the size of the current sample was too small to properly compare and contrast the experiences of women of different social classes and to draw any conclusions about the impact of social class on fertile women’s childbearing decisions and outcomes.

4.4 INTERVIEW CONDUCT AND DATA ANALYSIS

A semi-structured face-to-face life history interview was conducted with each participant. Participants were also asked to complete a short questionnaire that was designed to elicit non-identifying demographic details. The questionnaire also contained several items, adapted from existing instruments, designed to elicit information about women’s job and relationship satisfaction (Brayfield, 1951; Greenberger, 1988).

Women and other significant people in their lives were given pseudonyms before their interviews were transcribed and hard copies of the transcriptions printed out. These hard copies were read through numerous times. The aim was to employ a grounded theory approach to identify common issues and themes arising from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interview transcripts
were then imported into QSR NUD*IST 4, a qualitative research software package (Qualitative Solutions & Research, 1997). The data was then organised into index trees and free “nodes.” Further exploration of the data was conducted using NUD*IST, resulting in multiple adjustments and reorganisations of existing index trees and free nodes to reflect emerging categories and theories. At all stages, an attempt was made to analyse women’s experience in a way that both respected their agency and sense of themselves as “choosers,” and illuminated the social forces that shape and constrain female agency.

4.5 COHORTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Thirty of the thirty-five women interviewed for this study were born between the years 1959 and 1969 (the remaining five, interviewed before the recruitment age range was lowered, were born between 1954 and 1958). These women, roughly members of Generation X, were babies or girls in the late 1960s and 1970s, and young women in the 1980s (Bulbeck, 1997, 10; Mackay, 1997; Stewart, 1999). Because this group of women have only recently entered the years in which it was both biologically possible and socially sanctioned for them to become mothers (Berryman, 1991; Phoenix, 1991), little is known about this cohort of women’s experience of, understandings of and decision-making about motherhood or childlessness.
Gerson’s (1985) study of North American women, like the vast majority of studies examining the interplay between women, relationships and work, focused on the Baby Boomers. Gerson’s work looks specifically at “leading edge” Boomers, those born between 1941 and 1951 (Bulbeck, 1997; Mackay, 1997; Stewart, 1999). These women were young adults in the early 1960s through to the early 1970s and thus, according to Gerson, were on the cutting edge of social change. Gerson argues that because this cohort came of age at a time of dramatic social change, they are particularly well suited to illumine social processes:

These women came of age when dramatic changes were occurring in women’s options and life patterns; the subtle revolution in women’s work and family patterns, which had been developing for many decades, surfaced dramatically. Young adult women are most susceptible to and responsible for implementing changes...the current generation of young adult women is an especially good position to expose the causes, contours, and consequences of women’s changing life patterns. They are old enough to be nearing or recently past critical choice points in their lives, but young enough to have been exposed to the recent structural changes in work and family arrangements that have fueled the subtle revolution in women’s behaviour...[they are also] at the life stage when the structural conflicts between forging a work identity and creating a family become most acute (Gerson, 1985, 39).

The women of Generation X also occupy a unique position in relation to the rapid social upheavals that took place in both Australia and the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s: they were babies and young girls at the time. In contrast to the women of the Baby Boom, who were forced by rapid social change to confront and in some cases adjust their career/relationship/parenting
ambitions, the women of Generation X were born into a rapidly changing world. They came of age assuming and expecting they would work, and that work would be a priority in their lives (Bryson & Warner-Smith, 1998; Stewart, 1999; Wicks & Mishra, 1998). Many of the women of this generation see feminism as their birthright and assumed that they were entitled to, and expected to receive, the same education and employment opportunities as their male peers. This feminist consciousness was, to quote Australian Senator Natasha Stott-Despoja, “inherited not raised,” with many younger women simply not remembering a time when women weren’t expected to “do what they want” (Bail, 1996, 6). As Generation X feminist Catherine Lumby tells it:

Feminism gave my generation of middle-class women – the older end of the Gen X-ers – a bunch of stuff most us didn’t even know we had. An expectation we would find a career and support ourselves. A relatively guilt-free response to sex and relationships. And a major attitude problem with older men who insisted on addressing us as “lassie”. As a teenager, I regarded feminism as some weird hobby women of my mother’s era had, along with spinning, Splades and sincerity (Lumby, 1997, xxvi).

Thus, the current cohort offers an opportunity to examine how women who grew up with many feminist ideals and assumptions - yet often refuse to call themselves feminists (Bail, 1996; Bulbeck, 1997; Denfield, 1995; Trioli, 1996) - experience and understand childlessness.
4.6 FERTILE CHILDLESS WOMEN: WHO ARE THEY?

4.6.1 Previous research

Previous research findings describe the “voluntarily” childless as less religious, more urban, more affluent, more highly educated and more likely to be employed outside the home in “lucrative professional” positions (Ambry, 1992; Callan, 1985, 113; Crispell, 1993; Faux, 1984; Marshall, 1993; May, 1995; Somers, 1993, 6643-644). Voluntary childless marriages are usually described as happier than the marriage of people with children (Bailey, 1984; Baruch et al., 1983; Callan, 1985, 113; Campbell, 1985; Faux, 1984; Somers, 1993; Veevers, 1980). On the other hand, studies suggest that childless couples are more likely to divorce, although the relative ease of a marital separation in which no children are involved may account for this finding (Callan, 1985, 122). In Callan’s (1985) comparison of childless and married couples with children, the latter had nominally lower scores than their childless counterparts on three dimensions of marital satisfaction; cohesion, consensus and affectional expression. Somers (1993), while replicating Callan’s results on the higher levels of cohesion found in childless couples, was not able to replicate his findings on either consensus or affectional expression. Moreover, against Callan’s findings, she reported higher levels of dyadic satisfaction among childless couples. Research into relative marital satisfaction of childless couples has long yielded contradictory results that are difficult to interpret. Having conducted an in-depth analysis of these findings, Callan (1985) concludes that claims that the childless are, “considerably less happy or more
prone to divorce” or significantly more satisfied with their relationships than married couples are unjustified. The common finding of high levels of marital satisfaction amongst couples that self-select for “voluntarily” childless research he believes could result from the fact that, “only couples in happy, satisfactory marriages complete questionnaires sent to them, or agree to be interviewed” (Callan, 1985, 123). Moreover, duration of marriage screening requirements for the participation of couples in such research make it more likely that only couples happy enough to have remained married for a number of years volunteer to be interviewed. A third possibility is that high levels of marital satisfaction amongst childless couples is an artifact of the temporary but ubiquitous negative impact children have on a couple’s relationship: the J or U curve. Argues Bailey:

The effect of parenthood on marriage is nothing less than volcanic: shocking, explosive and disruptive with repercussions that cannot be imagined at the outset...There is a general consensus about the effect of children on a marriage: research in the United Kingdom and in the United States shows categorically that marriage takes a downward plunge from the moment of the first child’s birth. Optimists suggest that the marital relationship takes a U-bend, returning to an equal but different level of satisfaction in the post-parental years. Pessimists suggest the curve is more likely to be J-shaped, never returning to previous levels of satisfaction (Bailey, 1984, 85-86).

Bailey (1984) suggests that the best way for couples to inoculate their marriage from the J-curve or to avoid having it number among the post-parental wave of divorces is to split childcare and domestic responsibilities more equally. Such a split would enhance the “decisive bond” having a child creates between its parents and ensure that both partners, rather than just the woman, come to
terms with the “shock” of the “reduced income and curtailed social life” that accompanies parenthood. In families in which it is the woman who shoulders all the responsibility and makes all the sacrifices for the new baby:

The [woman’s] initial adjustment...[is] made the more harsh because her partner’s life appears to go on as before. This...may cause resentment...it may also set up decisive patterns of non-communication about the varying degrees of personal change each partner had to undergo...The danger of having only a ‘his’ and ‘her’ marriage without a common meeting ground is nowhere more likely than during the period where each partner adopts a strictly segregated role... (Bailey, 1984, 90 91).

4.6.2 The current study

General characteristics of the sample are discussed below. Individual biographies of the 35 women who participated in the study can be found in Appendix 1.

4.6.2.1 Age

Participants were born between 1954 and 1969. The distribution of birth years through this fifteen-year period is laid out below. As shown, the sample contained no women born in 1955 (aged 42), 1957 (aged 40) or 1967 (aged 30).
Chapter 4
Methodology and Basic Information About Participants

**Age Distribution of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Birth</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>35</strong></td>
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</table>

### 4.6.2.2 Place of birth

Twenty-four women (69%) were born in Australia, and six (17%) were born in the United States. Two of the six women born in the United States, however, were raised and currently live in Australia. Of the remaining five (all of whom currently reside in Australia), two were born in South Africa (6%), two in New Zealand (6%) and one in the United Kingdom (3%).
4.6.2.3 Parents place of birth

Twenty-two (63%) of the women’s mothers and fathers were Australian born with five (14%) of the women’s mothers, and four (11%) of the fathers were born in the United States (17%). Of the remaining parents, six mothers and seven fathers (20%) were born in English speaking countries (South Africa, New Zealand or the United Kingdom). Two mothers (6%) and two fathers (6%), respectively, were born in Western Europe and Greece.

4.6.2.4 Rural or urban

At the time of interview, thirty one women (89%) lived in or around a major city (either Melbourne, Victoria in Australia, Boca Raton, Florida or Austin, Texas in the United States). Four women (11%) lived in regional Victoria. Twenty-two women (63%) had grown up in or around a major Australian or North American city, with the remaining thirteen (37%) having been raised in rural Australia. This latter breakdown compares favourably with the division found in numerous large-scale “representative” samples of Australian women between women living in metropolitan areas (72%) and rural/regional areas (28%) (Brown et al., 1994, 15-16).

4.6.2.5 Highest level of education received

One woman (3%) had left school before year twelve, with four (11%) citing secondary or high school as their highest qualification. Nine women (26%) held a diploma, certificate or/and trade qualification. Twelve women (34%) held an undergraduate degree with nine (26%) having completed post-graduate
qualifications. Thus, in contrast to the majority of studies of the “voluntarily” childless, the current sample had a significantly higher proportion of women who did not hold an undergraduate or post-graduate qualification (Somers, 1993; Veevers, 1980, 185). Interestingly, of the fourteen women (40%) who held no higher educational qualifications, all were either aged between thirty-seven and forty-two, or were raised and/or currently living in the country.

4.6.2.6 Religion

Nineteen women (54%) described themselves either as atheist or as agnostic. The next two largest groupings were five women who identified themselves as Catholic (14%) and four women who said they were Jewish (11%). Of the remaining seven women (20%), three described themselves as Anglicans, two as Scientologists, one as a Buddhist and one as Greek Orthodox. When asked to rate how important religion was to them, four women (11%) rated it as very important, nine (26%) important, eleven (31%) neither important nor unimportant, two (6%) not important and nine (26%) not at all important. Again this contrasts with most studies of the “voluntarily” childless which find a preponderance of respondents with low religious affiliation and commitment (Faux, 1984; Ireland, 1993, 170; Somers, 1993; Veevers, 1980, 182).
4.6.2.7 Income

In 1999, the average Australian earned $38,740 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999c), while the equivalent US figure for 1996 was $35,172 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). In the current sample, four (11%) women earned between $1 and $20,799 while three women (9%) had a household income between $20,800 and $31,199. Nine women (26%) had a household income of between $31,200 and $41,599, while fourteen (40%) lived in households that earned between $41,600 and $77,999 per annum. Five women (14%) lived in households earning $78,000 and upwards each year.

4.6.2.8 Sexual orientation

Two women (6%) in the study identified themselves as lesbian, and one bisexual (3%). The remaining thirty-three were heterosexual. A standard figure for homosexual representation in the general population is 10 per cent (Bell, Weinberg, & Kiefer Hammersmith, 1981; Masters, Johnson, & Kolodny, 1985).

4.6.2.9 Marital status

Ten women (29%) had been married or involved in a long-term de facto relationship and were now divorced or separated. Eight women (23%) were married at the time of interview, and nine (26%) were in a de facto relationship. The remaining eighteen women (51%) were single. Of the seventeen women

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17 Australian participants answered this question using Australian dollar figures, while American women answered this question using US dollar figures.
involved in a marital or de facto relationship, eleven women (65%) strongly agreed with the statement, “I feel fairly well satisfied with my current marital or de facto relationship”, four (23%) agreed and two (12%) were undecided. Asked to rate their agreement with the statement, “I feel I am more fulfilled by my marital or de facto relationship than most other people,” four women (23%) strongly agreed, nine (53%) agreed, three (18%) were undecided while one women (6%) disagreed.

4.6.2.10 Parent’s marital status

The fathers of five of the women had died (11%); three when the women were still children or young adults, and two after they had become adults. The mothers of two women (6%) walked out on the family, severing contact for many years, when they were still girls. These two women were among the eight (23%) whose parents had either divorced (one or more times) or separated. Taken together, this means that thirteen women (37%) had witnessed the impact on their mothers and (though less often) their fathers of living outside of a married or stable de facto relationship. Eleven of these thirteen women (85%) had made these observations as children or young women.

4.6.2.11 Jobs and careers

Thirty-three women (94%) were employed at the time of interview, while two were unemployed (6%). One woman had been unemployed for between six months and one year, while the other had been unemployed for between one and two years. Twenty-nine women (83%) considered themselves to have a
career as against six women (17%) that did not. Of the thirty-three women currently employed, twenty-eight nine (85%) considered their current job to be part of a career, while only five women (15%) did not see their current job as part of their career.

When asked to rate how important their career was to them, ten women (29%) rated their career as “very important,” while thirteen women (37%) said it was “important.” Eleven women (31%) felt a career was “neither important nor unimportant to them,” while only one woman (3%) rated her career as “not important.” No participant felt her career was “not at all important.” Asked to rate their agreement with the statement, “I feel fairly well satisfied with my present job,” thirteen (37%) women strongly agreed, twelve (34%) agreed, six (17%) were undecided while three women (9%) disagreed. Women’s agreement ratings with the statement “I feel that I am more fulfilled by my job than most other people” saw nine (26%) strongly agree, thirteen (37%) agree, seven (20%) undecided, five (14%) disagree and one (3%) strongly disagree.

4.6.2.12 Life satisfaction

Asked to rate their agreement with the statement, “I feel fulfilled by my life at the moment,” eight women (23%) strongly agreed, sixteen (46%) agreed, eight (23%) were undecided while three women (9%) disagreed.
4.7 CONCLUSION

Like most research with small self-selected participants, the current sample fails to mirror the larger Australian and North American population in numerous ways. Lesbians and unemployed women are under-represented. Women from non-English speaking backgrounds are not represented as all, with only minor representation of women whose parents are from a non-English speaking background.

However, while women currently residing in the rural or regional areas are under-represented in the sample, when women who grew up outside the metropolitan area were added to their numbers, the presence of non-metropolitan women in the sample is significant. The study also seems to have captured a reasonable number of average and below average earners, although higher income earners still dominated. Nearly half the sample (46%) earned near average or below average wages, while the remainder (54%) earned above average. A diverse range of religious affiliations were also represented, with forty-six per cent of women identifying themselves as members of a religious group, and thirty-seven per cent nominating religion as important or very important. This suggests a more religious sample than those typically recruited for studies of the fertile childless.

18 These percentages fail to total one hundred because one woman left this question unanswered.
The small number of women in the sample who had been born and were living in The United States precluded the possibility of drawing meaningful comparisons between the experiences and understandings of fertile childless Australian and fertile childless North American women.
Chapter 5

Baselines: Childless By Choice, Childless By Relationship, Thwarted Mothers and Waiters and Watchers

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Women in the sample were broadly categorised as either childless by choice or childless by circumstance. However, the orientations towards parenthood of women who were childless by circumstance varied significantly. Thus, three sub-categories of circumstantially childless women are described: women childless by relationship, “thwarted mothers,” and women ambivalent or undecided about motherhood (“waiters and watchers”). These classifications, which describe the place, durability and stability motherhood plays in a woman’s “imagined future” and identity, seek to capture a woman’s baseline or dominant orientation towards parenthood (Gerson, 1985).

5.2 CHILDLESSNESS BY CHOICE

There were four women in this study, Deborah, Latisha, Lorne and Rachel, who were childless by choice. These women largely fit the way childless researchers like Veevers (1980) and Campbell (1985) describe women they call childless “independents.” For these women childlessness, not motherhood, is an often long held and always an important part of their imagined future and identity.
These women also report that they rarely or never deviate from their determination to pursue a childless life.

5.2.1 Childlessness as an often long-held and always an important part of a woman’s imagined future and adult identity

Forty-two year-old Rachel had what Veevers describes as “little-mother” syndrome (see Chapter 3). Because her father was a clergymen, her family moved from one country town to the next when he was re-assigned congregations. Rachel attributes her long-held desire to live a childless life to her memory of the difficulties her mother experienced raising a family of six and her own experience as one of the eldest in a large family:

I remember we all used to have to do things. I used to have to hang the washing on the line. We all had our set of chores to do. On Sunday mornings - there were three [children], then a big gap, then another three – it was “you do Samson, you do Adam, you do Liam.” You know, ”get ’em ready for church.” And all of that stuff went on all the time. It had to I suppose. And it was only as an adult, listening to [my Mum] saying, “I don't remember such and such. All I can remember about that was I spent that entire time bringing up children”. And I thought, “Yeah, I bet you did. You did washing. And you cooked. And that's about it”...Unless you're really committed to wanting to just be a person rearing children, it's very consuming of your life. And her life was consumed by raising six children. And supporting her husband who was a priest. And that's it...Every one of her brothers and sisters has tertiary qualifications...Except her sister and herself. They were the oldest ones that went off and got jobs as they were expected to do back in the forties, or whenever it was...[I knew I didn't want to mother early because] there was never - six children, three bedroom house. You didn't have a choice about the house. The house went with the church, dependent where you were. It was the lack of
personal space that really got me about living in a large family like that.

An only child, thirty-two year-old Latisha’s story fits with Veevers’ description of the issues motherhood raises for women who themselves were only-children (see Chapter 3). Latisha grew up in a world largely full of adults and remembers feeling uncomfortable around and often disliking other children from an early age:

My parents were married nine years before they had me [and] all their friends’ children were at an older age…[My mother was] always nice to children. Nicer than what I think I am. But, because I didn’t see children or her interact with children, I’ve really got no - apparently she was really good with the cousin that I get on really well with...But I didn't see any of that...when I was with children I didn't really enjoy it...Their pettyness. Specially remembering my cousins…I was probably a lot more vivacious [than other children], because I'd been around adults. Like I used to be at all Mum and Dad's parties, and stuff like that. I probably didn't have very much time for them.

From an early age, Latisha remembers wanting her girlfriend, “all to [her]self” and disliking when that friend’s “brother came in and annoyed you and all the rest of it.” She never planned on being a wife and mother, nor recalls having strongly focused career ambitions:

I knew I had to work to get the things I wanted to have. But I had no career - like at one stage I thought I might do something to do with art...[but] I'm slightly colour blind, so that wasn't...good...and then I was into cooking but not really, and I hated typing. Typing was never going to be...
Q: So you don't remember thinking, “I'm going to be a career girl.” It was more an awareness you'd need to work to get what you need?

No, I never thought I was going to grow up to be a doctor or a lawyer. I don't think I thought I was going to grow up to be a wife either or a mother. But...I knew that you had to work. And work is good, but I didn't have a career objective that I wanted to do.

Q: So how old were you when you were thinking, “I won't grow up and be a wife or a mother?”

Thirteen, fourteen.

Thirty-eight year-old Lorne has long felt that being childless is an important part of her identity:

Q: [When did your ideas that you didn't want to] get married or...have children...begin?

Probably late teens, twenty, twenty-one.

Q: Do you connect those to the ideas you've got now, or were they of a different variety?

I think they have developed somewhat...but I have a few friends that live interstate...and they've just visited recently. They've got a young family and they said that I've always been like that and that they were not surprised at all that I don't have children...They said, “you're the only person we know that it actually kind of sits well with.” So I took it as a compliment... it was a really comforting thing to say...[Also] an old flame...he was one of these guys who I met in the nightclub when I was nineteen, he just
looked me up. And to cut a long story short, he’d gone to London and [had returned home]...And it was just this amazing - because he looked me up and he said, I just knew I'd look under [your name] in the phone book, and I knew you'd live somewhere [in the inner-city suburbs]. This is, like eighteen years later. I don't know whether I was insulted or, I didn't know whether that means I'm so predictable. I said, “what!” and he goes, “Yep...I knew you wouldn't be married.” So, part of me thought that was kind of comforting. Maybe I've always been like this or felt like this.

Lorne was one of only several women in the sample who felt the word “childfree” accurately characterised her feelings that her childlessness is an uncomplicated but basic part of her identity:

Just sounds better. Childless sounds deprived. Childfree sounds more I have chosen to be childfree...[But I would] probably would say, “Oh I don't have kids.”

Q: Is it an important part of you that you don't have kids?

Yeah, I guess...I dunno...What it means to me is just, me. That's me. I dunno. Just, that's what I am, I just, don't have kids...Yeah, I don't really read much into it, if I just say, I don't have kids, I just, don't have kids. That's me.

5.2.2 Childlessness as a constant desire in a woman’s life from which she rarely or never deviates

Rachel describes her marriage to Donald as “fabulous,” and expresses general satisfaction with her life. However, if either had been less satisfying, she would not have had children to compensate for her chosen life's disappointments:
I can see how some people might [have children to] fulfil something that they weren’t getting in another way. But I think I would have changed something. Found a different relationship. Yeah, done something else... Decided it was OK to be on my own. Gone and worked overseas... I think there were a whole lot of things I would have chosen to change.

Q: But [you would not have thought], “I'm not feeling all that fulfilled. Maybe children will give me that thing that I'm looking for?”

Can't see it. Not for me.

When Deborah was thirty, her marriage was in trouble and she toyed briefly with the idea of having children:

The thought crossed my mind a few times. When I was about eighteen, I would have thought, “No, never, I don't ever want to do it.” Around about thirty, I tried to convince myself that it was something that I should do, and now I just think, “No, not for me, I just don't think it's right for me”... I must have said something to [my ex-husband] like, “We should have a baby, it brings you together.” “No, forget it,” he said, “it's not like that”... Most of my friends have two or three children now, so their lives have moved in quite a different direction and I probably don't see them as much. That hasn't even influenced me. On the other hand, I sometimes think they might secretly think, “Oh, isn't she lucky, she doesn't have to worry about any of this.” But I think people generally see you as pretty selfish and self-centred because you don't have children.

Q: Do you feel like you are selfish and self-centred?

No, I don't. I just feel that it is not right for me.
Latisha hoped to use our interview as a way of sorting through her feelings about childlessness. While her disinclination to mother has been a constant in her life, the decision of most of her friends to have children – and her consequent feelings of “missing out” on the social activities that come with motherhood - has led her to consider having children for the first time:

Q: Would you describe yourself as someone who's definitely decided not to have children?

Well no, because I don't want to close that gate...but at this stage, it doesn't look like it...But ...I worry about missing out...I don't want to say that I never want to have a child because I don't know how I'm going to feel in two years. My opinion hasn't changed all this time, but it's starting to sway a little bit. But then I spend time with people who've got children and it sways way back to the other way.

Q: So what's prompting it to sway?

Just my age, and girlfriends are doing it, and taking the kid to ballet, or... going to a school function and their lives seem more busy than mine...I always think if you're busy, you've got a full life. You know busy with work and busy going out to dinner, and busy going to this and to that, then it's a full life. Rather than if you've got time on your hands then it's not.

Q: And do you feel like you've got time on your hands?

Yeah.
Q: And so one of the things that you're thinking about is, "I ought to have a child?"

Yeah (laughs). Maybe I should be a little more busy.

5.3 CHILDLESS BY CIRCUMSTANCE

The thirty-one women comprising the balance of the sample were childless by circumstance. These women divided into three categories: women who were childless by relationship, women who were “thwarted mothers” and women ambivalent or undecided about motherhood or the “waiters and watchers.”

5.3.1 Childless by relationship

Three women in the sample, Kelly, Sharon and Janine were childless by relationship. For these women, motherhood was a vague part of their imagined futures and identities – almost a background assumption - when they met their current partners or prior to children becoming a topic of discussion in their current relationship. All believed themselves capable, in the face of their partner’s reluctance to parent, of re-imagining, their futures as non-mothers. Indeed, at time of interview, some were in the process of or had completed that process. However, despite the ultimate proven or prognosticated success of these re-imaginings, all the women in this category believed they would experience, were experiencing or had experienced some distress during the process. Most of the studies of the “voluntarily” childless discussed in Chapter 2 would classify these women as childless by choice.
5.3.1.1 Motherhood as part of a woman’s imagined future and adult identity prior to partnering with current partner

Thirty-five year-old Sharon’s family are third generation farmers. She is clear that her family’s unspoken expectations were that she would grow up, educate herself, find a career, marry and have children - in that order:

It was always assumed but not discussed that we would have kids. The model definitely was you grow up, you go to university, you get a job at whatever, have a career, meet someone, get married, and have children…So as a child, definitely I assumed that I’d grow up and get married and have kids. And probably right through until I was eighteen or twenty, I assumed that.

Thirty-seven year-old Janine is a mid-wife. She has recently completed a higher degree in Women’s Studies and “come out” as a lesbian. She was the woman who, when she telephoned to arrange an interview time, said that she, “hoped I realised that some people didn’t choose not to have children” (see Chapter 4). Janine attributed her long-held desire to mother to early childhood socialisation with “dolls and that stuff,” although she was unable to recollect such influences in her own childhood:

…We all take on stuff we are told from the time we are little girls, don’t we? We’re given dolls and that stuff, and social conditioning does have a lasting effect on us. And I think all women, straight and lesbian, take on that stuff and we think that we do need to be mothers. Society says that is our rightful role.

Q: Can you give me some examples from your own childhood of that socialisation?
Um, it's probably an example of the other probably, but my mother never ever gave us dolls. We were the only kids that we knew that didn't have dolls...We always had teddy bears. I remember one Christmas saying to Mum and Dad, “All I want is a bride doll, ”and my mother said “...they are cold, they're plastic, you can't play with them, you can't cuddle up with them.” And I said, “Because she looks beautiful and she's a bride.”...Anyway I carried on, apparently, and I got a bride doll. I made a big fuss over her for the first couple of months and then I threw her away and played with my bears. And my sister too, we both talk about, “how come we never had dolls.” So in some way, I guess my Mum was really quite a feminist, but never realised it.

Kelly was so certain motherhood was in her future that in her early thirties, she chose a career that would enable her to work while she cared for her child at home:

I had decided that...I want[ed] to be a Mum who stayed at home. But I knew that I'd still have to work. Because I knew I'd go spare if all I had to talk to was a little baby talking jibberish to me all day. I'd go nuts without other's people's adult conversation and input. So I'd actually even structured all of my work, so that I could work from home if I needed to.

Q: What kind of work were you doing?

Desktop publishing. So I could be home with my [computer]. Could have my fax machine. Could have my modem. It could all just happen. If I needed to, I could just pick up the kid, put it in the car, drive off, deliver. You know, it could mainly be at home.
5.3.1.2 Re-imaging futures: from a maternal to a non-maternal identity

Until the outcome of Martin’s therapy is known, Sharon has decided to put off the pain of re-imaging her future as a non-mother:

Q: What do you think it would be like for you don't end up being able to have children in this relationship because he doesn't want to?

...I don't know. I just can't quite imagine what I would do. And it's really funny, because you know, for ten years of my life it was like, “I'm not going to have kids, I'm going to do all these things.” And now I can't imagine what I'd do if I didn't have kids. It's like this bizarre twist.

Janine is currently in the process of re-imaging her future as a non-mother:

When I was married I thought if we want to have children, I can always do it later. Put off, put off, put off. And even at [my current age of] thirty-eight; you can have a child at thirty-eight, all things being equal. But once you are menopausal, really I would have missed the boat altogether: “Right, gone are your chances now.”

Q: So for you it's something that you could consider up until menopause?

Yeah, I could but...I don't think...I've missed the boat now.

By the time I interviewed Kelly, she had successfully re-imagined her future as a non-mother:

Now I wouldn't have a baby. I don't see myself being a Mum...one of the things that makes me now is the
relationship I have with Ivan. It's very precious. Very, very precious...There's a very dear friend of mine who lives in Italy, who is seventy-five. She met her husband during the resistance...He was already married and had children and he left his wife. And they had a similar thing happen. They met. And it was: we will be together....A couple of years later he died...[Ivan and I] went to Italy when I was thirty five. Went round to visit her... And I said to her, "Did it ever bother you that you and your husband didn't have any children? Did you ever feel like you missed out on anything by not being a parent?" And she said..."I (Will, ) tell you [something] that has helped me enormously in my resolution about this. ...He was my lover, my best friend, my husband and my child. There was nothing that I could add to this relationship that would make it any more perfect than it was." And I thought, "She's right." And I do feel like that about Ivan...That's how I feel about him.

5.3.2 Thwarted mothers

There are eighteen women in the sample who are thwarted mothers: Barbara, Renata, Sylvie, Shaney, Darcy, Janet, Karla, Judi, Blair, Tina, Brenda, Kristina, Kylie, Mary, Lori, Brenna, Hilary and Peta. The vast majority, though not all of these women, were single at the time of interview. Three of the women in this category had experience difficulties conceiving (see Chapter 4).

For the thwarted mothers, motherhood is an often long-held and always important part of a woman's imagined future and identity. Younger “thwarted mothers” were reluctant to seriously contemplate the possibility of ending their fertile years without children. They felt that – given their age – any in-depth consideration on this possibility was premature and unnecessary. Some older women too, resisted re-imagining their futures as non-mothers. For still other
thwarted mothers, the process of re-imagining their futures as non-mothers was so painful, that they were seeking modified versions of a future in which motherhood was a part. Even these re-imaginings, however, proved to be emotionally fraught.

5.3.2.1  **Motherhood as an often long-held and always important part of a woman’s imagined future and identity**

Recently married for the first time and experiencing the early signs of menopause, forty-three year-old Barbara had imagined she would mother since she was a girl:

> I have wanted children since I was eight. I have been clucky my whole life [and] have wanted, [have] felt the urge to have children my whole life. When I was about eight I had a scrapbook of pictures of babies, that I cut out of magazines. Now I don't know any other kid who'd ever did that.

Thirty-three year-old Sylvie’s mother separated from her father and re-partnered when she was a young girl. When Sylvie was a teenager, her mother was diagnosed with cancer at the same time that her mother’s second marriage with the man she calls her “second father” was dissolving. However, having experienced what she calls a “days of our lives” childhood has not stopped either Sylvie or her younger brother from wanting children:

> We both have always wanted children. It's never been an issue not to want them, I mean, there are some assumptions or givens. Life might not actually pan out like that but we've always both enjoyed children a lot... it's not something my family has ever put on me...when I was younger I was not one of those teenagers that baby-sat
kids. I wasn't expected to do that girl thing about being involved with other people's babies at a young age. I came to [wanting children] myself as an adult when my friends started to have children. I became aware of loving the fact that they had children and loving their children. And so from my mid twenties to the present [I have wanted them]...It is one of the few uncomplicated areas in my emotional life: I have just enjoyed the fact that that's been a straightforward emotional response and not particularly questioned it...I've had to do so much emotionally to work out my feelings about my very complicated family situation...But it hasn't meant I've never thought, "Oh, but I'd never want to put my kids through that." I've never felt a pessimism or cynicism about my ability to have kids and have a functional family.

Recently divorced, twenty-nine year-old Tina has also long imagined herself a mother:

I always loved kids, and I was very patient with them...I knew that I would have children, I always knew it...When I was young – sixteen to twenty - I just adored kids. I used to see a baby and I was just so clucky...And I think I would be a good mother, I don't have a problem with it, I don't fear my abilities. I remember I always... wanted to teach my daughter to dance...always. When I was seven I remember playing by myself in the garage, my mother made up this little dance studio for me with a barre and a nice big mirror, and I was always teaching my daughter to dance.

5.3.2.2 Re-imagining non-mothering futures: reluctance, resistance and partial re-imaginings and pain

5.3.2.2.1 Reluctance

Young thwarted mothers, those in their late twenties and early thirties, resisted my invitation to re-imagine, for the purpose of the interview, a future in which...
they did not mother. Twenty-nine year-old Kristina sees herself having approximately ten years before she needs to consider thinking about having children on her own rather than in the manner she prefers - in the context of a stable relationship with a man:

I do want to get settled and I do want to have kids for sure, but it's not an option at the moment. I guess things are kind of going...as I hoped they would when I was younger. I have travelled a lot. I've got a job in an industry that I really like. I've got good friends and live in a nice house. All of the sort of stuff I always imagined that I would do, and later on I considered that I'd have a relationship and children...I didn't ever imagine that I would have kids when I was young. That was always at the end of everything else I wanted to do...I haven't been in a relationship for a long time. And I think that's more of a factor for me than having kids. I don't want to have kids without the relationship so if there's not the relationship then children don't even come into it as far as I'm concerned...it's hard to say [what I'd do if I was childless and not in a relationship] because it's ten years down the track.

Thirty-two year-old Lori is determined to settle down in the near future. However, she also feels herself too young – and her chances of successfully partnering with a man she feels would make a suitable husband and father too good – to seriously contemplate re-imagining her future as a non-mother:

When I turned thirty I said, “You know what, it's probably about time that I got married.” Prior to that my last two boyfriends had proposed to me...they were...both long-term relationships, but I didn't want to marry them. And then...I was engaged [to Tony]...and we just broke it off. But that was right when I decided I wanted to get married, at that time. So now the guy that I met Saturday night, he seems like the perfect guy...I know I'm only going to marry someone intelligent and aggressive so they'll have a good career...But I didn't date those people...I wasn't ready to get married and [I didn't] feel that there was any rush or
sense of urgency to find the right person...[But now] the majority of people I am dating are Jewish and are successful. Finally, I'm trying to do that.

Q: And what do you think it is going to be like for you if it doesn't end up working out?

Meaning I don't meet someone, fall in love, and have kids? I don't think that's going to happen. I'm pretty optimistic...Maybe I was just about to lose hope and then I met Burton this Saturday. I knew him before but after going out with him, I definitely think there's not a que - I'm pretty optimistic. I was going to say there's not a question. But if it doesn't happen? I don't know. I'll cross that bridge when I get to it...I don't really worry about it too much.

5.3.2.2 Resistance

While thirty-five year-old Darcy felt she was too old to waste time in a relationship with a man unwilling to commit to parenthood in the future, she resists her family’s suggestions that she is running out of time to find a partner and have a child:

Well, Gregory...has...just run scared...I said to him prior to last Christmas, "OK, we need to have a look at this. I want to know are we committed to one another because I actually want to start looking at a family. Are we going to do this?...Because if we are not, we shouldn't be together. We are not in our twenties. We are not in our teens. I don't see any point in us wasting our time together unless we are looking at making this a permanent relationship."...He bottled up and we ended up splitting. A little bit heartbreaking for both of us, and heart wrenching, but he can't make a decision on it. Or I guess he has, by not saying "yes," he's actually made the decision not to do it.... I don't have a problem with it at this point...The two things that I do have a little bit of attention on - but it's not
such a big deal - is my age, for the health of my child, and I want my father to be a grandpa. And so I don't even really have that much attention on the first one. I don't. I know that there are people, even my brother, says to me "you shouldn't leave it, you shouldn't leave it." But I don't have that much attention on it at all. But I do in regard to my father. [Also] my grandfather [says the same]...But I don't have that much attention on it at all...I don't have any urgency...

Sylvie similarly resists accepting others' characterisation of her as a childless woman:

It's a slightly fraught area to talk about because it's never occurred to me that I won't [have children] and now I'm almost thirty-four and people kind of mention it, and I start to think "oh, is there an issue? Am I running out of time?" Because I've never actually felt like I was running out of time. I've always just thought it was an option and that I would have them.

Q: But people have started to treat you that way?

Yes. Yes...My first father carries on about it: “when are you going to have [children]?” My stepmother says, “When are you going to have children...I'm sick of storing all your things in the garage. We won't give you money for such and such until you get married.” I say "I can't hurry up and have children to clear out the garage for you.” About the financial thing I've said, “Maybe I'm not going to get married so therefore you're going to have to think about...the circumstances [under which] you're going to give me money"...I get quite shocked that people...feel a level of pity for the fact that I'm single and childless because that's not how I think of myself. I think of myself as a young woman who just doesn't have a partner yet. And I occasionally feel a bit sorry for myself about my romantic life not being great. But I've never thought of myself as a woman who will be single and childless. It's just not how I see myself and so it causes a start when I realise that other people see me that way.
5.3.2.2.3 Partial re-imaginings and pain

Eighteen months prior to interview, thirty-seven year-old Shaney had painfully relinquished her dream of having a child “the usual way” – in the context of a stable relationship with a man – and had begun travelling interstate to access artificial insemination services. Her mother’s revival of the marriage and motherhood dream, however, led her to abandon her pursuit of pregnancy through artificial insemination, and to return to her pursuit of what she deems “a fairytale”:

Of course the ideal would have been to have met the man of my dreams, and fallen in love and have it all happen in the usual way. Which as I said, I now think is a fairytale. I’ve really mourned not having a man, and time goes on, the lonelier I feel... The future often looks pretty bleak to me now. When I was on the [artificial insemination] program, that helped create the bleakness, a little bit. [I thought], “What a shame I’m having to do it this way. But it’s the only avenue I have to have a child at this point in time.” But the fact that I was going to get pregnant and have a child helped me: there was a glimmer of hope for a future for me, and that’s why I’m probably still angry with Mum. Because I feel like she stuffed that up for me. I was doing something about my life and making my life what I wanted it to be, and hopefully bringing a lovely child...into this world. I feel that has been knocked on the head, and Mum had a lot to do with that. It was because I had that underlying feeling, hope still, that there’d be a male around there somewhere. And I felt that I had to trade one [hope] off against the other. If I went down this avenue, then I was going to have to give up that one. And so I changed tack. This is the effect mothers have still, or at least my mother. I thought “no...I’d still rather do it all the normal way, what’s considered the normal way, where you have a

19 The Victorian Infertility Treatment Act (1995) denies infertility treatment to single women and lesbian couples living in the State of Victoria, Australia. Clinics in the neighbouring State of New South Wales, however, provide treatment to these groups of women.
husband, and a father and a family, so you can play happy families.” So I changed tack and of course there was no partner or male on that road. So I’ve been walking down that road ever since. Since the program, about eighteen months. The last time I went was March of last year.

Thirty-five year-old Karla is also faced with the dilemma of either pursuing pregnancy at an age when she feels young enough and when she always imagined she would parent, or holding on in the hope of meeting a man and having a child within marriage. While she still hopes to become a mother, she is grieving the loss of motherhood as she imagined it would be - effortless and within the context of marriage:

My parents sold their house and downstairs is all the junk. We were going through it and there was a cot there. I said to Dad, “Oh, hang on to the cot, Dad, I might want to make use of that soon.” And he said, “Oh, what do you mean dear” and I said, “I’m thinking of having a baby” and he said, “Well, can’t you wait ‘til you get married dear?” and I said “At this point Dad, not really. Whatever comes first, the kid or the marriage, I’m not fussed.” And he said, “oh, don’t make me go through this with your mother dear.” I would probably have their support. They love me enough to probably give me that unconditionally. It would be a hassle at first, the tenth degree, the Spanish Inquisition, but it would be OK in the end. I think they’d understand and respect me…I know women have babies in their early forties, but I still want to be reasonably young. I mean, even if I got pregnant today, I’d still be thirty-six by the time I had it. And I just want it to start happening now at this age. Just to get on with it…I keep extending the time and I guess that's pretty common. People have said, “oh, by the time you're twenty-nine” and then it's thirty-four and then it's thirty-six…But it's like, “is it going to happen or not? How long am I going to just hang on?” So that's the major thing.

Q: How long do you feel you can extend it up too?
I don't know (crying). Not much longer I don't think...some people meet someone and it all happens really quickly. And I can probably imagine that happening with me, because things like that do happen with me. But then, it just may not happen at all. Most of my girlfriends say, "Just shut up and do it. Stop worrying." I've been thinking about it for so long, it's like, "just get on with it." And it pisses me off that some people it just happens to...For some people it just happens...They don't think about it...But for others, like me, it's, "oh God." You sit around waiting and wondering and it takes away from it.

5.3.3 Women ambivalent or undecided about motherhood (the waiters and watchers)

Ten women in the study were ambivalent or undecided about motherhood: Bethany, Jacinta, Samantha, Jocelyn, Kaitlin, Laney, Matilda, Martine, Rhyll and Catriona. For the waiters and watchers, neither childlessness nor motherhood is a fixed or important part of their imagined future and their identity. Waiters and watchers neither avoid nor pursue motherhood. Instead, their feelings and decisions about motherhood vacillate, often in response to the desires and experiences of their partners and/or their peer group. These women have a similar baseline orientation towards motherhood as women childless by relationship, although unlike women childless by relationship, waiters and watchers have not yet partnered or (because they are still many years away from menopause) have not finished discussing the possibility of parenting with their partners. It is possible, therefore, to predict that in the future some waiters and watchers, as a consequence of partnering with people similarly ambivalent or antagonistic towards childbearing, will become childless by relationship.
5.3.3.1 Neither childlessness nor motherhood as a fixed or important part of women’s identities

The waiters and watchers usually have some memories of their early ideas about marriage and motherhood, although these ideas are usually described as vague. While some waiters and watchers remember starting from a position of being vaguely in favour of having children, others recall being vaguely against. Thirty-three year-old Jocelyn remembers holding a hazy expectation that she would have children one day:

Q: When you were a little girl, do you remember if you wanted to grow up and get married and have kids, or…

I don’t really remember.

Q: Do you remember [any ideas you might have had] when you were an adolescent?

Not really. I mean probably at that time I sort of thought that [marriage and kids] would happen. But I don’t really have [any specific] recollection about my ideas about it at the time.

For thirty-one year-old Catriona, vague relationship plans were not accompanied with any ideas about motherhood:

As a little girl…I can’t remember whether I had a picture of that at all.

Q: And when you got older, as a teenager or as a young adult?
I didn't have a fantasy about getting married or anything… I had ideas about the kind of relationship I wanted to have. But that never extended to thinking about having children, really. I didn't really think about that.

5.3.4 The responsiveness of waiters and watchers intentions and desires regarding children to their partners’ and peer groups’ desires and experiences

Thirty-two year-old Kaitlin is highly ambivalent and undecided about having children. Her job in the women’s health sector has given her a good vantage-point from which to observe the myriad of difficulties working women face when they become mothers. However, she recently enjoyed time she spent with her friend’s two year-old:

I visited my girlfriend… out in the suburbs… [and] her child was the most delightful two-year-old person I've ever met. I had more fun with him than with her. I mean she's a great woman, she's so well read, she's stimulating and challenging. She loves being a mother and that's really positive. The child is so well balanced because she's so well balanced, the father is happy. They are really doing it and they are happy and enjoying their life, which is fantastic to see, and it's nice to be part of that.

Q: Why did you find him more interesting then her?

Oh, because I haven't had much to do with two-year-olds for twenty years. It was like a whole new discovery. I can't remember the last time I spoke to a child as the person I am now. It was like, “Wow, these little things are great.”... Still, it's seven days a week, every day, twenty-four hours a day. Something else you've got to take into consideration for the rest of your life, or the next twenty years as least... I have no fantasies around it... Every now and then I think, “It would be lovely, they're beautiful.” And
I'm very clucky when I hold a baby, but then I give it back and go, “Wow, thank God I don't have to look after this every day.” [I usually] say, “Nah, I'm never going to have children, I don't want to have kids, I don't want to be responsible for anybody else’s life” to actually [asking myself], “is that what you really think?”... Maybe I'll feel differently at thirty-seven...[At work I see a lot of] women really struggle to be a mother and work at the same time; women just being incredibly stressed. They've got to work part-time but they've got to work in a job that's unsatisfying. They're torn because they want to be with their babies. And then they can't do their fitness, because that's taking time away from their babies, let alone their partners. So where is their personal time for themselves? It isn't there. I'm watching women, so many roles and still thinking about what's going to get cooked for dinner and that sort of thing...

Twenty-nine year-old Bethany’s observations of her friends’ parenting experiences have left her feeling unsure of her own capacity to make the sacrifices she feels are necessary to parent well:

[I worry about what having a child] does to your lifestyle, and how it changes a relationship and that kind of thing. It’s obviously very theoretical for me now because I haven't experienced it.

Q: Where did your ideas about how it radically changes your life come from?

Well, everyone says it does...I know that most people who have just had a baby, and even for quite a long time afterwards, most people’s time is occupied with the children. And I think that - I know that - I have to feel that I can take that on, and be prepared for it, and I just don't feel like I could do that at the moment.
Laney’s primary concern about having children is of losing her sense of self. Her observation of the childbearing experiences of her friends and sisters has provided some examples to emulate, and some to avoid:

I would take it very seriously if I was going to have a child and so I would want to feel in myself that I could cope with the demands and I guess that's the main agenda. And the other thing - and it's more selfish but on the other hand more responsible for the child -- is that I would [need to] feel that I would be strong enough not to get swallowed up by motherhood. [My friend] has this jibe, "Well Laney, if you have a child, you'll know what you're in for. No one would be able to say that they didn't tell you." Because I've watched so many of my friends have kids.

Q: Have you seen them getting swallowed up?

But I think some have been able to maintain their own lives more than others…I identify more with their ability to maintain a sense of themselves for themselves.

5.4 WOMEN’S CHILDBEARING DECISIONS: SOME EXAMPLES

The following examples are designed to give a feel for how women’s baselines interact with social attitudes and circumstances and lead to their decisions about motherhood. The specific attitudes and circumstances that constrain women’s freedom to choose motherhood will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. In Chapter 11, I will return to the lives of these same women to discuss the specific impact social attitudes and circumstances had on their childbearing desires and/or decisions and to hypothesise how more
supportive social attitudes and circumstances might have led them to decide differently.

5.4.1 Childless by Choice

Rachel was one of the eldest daughters in a large family. Her father was a minister and her mother a homemaker. Rachel remembers her mother’s life as dominated by the responsibilities of caring for children, and supporting her husband in his as leader of their Church. One of Rachel’s enduring childhood memories is of the lack of personal space, and the need for her to assist her mother in meeting the perpetual needs of the younger children in the family. In response to these experiences, Rachel decided at an early age that she never wanted to have children. In her late teens, Rachel met a man who for whom she still feels great affection. However, she broke up the relationship after several years because she believed they would be incompatible in a number of ways. Firstly, she intended to get a University education and he was a tradesman. More importantly, however, he wanted children and she believed his parents would have put considerable pressure on her to “produce grandchildren.” She married Donald when she was twenty. He was a twin and felt a desire, because of the lack of personal space he experienced as a child, to remain childless. As a couple they have rarely wavered from this decision, although Donald did dissuade Rachel from becoming sterilised because, at that point, neither of his siblings had married or had children. When one did have children, satisfying Donald’s parents’ desires to have grandchildren, childbearing went off the agenda completely. Rachel has never felt pressure, either from her own
parents, her parents-in-law, or society at large to have children. Indeed, in the
last few years she has been told numerous times that her choice to avoid
childbearing was extremely “sensible.” Her relationship, and her chosen career,
have both turned out to be extremely fulfilling, though she is confident that even
if they had been less satisfying she would not have had children to fill the
emotional gaps in her life, but looked for different ways of finding satisfaction in
her life. Now aged forty-two, Rachel considers herself physically too old to bear
children.

Deborah’s parents divorced when she was young, and she spent a lot time
living with her grandmother while her mother worked. Her mother’s extended
absences - she often travelled for business as was away for months at a time -
gave Deborah strong views about the importance of mothers fulfilling traditional
“good” mother standards and constantly attending their young children. During
her childhood, Deborah’s mother constantly told her that whatever she did, she
should never have children. Deborah says she never felt what she considers to
be a “normal” desire for children, and when she was eighteen swore she would
never have children. She married young, but the marriage failed when she was
in her thirties. This was the age at which she felt she “should” have children,
and which she saw as the “right” age to have children. Indeed, she suggested to
her estranged husband that they have a child to save the marriage, but he had
rejected the offer as a bad idea. Several years later Deborah re-partnered with
a man who wanted her to move overseas with him and have his children. She
terminated the relationship because she feared unable to cope either with the
move or with motherhood. Now she lives with a man who has grown up
children, no desire for any more, and a vasectomy. Although she finds the
relationship unsatisfying on some levels, she continues it because she has no
wish to be alone, and because she still feels no strong physical “need” to have
children. Despite this, she believes that had she met Mr Right when she was in
her early thirties, he might have kindled in her the yearning for a child she had
never experienced and she would have had children. However, even if such a
man came along now, she feels that at age thirty-eight she is both too far
beyond her ideal childbearing age and too emeshed in her identity as a
childless woman to become a mother now.

5.4.2 Childless by relationship

Kelly’s father died when she was an infant, and she and her older sister were
raised by a violent mother, often in conditions of poverty. Kelly ran away from
home as a teenager with the man who was to become her husband and soon
afterwards found herself pregnant. Fearing that if she told her mother about the
pregnancy it would confirm her mother’s prediction that she would “never
amount to anything,” she had an abortion. She moved overseas with her
husband several years later, but returned to Australia years later after the
marriage broke up to his infidelity. Kelly had always had plans to become a
mother, although her own violent childhood meant she felt significant anxiety
over her capacity to be a “good” — ever available, ever patient — mother. In
addition, despite the high value she places on work (it stimulates her
intellectually and provides her with a sense that she amounts to something) she
believes a good mother must provide constant care for her own child. This
determination to work and to mother meant Kelly changed her occupation in her
early thirties in order to begin working in an area she saw as more compatible
with being a full-time stay-at-home mother. When Kelly met Ivan, she
immediately felt they were meant to be life partners. However, despite her
sense that her time was running out, Ivan was reluctant to discuss parenthood.
In the face of his resistance to fatherhood, Kelly began re-examining her own
anxieties about motherhood; in particular her fear of losing her temper and
being violent with her children. Yet, Kelly feared that she might regret a decision
to remain childless, and was unsure how to give a childless life the same
existential meaning she felt attached to a parenting life. She began to seek out
other childless women in similarly intense and satisfying romantic partnerships,
soliciting their views about the possibility of regret and existential meaning in a
childless life. Once Kelly decided not to have children, she decided to, in her
words, make her work “her baby. This was five years ago, and although only
aged thirty-nine, Kelly has fully accepted her imagined future and identity as a
childless woman and says she can no longer “see herself” as a mother.

Sharon and her sister and brother were raised on a farm. Despite the fact that
both her mother and father were highly educated, the family moved overseas
and in general adapted itself to her father’s career, while her mother abandoned
her job once she had kids and spent her life farming and raising children.
Sharon grew up feeling that her brother was favoured by her father, and given
more advantages, because he was a boy. She grew up seeing the having and
raising of children as a natural and normal part of life and says it was always expected that she and her siblings would get an education, marry and have children (in that order). From her late teens to her mid-twenties, Sharon rebelled against such expectations. In contrast to her siblings who were working their way through University and getting married and having children, she read feminist theory, questioned marriage and her sexuality, and began working as a chef. During this time, she formed no lasting and meaningful relationships with either sex. However, in her thirties she began and completed her MBA, began working long hours in an office, and formed a lasting relationship with Martin. She began observing the difficulties faced by the parents, particularly the mothers, who worked in her office. In her view, working parenthood was a source of constant stress for parents who were expected to put in the same long hours as those without dependent children and feel constantly feeling guilty about the long hours their children spent in care. These observations led her the view that childbearing was an irrational choice for women to make, but also a commitment, should she decide to have children, to quit work and stay home full-time for at least five years. Then, unexpectedly, Sharon began to feel a strong desire to have children; one she attributes to her growing sense of security in her relationship with Martin. When Martin resisted, they began attending counselling. But despite her sudden inability to see herself remaining childless, Sharon is committed to staying with Martin whatever the outcome of his therapy. This is because she thinks it unlikely that, at the age of thirty-five, she is likely to find another man who she will like as much as Martin and who wants children before her fertility expires. It is also because she is daunted by
the prospect of becoming impregnated and then raising children “properly” on her own.

5.4.3 Thwarted mothers

Kylie was raised in a large and loving family by a full-time stay-at-home Mum and a working Dad. She always thought she would marry and have children and once she did marry, in her early twenties, she began pressuring her husband to agree to have children. He resisted because of concerns about the financial stress associated with childbearing and so when she “fell” unexpectedly pregnant, she felt forced to seek an abortion. The abortion, and the reluctance her husband expressed about having children that contributed to it, were the primary reasons the marriage ended several years later. During her short marriage, Kylie was disappointed to find her school marks too low to get into a medical course to train as a nurse. As a consequence, she followed her husband’s advice and became a model, but found the work boring and unsatisfying. She soon began working in a furniture chain, where she built herself up to a position of independence and responsibility. At the time of interview, however, she had just quit this job because she felt it was too comfortable and that she needed new challenges. Despite the fact that work is an important source of identity and emotional and financial independence for Kylie, she has strong views about how “good” mothers care for young children. Specifically, she believes a good mother sees motherhood, not her job, as her primary career. The conflict between the value she places on work and her views about how good mothers feel and behave has led Kylie to defer getting
pregnant despite the keenness of her new husband, Paul, to get things underway immediately. At age thirty-one, Kylie has given herself a year to plan how she is going to combine work and motherhood and to implement those plans before beginning efforts to conceive. Her current plan is to find work that pays decently and that she can do at home; enabling her to provide all or most of the care for her children.

Karla was raised in a Jewish family where both she and her brother were expected to have a successful career, marry within the faith and have children. When she was sixteen, her family moved from New Zealand to provide she and her brother with a larger pool of potential Jewish spouses from which to choose. However, while her brother did meet a Jewish woman and has had children, Karla was not as successful. In addition, her graduation with qualifications to teach coincided with a period of extremely high unemployment, and she found it impossible to get work. When she finally did secure work as a teacher, she found it unsatisfying. Throughout this period, Karla felt her desire to mother intensify. The time she spent with her niece and nephew convinced her that where she lacked the ambition to have a career, she had what it took to be good at mothering. She considered finding a sperm donor, but found it difficult to relinquish the desire instilled in her by her family to have children in the context of stable married relationship. At one point, she joined forces with a gay man who agreed to marry her and father her children, but at the last minute he called the engagement off. Lately, Karla had returned to considering less convention ways of becoming pregnant although she is uncertain about how
she would go about finding a sperm donor, the legal requirements of his relationship to her child, and what level of involvement she would like him to have in her child’s life. She knows her parents will disapprove of her having a baby outside of marriage, but will ultimately provide her with practical and financial support. Yet, at age thirty-five, she still believes there is a slim chance she might meet someone and everything will fall in place quickly. She is fearful of giving up her dream of having children the conventional way too soon, and fearful of leaving the pursuit of less conventional ways of having children too late.

5.4.4 Waiters and watchers

Martine’s early life was dominated by the tragic death of her infant sister Julia to cystic fibrosis. Her parents’ marriage, marred by their shared grief for her sister, was unhappy. Martine’s mother, however, felt too financially dependent and cut off from family support to leave her father. This was despite the fact that her mother worked from the time Martine was young and, due to the ups and downs of her father’s business fortunes, was the only source of steady household income. During her childhood, Martine’s mother repeatedly expressed the view that the maternal instinct was a “crock,” as she had never experienced it either with Martine or with Julia. Further, she encouraged Martine never to marry. Her father made it clear to Martine that if she had children, he would not consent to her mother minding them. Despite this Martine has no recollection of deciding as a child that she would not have children. Indeed, she developed considerable competence with young children, helping to care for the children of
the woman who looked after her while her mother worked. Martine’s parents wanted her to finish University (her mother had dropped out when she discovered she was pregnant with Martine), travel and avoid settling down in suburbia. She fulfilled these desires, completing her education, taking up a series of jobs that would lead ultimately to her assuming the directorship of a museum and taking up residence in an inner-city suburb. During this time, Martine observed a number of her friends marry and have children. She saw egalitarian marriages deteriorate into traditional arrangements in which the woman abandoned her career and financial independence to raise the children, while the husband became morose and taciturn and spent increasing amounts of time at the office. During this period, she began a relationship with a musician with a heroin addiction. One night they had unprotected sex and afterwards she informed him that if she fell pregnant she would have an abortion. He agreed, then went overseas on tour. When she did discover she was pregnant, however, she rang all across Europe until she tracked him down in a hotel room. Stuck in a crowded room, he responded to her news with a terse reminder that they had already discussed the issue. She felt angered by this response, and says that while she thinks she would still have had the abortion, she wanted him to tell her not to go ahead with it. Her current attitude towards childbearing is that it is not and will not be on her agenda unless and until she is involved in a successful relationship.

Jacinta was raised as one of four children in a Catholic working class family. Jacinta’s mother was the second of a nine child family in which the boys were
openly favoured over the girls. Consequently, Jacinta’s mother spent a large part of her childhood raising her seven younger brothers and sisters. Despite the fact that Jacinta feels her mother was vary loving and maternal to she and her sisters growing up, her mother will only consent infrequently to baby-sitting for her grandchildren, Jacinta’s nieces and nephews, and then only on her terms. Jacinta’s father was largely absent during her childhood, gambling and drinking away most of his salary, and providing little childrearing assistance to her mother. Jacinta remembers that in primary school she swore she’d never have children or marry, a view that was reinforced when her mother fell pregnant again at age thirty-nine. Aged fifteen, already suffering her first of two bouts of anorexia, Jacinta felt revolted at the fact that her parents were still having sex and was shocked at the difficulties her mother, suffering serious post-natal depression, had caring for the new baby. When Jacinta married Ronald in her twenties, she remained convinced that having a baby was too high risk. Not only was she anxious about how she would respond to her larger body shape during pregnancy, she worried about changing the dynamics of her very happy marriage. She was also worried that motherhood would turn her into a “dumpy Mum,” a woman locked in her house with her children, cut off from meaningful interaction with the outside world. However, recently, Jacinta has agreed to Ronald’s request that they have a baby, despite the fact that she remains highly ambivalent at the prospect of motherhood. She has agreed, in large part, because Ronald is both qualified and willing to provide primary care for their baby, leaving her to avoid “dumpy mumhood” through the continued pursuit of her education and her career.
CONCLUSION

The data suggest that that a meaningful distinction exists between women’s childbearing desires and intentions, and their childbearing decisions. The examples suggest that most women’s feelings about childbearing remain consistent from the point at which their baselines are established until after a decision about childbearing is made. Sharon still desires children despite the fact that she predicts she will decide against having them should Martin’s therapy fail to change his mind. Jactina still feels ambivalent and undecided about having children despite the fact that she has decided to assent to Ronald’s desire to have them. The exception to this trend appears to be women who are months or years past the decision-making point. It is at this point that women’s previous desires regarding children recede and women, like Kelly, no longer feel able to ‘imagine’ a future with motherhood in it and themselves as mothers. This change in desire would be necessary for women who seek to see themselves as authors and agents of their lives. It would be impossible, in other words, for women to feel their lives demonstrated the narrative consistency and control characteristic of a chosen life if they retained a life story that began with a desire for children and ended with childlessness and/or they retained an ongoing grief about or yearning for a life journey they had “failed” to achieve.

What is clear is that social forces play an important role in establishing women’s baseline orientation towards motherhood, and in their decision-making about
children. Early childhood experiences, like the experience and attitude a woman’s mother had towards childbearing and a woman’s own experience with her own siblings and other young children, contribute to a woman’s baseline orientation towards childbearing. Later experiences reinforce or undermine earlier views, often illuminating the conflicts between early views about how children ought to be raised and later commitments to relationships and/or paid employment as a source of fulfilment and identity. Women’s desires regarding children influence their choice of partners, and their partner’s desires regarding children and their willingness to share the burden of childrearing subsequently influences women’s decisions about motherhood. All of this takes place against the background of a society that largely sees childbearing as a choice, rather than a mandate for women, yet endorses values that make motherhood appear an “irrational” choice.

In Chapter 5, I look at women’s explanations for their desire and/or intentions to pursue or to avoid motherhood, and the assumptions that undergird some of these desires and intentions.
Chapter 6

Wanting Children/Not Wanting Children: Women’s Reasons for and Against

No one knows what the right thing is. First we come to believe that developing ourselves is the right thing. Then we hear that motherhood is the right thing after all. But how are we supposed to integrate the two? The only role model presented to us that attempted the mix has been the "having-it-all" woman who has a slick career and perfect children, and collapses from exhaustion each night after the last dinner plate is cleared.


6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I look at women’s explanations for their desire/decision to have and not to have children, and the sometimes unrecognised assumptions that undergird these feelings and decisions. All the women in the study could see both positive and negative aspects of a decision to remain childless or to have children. This means that in the current sample, even women who were childless by choice – those most “independently” committed to childlessness – cited some grounds for childbearing and some against remaining childless. In the same way, thwarted mothers – women with the most independent commitment to motherhood – saw some advantages to remaining childless and disadvantages to having children. This mix of feelings and reasons, often coexisting in the same women, explains why many women feel choice – with its connotation of certainty, conscious rationality and deliberateness – fails to
capture how they arrived on the childless path they are travelling. As Andrea Cook wrote in a recent letter to *The Age*:

I'm your [childless] "subject" - a 34-year-old, university-educated, childless woman. Not by choice. It just happened that way. That's the way my life has unfolded. I never once sat down and tallied up the pros and cons with children on one side of the balance sheet and work/finances on the other. Your editorial is not unique in giving the impression that women like me are consciously and selfishly deciding to abandon family and children in favor of getting ahead. The truth is more complicated, far less self-absorbed and much less rational.

In laying out women’s personal motivations for desiring/pursuing childlessness and desiring/pursuing motherhood, I also hope to provide an overview of the issues and concerns underlying women’s decision-making around motherhood. This precedes the more concerted focus on the primary underlying causes of circumstantial childlessness: “good” motherhood prescriptions, difficulties in finding and staying with Mr/Ms (wants to have children) Right and the conflict between motherhood, paid employment and individualist/consumerist socially normative views of how people ought to live undertaken in Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9, respectively.
6.2 WHY REMAIN CHILDLESS?

6.2.1 The all-encompassing nature of maternal responsibility and commitment

Many women were concerned about committing themselves to the responsibilities of motherhood. These women described motherhood as an all-encompassing “twenty-four hour a day” responsibility from which either a woman is never free, or is only freed when her child reaches adulthood. A number of women expressed concern about the irreversibility of the decision to accept the responsibilities of motherhood.

6.2.1.1 24 hour a day responsibility and commitment

To Lorne, the unremitting responsibilities of motherhood would lead her to spend non-quality time with her children, and perhaps even hit them:

Q: Do you remember, growing up, any ideas or feelings you had about getting married or having children?

I think I must have, because I have a really small book that had babies’ names, and I used to pore through that, and I loved my dolls, loved my dolls. I still have my dolls - Barbie dolls. I loved dressing them up and all that sort of stuff. But you know, dolls you can just chuck away in the drawer, so they're a little bit different than babies…My nephews and I have a fantastic time for [the] two hours [that I babysit]. We laugh and talk and read. No TV…no videos…they know the routine…I can't stand the old video games and PlayStation and crap. I want to talk.
Q: But you worry that if you were a mother it would be different?

Yes!...Because I'd be just wrung out. I mean, you have to be on call twenty-four hours a day, so I'd just be a raving lunatic. I'd be slapping them around...

Kaitlin enjoyed spending time with her friend’s child, but is doubtful whether that enjoyment could carry over into a relationship with a child that was “seven days a week...twenty-four hours a day...for the rest of your life”:

I visited my girlfriend...out in the suburbs...[and] her child was the most delightful two-year-old person I've ever met...Still, it's seven days a week, every day, twenty-four hours a day. Something else you've got to take into consideration for the rest of your life, or the next twenty years at least...I have no fantasies around it...Every now and then I think, “It would be lovely, they're beautiful.” And I'm very clucky when I hold a baby, but then I give it back and go, “Wow, thank God I don't have to look after this every day.”

6.2.1.2  Irreversibility of the childbearing decision

Part of Barbara’s self definition as a “wild girl” has been her demonstrated willingness to make unpredictable decisions that often lead to her jettisoning socially valued commitments. Although she acknowledges that in the last few years she has made a strong commitment to her job and her husband, a child would symbolise an even less negotiable commitment she could not jettison to waitress in “Dublin or Santorini”:

I used to be a sort of wild girl...I [had] a great job with a great income and a house and at thirty-five thought,
“Bugger this I'm leaving...I'll go to London.” People said, “You can't buy a house and go to London. And I said watch me!” So I did. Gave up the great job, the whole career thing...and went to London and waitressed. And travelled around...and then thought, “This is a bit stupid.”... I think that was a last ditch effort to pretend I'm a Bohemian. You know and can get up and go. I've always had this thing in life: wanting that ability to get up and go, and change my life at any time. And now I've really come to terms with the fact that I can't necessarily do that, and it pisses me off...Because I've got a very successful practice...and I'm married and I adore my husband, but the idea that I can't get up and go and be a waitress in Dublin or Santorini...

Q: That's hard for you?

Absolutely. Very hard....it terrifies me that you make a choice in life that then immediately sets off a whole chain of events that then limits your choice. That if I had a child, could I then not pursue my career - stuck! Trapped! The idea of being trapped is the most - I hate the idea of being trapped. Of making choices that are not reversible... I know that if I had a child my first responsibility would be to the child and not myself and that's the deal. That's the deal...that the child has to come first. Now in my work I've always put my clients first, my clients come before my husband, my personal time, my private life, my recreation. It's a responsibility. But I can always manage that responsibility. You know, I can cancel the appointment. But with a child, you can't.

Lorne also finds the irreversibility of a decision to become a mother daunting:

Q: What kind of woman is the kind of woman who doesn't want to have children? Are you that kind of woman?

Yeah. I guess all the cliches. I'm independent, fiercely so. I don't like being trapped. My partner comments on the fact that I often walk around with my shoelaces undone, and he thinks it's so I can step out at any moment.
Q: Do you think that's true?

Yeah, I do. I do. And the funny thing is I actually don't go out too much at night, but I like the thought that I can if I want to. For some reason, that is incredibly important to me.

6.2.2 Children are hard work and women’s work

Undergirding women’s conceptions of maternal responsibility as unremitting and all-encompassing are sometimes only partially recognised beliefs and assumptions about the normative and practical requirements of motherhood. Motherhood is seen as hard work and women’s work. For many women, motherhood is understood as a woman’s full-time occupation, or her dominant role, particularly when her children are young. This vision means that women assume the lion’s share of parental responsibility and the “hard work” of childcare. While some see the hard work of motherhood comprising women’s assumption of the “traditional” home-based role, others see it primarily made up of the juggle between maternal responsibilities and other pursuits, including full or part-time paid employment. In either case, most women assume that they, not their male partners, must face the difficult choices about work and childcare raised by the arrival of a new baby.

6.2.2.1 Hard work

Bethany concludes that young children are hard work from the experience of friends with young children:
I think I would probably like to watch a child, or children, grow up. I'm sure there are great pleasures in watching children grow up. I think it is just a matter of finding a way that I can do it...where I won't find all of it a hard slog. Where there are some rewards.

Q: You seem to have a very concrete vision of the slog...Where has that come from?

[I know a couple with two young children and] it seems hard for both of them. And I just think, "Oh my God."

Q: What about it seems hard?

The sleep issue is a big thing for me. Because I feel like [they] are always really tired all the time and I'm a complete disaster area when I'm tired...I'm just really grumpy and I get really emotional. I'm like a little child...I cry at the drop of a hat. And I just think, "Tired, and having a little baby. Yikes, it sounds really scary." And it seems like it's a big juggling act, trying to get everything organised. [The male partner in the couple] was just saying the other day that [they] always have to plan activities. You have to do this, and take one to an activity and always having to make sure they are occupied. It just seems like such a lot of work.

Hilary also sees children as a lot of hard work, although she is particularly worried about the teenage years:

If we're going to have children, we'd better have them soon, because if I have a child now, that child will be a teenager [when I'm] fifty. And that's a worry...I don't want to be coping with teenage trauma and puberty and crap like that when I'm fifty years old. Maybe I will [cope], maybe I'll take it in my stride [but] I just imagine what a fifty year-old wants to do with their life. That's maybe when they're thinking about the world cruise, or something like
that. Or laying back and relaxing. So [my husband and I] are prepared to work really hard for the next twenty years and then reap the benefits after that so that in our later years the hard work should be behind us. But if we leave it, teenage children would be hard work I think.

For Latisha, the equation is direct:

Q: Word association, “having children”?

Hard work.

6.2.2.2 Women’s work

Brenda didn’t realise it, but she came by her assumption that it would and should be her that sacrifices paid employment and other life interests and commitments in order to parent full-time from her father:

Q: When you were growing up did you plan to have a job or a career?

I was very unrealistic when I was growing up, and I wanted to be famous. And there was never any question we would go get a tertiary education and get a degree. Dad put that into our heads because he never had the opportunity to and he said, “The only thing I want you to do is get a degree.”

Q: Did you do that?

Yeah we both did...He always said to me [that] you should find a career that you can fall back on. You know, “If you’re going to get married and have kids get that degree so you
can always go back to work. Get that job that you can always go back to."

Q: So the expectation wasn't that your career would be the centre-piece of your life, but rather that it would be something that would be there if things didn't work out and…

Yeah, that's true, yeah. Didn't realise that but yeah, that's obviously what was behind all of that. The expectation was that I'd get married, have children and have this career to go back to after I'd had children.

Lorne’s description of the horrors motherhood holds for her always have her in the role many of her friends have assumed; that of the full-time homemaker sacrificing everything with hubby “bringing home the bacon” and wanting “medals” for providing even the most minimal assistance:

My closest friend was desperate to have a happy family, so she turned them out quick smart, like in her early twenties. She has never been with another guy, which is just so foreign to me. The whole thing actually, but I've seen that a couple of times. So they have a big, happy family for ten years and then disaster strikes…I'm intrigued watching other couples, how they do it, and none of it has ever appealed to me.

Q: Can you put your finger on what doesn't appeal?

I suppose the churning out of the family and the mother at home looking after the kids while the husband is out bringing home the bacon, that sort of thing… Only one of my friends is prepared to admit it, and she's just bowls me over. She's got four kids, she's been married ten years. She actually said, I was nearly in tears when she told me because I was so embarrassed. She said, "Lorne, don't
have kids, just don't have kids." She said, "Don't get me wrong I absolutely love my kids." She's a great mother, motherhood is everything to her. But she said, "The last ten years has been ruined for me. I would have loved to have travelled and loved to have done this, but you know, I can't. And she said, "I'm just waiting, there's another six years until they turn fifteen." Then she and the husband are going to start living. And later I just cried about that. I just thought, "never." Because that's how I'd be, I'd resent it...I can actually feel resentment building up in me just pretending it through...I figure that means that I'm just not into sacrifice, or [I'm] selfish and all those things so I guess that's just bad luck, if that's the way I am. But I'm also not into pretending. I wouldn't be able to pretend...I just think mothers are just absolute angels, they're on such pedestals but it's a pedestal I've never wanted to sort of sit on myself. I see them all around me, my friends, it just never ceases to amaze me what they do. And it's all just quietly done. And the husbands I see, who are all fantastic guys, but if they do something like sweeping the floor, they expect three million gold medals.

Martine has always assumed she would work and highly values her career. She envisions children would turn her into every other mother she knows: at home, financially dependent, bearing the brunt of the work of childcare and making most of the sacrifices:

My parents always wanted me to do the things that they didn't do…They wanted to travel the world and they didn't do it because Mum fell pregnant with me. If they had any aspirations for me, one that I would go to University probably because Dad hasn't had that much schooling. And the other was that I would do interesting things and that I would travel the world and explore and not get tied down in suburbia. So, in many ways, I've done that...When I was seven I told them that I wanted to be a librarian, and I stuck with it until I was fifteen when I decided I wanted to become a Museum director, which is what I am now. So there's never been any kind of point where I didn't know what I wanted to do. The only thing my mother ever wanted for me was to be economically independent from my father; that's the only thing she's ever wanted...
Q: Just like she didn't really want to be dependent on him?

Yes.

Q: Did she ever say anything about you ever being dependent on another man?

…I'm pretty sure she used to say, “Have your own money, be independent.” I think the implication was to not only be independent from Dad but be independent from your partner…The people I grew up with who got married and had children, they did it in their early twenties, so their whole life is completely different to mine and has been for years and years.

Q: Are you talking about what they do day to day, or their outlook?

Both…I look at them and I'm reminded of my Mum and Dad's concerns, the house in the suburbs and…they behave like them in some ways…I'm thinking of a couple in particular who before they were married we used to have loads of fun together, but the last time I was back he had turned into that kind of taciturn man who comes home late from his business and she was the one looking after the children…I actually think that's what happens. I haven't seen many relationships that have successfully stuck out their children's lives. Even the ones that I thought were quite sharing of responsibility and had good communication have split up. From the outside it looked like he got jack of the attention given to the kids and wandered off. That's my expectation of it actually. That the woman ends up bearing the brunt of the physical and the emotional work and whether she does it because he foists it on her or whether she does it because she pulls it away from him - it just happens and there's no escape from it…
Sharon’s upbringing and experience had led her to decide to leave work to raise young children, rather than attempt the working mother juggle. Although she laments the loss of her career, she assumes that it is her (and other working mothers) who are responsible for ensuring that a child doesn’t get left “for the rest of their life” in childcare:

Having kids is going to screw up my comfortable existence…and it really puts paid to lots of notions of career. There are careers you can have with children, but it is tough going and there’s a limit. It is definitely not equal out there for men and women in the business world, especially for women with kids. It’s just really a hard juggling act and I see it with people I work with, and I just think, it’s dreadful.

Q: What do you see?

The conflicting demands between your jobs. I'm in a job where I work fifty to sixty hours a week. And there are people [in my office who are] trying to bring up young kids and work at the same time. And you have to be there at work, otherwise you're not being serious, but with young kids, there is this guilt that you should be spending more time with the kids. And can you put them in creche at six months and leave them there for the rest of their lives. I look at that and I see other people having kids like that and I think, “I don't want to do that.” If I had kids I would give up work for probably five years. So I suppose one of my models of bringing up children is that if you're doing it, you are there with the kids and you teach them a lot. I suppose that is how I was brought up, So I think if you're going to have kids, why not actually do it properly…That's what I would say now [but] who knows? People say that you go stir crazy and maybe it's not the right thing to do and you really should go back to work…I think the pre-

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20 Creche is the Australian term for a child-care centre.
child or the post-child world are fairly different places for a lot of women.

Kylie’s upbringing has also given her strong feelings about the inadvisability of placing young children in childcare for long periods of time, or at all. Yet Kylie is palpably concerned about the loss of financial independence she would suffer by becoming a full-time mother. However, despite her anxieties about the hard nature of the available choices, she assumes that they are women’s – and so by implication hers – to face. When asked about this assumption, Kylie attributes it to her lesser earning power relative to her partner:

I can have that the mother works, and that the kid is looked after maybe for a percentage of the time. But not where the career becomes more important than the children. I think if you decide to have kids, you decide to have kids. That’s just my viewpoint, I can have that other people have different viewpoints and that some women are more career-orientated. I’m not. At this stage anyway. Maybe in a few years I will be. But at this stage I’m not. And I think it’s very important that the kids grow up and have that stability.

Q: So what are your work plans when you are pregnant and after the baby is born?

Well I would like to have something there that’s mine. And ideally something like work from home, that would be great. From my viewpoint I think that would be excellent to have that position. Where it’s like, you have your own area of interest, your own income source. Whether you’re working with your husband or whatever, just as long as you’ve got something going on. But the kids are there, like, as a part of that thing. Or you know, at some stage if they get dropped or whatnot. But not where it’s a regular thing that they’re at childcare and they can’t even talk yet. Or they’re this big and they’re being dropped off at eight thirty and picked up at six. I don’t think that that’s necessarily a
good thing. But I understand that women who maybe aren't so financially set up, that there would be no option, and that would be difficult for them, but a necessity. Whereas with me, it's not a necessity and I would choose to wear the hat of a mother a bit more strongly than maybe they would...But the choice to be a mother is an important hat for me.

Q: But it's not so important that you'd be willing to have nothing that is yours?

Well, that's something that I'm toying with. Only from the viewpoint that I would like to be independent and haven't really ever been in a situation where I've had somebody else pay for me, or for us. It's having to come to grips with that idea of what I'm doing...A mother is a career, if that's what you choose to do, and you choose to stop work. And to have your husband pay for that. [But] I don't quite feel comfortable with it. Only because I've never actually turned around to somebody and said "Here, I need some money. Can you pay for bla de bla?" So maybe when it comes that I have kids I'll decide that I don't want to work. I don't know.

Q: It sounds also like there is a built in assumption here that if someone needs to be home for them, and they're not going to be in creche for long periods of time, that someone is going to be you?

Yeah, oh yeah. Definitely. Yeah.

Q: If your situation were different, would you be just as happy for that someone to be him?

I don't have a problem with who it is. But in this situation, he earns more money than what I do. And thus it's more survival for the family for him to work.
Jocelyn’s vague plans for motherhood involve her juggling a mitigated version of her currently high-powered career with the responsibilities of motherhood. While she also assumes that it is the mother, and so by implication her, who will have to juggle in order to ensure the child doesn’t spend too much time in care, she doesn’t have an in principle objection to those sacrifices being made by the child’s father:

[My friends are] both working really hard. So they'll do things like come home late, and the child will still be awake, and they'll bring the child presents. Bad stuff like that. And [my friend] says to me, "It's horrible, I'm becoming the typical hard working over-working mother who has to find ten minutes to find a new present every day for the child whom she doesn't see except in the morning just before work." And I don't know. Bringing a child into the world for that doesn't seem quite the right thing to do…

Q: What do you think you should bring them into the world for?

To be a part of your life, but a real part, and not just - I don't know. There was an article recently about working women in the paper. I only read a tiny bit of it. But one of the women was saying that she got just an hour with her kid every now and then. Watched videos with the child, doing school exercises, swimming races, so that she felt that she had some involvement. But she was glad that she had a child because she could do it all. And that sort of attitude I don't think is very good for a child. Maybe that child will end up having a very nice life, but I guess it's just not the way that I've been brought up…My mother was at home until [my sister] went to primary school, and then after that she was teaching, so she was pretty much home by the same time that we were home.
Q: Would you be willing to do that? Your job at the moment wouldn't fit that schedule?

It wouldn't. But maybe there would be some part-time option, or something like that...I think there's a difference between coming home at five and coming home systematically at nine o'clock every night. I mean, coming home at nine every night would be hard enough if it were just you and a partner. But if it were you and a partner and children, I don't see the point in it really.

Q: And do you feel the same way? Like not seeing the point when you think about a man, a father, systematically coming home at nine at night? Or do you feel differently about a mother?

Yeah, no, yeah I think that, that – I probably do feel a bit differently about a father. Like if father came home at eight at night and the mother came home at eight every night, I would think one of them, probably the mother, should try and get home a bit earlier. But if there was a situation where the father was able to work from home and I was coming home late, then that would be a bit better, because there would be someone there with the child.

Q: So it doesn't necessarily have to be the mother?

Not necessarily.
6.2.3 No husband or family support

Many women’s assumptions or beliefs that they will bear the bulk of the work and sacrifices entailed by parenthood are grounded in a realistic assessment of their situation. Some women know that their and/or their partner’s family or their partner are unwilling or unable to help them and/or that their lesser market earning power means it “makes more sense” that they be the ones to stay at home. Indeed, the recognition several women have of their partner’s unwillingness to share the burden and/or their lesser earning power has led them in the past to seek, to seek currently or to have secured a relationship with a wealthier men whose money will assist them to purchase the assistance that would otherwise be unavailable.

Janet receives an unemployment benefit. Recently she aborted a baby she wanted, and had initially decided to keep, because of her own lack of financial wherewithal and a lack of support – or a perceived lack of support – from her family and the baby’s father:

Q: …how did you feel after the termination?

I was absolutely confident. I mean, I acknowledged that it wasn’t the perfect outcome, but I was very clear about actually doing it.

Q: What would have been the perfect outcome?
Having the baby (she sighs). Having been in the circumstances that would’ve felt, to me, comfortable and appropriate for having the baby.

Q: And what would those circumstances have been?

Being out of debt, having a reasonable income, living in a nice house and having a lot more support, or what I perceived as a lot more support [from family and the father].

Kelly’s lack of family support and her reluctance to ask her friends for help was a real negative on the childbearing scorecard:

I used to think about was how difficult it would be for us, given that we don't have any parents. There’s no extended family of mine or his in [name of City]... I remember thinking that was a huge obstacle actually because I would have always felt a bit strange about asking my friends to help me. You know, unless they had children of their own, in which case they'd know what to expect. But I have friends now who have children and I know they feel the same way about asking me, even though I'm quite happy to go look after their kids. It's quite a novelty. But they always look at us at a last resort and I can't convince them otherwise. They just think, "It's too much of an imposition."

Tina delayed having children with her now ex-husband because his lack of “readiness” meant he wouldn’t have fulfilled even the most minimal requirements of fatherhood. Tina still hopes for a father who will “help,” but is actively searching for one who is making “a little bit of a living” so she can buy the help she wants and clearly assumes she won’t get elsewhere:

Q: Did it bother you that [Daniel] was saying he didn’t want to [have children yet]?
No, because I knew Daniel just didn't have the patience for children at that stage. He just so wasn't ready…I knew the way he was around his nephews...[If] we were babysitting and God forbid I said to him, “Change a nappy,” well that he wouldn't do. Or if [the kids] were there and he wanted to watch the TV, he's say, “Can't we get the kid to shut up, I want to watch this.” He just didn't have an understanding about children, and after seeing that there was no way I was going to push him into having children. When I eventually bring up children I want it to be with a person who really wants children as well and who is prepared to help;...to play an active role in parenthood.... You just become set in your ways [when you have a child]. I love getting up in the morning [and] leaving the house for a walk or to go to the gym. Having a child [will mean] having to organise a baby sitter or only going to the gym when it suits the child or when your husband is around...Being woken up in the night, my absolute worst.

Q: But yet you are saying you would like to have children. Why?

I do [but] I [also] want quality of life too, and I believe I'm ambitious enough to have both, the children and the quality of life. I need a husband who has the capacity to earn relatively well, so that I can actually organise a nanny, or I can send my children to creche...I want to know that I can go a gym with a creche, put the kids in the creche and not worry about the $4.00 that I'm spending on it and go and do my workout. If I was struggling for money, I wouldn't want to bring children into this world because then I would really have to give up my entire lifestyle. I am prepared to compromise within reason. I'm not prepared to say, "Now I'm going to have children, I've got to give up the gym, I've got to give up all my activities, we can never go out to dinner for the next fourteen years." I want to be both, a parent, and a human being. I want to be able to get a nanny [and say], “Please look after the children for the next week, my husband and I are going on holiday.” That's what I want, so I've got to find somebody who's making a little bit of a living.
Bethany is engaged to a man with a good earning capacity, a fact on which she will be relying should she have children given his stated refusal to change any aspect of his life to accommodate the work of childcare:

I will play a bigger parenting role. I know that because Jack’s told me that he will still be going to work, and he will pretty much be doing what he's doing now. So it will be up to me and - if I get help - up to me and the help except when he is home…

Q: And are you happy that is the way it is going to be once you have children?

It is hard to know what it will be like. He says at the moment how he finds babies disgusting and one vomited on him the other day and he thought it was foul, and he was just really grossed out by the whole thing. And he says, "I don't want to come home and change shitty nappies after I've had a long day at work." It's hard to tell if that is his perception now because he's seeing other people's babies and not his, or whether he'll be really like that. We had a conversation a while ago and I was saying, "You know, it would be nice if you would come home and change one nappy at least," and he felt the whole thing was a bit ridiculous because it was all not happening now. I mean, I know that he would help me; that he wouldn't just let me do absolutely everything. And I also know that he earns enough money for us to be able to have someone to help, which would be good because [even though] I don't see myself as a career person, I'll probably always do bits and pieces just to earn a bit of money. But I think he'll principally be the supportive person financially and I think it is fair enough if he's been working all day that he shouldn't have to come home and also work more. I mean, I'll have been working all day but I might have someone who helps me so there might be [the chance] to have a bit of time to myself as well. In which case I think it is perfectly reasonable for him to be able to come home after work and not have to do too much. I mean, he might want to cook dinner or something like that, but I don't know.
Chapter 6

Wanting Children/Not Wanting Children: Women’s Reasons for and Against

Q: What kind of help are you envisioning having?

It would be nice to have someone a few hours a day or something like that during the week. I mean not sort of twenty-four hour care or something but...

Q: So, you’re envisioning doing it mostly by yourself but having a couple of hours each day where you can go out and get a bit of a break?

Yeah. Or maybe a bit longer. It depends, I guess it probably depends on the age of the child or whatever. I think that I would go mental without any time to myself. Staying at home all the time with some little baby would be pretty isolating.

6.2.4 Loss of self at the centre of one’s life

Many women are inclined against motherhood either permanently or temporarily because they conceive it as requiring them to abandon or compromise their own desires and goals. Some women describe their desire to enjoy and/or remain at the centre of and in control of their working and emotional lives as “selfish.”

Brenna attributes her desire to avoid parenthood in a previous relationship to her husband’s “selfish” desire to pursue his career and her “selfish” desire to enjoy the material rewards of her successful business:
[We didn’t want children because] we were both selfish. He was a body builder and he wanted his career to expand. I wanted that for him. And that’s why we moved here. We bought a health club and just went from there. So I guess purely selfish reasons... I don’t know that I would have been a good mother, because we were selfish. With a health club, there is no regimen in your day. You get up whenever you want, because we had people running the gym. You don’t have breakfast, lunch and dinner, you don’t have a steady schedule. We travelled a lot.

Q: That all sounds very nice to me. Why do you describe it as “selfish”?

Selfish. We wanted to make money. We didn’t want to share our time. [We wanted to make money] to do things, to travel, to have money for cars, to have a nice home and beautiful clothes. I was very materialistic.

Among Bethany’s reasons for delaying motherhood is her present unwillingness to embrace a change of “lifestyle” that will shift the focus of her life away from her relationship with Jack and her ambition to travel to France to refine her French language-speaking skills:

The whole thought [of childbearing] absolutely horrifies me...The radical change in life...What that does to your lifestyle and how that changes a relationship and that kind of thing. And it’s obviously very theoretical for me now because I haven’t experienced it so I don’t know what is it like. But I know that at the moment I’m not ready to go and see what it is like...I know that most people who have just had a baby, and even for quite a long time afterwards, much of their time is occupied with the children. And I know that I have to feel that I can take that on, and be prepared for it, and I just don’t feel like I could do that at the moment.
Q: What else is going on for you that makes you feel like you can't do that at the moment?

I quite like the way things are at the moment, and I feel like I haven't had enough time with Jack, just the two of us, to hang out together and stuff. And I'm not prepared to give that up at the moment and I don't know if he is either actually...And I still want to do a bit more travelling. I'd still like to be able to spend a serious chunk of time in France to get my French to where I'd like it to be. And it's not very realistic to think I could do that sort of thing with a young child in tow.

Brenda is currently enjoying being at the centre of her own life although she reluctantly recognises the necessity of parents abandoning their “selfish” desires to be at the centre of their lives when children come along:

Q: What kinds of ideas were there in your family about parenthood and having children?

Basically the world revolved around us...

Q: Do you think that's the [way it should be]?

Yeah, probably. I don't like that view but I see that it is what should happen.

Q: And why don't you like that view?

Oh I don't want to revolve my world around a child. I think I'm a bit selfish at the moment, enjoying going out whenever I want to and not have to find babysitters or whatever...As I said, I think if I got into that serious relationship, my attitude [towards] children would change
because there's a possibility there. Whereas now the possibility isn't there so I can be as arrogant as I want and selfish as I want and shock people. Probably I tell people that I hate kids because I shock them. To shock them because I really don't like [children] being the centre of attention because I like being the centre of attention.

Q: What worries you about having kids?

The constant noise…and waking up early and all their me, me, me and the whole world revolving around them. I'm just not ready for that...

Q: Do you think you could make yourself ready?

Oh yeah. If I were going to have a child I would change my selfish ways.

Kaitlin's experience mothering her younger brothers and sisters makes her disinclined to put her own life “on hold” in order to focus her attention on the needs of a child. While she allows that this might change and worries that she will regret a decision to remain childless, she is reluctant to assume the familiar mantle of being “responsible for anybody else’s life.”

Q: Would you call yourself a childless person?

No, no, because children has never been an issue. It's only been in the last month or so that…it suddenly hit: “Tick-tock, tic-tock.” It's like, “Oh, I'm going to have to think about this a little bit, rather than just saying, “Nah, I'm never going to have children, I don't want to have kids. I don't want to be responsible for anybody else's life.” [I have to ask myself], “Is that what you really think?” [Because] maybe you'll feel differently at thirty-seven...
Q: Would you describe yourself as a childfree person?

Yeah, I'm loving not having children. I feel like I've already had a family. But I really haven't, I know I haven't. I just love only being responsible for myself. It's just such a wonderful feeling. I feel so free, so light, rather than constantly worrying about other people. And I just don't want the burden of a child. I feel like my life would have to go on hold, and I still haven't done all the things that I want to do. Maybe in a few years time when...I've achieved a few things in my new career that I really want to achieve, then maybe I'll think, “Yep, I can step back a bit, and go into mothering.”

Rachel assumes that mothering means the provision of full-time care for children. Because she spent her childhood helping her mother care for her three younger siblings, she sees her adulthood as an opportunity to put her own goals and ambitions at the centre of her life:

Unless you're really committed to wanting to just be a person rearing children, it's very consuming of your life... And I love other people's babies. All of our friends' children adore us. We have wonderful times with them. But it's quality time all the time, you know?...We can hand them back. We don't have the responsibilities. If we want to do something, we can just do it. It seems very selfish I know. But we have freedom to make different choices...[I chose] not to pursue [a special] relationship at university [because]...I made an intellectual choice that the relationship would have impacted on me more than I wanted it to do...It might have been harder to pursue a professional career, and so on. So I actually chose not to pursue that relationship....There would have been a lot more conflict [in that relationship] about me pursuing what I wanted to do...

Q: So why do you think you might have ended up having children in this alternative life?
It would have been much harder not to have. There was a much more rigid set of those life expectations...[and] I think it would have been harder for me to maintain the things that I wanted to pursue. I would have had to let go a lot more of my things to maintain the relationship and the family and work within those pressures...

Q: You said before that you were “selfish.” What did you mean?

I think that expressing your satisfaction about having those sorts of freedoms and being able to choose where we go on holidays, when we go on holidays, not worrying about school holidays. The sort of life we have. Being able to sit at home at night and just talk to each other or not talk to each other, as we choose can be taken as being selfish. And in some people it might be. But I know that we do other things...I don't think that I am a selfish person. If you ask my patients about that, they would say I wasn't selfish...I'm generous with my time and support, I've been involved in local government, where you give masses and masses of time. So in terms of an overall person, I don't think I'm a selfish person. However, some of my needs and the things that I really like about my life have to do with having freedom. And for some people having freedom might be seen as being selfish.

In addition to the lack of support available to help her raise a child, Janet also chose an abortion because of unwillingness to “give up” her educational opportunities and her living situation:

I rang Fargo that weekend and said, “I'm having the baby” but then something shifted in the next couple of weeks, I'm not sure what it was...I started thinking about where I was as a person. I had a very good job that I'd not had very long, with a very caring and supportive boss. I had just started a degree - my pitch at tertiary education - a lovely humanities degree with fabulous course structure. I was paying off my debts...I was living in a lovely little place in the middle of the bush that I would have had to leave. There was no way I would've had a baby in those
conditions; with no running water, no power and the rest of it, I'm not that stupid. I didn't want the relationship with Fargo so I knew I'd have to do it on my own...I realised that I wasn't actually prepared to give all that up. [I was in a] space in my life where I was finally getting it together, which is probably one of the reasons I got pregnant. I was finally getting it together, I was actually relatively happy and felt I wouldn't have those opportunities again if I had the baby.

Latisha speaks of her "selfish" unwillingness to risk having a child who might displace her as the central focus of her husband's and friends' attentions:

Q: [When you observed your friends' siblings as a girl] did you feel you were missing out?

From what I could see I wasn't missing out on anything that I needed to experience...The little boy pulling the girl's hair, and yelling and - it's being selfish - because you want to have that girlfriend all to yourself and her brother comes in and annoys you and all the rest of it....And also [having a child] it's obviously going to change the dynamics of my relationship with my husband, having someone else in the house....

Q: [So is a concern that a child would displace you as the [main focus] of your relationships with friends and your husband?

Yes it is, because I'm a really shallow, selfish person...

Q: Oh no, you said that. I'm just trying to get clear...

Yeah, I've even got it now with girlfriends that have got children. Like I don't particularly like children and they come over, and there's one girlfriend, you cannot have a conversation with her, because the child is always
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interrupting. You just start a conversation and it's like, "Oh, why bother?"

6.3 WHY HAVE CHILDREN?

6.3.1 Feeling ready

Women often cite “readiness” as their reason for pursuing children. This can mean that what they desire in life is consistent with the responsibility and commitment entailed by parenthood or that they are emotionally, financially and or physically prepared for the challenges of parenthood. It can also mean that having pursued the experiences and goals available to those with the freedom of the childless, they seek new life challenges.

6.3.1.1 The desire for responsibility and commitment

Karla yearns for the responsibility and commitment demanded, and the challenges presented, by parenthood:

I'm not enough for me…I really want to love a child and bring a child into a world, and give what I can to it.

Q: Break down what is important to you about having a child?

…Just to be totally responsible for another human being is to me the ultimate joy and the ultimate pleasure and responsibility: to have this life dependent on you…It's easy enough to be responsible for yourself. And there's not
enough there for me to be responsible for...It's too easy. I want it to be harder, I want the challenge. I'm too comfortable where I am. Which is nice, it's good to be comfortable where you are. But it's like, OK, what's next.

6.3.1.2 Physically, emotionally and/or financially prepared

Tina feels financially, physically and emotionally ready to commit to the responsibilities of motherhood:

I think because for a long time now, I've been ready to have children. All I'm really waiting for is the right husband. I feel that if I met a guy tomorrow and we got married in three weeks time, and once we've had that beautiful holiday and honeymoon together, I could come back and get pregnant. I'm not absolutely desperate to do it, but I could do it.

Q: What makes you feel like you're ready?

Everybody says they're never actually ready...

Q: But you just said that you do feel ready...

Financially I could have a child. Emotionally I'm stable, very stable. I'm not an emotional wreck, I've got some friends who are, but I'm not. And physically I'm ready. I don't have any problem. I'm just thinking of my sister-in-law, she's got cancer. She hasn't got the symptoms as yet, but she knows that she's got it and having a child could actually make it progress. Whereas I'm at the peak of my health, I don't smoke, I don't drink, I don't need to change any way to have a child except that I'm going to have to buy a new wardrobe.
Hilary has used her freedom as a childless person to accomplish a lot of her early life goals. These earlier accomplishments contribute to her sense that she and her husband are now financially and emotionally equipped to be parents:

I’d always wanted to go to Europe, just always…And after I got back from Europe then I wanted to go to Uni, and then after Uni I got a really good job…[And] it all contributes to me feeling ready to have a child now. I’ve done a lot of things I’ve wanted to do. I’ve been to Europe, I’ve done a course, I’ve got a good job in a sector that I wanted to work in…I’ve had it good up ‘til now and now I’m ready. We are finally actually ready, we can offer a child lots of material stuff if need be and we can offer a good education. So financially we are ready and emotionally I think we are both ready.

6.3.1.3 Fear of not taking /desire to take risks and to face new life challenges

No longer fearful of the lose of independence or personality as a result of motherhood, Samantha is worried about failing to take the risks “in life and in love” that attend a decision to have a child:

Q: So you could give up having a child?

I think so, but when I project into the future I just think, “What an amazing thing not to do.” I mean, how would that feel once you hit menopause and go, “Oh boy, I really didn't do it.”

Q: What do you worry it might feel like?
I worry about an enormous sense of loss. I worry about being passive, that I didn't take a risk in life and in love, you know. That I didn't take those kind of risks.

Q: Why “risk”? 

Identifying having a child as having a risk. That is interesting isn't it? Maybe I meant - well I still have a big fear of birth.

Q: The pain?

Yeah...It's quite powerful, but I'm sort of at the stage that I know I could get through it ...I don't see it as a risk in terms of finance, and I've definitely got past the stage where I think I'd lose my personality, wouldn't be able to fly to New York and all those ridiculous things...I don't think that I'd lose independence or who I am. I don't feel that any more at all.

Q: Do you feel that it is possible that it would be the reverse, or that it would be neutral?

I don't think it would be neutral, I think it would be amazing. I think it would be absolutely fantastic. I have really positive feelings, I just think it would be mind-blowing. I couldn't begin to imagine, really what it would be like, but I imagine it would be pretty incredible.

Sharon feels motherhood will help her develop a more selfless and flexible side to her nature as well as a different perspective on the world: 

[I want to have children because of] not wanting to be selfish. I've got a bit of a fear that, you know when you've got two incomes and no kids, both professionals who earn
a lot of money. It’s possible to get very insular in some ways and think the world revolves in a certain way, because you can order most things in your life. Whereas you can’t order having kids…They operate on different timetables and have different needs and basically you’ve got to deal with disorder…[and] with being a bit more selfless. I guess that’s part of it…I know quite a few women in their mid forties who haven't had kids and they can be pretty narrow and bitter and selfish. I mean, it’s funny. Maybe they're just focussed on what they're doing.

Q: Why don’t you tell me what about them makes you describe them as narrow and bitter and selfish?

I suppose there's not a warmth and an acceptance of things being different. It's the sort of attitude of, “I'm in control of the world and my life and it's going to go my way,” as opposed to being a bit more malleable. It's a funny thing…

Q: Would you describe yourself as childless?

Yeah, I think I would in some ways.

Q: What does that mean to you?

On one level, well I don’t have children. And on another level, I don't have access to children - I don't have much to do with children. And I suppose on a third level, I'm further and further away from myself as being a child, and what's that like, being able to see the world from a child's point of view. And I guess that ties back again into the selfless/selfishness thing, as being able to see the world from the perspective of someone who’s not different to you in a lot of ways, but actually just a whole lot younger. Which is something that I think as an adult I don't do.
While Rhyll acknowledges that motherhood is one avenue to the sort of personal development described by Sharon, she is sceptical about claims that motherhood or any other singular experience is the only way to become a “fully rounded personality”:

Pregnancy, giving birth and mother of young baby stuff. I've never had any romantic ideals about, “Oh, I'd just love to have the experience.” I mean, I just don't feel that way. I don't have to experience everything in life to have an understanding of what it is to be a person. I just don't need to do all of those things…And I get really pissed off at people who put that on me, as some people have occasionally; some mothers. I've always equated it to people who go to Europe when they are twenty and spend four months back-packing around and come home and start telling everybody that they are not a fully rounded personality until they've “travelled.” And you just think, “Well, you could be more in the world you're in just living in one suburb of [Name of City] and you could develop a fully rounded personality and maturity and strength of character and a broad perspective.” It's what you make of the experiences that life does bring you. You don't have to do every single one that is possible.

6.3.2 Have husband’s and/or extended family support

Ronald’s support – indeed his stated willingness to provide the primary care – is critical to Jacinta’s favourable attitude towards childbearing:

Q: How would you rate the intensity of your desire to have a child at the moment?

Six, I suppose.

Q: Are you happy to have a child at six?
Yeah. Look I am. I'm happy to have a child because of Ronald because I know that he'll be fantastic and he'll be really supportive and it will be a really nice thing to do together. If it weren't for him, then probably not. You know, if I was this age and single, I would probably think, “No.” So I don't feel like a really maternal urge to get pregnant and have a baby or anything…

Q: You mentioned this new promotion at work that you are quite excited about. Have you had any thoughts about how you are going to go forward with that?

Yeah. Don't know, except that there are two other women who I work with who have both had two children each. They have taken maternity leave and have come back. The company is really good like that, and I just figure that you know, that's what I'd do.

Q: So you'd take leave and then come back full time.

Yeah. I'd like to keep working...Ronald is teaching...[and] he's not really rapt there...Unlike me, has always been very happy go lucky about....work. Like, he'll quit a job and he may not have another one [and even] spend time out of work, he's fine with that. I've always been the one that has held down a steady job. So I know there is probably more chance of me doing that than him, and so we've even tossed around the idea of me going back to work, and him spending more time at home looking after the baby.

Q: How do you feel about that?

Yeah, I feel OK. I feel really good. He's a fantastic carer. He's actually worked in childcare centres before, over the years, so he's really great with kids…
Karla is confident that even though her parents would prefer her to have a child in the conventional way, in the context of a marriage, they would provide practical and financial support to her as a single mother:

[My parents] just sold their house and downstairs is all the junk. We were going through it and there was a cot there and I said to Dad, “Oh hang on to the cot, Dad, I might want to make use of that soon.” And he said, “Oh, what do you mean dear?” and I said, “I’m thinking of having a baby” and he said, “Well, can’t you wait until you get married dear?” and I said, “At this point Dad, not really. Whatever comes first, the kid or the marriage, I’m not fussed.” And he said, “Oh, don’t make me go through this with your mother dear.” It was really funny but it was like yeah, I would probably have their support. They love me enough to probably give me that unconditionally. It would be a hassle at first, the tenth degree, the Spanish Inquisition, but it would be OK in the end. I think they'd understand and respect me.

Q: What kind of support could you expect from them?

Physical, looking after and financial probably, a bit. But I would never rely on knowing [the money] was there. Even though they help out in certain ways sometimes, they're great like that.

Q: Why not count on it?

Because I wouldn't want to be going into it expecting their help...I mean I know it would be bloody difficult at times. But I don't want to be thought of as using them for their money. I mean, they don't have much anyway, but I don't want that to be an expectation of them.

Q: Are you happy to expect support like looking after?
Yeah, I would be happy with that. And I know they would give of it. Especially Mum, she's a sucker for a baby...I know that she would.

Hilary has always known she could count on her large family – particularly her sisters – to make a fuss over and look after her child:

I would always have been able to rely on family and I still can now. I would probably never see the child as far as my sisters were concerned because they'd all want it: to pass it around and care for it and spend time with it. They're all really maternal and clucky, [particularly] the older ones.

### 6.3.3 To satisfy or to keep partner

In the same way that some women do not have children to satisfy their partner or to sustain their relationship with him/her, some women express a desire to have children for similar reasons. Ronald’s desire to have children and his ability and willingness to be the primary parent while Jacinta works full-time have been critical to her in-principle decision to have a child:

Ronald and I have been thinking that maybe we'll have a baby one day. And that's really changed in about the last twelve months because up until then, I've thought that, "Ron and I have such a fantastic relationship, I don't want...a baby to come in and spoil what we've got."...Got a good little life.

Q: What's good about it.

Because we spend so much time together and we just seem to be so well matched. We are selfish but I'm not critical of the life we have. I've heard people say there is
an element of selfishness in not having kids, but it always seems to me to sound like a negative thing. We can do whatever the hell we want...And I hear people say that having a baby changes that...But having said all that, probably in the last six months, Ronald mentioned, "Maybe we'll have a baby."

Q: So it was his idea...?

Yeah, because I've always said, "No, no, no." I've always said to people, "We're not having kids, we're not going to have kids, no that will never happen." And Ronald's always had that jokey thing of, "Oh yes, we're going to have six." So its never been anything we've seriously - but he brought it up and I just said, "I'm thirty-three, so if we're going to have a baby, we'd better have it sooner rather than later." ...And sometimes I think, "Wow, that's fantastic," but sometimes I think, "Yeah, I'm really neither here nor there about it."

Q: What was your reaction when he brought this up, given that you thought that you weren't going to be having any?

It really changed my ideas about it because I was really touched that would be a good thing to do...I'm happy to have a child because of Ronald because I know that he'll be fantastic and he'll be really supportive and it will be a really nice thing to do together. If it wasn't for him, then probably not. You know, if I was to sort of at this age, and maybe I was single I probably would think, "No" because I don't feel like a really maternal urge to get pregnant and have a baby or anything.

Kylie has her own independent desire to have children, but she can wait. She is being urged ever-forward, however, by her partner Paul's "keenness":

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Q: You were saying that you thought you could have children with your current partner Paul. Is that something that's on the table?

Definitely...

Q: Is there a time-line on that?

Probably a year.

Q: And how did that time line get set?

…It was like he'll get clucky because he's with kids all the time [at his job]. And [he'd say], “Well, when are we going to have babies?” He adores children, and he's a fantastic father, so I don't have any doubts or reservations about that…But Paul was saying, "Well, shit I'm thirty-seven, so if we're going to have them we'd better hurry up"…He doesn't want to be fifty and have a child...

Q: The time line of next year was really initiated from him?

Yeah, and me [but]… I wouldn't be pushing, push, push, push. [But] I actually like the fact that he's keen…And it's not like, "Oops, I'm pregnant." [Instead] it's like, "Honey, when are you getting your IUD out? Let's have a family."…A lot of our friends do have kids…[and] babies…[and] I get clucky.

Q: Have you noticed that there have been certain times in your life when you've been more or less clucky?

Probably more now, because I've got a partner who's keen.
Although Peta would have chosen to have a child, she had decided to remain childless because of her reservations about using IVF. She is currently investigating IVF with her partner Mitch, however, because she is concerned that by the time Mitch wants children, she will be too old to conceive, and he will leave her for a fertile woman:

I think I'm probably resigned and happy with my decision that I've made not to have children. I do get upset at times, and would love to have a child of my own. But Mitchell has talked about the fact that he does want to have children. That's the hard thing for me because I don't want to get to the age of forty, and it be too late for me to have a baby. I don't really want to have a baby at the age of forty either. I just think I'll be too old then...I had always imagined that if I were going to [have children] it would be in my early thirties.

Q: So about now.

Yeah, about now. And I don't think that's going to happen. So I don't want to get to the age of forty and then have a million attempts at IVF and get really depressed and then have Mitchell turn around and say, “Well, you can't give me any children.” And be bitter and God knows what else about it and go off and find someone who can give him those things...

Q: How do you think it will be in the end for you if it doesn't work out?

I'm not so much worried about not having a baby, I'm worried about keeping the relationship together.

Q: As a childless relationship?
Yeah, and if we attempted [IVF] and it didn’t work out...[Because] at this stage he feels that he would definitely want to have a child at some point, so that worries me...It is a risk...But then I think, “Well, just take a risk for once in your life, throw caution to the wind.” The worst that can happen is you are a bitter lonely old childless partnerless woman. I'm sure there are worse things. Go home and live with Mum and Dad. They would love that.

6.3.4 Averting regret

One of the most common reasons women cite in favour of having children is a concern that they will come to regret a decision to forgo motherhood. A number of factors have contributed to Janine’s decision not to pursue motherhood. Yet, while she emphatically states that she doesn’t want to have a child, she is concerned she may regret missing out on motherhood:

And I really don’t think that I want to bring a child into the world for those reasons that I've stated....but perhaps in years to come that will be something that I'll have to learn to live with - my decision.

Q: What do you feel you may have to learn to live with?

Never having a child, never having that bond, the love that I think only a mother and child can have. Never having the sensation of a human being growing inside me, never being able to breastfeed. Yeah, all the stuff. I've spent a lot of years around women and birthing and babies and I've been present at deliveries and helped a lot of babies in the world. And I often go away from a delivery thinking, “Yeah this is something that I will never experience now.”
After Mary’s marriage broke up, she considered giving away her plans to have a child. But concerns about regret have steered her back towards her original intention to mother:

If I didn't have children then I'd always have heaps of money to get by. I [could] go and travel anywhere I want, and there are still a few places I would love to travel to. And I think it's probably a bit more carefree and easy a lifestyle, and more spontaneous; you can just do what you want to do. So I sort of [thought about] that [but] always in the back of my mind I [kept] thinking, “Would I regret it later on? That's what I kept thinking, “Will I regret it later on if I never did? And I [never got to the] stage where I could comfortably say, “No, I don't want to have children, and I'll never regret it.” I [never] got to that stage.

Hilary is also motivated to pursue motherhood in part because of a fear she’ll regret a decision to remain childless:

I think I'm a really typical thirty-five year-old married person who hasn't got any children. Others in [our] situation all have the dog or the cat, they have something that they willingly acknowledge: "here's our baby." And that's enough. They are easier to care for, take them to the vet once a year or whatever.

Q: So why isn't that enough for you?

…Because there's a cut-off point where it's just too late to have a baby [and] I might regret not having a baby. What if I regret not having a baby?

Q: And what do you fear you'll regret?
…That I could be missing out on something; not the actual labour or anything like that. But the pregnancy, what's it like to be pregnant, and then more than that. What it's like to have a little person to mould to shape and to…know what [my husband's] son or daughter [would] look like.

The prospect of childlessness poses identity issues for Laney, as well as raising concerns about feelings of regret and loss:

Q: How are you going to feel if it doesn't end up working out?

I don't know. I often wonder what it would take for me to reconcile that and particularly this year I have thought more about that possibility - that I won't ever have children…I have been thinking about, "What would it mean?" And I have this thing about becoming my [childless] great aunt Myrtle and not wanting that to happen. And am I going to be the next generation's great aunt Myrtle?…[And] its a fearful thought….I guess it would be a loss, I would feel regret and I don't know how I would cope with that. I have a fantastic life and I travel, I study, I have good friends, I have a nice house so (pause). I think I would be sad.

6.3.5 Identity: motherhood confers and confirms femininity and adulthood

For Kylie, motherhood is the fulfilment of her womanhood:

So I think [I want to have children for] two reasons: my upbringing plus having a partner who wants to have kids.

Q: …If you'd stayed with your first husband, do you think that you might feel differently about having children now?
No. I think that to have children has always been a goal...It's with me. So yes, it's my decision and it's something that I want to have to fulfil my life as a woman...

Lorne feels that women are designed to want to become mothers, and to follow that desire through with action:

Q: On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate the intensity of your desire to remain childfree?

Oh - nine...

Q: Nine? Why not ten?

I dunno...I think it's called keeping your options open...I guess I should say ten: one hundred percent intensity. It's just that thing, for the same reason I don't go and get my tubes tied. Because I have thought about that, but there's some intangible something - I mean apart from it being a great effort. It's obvious something is there, some weeny little thing, but I hope it stays weeny. It's not a really a desire, it's just the possibility. So possibility for me doesn't mean like, "Oh I want it." It's just I know it's possible, so I feel like I'd be burning all the bridges, and maybe that's unnatural or unfair or something.

Q: What would be unnatural about it?

Well, I actually think women are here to reproduce, so I'm just bloody glad they do. I think it's a very natural, good thing. I think women's bodies, after they've had babies, they kind of get better. So it's funny that I don't want to go that way, but I don't. But I think [mothers] kind of calm down, and they become more tolerant, and they're at home with their bodies more, and all that sort of stuff.
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Q: So where does that put you as a woman?

Oh, I'll be just uptight and paranoid till I die and my hormones will be going berserk till the day I drop dead, I guess.

Peta feels her reproductive difficulties make her less than a “proper” woman:

Well, my career isn't really going anywhere at the moment. If things are going well and you’ve got lots to do and you're working and you're earning money and you're having a good time, and all that kind of stuff, that definitely makes it easier [to deal with feelings of sadness about my childlessness]. And then in your lowest of low times, everything comes down on you, and then the topper will be, “And I can't even have children, I'm not even a proper woman, I can't even have children.” That's in your deepest, downer sort of periods.

Q: Do you feel like a part of your womanhood has been lost?

To a certain extent I do think that. You do feel a little bit inadequate I suppose, but I don't know, what can you do?

For Laney, deciding to remain childless would mean sacrificing her identity as a “potent, fertile woman”:

Q: What would you be giving up if you decided not to have kids?

...In some ways a dream...I guess I would have to give up an idea of myself as a potent and fertile woman...
Q: So having a child is a symbol for you of

Being a woman, yeah!…So I’d be giving that up.

Samantha feels herself, and has been made to feel by others, that her childlessness makes her less than a full adult:

You know what I'm saying, it's not such an overwhelming need [to have a child] that I'd just say, “Bugger it, I'll just do it myself.” And I would do it if I felt the need, because I've always made my own way, but I don't feel that need.

Q: How would you describe that need?

I guess I feel like if I was a real fully integrated adult women this would be this overwhelming drive. I don't think that intellectually, but I know there is a sense of that. That I'm hedging my bets and playing at being a child still…Certainly in work situations I've been treated like a child by older women, or even women my own age with children. They treat me like I'm not quite real, that I'm frivolous, that I don't quite deserve the same amount of pay. That came up as a big issue with one boss [with me as well as]…with another older childless woman, so it wasn't just me that experienced this with that particular person. She…brought in a woman on a very senior level who was far less experienced even than me and she kept saying that this woman was divorced and had children…This woman was actually extremely wealthy as well. But there was this great sense of identification for her, with women with children.

Q: How did that make you feel?

Oh, very angry…
Q: So you feel you could give up having a child?

I think so, but...[thinking about it brings on]...fears about being an adult - that I hadn't done what adults do.

6.3.6 Remaining “in-step”

A number of women see motherhood as a way of remaining “in-step.” Women gain an identity of sense of self in part from doing what other people in society are doing, sometimes feeling low and isolated when they feel “out of step” (Baruch et al., 1983, 41). Willing to be “unique” in many areas of life, Lori doesn’t want to be the only one of her friends who marries21 and has children late, or doesn’t marry and have children at all:

Q: Let's imagine that for some reason you don't end up hooking up with the right guy and five to seven years from now, you still don't have children. Do you feel others will judge you, or is it a neutral thing now?

I think probably judge. I never thought so before, but just listening to [one of] my brother's friends. We were hanging out once and he mentioned some girl and he said, “Oh my God, she's thirty and she's not even married.” You know, talking about this girl, “What a loser, she's not even married and she's thirty.” At that time I was twenty-nine. [So] if I'm not married? It's tough because a lot of people will look at my career. If I'm not married in five years I'll probably be like top person in this company that I'm working with. So at that point I think I'd be super successful so I think some people would rationalise and

21 Lori sees marriage and motherhood as a matched set, and so uses the terms interchangeably throughout her interview.
say, “Look what she has career-wise.” But I don't know. I'd still feel like it wasn't a good thing. I think other people would view it worse or just odd.

Q: And they'd have something to say about it?

Yeah, but I've always been a bit unique too. But I don't want to be in this situation. I don't want to be unique.

Among Jacinta’s mixed feelings about what she calls “the mother’s club” are fears about being left out:

If I didn't have such faith that Ronald would do a great job and because he is so caring then I'd probably be more worried about [my parents belief that by not taking care of the child I was being unmaternal]...

Q: Do you think he’d do a better job than you?

In a lot of ways I do. Yeah, in a lot of ways.

Q: And how does that make you feel?

Lucky, on the one hand. But maybe not part of the mother’s club that so many women belong to...

Q: ...So what’s the mother’s club? Do you have any friends who are in it?

Oh yes, loads. In this street, in this small street, someone counted that there are eleven children under the age of five. There are pregnant women and mums. Loads of
them. And a lot of the girls I went to school with are mums. And my sister is a Mum.

Q: Were you looking forward to joining into that?

Maybe. But sometimes I see it as being really, really mundane. I hate - and maybe I hate this because I'm not part of it and I'm feeling left out - but I hate sitting amongst groups of my friends and they talk about how much Bonds cotton jumpsuits are on special. What kinder they're going to send their kids to, and how late they were up last night because of the baby. I hate that and I just think, "God, get a life." But I'm aware a lot of that is probably because I feel left out.

Latisha believes that one of the best things about being a mother would be being part of the social life that surrounds children, and which so many of her friends are a part:

Q: When you say, "tick tock tick tock," what do you mean?

Oh, the biological clock, you know. And like, yeah, even Elle McPherson is having one now...It's actually good because [my husband and I] have been together so long now that people have stopped asking if we're going to [have children]. But it's just the social side of it. That if you have children then you go to creche, and then you've got school, and stuff like that. It broadens your thing.

Q: So you feel like you're missing out on it a bit, or you're worried about missing out?

I worry about missing out. You know, if you could just have the good bits and not [the rest].
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Q: And what are the good bits…?

Buying clothes, buying things. Interacting with other people…Like I think from six onwards could be the better stage of children…Getting them dressed and taking them to school and them being more independent and not having you to do absolutely everything for them. And giving them help with their homework…I like the idea of helping with homework and reading. I like the idea of helping them get dressed to a certain stage…

Q: But to me that sounds like somebody who is more in favour of having a child when it all comes out in the wash than not having one. And up to now you've given me the impression that you're more in favour of not having one than having one?

I don't want to say that I never want to have a child, because I don't know how I'm going to feel in two years, or whatever. My opinion basically hasn't changed all this time, but it's starting to sway a little bit. But then I spend time with people who have got children and it sways way back the other way.

Q: So what's prompting it to sway?

Just my age, and also you know, girlfriends are doing this, and taking the kid to ballet, or doing that, or to a school function and their lives seem busier than mine.

One reason Peta would like to have children is to avoid being the “odd one out”:

[When I was doing my training] everyday you'd go to college and it would be fun...you'd just be together [with the other students in the course] practically twenty-four hours a day. You'd socialise together as well.
Q: If you still had that intimacy in your work context or elsewhere, do you think your interest in children would be different?

I don't know. It would depend on if anybody else had children, and what they were going through at the same time. Because you don’t want to be the odd one out. And I do feel that way a lot of the time. If I go somewhere to a barbecue or a party or whatever and it's like a “bring the kids” type party, I do feel left out that everybody - practically everybody there - has children. Even though they all know me and love me and…I love them as well, it's a little bit depressing.

Q: Do you feel like you have anything in common with the other people there who don't have children?

I don’t know, I suppose, sort of. You sort of form a bit of a bond because you don't have any responsibilities at the end of the day, you can get more pissed, so you bond in that way. [But] I don't really think that is important.

Q: I was wondering if you feel like you are on the same kind of life journey that they are, or whether you are lumped together because you don't have kids, but they have a different take on it then you do?

They might be much younger or they might not have considered having children yet, or decided not to; there are so many reasons.

Q: Like being childless by choice?

Yeah.
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Q: Do you feel you relate to people who are childless by choice?

Yeah. And I sort of admire them in a way too, because they’ve taken a really strong chance about it, I suppose…It would be interesting to know why.

Q: To me you don’t sound like someone who is in that category.

No, if I had the choice I would have had a child by now.

6.3.7 Imagined future

Using expressions like, “I just can’t see it” or “I always imagined,” women’s reasons for pursuing motherhood demonstrate the powerful push many experience to match up the life they are living with the future they always imagined for themselves. For a significant number of women, having children fulfils an imagined future that derives from their positive experience in their families of origin. Karla’s parents imagined her future would contain a number of things, including motherhood. While Karla feels she has failed to fulfil some of her parents’ “shoulds,” her imagined future still contains the desire they instilled in her to become a mother:

[When I broke up with my last boyfriend I felt]…depression basically. Sunk into that for awhile…But in reality I know I couldn’t have lived with him anyway. So you sort of realise that it was just the big, “Oh my God, this is it” thing. That you wanted “it” to happen, and to make everyone else happy as well.
Q: What was the big it?

The package. The husband and the life and the kids and everything else that goes with it. The sharing, the partner, sharing bringing up. Having a nice life together. It's all a fairy tale that we all sort of aspire to. Drummed into us I think from childhood I think.

Q: Was it drummed into you?

Yup. Well and truly, by parents, relations. I don't know if it's what they said, it's little quips here and there. [But] you're brought up to make a home, and learn ways of living or values that you can could pass on to children. When we moved here from [name of another country] when I was sixteen it was so we could be in a more Jewish community and meet prospective people [for me to marry]. I can't remember the exact words, but there was just this sense that this is what is supposed to happen, and here's how we're going to try to make it happen for you. And this is one of the reasons that we're going...

Q: When you were little were work plans important to you?

I think so. I always wanted to teach. I don't know why, but I remember thinking that [but] I'm not really interested in teaching, I just want to make the stuff myself. So that was kind of eye-opener. Was that real, or maybe I was just saying it because it was what they wanted to hear - that I had some ambition or something. Or I ought to have some: the shoulds, the terrible shoulds.

Q: What were the shoulds?

You should grow up to be a person with a good career and a good wife and good mother and a good citizen. All those really high values. Which I fully agree with, if you are in
those situations. But I think the pressure was so great, I just couldn't live up to it (she cries).

Motherhood was always a part of Barbara’s imagined future; a future that has required some re-working since the onset of early menopause:

Now I have wanted children since I was eight. I have been clucky my whole life. I've wanted - I've felt that urge to have children my whole life. When I was about eight I had a scrapbook of pictures of babies, that I cut out of magazines...So I've wanted kids, but the same time, I've had four abortions. And I don't regret one of them...And I know that I might have missed the boat. And I think about that and the last time I discussed it at length with a friend... because I wanted a baby but I didn’t want that man's baby and I didn't want the relationship that I would have to have with that man for twenty years...And I still think about it [because] I've got pre-menopausal symptoms. You know, hot flushes and I've got the whole gamut of menopausal symptoms...Whatever I've done I've worked very hard at long hours, and it was never – if I look at each of the pregnancies and where I was at that time, it was kind of like I'd made a decision not to have a child at that time, but I always thought I'd have a child. I always thought.

Children are such an ingrained part of Lori’s imagined future she finds it hard to imagine – and not to judge – those who choose to be childless:

Q: Would you describe yourself as childless?

Right now, no. I'm certainly not selfish, and I think of childlessness as selfish. I would describe myself as somebody who hasn't yet met the right person and had children yet.

Q: Why is selfish the word that comes to mind?
Because a lot of times - I mean granted some people have problems having kids - but whenever I hear someone tell me that they don't want to have kids, I always think of that as a selfish thing. “What do you mean you don't want to have kids?” That's been my whole goal in life, really: to get married and have kids and take them to T-bowl and watch them grow up and have a childhood like I had. Be able to provide for kids what my parents provided for me. I knew it took a lot of work and effort and time and a lot of pain and anger, my parents went through raising four kids, but it is something that I think everyone should go through. I think it is something that is worthwhile and worth it.

Q: What is worth it about it?

The pleasures and everything we brought to my parents, seems like it is well worth it. To watch your kid be successful whether it be play music or sports or watch them get married and walk down the aisle. I don't know, I can't imagine people not wanting to do that.

Hilary’s stress over the difficulties she and Johnson are having conceiving demonstrate the precise place motherhood holds in her imagined future:

I think I'm really typical of a thirty-five year-old married person who hasn't got children. Others in that situation, they all have the dog or the cat that they willingly acknowledge, “Here's our baby." And that's enough. They are easier to care for, take them to the vet once a year or whatever.

Q: So why isn't that enough for you?

Just because I was raised - there was just no question that – [I would have children]...What would Johnson’s son or daughter look like? I feel there's someone that's meant to be...I can fit children in now. I'm having children now because I can fit them in. So I've only allowed a little bit of
room in my life. It's very structured, it's that type of selfishness, “OK, I can slot them in now; it would work in now because I've got other plans." So if I had a child that would work in well, because by the time we're ready to move to the country and live down there, the child will be ready to go to school and there is an excellent school down there which I have a real interest in. And the community would be rapt that when we move down there we had a child to go to their school, because they are at risk of losing it because of the population. So we would be seen as more of an asset to the community. That fits in well. Five years time, when [the] baby is [born] we can move down there.

Q: But if you got pregnant at thirty-nine, would that fit in?

I haven't actually entertained that thought of being pregnant at forty. I don't think I could survive if it was another five years away…I haven't seriously entertained the thought that I'm not going to get pregnant soon…If I'm a parent at thirty-nine – no, I just can't see having my first child at thirty-nine. It has to be before that.

Kylie attributes the powerful place motherhood has in her imagined future to her desire to recreate for her own children the happy and stable childhood she enjoyed:

I look at my upbringing, and how I enjoyed it and the relationship that I had with my parents and my brothers and sisters and I want to give that to others so that they can have that. Friends will talk about their family or their fathers and mothers and not have [the positive] association with them that I do. And I would like to think that I can create that special relationship that I have with my Mum. It's unique and I love it. And I would like to think that I can give that to a child who is willing…
Kristina imagines her future as part of a family because that was how she had been raised, and wants to “pass on” the “closeness” she has with her family of origin:

I think I always assumed that I would grow up and have the husband and the kids just because that's how I'd grown up. And I guess I do want that, because I've grown up in a really close family unit. I love things Christmas and family get-togethers. We always get together for each other's birthdays and mother's day and father's day is important in our family. I don’t like to think that I'm not going to be able to pass that on to my own children one day. So I probably think that some time in the future hopefully, I’ll be able to pass that on to the next generation.

Tina hopes to have a child in whom she can feel the same pride and joy her parents feel in her and her brothers:

I'd like to have, not a carbon copy of myself, but I'd like to have an offspring, a child that I can help mould. Hopefully a healthy child who is not too difficult who I can be part of, as my parents are of me and of my brothers. I come from a lovely family, my Dad's telling me all the time how lovely I am.... I’d love to have a baby and watch it grow into a child [and] into a teenager [and] adult. Like my parents do of me, they feel very proud of me, being their daughter, and I would love to [feel proud] of my own.

6.3.8 Children create enduring relationship bonds that ensure against loneliness, and affirm existing relationship bonds

Children are also desired because they create an enduring relationship bond between parent and child and between the child’s parents. This bond is less transient than that of friendship, and offers insurance against old age. A woman
may also have a child in part to express gratitude to her own parents by giving them grandchildren, and by so doing affirm the existing relationship bonds with her own parents.

Peta feels that the experience of having a child creates an unrivalled and enviable and time-tested bond of intimacy between the parents themselves, and between the parents and the child that endures until death:

I think that especially if you've been there at the birth, you feel so attached to that child immediately. But I have always experienced a period of depression, slight depression after experiencing a birth...Because it's such a personal and an intense thing to go through and...I feel that even though everybody that I've been through it with has been supportive of me and included me in everything, there is a bond that only that couple and their new child can experience. That's what I really cried about last time, their love for one another. I wrote to them and told them that it was amazing to see in each other's eyes the love they had for one another and told each other so at the time. It was just so beautiful. And that's the sort of thing that I think, “I will never experience that.” That makes me sad, that makes me cry now, talking about that. That sort of deep, that sort of really deep intimacy. Thinking, “Look what we've done, we've made this, we've produced this wonderful being.”

Q: And do you that intensity is not available outside of birth...?

I've certainly never experienced anything that I can say is like that experience. I'd like to think there was something.... When I'm seventy, if I haven't got any children by then, I'll probably still be a bit sad that I don't. You start to think of things like, what happens when I am seventy, and I don't have a partner, and I don't have any
children to look after me? My parents are dead, my sisters are dead, I'm the youngest of the family, and I'll be left with no one to care for me, or look after me, no other close relative. I'm the end of the line, so to speak. So that's a bit daunting.

Blair believes the enduring bonds of family create more meaningful and long-lasting relationships: bonds that ensure against loneliness in old age.

I was engaged when I was a lot younger. And one of the things [my fiance] said to me was, "I don't want to grow old alone." That's always kind of stuck in my head. He watched his father at his fiftieth birthday, big Italian family, all the cousins and nieces and nephews all running around with Poppy. And he said when I become my father's age I want to have my family around me…He was right, I think that's really important. Friendships are great and you can become very close and very attached to friends, but the ties and the binding of the family, are something that I don't think are really breakable. Even though my mother and my sister haven't spoken for thirteen years, there is a lot of emotion, a lot of feelings and a lot of ties there…and that will never be broken. Whether it's good, bad or indifferent, that will never be broken…Whereas people come in and out of your life for different times for different reasons, and you let them come in and out. With family it's different. They may be in and out of your life, but they are still always there. So I think my fear of being childless is when I get older, of being alone.

For Kylie, children are a “huge” part of life not to be missed, and a preventative measure against loneliness in old age:

Q: What does not having children mean?

…Pain…I just think it would be awful to be a woman and be old, you know like fifty or even I've got girlfriends who are forty-five. But they're straining; one's straining to have kids. And the other is now going through menopause. And she hasn't had them, and I know that she bleeds. Not
physically, but emotionally. And the other one, she's trying so hard, but it just hasn't happened. I would hate to be in that position. Or to be old, to be seventy, and not have children. I just think that would be a huge part of your life that you've missed out on. I'd hate it.

Q: What are you worried you'd feel if you hit seventy and had no children?

Lonely, so lonely. I was on the train and this old guy was sitting next to me. And he pulled my paper over so he could read it too. And I started talking to him. His wife had just died and he had no children and he had just gone to Japan or something like that. He had sold his home and was going to live in an old age home, because he was lonely…And I was on the verge of tears. I had to look out the window. It was like, "this is far too hard for me to confront."

Brenna's desire to have a child is caught up with her Dad's death, and her desire to express gratitude to and strengthen the relationship bond with her mother:

I'm thirty-three and my Dad died at sixty-two. And I can't explain to you the loss I feel, the sadness I feel, that he's gone. More so now than when he died, the feeling just gets stronger and stronger for me. I wish that I had a baby when he was alive…Because, he missed out on being a grandfather. He was such a great Dad and he would have been a great grandfather. And I'm sad that I didn't give him that. And I want to give it to my Mum…

Q: So there was a connection between your Dad dying and your feeling like you really wanted to actively pursue having a child?

Yes.
Q: Was that actually when you decided you definitely wanted to have one?

Pretty much, pretty much. I can't explain to you how much I loved my Dad. And how much I love my Mum. To be my age and not have my Dad, it's the worst feeling.

Judi feels indebted to her Mum and Dad for being such good parents, and is happy that her desire to have children will also please them:

My friend was telling me her Rabbi said that the greatest gift you can give back to your parents is to have kids yourself. That certainly would never be the predominant or primary reason why I had kids. But I look forward to it for that too...Because I'm not beyond, or afraid, to admit that I feel that indebted to my parents in a lot of ways just for being good parents. And I would love to give that to them, even just for the sake of giving that to them. But I wouldn't do it just for them, because clearly I would have to live with it, and it would be my life that would change. And I don't live my life for them. But I'm pretty excited that something I want to do will also make them psyched...So that's an issue.

6.3.9 Children as providers of existential meaning and fulfilment

Many women see motherhood as a meaningful activity that will give, or assist in giving, their life existential “anchorage” (Bardwick, 1980) and existential “meaning” (Frankl, 1959). Finding such meaning is essential to them feeling fulfilled (Aptner, 1995; Bardwick, 1980; Crouch & Manderson, 1993; McMahon, 1995; Murray-Smith, 1998; Ribbens, 1994). Hilary nominates the leadership, nurturing and teaching opportunities afforded by motherhood as part of what would make the experience “worthwhile”:
I look at [my husband’s] baby photos, and I know I'm going to have a boy. I'd like a little one of him running around. I'd like a little person following me around, and someone to take care of...I'm not big on sleep deprivation which I know...will come if you have a baby. But I think it would be really rewarding to have a child. I think education would be big, teaching your child to speak, and just develop. When you see little kids and how they develop, I think that would be a bonus. Introducing him or her to different things [and] watching them be really amazed at simple things. I think it would be very worthwhile.

For Karla, remaining childless would strip her life of any meaning and purpose:

Q: What is it going to be like if it doesn't work out?

What it means to not have children? I guess I hope that I would find a way of life that is fulfilling enough to fill that void. Oh, that is so negative to even think that to not have a child would be a void, but that's how it is for me right now. And what disturbs me most, is that I don't really want to go on if I don't have children. And yet I love my life and I love my friendships, but I just - it's awful but I just feel I'm not worthy, I'm not enough to be on my own. I'm not enough for me. I really want to love a child and bring a child into a world, and give what I can to it.

Kelly sees children as the ready-made proof that there was a point in her “being here.” She believes childless people have to invent this sense of purpose to give their lives meaning:

Q: Once you made the decision to remain childless, did you ever look back?

It comes up every now and again. I still occasionally think about it. For instance, the other day I said to Ivan, “Who are we going to leave all these things to?” Just practical considerations. And he goes, “Well, you know, even
having children is no guarantee that they're going to want the stuff that you leave to them." So I suppose that's right. There's always my nieces and stuff. So there's just little things that just occur to me from time to time like, "What will my legacy have been?" Because a lot of people look at children as a legacy. Like, this is the combination of the two of us together and we will live on through our children. And I won't ever have that. But I've actually reconciled myself to thinking about the fact that one day I'll be sixty and I won't have grandchildren either....[but] choosing not to do it at all...gives me the opportunity to channel my energy and interests into other things.

Q: Is that important for you; to channel your energies?

Yes.

Q: Why?

Well, I guess because I'm not going to have a child. And I feel the need to work hard on leaving something else behind. It's not going to be another person, so whether it's people remembering me for something I did for them...I'd just like to think that there was a point to my being here ...I also want to write a book...My friends say to me, "That's such an ego thing, that somewhere there's got to be a book with your name on it." I said, "Well, that's probably the only thing I'll have. I mean I've got all these stories, but when you all pop off they'll be gone too."

Laney hopes children will fulfil her in a way other things in her life, including the pursuit of her Master’s thesis, have not:

Somebody actually asked me, "Why do want to have kids" [and]... when I stopped, I really didn't know, I couldn't answer. And I had to then think that it was to go along with what everyone else was doing and I think it was to have
this thing in my life that belonged to me, that would fill this hole.

Q: What is the hole that they would fill for you?

It's just a sense really; that I haven't felt fulfilled…

Q: You actually used the word "fulfilment" quite a ways back. So I want to ask whether your education and pursuing your Master's thesis has made you feel fulfilled?

No, it hasn't if I'm honest, but it has given me heaps of other things.

6.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an overview of some of the concrete and abstract issues that had factored into women’s decision-making about children currently or in the past. Among sample of thirty-five, only one woman – Matilda – indicated that she had not seriously considered prior to interview the pros and cons of having children and remaining childless. That women often had quite thoroughly considered reasons in favour or against childbearing suggests most saw motherhood as a decision they must make – a choice – rather than a mandate to which they must submit. Indeed, I will present evidence in Chapter 9 that women’s belief that motherhood is a choice leads them to believe they should have good reasons to choose it. Thus, the data appears to confirm previous research findings suggesting that choosing whether or not to mother,
rather than the motherhood experience itself, is the defining right of passage for modern day women (Faux, 1984; Wilk, 1986; Ziman Tobin & with Aria, 1998).

Samantha speaks directly to this point when she says:

> I think [realising you won’t have children] would be a huge turning point. I can't see how it wouldn't be in anyone’s life, even if you were completely committed to being childless or childfree. I don’t see that people take those decisions lightly no matter if they are clear as a bell or not. You’re still going to have a range of really strong responses.

While women’s attitudes towards motherhood were influenced by a range of factors, prominent among these were the nature of social attitudes towards working mothers and the availability of social supports for working parents. The data suggest that the existence or lack of such assistance supports or undermines women's desires/decisions to mother.

As seen in previous research, many women assume that motherhood is woman’s work and/or that it is a full-time job (at least when the children are young). When mothers are assumed to be the right parent to provide child care, and mothering “properly” means a woman must relinquish her job, her financial independence, her social and recreational life and even the most basic freedom of movement, it’s little wonder so many women find the commitment motherhood appears to demand so daunting. As Morton and Morton note:

> Where is the father in all this?...The option is there for fathers to stay at home and raise the kids while the mothers go out to work, but it is rarely taken up...It seems men are unwilling to accept the loss of independent
identity that has been women’s lot through the ages, rightly perceiving that with the loss of identity goes a loss of respect...We therefore face an impasse. We prize our individual autonomy and identity and at the same time chide any woman who refuses to renounce it as soon as she becomes pregnant. Little wonder that women, given the choice, are doing what men have always done and opting out of child-rearing altogether (Morton & Morton, 2000).

In the next chapter, I examine the way women understand and negotiate socially normative views of good motherhood, and the role such social norms play in women’s childbearing decisions.
Chapter 7

Good Motherhood Requirements and Women’s Fertility Decisions

More thoughts from the creche:

Mum’s not here! What’s happening? Who am I?
She’s still not here! Why? Where am I?
I know where I am. I’m staying at a creche.
I know why. I know who I am.
I’m a stay-at-creche baby so she doesn’t have to be a stay-at-home Mum.

Michael Leunig cartoon, 2000

Leunig is not a political cartoonist; he wallows in therapeutic caricature, ignoring the social causes that limit what people can do. If you spend too much time with your head up your bum in search of existential angst, all you'll find is dark and dirty.

Don Edgar, co-author of “Today’s Child Care, Tomorrow’s Children, 2000

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The current data replicates previous findings demonstrating the shared nature of many women’s normative views about mothering. Many women, in other words, have similar views on how a “good” mother should feel and behave towards her children (Brown et al., 1994; Eyer, 1996; Maushart, 1997; Smiley, 1998; Swigart, 1991; Wearing, 1984). These views not only exert a powerful

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22 For the sake of readability, I will omit quotation marks from around “good” when speaking about good motherhood for the remainder of this thesis.
influence on mothers, but on childless women considering motherhood
(Cannold, 1992; Cannold, 1998a). Specifically, the current data suggest that
many childless women have a narrow view of what constitutes acceptable
maternal feelings, attitudes and behaviours. Women’s unwillingness to meet
such socially normative views of motherhood and/or their fear that they will be
unable to meet such social norms lead some to delay their entrance into
motherhood and others to avoid it altogether. Good motherhood standards
appear, in other words, to constrain women’s freedom (in welfare feminist
terms) to choose motherhood.

The conclusions of a 1994 study of the first-time mothering experience of
women in Melbourne suggested that there was little difference in the normative
conceptions of good motherhood expressed by mothers in the 1990s (Brown et
al., 1994, chapter 7), and traditional conceptions articulated by mothers in the
1970s (Richards & Harper, 1979; Wearing, 1984). The current findings suggest
that like Brown et al’s Melbourne mothers and their Baby Boom predecessors,
childless women expect a good mother to consistently provide unconditional
love, to be patient, nurturing and responsible.

Traditional good mother requirements also held that a good mother always puts
her children’s needs first and fulfils her young children’s needs to have her “in
constant attendance” (Wearing, 1984). The data suggest that the acceptance by
some childless women of such traditional requirements led to their intention to
put their own needs aside and to stay home full-time with their young children if and when they had children. Some childless women signalled their endorsement of more modern day prescriptions for good motherhood by endorsing the separateness and legitimacy of their own needs (Brown et al., 1994, 156). However, this group also accepted the traditional requirements that they attend their young children constantly or almost constantly. These women had or planned to resolve this conflict either by choosing childlessness or home-based work. A third group of childless women accepted the separateness and legitimacy of their own needs and rejected the traditional constant attendance requirement. This enabled them to make plans to use paternal care, home-based nanny care and/or centre-based care as a way of meeting these needs if and when they became mothers.

The childless women in the study also expanded the requirements for good motherhood articulated by past and present-day mothers (Brown et al., 1994; Wearing, 1984). For them, a good mother was one who had children in the context of a stable (for some women heterosexual and married) relationship, who was financially and emotionally stable and who had her children at the “right”\(^\text{23}\) age with the “right” man and at the “right” point in her relationship. She was also a woman who was enthusiastic about having and raising a child, and had made a conscious and serious decision to become a mother.

\(^{23}\) This finding confirms previous data suggesting the existence of socially normative views about the “right” age for motherhood (Berryman, 1991; Phoenix, 1991; Walter, 1986).
7.2 SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE: CHILDLESS WOMEN ENDORSE TRADITIONAL LONG-STANDING GOOD MOTHERHOOD STANDARDS

7.2.1 Unconditional love

Thirty-five year-old Karla loves her parents, but feels their love for her was contingent on her achievements. She believes she is good with her niece and nephew and will make a good mother because she is able to provide the unconditional love she believes children need:

I know how good I am with children, and what I can offer...In my childhood, as soon as you achieved something it was like, “Now you can go on and do this.” I felt like “Oh, just let me have this. I just want to bask in this one for now.” ...I felt exhausted. And I think I still feel that greatly.

Q: Would there be a chance that that would happen with any child you might have?

I hope not...I'll hear my parents say [to my brother's kids], “Oh, that's terrific dear, now you can do this.” I feel, “Oh, leave them alone, just let them have that.”...I put my two cents in and say, “That's great. You're doing well and you're enjoying it and that's enough.” You don't have to be in the bloody Chicago Symphony, you can just play the flute and play those pieces you like. It doesn't have to mean you're going to be the next soloist.

Forty-three year-old Barbara believes the unconditional love good mothers feel for their children compensates them for the sacrifices motherhood requires:

A girlfriend said, “Well, you haven't seen me for three years because I've been wiping bottoms for three years.”
know intellectually that the love you have for your child will compensate for all of that, and the love they give you has to compensate for all of that and that you won't care. And you would never want that child to go away. I think that if I had a child I would take it on, I would take the responsibility on full bore.

7.2.2 Patient/Nurturing

Because she believes she lacks the patience and energy necessary to make all the time she spends with her children quality time, thirty-seven year-old Lorne believes she would never make a good mother:

I have two nephews and I love them to death and they love me...We just have such a good time. But I'm just always so happy to drive home. And I just fall asleep and I'm a bad sleeper. Just two hours with the kids that's it, I'm done in. And there's not even nappies or any of that stuff...I'm really into quality time... My brother and sister-in-law are always so tired and they're telling the kids off all the time. I hate to see that. So I just push them out the door...And the kids and I have a fantastic time for two hours. We laugh and talk and read. And no TV...No more videos, turn off the Simpsons...I can't stand the old video games and PlayStation and crap. I want to talk.

Q: If you were a mother...would things be different?

Yes!...Because I'd be just wrung out. You have to be twenty-four hours a day on call. I'd just be a raving lunatic. I'd be slapping them around. Very rarely, but sometimes I am driven to that. I just feel my blood boiling and I just realise it's so unfair. I mean kids are kids for God's sake, you've got to allow them to be kids...But I would have to belt the kids on the bum, and I know that's no good nowadays. You don't do that sort of thing...It doesn't happen often, but I do remember those moments and I think they're important to remember.
Thirty-nine year-old Kelly’s mother was angry and violent. Kelly fears she might not meet socially normative views of good motherhood because she would lose her patience, and lash out physically at her children:

[One thing I thought about when I was considering having children] was, “Have I changed enough from my initial programming to not to belt the crap out of them? Will I be like my mother was? Will I have to exercise absolute control? Will I get angry and hit them?” And I was not convinced that I would be able to cope. And people would go, "Oh well, you know, it's different when they're your own." But deep down, I used to think, "What if it doesn't change? What if I am like her? What if I do have a short fuse? What if I do just lose my temper and hit them?” I never wanted that to happen.

7.2.3 Flexible

Twenty-nine year-old Tina is confident she can meet the socially normative demands of good motherhood. Nonetheless, she believes she'd be better off to have a child sooner rather than later in order to avoid becoming older and more inflexible:

I always loved kids, and I was very patient with them... I knew that I would have children...But even though now I really would want children - I definitely would want them - my patience now is a lot less than it was when I was young...You just become set in your ways, set in your routine. I love getting up in the morning...I take the dogs for a fifteen-minute walk, and then I leave the house and I go for a walk or I go to the gym. Just a little thought that [when I have a child] I'll have to organise a baby sitter or only go to the gym when it suits the child or when my husband is around. It's obviously a total change of life, but when you're nineteen you don't think of that. You don't think, “I'm set in my ways, I would really hate to change it.”
A number of factors contribute to thirty-seven year-old Janine’s decision to remain childless. One is her belief that the best time for women to have children is when they are younger and more easily able to adapt to the changes in lifestyle demanded by a new baby:

I work hard in other areas of my life. At least I get paid, mothering you don't get an income. But it's not the hard work. I just like my life-style too much. I want my independence and I don't have the patience any more. I've missed the boat now. I couldn't imagine having no sleep.

Q: When did you stop feeling you could make the necessary sacrifices?

Well, because…I knew I wasn't happy in my marriage, I made the decision that it wasn't right to have a child. But if I was going to, I guess I would have done it between thirty or thirty-three, but I knew.

7.2.4 Responsible/Committed

Barbara holds strong normative views about what children need, and what good parents are therefore obligated to provide:

Children need to be kept safe and nurtured and cared for and loved. They need to be given the opportunity for education, and they need to be protected. There's a lot of crazy, it's a very crazy environment and I think parenthood is an incredible responsibility.
Her husband’s belief that they ought to have a child changed thirty-three year-old Jacinta’s beliefs about her ability to fulfil the enormous responsibilities of parenthood and, by so doing, to be a good mother:

Q: What was your reaction when he brought [having children] up, given that you thought that you weren’t going to be having any?

It really changed my ideas about it… I thought that was a real indication that he thought that we were for real, for long term, and that we had a really good thing going. He could tell me that ‘til Kingdom Come, but it took him [saying] something like that, because [having a child] is the ultimate commitment. [It is] the biggest responsibility you’ll ever [undertake], far more so than financial commitments. I just think it is a huge statement in how much you’re prepared to take on.

7.3 CHILDREN’S NEEDS, WOMEN’S NEEDS, CONSTANT ATTENDANCE AND NON-MATERNAL CARE: TRADITIONAL AND MODERN DAY PRESCRIPTIONS FOR GOOD MOTHERHOOD

7.3.1 No conflict: women who intend to meet traditional good motherhood requirements

Kristina (thwarted mother) endorses her mother’s view that mothers must provide full-time care for young children, and ensure they always put their children’s needs first. Her mother did this by staying home when the children were young and then, when they went to school, taking a job that enabled her to tailor her work around the children’s needs. Kristina’s plans are similar:
I know that my Mum has some... old fashioned values. There have been passing comments about how when women have babies they should be there for them...

Q: Not working, staying home?

She's not big on creches and daycare from when they are really little. My Mum actually had a business when I was younger but there's never a day that I can remember that she wasn't there to drop me off at school, or pick me up after. Even if I had to go back to the business with her, she always put me first. Mum and Dad had a business...and they used to work astronomical hours...Dad would be gone at five o'clock in the morning and working until ten o'clock at night, but Mum was always there for the kids. Even if the kids were actually with her in the shop, she was always there and she'd always make sure they had dinner with her. Even if Dad wasn't there, the shop would be shut and they'd have dinner together...So I think that's why Mum thinks that if she could do it, women [today should not] put their babies in creche and go back to work two weeks after they have had them.

Q: What do you think about that?

I honestly think if I had a baby, I'd want to stay home with it, at least for the first couple of years and then I think I'd like part-time work. But I always think that if you're going to take the time to have a baby, then for the first couple of years then it is important that you are around.

Sylvie (thwarted mother) also feels she will be able to avoid any conflict between her needs and traditional good mother requirements. She believes her current career success will enable her, when the time comes, to put her own needs to one side and to provide full-time care for her children when they are young:
…I actually love my job but because it kind...[but] I could also imagine giving it up and trying other things because...what I've had to strive for is an emotional peace and resolve...Having a deep loving relationship [and] having children is kind of an exciting challenge for me. I've been working for twelve years now quite hard. So I'm not as career focused in that sense because I don't have that sense of having missed out on anything in terms of career...If I hadn't had what I have I would really regret it because work is very important to me. But because I've had such a good run it would be easier for me to put that to one side for awhile...

Lori (thwarted mother) also sees herself as having had enough benefits from her current career to put it to one side in order to care for her children full-time once she becomes a mother:

Yeah, I'd stop working when I had kids, because I love kids so much...Like right now, I'm really into my career. I'm really into working and I'm travelling and all that but if I had a kid, I'd give it up in a heartbeat. People don't believe that, even my ex-fiancee had trouble and his mother. She was like “she has a career and da da da” but I couldn't care less at this point, because I've done what I wanted to do. I've become pretty successful in my mind, and have a good name out there. I've established myself and hit goals

7.3.2 Conflict: women who accept some modern and some traditional prescriptions for good motherhood

7.3.2.1 Childlessness: avoiding the conflict

Blair (thwarted mother) is firm about the importance to her of having time by and to herself. However, she is equally committed to traditional beliefs that a good mother must provide full-time care for her young children, and put her children’s
needs first. This has led her to conclude that while she would like to have a child, she has the wrong “personality” to be a good mother:

I love kids…but I just don't think that I am the type of person that would be a good parent.

Q: What is it about you that wouldn't make a good parent?

I tend to be really selfish with my time. I like being with children, playing with them, working with them at their colouring or school things or doing crafts or whatever it happens to be, but I don't think I could do it full-time.

Q: So at some point you don't want to do that any more, you want it to stop?

Yeah. Like I said before, I like my own time, I like my privacy. I don't know if I'm the type. When I don't want to be bothered, don't bother me. And I don't think that's fair. You can't do it to a child. I had it done to me my whole life. And I know how it feels, and I know I'm that way. When I need my time, I need my time, and I don't think it's fair to a child. When they want attention or they need attention or are demanding attention, it's very hurtful to be pushed away…I can remember a multitude of times running into the house and Mum would be sitting at the kitchen table and I would want to crawl up into her lap and she would just push me off and it was like, “Get off me.” And that's tough. And I have that tendency too…I [am not saying] I don't want [children]. I just know that I don't have the type of personality I should have.

Lorne (childless by choice) is equally firm about the importance to her sanity of being able to meet her own needs. She also assumes that mothers must put their children first and stay at home full-time with them. The clash between
these two requirements has led her to see herself as the wrong type of person to mother, and to choose childlessness in order to avoid the conflict altogether:

But I just believe I'm not the correct person [to be a mother]. I'm not one of those...

Q: What kind of woman is the kind of woman who doesn't want to have children?

Independent, fiercely so. My partner comments on the fact that I often walk around with my shoelaces undone, and he thinks it's so I can step out at any moment...And the funny thing is I actually don't go out too much at night, but I like the thought that I can if I want to. For some reason, that is incredibly important to me. I mean, I'm not really sort of ambitious in a career sort of way. It's not like the old glass ceiling and all that sort of crap. I don't know, I just like balance, as I saying before, work and leisure and all that sort of thing...I just think mothers are just absolute angels, they're on such pedestals, but it's a pedestal I've never wanted to sort of sit on myself. But I think they're just incredible, I mean I see them all around me and it just never ceases to amaze me what they do. And it's all just quietly done...I know for a fact, I would be out with the moccies, ten ton tissie, the fags, I'd go right into it...Off with the Valium. I would just fall right into the pit of the fat, numb, house-wife thing. I couldn't fight it...[My friend] is still just gorgeous, wears the makeup and the high heels...She's got the spit, and the vomit and the crap everywhere, but she's looking gorgeous. And so I really admire her, but [I could never do that].

7.3.2.2 Home-based work: obviating the conflict

Kylie (thwarted mother) values the separate identity and financial independence she has from her husband and aspires to retain both after she has children. Yet she also aspires to provide exclusive or near-exclusive care for her children.
Good Motherhood Requirements and Women's Fertility Decisions

when they are young. She hopes her plans to work at home will obviate the conflict she perceives between these two goals.

[Working is] fine as long as it doesn't cut across the kids…where they suffer…I suppose because I had the environment where my mother was there, and Dad would get home at six o'clock and off we'd go…That's what I would like to have for my children…They're not being dropped off at child care and then picked up at six o'clock. With the carers seeing more of the children than what the actual parents do. I don't necessarily agree with that…I think if you decide to have kids, you decide to have kids. That's just my viewpoint. I can have that other people have different viewpoints and that other women are more career-orientated. I'm not. At this stage anyway. Maybe in a few years I will be, but at this stage I'm not.

Q: So what are your work plans when you think about…getting pregnant?

Well I would like to have something that's mine. Ideally something like work from home. That would be great. From my viewpoint I think that would be excellent to have that position. Where it's like, you have your own area of interest and your own income source…Just as long as you've got something going on. But the kids are there, as a part of that thing. Or you know, at some stage if they get dropped or whatnot. But not where it's a regular thing that they're in childcare and they can't even talk yet. Or it's like they're this big and they're being dropped off at eight thirty and picked up at six. I don't think that that's necessarily a good thing…[but] I would like to be independent and have never really ever been in a situation where I've had somebody else pay for me…I don't quite feel comfortable with it. Only because I've never actually turned around to somebody and said, "I need some money. Can you pay for bla de bla?"

Darcy (thwarted mother) speaks passionately about her needs to pursue her independent interests and to share in the financial responsibility for the
household. Yet Darcy’s experience as a young girl has given her strong views about the importance for children of having full-time maternal care. She also sees home-based work as the solution to this conflict:

It's a result of coming home to an empty house and not having a mother to come home to. We had housekeepers who came and went. But my father was a builder so he'd be gone by 7:00 in the morning. He would make our lunches before he went to work, and it was my responsibility for me to get my brother and I to school, and we would come home together to an empty house. I think things would have been different if I had a mother in my life. I had people who were there, but it's not the same. I don't know how to explain that. I actually think that having a mother in your life, to put a Band-aid on your sore, to kiss you and tell you everything is going to be all right and that they love you very much, is a really important thing...

Q: I think I understand your feelings about coming home to an empty house, but you also speak quite passionately about having a career and not wanting to give it up. How will you marry the two?

That's why I will always remain self-employed. And even when I've finished my masters, I want to work as a consultant so it gives me the freedom to work the hours that I want, and to have the time that I need. I will always have a career, but I will always tailor it around family...that was four years ago I already made that decision. And I discussed that with Gregory. You know, this is what I want to create, and one of the main reasons I want to create that is that I will always be working. I couldn’t not work. But I will not be a mother that doesn’t exist for children.
7.3.3 No conflict: women who intend to meet modern prescriptions for good motherhood

Jacinta (waiter and watcher) thought childlessness would be her solution to the conflict she perceives between her needs and traditional prescriptions for good motherhood. But since her husband Ronald has announced his interest in having a child, she has begun to modify her belief that in order to be a good mother she would have to put all her needs second and provide full-time care:

There are two other women who I work with who have both had two children each. They have taken maternity leave and have come back. The company is really good like that, and I just figure that you know, that's what I'd do.

Q: So you'd take leave and then come back full-time?

Yeah. I'd like to keep working. I don't want to stop. Not because I love work so much but because I think it's good to be part of the - I want to sort of keep another interest up. Money's an issue for me and I'd like to still know that I can earn...Ronald, unlike me, has always been very happy go lucky about what happens with work...I've always been the one that has held down a steady job. So I know there is probably more chance of me doing that than him, and so we've even tossed around the idea of me going back to work, and him spending more time at home looking after the baby.

Q: How do you feel about that?

Yeah, I feel OK. I feel really good. He's a fantastic carer. He's actually worked in childcare centres before, over the years, so he's really great with kids... And I wonder about this stereotype of the Mum looking after the kid and the Dad coming home and the Dad...being a bit left out of things. I wonder how that would be in the reverse. If I'd
feel a bit odd about coming home and not being there when the child had done this or reached this milestone.

Q: Why do you think you'd feel odd?

Odd as in because its odd that the mother isn't the person in that role. Because that's the way, that's always been.

Q: Has that always been your expectation?

Yeah, and certainly never me being the breadwinner. But in some ways it makes sense and I'd be OK with it…

Q: How would your family feel about it?

Oh, they'd think it was totally weird...They'd think I was unmaternal and they'd think, “that's so nice of Ronald,” and boy would he skyrocket in their esteem. I mean, they think he's pretty fantastic already but they would think he was just amazing. But they'd think it was unnatural of me and they'd probably think that all sorts of horrific things would happen to the baby, being raised more by the Dad than then the Mum.

Q: Do you think that you'd feel that you were somehow being un-maternal as well?

Probably a bit. If I didn't have such faith that Ronald would do a great job and because he is so caring then I'd probably be more worried about it.

Q: Do you think he'd do a better job than you?
In a lot of ways I do. Yeah, in a lot of ways.

Bethany (waiter and watcher) clearly sees her need to have some time to herself each day as legitimate, and has married a man with enough money to enable her to hire someone to provide care for her children while she takes this needed break:

Jack earns enough money for us to be able to have someone to help, which would be good. I don't ever see myself as being a career person, I'll probably always do bits and pieces just to earn a bit of money, but he'll principally be the supportive person financially...I might have someone who helps me so [I can have] a bit of time to myself...It would be nice to have someone a few hours a day or something like that during the week... think that I would go mental without any time to myself.

Tina (thwarted mother) grew up in a world where traditional good mothers had nannies that enabled them to also meet their own needs. She also sees no contradiction between being a good mother and using nanny or centre-based childcare to meet her own needs for exercise or holidays:

Another benefit of having a nanny is for the parents. If they are at work, or if they want to go out at night - it's much easier to have children there, because you've always got someone to look after them...My parents were always there for us. My mother only worked until - she would pick us up at school at two o'clock and then she would be with us for the rest of the day. But if she had to go back to work she always knew my nanny was there...[I want to have children] but I do also feel that I want quality of life too. I believe that I am ambitious enough to have both, the children and the quality of life...I need a husband who has some sort of capacity to earn relatively well, so that I can actually organise a nanny or I can send my children to creche, so I can have a bit of both. I want to be able to know that I can go a gym which has a creche, put the kids
in the creche and not worry about the four dollars that I'm spending… and go and do my workout. If I was struggling for money, I wouldn't want to bring children into this world because then I would really have to give up my entire lifestyle. I am prepared to compromise within reason. I'm not prepared to say, I'm now going to have children and I've got to give up the gym and all my activities, we can never go out to dinner….I want to be both, I want to be a parent, and I want to be a human being. And I want to be able to say, “OK, here are my children, get a nanny. Please look after the children for the next week, my husband and I are going on holiday.”

7.4 ADDITIONAL DEMANDS: CHILDLESS WOMEN’S EXPANSIONS OF GOOD MOTHERHOOD REQUIREMENTS

7.4.1 Relationships: coupled, married, heterosexual

7.4.1.1 Coupled

The overwhelming majority of women in the study believed a good mother had a child in the context of a stable coupled relationship. Kylie has recently remarried a man who has two children from a previous marriage. The pain her new husband and his children experience living apart contributes to her relief that she didn’t have children in her previous marriage and her condemnation of divorce when there are children:

I don’t [regret having an abortion] now that [my ex-husband and I have] split. I don't. Although if we had have had kids it may been different… I don't think that you should split, if you've got kids. I really don't. Looking at the pain that this husband's been through on the whole thing, I don't think so. And looking at [his] kids' pain and their tears, it just breaks your heart.
Lorne sees children as the proper outcome of a stable partnership and morally condemns single mothers for using their procreative power selfishly and irresponsibly:

Women have incredible power...They can just, oops, forgot!...I think it's just criminal. I think it should be charged...It's that thing of, "I've got to have a baby under any circumstances, whatever it takes."...There's something about the flippancy of it...I find it incredibly selfish...Because it's me, me, me, me, me: I want, I want, I want, I wanna baby.... I just think that it's harder than they think to bring up a kid, and they think, "Oh well, I'll be able to do it, that's fine."...Often they have nothing, so that poor kid has a tough beginning...You hear them say, "Oh yes, I can look after myself, no problem, I don't need anyone's help. I don't need any money, twenty cents will get the kid through." And I just think it's so much easier if you have supportive partner... A lot of people go, "Yeah, good on you, you can do it, you're strong."...I'm a bit old fashioned...I like...daddy, mummy and kids. I like that sort of set up, and I don't see any other sort of set up. Actually I'm not so - two mums, like the lesbian thing, and the gay couple, that's sort of OK, I think that'd be fine. But I think [it takes] two people. I don't think the one person thing [is right].

Thirty-two year-old Lori draws a link between single motherhood and feminism. While she isn't "into" either for herself, she doesn't apply this judgement to all women:

I've never been into [feminism], supporting yourself and doing all that...that's it's OK to be on your own, that's it's OK not to have [children], OK to raise kids on your own if you want to raise kids without a husband and...all that. I don't believe in that at all. [I believe in] having the normal thing. Meeting someone, falling in love, and having kids. The old traditional concept...I don't want to [provide for a child on my own]. I don't even think about it.
Q: How do you feel when other women do that?

No, I don't frown on that one bit. If that's what they want, that's great. But I can't imagine having a child [that way].

Thirty-four year-old Blair and her ex-partner of many years had considered having a child. While Blair would like to have a child, she doesn't feel it would be right for her to do so outside the context of a stable relationship:

Definitely one of the more important things for me to have a child would be a stable relationship. I feel that in order to bring a child into this world, you have to have a certain stability. And in my life right now, I don't have that. It would be nice to be in a stable relationship...one that you feel secure in....

While realistic about the vagaries of marriage, Darcy is determined to start her child off on the “right foot” by giving it two parents:

I feel so strongly about having two. Sure marriages and couples split up every day. What I'm saying is I'd like to start off on the right foot. And if we don't work, well then OK, we don't work. But I'd actually like to start off with giving my child two parents.

Despite Sharon's fierce opposition to social norms prescribing marriage for all mothers, she wouldn't want to become a single mother herself:

I can't really imagine wanting to have kids enough to bring up a child on my own. I mean, I think that'd be really hard on the child and on me...I don't think I would really want to do that...[But] there's no rights or wrongs. I get a bit upset when I see all these debates in the paper, these campaigns against single motherhood...It's all about, “women have got to have children and...they should do it
in families and in relationships.” And lesbian women aren't allowed to get IVF treatment any more and it's like, "Why?" And that all makes me a bit angry

Twenty-eight year-old Brenda believes her disability makes it essential for her to have children in the context of a stable partnership:

I'd need someone's support...It would have to be a partner, because other people don't stay around permanently.

Q: What if your parents said they'd support you?

Yeah, except realistically, that's an upheaval of life. I'd either have to shift back there or they'd shift here. And they wouldn't shift here, so you know, that's not really the support that I'd want. I mean, how do you hold onto a child and wheel? How do you go shopping with a shopping trolley and a child?

Q: So in other words, you think if you weren't disabled, their idea of perhaps going at it alone wouldn't be quite such an issue?

Absolutely, that's right...I think it's going to be hard enough as it is. I don't want to put undue pressure.

For Judi, the practical difficulties of having a child outside the context of a stable relationship make it a priority for her to be in a relationship prior to conceiving:
If the time came when, like [when] I'm thirty five or however old I think I would definitely consider having kids. But I'd give myself at least another four or five years before I thought about making that decision. ‘Cos I think for the kid's sake it's better to have a partner...When you absolutely desperately need to sleep, the other can [do things]. Just practical stuff like juggling the kids' needs and being more supportive, and having two role models. Good cop/bad cop is helpful too. I think it's easier when there's two care providers.

Q: Do you have any feelings about children being raised by a woman alone?

No. I think that's fine. But I think for my life, it would be easier to have someone helping.

7.4.1.2 Married and/or heterosexual

There were a small number of women in the sample who not only felt a stable partnership was the right context in which to raise children, but a partnership that was married and/or heterosexual. Latisha expresses a mild socially normative belief in the value of marriage prior to children:

I think love and marriage, horse and carriage, marriage and children. But then again, you don't have to be married to have children these days. [But] I think it's probably a better way to do it...

Lorne is also mildly pursed-lipped about the social approval she sees being handed out to unmarried couples that have children:

I would only get married if I wanted to have kids…it would be to have a family. But you know that's very old-
fashioned nowadays, apparently. You can just have a family anyway.

Lori is clear that her personal values dictate that she marry before having children:

Q: Have you ever tried to become pregnant?

Absolutely not.

Q: Why “absolutely” not?

Because I'm not married. My whole thing is that you don't do one without the other.

Darcy doesn't care about marriage, but believes heterosexual couples are better placed than same-sex ones to raise children:

And I had, the only thing that I was and still am very firm on that I would need to feel that the relationship was, that we were both committed to it. Whether we were married or not is a side issue, but that - because of my home environment - I wouldn't by choice, raise a child on my own...There are issues out there about gay women having children. I don't think that fills the role at all, to have two women. I think you need the male and female, that the child should have the influences of the female and the male...

Judi also has concerns about children being raised in the context of a lesbian relationship:
Intellectually, there's no problem when two women raise kids. But I think that, to be perfectly honest, there's a little part of me that [feels it is not] the most natural, or that there is something you lose in not having a man around… Intellectually, I think that it's much better to have two loving parents, be they females or males… than one stressed out, economically distressed parent. But I do have to say that, I don't know.

Q: Can you put your finger on what would be important [about having a parent of each gender]?

Well, just the obvious stuff…Exposure to different - not different ways of thinking - because you could have two women with different ways. Even physical anatomy lessons…different things a guy would probably expose the kid to. Not to say that you don't have two women who have different interests. But the sexes are different. And just for a boy child to identify with. I don't know if all that is true necessarily. But those are the sort of things that I would [consider]…Also, homosexuality isn't that well accepted, and if I look at it from the kid's point of view, they'll probably go to school and have some difficulty with that…

Janine is a lesbian, but also objects to lesbian parenthood because of the prejudice children of lesbians face, the problems that confront children born from anonymous sperm donation and the difficulty she believes lesbians have raising boy children:

[Having a child in lesbian relationship] wouldn't be fair on the child [because of] the discrimination the child would face. I have lots of lesbian friends who are now having children, and they are using donor sperm…but I just think it's selfish…We are going to be creating a whole generation of children who really want to know their family history, their origins…Another factor for me is that I wouldn't want to bring a boy into the world. I know that sounds really horrible but…my life is primarily with women, and I don't know how a boy would fit in…I don't think I
could give a boy the love or the upbringing that I could give a girl...I don't have any male friends and I think it would be difficult for that boy to grow up in that environment. And some of my prejudices would become apparent to the child...and I don't think that would be a good thing.

7.4.2 Financial and emotional capabilities

One of the reasons Deborah doesn't want children is her belief view that it would be wrong to have children when she wouldn't be able to provide materially for them in the same way her parents provided for her:

It worries me that maybe in five years I'll think, "Oh, what did I do, why didn't I have children." But I think the reasons that I haven't wanted to are enough to keep me thinking that way. Financial reasons: not feeling like you'd be able to give as much as your own parents gave you in terms of good education and all that sort of thing... I had a private education and I know I couldn't afford that...I wrongly think that having children is for people with a lot of money, because they can have a nanny, and they can have their holidays and their little bits and pieces...

Lori's also believes that people should only have children if they can provide materially for them:

A couple that I know, they don't want to have kids. I don't know if I think they are selfish...They're laid back, they own a surf shop. Maybe they don't feel they could provide for a kid that well. Maybe that's why they don't want to have any children.

Q: So if you don't have enough money then it is a fair enough decision not to have them?
Oh sure, if you can't provide, sure.

Thirty-one year-old Mary has recently divorced her husband, and has begun a new relationship with a man with little means. While she feels she and Troy, her ex-husband, put too much stress on being financially stable before they had children, she still feels it essential that she have some money “behind” her before having children:

Financially it would have been much easier [having children with Troy] than what it will be now...it will be more of a struggle now. I have still got a fair bit of money behind me because we owned our house, and I've got money from that...Part of my problem was that Troy was so money orientated...And when I left, Raoul said, “Why would you want to be with someone like me. I can't offer you anything. I won't have much behind me.” And I said, “If money was the thing that was important to me, I would be still where I was.” But I did have to look at all that stuff when I decided to leave. And one of the most important reasons why I didn't have children when I first felt I wanted to was [money]. But now it doesn't really matter to me...But as I said, I have got some behind me. I wouldn't like to have nothing behind me.

Many women also stressed the need for good mothers to be prepared, capable and emotionally mature enough to look after a child. For Kristina the silver lining on the cloud of a recent break-up with an important boyfriend was the opportunity the split provided for her to achieve the personal “growth” she feels is necessary for her to “settle” and mother well:

Martin [is] part of the reason I have changed so much in the last three years. He recognised in me that there were things I needed to do and if I stayed with him, I probably wouldn't have done them. I hadn't travelled. I'd travelled a little bit, but not done the big overseas trip. And he knew
that I wanted to do it, but I think if I'd stayed with him, I probably wouldn't have. I probably would have settled. If he had asked me to have marry him, I would have said yes... he recognised in me that there was stuff that I needed to do as well... I think I've learnt a lot from it, I've re-assessed a lot of friendships because of it. I went overseas and I've learnt a lot from that. I think he actually ended up making me a stronger person that I would have been if I hadn't met him...It was a really hard year. But I look back now and I think it changed me a lot and I really like the person I am at the end of it....

Laney’s prescription for being a good mother is being emotionally self-confident and autonomous:

For me [a good Mum] it is being very very sure of yourself and being free within yourself, free within myself...Women in their thirties are working towards finding out who they are. And I certainly know who I am much more than I did when I was thirty... [I've watched people I know have children and get swallowed up]...Some more than others... some have been able to maintain their lives more, their own life more than others...I identify with [the ones who had] the ability to maintain a sense of themselves for themselves.

Thirty-one year-old Catriona’s believes she must be emotionally mature and confident to be a good mother:

I feel like [having children] is something you do when you have a reasonable level of confidence...confidence in my own ability and feeling adult enough.
7.4.3 The “right” age, the “right” person and the “right” point in the relationship

7.4.3.1 The “right” age

Most of the childless women in the current sample had relatively rigid ideas about when they wanted to have children. Their ideas are a mix of views about the beneficial and detrimental effects of being too “old” or “young” to raise children, and their beliefs about and understandings of their own biological limitations and capacities. Kelly believes a woman is still young enough to be a good mother if she has her children when she is aged in her mid to late thirties:

There is definitely a cut off. I would feel that if I waited until I was forty or plus, that I'd be cheating the kid out of a bit of parent time. I couldn't really - I wouldn't have the energy like I would have had when I was younger: to run around, do things with them. And what would I do on their twenty-first birthday when I'm like sixty something? I can remember going to school with a girl, she was obviously a “change of life” baby and the generation gap was just huge. For her, it was like growing up with her grand parents. And I just remember thinking, "If I had kids, I wouldn't want to do that to them."...If I was going to do it, I always thought that I'd have two...So [I'd have] one at thirty-five and the other at thirty-eight. All out of the way by forty, nice and tidy.

Bethany feels pressured to have children before she is much past her thirtieth birthday and so “too old.” Interestingly, her strong belief that she needs to be young is not matched by any concern about the age of her fiancé, who is eight years her senior:

I don't know if it is the influence of my mother or whether it is my own thing, but I don't want to be an old bag of a
mother. I know that sounds really harsh [but] I don't want to be in my late thirties and having my first baby...I don't want to be having to deal with a young child when I am that age, and then growing older and still having a teenager around the house and having all these sorts of pressures when I'm meant to be - not when I'm meant to be - but [when I will] probably be dealing with menopause. Having to deal with some ratty teenager and menopause and all those sorts of things doesn't sound very appealing, or ideal at all, so I sort of thought that if I could start early...

Q: Do you know what Jack’s feelings are about having children?

I think he’d quite like to, but he's in no hurry either....

Q: He's a little bit older than you?

Yeah, he is. But I mean he comes from a family, his father had his first child at forty. And he has no memories of his father being too old or, not being able to go outside and play ball with them or anything like that so he doesn't...feel that forty is getting old to be a father...

Q: Do you have any concerns about that?

No.

Deborah believes she has gone past the ideal age to have children; an age she nominates as the mid-twenties:

[Having children at age twenty] is probably too young. Maybe, say twenty-five or something. In your mid twenties would probably have been the ideal time if it was going to
happen. The older I get the further away I get from even considering it. Maybe around thirty I would have done it.

Q: Was that a key age for you?

I think so…Because I was thinking the time is getting on, and if you're going to do it you'd better do it now, within the next few years. Because of age and fertility, and that sense of not wanting to be too old when your children grow up.

7.4.3.2 The “right” person

A number of women believed that a good mother didn’t have children with anyone, but the right “one.” Janine, for instance, felt that for her to become a mother, she would have needed to be in a stable heterosexual relationship with the right person; a person who stimulated her and with whom she felt connected:

I knew I wasn't happy in my marriage. I made the decision that is wasn't right to have a child…But not in that circumstance…I guess when I took up with a woman I thought, “Yeah, this is a bit too hard now.”…My marriage was very like traditional, like I thought marriages were. And are. It was a good marriage. People say, "What went wrong?" Nothing went wrong I just got bored…And then when I left, and then fell in love with my current partner, I never imagined a relationship could be like this…I never imagined that you could be so connected and so happy and it's so different.

Q: Do you think if you had been able to have that real connection with your husband and hadn't got bored do you feel like children would have followed?…
Probably, probably, yeah. If the relationship had been different...

Karla describes herself as “desperate” to become a mother. While her strong preference is to have a child in the context of stable relationship, she is currently tossing up the possibility of becoming pregnant through a clinic-based artificial insemination program. However, even though she would not have a relationship with the putative father, she still wants to like and to respect the donor “as a person”:

I'm tossing up... the sperm donor thing. I think I'd like to see the person, and meet them and know what their life was like and how they live. I know they have all those details: colourings and interests and careers and medical history and all that. But to me there is something too clinical about it. And yet it's not totally out of the question, it's a last resort. It would have to be a person that I respected and liked as a person. That's the main thing, that I respected them. Family upbringing I guess.

Despite her personal moral ambivalence about abortion, thirty-five year-old Rhyll had one several years ago because she was repulsed by the prospect of sharing her child with a man she neither liked nor respected:

When I was thirty-two...I STUPIDLY got pregnant to this bloke who I really didn't even like very much...[When] I realised I was pregnant, I cut it off straight away. Because I didn't want this man in my life, at all... I have never wanted to be a single parent...The burden of it, having to take on that responsibility without being able to share it at all. I just wouldn't want to do it, if there was any choice in the matter. Not that I think it’s wrong or anything, I just don't know how women do it.
Q: So was it more difficult to choose abortion because of this realisation?

It did make it more difficult. But the interesting thing was, the decision was quick. Just because of who the father was... There are not many men around I really like or respect. Lots of men I fancy but respect is... a tricky one.

Q: Was the problem that you didn't like him and his genes were in this child or...?

No, no, no. Not his genes... I couldn't bring a child into the world and know who its father was and where its father was, and deny it the right to know that father... It would be immoral for me to deny it the right to develop a relationship with the child: it would be immoral for me to deny the child a relationship with him. So who the father is matters a lot, because single parenthood or not, I would still be tying up my life with this man... I would be sharing a child with him. And I didn't want to because I didn't like him and I didn't respect him.

7.4.3.3 The “right” point in the relationship

Kristina's beliefs about the importance of personal growth are complemented by her desire to have her children at the right time in her relationship:

Martin always loved kids... It is hard to say but I imagine we would have eventually had kids. I think we probably would have done a lot of stuff before we would have had kids... I guess it depends on the age when I get married, but I would really like to have a marriage without children for awhile. I think you need time for the two of you before you bring kids into it. We could have travelled. If we had ended up together we could have done a lot of that stuff together, and then settled [down].
Thirty-five year-old Hilary believes the right time for a couple to have a child is when they are financially and emotionally ready for children and have spent enough time together to know one another:

I wouldn't have a child until I was financially and emotionally prepared for it. A lot of material things do need to come first. And emotionally, being in a good relationship and really knowing my husband and things like that... So now financially we are ready and emotionally I think we are both ready.

Bethany believes it is not the right time in her relationship with Jack to have a child because they have not had enough time together as a couple:

I quite like the way things are at the moment, and I feel like I haven't had enough time with Jack, just the two of us, to hang out together and stuff. And I'm not prepared to give that up at the moment... [We've been together] two years. And I don't know if he is either actually.

7.4.4 Enthusiastically, consciously and seriously deciding to have a child

7.4.4.1 Enthusiastically

A number of childless women thought good mothers needed to be enthusiastic about motherhood. Interestingly, most of the women who endorsed enthusiasm as a characteristic of a good mother saw such enthusiasm as evidence of a biologically based feeling or drive to mother. Forty-two year-old Rachel has no
regrets about not having children with a previous partner because she was never keen to have children:

I don't have any regrets...I'm probably glad it didn't work out that way...I don't think you should have children unless you really want to have children. And I don't think that necessarily always the case [with people who have them].

For Bethany, enthusiasm for motherhood is a prerequisite for childbearing. This is both because she believes that for her to be a good mother she needs to be enthusiastic and because she thinks enthusiasm will inure her against coming to regret her decision to have children:

I had a bit of a clucky phase when I was [twenty]...Like I thought it would be really nice to have a baby...[and then] it really went.

Q: And you haven't had it since?

No.

Q: Is that what you are hoping is going to reappear for you?

Well, I hope so. Otherwise I don't know what I'll do. I'll be in a bit of dilemma, I think.

Q: So you feel like you need that feeling to remerge for you to actually go ahead with it?
I feel like I need to be interested.

Q: You wouldn't just go ahead and hope the feeling came later?

I think...it might be a bit dangerous to do it the other way. I don't want to be in a situation where I'm thinking, "Well, what am I doing this for?" For me, I find it irresponsible. Just to sort of say, "I'll give it a go and see how it turns out." I would not want to be in a situation where I was resenting having a child. I just don't think that's right for the child. Probably wouldn't be right for anything else, mind you. It would be a disaster for everything.

Like Bethany, Lorne is also waiting for the enthusiasm for childbearing that she believes would accompany an “urge” for maternity:

[A good reason to have children] comes from deep inside. I've never had it. But I'm waiting...[It's] some sort of really maternal, you know: you want to bring something into the world and love and care for [it], that sort of thing. I'm not very good with anyone or anything that even remotely needs me...[But] I think it's a natural thing. And I thank God that ninety-nine percent of women do have this natural sort of urge, because it's not like I wouldn't want anyone to have any. But I just believe I'm not the correct person. I'm not one of those...I've had friends and some of them are really honest and are happy to talk about it, and they say that it's just something you feel. It's this sort of urge, you go all funny, and you just have to; you just feel you have to have a baby. Well, I just can't imagine...

Catriona’s enthusiasm for childbearing – a necessary feeling for her to decide to have children – has risen steadily as her relationship has progressed:

Q: On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate the intensity of your desire to have children?
Six. Sort of rising. Six to seven I'll say...I think as my relationship has intensified it's intensified; that feeling...

Q: And how did you feel when that happened?

Quite strange...I think I thought I might never feel that...I think I'd probably like to be a seven. But I feel like I'm moving along, so I feel quite happy.

Q: Why did you think that you might like to be a seven?

I don't know...Maybe I think I would like to feel ready to have a child sooner rather than later. Because I would like to be [ready and] if I decided to have kids, I'd probably want to have a few. And I'd want to be relatively young and energetic and stuff.

Q: Would you be happy to have them if you were a six?

No. Nope.

7.4.4.2 Consciously and seriously

Judi feels strongly that couples should consciously decide to become parents, and take those decisions seriously:

I have three friends who are thirty years old and well educated and they have all gotten pregnant accidentally, or so they say. They say, “I couldn't be more surprised. I guess we weren't using birth control.” My God!...None are great situations, in my opinion. In one, she was about to move out because he...hadn't proposed, and she really wanted to get married. She was getting really frustrated, and just as she was about to move out, turned up
pregnant. To me, that's not a great way to start a pregnancy. I mean personally, it's preferable when it's all a choice...I think it's ideal or preferable to make the decision. And I don't have any issue with having kids before they are married or never getting married at all. It's more that both of them were clearly questioning and not sure. It wasn't like, “We've decided we're going to be together, and that we want this to happen.” It was like, “Oh my God, here it is. I guess it's OK.” And I think it can work out, but it certainly - I guess I don't take the whole decision of having kids very lightly...Why not wait until you really, really want them and then to do it intentionally? It's preferable, if you know what I mean.

Like Judi, Jacinta also questions the “light” or non-serious way people embark on the journey to parenthood. In her mind, a conscious and serious decision offers some insurance against regretting the decision later:

I really wonder whether I could possibly be a Mum. I don't know if I'm cut out. I don't know if I'm equal to the task...because there is so much involved. People seem to take it really lightly. It really amazes me...Can I cope with all of the demands of my life that I've got now plus a baby? [Am I] equal to the task in terms of, it's a life long thing. It's not like you say you're going to have a baby and then in three years, no. It's over. It's the rest of your life sort of stuff.

Kaitlin has spent the last few years in therapy seeking to make sense of the maternal role she played as the oldest daughter in a working-class Catholic family. Like Jacinta, Kaitlin believes that conscious childbearing decisions are more responsible and more likely to preclude later regrets:

[Having children] would be a totally different experience now, but if I'd done it in my twenties it would have been a similar experience [to the one I had as a child].
Q: And is that because you are a different person?

Different person and far more conscious. So if I decided [to have children] it would be fantastic and I would run with it. I really would have thought it through and taken on the responsibility of it and really understand what I've taken on. Whereas [in my twenties] there wouldn't have been a lot of thought behind [my having children]...[I believe I now need to] think about [having children] and make some decisions. So that when you're forty you're happy with where you're at, and have no regrets.

Darcy does not regret the fact that her determination to make a conscious decision with her partner to have a child resulted in their decision to separate.

Darcy believes that by making a conscious decision to have children together, she and Gregory would have demonstrated their readiness for parenthood:

Having a baby is something that was never going to occur unless it was a conscious decision on my part to fall pregnant and have a baby... I wanted to choose when that would occur. So I've always had a form of contraception and it was always going to be when I had made the decision....

Q: What would have happened [in your relationship with Gregory] if you had just fallen pregnant, as opposed to having had a discussion and consciously making the decision?

I could guess off the top of my head that he would still be there. I don't think that Gregory would have run away. But I wasn't prepared to do that because there were problems that were coming from somewhere that we had to look at and that I wanted to address. It wasn't just this question of starting a family. He was bottling things up and had shut himself off. I wanted to find out where that was coming from and what was going on...I wasn't prepared to start a family on that shaky ground...There is enough effort
required in getting on with our lives and our careers and raising a child. I wanted to be able to find out and handle what our problems were first.

For Laney, making a conscious decision about having children ensures a decision that is based on her own values, rather than an unthinking conformity to what “everyone else was doing”:

I love kids but it was just an assumption, a fantasy. I’d [never thought], “So, why do I really want to have kids?”...About two years ago somebody actually asked me, "Why do you want to have kids?" and [I said], “Oh you know.” But then when I stopped, I really didn’t know, I couldn’t answer. And I had to then think that it was to go along with what everyone else was doing.

7.5 CONCLUSION

The current data provide further insight into the good motherhood standards held by childless women. The data suggest most women accept many traditional good motherhood standards, and endorse an expanded list of good motherhood requirements. However, like some of the Melbourne mothers interviewed by Brown et al (1994), some childless women appear to have modified several of the longstanding requirements of good motherhood. Specifically, they accepted the separateness and importance of their own needs and the validity of mothers spending quality time with their children rather than attending them constantly. Both these beliefs are pre-requisites for women’s acceptance of the importance and necessity of non-maternal care.
Only a small number of women accepted both tenants of modern-day motherhood. Like similarly aged mothers (see Brown et al., 1994), most of the childless women in the study endorsed traditional views of good motherhood. However, the data suggest that traditional good motherhood standards may impact differently on childless women than they do on mothers. While traditional good motherhood ideals may constrain the freedom of mothers to enjoy and feel confident about the mothering practice and/or to pursue employment or other non-maternal activities, these ideals may constrain the freedom of childless women to pursue motherhood. The failure of a number of women to have achieved the stable coupled relationship they saw as essential (either for any women or for them) to be a good mother delayed these women’s entrance into motherhood. Similarly, some women’s recognition that their needs and expectations as modern-day women, say for time to themselves, clashed with their traditional beliefs that good mothers ought constantly attend their children seemed to contribute to their decision to delay motherhood or to avoid it altogether.

But traditional good motherhood standards did not necessarily lead the women who endorsed them to delay motherhood or to decide against it altogether. The data suggest that women who accepted traditional good motherhood prescriptions and felt they had the desire, the “personality” and the practical capacity to fulfil those demands were unlikely to feel such prescriptions constrained their freedom to choose motherhood. For instance, one of the numerous forces constraining Blair’s freedom to choose motherhood is her
acceptance of traditional good motherhood requirements, and her belief that she lacks the right “personality” to fulfil those requirements. In contrast, traditional good motherhood standards seemed to constrain the freedom of those women who accepted them but didn’t want or didn’t feel personally or practically able to fulfil them to choose motherhood. Sylvie’s desire and felt capacity to set aside her career and identity as a working woman in order to fulfil the traditional demands of good motherhood means such demands have not acted to constrain her freedom to pursue motherhood. While Sylvie proposes setting aside her current identity and occupation to meet the demands of traditional good motherhood, both Darcy and Kylie hoped to retain and fulfil this identity while at the same time fulfilling the requirements of traditional good motherhood by working at home. The degree to which women believed that home-based would truly offer a solution to the potential conflict between current identity and needs as a working woman and traditional prescriptions for good motherhood appears related to how strongly a woman believed home-based work would obviate the conflict. Kylie’s continued delay of motherhood, despite her commitment to motherhood and her partner’s keenness to get efforts to conceive underway, suggest her lack of faith in home-based work as a total solution to the conflict she perceives. Thus for Kylie, traditional good motherhood standards appear to be a constraining force on her freedom to choose motherhood; one which has led her to delay her decision to become a parent. Darcy, on the other hand, appears to have full faith that home-based work will resolve any conflict between her desire to provide traditional good mothering and her strongly felt need to engage in paid work. In her case, the
demands of traditional good motherhood appear not to be constraining her freedom to choose motherhood. Keeping in mind that most of the decline in fertility levels in Australia and the United States is of more women having less children (rather than more women having no children at all), it is interesting to wonder what impact such standards may have on Darcy’s decisions around having a second child. It is possible, in other words, that while Darcy’s faith in the problem solving capacity of home-based work has meant her support for traditional standards of good motherhood appears unlikely to delay her entrance into motherhood, she may lack such faith the second time around. If this is the case, such traditional standards, should she retain them, may constrain her freedom to choose motherhood again.

More modern day definitions of good motherhood appear, on the face of it, to reduce some of the tension between modern female identity and aspirations. This is because they define a good mother as a woman who can want and can take time for herself either to work or to fulfil other needs. Such a definition does not clash with a modern female identity structure in which autonomy and independence feature importantly. However, the reduction of tensions between socially normative views of good motherhood and modern day female identity and employment aspirations does not clear all the obstacles from the path of women who want to choose motherhood. Women also need to have or to have the capacity to purchase the support necessary for her to be able to fulfil her need to engage in paid employment or have personal time. Bethany’s story suggests that should she have felt precluded by social norms around
motherhood from employing a nanny in order to get some time for herself and avoid going mental, she would not have even considered motherhood. However, it is also likely that she would not consider motherhood were she unable to use Jack’s salary to purchase the childcare services she deemed a legitimate expense.

Not all women’s good motherhood prescriptions were the same. Some women’s views applied not only to themselves but also to other women. They were beliefs, in other words, about what was objectively true or right about good mothering practice and thus prescriptions for how all women ought to mother. More often, women’s views about motherhood were only personally prescriptive. That is, they prescribed how the woman felt she ought to mother, on either moral or practical grounds but did not apply to other women’s choices. For example, Lorne is fiercely opposed to single motherhood for all women. Lori wouldn’t, for moral reasons, have children without being married but doesn’t “frown” on other women becoming single mothers. Sharon is fiercely opposed to normative judgements being made about single or lesbian motherhood, but would reject single motherhood for herself on practical grounds.

The additional prescriptions childless women added to the list of existing good motherhood requirements articulated by mothers were a constraining force on some but not all women’s freedom to mother. Darcy feels so strongly about having two parents that despite her intense desire to mother, she would forgo
the experience if she never found the right partner (see Chapter 9). Whereas Judi, despite her belief that it would be better to be heterosexually partnered, would be willing to pursue motherhood on her own should she fail to meet the right person with whom to have children by the time her fertile year are waning. There was some suggestion in the data that women with practical rather than socially normative or personally prescriptive reasons for supporting additional requirements for good motherhood were more likely to see these requirements as negotiable should they come into conflict with their desires regarding parenthood.

In Chapter 7, I will examine the conflict between women’s understandings of the demands of motherhood and their desire to pursue paid employment, and the impact of this conflict on women’s freedom to choose motherhood.
The truly equal and happy marriage is often the one in which both husband and wife are wage earners. When children come along, however, they complicate the situation.

Jean Daly, Women’s Clarion, 1925

Many women have made the choice to have children early and try to establish careers, and we’ve all watched those exhausted but determined women being punished for not staying back late in the office, or for needing to take time out to care for a sick child. Indeed, many of we childless women have inched past them in the career race, feeling guilty but powerless to help. And if they dare to take time out from the paid workforce in those wonderful early years of a child’s life, we’ve watched many of them get left far behind in the race.

Sian Prior, age 34, radio presenter, 1999

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The data presented in this chapter demonstrate that most women imagine a future of paid employment, aspire to be successful and to advance up the ladder. Moreover, for many women work is a means of achieving financial independence and competence and contributes to their sense of themselves as independent, intelligent and socially valued and valuable individuals.
The data also suggest the falsity of Maushart’s (1997) claim that childless women fail to observe, and mothers seek to hide, the difficulties of motherhood. The testimony of childless women presented in this chapter demonstrates that many observe and listen to the conflicts and stress experienced by the working mothers they know personally and/or with whom they work.

In her 1990 study of feminist mothers, Gordon found that women said “yes” to work, but “no” to careers because women who pursued careers were seen to represent and to support capitalist values (Gordon, 1990, chapter 5). The current study also found that childless women said “yes” to work – or what I will refer to as “jobs” – but “no” to careers, but for different reasons. Some childless women who intended to have children rejected careers because they saw them as conflicting with the requirements of good motherhood in a way a job would not. Some intended to resolve the career/good motherhood conflict by working at home, while others modified their definition of a good mother to include a woman with a career.

Childless women who did not intend to have children also valued work but not a career. This was because having defined a career as an intense time-

24 As quoted in (Lake, 1999, 91).
consuming endeavour pursued only by single-minded women interested in their own personal and material advancement, they feared being socially condemned as “selfish” if their childlessness was seen to be motivated by career aspirations. Indeed, one way these women underscored the absence of selfish career ambitions in their childlessness choice was to endorse traditional good motherhood prescriptions, but describe themselves as essentially incapable of fulfilling them. Indeed the only women who felt free to embrace a career were women who were childless by relationship. While many of these women accepted the equation between a woman who rejects motherhood for reasons of career and a selfish woman, they felt the circumstantial nature of their childlessness “cleared” them of any suspicion of having selfish motivations for childlessness. Thus, it was only these women who felt able – after having established the circumstantial nature of childlessness – to embrace an identity as a career woman.

Gerson (1985) contends that social structures constrain women’s freedom to implement their work and motherhood choices, and that women re-shape their desires, goals and choices about work and motherhood in response to such constraints. The data largely confirm her analyses of the impact of social structures on women’s lives, and women’s responsiveness to the constraints they impose. It also confirms her observation that while women respond to their environment in “contextually sensible ways,” most lack “full conscious awareness” of the structural forces shaping and constraining their decisions (Gerson, 1985, 193). Instead, consistent with individualistic understandings of
the life course characteristic of western cultures (see Chapter 2), women see
themselves as authors and agents – or in control – of the own lives. Thus,
women did not tend to see the work/motherhood conflict as the outcome of
social structures and attitudes that affect all women and are largely beyond their
control. Instead, they tended to see the conflict as an individual problem that
could be resolved through good individual management: by their having the
right attitude and making the right choices at the right time.

It is in this context that many women defined the work/motherhood conflict as
one between “career” and motherhood. This definition of the problem offered
women intending to have children several possible individual “solutions.” The
first was to eschew a career and a self-definition as a career woman, and
embrace a job and a self-definition as a mother who works. Some women
perceive this solution as one that reduces the conflict between the practical
demands of motherhood and of paid employment because a job, relative to a
career, requires less of the mother’s time. In addition, taking on an identity as a
woman who works was seen to reduce the conflict between the woman’s
identity and the socially desired identity for all women with children: a good
mother.
8.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF WORK

8.2.1 Paid work as part of women’s imagined futures

Growing up, Lori imagined herself in a job similar to the one she has now:

When I grew up I always thought I'd be a corporate exec, carrying a briefcase in New York City, working on Wall Street. Then, when I got out of college, I had this opportunity...[to drive] a van selling suntan lotion. [I did this] for years and years. Then I got promoted and I didn't drive a van, I had to manage people...Now I'm travelling. When we're done [with this interview] I have to make flight reservations. I'm travelling, I'm on aeroplanes, I've got my laptop. That might have been what I pictured it to be.

Kristina’s work life has also fallen in line with the way she’d imagined it when she was a teenager:

I sometimes look at my life and think back to when I was a teenager. I always dreamed about wanting a career and living in the city and travelling a lot. I look back and think, “Wow, I’ve got it.” I think that's why I'm happy at the moment, because I have actually got the lifestyle that when I was thirteen and fourteen I dreamed about having,

Latisha clearly remembers imagining a future in which paid work featured prominently, although what sort of work was never clear:

I've always had really strong ideas about work. Like if you want to get something you have to work for it.

Q: Did you have ideas about what you might want to do?
No. And I still don't...[but] I knew I had to work to get the things I want to have. But I had no [specific] career [ambitions]. Like at one stage I thought I might do something to do with art, and went and did [a course]. But I got my eyes tested and I'm slightly colour blind, so that wasn't good. But I was into art, but then not really, and then I was into cooking, but not really. I hated typing; typing was never going to be [it]... It was just kinda, you know, you work. [You] need to grow up and [you] need to work; work is what you do to get what you need.

Martine now works in the field she chose when she was only seven years old:

When I was seven I said to [my parents] that I wanted to become an Archaeologist, in fact I wanted to become an Egyptologist. And I stuck with it until I was fifteen and Mum volunteered me at the local museum and I met the director there...And I decided I didn't actually want to be an Egyptologist, I wanted to become a Museum Director, which is what I am now. So there's never been any kind of point where I didn't know what I wanted to do.

Darcy has trouble imagining her future, or herself, without work:

I will always be working. I couldn't not work...

Q: Why couldn't you be a woman unengaged in paid employment?

Because I have spent so many years getting educated, working towards doing - and doing things - I'm very passionate about. I just couldn't not work, I couldn't not work. I don't quite know how to answer that. I've been self-supporting since the age of sixteen...but I also feel very strongly about what I want to do, and I like the particular lifestyle. I don't expect, unless I marry somebody really wealthy, to be supplied with that; I'm very happy to contribute to it.
Q: And what feelings or images or emotions feed back to you when you think about yourself as someone who is not working?

Oh! Awful. Well, I don't ever think about it.

Q: Well, let's say you have an incredibly wealthy husband who is capable of supporting you…?

I still couldn't do it. I would still want to keep going with the marine biology work. I would let the consultancy go and I would do the marine work. I could never be idle…I would always be working in some form, or some capacity. And I love what I do…

8.2.2 The desire for work “success”

For a number of women, achievement and advancement at work – “success” as it is traditionally defined - is a priority. Jocelyn strives for the recognition and respect conferred by a promotion for which she was recently passed over:

There are promotions and things you can get that show you are respected within the firm. Show that they think you are knowledgeable and experienced and all that sort of stuff. When I first got to this firm, I think I got there in September, the following June a couple of people were given a promotion, and I wasn't. Not that I should have expected it. I…hadn't had that much experience. But I was a bit miffed. I spoke to [my boss] about it. She said "We don't do anything until you've been here at least a year. But...next year, don't worry about it." So that sort of thing is important.

Catriona is feeling frustrated at her inability either to leave her work as a gallery assistant to work as an artist, or to advance towards a career as a curator:
I've been working for two years in my current job as a gallery assistant. Before that I worked at another gallery for one year and one half. Before that I was basically studying to get qualifications to work as a curator…and before that I did an arts degree.

Q: So you've been working in the career for which you trained?

Yeah.

Q: Do you like it?

Not all the time. I like working with paintings and art and that kind of thing. Sometimes I don't like being a gallery assistant because I think I'm going to be an artist. So I get kind of jealous. It's badly paid and it's hard to get anywhere. So I don't like the fact that I don't know where I'm going to go. And I don't want to stay where I am forever.

Q: So there's not a career track?

Not where I am...I'm thinking about what to do. How I could get more skills. So maybe I could move sideways or something, but I'm just not sure...I like the work, but I don't like the organisation very much. So, I'm just keeping my eye out and if anything else comes up, I might apply.

Jacinta is excited about being promoted from office administrator to account manager:

I'm the office administrator [but] I'm about to get a promotion. I've been asked if I'd like to step up into an account managers role which is something I've never ever
done before, but the position's been vacated and the manager's approached me...It will mean a lot more responsibility and a lot more hours. And I'm really excited about it because it's a really good goal...[My partner and I] dedicate quite a bit of time to work. Work doesn't always demand of me the hours I put in, but I like to know that things are done properly and that I'm going to start off the day tomorrow not in a complete mess. So I tend to do more than what is absolutely necessary, but for me its necessary.

8.2.3 Work as means of achieving financial independence and competence

For a significant number of women, work was valued as a means of achieving financial independence and competence. A number of women related their valuing of such benefits to the value their mothers placed on financial independence and competence and/or the difficulties they had in achieving it. For Lori, making a good salary meant that she didn’t need to marry and so could enjoy the emotional, sexual and social freedoms of being single:

My friends that aren't married would love a boyfriend more than anything in the world. A lot more than I would...I think they need one more than me. I don't need a boyfriend for anything. There's nothing that I need a boyfriend for. I have enough dates to go out to dinner. I could date a ton of different people for sex...Financially I don't need someone to help me out at all. They do, they all need a boyfriend for all that stuff. They need a boyfriend for a sense of security. But I kind of love not having one. I love being free; I love going to a bar. I mean when I go out, every single time I meet a new guy...I love looking at a guy across the bar and saying (beckons with finger), “come here.” I just love that stuff.

Q: What kind of security does having a boyfriend give a person?
Financial security is the main thing.

Lorne is an actress, and accustomed to making low wages. One of the highlights of her life was working and living in Asia because she was doing what she loved, had large amounts of input into the production of the work, and was paid well:

I started working in a small, modern, contemporary theatre company when I was sixteen. I left school. Then I worked in a nightclub, just being a cocktail, barmaid person, and then I went overseas and worked in London for a year...Then I got some contracts to go to Japan...and Korea for about four years. They were the best times of my life...We earned lots and lots of money. I guess we had a lot of power...we got our own Korean agent and basically demanded a house, and sewing machines and we did all the sewing of the costumes so it was a very fulfilling and satisfying...and writing our own scripts. We were doing what we loved.

One of Kylie’s concerns about making a career of motherhood is losing the financial independence that results from having paid employment:

I think if financially we're set up enough for me to be there for the child...But to have - for my own outlet - something that's mine in the area of work is also important. But the choice to be a mother is an important hat for me.

Q: But it's not so important that you'd be willing to have nothing that is yours?

Well, that's something that I'm toying with. Only from the viewpoint that I would like to be independent and haven't really ever been in a situation where I've had somebody else pay for me, or for us. It's having to come to grips with that idea of what I'm doing...A mother is a career, if that's
what you choose to do, and you choose to stop work. And to have your husband pay for that. [But] I don't quite feel comfortable with it. Only because I've never actually turned around to somebody and said, "Here, I need some money. Can you pay for bla de bla?"

A number of women related the value they placed on financial independence and competence to the value their mothers placed on financial independence and competence and/or the difficulties they had in achieving it. Judi remembers as a young woman disapproving of her unemployed mother’s economic dependence on Judi’s father:

Had you talked to me in high school I was like, “Mom didn't have a job, and I can't believe it, and that was terrible, and how could she be so dependent.”

Brenna still feels critical of her mother’s failure to get a paid job after Brenna and her brother were old enough to be in school. She notes that her mother, now employed, also regrets her failure to enter the paid workforce earlier:

[My Dad] was a policeman. She stayed home. Even when I was in school my mom didn't work. I don't agree with that...I think that she could have [gone] out and done something and helped my Dad a little bit, so it wasn't so hard on him. I think it’s hard to have to work and take care of all the bills. And she sat home even when I was in school. I can understand when I was little, her staying home. That was her choice. But then things were different than they are now...She works now...[and] loves it and is sorry that she didn't do it sooner.
8.2.4 Work as a contributor to women’s sense of themselves as independent, intelligent, socially valued and valuable

Sylvie wants a relationship, but it would not replace the important role her career plays in her sense of herself as an independent person:

I've had this argument with quite a few men, and I don't actually know what they are getting at. Do they think I should be at home waiting by the phone in case I meet someone?...I have to work, and I want to be fulfilled by my work and it tends to be that fulfilling jobs are also more demanding...I remember when I broke up with the last man I [had] a long-term relationship with, people saying, "Oh, you've let a good one go," as though I actually had options. I hadn't wanted the relationship to end, I was very distressed about it ending...They assumed that I had left him because I am this kind of single career gal when actually it hadn't worked out for other reasons, nothing to do with that...It never occurred to me that I wouldn't work, a woman staying at home was never actually a role model. It just never crossed my mind. I think that's why when people say I am being a career woman I don't know what to say because it is just my working life is just the air I breathe...[Not working for me means] having no agency. I do think that one of the things I've really always actively rebelled against is between what men want and not feeling like my desires and needs are being respected and that I can be pro-active about decisions I've made.

Laney’s completion of her Master’s thesis helped her to understand the importance to her of doing work consistent with her value system. Her decision to start her own consulting company, so she can work with the workers rather than management, has been an important part of her emerging identity as an independent thinking woman:

I don't come from a line of great thinkers and the women are usually not educated on my mother's side. The husband doing the thinking and the woman looking after the home was the norm and the culture in our
family…. [So] what I really needed to do was to find out if I had a mind. And that's why I went back to study…. I was driven to study and so I started a post grad diploma…. and from there I've just kept going…. When I first started the post-grad dip, and I started getting [good grades], it was amazing…. I [had thought] I couldn't do it, I couldn't take it any further. And I did. But it was sort of this amazing struggle to get it down, to think. To get it right and take a position…. I was writing about consultancy, these whiz-bang super consultants can promise certainty but they can't deliver it. I think it was re-affirming… [my] decision to [start my own company] because when I [was working as a consultant we'd promise]… a whole bunch of things that we couldn't necessarily deliver, and I was playing that game. So for me it was saying, “no, I'm not going to do that any more”.

Q: Not going to promise what you can't deliver?

I'm not going to work with big executives where they want image, promises [and] certainty. I will work with the workers. It was symbolically just taking a position on something I believed in, and knowing my own mind. And asking myself what I wanted to do rather then following along with what everybody else was doing… [and of] being a thinking woman.

For Kylie, work not only provides financial independence, but emotional autonomy and a sense of self and purpose:

Now I've just resigned from the position that I've had for the last few years… I had a wonderful time. But [I wanted to push myself out of the] comfort zone… I've got some work that I can do with my husband. He's been pushing me for the last few years to come and work with him. So that's been this ongoing battle of purposes… Because while I think that it can work to work with your partner… you really need to have that separateness of hats and areas in the business. Like, “that's your baby, you run it and this is mine.” And with his medical practice, it's an area that I know a little bit about but not a lot. Where with what I've had, I worked myself up to a… power position
within the organisation...But I haven't quite discovered what my area in [his] business would be...And he has an extremely busy practice.... Because he gets the kids. He handles their ear infections. Handles their asthma. Handles all these different things...And I look at that and I go, "WOW, that's just fantastic!"

Q: And you want something like that for yourself?

For me...[But] I haven't quite worked out [what]...So it's all in a bit of a limbo state...

Q: What I'm picking up from you is that it seems quite important to you that you do find something for you that gives you feedback that you are contributing?

Completely. That's right. [And] where you're producing, you have to. Or from my viewpoint, anyway. It's like what you do you get a buzz out of...Everything that I've done in life I've always loved doing...It's always been like a growth, take whatever you can from it. But it hasn't been mine. What I had at [my former job] was mine, but I was working with others. But still it was my area. I was in control of all these different departments and things like that. I just need to find that, wherever it is...And at thirty-one...I would have liked to have had something a little more concrete.

Q: Happening for you already?

Yeah. So that's where it's a little daunting. I like to be independent.

For Jacinta, work is a way to preserve her identity as an independent woman, and to avoid becoming a "dumpy Mum":

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Having a baby would be such a huge thing and of course it is only normal that you are absorbed in everything to do about it. But it just confirms to me that if you don't have another life other than a baby...I worry about...losing touch with the big wide world out there. I worry about becoming concerned with things like how much the nappies are going to cost me when [important political debates] are going on. I worry about losing perspective...and becoming a dumpy Mum...There's a lady up the street who is a dumpy Mum. She's got twin boys [and] all she does is complain..."Oh God, I'm so tired, they were awake at 5:00." And she just goes on and on and on...She never reads a paper, she never sees a film. You can never talk to her about anything other than her kids because she just doesn't know about anything else. That makes me think, “So that's it. You have your kids and then there's nothing else, nothing other than that.”

8.3 WATCHING AND LISTENING: CHILDLESS WOMEN’S OBSERVATIONS OF THE CONFLICT BETWEEN PAID WORK AND MOTHERHOOD

A number of childless women cite the experiences of work colleagues, friends and sisters as evidence for their concerns about the difficulties of combining paid work and motherhood. Most of Deborah’s friends have very young children, and are either working or studying full or part time. The difficulties these women face are among the reasons Deborah cites for wanting to avoid having children altogether:

I don't have this wildly exciting life, but it is nice to think that if you want to go away somewhere you can. So many of my friends have young children now and I see how beleaguered they are and [I think], “Oh God, how do they do it? I'm so glad I'm not doing that.” In the back of my mind I also think they've got the great joy of having children as well...There must be great joys in it, it's not all horrible.
Q: But those joys are not immediately apparent to you?

(Laugh).

Sharon has observed enough working mothers in her own office to know the difficulties working mothers face:

[Having kids] really puts paid to lots of notions of career. There are careers you can have with children, but it is tough going and there’s a limit. It’s definitely not equal out there for men and women in the business world, especially for women with kids. It’s just really a hard juggling act and I see it with people I work with. I think the conflicting demands when you work are dreadful. I'm in a job where I work fifty to sixty hours a week. And there are people there trying to bring up young kids and work at the same time. And you have to be at work, otherwise you're not being serious. But...they've got this guilt that they should be spending more time with the kids.

Her sister’s experience warned Hilary of the risks faced by women who need to work and try to mother:

My sister was eighteen years old with a baby and within another year another baby was on the way. Then they got caught in the trap that so many people did: she was working nights, he was working during the day. They were paying off an amazing mortgage; the interest rates were insane. They had bought in a new estate, away from the family, no support. Nothing went right. And then comes the divorce.

Jocelyn has observed the difficulties her friend Riana has balancing the demands of her high-powered job and motherhood:
[Riana and her husband are] both working really hard. And so they’ll do things like come home late, and the child will still be awake. And they’ll bring the child presents. Bad stuff like that. And Riana says to me "It's horrible, I'm becoming the typical hard working over-worked mother who has to find ten minutes to find a new present every day for the child whom she doesn't see except in the morning just before work."

Kaitlin’s observations of her friends’ and workmates’ experiences of combining work and motherhood has left her with few illusions about the difficulties:

The way work is structured now is very much around the male model. It's getting better, but I'm watching women really struggle to be a mother and work at the same time: watching women be incredibly stressed...They have got to work part-time but they've got to work in a job that's unsatisfying. They're torn because they want to be with their babies, and they can't do their fitness, because that's taking time away from their babies and their partners. So where is their personal time for themselves? It isn't there. They've got so many roles and they're still thinking about what's going to get cooked for dinner...

8.4 WOMEN WHO INTEND TO HAVE CHILDREN: RESOLVING THE CONFLICT BETWEEN “CAREER” AND GOOD MOTHERHOOD

8.4.1 “Jobs” not “careers”

Women who intend to have children also intend to reject their careers and an identity as a “career woman” after or in preparation for having children because they see both in conflict with the requirements of good motherhood. However, many plan to be a mother who has a “job.”
Kristina indicated in her questionnaire that she sees her current job to be part of a career that is “important” to her. She takes her work life seriously, swapping and changing jobs that offer more challenge, better remuneration and a career pathway:

I wanted to get into the travel industry...So then I did a Jetset six month course and I got a diploma of travel...I was employed about six weeks or two months after I finished my course...Then I spent four years as a consultant at the agency and that was great, because it was a small business - a family-run business - and so you learnt everything because you were doing everything. But then after a while I knew I wasn't going to go any further...So I left and went to Thomas Cook, to one of their corporate offices, which was something I'd always wanted to do...I was getting paid more than I was at the last job, but you'll never retire working in the travel industry...Money doesn't really matter to me, I'd rather have job satisfaction...I thought that I could go further because it was a big corporation...and there is so much more scope to move around in Thomas Cook. You can go into different departments, and different branches and all sorts of things...

However, Kristina intends to take a leaf out of her mother's book and, once she has a baby, downgrade her career to full-time motherhood and then a part-time job. She expects this decision to reduce the practical conflicts between paid work and motherhood to provide her with an identity – a mother who works – consistent with traditional definitions of good motherhood:

My Mum was very much a career woman when she was younger...[But] now she's not big on creches and daycare from when they are really little. My Mum actually had a business when I was younger, but there's never a day that I can remember that she wasn't there to drop me off at school, or pick me up after. Even if I had to go back to the business with her, she always put me first. Mum and Dad
had a [small goods] business and they used to work astronomical hours. Dad would be gone at five in the morning and work until ten at night, but Mum was always there for the kids. Even if the kids were actually with her in the shop, she was always there and she'd always make sure they had dinner with her...I think that's why Mum thinks that back in those days that she could do it, so I think she's not a supporter of women going back to work two weeks after you've had a baby...I honestly think if I had a baby, I'd want to stay home with it, at least for the first couple of years and then I think I'd like part-time work. But I always think that if you're going to take the time to have a baby, then for the first couple of years then it is important that you are around. But not necessarily all the time, once they get a little older. I mean I think the way that we were brought up was fantastic, because my Mum kept active but I never felt like they were never there for us. Mum was always there. If we were sick, she wouldn't go in to work, because it was their business.

Lori is currently very dedicated to her career and is pleased she has accomplished her career goals. However, having recently decided she is ready to get married, Lori has begun to think of her career as a job – a way to earn money and remain constructively busy until marriage to a right man allows her to quit work altogether:

I decided I wanted to get married...I think I realised I'm ready to do that.

Q: And what hadn't you felt ready prior to that?

I never really met anyone I liked enough I don't think...No one ever knocked my socks off, I never met any guy...

Q: So what kind of person are you are looking for?
He has to be ambitious, similar qualities and traits that I have... The majority of people I am dating are Jewish and are successful. Finally, I'm trying to do that.

Q: So you are trying to date the sort of people who you think you could marry?

Right...

Q: Why is ambition and success so important?

Well, I think they probably go hand in hand. I want to live a life similar to what I grew up in. I don't want to go any less. I'm not saying I need to live like I do now, because I think we live better now, I was in an upper-middle class family and now with my brother being as wealthy and successful as he is, I get a lot of the perks. Not straight out financially or anything but I fly in private Lear jets and go to these places with him and do sick things. Just ridiculous crazy things and I don't need that. But I do need to live in a comparable place, and lifestyle that I grew up in. I don't ever want to have to worry about money to the point that we get crazy.

Q: And do you want to stop working at some point?

Yeah, I'd stop working when I had kids, because I love kids so much...Like right now, I'm really into my career. I'm really into working and I'm travelling and all that but if I had a kid, I'd give it up in a heartbeat. People don't believe that, even my ex-fiancee had trouble and his mother. She was like “she has a career and da da da” but I could care less at this point, because I've done what I wanted to do. I've become pretty successful in my mind, and have a good name out there. I've established myself and hit goals... I always say to my friend Lynn, she's working, “just get married and you won't ever have to work again. [You can] play tennis.”
Q: And does that sound appealing to them?

Yeah, for sure

Q: So a job for them is just getting the money to live, but the minute they can give it up they will.

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Q: Is it the same for you?

...a job is just to survive, yeah.

Shaney indicated in her questionnaire that a career was “very important” to her. She used to run the family business but, after falling out with her father, started her own:

I was running our family business and had a bad run-in with my father... So I left that and start[ed] my own business and was on a government scheme... I still get angry about [the fact that] women are still - and I see this all the time - not given the credit that they are due just purely because they are female. And I see this in the business world all the time and I managed a company that was in an industry that was very male oriented and it used to make me sick. The number of women in a meeting, including me, that would just be talked over. They wouldn't think of doing it to each other - if the discussion got heated they would talk over each other, but when it was just a matter of putting in ideas, the fellas would never speak over each other. Often if I or another female started talking you'd be half way through your first sentence as though you weren't even speaking, as though they weren't even hearing you speak. That you were just a nothing. And I see that still, even where I'm working today.
Yet despite this, Shaney says she is not a career woman, although she is confident she thinks she will probably take a job after she takes a few years off to raise children:

I'm not an ambitious career minded person, I didn't want to have a career as my life, but I thought I'd probably still work, so it wasn't entirely wife and mother though mind you I'd love to stay home for a few years and do nothing...

Sylvie describes her career as like the air she breathes. Yet because she will be coming to motherhood later in life, she believes her past career successes will enable her to do part-time consulting work that will preserve her identity as a successful independent woman, but reduce the practical conflict between motherhood and paid employment:

[People I work with think], "If you have a career you can't be a mother", and so they feel like I have chosen to be a "hardbitten career woman."...My mother...worked her whole life and it never occurred to me that I wouldn't work...I think that's why when people say I am being a career woman I don't know what to say because it is just my working life is just the air I breathe. I get agitated because I don't know what they mean.

Q: Because you don't know what the alternative is?

Yes!...I think the possible problem is that women feel an obligation to...have a high powered career and to have children - the superwoman thing. I think this is a problem that...modern culture presents women with.

Q: Do you feel that has influenced you? Do you feel under pressure to be a superwoman?
...I actually love my job...[but] I could also imagine giving it up and trying other things because...what I've had to strive for is an emotional peace and resolve...Having a deep loving relationship [and] having children is kind of an exciting challenge for me. I've been working for twelve years now quite hard. So I'm not as career focused in that sense because I don't have that sense of having missed out on anything in terms of career...If I hadn't had what I have I would really regret it because work is very important to me. But because I've had such a good run it would be easier for me to put that to one side for awhile...[Or] I might stop full-time work but I've got enough behind me to know that I would get various jobs as a consultant... But I also have a sense that that would never really happen, that I might stop full-time work but I've got enough behind me to know that I would get various jobs as a consultant.

Jacinta is likely to keep on doing her job full-time after she has kids while her husband provides primary care for their child. While this arrangement reduces the practical conflict between paid employment and motherhood, Jacinta still characterises her work in job-like, rather than career-like, terms in order to avoid being socially perceived as a “career woman,” a term synonymous for her with an “unnatural” or “bad” mother:

The company is really good [with maternity leave] and I just figure that's what I'd do.

Q: So you'd take leave and then return to work full-time?

Yeah. I'd like to keep working. I don't want to stop. Not because I love work so much but because I think it's good to be part of the - I want to sort of keep another interest up. Money's a worry, of course, for me. I'd like to still know that I can earn...I certainly never [imagined I'd] be the breadwinner. But in some ways it makes sense and I'd be OK with it. [But] I don't know. It also sets me up as being some kind of - I think about me going off to work, and
Ronald staying at home with the baby and that just seems really odd. Like it puts me in a slot where I don't feel I really belong.

Q: Which slot?

Sort of the career woman. Because that seems to me to be all hard edges, and briefcase and stuff...just kind of a bit of a hard-nosed, and driven...There is just something about it that kind of doesn't sit right there.

Q: How would your family feel about it?

Oh, they'd think it was totally weird...They'd think I was un-maternal and they'd think, “that's so nice of Ronald” and he would skyrocket in their esteem...But they'd think it was unnatural of me

Q: Do you think that you'd feel that you were somehow being un-maternal as well?

Probably a bit.

8.4.2 Working at home and redefining good motherhood

8.4.2.1 Working at home

Darcy accepts traditional prescriptions for good motherhood; namely that good mothers make their children the central focus of their lives and provide most or all of the care for their young. She proposes home-based work as a way of
preserving this traditional definition but reducing the conflict between it and her desire to maintain her career:

It's a result of coming home to an empty house and not having a mother to come home to. We had housekeepers who came and went. But my father was a builder so he'd be gone by 7:00 in the morning. He would make our lunches before he went to work, and it was my responsibility for me to get my brother and I to school, and we would come home together to an empty house. I think things would have been different if I had a mother in my life. I had people who were there, but it's not the same. I don't know how to explain that. I actually think that having a mother in your life, to put a band-aid on your sore, to kiss you and tell you everything is going to be all right and that they love you very much, is a really important thing...

Q: I think I understand your feelings about coming home to an empty house, but you also speak quite passionately about having a career and not wanting to give it up. How will you marry the two?

That's why I will always remain self-employed. And even when I've finished my masters, I want to work as a consultant so it gives me the freedom to work the hours that I want, and to have the time that I need. I will always have a career, but I will always tailor it around family...that was four years ago I already made that decision. And I discussed that with Gregory. You know, this is what I want to create, and one of the main reasons I want to create that is that I will always be working. I couldn’t not work. But I will not be a mother that doesn't exist for children.

Kylie’s enjoyment of being raised in a typical 1960s family (Mum at home while Dad works), is behind her acceptance of traditional prescriptions for good motherhood. Like Darcy, she sees home-based work as a way of preserving those beliefs, but also enabling her to have the sort of career enjoyed by her
husband and some friends; one about which she is passionate and that offers her emotional and financial independence:

Everything that I've done in life I've always loved doing...It's always been like a growth, take whatever you can from it. But it hasn't been - mine. What I had at [my former job] was mine, but I was working with others. But still it was my area. I was in control of all these different departments and things like that. I just need to find that, wherever it is...And at thirty-one...I would have liked to have had something a little more concrete.

Q: Happening for you already?

Yeah. So that's where it's a little daunting. I like to be independent...

Q: What words of images pop into your mind when I say “working woman?”

That's fine as long as it doesn't cut across the kids...where they suffer. Because I had the environment where my Mother was there, and Dad would get home at six o'clock and off we'd go. It was like, here's a family, we are all making dinner, da da da da. That's what I would actually like to have for my children. So it's like they have that stable family environment...I think it's very important that the kids grow up and have that stability.

Q: So what are your work plans [when you have children?]

Well I would like to have something that's mine. Ideally something like work from home. That would be great. From my viewpoint I think that would be excellent to have that position. Where it's like, you have your own area of
interest, your own income source...Just as long as you've got something going on. But the kids are there, as a part of that thing. Or you know, at some stage if they get dropped or whatnot. But not where it's a regular thing that they're in childcare and they can't even talk yet. Or it's like they're this big and they're being dropped off at eight thirty and picked up at six. I don't think that that's necessarily a good thing...

Q: You don't have concrete plans about how you would work out the childcare? You've just got more of this general plan and you'll figure out how to put it all together when the time comes?

Yes. Financially we're set up enough, that to be there for the child [would be possible and] from my viewpoint, is very important. And then to have something for my own outlet - that's mine in the area of work - that's also important. But the choice to be a mother is an important hat for me.

8.4.2.2 Redefining good motherhood

Other women considering children sought to resolve the conflict between good motherhood and career by modifying good motherhood prescriptions. These women suggest that it may be possible to be a good mother and also have a career. Catriona had planned to first travel and have a successful career, and then to have a child. Having recognised that she'll need to stick at being an artist a bit longer in order to achieve success, she appears to be in the process of redefining her definition of a good mother to include a woman who has a career:

[When I was younger] I think I might have wanted to be an artist at one stage [and] it's what I want now. Not that I'm
doing enough. But it's still in my head...Sometimes I don't like being a curator because I think I'm going to be an artist. So I get kind of jealous. It's badly paid and it's hard to get anywhere. So I don't like the fact that I don't know where I'm going to go. And I don't want to stay where I am forever.

Q: So there's not a career track?

Not really. No. Or not where I am...I'm thinking about what to do. How I could get more skills. So maybe I could move sideways or something, but I'm just not sure...I like the work, but I don't like the organisation very much. So, I'm just keeping my eye out and if anything else comes up, I might apply... I wanted to have achieved more before I have children.

Q: What did you want to achieve?

I don't know. Lately I've been thinking that... I don't see it that way any more. But that's how I did see it. That I had to do all these things and then have children. Travel, live somewhere else for a while, have a major exhibition. [But] I have travelled a bit and I've painted a bit. But...I'm not wanting at the moment to live in another country. So that's not worrying me so much. And I'm feeling I'd like to try and combine [working and having a child] somehow. [If I was happier at the gallery] it would be easier in a way, because I could have maternity leave, and go back to that job. It seems to be quite good there in terms of people...staying on once they've come back [from having a child]...

Laney's pursuit of her Masters and her plans to do a PhD are part of her quest to locate and solidify an identity as an independent, thinking woman. The importance of this identity has led her to challenge the career woman/good mother dichotomy. She now believes that a good mother must resist getting
“swallowed” up by motherhood by preserving her own identity through study or the maintenance of her career:

Just because I'm a warm nurturing person doesn't mean I'd be a good Mum, I don't think.

Q: What do you think it takes to be a good Mum?

I think, for me I think it is being very very sure of yourself and being free within yourself, free within myself, I think that's a very good start.

Q: And do you feel you are at that stage?

Women in their thirties are working towards finding out who they are. And I certainly know who I am much more than I did when I was thirty...I would take it very seriously if I was going to have a child and so I would want to feel in myself that I could cope with the demands. And the other thing is that I...would [want to] feel that I would be strong enough not to get swallowed up by motherhood...Because I've watched so many of my friends have kids.

Q: Is that what you've seen, have you seen them getting swallowed up?

Yeah, yeah.

Q: All of them?

Some more than others. In some ways I think that's a normal part. But I think some have been able to maintain their lives more - their own lives - more than others.
Q: Are you modelling against the ones who have been able to maintain their lives more than others, or does the degree to which they have lost themselves still make you feel uncomfortable?

No, no, it would be the first. I would identify more with their ability to maintain a sense of themselves for themselves.

Q: And do you feel at this stage - I'm just trying to link everything you've said together now -- that you now have a sense of self that you could defend?

I'm getting there. I'm not sure if you every know but I feel I'm getting closer…I believe you can have it all: a career and your study and children, but [you need to be] strong enough in your sense of self...When I first started the post-grad dip, and I started getting [good grades] it was amazing…I [had thought I couldn't do it, I couldn't take it any further. And I did. But it was sort of this amazing struggle to get it down, to think. It was this amazing process of getting it right and taking a position... it was symbolically just taking a position on something I believed in, and knowing my own mind. And asking myself so what do I want to do, what do I want to do, rather then following along with what everybody else was doing...It is a product of me, and being a thinking woman....

Q: Do you feel that was a journey you had to take before you were ready to pursue a relationship or to have a child?

Yeah, I do...and so the last years...[I've been trying] to find out where I fit in the world as myself...
8.5 WOMEN WHO INTEND TO REMAIN CHILDLESS: RESOLVING THE
CONFLICT BETWEEN “CAREER” AND SELFISH (“BAD”)
WOMANHOOD

8.5.1 Childless by choice

Childless by choice women were careful to emphasise that they didn’t have
“career” – read selfish – reasons for choosing childlessness. Instead, they put
down their choice to be essentially incapable of being a good stay-at-home
mother. For instance, Deborah endorses one of the primary requirements of
traditional good motherhood: the stay-at-home Mum. She scoffs at the idea that
her rejection of motherhood was career-based, grounding it instead in her
essential incapacity to make the sacrifices necessary to be a good mother:

From an emotional point of view I don't know if I could handle [having children]...My expectations would be too
great, and the disappointments would be too great. In a
sense if it wasn't measuring up. And I'd like to think that I
wasn't like that, but I'm sure I would be...A psychiatrist
once told me...unless you feel a strong physical need for a
child...then you should[n't] do it...That is only his opinion
but I thought, "yeah."...I think people generally see you as
pretty selfish and self-centred because you don't have
children.

Q: Do you feel like you are selfish and self-centred?

No, I don't. I just feel that it is not right for me...I don't think
I'm a great feminist...I think a feminist point of view is, "oh,
you have to have your career and put yourself first and
everything."

Q: But that hasn't influenced you?
No, not at all. I think I'm probably quite old fashioned. [I'm in favour of] equal pay and treating everyone the same...But in some ways I think it's gone too far. You can't have everything. In some ways there are reasons that women should be like women, and men should be like men, there is a reason for that...I think to have your children early is a good idea and would have been for me if I'd have them. Because I've never been a career sort of person. So I wouldn't have been the type who would have said I've got to pursue my career and do all that, and then have my children when I'm thirty-five...From a personal point of view I wouldn't want to work and have children...I think it's good that women can push themselves into their career and feel like they can get somewhere and do it just as well as anyone else. But in some ways I see it as a disadvantage in the family sense that women have really gone work, work, work, career, career, instead of concentrating on family things. That's a pretty old fashioned view. I guess economically it's a necessity that women do that, but not for all women, and I think the sad thing that has come out of that feminist movement is the powerful career women. When I see women like that who have got children who they don't see and they've got someone full-time looking after them and it's all just a chore. But they wanted to have this child, they had to do that to satisfy their need to have them and show that they could do it, perhaps. There was an interesting documentary about some English women and I thought, this is where feminism has really [taken us]...There must be a lot of women who prefer their career to their children, maybe, but they still wanted to have the child. Can you do both successfully if you work to that extreme? I probably wonder about that a bit...My mother [was] a career women...she was a full-time working mother...I think for sure my mother should have been around a lot more, showed a lot more interest and I think I'm very conscious about that. If I had had children I'd have to nurture them. And I suppose that goes back to I'd just want it all to be so good. The disappointment if it weren't would be too great.

Q: It wouldn't be in your power to make it "so good"?

Yeah, I think so.
Q: What is outside of your control?

Maybe just the financial thing, of having to go to work, and not being able to spend that time with them and having to put them in childcare. And losing control in that sense. There's a lot of conflicting views there, because, "Oh no I don't want to be bothered with all that," but on the extreme other side, "if I had, I'd want to immerse myself"…

Q: Have there been any disappointments in work?

No, I don't think so. I think that might be associated with being career-minded. Being disappointed that you didn't achieve something, or you didn't do as well as you could of in that job. I've always treated work as just a means to an end: just a pay packet at the end of the week.

Lorne explicitly rejects any connection between her choice to remain childless and being career oriented. She endorses the “old fashioned” view that a good mother is in a stable marital relationship and stays at home full-time with her children, attributing her childlessness to an essential incapacity to make these sacrifices:

I think [having children] is a natural thing…And I suppose I thank God that ninety-nine percent of women do have this natural sort of urge, because it's not like I wouldn't want anyone to have any. But I just believe I'm not the correct person. I'm not one of those…

Q: What kind of woman is the kind of woman who doesn't want to have children?

Independent, fiercely so…I mean, I'm not really sort of ambitious in a career sort of way. It's not like the old glass
ceiling and all that sort of crap. I don't know, I just like balance, as I saying before, work and leisure and all that sort of thing...I just think mothers are just absolute angels, they're on such pedestals, but it's a pedestal I've never wanted to sort of sit on myself. But I think they're just incredible, I mean I see them all around me and it just never ceases to amaze me what they do. And it's all just quietly done...I know for a fact, I would be out with the moccies, ten ton tessie, the bags, I'd go right into it...Off with the Valium. I would just fall right into the pit of the fat, numb, house-wife thing. I couldn't fight it...[My friend] is still just gorgeous, wears the makeup and the high heels...She's got the spit, and the vomit and the crap everywhere, but she's looking gorgeous. And so I really admire her, but [I could never do that].

Q: And why could you never do that?

Just at home it would be ridiculous. You'd want to be in a tracksuit, and easily washable things...I'm a bit old fashioned...I thought [feminism] meant equality, but I've come to see it as meaning superiority...You're a woman, you can, you know have a baby with whoever, you just go and have a one night stand, I mean it happens, to get pregnant. So I mean you can, you have that power, so go for it....I sort of sense a bit of superiority, now, not equality...[and] I guess I feel a bit sorry for the kid...I think it'd be better if they had...a father to get the - I'm heavily into getting the role models. Say the father can do all the boy stuff and the Mum can do the girl [stuff]...

Q: More word association: working woman?

Strong.

Q: Career woman?

Abrasive.
8.5.2 Childless by relationship

The fact that their childlessness wasn’t chosen, and that they planned to put their careers aside or turn them into jobs in order to provide full-time care for their children assists women childless by relationship to demonstrate that career – read selfishness – was not behind their decision to remain childless. Once this is established, these women appear comfortable endorsing a career-focused life without fear of being branded a selfish – read “bad” – woman. Sharon recognises the clash between good motherhood and career, but makes it clear her childlessness would not have been the outcome of her unwillingness to sacrifice her career to resolve that conflict:

[Having kids] really puts paid to lots of notions of career. There's careers you can have with children, but you know, it's tough going and there's a limit. It's definitely not equal out there for men and women in the business world, especially for women with kids. It's just really a hard juggling act and I see it with people I work with, and I just think, it's dreadful.

Q: What kind of things do you see?

Oh, just conflicting demands between jobs where you work. I'm in a job where I work fifty to sixty hours a week. And people trying to bring up young kids and work at the same time. And you have to be there at work otherwise you're not being serious. But you know, with young kids, and this guilt about should you be spending more time with the kids. And can you put them in creche at six months old and leave them there for the rest of their lives...And I look at that and I see other people having kids like that and I think, well, if I had kids I don't want to do that. If I had kids I would give up work for probably five years. So I suppose one of my models of bringing up children is that if you're doing it, you're there with the kids.
And you teach them a lot, and I suppose that's how I was brought up. So I also think well, if you're going to have kids, why not actually do it properly. Don't do it half way...[But if I wind up not having kids] I think what I'd do is absolutely throw myself into my career and get really, really career-focused, whatever career that is. But you know - find a career and get very orientated on work of some form.

“Selfish” career reasons were not the cause of Kelly’s childlessness. She tried repeatedly to get Ivan to have a child with her, and was willing to trade in her successful career for a job she could do at home in order to care for her child – as does a good mother – full-time. But now that she has accepted that she will not have a child, Kelly feels she can – and indeed ought – to make her career her life’s focus in order for her to leave something meaningful behind:

I had decided that if I was going to have children, I'd want to be a Mum who stayed at home...So I'd actually even structured all of my work so that I could work from home if I needed to...[Making the decision to be childless] gave me the opportunity to channel my energy and interests into other things [which is important]...because I'm not going to have a child. I feel the need to work hard on leaving something else behind. It's not going to be another person, so whether it's people remembering me for something I did for them, not in a way that they owe me something back...I'd just like to think that there was a point to me being here...[The feeling of wanting to have a baby] went on a bit longer after I'd [made the decision but] not for very long. Maybe another six months or so where I'd still think to myself "Oh, you're still thinking about that." [But then I] started to get involved in the project where I work now. And that is my baby. That's turned into my baby. I have physically created something from nothing. I control it, absolutely...[The decision] freed me. It was like "Well now that the burden of that decision is out, I can now give all my energy to something where I can get enormous benefit back."
8.6 CONCLUSION

Childless women’s testimony underscores the important role paid employment has in women’s imagined futures. Many childless women strive for success at work and value paid employment as a means of achieving financial independence and competence and a sense of themselves – an identity – as independent, intelligent and socially valued and valuable individuals.

The testimony also reveals that many childless women attend to the experience of their mothering friends, colleagues and acquaintances. Through listening and observing, they have come to recognise that women experience conflicts between the requirements of paid employment and of motherhood in Australian and North American societies.

The way women define this conflict in large part determines their allocation of responsibility for its resolution. It is perhaps not surprising that in individualistic societies like Australia and the United States (see Chapter 2), few women primarily defined this problem as structural in nature. Few, in other words, evinced an understanding of the conflict as the result of social structures that assume all paid employees have a “wife” at home, and social attitudes that require good mothers to feel and behave in ways that are impossible for nearly all women, but in particular women working full-time (or career women). Most childless women focus on resolving this conflict by choosing from among the available options: delaying/avoiding childbearing, dropping out of the paid
workforce temporarily or taking on a full or part-time “job,” or doing it all by 
working at home (what I see as a modified “super-Mum” solution). Only a few 
women attempted to mitigate the conflict by modifying the requirements of good 
motherhood, and none took political action – individually or as a member of a 
collective – to draw social attention to and/or to redress the structural features 
of paid work and formal childcare that make life difficult for workers with family 
responsibilities.

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of childless women are vague about how they 
intend to negotiate the paid employment/motherhood conflict. As Bethany’s 
husband Jack notes, it seems “ridiculous” to get too focused on the details 
when it’s not “even happening now.” In addition, few women seemed to have 
jobs that they’d occupied for a considerable enough time to have knowledge of 
and/or to be eligible for maternity benefits, even if those were jobs they intended 
to still be working in when it came time for them to have children. In other 
words, the fact that family-friendly policies like parental leave are work-place 
based and worker-specific in both Australia and the United States, not 
government guaranteed and available to all workers (see Chapter 3), may 
constrain women’s capacity to make concrete plans about integrating 
motherhood into their working lives.

Delayed motherhood may be one outcome of these difficulties. If the goal is to 
get travel and their careers “over with,” or to the point where they can be set
aside or turned into “jobs” so they can mother, but women live in a world where rapid progress up the ladder is difficult (for everyone, but for them in particular) and job security scarce, then delaying childbearing until things improve is a reasonable strategy. Delay also enables some women to maintain their existing views – often consistent with traditional good motherhood prescriptions – about how they ought and will look after their children.

But for some delaying women a decision to begin seriously considering having children is eventually made. It is at this point that the crunch comes and they realise that something will have to give. For some women it is paid work altogether while the children are young, or their pursuit of a career. Others relaxed their definition of good motherhood or suggested home-based work as a way of obviating the conflict and enabling them to do it all.

A quick trip around the Internet demonstrates that home-based work is increasingly being promoted to women as the “solution” to the conflict between paid employment and good motherhood. My favourite site features a photograph of one such successful mother. She types away happily at her computer while her children cluster, smiling, around the keyboard (Fogler, 2000). Government reports and websites, however, warn employers not to view home based work as an alternative to paid dependent care or vacation time (Department of Productivity and Labour Relations, 1996-1999; SA Working Woman's Centre, 1991). They also note men’s improved access to formal
teleworking agreement vis a vis, in particular, women of childbearing age (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999b; Davies, 2000). Sue Mountford, the Victorian branch secretary of the Community Service and Public Sector Union, argues that work-at-home opportunities have largely been made available to “executive males” despite the fact that women are “still having as hard a time as ever trying to access work arrangements that allow them to be at home with their families.” However, Mountford says the issue is not a priority for the union, as it is still fighting to get women, “basic conditions like maternity leave” (Davies, 2000) The view that home-based work may assist worker-flexibility and by so doing mitigate the work/motherhood conflict – but by no means end it – can also be found in the personal stories of the women who responded to a request for personal stories I posted on several feminist Internet lists. These women felt that while home-based work allowed them to see more of their children, provide care for sick kids and to better manage school holidays, significant caveats applied. The most important one, cited by every working mother who responded, is that someone else cares for the child and/or the child is asleep and/or at school while the woman works. As one woman noted, while it may be possible to “vacuum the porch” while talking to a child, it is impossible to “do research, make cold calls, draft documents, code programs, handle customer complaints, or add numbers while adequately attending to children.” Indeed, all the women agreed that while working at home helps, it does not solve what one woman called the “work/family conundrum” (Various, 2000). What this suggests is that women like Darcy and Kylie may find that, despite
their expectations, working at home does not completely alleviate the conflict they describe between good motherhood and paid employment.

Those who choose or decide to remain childless avoid crunch-time. These women are able to retain traditional prescriptions of good motherhood because remaining childless means that such prescriptions will never inhibit their capacity to benefit from paid employment. This does not mean that – improperly negotiated – fertile childlessness is not socially costly for these women. It appears that while women intending to remain childless no longer perceived themselves to be at social risk simply for being childless, they do feel at risk if their childlessness is understood to be the outcome of a “selfish” devotion to “career.” The new social equation, in other words, is between career women and childlessness (career woman = childlessness) with career women replacing childless women as paradigmatic cases of femininity gone wrong (career woman = selfish and unmaternal). While logically this suggests that longstanding normative beliefs that childless women are selfish and unmaternal still stand, the eagerness of many women intending to remain childless to clarify that their careers were not influential in their choice and/or that they did not choose childlessness suggests that under certain conditions, such judgements may be avoided.

It is unclear whether or not the desire to avoid such social judgements is behind the social conservatism of most of the childless by choice women in the study.
Whether, in other words, these women affirm traditional good motherhood standards – like providing full-time care for children when they are small - as a way of underscoring the lack of influence career has had on their childlessness choice. What is clear is that the testimony of women childless by choice confirms Marshall’s finding that far from being social rebels, resistors of what she calls the ideology of parenthood, many of these women are socially quite conservative. That is, they accept traditional good motherhood prescriptions and essentialist understandings of their incapacity to meet them ie. a lack of an innate maternal instinct or drive. Their choice to remain childlessness is not evidence of their resistance of socially conservative ideas of what good mothers are and do, but of their belief that they are essentially incapable of making the sacrifices motherhood (legitimately) demands of them as women (Marshall, 1993).

The data suggest that the practical and normative conflicts between paid employment and good motherhood constrains some women’s freedom to choose motherhood. However, it also suggests this conflict runs a distant second to the primary obstacle women encounter in their journey towards motherhood: finding the right man (or women) with whom to have children. It is to this difficulty that I turn in Chapter 8.
Chapter 9

The Search For Mr or Ms Right

A friend of mine she cries at night/and she calls me on the phone/
Sees babies everywhere/and she wants one of her own/
She’s waited long enough she says/but still he can’t decide/
Pretty soon she’ll have to choose/and it tears her up inside/
She is scared/scared to run out of time

Bonnie Raitt, *Nick of Time*

9.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I examine what women want in the relationships they seek, and value about the relationships they have. I also explore the impact their relationships with Mr or Ms Right, or their failure to find him or her, have on their childbearing decisions and outcomes.

Seventeen women in the study were partnered at the time of interview, while eighteen were single. Partnered women spoke fluently about the value they placed on their relationship, and their desire for that relationship to last, in the words of one, “forever and ever.” Single women expressed a desire to be in a stable long-term relationship, although many felt demoralised by the difficulties they’d encountered finding the right mate. Single women were careful, however, to qualify their expressions of desire for a relationship with the assertion that they did not feel “desperate” or unable to “make their own lives.”
The impact relationships, or their lack, have on women’s childbearing decisions and outcomes varied significantly between the different groups of women. Because childless by choice women chose partners who were likely to support their desire to remain childless, these partners had little impact on the woman’s pre-existing choice to remain childless. However, relationships, or their lack, appear critical to the fertility decisions and outcomes of women who were childless by relationship, thwarted mothers and waiters and watchers. The core ambivalence and undecided attitude of women childless by relationship and women waiting and watching meant their partners’ desires regarding children have, or were expected to have, a strong influence on these women’s fertility decisions and outcomes. In contrast, nearly all thwarted mothers are childless because of the difficulty they experienced finding and/or forming a stable long-term relationship with Mr or Ms Right or a Mr or Ms Approximate. While these difficulties failed to diminish these women’s desires and intentions regarding motherhood, they did contribute importantly to their decisions to delay their pursuit of single motherhood; delay that increased their risk of encountering age-related infertility.

9.2 PARTNERED AND SINGLE WOMEN: VALUING OF AND DESIRE FOR LONG-TERM STABLE RELATIONSHIPS

9.2.1 Partnered women

Barbara has always wanted to be in a permanent relationship but she was forty by the time she met Troy. They married fifteen months ago:
I've always wanted to be in a permanent relationship. It's been a goal…One I thought wouldn't happen. At thirty-five I decided statistically it won't happen. Statistically women of my age do not meet the man of their dreams and live happily ever after… I had never been in a stable relationship since I was twenty until now. [Now] I'm married and I adore my husband…[I'm in] a relationship with the most loving and devoted - Troy is the most wonderful husband partner. It is just extraordinary how wonderful he is and how happy we are.

Lorne also highly values her relationship with Dirk and hopes it will be a forever thing:

I love my partner, we've been together five years…I suppose I'm so happy because my partner asks for nothing…He's got his own full life, and I have mine. And we come together and we love to chat about it all…I mean I've said in moments of drunkenness [that] I hope we're together forever. That's what I would love. Forever and ever…I've heard friends say, “Oh, you know when it's the right one” and I've always thought, “what a load of crap.” But I do. So that's lovely…[and] an amazing feeling. I can't believe that I've actually finally got that feeling.

Kelly believes her relationship with Ivan “makes her.” Should their relationship fail to go the distance, she avers that she would never partner again:

We met at a party…And we just started talking…And I knew about the second day that I was with him that this was it…'d found the person…I knew I wanted to be with him…One of the things that makes me now is the relationship I have with Ivan. It's very precious…. I've always said to him, "If it came unstuck for whatever reason, that either we decided to split or you died, I'm telling you here and now, that it will be my last relationship." And I know it will. Forever is a long time, but I'm just not interested…We're not slavish and gooey but I feel sometimes that Ivan and I present a very united front to the world. We always stand shoulder to shoulder with each other. And I really like that
9.2.2 Single women: desirous (but not desperate) for stable long-term relationships

9.2.2.1 The desire for stable long-term relationships

Single women expressed a desire in the immediate or long-term to be in a stable long-term relationship, with several women noting the difficulties they were encountering in their search for Mr or Ms Right. For example, Kristina appreciates and is taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by her single uncommitted lifestyle. However, she is clear that eventually she wants to “settle” in a “committed” relationship:

The reason that I'm restless at the moment is because I don't have any commitments. I can be committed. When I'm in a relationship I'm 100 per cent committed, and I'm a lot more settled when I'm in a relationship. It's more at the moment that the world is my oyster, and why not take advantage of it. I don't even have a house, I rent, so I've got literally no commitments, except for my family and they're always going to be there. And I think at the moment that this is the way I am happy to live my life. But I also know within myself that I do want a relationship eventually, and I will be really happy to settle...

For Lori, marriage and children are inextricably connected. Both have been a part of her imagined future since she was five years old:

I always tell all my friends that I've been wanting to have kids since I was five years old...

Q: Have you ever tried to become pregnant?

Absolutely not.
Q: Why is it an absolutely not?

Because I'm not married. My whole thing is that you don't do one without the other.

While Lori wants a husband and children in her future, she enjoyed being single and childless in her twenties. It was only when she turned thirty that she decided it was time to realise her long-term plans for marriage and motherhood:

I never even thought about being married because I was so busy with my career. I got out of school, started working, first I had fun for a few years, and then I started working. When I turned thirty I said, “you know what, it's probably about time that I get married.” Prior to that my last two boyfriends had proposed to me, but I would never marry them. And then right after that I met Tony, who is my ex-fiance…and we just broke it off. But that was right when I decided I wanted to get married. So now the guy that I met Saturday night, he seems like the perfect guy…I was looking at [him] and thinking, “this is the type of guy I'd like to spend my life with.”

Catriona has long been interested in finding a stable long-term partnership relationship, and was surprised at how difficult it was to find a man willing to stick around:

My first significant boyfriend [and I broke up because] I just felt it wasn't right. And then after that I seemed to have a lot of trouble finding people who were committed to me. It was more them deciding they didn't want to continue for whatever reasons than me...But these weren't long-term things...

Q: Has your experience of relationships been like you imagined it growing up?
Not really. Not until now. [They haven’t been as] secure [or] permanent [as I had hoped].

Jocelyn has also found the search for Mr Right trying:

I was living in a college up at Uni. And met a guy there and we ended up going out for a couple of years. And then…his mother was diagnosed with cancer and he just broke it off after a while…I was really upset by that. Then I was living in a house with a bunch of people and…one of them said, "Well, what about it?" So we went out for a couple of years. Then he moved back to Adelaide…Then I ended up meeting someone who I got along well with. He was probably the person with whom I felt most comfortable with…we spent a few months in Spain together. Then I came back early and…when he got back he said, "Oh, look, I think it's not going along the right track. I'm not that happy." And I said, "But you just got back, how do you know?" And it dragged on for a while. But it wasn't that happy. So that was that. And then I didn't see anyone for probably about a year…Then I went out with a fellow. He'd just come out of a relationship with someone. And I think I was wanting too much too soon…More recently I met a guy through some friends who on paper seemed really nice. He was very interested in music and theatre and all the things that I was interested in. And you know great cook, and handsome and well dressed, and bla bla bla. But he turned out to be quite intense and depressive. But I thought I've been on my own too long; that maybe I should give it more of a try…So I tried. I said to him, "You've got to take it really slowly. Because I'm not really used to all this, I'm not sure what I think. But I'm willing to give it a go." And after three months he said, "Well, I'm not willing to give it a go any more." Notice in writing that he dropped 'round, effective immediately. He's a lawyer, handed me an envelope with all these writings in it and said, "it's self explanatory." And rode off on his bicycle into the sunset. So since then, I think, yeah, whatever. I just think that he was in love with the idea of being in love. Showered me with flowers and gifts…He went away for five weeks and then came back with a beautiful Valentino scarf from Italy, in pinks and whites. Anyone who knew me for five minutes would probably know that I wouldn't be wearing pinks and whites. So I think that he had the idea that I was a person that one could be in love with.
Brenda too has had little luck in finding a man willing to make a permanent commitment:

[My last boyfriend] was a Libran [and] just couldn't commit. I deserved better, but that was it. When I first met him he'd been living with a girl for five years. They'd bought a house together and she'd walked out on him because he didn't ask her to marry him. He was just procrastinating on that, didn't realise that's what she wanted. I was going out with him about three months after she'd left and by the end of our relationship nothing had changed between them. They still had the house together, they still had the same car together and you know he couldn't commit to me. He finally said, “well, really we're at the stage in our relationship where we either have to get engaged or split up. So we're splitting up.” I was trying to force him to [commit] but you know the ball was definitely in his court because he was the one with the past history and the baggage.

9.2.2.2 Not being desperate

Although nearly all the women expressed their desire for a stable long-term relationship, many wanted to ensure this desire was not understood as desperation. While Kaitlin feels ready for an intimate relationship with a man, she is careful to make clear that she is not “desperate”:

I feel really ready to be in a relationship with somebody...An intimate relationship with a man who fulfils my needs, my feelings...I feel that, but I don't know. I don't feel desperate, I don't feel incomplete, but that would be a lovely addition. [If it didn't work out] I think that would be very sad because we all have needs and there is nothing more beautiful than to be held by a man. But we live in a world where women are just striving and men are not keeping up in many ways.
Renata also qualifies her desire for a permanent relationship with a gruff refutation of her mother's suggestion that she is desperate. Instead, Renata sees herself as responsible for “mak[ing] her own life”:

Having a special partner-type of relationship is quite important. I haven't had one that's gone longer than about five or six months for five years. You miss the intimacy of someone knowing something about you, or being able to read you, or just being that little bit more caring. That's of course if it's that kind of relationship. You can only hope that it is. But while I think they're important and if it's a good working relationship, it's very fulfilling, I'm not going to slash my wrists because there isn't one happening currently. It's like anything; you make your life. You could sit home and close the doors and not go out, or you can get out there and be part of just what's happening and things that interest you... I'm quite happy. I mean it's hard to convince some people of it, like my mother who thinks I must be chronically lonely and depressed, but I'm comfortable with who I am as a person. That took a bit of soul searching as it does in everyone's life. But I'm comfortable with who I am, what I do...I go, I make my life, [I don't] sit back and wait for it to happen.

Brenda rejects desperation as a counter-productive strategy for achieving her long-term goal of partnering with the right man and having children:

Q: So there's no point sitting around thinking, “Well I really want to [find a partner]” if that's not something you have control over?

Absolutely, definitely. Like, “come on let's go find a man.” When you look you're not going to get them...I think people get scared off. If someone's looking totally desperate to be together with a man and makes it clear that this is the next step, the man's going to run a mile. Looking for some fun or a friendship to start with is a lot more productive and then see where it goes...If someone came up to me and said, “Come on let's get married and have kids” [after] dating for six months,” I'd be like, “get
lost, no way." Whereas if someone came up and said, “do you want dinner and see what happens.” That's much better.

Jocelyn continues to date and eventually wants to marry but is uncomfortable with being or being seen as “desperate” enough to live her life around the possibility of meeting someone:

I'm not planning my life in the hope that I'll get married and everything else will work around that.

Q: So how are you planning your life?

Just going along. Doing things. Getting involved in my career. Seeing friends. Occasionally meeting new people; doesn’t happen so often. Just sort of spending energy and time on career, friends and family…It's not something that I dwell on. It's just the way things are. Maybe if I were involved in a relationship then I would think that marriage would be a great thing. But I'm not really the sort to go out and chase relationships for the sake of it. I know girls, other accountants, who will jump at every opportunity they can get to go out to go to a new party, on the chance of meeting somebody: a new guy who might be “the one.” So I think that if you’re that sort of person, you’re that sort of person. But I don't think I would [do that].

Sylvie’s mother divorced her father and her stepfather while she was still living at home. She connects women’s desires to avoid appearing desperate with feminism, and believes such imperatives stop women from admitting the importance of men in their lives:

I was never allowed to talk about the fact that I missed my father, that I missed men and that men were important to me. I think that’s the problem with feminism. Women do
crave love and being looked after and those kinds of things and I was never allowed to express that. My mother couldn't talk about it because it made her vulnerable and so that's been the difficulty...It's being allowed to be vulnerable and that being OK. That is partly my family, but I also suspect feminism does it as well. Women should be allowed to say, "I want love, I want this," and not be made to feel that means they have a problem with being overly dependant and all that kind of stuff.

9.3 THE IMPACT RELATIONSHIPS, OR THEIR LACK, HAVE ON WOMEN’S CHILDBEARING DECISIONS AND OUTCOMES

9.3.1 Childless by choice

Women who are childless by choice have an “independent” or self-directed desire to remain childlessness. This leads them to choose partners who are ambivalent or antagonistic towards parenthood, and so likely to support or at least not to impede these women’s childless choices. Consequently, the partners of women who are childless by choice have little impact on these women’s pre-existing choice to remain childless. Lorne, for example, sees childlessness as an inextricable part of her identity. This means that even if her beloved current partner wanted children, she would send him packing:

I've said in moments of drunkenness [that] I hope we're together forever. That's what I would love. Forever and ever...

Q: What if he said, “I really want to stay with you but I also really want to have kids. How about it?”
I'd say, “See you later.” Straight away...Straight away...And I would be very clean cut, because I would hate to hold him back...he's got to go out and start meeting people and it might take a couple of years, so he'd better get cracking now...[Because being childless is] just what I am. I just, don't have kids...I just, don't have kids. That's me.

Rachel chose Donald because he shared her long-held desire to remain childless, and believed he would give her the freedom to pursue her own independent interests and goals. Her commitment to childlessness is so strong that even if her relationship had failed, or she failed to reach her goals, she would not have considered having children as a way of finding fulfillment:

[Our childlessness is] a choice. We discussed it before we were ever married. And it was...always going to be a childless family. We both expressed that we really had no interest in having children. It wasn't something that we wanted to do...It was the expectation in David's family that meant that I had the choices that I had about what I did. And Donald is really supporting that...There's recognition in our relationship about the needs of each individual....

Q: It sounds to me like...your current relationship is...

Fabulous. Fabulous.

Q: Do you think if [your relationship or your life had been less fulfilling] that you might have pursued children?

I can see how that is how some people might have [tried] to get fulfilment [by having children]...but I think I would have changed something. Found a different relationship. Done something else...Decided it was OK to be on my own. Gone and worked overseas. There was a whole lot
of things, I think there were a whole lot of things I could have chosen to change.

Q: But your thoughts wouldn't have turned to "I'm not feeling all that fulfilled. Maybe children will give me that thing that I'm looking for."

Can't see it. Not for me.

9.3.2 Childless by relationship

The desires of the partners of women who are childless by relationship significantly impact on these women's fertility decisions and outcomes. For Kelly and Janine, their partner's aversion to childbearing was critical in their abandonment of their pursuit of motherhood. Sharon is also likely to stay with her current partner, even if he remains committed to childlessness, despite her strong desire to have children. One reason these women remain committed to their relationships despite the unwillingness of their partners to fulfil their desire for children is the high degree of satisfaction these women express with their relationships. Sharon also describes the difficulty and awkwardness that would accompany a search for another man with whom to have children. Kelly left her previous husband because of his inability to support her during her extended period of bereavement over her mother's death and because he was unfaithful:

At night I used to just cry. Every single night....I used to get into bed and I'd think of all the things I wanted to tell her that day. And things that I'd seen. Things that I knew that she'd never see...I felt that he didn't really understand the loss. I was embarrassed to grieve...And if sometimes
tears just popped out, he'd say, "Haven't you got that together yet? Why does this still keep happening?" And I kept thinking, "Well since when is there supposed to be a time limit on this?" And I felt very isolated... He just didn't really know how to deal with it....He [also] had an affair with a girl I worked with. At our house. I actually discovered them.

Her new husband refuses to have children. However, the enormous satisfaction Kelly feels with her current relationship led her to seek – and achieve – resolution about her childlessness:

Well, I kept thinking, "I love working [and] there's plenty of time."... So I always imagined, and Ivan certainly wasn't in any hurry. He didn't really ever show much in the way of interest in other people's kids... He doesn't really connect terribly well with them... And also at that stage, not a lot of our friends had kids... I had to prod him a little bit to get him to think about the future... So I started talking to him about the possibility of it. And it was, "Oh well, no rush." Because he's [a few years] younger than I am... and I think he'd always been a little bit wary of the whole thing. He was terrified by the whole prospect of it. So, the subject would come up every now and again... "Oh well, another year, it'll be OK"... And I'd suddenly go, "Oh, gosh, well I suppose if I'm going to do it I'd better start thinking about it again." Then I'd resurrect it. And I'd get Ivan involved in the discussion. And he'd be sort of like, "I don't really want to do it." And I kept saying, "Well it's fine for you, because you can still do it when you're seventy. But I've got to, there is definitely a cut off."... Then I was thirty-four, thirty-five, I was starting to think, "Hmm, bit of a count down now." And we were still sort of discussing to and fro.

Q: But his view is remaining that he doesn't want to do it?

Yeah... And under threat of death I told him, "If you run off with someone when I'm forty five and go and have a baby, I'll kill you. Cos you always told me you didn't want it."... So, he doesn't seem at all concerned about it. He
loves his own company and peace and quiet. He likes travelling. He likes just the two of us.... There's a very dear friend of mine who lives in Paris, who is seventy-five. She met her husband during the resistance...And they had a similar thing happen. They met and it was just like, "We will be together." I met them when I was travelling and I can remember being absolutely astounded, just watching the two of them...They were just this wonderful little self-contained unit...And I said to her "Did it ever bother you that you and Matthew didn't have any children? Did you ever feel like you missed out on anything by not being a parent?" And she said, "There are two things I can tell you that have helped me in my resolution about this." She said, "By the time I met him, I was already thirty...and that was quite old in those days for anyone to even contemplate having a child." ...I realised that Matthew was my lover, Matthew was my best friend, Matthew was my husband and Matthew was my child."... And I thought, "She's right," I do feel like that about Ivan.

Janine has found in her current relationship the “missing” element that drove her from her marriage:

So I had the full wedding, the beautiful reception, and then eight years later, I decided I didn't want to do this. And I said to Mum, "I'm really dissatisfied, there is something missing"...So I left..."...[Because] I knew I wasn't happy in my marriage. I made the decision that it wasn't right to have a child. But if I were going to, I would have done it between thirty and thirty-five...But not in that circumstance. Not in [that] marriage...[The] emotional contact, the intimacy that I was missing from my husband, I was getting from women, not sexually, but just the intimacy...It wasn't about that I was a lesbian and didn't realise it, it was just about being satisfied with my lifestyle...I didn't go on a hunt looking for women, I just met this woman and didn't even know that she was a lesbian and we just went to the pictures, then we went out to dinner...and I just really fell in love. And I thought, “this feels so right.”...It was a good marriage. People say, "what went wrong?" Nothing went wrong I just got bored...And then when I left, and then fell in love with my current partner, I never imagined a relationship could be like this...Never imagined that you could be so connected and so happy...
is that important to both of us, we really work on it...because we love each other so much we want to sort things out...

Despite her sadness at missing out on motherhood, Janine accepts her partner’s refusal to co-parent with her without rancour and seeks to resolve her unhappiness about the situation by thinking about it as a “choice”; albeit a constrained one:

[My partner] doesn't want to be a parent, and she said to me, "If you do choose to have a child, you need to know that the responsibility would be all yours." She said, “Of course, I would love the child, but you need to go in thinking that it's your decision, it's your child. And if we ever split up...” I think she's sensible about it really, and she would be a fantastic Mum...But she's not prepared to be a co-parent...She says she's never wanted children...And being forty-four, she says she's too old now. She likes her sleep and likes her lifestyle, and children would be a major inconvenience. And also she sees things from a planet perspective and she says ...there are enough children in the world...I can reject...[motherhood] with my head, but with my heart I think that's what women are designed to do, and it's a little bit sad to think that I'll never experience it. Perhaps in years to come that will be something that I'll have to learn to live with - my decision.

Q: What do you feel you may regret?

Never having a child. Never having that bond, that love that I think only a mother and child can have. Never having the sensation of a human being growing inside me, never being able to breastfeed. I've spent a lot of years around women and birth and babies and I've been present at deliveries and helped a lot of babies in the world...I often go away from a delivery thinking,” this is something that I will never experience now. And maybe it could have been different.” But it's a choice. But it's not really a free choice...It's a limited choice.
Sharon’s stable long-term relationship with Martin is her first, and prompted her desire to have children:

I hadn't been in any long-term relationships until this one. I'd been in lots of short relationships. And I questioned about my sexuality all the way through that as well. So it was like kids and relationships and marriage, none of this is pre-ordained. There was nothing I was aiming for, I guess. But now I'm in a pretty stable de facto relationship with a guy and I really want to have kids. It's amazing…

Q: So when did that start?

I guess about two years ago…[That’s when] I got this really strong, I think it's a biological urge, it really feels like it…[But if I don't have children now] I might not have the opportunity [because] I'm getting older….

Q: At what point will you start feeling you’re too old?

Well, it's creeping up all the time. I mean two years ago if I hadn't had my first child by the time I was thirty-five, it was too old. I just shifted the goal posts a bit….I would really like to have a first child in the next year, because I would want to have more than one child and I'd really want to be, I wouldn't want to be having children after forty.

Sharon and Martin have been in couples therapy, and Martin is currently pursuing counselling on his own, to resolve their dispute about having children. But Sharon’s satisfaction with her relationship with Martin and her reluctance to start searching at age thirty-five for someone else with whom to have children is likely to lead her to stay with Martin, regardless of what he decides:
My partner is not very interested in having kids. So we're having this huge debate at the moment, and it's being going on for about a year and one half about having kids and not having kids, and it's a nightmare...We went to see someone at Relationships Australia because we've got to the stage where we just couldn't talk about it. I was just getting upset all the time. She was quite good, and she talked us through a few things, and then basically got onto [the childbearing dispute]. She then suggested he go and see a psychologist and actually talk through some of this and figure out what's going on. So he's doing that and I'm just going to try not to create too many scenes for the next few months. But if he's absolutely convinced he doesn't want to have kids, do I go and find someone else, do I have kids by myself, or do I stay in this relationship? I mean I want to stay in this relationship...[and] I can't really imagine wanting to have kids enough to bring up a child on my own.

Q: So, is that ruled out?

No, not entirely. But I don't think I really want to do that. I don't really relish the idea of going out there trying to find a partner to have kids with, you know. That's a bit of an ordinary scene. And I don't really want to end this relationship. So, it's really a tricky situation...So, I'm actually trying really hard, and I haven't ever said, "We have kids or I go." I mean I've just never said that. [I've said], "Let's work through this together and so either you convince me or I convince you, so that we can both still stay together and be happy about it."

9.3.3 Thwarted mothers

The desire of thwarted mothers for children is self-directed; existing independently of the presence of the right partner or that partner's desires for a child. However, like all the women in the study, thwarted mothers ideally wanted what one woman called “the whole package”: a partnership with the right person
and parenthood in the context of that stable long-term relationship. The data suggest that age influences the manner in which thwarted mothers pursue “the whole package.” Younger women saw themselves as having enough time to pursue the whole package without compromise. This led them to divorce Mr or Ms Wrong if a relationship with Mr or Ms Right was in clear view, or to continue pursuing Mr or Ms Right despite past lack of success.

In contrast, some older thwarted mothers were willing to compromise their desire for a relationship with Mr or Ms Right and accept a relationship with Mr or Ms Approximate in order to have children. When relationships with Mr or Ms Approximate failed, these women began seriously considering pursuing motherhood on their own, although the power of “the whole package” seemed to exert a serious drag on the momentum of this pursuit. Other older thwarted mothers continued their pursuit of Mr or Ms Right, betting they had enough fertile years left to be successful, but ultimately willing to accept childlessness if they were mistaken.

9.3.3.1 Younger thwarted mothers

9.3.3.1.1 Divorcing Mr Wrong and marrying Mr or Ms Right

Brenna is thirty-three and says the “urge” to have children hit her when she was thirty-two; around the time she divorced her husband Kirk and married Sam. She divorced Kirk because he was too selfish to meet her partnership needs
and to be a good father. She married Sam (who was waiting in the wings) because of his ability and willingness to provide her with the whole package - a stable long-term partnership and children:

I'm not married to Kirk any more...We never wanted children...I'm re-married to a wonderful guy and we want to have children...So maybe (the difference) was my relationship with Kirk...[Sam] is such a wonderful guy...And he'll be a great father. He's a great husband...Kirk is very selfish...I don't think he would have been a good father.... Kirk was a taker. He just drained every ounce of everything that I had in me, out. I lived for him. I did everything for him. And I just couldn't do it any more...When my Dad got sick...I was so upset. And he wasn't there for me...he didn't support me.... And we had had problems prior to that...He was unfaithful...

Q: Was that for you one of the things that made you decide to end the marriage?

Oh absolutely. I should have... tried to talk to him about it...Kirk and I could have worked it out. I mean I still love him. He still loves me. We could have worked it out and everything would have been OK. But, again, I think we were at different points in our lives. And we both changed.

Q: You were saying, “we could have worked it out.” But you chose not to?

...Yes. Sam and I were friends since about 1991. And he was there for me when my Dad was sick. And I think that if I hadn't met Sam and I hadn't had the feelings for Sam that I did, I would have felt differently too.
Q: So you could see clearly that there was someone else? That you might be able to get the things that were lacking?

Right…

Kylie is thirty-one and has wanted to have children since her early twenties. She divorced her first husband and remarried a man who she is confident is the Mr Right with whom she can have children:

I was married at twenty…My husband, who was a hairdresser, steered me into modelling, which I did for five years…It wasn't really what I wanted to do…[but] I didn't really know what I wanted…[But it] was something that was offered to me…and he didn't want to have children at that stage.

Q: Did you?

Yeah, I could. I could have.

Q: So was it actually discussed between the two of you?

Oh yeah, sure. And he didn't want them. And friends would come over and try to convince him. You know, he was stuck on the economics of it or whatever.

Q: Do you regret that you [didn’t] have children [with him]?
No, because I think that this relationship that I have now will give me that and a lot more....[I had an abortion when] I was just married...He didn't want the child....So the decision was made. But at that point we decided that we'd do this once, we'd never do it again. And that is my personal belief on it now, even with a new partner, although he's loving and adoring and completely wants to have [children]. So it would never be that situation...[My new husband] Paul says, “Well, when are we going to have babies?” He adores children, and he's a fantastic father, so I don't have any doubts or reservations about that. The other night...Paul was saying, "Well, shit, I'm thirty-seven, so if we're going to have them we'd better hurry up."... He doesn't want to be fifty and have a child...I like the fact that he's keen...and it's not like, "Oops, I'm pregnant." [Instead] it's like, "Honey, when are you getting your IUD out. Let's have a family."

Mary is thirty-one and has always planned to have her children around the age of twenty-six. She ended her marriage to Troy when it looked like he was reneging either on his commitment to having children or his promise to support her as a stay-at-home mother. Raoul was waiting in the wings and she decided to give her relationship with him “a go” after he made it clear he would be willing to provide her with the whole package - a committed relationship and a child:

I got married just after I finished college...and I always thought I would have children...When I was about twenty-five or twenty-six. I would have loved to have had a child then...I don't want to be too old when I start [and] you hear different stories about once you have a child over thirty there can be complications.... And that was my feelings at the time. And then I talked about it with my husband...and he said, “Why don't we keep working, we'll just pay off [the house] first?” [But] I think it was just I felt, “I'm old enough now [to have a child]. Or at least I'm getting towards an age where I should consider it.”

Q: So what did you feel when your husband suggested you wait?
I was all right about it. Because I thought, “Yeah, it makes sense.” And if it’s only another couple of years it’s no big deal. And then we got to the point where [he said], “You only have one more year and then you’ve got long service leave. Why would you throw that away.” So that was the next thing.

Q: Were these reasons real, or did you start to think there may have been something else going on there?

I know for a fact that he was never really as keen to have children as I was. And for awhile I probably struggled with it because I thought, “He really doesn’t want to and all this time I’ve been led to believe that he did.” You start thinking like that…Then we started growing apart to some degree…We had never ever really argued about anything and from March to July it was an argument all the time, and over really stupid things…[During one] he said to me, “There is no way I’d ever have children with a person like you”…I thought I could never trust that he would ever have them now…It really scared me, that if I had a child with him and I was at home and doing all the things that I wanted to do, [if my friends] rang me up and said, “come out”…he’d say, “I’ve been working all day, you’ve been home all day with the child relaxing, I'm not going to mind it now when you go out.”…I think part of him never wanted to have children anyway…[I also had someone else tell me] they had very strong feelings for me around that time…[I didn’t try to work things [out with Troy] because I had less and less feeling for [him]. I could have probably smoothed some things over and I never bothered to. And this person was there for me all the time…When I made my mind up that, “Yeah, I’d have a go with him” I asked him [about children]…I was almost testing him in a way. I said, “Oh, you’d never want to have any children.” And he said, “Mary, I couldn’t think of anything more beautiful than having a child with you.”… I was certain of the future I had before and probably now I feel OK about it again, but for awhile I wasn’t certain about what my future would be, even in this relationship. Now I am certain of how it will be and I haven't got any doubts about that…
9.3.3.1.2 The continued pursuit of Mr or Ms Right

Tina is twenty-nine. When her relationship with Daniel was good, he didn’t want to have children and bought her a dog instead. When Daniel became Mr Wrong, she divorced him and has been unsuccessfully searching for a new Mr Right ever since. Although she would ultimately pursue a child on her own, she feels too young to seriously consider this option now:

I married a guy who I was exceptionally suitable to, and I am still suitable. We are very compatible people...We both like to go to the gym. We both like to take a lot of holidays. We like the good things in life. We're both ambitious. We're both - what else - the same religion. Which doesn't really make that much of a difference to me. We're both Jewish. So it does help...But unfortunately...Daniel bought into a strip joint...He started living a different life to me...He changed. He realised that he probably got married too early and didn't have enough time to see what the grass was like, whether it was greener, meet some other women. And one thing led to another, and he was following this path, and I was following that path, and just had to let each other go... I was ready [to have children] after we'd been married for one [year]. I would have been roughly twenty-five. I kept saying, “Oh, we should start a family,” but I didn’t push the issue...[because] I knew Daniel. He just didn't have the patience for children at that stage. He just so wasn't ready...I got [my dog] when I kept saying to Daniel, “Come, let's have a child.” He said, “no, I'll get you a dog.”...My energy has gone into looking for that perfect guy. And God, that takes a lot of energy. Because there aren't any out there...You don't really want to go out there, because there isn't much. I've been on that many blind dates...And me the idiot goes, and I'm quite happy to meet people. But as far as compatibility with a suitable husband, no I think I actually have to have him made...I want to meet someone and think, “well, he's nice.” Not necessarily, he's absolutely stunning. But I want to feel physically attracted to him, and I want to feel mentally attracted to him because I need someone who I can feel stimulated by....
Q: What are your feelings about having children at the moment, is that on the list?

Absolutely. Absolutely. But I'd have to be 100 per cent about my marriage. It's not the children that bothers me, it's the marriage that bothers me. I...really don't want to bring children into this world, doubting my marriage and then have to stay with someone because I've got the children, or feel guilty about leaving him because I've got the children...

Q: How about having a child on your own?

I'm not ready to face that as yet, because I do hope to have a partner in life. But I think that if that were my only option, I would do it as well. In fact, I know 100 per cent that if you said to me that I'll never find that right man, do I have a child? Yes, I will have a child.

Brenda is twenty-eight. She has always wanted to get married and have children. While to date her efforts to find Mr or Ms Right and get him to commit have been unsuccessful, her plans to organise a “break the drought” party suggest she’s still trying:

I always thought that I would get married, have children...My Dad... always says that he's too young to be a grandfather anyway, so I think he's quite happy with the way things are going. Not that there's ever been a choice. My parents haven't pressured me to get married or anything, which is fantastic, but that's the circumstances as well, because there hasn't been the opportunity [for me] to marry...See, I've never got to the stage of permanency in a relationship....We were going to have a “break the drought” party this year because the three of us in this house are all single... The last guy I went out with was probably the only guy I could ever marry....Realistically he was the only one I could ever possibly imagine having a
serious relationship with. So before that the longest I had was six months and none really suited.

Q: So nobody stuck out as…

A partner for life, no.

Kristina is twenty-nine. She would have “settled” with Martin, the first man she felt was Mr Right, but he was on the rebound, and broke the relationship off:

…I met Martin when I was twenty-six …He'd just come out of a really long-term relationship, and it started to get serious and he said: I just can't do this. So that really hurt me a lot because I thought I could marry this person, and I'd never ever felt that before about any one…

While she is enjoying her time as a single woman, Kristina remains alert to the possibility of finding the right man with whom to settle down. At present she considers herself too young to seriously consider what she might do should he fail to come her way before her fertile days start waning:

I don't even think about [whether my fertility is waning] to be honest. I still feel like I'm twenty-one or twenty-two [so] it doesn't cross my mind at all….I do want to get settled and I do want to have kids for sure, but it's not an option at the moment…[I'm doing now all the things] I always imagined that I would do, and later on I considered that I'd have a relationship and children…I didn't ever imagine that I would have kids when I was young. That was always at the end of everything else I wanted to do…I haven't been in a relationship for a long time. And I think that's more of a factor for me than having kids. I don't want to have kids without the relationship so if there's not the relationship then children don't even come into it as far as I'm concerned.
Q: If you get to that thirty-seven or thirty-eight age [that you nominated as your cut-off] and there was no relationship, do you think you’d try to have children somehow?

Maybe, it's hard to say, because it's ten years down the track. It would probably depend too on lifestyle, as to whether or not I have a stable home and money - they’re not cheap and things like that make a big difference.

Q: If all those things were in place, might you do it?

I don't know, maybe. But then you sort of think, “Well, how would you go ahead with it. With a program or a friend or, what would you do?”... If I decided to have kids by myself, then it would have to be - if I asked a friend - a deliberate ask and they'd have to know what the situation was and what they were going into. Or it would have to be a program...I would have support from family. Obviously my parents wouldn't want it to be that way either, but they would never wash their hands of me or anything like that...But there's always adoption, as well. That's another option. I honestly don't know, it's ten years time and I think it's too far down the track to say.

Judi saw Lyndon as Mr Approximate, although she knew their relationship guaranteed her children. She rejected his proposal of marriage because at twenty-eight, she believed she had enough time to find a Mr Right who would also give her children:

Lyndon called me in the middle of the night and he was having this major drunken epiphany of wanting to get married...I had just seen my college friends for the first time in a while. And I was pouring out my heart to them and listening to myself saying I'm not that excited about being married to him...We had been together for three years and we really like each other's families. And we're really compatible in a lot of different ways. We both
wanted the same thing; eventually to be in a relationship with kids. He's a really great guy and I'll never forget what I loved about him...But the bottom line was I wasn't emotionally satisfied, I wasn't intellectually satisfied. I didn't feel that he could go outside by himself and see my happiness. I just didn't trust that we could sustain it...There were lots of things that...were really safe, appealing and comfortable about just staying in it. But the bottom line was I knew I'd be sacrificing my own happiness. And that I had to make a choice. To choose to have this life that's probably pretty much OK, and secure, and you get to have kids...and you're positive of it, it's a sure thing. But you'll probably always wonder if there's some other relationship that could have been more satisfying, or [in which] you could be happier...And so I said at twenty-eight, I'm ready to take the chance and assume I'll meet somebody. And I can have both: happiness with that individual and kids...I just wasn't ready...to settle.

9.3.3.2 Older thwarted mothers

9.3.3.2.1 Searching for or sticking with Mr or Ms Approximate

Thirty-three year-old Peta knows that if she is going to have a child she needs to begin pursuing one in the very near future. While she continues to mourn the loss of her relationship with Allen, the man she felt was Mr Right, she has begun pursuing a child with Mitchell, Mr Approximate:

Mitchell and I had been seeing one another...We weren't having sex or anything – but lusting after one another. But the whole time I was saying, “I'm never going to have sex with you, and I'm never going to break up with Allen.” And then the end of the show happened, and we all went out and got really pissed and Mitchell and I ended up kissing. And it's the classic, Allen discovered us...Allen originally gave me all the ultimatums...and then told me -after leading me on thinking we could get back together and work it out - “no.” He said, “I don't want to do it any more. I
still love you, but I can't live with you." I was absolutely devastated. I just did not think that would happen at all. And I’ve tried several times to make him see sense, which I still don’t think he has… I mean Allen was quite a special person really, he wasn't like your average bloke. I've lost someone who really understood me and my condition and probably won't find anybody like that again…Allen probably would have loved to have children…We talked about IVF, and I have an IVF gynaecologist [but] just kept putting it off and putting it off and before you know it you're thirty and then our relationship broke down. Now I'm with a younger man. He's twenty-six and I'm thirty-three. He doesn't want to have children yet, he’d like to wait until he's at least thirty. So do the calculations I'll be thirty-seven and I just think, “I don't know if that's too late.” Because the older you get, the older the eggs are, and the harder it is to fertilise and all that sort of stuff. So we're actually going to see a counsellor this week just so that Mitchell can understand it and hear it all from a professional in the field…. Mitchell has talked about the fact that he does want to have children….So I don't want to get to the age of forty and then have a million attempts at IVF and get really depressed and then have Mitchell turn around and say, “Well, you can't give me any children”… and go off and find someone who can give him those things….At this stage we are committed to one another, but I am still getting over Allen. I find that quite difficult, I struggle with that daily…..

Unable to find Mr Right, thirty-five year-old Shaney began searching for a Mr Approximate with whom to have children:

I decided to go to an agency...That was Plan A for having a child. I figured that thirty-five or thirty-six was the latest I'd be wanting to have a child because I didn't feel it was fair to have anything older than a fifteen year-old with a fifty year-old mother…So the fact that there had been no partner around by that stage, I figured well I better have one on my own. And that was how I thought I'd do it. And the agency knew all about this, I didn't tell any fibs or anything like that.
Q: You wanted to meet someone and partner quickly, or meet someone who would help you get pregnant?

Well, either really. I wouldn't have minded. I had in mind to make an arrangement. The ideal at the time for me was to have met say a business man that was a bit of a workaholic, would love to have kids, but didn't have time for it and didn't have time for a wife either. I thought that would be ideal for me. To have children, to be able to have a break every now and then by giving these children to their father, who wanted to spend a little bit of time with them, but not too much. That would work out perfectly for us, plus to be able to have the children at not too late an age...

Q: So you told the agency this?

Yes, and they suggested not hitting the men with it straight away, which is fair enough. But I had no intention of - I can't think of the word - being dishonest at all. I would have been quite honest about it. Of course the real ideal would have been (affected voice) to have met the man of my dreams, and fallen in love and had it all happen the usual way (laugh). Which as I said, I now think is a fairytale...Just by my own experience, and by various other people I know, it's not easy at this age to meet a man that you can create a partnership with. They're just not around. Tried lots of things...it just doesn't seem to happen...There's just not that many people around. After thirty there are a reasonable number of people around until I was thirty-five, but the crowd was getting thinner by then. And the fellows that were left were left for a reason, shall I say.

9.3.3.2.2 Holding out for Mr or Ms Right

Thirty-five year-old Darcy continues to search for Mr Right and denies being concerned about declining fertility. Although Darcy seems confident of finding
the right relationship in which to have children by the time she is forty, should Mr Right never appear, Darcy would forgo motherhood:

I’ve always known I would have children...The only thing that I was and am still very firm about is that I would need to feel that we were both committed to [the relationship]....I wouldn't by choice, raise a child on my own....The relationship that I have just come out of [was] the first time in my life that I considered having a permanent relationship with someone. He was the first person that I would consider having as the father of my children...I said to him, "OK, we need to have a look at this. I want to know are we committed to one another here because I want to start looking at a family. Are we going to do this or are we not? Because if we are not, we shouldn't be together. This is silly. We are not in our twenties. I don't see any point in us wasting our time together unless we are looking at making this a permanent relationship."...He bottled up. And basically we ended up splitting.... I don't have a problem with [being childless] at this point. I guess the two things that I do have a little bit of attention on but it's not such a big deal are my age, for the health of my child. Secondly, I want my father to be a grandpa. So that's the other point. And so I don't even really have that much attention on the first one. I know that there are people, even my brother says to me, "you shouldn't leave it, you shouldn't leave it." But I don't have that much attention on it at all...

Q: Are there other people who tell you not to leave it, that you should hurry?

The only one who did was my grandfather. Apart from that no, no one has ever said anything...I don't have any urgency, I don't - I guess I would be pretty unhappy if I were forty because I do want children. So if I was forty and I was sitting here talking to you, and I didn't have any children, I would then be feeling pretty lousy I think.

Q: Why?
Because it's starting to get that bit older again... People say to me that the older you are than the harder the birth will be. Well, I just figure that this runs par for the course for me having them late, I just have to put up with it. What can you do about that, nothing. But more importantly, for me, is the fact that I actually wouldn't go ahead and do it without having a partner. One of my closest friends, a wonderful woman, has actually the exact opposite viewpoint. We don't fight about it, but we are just aware that we have different viewpoints on it. Her viewpoint is that she is financially secure and she wants a child, and that she would actually have a child without the male participating.

Q: And why do you disagree with that?

Because I want the input from the father.

Q: So much so that if forty came and went and you still haven't found the right guy you would forgo the chance to become a mother?

I would. I think I would forgo that.

Barbara is in her early forties. She always thought she had enough time to find Mr Right and have children later in life. She finds it ironic that now that she has finally met and married Mr Right, she has little chance of being able to conceive. However, despite having missed her chance for motherhood, Barbara has no regrets about four past abortions because none of those relationships were with men who were, in her words, “the one”:

I have wanted children since I was eight. I've been clucky my whole life... So I've wanted kids, but the same time, I've had four abortions. And I don't regret one of them. But I
know that I might have missed the boat and I thought about that the last time [I was pregnant] and discussed it at length with a friend...because I wanted a baby, but I didn't want that man's baby. And I didn't want the [twenty-year] relationship that I would have to have with that man...I'd really looked at it and thought about [my age]. I was probably thirty-nine and I knew then that it might be the last opportunity that I had to have children...[Each time I got pregnant]... it was never the right time [because] I was never in a stable relationship...If I look at each of the pregnancies, it was like I'd made a decision not to have a child at that time, but I always thought I'd have a child. I always thought. It was quite difficult to make the decisions...[but] at none of those four times was I in a permanent relationship...at no time was I thinking, “this is the one”...I had to be in a relationship like I am now. With a loving, devoted, wonderful husband...And the joke of course is that I probably can't have children now...If one of those four fathers had been a man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, or if one had been a great love - there's been three great loves if you like - that child would exist. Absolutely.

Q: What about your career though?

It's been very important to me, very important to me...[but] I think the crucial thing is I was never in a permanent relationship...I thought I'll be one of those women who have a baby in their late forties, you know, when you've done everything else. And when [the doctor] said you're menopausal...it was a shocking thing...You go through this whole thing of, “why me?” Is it because...I threw away four opportunities to have a child? I am not happy about that. But if I had my time over, I wouldn't have got pregnant to those four men. And looking back at each of them, not one of them was a viable long-term relationship. Not one and I knew it, and I look back and I'm glad...

9.3.3.2.3 Delaying the pursuit of single motherhood
Shaney has pursued a number of avenues to have a child, including going to a dating agency to find Mr Approximate. But while she mocks her dream of having a baby in the context of relationship with Mr Right as a “fairytale,” the glimmer of hope she still nurses of having that dream come true has led her to defer efforts to conceive using donor insemination:

I did a lot of travelling up to Sydney and went to a clinic to try and get pregnant…I should also throw in here that I've had a Christian upbringing…Mum said to me, “Whatever you do, I'll support you….I just feel I should let you know that I've been praying a lot about this, and I feel that God might have other things in store for you.”...She's entitled to her opinion but it put me off going, and it made me feel like I was ruining my life...It was actually quite subtle [so] it wasn't until months later I thought, “why did I stop for, dammit?” Why didn't I just say to Mum, “What do you know? You've never been in my situation?”...She is the one that has the fairytale that there is somebody out there for me. ....And I've started saying, “It's a fairytale. It's not going to happen. Don't hold your breath here. I'm thirty-seven now, and nothing has happened yet.”

Q: So you don't actually feel that it is going to happen?

No, not really. I still hope it does. And that's where Mum's influence comes into it. Every time she says that, it sparks that hope again. And then after a couple of months where I've got depressed about it all again and nothing happens and I don't meet anybody and rah rah rah. I squash it down again and start realising that it's not necessarily going to happen...When I was going to Sydney...I felt, “what a shame I'm having to do it this way. But it's the only avenue I have to have a child at this point in time.”...But the fact that I was going to get pregnant and have a child helped me there. That was a glimmer of hope for a future for me and that's why I'm probably still angry with Mum...I was doing something about my life and making my life what I wanted it to be, and hopefully bringing a lovely child...into this world. I feel that that has been knocked on
the head. It was because I still had that underlying hope that there'd be a male around there somewhere. And felt that I had to trade one off against the other. If I went down this avenue, then I was going to have to give up this one. And I immediately changed tact...The last time I went [to Sydney] was March of last year...I'm just considering [going back now] but I'm getting a bit old. Back then, I was thirty-six. They said a lot of people come to us at thirty-eight and thirty-nine and it's really too late...They said, “It's good you came to us now.”

Karla’s difficulties in forming a stable long-term relationship with a man with whom she could have “the whole package” have led her to consider single motherhood. However, her ongoing hope that she still may find the right man has led her to delay just “getting on with it”:

I haven’t met any one who I thought might be a possible father. Well, I have, but it didn’t work out...He lived overseas and was coming to terms with his own sexuality. We would meet together every year or so and then he said, “Look, let's do it. Let's get married and do the whole thing.” And then a few months later it was like, “shit, I'm sorry I can't, it's a lie.” That was awful. It was shocking, it was traumatic...I thought it was the big, “Oh my God this is it”. The whole package: the husband and the life and the kids and everything else that goes with it. The sharing, bringing up, having a nice life together. It's all a fairy tale that we all sort of aspire to...[I have considered] getting a donor or just getting pregnant from a casual relationship and not telling that person...And now I think in the last year I've thought about donor again. Now I'm a bit confused about that, about what financial support I would like, and wouldn't like or what involvement from the father. I mean ultimately, yes it would be lovely in a partnered relationship, but at this point I can't really see it happening (crying). But then there is this little voice in the back of my head that says, “Yeah, it's going to happen.”

Q: When did you first start thinking about doing it on your own?
Probably mid last year...I know I can do it...I'm getting ready to do something now. But there's still that niggly thing, a parental thing that comes in and says, “Look there’s someone out there for everyone, don't rush into it yet, you should just wait a little bit longer.” But how long are you supposed to wait?...Some people meet someone and it all happens really quickly. And I can probably imagine that happening with me, because things like that do happen with me. But then, it just may not happen at all. Most of my girlfriends say, “just shut up and do it.” I've been thinking about it for so long, it's like, “just get on with it.”

9.3.4 Waiters and watchers

The concept of “the whole package” functions differently in the fertility decisions and behaviours of women who are waiting and watching. The ambivalent and undecided nature of these women’s attitudes towards children means that finding and settling into a stable long-term relationship serves – or is expected to serve – as the necessary prompt for their desire for children. This means that in contrast to thwarted mothers, advancing age and consequent declining fertility have little impact on the fertility decisions and behaviours of these women. It also means that while these women only want children in the context of the “whole package,” should Mr or Ms Right never eventuate, they are unlikely to desire and/or pursue motherhood on their own. In the same way, those who are in a stable long-term relationship with Mr or Ms Right are, or expect to be, strongly influenced by his desires regarding children. Waiters and watchers report delaying childbearing or initiating childbearing efforts as a consequence of the wishes of their Mr or Ms Right. Those who are single state that they would be willing to forgo children if that was the desire of their Mr or
Ms Right, suggesting that some of these women might eventually become childless by relationship.

9.3.4.1 “The whole package” as a prompt for desiring and/or pursuing children

Thirty-six year-old Martine explains succinctly why she’s never seriously considered having children:

I've never felt like I've had a successful relationship in which the whole question of children has ever come up.

Thirty-three year-old Jocelyn only desires children in the context of a stable long-term relationship:

I suppose I'd be quite traditional in the sense that I wouldn't have children without having them with someone who I wanted to have them with, and spend time with. So without having that person in my life, it's hard to imagine having children.

Q: So you're not that sort of person who would think about having them on your own?

Nope.

Q: Definitely. No question about it? So if I were to come back and speak to you when you were thirty-eight, you're quite confident that if no-one special had come into your life you wouldn't be pursuing children?
I don't think so. Children to me are part of a relationship, and not just a thing in themselves.

Q: What part of a relationship are they? How do they fit into a relationship as you see it?

If there wasn't an understanding between me and a man; that with him I wanted to have children. The children on their own aren't something that you have for the sake of having children.

Thirty-six year-old Rhyll is only willing to entertain the prospect of children in the context of a stable long-term relationship. While she is aware that she is getting older, Rhyll will ensure that the rhythm of her relationship with Jock, not her biological clock, will dictate whether and when she has children:

I have yet to get to the point of being sure that the relationship is going to go on and on and on, and I have absolutely no desire to be a single mother. I don't think there is any point of discussing having babies with him, unless that discussion is held within the context of, “this is a relationship for life.”... We can't deny that the biological clock exists, because menopause is there...It's a recognition that, “Shit, if I'm going to do it, I'm thirty-six now, I really wouldn't want to do it after thirty-eight.”

Q: You haven't mentioned those calculations before.

Yeah, but I've thought about them...Knowing there is a deadline means...you have to start clearing the decks and planning. You've got to start saying, “time is up. Sometime in the next four years, I've got to have a baby.” But I haven't made that decision, and I'm not likely to make that active a decision on it...But it is in the back of my head that I'm thirty-six, and that in a relationship with somebody who is ideal father material. But that doesn't mean I'm
going to rush any decisions about anything. I wouldn't have a baby with Jock just because I wanted to have a baby. I would because it seemed like the right thing to do, as a partnership. The distinction is the “I, I, I.” As opposed to it seemed like the right thing to do for us, as a partnership...If it seemed like the natural next step for us together...If it was like, “OK, this seems like the right thing to do.” As opposed to, “Oh God, I'm thirty-six, well I've got a man around who is the right source, so I'll get pregnant now because it's my last chance.”

Q: What would make it seem like it's the right thing to do?

...If I suddenly get to the moment in the relationship where I just suddenly know that it is right. That would be significant.

9.3.4.2 The expected or actual influence of Mr or Ms Right

Jack is Bethany's Mr Right. Like all waiters and watchers, Bethany is ambivalent and undecided about motherhood and has many of her own reasons for wanting to delay it. However, she also cites strong reasons for wanting to begin her family earlier rather than later. However, the revulsion Jack expresses for babies, and his stated unwillingness to participate meaningfully in the hard work of caring for young children has led Bethany to put off becoming a mother for the next “three to five years”:

I'm very happy in my relationship...I don't envisage that I'm going to be having any more relationships, I think this is the one that's going to be for the long haul... I sort of envisage [having children] in the next three to five years, but when, I don't know.
Q: Do you feel any pressure about having children? Like…

Tick tock?

Q: Do you feel the tick tock?

Yeah I do. I do feel the clock. And it's a very strange thing because I feel incredibly young in a lot of ways and yet I know that biologically I'm not as young as I feel and I find that kind of annoying sometimes. Because I don't - I don't know if it is the influence of my mother or whether it is my own thing - want to be an old bag of a mother. I don't want to be in my late thirties and having my first baby…I know that I will play a bigger parenting role because he's told me that he will still be going to work, and he'll be doing what he's doing now pretty much. So it will be up to me and if I get help, up to me and the help except when he is home…It is hard to know what it will be like. He says at the moment how he finds babies disgusting and one vomited on him the other day and he thought it was foul, and he was just really grossed out by the whole thing. And he says, "I don't want to come home and change shitty nappies after I've had a long day at work."…We had a conversation a while ago and I was saying, "you know, it would be nice if you would come home and change one nappy at least." And he felt the whole thing was a bit ridiculous because it was all not happening now.

Conversely, Jacinta was committed to being childless until her husband Ronald expressed a desire to start a family. Now she's preparing to become a mother:

Ronald and I have been thinking maybe we'll have a baby one day. And that's really changed in about the last twelve months. Up until then, I thought that Ron and I have such a fantastic relationship, and I didn't want a baby to come in and spoil what we've got. We get along fantastically. Got a good little life…I've heard people say there is an element of selfishness in not having kids, but it always seems to me to sound like a negative thing. We can do whatever the hell we want. If we want to take off on a weekend, if we
want to sleep in until eleven o’clock, we can do that. I hear people say that having a baby changes that. And I’ve kind of been nervous too about how it might upset the dynamics here as well. Because we’ve only got each other to be concerned about and to care about, and I’ve wondered how another little body might effect that. It might mean that we start arguing which we just don’t do; we talk things out a lot because we’ve got the time to do that. I can see how people are really constrained by time limits and things when a baby comes along. But having said all that, Ronald said, "maybe we'll have a baby."

Q: So it was his idea?

Yeah, because I've always said, "no, no, no." I've always said to people, "we're not having kids, no that will never happen." And Ronald's always said that jokey thing of, "we're going to have six." But he brought it up and I just said, "I'm thirty-three, so if we're going to have a baby, we'd better have it sooner rather than later. Because I just don't want us at thirty-eight to decide we're going to start a family because I'm concerned that that will be too late." And sometimes I think, "wow, that's fantastic," but sometimes I think, "I'm really neither here nor there about it."

Q: What was your reaction when he brought this up, given that you thought that you weren't going to be having any children?

It really changed my ideas about it. Because I was really touched that he thought that would be a good thing to do. I know this probably sounds silly because we've been together for so long - but I thought that was a real indication that he thought that we were for real, and for long-term, and that we had a really good thing here. I mean he could tell me that 'til Kingdom Come, but it took him to say something like that, because it's the ultimate commitment, the biggest responsibility you'll ever have. So I thought about it for a couple of days and went back to him and said, "If you really want to have a baby, that's fine. Because if you have said that, I know that you must have
considered that this is going to be a huge change in our lives. And if you think we can do, then we can do it.” So it really changed my mind about things just because he’d said the word.

Samantha has a vague interest in having children, but is not the type that “melts with delight at the sight of a pram.” She would like to meet Mr Right and become a mother, but if he didn’t want a child, she feels confident she could live with remaining childless:

Q: Would you describe yourself as childless?

Yup. Well, that's why I brought up the issue of being single, because I can't actually look at them separately. Because I've never had a strong maternal drive...I have no doubt of my capacity to love my own child, I truly don't. But I'm not the person who melts with delight at the sight of a pram. You know, like for some women, it's everything. And for me it's that vague sense of, “Oh yeah, it could be good.” So for me it's really tied up with an idea of a relationship. I imagine part of a relationship would be to have children... I think if I was with someone who definitely didn't want to have a child I could deal with that.

Q: So the most important thing is to have the relationship.

Yeah, because I don't have this huge drive to have a child...[although] it's something that in the last couple of years I've really moved towards thinking I would love to do. But I don't feel strongly enough about it that I'd do it by myself...It's not such an overwhelming need that I'd just say, “Bugger it, I'll just do it myself.” And I would do it if I felt the need, because I've always made my own way, but I don't feel that need.
9.4 CONCLUSION

9.4.1 Pure relationships are fine, when you’ve got the time

Being in a relationship with the right person is clearly important to all the women in the sample. However, the emphasis many women place on wanting but not being desperate for – or needing – a relationship supports the suggestions made by social theorists that educated middle-class women seek “pure-type” relationships: relationships based on interpersonal fulfilment, rather than on emotional and/or financial need (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). As Sylvie noted, second-wave feminism has stressed the importance for women of being emotionally and financially independent from men; of not being - or being seen as - “desperate” (Bardwick, 1980; Friedan, 1963; Greer, 1971).

For many women in the sample, emotional and financial independence from men seems part of their identity as modern-day women (see also Chapter 7).

At the same time, the data suggest that most women want more from Mr/Ms Right than interpersonal fulfilment. They also seek someone willing to commit to a stable long-term relationship and to embark upon and share the responsibilities of parenthood. Some women seem willing to abandon “impure”

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25 For Giddens, the pure relationship ideal is “entered into for its own sake” and is “free-floating”; not weighted down by family obligations, restrictions or expectations. Consequently, the pure relationship is “contingent” on the on-going satisfaction of both partners. In the event that one or both partners fails to gain “sufficient benefit from the relation to make its continuance worthwhile,” notice is given, and the relationship terminated (Giddens, 1992, 63). Pure-type
relationships with Mr/Ms Approximate for ones closer to the pure ideal without regard to children. Others seem willing to do so only when either a more pure-type relationship in which children are assured is waiting in the wings, or when they feel they have enough time to search further for a partner closer to the pure-type ideal who also wants to have children. Those who don’t feel they’ve enough time to find Mr or Ms (wants to have children) Right before their fertility expires settle for Mr or Ms (wants to have children) Approximate. Thus, while some women may no longer “need” men emotionally or financially, they do want to have children with them, and so will stay with those that are less than perfect when they perceive themselves to be at the age when their odds of finding something better are slim. Australian researchers Birrell and Rapson make a similar observation:

…marriage bestows considerable benefits, even to well-resourced women. Moreover, as the biological clock ticks, the benefits of collaboration become more obvious…for women who leave the choice of a partner too long, there is a danger that the field of eligibles will shrink too far (Birrell & Rapson, 1998, 14).

The upshot of all this is that by failing to include children in his account of the transformation of intimacy in post-modern societies, Giddens’ explanations of what motivates women to seek, form and dissolve— or fail to dissolve—relationships remains incomplete. Feminists have questioned the “fit” of Giddens’ theories with empirical reality, noting the absence of parent-child relationships are also based on confluent, as opposed to romantic, love. Confluent love is active and contingent.
intimacy from the pure relationship ideal (Jamieson, 1998; Smart, 1997) and questioning whether parents pursue and would be able to achieve confluent love (Smart, 1997). The current data suggest that accounting for women’s desires for children also challenges, in part, Giddens’ claims about the increasing female-led search for pure-type relationships.

9.4.2 The contribution of relationships to circumstantial childlessness

The impact relationships, or their lack, have on women’s childbearing decisions and outcomes vary significantly between the different groups of women. Because women who are childless by choice choose or intend to choose partners who are likely to support their desire to remain childless these partners have little impact on these women’s fertility decisions or outcomes. However, the data suggest that relationships or their lack are critical to the fertility decisions and outcomes of women who are childless by relationship, thwarted mothers and waiters and watchers. In some instances, the impact of specific relationships increases the likelihood that women will decide to have children, or end up a mother. This is the case with some waiters and watchers, who have been or believe they would be influenced by the positive desire of their partner to have children. However, more often it appears that specific relationships or the lack of the right relationship leads women to decide against having children, or to wind up circumstantially childless.
While “the whole package” ideal functions differently for thwarted mothers and waiters and watchers, the data demonstrates the importance women place on having children with a long-term Mr or Ms Right. Only some thwarted mothers were willing to seriously consider mothering on their own, and then only when their fertile years were waning. Even then, the idyllic pull of the whole package puts a considerable brake on the progress of these deliberations. Other thwarted mothers chose to risk losing their fertility rather than sacrifice their desire to “have it all.” Indeed some had already lost their chance to mother because Mr or Ms Right arrived too late. Several more are at imminent risk of age-related infertility if Mr or Ms Right fails to put in an appearance in the very near future.

What is clear is that women’s awareness of their biological limits impacts on their fertility decisions. In Chapter 9, I will present more evidence suggesting that despite women’s understanding of their maternal desires – or lack thereof – as rooted in their biology, there is significant social basis to the existence and timing of women’s childbearing desires and decision-making. Moreover, it appears that the lack of socially normative good reasons for having children may contribute to some women’s doubts about the rationality of choosing motherhood at all.
Chapter 10

Maternal Instincts, Ticking Clocks and Good Reasons to Mother: The Irrationality Of Having Children and the Social Clock

Men and women now have choice about the way they live and a growing minority would prefer to live independently, with money, nice clothes and good holidays (how selfish, you say, but none of us are immune from these desires), rather than in tracksuit pants wiping Weetbix off walls every morning. All perfectly understandable.

Sian Watkins, staff journalist and mother of a one year-old, The Age, 2000

10.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will examine what women see as “bad” (morally unjustified and socially maligned) and “good” (morally justifiable and socially affirmed) reasons for having children. While women in the study were not asked this question directly, many spontaneously offered their views during interview. This suggests that not only do women believe that a good mother ought make a conscious and serious decision to have children (see Chapter 7), but that she ought make that decision for “the right” rather than “the wrong” reasons.

The data suggest that many women believe there are few good – what some women call “rational” – reasons to have children. This belief leads them to rely on biologically based explanations for the existence and timing of their desire to
have children. Many believe, in other words, that maternal
instincts/drives/hormones determine the existence and timing of their maternal
desires – or lack thereof – and that such biological mechanisms are, by
definition, beyond the pull of reason.26

Despite many women’s beliefs that their desires for children were irrational and
thus biologically based, the data suggest that there is a significant social basis
to the existence and timing of their desires regarding children. In Chapter 5, for
instance, socially-based motivations to have children, like the desire to stay “in-
step” with siblings, friends and peers, were discussed. Social circumstances,
like whether women had spousal and/or familial support to mother, also
contributed to a woman’s desire to mother and her willingness to act on this
desire. In this chapter, data are presented that further supports my contention
that it is predominantly a social, rather than a biological clock, that influences
the timing and existence of women’s maternal desires. One would expect that a
biologically-based time clock would be impervious to women’s social
surroundings or fertility knowledge-base. Yet numerous women note the critical
impact the area in which they were raised (urban or outer suburban/country)
had on their and their friends and peer group’s motherhood schedules. Many
also discuss how leaving home, getting an education and adopting a new set of
friends influenced their decision to revise their own motherhood schedules.

26 The view that the existence and timing of women’s childbearing desires is biologically-based
is also widespread in general audience publications. See for instance (Davitz, 1984;
Equally telling were women’s revelations that they knew rather than physically felt (like one physically experiences a toothache, for instance) that their “clock” was “ticking.” Taken together, this evidence suggests the significant role social circumstance and knowledge plays in women’s felt experience of “the clock.”

It may be that it is the interaction of a woman’s baseline desire to have children with social circumstance that leads the “alarms” on women’s social clocks to “ring.” For thwarted mothers and women childless by relationship, this ringing tells them it’s time to implement their plans to mother. For women waiting and watching, the alarm tells them it’s time to make a decision one way or another about motherhood. For women who are childless by choice, the alarm tells them it’s time to test and to reaffirm their and their partner’s commitment to childlessness.

10.2 MATERNAL INSTINCTS/DRIVES/HORMONES AND THE BIOLOGICAL CLOCK

10.2.1 Maternal instincts/drives/hormones

Janet attributes the early inception of her desire to have a child and her yearning to become pregnant again after a termination to her maternal “hormones”:

McKaughan, 1987).
My hormones clicked in when I was about ten. I wanted to be pregnant from when I was about eleven; through to well after it finally happened. I mean for more than twenty years.

Q: So you're talking about a physical wanting?

Yes, absolutely. And an emotional need, but certainly a very physical, very physical, need...[It] was the best moment of my life: finding out I was pregnant...It showed I could get pregnant against all the odds...[and] my body really, really wanted it...The friends that had known I'd been pregnant were fantastic about me choosing not to be. And everything was fine, but nobody warned me...about the possibility of Post-Natal Depression or Post Termination Depression...And I had said, “Look, I'll be fine because I'm very clear about this. This is what I want, I've made the choice”... And it was horrible; it was absolutely horrible...I was simultaneously incredibly horny and very depressed. I said that to a long-term lover...who said, “Now you know what it's like to be a boy.”

Q: So what do you think that was about?

That was about my body wanting to be pregnant again. I mean, I have no doubt about that at all...

Latisha attributes her disinterest in babies to her lack of bodily-based “maternal” feelings:

If I ever [get] given a baby to hold I look at it and go "(sigh) Oh OK," and just give it back. So there's not a big maternal thing with other people's children...[My childhood friend]...wasn't maternal [and now she's got kids].

Q: And when you say that she wasn't particularly maternal, what do you mean by that? Could you describe
somebody who is maternal? What do they look and act like?

Oh, Princess Diana. God, I don't know. Someone who sees a baby in the street and goes, "Oh, isn't it beautiful, Oh, what's its name? Oh, isn't it, and how old?"

Q: When you see a baby what's your reaction?

Nothing…

Q: Do you [have any maternal feelings?]

No. None. Um, only towards my cats…I've heard of [women who describe their desire to have a child]…That they feel empty without [one]. But I haven't had any [feelings like that].

Q: Do you wish you felt differently than you do?

No, because your body feels how your body feels. It's sort of, I don't think it's something that you can produce.

Samantha also feels she lacks a biological drive to mother:

Q: Would you describe yourself as childless.

Yup.

Q: What do you think you're saying about yourself with that description?
Well, that's why I brought up the issue of being single, because I can't actually look at them separately. Because I've never had a strong maternal drive. I have no doubt about my capacity to love my own child, I truly don't. But I'm not the person who melts with delight at the sight of a pram, you know. Like for some women, it's everything. And for me, it's that vague sense of, “oh yeah, it could be good.”…

Q: Before everything became so unsettled [in your life, did you have] ideas about having children?

Yeah, it's something that in the last couple of years I've really moved towards thinking I would love to do. But I don't feel strongly enough about it that I'd do it by myself. You know what I'm saying? It's not such an overwhelming need that I'd just say, “Bugger it, I'll just do it myself.” And I would do it if I felt the need, because I've always made my own way, but I don't feel that need.

Q: How would you describe that need?

I guess I feel like if I was a real, fully integrated adult women, there would be this overwhelming drive…

Kaitlin thinks her lack of maternal “drive” explains her current disinterest in having a child:

I know that women do [have children on their own] because they are so incredibly desperately driven to have a child; it's what they want. But I don't have that overwhelming urge; that drive. But that might change… wouldn't be surprised if it kicked in, “Oh God: I want a baby!” …Every now and then [I think], “it would be lovely, they're beautiful.” And I'm very clucky when I hold a baby. But then I give it back and go, “Wow, thank God I don't have to look after this every day.”
10.2.2 The biological clock

Hilary describes her “biological clock” as a concrete biological organ or mechanism. Despite describing a range of social considerations behind her decision to begin pursuing pregnancy in her early thirties, she attributes the timing of this decision to the workings of her clock:

Q: What made you decide at thirty-three that it was time to come off the pill and start trying to get pregnant?

I didn't - there's this biological clock. It was getting loud. The ticking that you hear starts to get loud. It was just kind of like, we have a lot of fun my husband and I. We have a fairly carefree life, we've both got good jobs and we can afford to do good things. Take a trip here and there...Because once you have a child it's there for the rest of your life, so [I needed to think about] what the rest of my life [was] going to be [like and] how I was going to slot a child into it...Because we do want children. We always knew we wanted children. There was no question that we would have children. It was just if we're going to, we'd better have them soon, because if I have a child now, then that child will be a teenager - I'll be fifty when that child is fifteen. And that's starting to get a worry. How am I going to cope with a fifteen year-old when I'm fifty? Who wants to cope with a teenager when you're that old?

The onset of Samantha’s concern about running out of time to have children convinced her that the biological clock was “real”:

Q: Have you ever experienced biological clock “ticking”?

I certainly worry now. In a sense of being aware that it is real.
Q: Do you worry that time is running out?

Yep but probably only in the last couple of years.

Q: When you were thirty?

Yeah.

Q: What do you think of [the ticking] as?

Just as time running down.

Kelly’s sense that her desire for children was outside her conscious rational control led her to see her “clock” as responsible for the decision-making crisis around children she experienced in her thirties:

There were times when it occurred to me that I was probably more in love with the idea of being a mother, than what the reality would truly be...I’d think about, "What about when I want to sleep in on a Sunday?" Very selfish, I admit. How much would it actually change my life? Knowing that Ivan needs ten hours sleep a night, it would always fall to me to be the one that got up, because he’d be a cranky, jibbering mess in the morning. And I kept thinking, “What kind of sacrifice is really involved?” Obviously there’s huge reward, but is it going to upset the balance between he and I? So I think I got through to about thirty-three and then...just - all of a sudden - I’d see a woman with a baby. And I’d find myself wanting to cry. Or I’d see something, like an ad on telly, read something in a magazine. And tears would come. And I used to think, "This is just bizarre. Because I don't really think I want that. Yet it moves me.” And I got all the way to thirty-five before I suddenly realised, "Aaaaaah, maybe that was the clock ticking." Because I’d never felt like I had any control
over this thing at all. It would just pop out, when I least expected it.

Q: What do you mean, "It was the clock ticking"?

Well, you know when people talk about the biological clock and that need woman supposedly have to be a mother. I thought, "Well that must be what it was." You know, like my hormones telling me, "Time's running out and you'd better do something if you intend to do it."…. 

10.3 WOMANHOOD DOES NOT EQUAL MOTHERHOOD

The study confirms the findings of previous researchers that for the current generation of fertile women (late-edge Baby Boomers and the women of Generation X), womanhood does not equal motherhood (Bulbeck, 1997; Faux, 1984; Marshall, 1993). Jacinta resents the inquiries acquaintances make about her childbearing intentions. She believes they reflect an assumption that all married women mother; an assumption that she does not share:

I'm constantly surprised that people will say, “When are you going to have children?” And they wouldn't have a clue about if we can or if we can't, or if we've discussed it. It's such a natural assumption that one day we'll have kids. And that amazes me, just amazes me. I would never ask anybody that...[It makes me feel] angry [that they] assume that because I'm a woman I'm going to be a Mum. I really don't like it. I don't think it's their business...They're not thinking outside that vision of: you're a woman, and you've got a partner. Therefore it naturally follows that you're going to be a Mum. So I get a bit pissed off at that.
According to Mary, the reasons her friends have for avoiding motherhood include their desire to spend their money on themselves and to preserve the leisurely nature of their lifestyle. She sees her friends’ decision to forgo children in order to preserve their current lifestyles as “fair enough” given the absence of motherhood from the social requirements of “good” or adult womanhood:

Lots of my friends have no intention ever of having children. A couple of them would probably like to if they had the opportunity and in a good relationship, which they are not at the moment. But one of them is adamant that there is no way she ever wants children. I've known her for fifteen years, and she's always been the same. I think that's just her. I've probably talked to a few people too, since I've been weighing up do I really want to, or don't I? And does it really matter if I don't? And does it really matter to me if I don't. They say, “I've got no interest in having children. I don't want to give my money to anyone else. I just spend it on myself, enjoy life.” Another girl said, “Oh, I'm too selfish to ever have them because I like my lifestyle.” She works on and off and plays golf and travels. So she said, “No, I like my life like it is, I'm too selfish. I don't want to change it.”

Q: What do you think about that?

I think it's fair enough. I don't have any problems with it. I don't think, “Oh, you're crazy, how could you not want to have children.” They probably just like things how they are in their lives and don't want to change them. I don't even really know if I want them or not. So how could I judge anyone else anyway? Because I don't really think that every woman should grow up, be married and have children. And I don't think that every woman who is in a relationship should have children.

Hilary’s comments suggest that she shares the view of her peer group that motherhood is a choice, not a mandate. They also suggest the increasing
availability of socially normative reasons – like material comfort, relationship concerns and lifestyle issues - for avoiding motherhood:

There are women in...[my] work environment who say, "Why have children?" It's just not a given that because they are a woman, they're going to have children. They've got their dog, they have a great life, a wonderful partner; it's just not a thought. Oh, it might have been, but they're quite happy... [to say], "No I don't want children, why would I"?

10.4 THE “BAD” AND THE “GOOD”: SOCIALLY NORMATIVE REASONS FOR HAVING CHILDREN

Women’s understanding of motherhood as a choice leads them to believe that those choosing it should have “good,” rather than “bad,” reasons for doing so.

10.4.1 Bad reasons for having children

Nearly half the sample (17 women) spontaneously offered eleven (11) “bad” reasons to have children.

10.4.1.1 For trivial lifestyle reasons

Lorne gets angered by the shallow reasons that she believes people often have for having children:

I have what I call fourteen children, all my friends’ kids. And I'm godmother to some of them...and so I often go out and buy presents for them and I love doing that. Sometimes I used to ask [my] Mum if she'd like to come along and help me choose something nice. And I stopped,
because she'd look at me and go, "Why don't you have one?" as though you can answer that in one sentence. "Because la, la, la. What do you think about these little bootees, Mum."...And then she'd say, "Why don't you have a baby. I could look after it." And I'd say, "What would I do with a baby?" "Oh you could dress it up." And I never forgot it..."You could dress it up." As though I was meant to say, "You're right, I could dress it up, because I loved my dolls so I'm going to have a baby. You're right Mum, you're right!"...I don't know why [that comment] has stuck in my mind. Yeah, right, so you could dress it up. That's a good reason. Well that's enough. That's a good reason...I laughed at the time, but deep down inside it made me terribly angry. Terribly angry...[because] I think there's a bit of seriousness...Because I feel people say things that are silly, and I've got so many friends that I love that...I suspect actually have a kid for that reason - I can dress it up, or very shallow reasons. So, I just think [having a child] is a much more serious thing than even getting married...That's how serious I think it is.

10.4.1.2 When you don’t really want them

Rachel believes it would be wrong for people who don’t really want kids to have them:

I don't think you should have children unless you really want to have children. And I don't think that is necessarily always the case [when people have kids].

10.4.1.3 To satisfy one’s own needs without adequate consideration of the child’s needs

Jocelyn doesn’t think it's right for women to have children to satisfy their own need to “do it all,” without considering their capacity to provide the right sort of parenting to their child:
Q: So you don't think your friends are doing a particularly good job [raising your godchild]?

No. They're just letting her run amok, because they're both working really hard. And so they'll do things like, come home late. And the child will still be awake. And they'll bring the child presents: bad stuff like that. And my friend says to me, "You know, it's horrible, I'm becoming the typical hard working over-working mother who has to find ten minutes to find a new present every day for the child whom she doesn't see except in the morning just before work." And I don't know. Bringing a child into the world for that doesn't seem quite the right thing to do... And...there was an article recently about working women in the paper. I only read a tiny bit of it. But one of the women was saying that, you know she got just an hour with her kid every now and then. Watched videos with the child. Doing school exercises...Swimming races: so that she felt that she had some involvement. But...she was glad that she had a child because she could do it all. And that sort of attitude I don't think is very good for a child.

Janine opines that people only have children to fulfil their own needs and that this is a “selfish” reason to have a child. She finds the desires of lesbians to have children particularly morally offensive because she says these women ignore the social difficulties their children face:

Yeah, I will never have children: not now. I think it's too difficult as a lesbian, I think it wouldn't be fair on the child, the discrimination the child would face. I have lots of lesbian friends, who are now having children, and they are using donor sperm in programs in Sydney that accept lesbians, but I just think it's selfish. Look at all the problems we have with adoption and a whole lot of children that are searching out their natural parents now. It's like we haven't learned any lessons. We are going to be creating a whole generation of children who really want to know their family history, their origins. Where did their father come from? I just think it's really selfish to [have children to] satisfy a need within us. Well, why do we have children? Why would I be having a child? I would be
having a child so that I have the experience of being a mother, and experiencing that love between a mother and child. I think it's different between partners. I would be feeling a need or a desire within me and I don't think they are the best reasons to bring a child into the world. That's what I mean about being selfish.

Q: What are good reasons for bringing a child into the world?

That's an interesting question isn't it? Well, perhaps that's why people bring children into the world - it's a selfish act in general. I don't know. I'd have to ask a lot of straight people why they have children but perhaps it is for purely selfish reasons. I mean, there are children that need homes, that need love. Existing children, children that are in care, crisis children, they don't have enough foster parents. Perhaps it would be better to foster a child and give a child love instead of bringing one into the world just to satisfy my own needs.

Laney also feels it is wrong to have a child to fulfil her own needs: even her need to give:

…For many years I had this fantasy that I would have kids, and hadn't really worked out why. Why I had this desire to have kids and I think that a lot of it was around me rather than the kids. So it was for my needs rather than a child's needs.

Q: And what were those needs?

Mine, for me? Around filling the hole that I felt was in my life. And, this will sound corny, like I have so much to give. And I thought that was what I wanted…to have this thing in my life that belonged to me, that would fill this hole, whatever. I don't think they're the right reasons…Because I [would be] trying to right something that was wrong and I
think that that is not a good reason to experiment on a child…It's like trying to sort myself out by doing something with a child: my needs, rather than the child's needs…

10.4.1.4 To quell boredom

Brenda thinks the desire to quell boredom is a bad reason to have children:

I know women that were bored so they had a child. And I thought, “Oh God”: totally wrong in my opinion.

Lorne also knows such women, and is similarly disapproving:

I think it's a wrong reason…I've just seen it too many times that when you've got nothing, well you might as well have a kid. Then you'll bloody well have something to occupy your days.

10.4.1.5 To remedy dissatisfaction at work

Sharon is discomforted by the possibility that her desire to have children is related to her unhappiness at work:

Q: Do you think if you were, [as you say you are not, happy at work] that you would feel any differently now about having kids?

I'd hope not.

Q: Why would you hope not?
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I hope I'm not wanting to have kids in order to solve my work problems.

10.4.1.6 To stay in-step

Laney doesn’t feel it would be right to become a mother unthinkingly, simply because that was what everyone else is doing:

…I thought [that having kids] was what I wanted. I love kids but it was just an assumption really, a fantasy, without thinking “so, why do I really want to have kids.”…[When somebody asked me why I wanted them] I had to then think that it was to go along with what everyone else was doing…I don't think [this is] the right reason.

10.4.1.7 Because time is running out

Lorne thinks it wrong to “shoot out” a child simply because the time available in which to do so is running out:

…When you get the natural maternal urge thing…and you think, it's running out, it's running out, tick, tick, tick, I'd better have a baby….

Q: Have you ever felt that?

No, but I feel I’m meant to.

Q: And why do you feel you’re meant to?

Well, ‘cos everyone tells me so…Usually older women who have had babies. You know, [women] over forty,
because that's usually the reason that they've had them. But I don't know them well enough to really, I would like to dig deeper, “So the reason you have a baby is because you thought [time] is running out, quick?” Doesn't seem like a good reason to have a baby to me.

Q: That fact that you're about to lose the capacity to do it?

Yeah...It seems like a crappy reason...I think you have to really...want...[to] bring someone into the world, and care for them...Just so much more involved than, “gee, the clock's ticking out, quick. Shoot one out.”

10.4.1.8 To avoid loneliness in old age

Latisha judges the practice of having children to prevent loneliness in age as both “selfish” and high-risk:

If you have a child for [the] selfish reason that you don't want to be left alone when you're old and so you've got grandchildren and all those things, the child can end up hating you anyway. So you might never see the child anyway. So if you've given up twenty years of your life, or you've put in twenty years of your life, and these days it seems to be longer - children seem to be home a lot longer – [for nothing].

Rachel also disapproves of having children as insurance against loneliness in old age:

People say, “What are you going to do in your old age? It's really great to have your children around you in your old age.” That's a really poor excuse for bringing children into the world.
Shaney’s friend told her that having children to avoid loneliness in old age was “selfish,” although Shaney felt this judgement was overly “harsh”:

I really don’t want to become - this is very, very selfish of me - an old person with no children and no family around me.

Q: Why is that selfish?

Because as a friend said to me once, “that’s a pretty selfish reason to have children.” That’s actually not why I want to have children, but it worries me a bit. That is in there somewhere, [that you] have children so you won't die alone.

Q: What are the right reasons for having children?

Well, exactly. That was my answer to that friend who said that, “well, what are the right reasons?” She said, “because you want to create life is the right reason: not because you want to create a life for your purposes.” So I can see where she was coming from, I don't actually agree with what she was saying. I think she was pretty harsh on me too, actually.

10.4.1.9 To hold a relationship together

Renata believes having children to hold a relationship together is a bad reason:

Q: …If you had been less satisfied [with your relationship] would children have seemed more of a possibility for a fulfilment that you weren't getting elsewhere?
I think I would have run screaming from that because Justin's older sister, when I was only starting to go out with him...had a miscarriage. Her relationship with her husband was disgusting. They had a baby and within nine months, the relationship was over. And you look at that and think well, probably having a child [because] your relationship is no good is not a good [reason].

Lorne couldn’t agree more:

[Having a child because your time to have one is running out] seems like a crappy reason. It's sort of as crappy as, 'Gee our relationship's pretty shitty, let's have a baby, it'll bring us closer together. Ho ho ho." Oh God. That's got to be top of the list of the world's worse reasons.

10.4.1.10 To adhere to female socialisation to mother

Janine thinks women oughtn't to have children to fulfil what she believes are society’s expectations of all women to mother:

I think a lot of the reasons [that women have children are]...about societal expectations of women. A lot of friends who are in that situation have achieved a lot in their careers. They are now in the $60,000 plus bracket, they are well established. They have nice houses, nice cars, perhaps a child is missing...I mean, we all take on the stuff we are told from the time we are little girls, don't we. We're given dolls, and that stuff, and social conditioning does have a lasting effect on us. And I think all women, straight and lesbian, take on that stuff and we think that we do need to be mothers. Society says that is our rightful role.
10.4.1.11 To experience pregnancy

Brenda doesn’t think the desire to experience pregnancy is a good reason to become a mother:

I think it would be interesting to look at [my pregnant body] and interesting to see how big your boobs grow and things like that. It would be interesting, but I’ve done that with the others [I know who have been pregnant]. I’ve seen the photos and you know I’ve seen their stomach grow and they’ve given me the intimate details. I probably would like to experience it for myself, just as an interesting observation, but that’s a really stupid reason to get pregnant.

10.4.2 Good Reasons for Having Children

Unlike the “bad” reasons women gave for having children, “good” reasons were rarely proffered spontaneously during interviews. When women’s views on this question were sought (typically after a “bad” reason for parenting was offered), they struggled to come up with good reasons to mother. Below are the three good reasons women did give for having children.

10.4.2.1 Because it is an extension of you and your partner

Lorne believes the right reason to have a child is because you feel it is an “extension” of you and your partner:

Q: What are good reasons to have children?
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...That you feel it's sort of like an extension of you and your partner; those old-fashioned reasons.

10.4.2.2 To raise good citizens

Sharon thinks the desire to raise children to be good citizens is a good reason to have them:

...It's a sense of being able to... teach kids. And being able to watch these young people grow up, and rear them so that they're good people.

10.4.2.3 To be a real part of your life

Jocelyn believes it right to bring children into the world to be a real part of their parents' lives:

Q: What do you think you should bring children into the world for?

To be a part of your life, but a real part. And not just, I don't know.

10.5 THE IRRATIONALITY OF DECIDING TO MOTHER AND THE PULL OF BIOLOGY

A number of women understood questions about good and bad reasons to have children as questions about rational or irrational reasons for having children. The difficulties these women had articulating rational reasons to have children contrasted sharply with the easy time they had arriving at rational reasons to
remain childless. The rational reasons they gave for avoiding motherhood ranged from the disruption to sleep young children cause, to the considerable personal independence, freedom, material gain and career advancement women must sacrifice in order to fulfil the responsibilities of modern-day Australian and North American motherhood. The discomfort women felt making considered but irrational decisions about motherhood led them to understand their own and other women’s desire to parent as the result of overpowering instincts or drives. Instincts or drives that are, by definition, beyond the pull of reason. Barbara’s struggle to think of any good reasons to have children – and the ease with which she can produce “rational” reasons not to - has led her to conclude that her and other women’s desires to mother are the result of a strong but resistible physical “urge”:

It has occurred to me that this urge to have children is a physical thing. Men don’t have it…Well look, if women didn’t have a maternal urge, why would you have a baby? Why would you?

Q: …So what does that make you then, somebody who hasn’t decided to follow that maternal urge?

Someone who regards the bringing of children into the world as something you really need to consider very carefully from a rational perspective: about how that fits into your life, your lifestyle and your life choices as opposed to, “I want a baby.” Because I honestly think most women want a baby. And it’s an all consuming urge to have a baby. It is a…literally gut wrenching urge they’ve got to have a baby. I know that I have felt it. And I don’t think women think, “I won’t have a good night’s sleep for years. I will never have a weekend alone with my husband again. I will have to compromise in my work…I’ll never go
to a folk concert again. I'll never go to a rock 'n roll [concert]. I can't just go out whenever." Women don't think about it.

Q: Do you think they should?

Yes! Absolutely!

Q: So you shouldn't let that physical thing overwhelm your senses?

Well, if we didn't there wouldn't be any - we'd be really buggered as a race, wouldn't we?

Although a range of social factors surround Sharon’s recently discovered desire to have children, she experiences this desire as biological because of what she sees as the irrationality of a decision to have children, and the rational grounding of her previous anti-child position:

So now I'm in a pretty stable de facto relationship with a guy and I really want to have kids. It's amazing.

Q: Why have you [experienced it] like that?

Because, if I look at it really rationally, I say having kids is going to screw up my comfortable existence. I've got a very comfortable existence. And it really puts paid to lots of notions of career. There's careers you can have with children, but it's tough going and there's a limit. And the world is definitely not equal out there for men and women in the business world, especially for women with kids. It's just really a hard juggling act and I see it with people I work with and I just think it's dreadful.
Q: What kind of things do you see?

Oh, just conflicting demands between jobs. I'm in a job where I work fifty to sixty hours a week. And people trying to bring up young kids and work at the same time. And you have to be there at work, otherwise you're not being serious. But you know, with young kids, there's this guilt that you should be spending more time with the kids...Yeah, so on that rational level, it's making a decision that goes forever. I don't usually make decisions like that. And physically it's hard, and financially it's hard. You can think of a whole heap of reasons why not. And I'll write a list of pros and cons. And there are masses and masses and masses of cons. And the pros are like, "Well, I want to." It's like, come on, you're intelligent, you must be able to think of some good reasons here...

Q: What do you think is a good reason?

Well, because I want to. I'm trying to break that down into why, and that's where I come back to, I think it's a sort of biological thing...

Q: Well you talk about it being biological, is that another way of saying, "not rational"? Because you've got this rational list of reasons on the right, and then you've got this one tiny reason on the left, so rationally you should [decide] not to have them. And yet you're on the "having them" side.

Yes...it's physical or it's emotional...The other complexity of this is my partner is not very interested in having kids. So we're having this huge debate at the moment, and it's being going on for about a year and a half about having kids and not having kids, and it's a nightmare. And so we've been sitting down drawing these lists about pros and cons and stuff. And it's really hard for me to say [why I want them]. There are these emotional, irrational reasons for having kids that are actually much stronger than the rational ones. But he's a very rational person and he's not
really all that good on the emotional side, and he just
doesn't want to deal with, can't figure out [my emotional
irrational reasons].

10.6 THE SOCIAL CLOCK

Despite many women’s commitment to a biologically-based view of their
maternal desires, the data suggest that the social world has a powerful
influence on the timing of women’s desires to become a mother, to make a
decision about motherhood, or to confirm their decision to remain childless. As
discussed in Chapter 5, social factors like the attitudes of a woman’s parents
the existence and “readiness” of the “right” partner and the behaviour of a
woman’s friends and peer groups regarding motherhood influence when women
consider and make decisions about motherhood.

Social circumstances instigated a feeling of “it’s time” in all the women in the
study, although women differed on what they felt it was time to do. For women
who desired motherhood – the thwarted mothers and women childless by
relationship - these circumstances instigated a sense that it was time either to
have children or to set the stage for motherhood. For the undecided waiters and
watchers, social circumstances instigated a period of consideration of
motherhood. For women who are childless by choice, these circumstances
initiate a period of testing and reaffirming their or their partners’ commitment to
childlessness.
10.7 SETTING AND RE-SETTING THE CLOCK: TIME LINES AND SCHEDULES TO MOTHERHOOD

Women’s time lines to marriage and motherhood are strongly influenced by the interrelated factors of where a woman lives and her social and economic circumstances. Time lines are different in inner city than in country and outer suburban areas where women have less money, education and opportunity. Women also report that their time lines altered when they achieved more education and/or physically removed themselves from the influence of the ethnic/religious groups in which they were raised. Indeed, many women’s stories suggest that questioning/delaying marriage and/or motherhood – along with attending university and/or living in the inner city – were concrete way of establishing and displaying their transition to a new social/economic class.

Brenda contrasts the time lines of her social circle with the time lines she had growing up in the country and with those currently in vogue among the young women from less privileged suburbs:

Q: When you were growing up did you plan when you’d get married?

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27 Some women discuss time lines to marriage and motherhood, some just to motherhood. Many of those in the latter group are women who use marriage and motherhood interchangeably because of their assumption that the former always precedes the latter, and the latter inevitably follow the former.

28 The influence of a woman’s demographic location, her educational level, her race/ethnicity and her religion on her fertility outcomes is well established. See (Ambry, 1992; McDonald, 1998a, 16; National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), 1999; Rindfuss et al., 1996b; Wicks & Mishra, 1998).
Yeah at age twenty-five, twenty-four or was it twenty-two? No, I think it was twenty-three actually, that was the perfect age to get married...[But] as soon as I got to twenty-one, I thought, “Oh no.” So it changed when I got older, but you know, [I remember] all my girlfriends at high school sitting around saying, “when is the perfect age?” And it’s interesting because I was [recently] talking to a group of kids at [a school I visited] and I said, “You know, when I was at school I said twenty-three.” And they’re going, “Oh, eighteen now is the perfect age for a relationship....And I said, “Oh, there isn’t ever the perfect time,” but they were saying eighteen was the perfect time to have a child because, “that's when Mum had me.”

Q: Are you suggesting that girls are now actually lowering the age....?

No, no, no. Just that group. You know they came from a [underprivileged outer suburban area], so that area sort of promoted that. You know, a lot of them have children by eighteen anyway.

Kristina agrees that the “right” age to have children differs from country to city:

It's a different sort of outlook when you stay [in the country]. I think if you stay in a country town you tend to get your job, you get your relationship, there's more chance of getting married younger, and if you do get married then you have kids. I mean, she didn't have kids straight away but I look at my friends who have not moved out of Cagal...and probably eighty per cent of them are married with kids. Whereas the friends that I've kept from Cagal who are [living in the city] have the same sort of lifestyle as me. So I think that's got a lot to do with it as well. Maybe if I'd stayed in Cagal I might have been in a relationship and got married too.

Q: Why [do people end up marrying and having children earlier] if they stay in the country?
…that's more of the lifestyle of the towns that people are settled in...[so] it's just easier to settle into a relationship and get married...Because the social life is built around couples and even sporting groups. And I think it's more an age thing too: it's the “right age” to get married if you are still there. Your friends all are [getting married], and you've been going out with this guy for a long time and it's the right thing to do at the right time.

Q: What is the right age?…When did most of your friends get married?

About twenty-three to twenty-five.

Q: And that's younger than in [name of City]?

I'd say so.

Q: Is there a right age in [name of City]?

...a lot of my friends have, in the last couple of years, gotten married and they've all been late twenties, early thirties.

Caitlin sees her decision to live in the multi-cultural inner-city as critical to her capacity to reject the outer suburban and Catholic values around marriage and motherhood with which she was raised:

I'm second in the family. There's a very strong Catholic framework.

Q: Did you go to Catholic schools?
Oh, absolutely. You were not allowed to go to the other atheist school sort of thing. You had to go to Catholic school. So I went to public school for two years, but that was because the Catholic school didn't have prep. And I stayed an extra year to look after the next child that came along into prep. So I went to the local primary Catholic school and a regional secondary Catholic college.

Q: And what was the spacing between all your brothers and sisters?

About a year apart, eighteen months, two years...That was the framework, you don't have contraception in Catholicism...that was evil. I remember a friend of Mum's saying she couldn't have a hysterectomy even though she was bleeding to death, because it was a form of contraception. We're talking twenty years ago. It's a lifetime away now to me, but it was the reality of my childhood. And most people had four to seven children when I was growing up...I didn't know anybody who wasn't Catholic, to be honest, until I went and worked in a bank when I was eighteen. Which was the most flattening experience, because I was eighteen going on twelve: very emotionally young. You grew up in a really white, white lower-middle class, working class area and then you hit the big town in the city...I fought the Church all the way through, I was a rebel. I mean, I fought and I argued with it but it was still part of my socialisation...Then I did teaching...I'm just a freak in the teaching crowd [because I'm single and childless]...They're all living in [wealthy inner-city suburb]. They...are conservative, middle-class...And all we seem to do is celebrate someone's birth of a child. And so, I play along with it, it's great but that's not where my life is at...Their values are pretty old school values, they're pretty conservative. Feminism's a dirty word. They're very Catholic in many ways...I'm the most educated of my family...I'm not living my parents life...

Q: But do you feel like somebody is out there still living it?

Yeah, God. You go out there to the outer...suburbs.
Q: So people are still living the life that you've left?

...Well, I didn't go to the school reunion but I heard about it and it was frightening. They are just boring, boring, boring, boring lives. A lot of them haven't [changed]. But maybe if I grew up in a wealthier area people would be more socially mobile and more education and lifestyle, but out there it is pretty - I met up with three guys I went to high school with. Just bumped into them...You know, I was saying, “I feel like I escaped.” And they go, “Yeah, but we're one of the few.”...

Jacinta grew up in what is now an outer suburban area, but then was country, and attended an all-girls Catholic school. Unlike most of the girls with whom she went to school who followed the expected path of leaving school, getting married and having children in their early twenties, Jacinta went to University and lived with her husband Ronald before they married:

I grew up in [outer suburb] where Mum and Dad bought a house in a new estate. They bought the house when no one even knew where [the suburb] was.

Q: Was it country?

Oh, very much yeah...So I moved there when I was two and lived there until I was twenty-four. And then I was a [University] student, moved out on my own...I went to [name of Catholic girl’s school].

Q: And was that an important part of your upbringing?

It was a conscious decision that Mum made. Mum is Catholic...[and] was fairly determined that the girls should go to all girls school...I think the Catholicism had more of
an effect on me than the all-girls nature of the school. We went to Catholic primary school as well...I also think that, again this probably has more to do with the Catholicism, we weren't given much freedom of expression at secondary school because it was expected that we were to be young ladies at an early age...We were expected to conform and to be very adult-like, and I guess that was what Mum hoped it would teach us: to be Ladies...Very proper, very well behaved...I'm studying [now]. I'm doing my honours in Literature part-time and it will take me this year and next year. And I don't intend for that to be all of the study that I do, and that's really important to me.

Q: Why is it important to you to continue with your education?

I really like it, really like the learning and stimulation and it adds a whole other dimension to my life. It really expands it out, I get to talk to people and learn from people who I normally wouldn't be running into day to day...None of my family are tertiary educated...they wouldn't have a clue about University. They don't know what it means, they don't know what it can lead to. For them, people always got jobs, they left school at year ten or whatever...They still think that...A lot of the girls I went to school with are mums...Almost all of them are married and have got kids. And I suppose they started having kids at around sort of twenty-four-ish. Someone always seems to be pregnant...Of all of them, Ronald and I are the only couple amongst that group of friends that have lived together before they were married. And they all did things: got married, got their house, had kids. And it all happened very quickly...

Q: Have you got a second set of friends now who don't have children?

Two girlfriends who I'm really close to, one had her first baby early last year, and she's just pregnant again. And another girlfriend got married last year and she's trying to get pregnant now. They're sort of my age.
While the daughters of other first generation Greek immigrants adhered to custom and entered an arranged marriage in their early twenties, Matilda identified with changing Australian values about women roles:

My parents are originally from Greece and my sister and I were both born here...Coming from an ethnic family, the expected thing was that when you reach a certain age say eighteen, twenty or twenty-two, you...marry and have children...If you reach a certain age like twenty-five, forget about expecting to eventually be getting married because [you’re] twenty-five: too old, left on the shelf. That sort of thing.

Q: And what about people having children? Once people did get married were they expected to have children straight away?

Oh well, within a year of marriage, that was the expected thing...I think my parents were slightly different in the sense that I think they assimilated more into the Australian culture than say my mother's sister. But she never actually said it, [it was coming] mainly from my father's side. Because his family came out to Australia probably in the middle to late sixties so they had that sort of old attitude from overseas and whereas my mother's sisters came out in the early sixties. [They had better] assimilated to the Australian culture so their thought processes was probably slightly different...I always wanted to go to university...and so that's what I ended up doing...And then I thought I'd like an interesting career...I was probably the first one to get an education at all in the family, to go through and finish university, so that was important [to my parents]...But then they assumed after that, that I'd get married, and have a family and that didn't happen...I think [the central message of feminism] is the equality issue: women should have equal rights, that sort of stuff...I was also starting to mix with other women at university...You were open to all sorts of things at university that you weren't at home or the friends you went to school with: they were all brought up along the same lines as you were...People who looked different, which was quite
nice…And what was interesting was finding men in [my university] classes who were supportive of women and of women’s issues. That was a real eye opener.

Q: You hadn't seen that before?

No, not really, not with kids through high school. But at university, yeah…All of my university friends now have children…

Q: At what age did your friends start having children?

Thirties.

10.7.1 Knowing, not feeling, that time is running out

Further evidence that women’s desires and their timing are primarily influenced by social events, rather than biological processes, comes from data suggesting that women only experience the “ticking” of their “biological clocks” when they are intellectually aware of the relationship between age and declining fertility and/or increased birth defects.29 Jacinta is eager to have children before she turns thirty-five. However, her concern about her advancing age derives from her knowledge of the current hospital pre-natal testing regimen, rather than any felt experience that she is becoming too old to become pregnant or to bear a healthy child:
Q: You've mentioned a couple of times that you didn't want to start trying to have a baby at thirty-eight because you thought it might be too late. [Why]?

Actually, thirty-eight would really worry me. I just hear that after thirty-five that there are increasing risk to the baby and things going wrong, deformities increases. So that makes me nervous. That makes me really nervous. Because I'd hate to be in a situation where it was recommended that certain tests are done - amniocentesis and things like that – because I think, “well, what if you do them, and the tests come back and show something is wrong, then what do you do.” And I don't want to be put in that situation...

Q: Do you feel like you're any less fertile sitting here today than you were five years ago?

No, no. But I'm aware that I might be becoming less and less.

Q: Do you think you might be becoming less, or do you feel that you are becoming less and less?

I think I might be, I don't feel it.

Matilda speaks of the biological clock, but has no felt experience of her fertility running down, only received wisdom that this is the case:

Q: Would you say that you intend to have children in the future?

29 As discussed in Chapter 3, expert opinion varies on the precise age at which female fertility wanes/expires and birth defects increase.
I don't know. I think when I hit forty, I'll probably say, “well I'm definitely not having any.”

Q: Why forty?

Because I think you are probably getting on. The biological clock is sort of ticking away and you're getting too old to have children...I just use the number forty because I know women who've had kids at forty-two, forty-three or forty-five.

Q: What does it mean to you when you use the expression “biological clock” and “tick, tick, tick”?

Oh well, you've only got what ten years to go...Well, if you seriously want children then you should seriously consider because you've only got a few years left before your natural processes start to cease...

Q: ...If you hadn't heard anything about the biological clock, do you think you would feel in yourself the experience of being less fertile than you were five years ago. Or is it just something you know about in your head because you watch TV?

No, it's something I know about in my head...

Q: Do you actually feel like you're less fertile now?

No, not at all.
Bethany has been told that she is biologically aging and that her fertile years are waning. This knowledge “annoys” her as she feels as young and as fertile as ever:

Q: Do you feel any pressure other than what your mother says [about mothering young]…?

Tick tock?

Q: Do you feel the tick-tock?

Yeah I do. I do feel the clock. And it’s a very strange thing because I feel incredibly young in a lot of ways and yet I know that biologically I’m not as young as I feel and I find that kind of annoying sometimes…

Q: …If you didn’t know that time is running out, would you actually feel like you are any less fertile today than you were two years ago?

Q: …No, I wouldn’t.

10.7.2 “It’s time to…”: The interaction between social circumstance and the timing of women’s desires to have children

10.7.2.1 Childless by Choice: It's time to test and reaffirm my/our commitment to childlessness

Although always extremely disinterested in having children, Latisha felt her “clock” begin “ticking” when others around her began to have children and she
realised remaining childless could have social costs. This ticking has led her to test her and her husband’s commitment to childlessness:

Q: So you never discussed [having children with your husband]?

Well, we both - I think we both knew. The lifestyle we were leading wasn't going to be big on children. And if I ever got given a baby to hold I'd look at it and go "oh – OK," and just give it back. So there's not a big maternal thing with other people's children.

Q: And he would have known that?

And he's not, yeah. I've said, “look do you think we're going to, because you know, tick tock tick tock”…

Q: When you say, 'tick tock tick tock", what is that about?

Oh, the biological clock, you know. And even Elle McPherson's now having one...It's actually been good because we've been together so long now, people have stopped asking if we're going to, so we don't have that pressure. But it's just the social side of it. If you have children then you go to creche, and then you've got school, and stuff like that. It broadens your thing…

Q: So you feel like you're missing out on it a bit, or you're worried about missing out?

I worry about missing out…
Q: It's imaginary, but how do you think he'd react if you just decided tomorrow [that you wanted to have a child?]

Oh, he told me I have to give up smoking… I said I would once I got pregnant and he said, "Well you'd have to stop beforehand." But he'd have to stop smoking as well…

Q: So there's things that have to get done beforehand?

Well, there isn't really, [it's] an excuse to put it off a bit longer, I guess… It only comes up occasionally, and then when it does, I… end up spending time with a girlfriend who's got a child and then I come back and go, "No way!"

Q: And he's happy with that?

Like, he hasn't said, "I'm dying for one."

Lorne believes the arrival her fortieth birthday will give her the peace of mind about childlessness she has lost in the run-up to this birthday. The end of her childbearing years has led her to question her own commitment to childlessness and to test her partner Dirk’s commitment to their childless relationship:

I'm looking so much forward to turning forty, because then I figure… [the pressure] will really drop off… A few times I've made mental lists [for and against children]… and it's always overwhelmingly "against"… I'd love to be able to think of a few "for"…

Q: Why would you like to think of some “for”…?
Because I think it's a natural thing... But I just believe I'm not the correct person. I'm not one of those. But I'm interested... I've had friends and some of them are really honest and are happy to talk about it. They that it's just something you feel. It's this sort of urge, you go all funny, and you just have to... have a baby... Well, I just think as hard as I like and I can't imagine...

Q: Does that worry you?

Sometimes. Yeah, because I love my partner [but]... I actually feel that, because he's a bit younger than me, one day he will get this urge, whatever it is...

Q: And what does he say about that?

Not much. He's thirty-one and mature in some ways and immature in others, and he doesn't sort of do any babysitting, and he's a bit “eeeeeer” [about children]. But I've seen that a million times [before]. In five or ten years... that'll change I betcha... It's unfair of me to predict, but I predict that he will follow suit....

Q: What makes you feel a little bit concerned or uncomfortable about the fact that you weren't able to come up with reasons of favour of having children? So what? Why do you feel like that's a problem?

Well, it's not a big problem. I mean, maybe I should be sort of happy because that sort of confirms what I feel. That I'm just one of those women who shouldn't have children.... I suppose my partner he went to [privileged boys school] and he has ten friends that all went... and they've all done exactly the same thing. They've all married [privileged girls school] girls and they've all started families about the same time... And they're all very lovely, lovely, lovely people... [but] I definitely don't fit into their lovely thing. And
it's funny because Dirk is also starting not to fit in too, and I try not to point it out to him...

Q: Why do you want him to notice?

...It would mean that we're just observing and taking note of what's happening around us. I hate being blind to what's going around me. I don't want to ignore that all my friends are having kids and they're very happy...I just don't want us to be in our own little merry independent world when that's not the whole of the world because other stuff goes on too.

Q: Is it a kind of external check that you have made the right choice?

Yeah I think so.

Q: And do you want him to also recognise that that's the case?

Well, well I mean that would be great but...he's not a big talker...

Q: Do you want him to recognise that your [childless] life has some benefits?

Yeah. “The way we live at the moment is so different from your contemporaries, and how does that make you feel? Maybe you wish you were like them. And if so, then I'm the wrong girl to be around.” That sort of stuff...I mean I've said in moments of drunkenness [that] I hope we're together forever. That's what I would love. Forever and ever. I've heard friends say, “Oh you know when it's the right one” and I've always thought what a load of crap. But
I do….So that's an amazing feeling and I can't believe that I've actually finally got that feeling…So I figure it must be similar for babies. You get this “now is the right time for us” [feeling]. I figure I can't be any more in love, so there must be some maternal thing that comes along…

Q: Are you hoping that it will come along?

Um. Not really…I'm hoping that it won't. I'm hoping that it doesn't come along when I'm fifty…I think that's what I'm afraid of…I'm afraid that [then motherhood] will seem terribly important…and that'd be terrible. I'd probably shoot myself…Up until you're forty, forty five, it's still such a grey area and I know that women can go from hot to cold and all that sort of thing…It's just throwing different possibilities around in my head. They all just sort of go “brrrrrr” and it will be quite peaceful when at least one's resolved.

Deborah’s belief that her late twenties or early thirties were the right time for her to have had children led her to question her commitment to childlessness during that stage of her life. Having made the decision then to forgo motherhood, the approach of her fortieth birthday has not reopened the motherhood issue for her:

When I was about eighteen I would have thought, "No never. Don't ever want to do [have children].” Around about thirty I think I thought, "I should do it" and tried to convince myself that it was something that I should do. Now I just think, "No, not for me. I just don't think it's right for me"...Because a psychiatrist once told me…that if it is a great physical need to have children then you should do it. If you don't feel an overwhelming physical need then you're only doing it because it is the stage of life you think you should be going through. That is only his opinion but I thought, "yeah." And I know I don't feel that way…I'm thirty-nine this year and for me to start to have a baby now, I'd be fifty-nine when it's twenty. I guess you shouldn't think about that in terms of age, but I even think now I'm too old. Not physically, but in other ways. I think to
have your children early is a good idea and would have been for me if I'd have them...In your mid twenties would probably have been the ideal time if it was going to happen. And the older I get the further away I get from even considering it. Maybe around thirty I would have done it.

Q: Was that a key age for you?

I think so...Because I was thinking the time is getting on, and if you're going to do it you'd better do it now, within the next few years...[If I had had a lot of money] I probably would have thought differently, yeah. I probably would have had [children]. But not now, not at this age, even if I had a lot of money now I still don't think I would but around twenty-five or early thirties if the circumstances had of been right. I probably would have wound up just going through with it...[Also] if I'd felt really right about somebody having a child might have been the next stage, at a certain age, but now it's a different kind of thinking. It's not to do with the person you're with any more. It's just out of the question.

10.7.2.1.2 Women Childless by Relationship and Thwarted Mothers: it's time either to set the stage for motherhood or to have children

She calls it a “biological urge,” but Sharon traces the timing of her desire to mother to the influence of her social circle:

...I guess about two years ago [I began wanting children]... I don't know how much of that is because a lot of my peers are having children now. I mean, peers who I'm friends with now...There's a whole bunch of friends from the country who had kids when they were twenty. But, you know, people I mix with now are all having kids, and are all on to their second or third child. And I suppose I've [now] seen other people with their kids, and actually held other people's babies and stuff. Which was something I didn't do until a few years ago. I'd never
basically seen a baby or had anything to do with anyone under the age of fifteen...So, yeah, I've got this really strong - I think it's a biological urge. It really feels like it.

Despite Judi’s determination to become a mother one day, she doesn’t yet feel “it’s time” to implement her plans to mother because her peer group are still single and childless:

Q: When Nancy and Lesley and your other friends [got pregnant]...

They're not really friends. They're sort of kids of friends of my parents. People I knew growing up.

Q: Is it important when people like that, your [childhood]... peer group, start getting pregnant? Did that [impact] on anything you felt about time lines [for childbearing]?

Yes and no. Back in high school, I rejected some of their decisions and priorities and stuff and I was a little bit more on my own...So it's always been easy for me to disassociate myself from the group of girls who did everything the way they were supposed to do it. Because I always had a different agenda, and different priorities [than they did]...They weren't as into school, or travelling. And they were just...much more [interested in] having a boyfriend, and a big wedding...They were the cool girls...while I was friends with everybody...And so that makes it easier. Had it been - and none of the women who I was friends with are married, and none of them have kids. So there's sort of a distinction, because I say, “oh yeah, but look at all those people. Those attorneys and those people that are doing great things and doing this and that. And they're just like me.”
Lori decided it was time to put her long-standing plan to mother into action when
the social circle with which she identified – her friends from university – began
having children:

My best friends from high school got married right out of college. All my [high school] friends just about got married just out of college. My college friends and team mates aren't married. They are getting married as we speak, like right now.

Q: Has that added to your sense that “it's time”?

Yeah for sure, for sure. I just was talking to my best friend Deryn...and our friend Dina just about a year ago when I was engaged and she met [my fiance] Tony and she goes, “God, you've got such a great life. I wish I could meet someone like him. Knock my socks off, get married.” And she's now married. She met a guy right after that and now she's married and...her husband is on like, “Top 40 under 40” in terms of success in some New York magazine. I was just talking to Deryn and I'm like, “God, I gotta do that.” So yeah, watching them all get married now, for the first time, I'm getting a little concerned.

Darcy’s maternal “instinct” lay dormant until she met the right man, the “band” of friends with whom she identifies began having children, and she had accomplished her goals:

Q: When did you start to feel [what you call] the maternal instinct?

I guess I really started to get it, to feel it when the relationship that I have just come out [started]...He was the first person that I would have considered as the father of my children. And it was at that point that I opened up to
the fact that OK, now it's something to look at. It was something that was never going to occur unless it was a conscious decision on my part to fall pregnant and have a baby...If I think about high school and all the females that I associated with, there are two definite bands...those who had the children straight away in their early twenties and those that didn't until they were in their thirties...From high school buddies that I still run into, they all have children at school. They married and had their children in their early twenties.

Q: So they did that first?

They did that first.

Q: And what did the ones who had them in their thirties do first?

Worked and travelled. They travelled, or further education. If I think about [one friend], she's a year older than me. She became a registered nurse, then travelled overseas for a number of years...

Q: Was [having children] something that you thought about doing after you had done other things? Were you in the second band?

Yes.

Q: So there were certain things that you wanted to do first?

Yes...I wanted to get my University degree. My very first boyfriend I had from the age of fifteen to twenty. He was wonderful; a lovely, lovely guy. And all he wanted was to
have a wife and children. Which he now has, with the one directly after me. And I didn't want that, at that point. I wanted to do some travelling and I wanted to go to Uni...so we split.

10.7.2.1.3 Waiters and Watchers: It’s time to make a decision about motherhood

Although ambivalent, Catriona is more in favour of having a child than against. Her increased certainty about eventually having children is the result of her growing faith in the permanency of her current relationship, although the childlessness of her friends and the late age at which her sister had children has made her relaxed about the precise timing of motherhood:

Q: Do other people treat you as a childless woman?

Occasionally...I was talking to some people in the admin staff where I work. They're quite different from me, got married quite young and they've got children. They're about the same age as me. And one woman who I don't know that well said, "How old are you?" and I said, "thirty one" and she said, "No spring chicken" or something. And this other woman said that she'd had her first child at twenty-three...

Q: What do you think they were saying?

I don't think they were being critical. It's just different. Their lives have been different from mine...[But] I felt a bit like, "God, maybe I should have a child soon"...Because often I don't think I am thirty one...It's a shock to me sometimes that I am thirty-one.
Q: So if you were better at realising that you were thirty-one, would you feel like it might be time to be getting on having children?

Not really. Because I feel like I will, maybe in a year or so. But at the moment, I don't think that I'm ready to do that…

Q: What people or influences have been important in your life in terms of your current feelings about being childless or childfree?

I've got friends who have lived similarly to me. And who might be starting to have kids soon. But they haven't done it very young, oh a few of them have, but not many. [And] my family because, compared to a lot of other families who had children early, they didn't…

Q: On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate the intensity of your desire to have children?

Six. Sort of rising. Six to seven I'll say.

Q: When did it start to rise?

I think as my relationship has intensified it's sort of, that has intensified. That feeling…

Q: Has there been another time in your life when you felt the desire to have a child?

No.
Q: So that was the first spark of it?

Yes...

Although Kaitlin lacks the “drive” to have children, in the last year she has been hearing the “ticking” of her “biological clock.” She experiences this ticking – which coincides with her awareness that many of her friends will soon have children as she will increasingly be seen as a “childless woman” - as a wake-up call about the need for her to carefully consider whether or not she wants to mother:

Q: Would you call yourself a childless person?

No, no, because children has never been an issue. It’s only been in the last month or so that my reproductive time is finite. It just suddenly hit: “oh, tick-tock, tic-tock” [and] it was like, “Oh, I'm going to have to think about this a little bit...actually [find out] what [I] really think...I think I'd like to share [motherhood] with somebody. I don't see it as a solo thing. I think it is too much for one person. I know that women do [become single mothers] because they are so incredibly desperately driven to have a child - it's what they want - but I don't have that overwhelming urge, that drive. But that might change. I've done a huge change in five years...so I expect to change as I go...I wouldn't be surprised if it kicked in...

Q: Would you prefer that it never kicked in?

Oh, it would be great. I’d be free.

Q: So if you never felt the desire to have them, you'd be quite happy not to have them?
Yeah. I have friends...who don't have children. But now one of my friends has had a child. It's going to become more and more an issue as people around me are having children, I think.

Q: And have you considered the possibility that you might start losing your collection of childless people as they start having them?

Yeah, I still have some single friends, or childfree people in my life [now] but that will change I'm sure...

Q: Do others treat you as a woman who doesn't have children?

Not as yet. I think I'm still young enough to get away with it, but that will probably change.

Rhyll is one of the few women in the study who understands her biological fertility as a “deadline" for a decision about childbearing predominantly shaped and timed by social factors. For her, the critical social circumstance shaping the whether and when of motherhood is the pace and internal logic of her relationship with Jock:

We can't deny that the biological clock exists, because menopause is there, so there is a biological clock. But I don't reckon that the biological clock means that as you get closer to that age there is a biological imperative to the strength of the urge. But it may become more imperative that you address the question, simply because time is running short. But it's not like there is a build-up in any biological way with more and more of you craving to have a baby. It's just recognition that, “shit, if I'm going to do it...I really wouldn't want to do it after thirty-eight."
Q: You haven't mentioned those calculations.

Yeah, but I've thought about them. That if I was going to have a kid I wouldn't want to have the first one any later than thirty-eight because of health risks for the fetus and that's sort of stuff...knowing there is a deadline means that if you seriously want to have children then when you get to my age, and you haven't had them, you have to start clearing the decks and planning. You've got to start saying, “time’s up. Sometime in the next four years, I've got to have a baby. So what am I going to do about my life to organise it that way?” But I haven't made that decision, and I'm not likely to make that active a decision on it because that's not the way I operate. So I'll just keep rolling along. But it is in the back of my head that I'm thirty-six, and that I'm involved in a relationship with somebody who is ideal father material. But that doesn't mean I'm going to rush any decisions about anything. I wouldn't have a baby with Jock just because I wanted to have a baby. I would because it seemed like the right thing to do, as a partnership... the right thing to do for us, as a partnership....If it seemed like the natural next step for us together...If it was like, “OK, this seems like the right thing to do.” As opposed to, “Oh god, I'm thirty-six, and I've got a man around who is the right [kind], so I'll get pregnant now because it's my last chance.”

10.8 CONCLUSION

The data suggest that the existence and timing of women’s desire for children is socially, rather than biologically, based. The biological clock is not an independent biological entity, compelling the nature and timing of women’s desire for children. Instead, it appears that women who imagined a future with motherhood in it also often imagined when in their future they might become a mother. The data suggest, however, that women can and do reset their clocks
in response to changing “expert” views about the endpoint of female fertility, increased levels of education and/or the childbearing behaviour of their peers.

One of the more startling findings of the current research is the difficulty many women in the study had articulating “good” reasons to have children. No such difficulties existed for “bad” reasons, which seemed to fall into two broad categories. Bad reasons to have children such as “for trivial lifestyle reasons,” “when you don’t really want them,” “to satisfy own needs without adequate consideration of child’s needs,” “to quell boredom” or “to remedy dissatisfaction at work” seem to reflect the good mother requirements to which women subscribe (see Chapter 7). For instance, the prohibition on having children “when you don’t really want them” or “to quell boredom” is really just the flip side of the requirement that good mothers be “keen” to have a child. The second category of “bad” reasons, “to stay in step,” “because time is running out,” “to avoid loneliness in old age,” “to hold a relationship together,” “to adhere to feminine socialisation to mother” and “to experience pregnancy,” were socially normative reasons that prevailed until the late 1970s or early 1980s (Veevers, 1980). It is likely that women’s rejection, as bad reasons to have children, of the desire “to experience pregnancy” or the desire “to reflect feminine socialisation to mother” reflects the profound influence feminist rejection of the “motherhood mandate” has had on social norms and attitudes around women’s roles.30

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30 This conclusion would support the findings of researchers, and the conclusions of social theorists, that feminism has profoundly influenced the attitudes, beliefs and life expectations of
It is worth noting that the word “selfish” pops up a number of times when women seek to explain why a particular reason for having children is wrong. For instance, Janine claims it is selfish for women to have children to satisfy women’s own needs without considering the needs of the child, while Latisha deems it selfish for a woman to have a child in order to prevent loneliness in old age. This usage suggests that the selfish tag (once routinely applied to the childless) is now increasingly being applied to people who decide to have children for the “wrong” reasons. Certainly the increasingly vocal “childless by choice” or “childfree” movements argue that parents are “selfish,” although interestingly their justifications for these claims – that children use up the earth’s scarce resources and parents use a disproportionate amount of tax-payer social resources - differ from the reasons given by women in the study (Cannold & Moore, 1999; Childfree Association, 1999; Childless by Choice, 1999; Griffin, 1999; Life Matters, 1999; McIntosh, 1999; No Kidding, 1999).

For some women, the lack of socially normative reasons to have children and their awareness that the requirements of parenthood compromise current socially endorsed values – like independence, freedom, career advancement - lead them to conclude that parenthood is an “irrational” choice to make. There are three points to make about this. The first is that in the face of their belief that late-end Baby Boomers and the women of Generation X (Lumby, 1997; Marshall & Wetherell, 1989; McKenna, 1997; Wicks & Mishra, 1998).
having children was irrational, a number of women relied on their understanding of their biological femaleness – their “hormones,” “clocks” or “drives” - to make sense of their desire to mother. Their reliance on biological explanations for their desires and behaviour refers to mainstream beliefs, echoed by sociobiologists, that the human “animal” is controlled by their Darwinian desire to propagate the “species” in order to survive. It also calls on understandings of human biology as timeless and unmalleable, particularly by social attitudes or circumstance (Grosz, 1999; Lowe & Hubbard, 1984). Thus, some women argue that their Darwinian drive to procreate overpowers their socially derived understanding that having children is going, to quote Sharon, “screw up” their “comfortable existence.” However, their conclusions that their biology “made them do it” is not supported by the data. Instead, the data suggest the powerful influence social knowledge and circumstance has on the existence and timing of their desires regarding children.

The second point is that in historical terms, the need for women to make decisions about motherhood – rational or otherwise – is new. It is only because modern-day women have the access to safe, effective contraception and widely accept the hard-fought feminist contention that womanhood does not equal motherhood, that they have a real choice about motherhood. The data suggest that with such a choice comes the demand that those who choose it have good or rational reasons for doing so.
The third point is that not only do many women in the study believe their desire to have children was irrational, the increasingly high profile “childless by choice” or “childfree” also argues that this is the case. It may be that in contrast to traditional cultures, in modern western societies it is childbearing itself, rather than the pregnant women, that is “liminal.” This liminality may have been brought about by the newfound definition of motherhood as a choice and the increasing difficulty women in individualistic/consumerist Western cultures have articulating “good” reasons to choose it.

In the preceding chapters of this thesis, I have explored the social attitudes and circumstances that have contributed to many women’s circumstantial childlessness. In the concluding chapter, I explore the implications of these findings for the future of motherhood.
Chapter 11

Conclusion: The Freedom To Choose Motherhood and Childlessness

Whether or not the predicted rise in childlessness materializes, it remains clear that most people still expect and want to have children.

Martha McMahon, 1995

Traditional households and childless workers will retain an advantage over those who would try to combine committed work with involved parenthood until parenthood is defined as a right and not just a privilege of all workers, regardless of gender.

Kathleen Gerson, 1985

Unchecked, radical individualism has produced a society in which people are unable to sustain relationships or look after their young. This is no longer “just a particular set of choices, but a social pathology.” We can’t have our cake and eat it: unlimited choice and uncluttered freedom get in the way of family strength and community well-being.

Sylvia Hewlett and Cornell West, 1998

11.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In this thesis I have sought to reveal the impact social attitudes and structures have on individual women’s fertility decisions. The data suggest that a complete
understanding of the phenomenon of fertile childlessness requires the recognition of circumstantial as well as chosen childlessness.

Following Gerson (1985), I have posited women's decision-making as the outcome of the choices they make in constrained circumstances. Fertility levels are declining in most Western nations. Such declines are commonly attributed to a rise in numbers of women who “choose” to have only one child or none at all. The current data suggest that at least some childless women are not choosing (as this word is commonly understood in individualistic western cultures) not to have children. Rather circumstances, like their failure to partner with Mr (wants to have children) Right or the incompatibility of their current identity and job with the practical and ideological demands of motherhood, lead them to decide to delay childbearing, or to avoid it altogether. A woman’s baseline orientation toward motherhood – the place, durability and stability motherhood plays in a woman’s imagined future and identity – influences the degree to which such circumstances impact on her fertility decisions. Her view of how she ought to mother (and therefore how much conflict there might be between these values and her current identity and values around relationships and work), and whether motherhood makes sense according to her own values and those of the society in which she lives also impact on her childbearing decisions.
While the sample fails to meet (both in methods of sample selection and size) quantitative standards for statistical reliability, corroboration for the major findings can be found in demographic research and in more critical readings of existing smaller-scale psychological and sociological studies of the “voluntary” childless. The former studies demonstrate that declining fertility - women having fewer children than they otherwise might have had or none at all – can be correlated with the degree of attitudinal and structural support a society gives to parents. In societies where such social support is high, fertility is relatively high. In societies where little support exists, fertility is relatively low. These studies suggest that when a society reduces the direct and opportunity costs women bear in becoming mothers, women’s freedom to achieve the family size they desire increases.

11.2 MOTHERHOOD IN THE FUTURE

The data suggest that the place, durability and stability of motherhood in women’s imagined futures and identities determines their baseline orientation towards motherhood. The childbearing desires and decisions of women with relatively “independent” baselines, those who are childless by choice or thwarted mothers, appear less vulnerable to the influence of idiosyncratic and structural circumstances than those of women whose baselines are more contingent. The childbearing desires and decisions of women with more contingent baselines, women childless by relationship and waiters and watchers, appear more sensitive to idiosyncratic and structural circumstances. This suggests the possibility, in need of further investigation, that the fertility
decisions of women with more contingent baselines are more likely to fluctuate in response to the amount of social support their society offers to parents. This fluctuation may result from the greater ease with which women with more contingent baselines are able to reconfigure their vague imagined futures and identities as mothers to imagined futures and identities as childless women.

While it was beyond the focus on the current study to investigate the source of women’s baseline orientations – i.e. why some women had stable, durable, and independent commitments to either childlessness or motherhood and others did not – the data does provide some clues. As other studies have shown, women who were among the eldest in larger families or who were only children were well represented among the childless by choice. Current fertility patterns suggest that in the future families will be smaller, suggesting that while less women may orient towards childlessness as a consequence of being an elder sibling in a large family, more may do so as a consequence of being an only child. Witnessing their own mother’s oppression as a consequence of bearing and raising children alone or with little assistance from male partners was also common among women oriented towards childlessness. Women’s changing work and fertility patterns, and the increased participation of at least some men in domestic life (Baxter & Western, 1997; Edgar, 1997; Lewin, 1998), suggest that in the future less women will orient towards childlessness as a consequence of witnessing – as girls and young women - their own mother’s domestic isolation and oppression.
At the same time, however, women are developing their orientation towards motherhood in a world increasingly antagonistic - attitudinally and structurally - towards motherhood. Reasons for becoming a mother, to express and confirm adult feminine identity, to hold a relationship together and/or to create or strengthen family bonds, have lost their social currency and new normative reasons for parenting have failed to take their place. Instead, the data suggest that in the face of women’s increasing realisation that their values and identity as modern-day women are in direct conflict with the maternal values and identity, some women are concluding that motherhood is an irrational choice to make. All these changes may lead to a future in which increasing numbers of women orient towards childlessness or whose orientation towards motherhood is less independent and more ambivalent and contingent. Such women’s fertility rates may, as suggested above, be more responsive to social structures antagonistic to parenthood. This means that in the future there may be more women likely to respond to social conditions antagonistic to parenthood by delaying motherhood, deciding to have fewer children, or deciding to have none at all.

The role of women’s imagined futures and identities in their childbearing desires and decisions also suggest that it is not women’s instincts, drives, hormones or clocks that are behind their desire to mother or to remain childless. Instead, the content, durability and stability of their imagined futures and identities – as
mothers or childless women – determines both the existence and strength of their desire to mother.

11.3 WOMEN’S CHILDBEARING DECISIONS IN A DIFFERENT WORLD

How might the childbearing decisions of the women in this study have differed had they been made in societies with attitudes and structures equally supportive of women’s freedom to choose as well as to avoid motherhood? To conduct this speculation, I return to the lives and decision-making conducted by women discussed at the end of Chapter 4. Before doing this, however, it is necessary to stress that such an exercise is purely speculative. It is impossible to know how any particular woman might have responded to different social attitudes and circumstances and how those responses would have impacted on her childbearing decisions. However, the findings of this thesis (findings corroborated by demographic studies) suggest that some women’s decisions would have been altered had they met with different social circumstances. Specifically, they suggest that in societies with attitudes and structures supportive of parenthood, women are freer to choose parenthood, and more consequently do so. To make such a suggestion more concrete, I have sought to provide some examples of how more supportive social attitudes and circumstances might have led women with different baseline orientations to make different decisions about motherhood.
11.3.1 Childless by choice

Both Rachel and Deborah’s ongoing commitment to remaining childlessness is largely independent of the social circumstances they encounter, although early circumstance played an important role in establishing both women’s baseline orientations towards chosen childlessness. While there is one point in Rachel’s story, and several in Deborah’s, where different circumstances may have led them to consider having children, these points are rare and uncertain. Even if Donald’s siblings had not had children, it is far from certain that Rachel would have consented to having a child in order to supply her in-laws with grandchildren. Even if Deborah’s husband had consented to her offer to have a child to save their marriage, it is unclear whether she would have actually gone through with having a baby given her longstanding desire to remain childless. It is also uncertain whether if Deborah had met the right man he would have kindled in her a desire to mother.

Instead, these women’s commitment to childlessness tended to shape the way they negotiated the social circumstances they encountered, rather than the other way around. Rachel and Deborah’s first order commitment to childlessness shaped, for example, the partnerships in which they were willing to engage and/or those they were willing to pursue in the long-term. It is thus hard to imagine that even if Rachel and Deborah had forged their life paths in societies attitudinally and structurally supportive of motherhood, that the decisions they made about motherhood would have been substantially different.
Chapter 11

Conclusion: The Freedom To Choose Motherhood and Childlessness

11.3.2 Childless by relationship

The vague part motherhood played in their imagined futures and identities led circumstance to play an important role in both Kelly’s and Sharon’s decisions to remain childless. They led them, for instance, to choose male partners with no regard to these men’s childbearing attitudes and desires. Had both women married men who wanted children, it is likely that both would have become mothers. Gerson’s work suggests that men’s attitudes towards fatherhood are also the outcome of interactions between their individual biographies and social structures (Gerson, 1993). This suggests that Ivan and Martin may have been more likely to have come to their marriages with positive or neutral attitudes about fatherhood if they had been raised and lived their adult lives in societies with supportive attitudes and structures around childbearing. A more ambivalent or pro-paternity Ivan may, for example, have decided to support Kelly’s desire to have a child, rather than encourage and reinforce her anxieties and reservations about motherhood. On the other hand, Ivan may have been a childless “independent;” his desire and decisions about fatherhood maintained relatively independently of social attitudes and structures regarding parenthood. However, while it is impossible to know how different social attitudes and circumstances would have impacted on either Ivan or Martin’s childbearing attitudes and desires, it seems likely that it would contribute to a greater number of men having less antagonistic or even more supportive attitudes towards childbearing than is currently the case. This, in turn, would be likely to contribute to greater number of women whose decisions about motherhood are contingent.
on the attitudes and desires of their partners – women like Kelly and Sharon - to decide in favour of motherhood.

Alternately, more women with antagonistic or indifferent partners might choose to pursue motherhood if they felt they could access and/or afford socially approved means of sharing the childcare burden. If Kelly had access to her own parents, friends, neighbours, a nanny and/or centre-based care with whom to share the care of her child and could do so without suffering financial hardship or social disapproval, she might have decided to have a child despite Ivan’s stated unwillingness to provide meaningful assistance. Again, while it is impossible to know what Kelly might have decided in a world where such options were available, it is possible to imagine that some women might decide to have children with a reluctant partner if they could access and afford other socially approved forms of assistance.

A less tangible source of social support are normative views that decisions to parent are “good,” “rational,” and or “make sense.” Thus, while Sharon knew she wanted to mother, she believed she should not have had this desire because it was “irrational.” While Sharon’s confusion about why she wants to

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31 Beck and Beck-Gernsheim suggest the reason most women cannot count on extended family and community support is that the changing patterns of employment in post-industrial societies mean the “perfect employee fits in with the job requirements [and is] prepared to move on whenever necessary” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 6). They argue that such patterns are toxic to the strength, functionality and very existence of all sorts of relationships.
mother and her belief that motherhood and modern day values were incompatible did not appear to have altered her desire and pursuit of motherhood, the absence of socially endorsed “rational” reasons to choose parenthood may contribute to some women’s decisions to delay or to avoid motherhood.

11.3.3 Thwarted mothers

Although both Kylie and Karla had an independent commitment to motherhood, circumstance features significantly in their childbearing decisions. Kylie has delayed her entrance into motherhood until she fashions an employment situation that will enable her to meet traditional standards of good motherhood. If her faith holds in the capacity of home-based work to provide that solution, and she is able to organise challenging well-paid work from home, she may adhere to her decision to begin attempts to conceive next year. If she loses faith in home-based work as a solution or is unable to organise suitable work, she may delay motherhood further. This may lead her to become one of the women demographic studies suggest wind up having no children or fewer children than they desire as a consequence of delay. This would happen either because she had her first child so late that she became menopausal prior to reaching her desired family size or because once she had a child, she was so overwhelmed by the difficulties of working motherhood that she decided to delay or forgo having any more children.
Both women sought the right men with whom to have children, but (thus far) only Kylie has had success. Karla is lucky because she feels she can count on both financial and practical assistance from her parents to raise her baby. However, despite her concerns about age related infertility, Karla’s pursuit of single motherhood is impeded, among other things, by her knowledge that her family and others would disapprove of her pursuing motherhood independently and her ignorance about how she might go about becoming pregnant and making a suitable emotional and financial arrangement with the biological father. Such difficulties, which also dogged Shaney’s pursuit of motherhood (see Chapters 4 and 8), have exerted a considerable drag on the momentum of Karla’s pursuit of motherhood and may eventually lead Karla to have less children than she wants or to have no children at all.

It is possible that if Karla lived in a society that provided attitudinal and material support to all women who wanted to become mothers, her entrance into motherhood may not have been delayed. In a society where single motherhood was not stigmatised, Karla’s parents may have been less likely to have urged Karla, as a child and an adult, to only mother in the context of marriage. Karla may also have been more knowledgeable (through the experiences of others she knows and official information channels) about her options in regard to having and raising a child on her own: options that would be both accessible
and affordable. While Karla’s response to such changed social circumstances can not be predicted, it might be expected that social support for single motherhood and ease of access to information and resources to achieve it would increase the number of women who would decide to pursue motherhood alone.

11.3.4 Waiters and watchers

Both Martine and Jacinta are ambivalent and undecided about motherhood, but committed to their careers. This led social circumstance to play a critical role in their decision-making around motherhood. Their commitment to their careers appeared to heighten both women’s awareness of the profound conflicts working parents experience in both Australia and North America. In Jacinta’s case, Ronald’s willingness to take on the responsibilities of a traditional “wife” resolved her conflict about becoming a mother. But while increasing numbers of men are willing to shoulder some proportion of the childcare burden while women take on the responsibility of primary wage earner, these families remain in the minority. More importantly, such men are likely to be confront the same problems as women in such roles; like social isolation and financial dependence. In addition, many men struggle to overcome their early

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32 Among the options not currently available to Australian women like Karla are access to affordable assisted reproductive techniques (these programs are expensive and only those in New South Wales allow access to single women) and generous pensions for single mothers.

33 In Britain, nearly one third of men provide primary care for their children (Edgar, 1997). Recent US figures show that 25 of married women are the primary wage earners. This figure was only 15.9 per cent in 1981 (Various, 1998, 43).
socialisation that their primary role in the family is as the main breadwinner, and some report that they are ostracised by the mostly women they encounter at places like playgroups and doing volunteer work at school (Various, 1998, 47).

It is possible that if both Martine and Jacinta had observed the parents around them having less difficulty managing the responsibilities of parenthood, this would have altered their own desires and decisions regarding motherhood. Again, the impact of such changes are likely to be the most profound for the waiters and watchers because their ambivalent and undecided orientation towards motherhood leads them to take note of the negative experiences of the mothers around them and to place a high value on paid employment. What if the fathers that Martine knew were happily sharing the responsibility for breadwinning and childcare with their partners? What if the stay-at-home mothers Jacinta knew from her street were less isolated and “dumpy,” and the working mothers at her place of employment less stressed and conflicted? What if there was less stress on couples when a new baby arrived because new parents were entitled to extended paid parental leave and, when it expired, part-time hours until the child reached school age? What if new parents could count on assistance from family and friends who lived nearby and were less taxed themselves by the demands of meeting their own work and family obligations? While the decisions Martine and Jacinta might have made in response to supportive social attitudes and structures can not be known, it is possible that such attitudinal and structural changes would lead more women waiting and watching to decide in favour of motherhood.
11.4 CIRCUMSTANTIAL CHILDLESSNESS: A FEMINIST ISSUE?

Australian feminist groups have argued that the policies of the conservative Howard government – like removing the subsidies for child care services – are designed to put women back behind the “white picket fence” (Women's Electoral Lobby Australia, 1999). It appears that some Australian mothers have indeed understood the intent of these policies to be to encourage them to stay at home (Finzel, 1998). Yet when forced to choose between motherhood and work, increasing numbers of women are likely to choose the latter (Goward, 1998). Ironically then, the very policies that may succeed in forcing some working mothers to reluctantly abandon their jobs and return home to care for their children may be the same ones that ensure there are fewer mothers in the future to force back into traditional roles.

The data challenge frequently made assertions that Australian and North American societies are “pro-natalist.” Instead, like other recent research in the area, it suggests that most women see childlessness and motherhood as options with equivalent social standing. That this is the case is a tribute to the influence of second-wave feminism on female values, identity and the female life course. The influence of feminism is also made apparent in women’s desire to qualify their expressions of desire for a stable long-term relationship with the assertion that they were not “desperate” or unable to “make their own lives” without a man.
Indeed, the Australian media’s consistent suggestion (Arndt, 1997; Australia Talks Back, 2000a; McIntosh, 1998) that hordes of women are abandoning relationships with men to pursue single motherhood via sperm donation may be understood as part of the infamous feminist backlash (Faludi, 1991). Such portrayals often seem designed to stir up male anxiety that women’s primary interest in them is no longer as husbands or fathers but as sperm donors (Cannold, 1998b). However, the data suggest that even women highly committed to motherhood are willing to delay pursuing motherhood alone - and thus risk age related infertility - in order to avoid giving up their dream of “the whole package.” This is not to say that a significant gap has not opened up in the last thirty years between what women want (and are now in a financial position to demand) and what men are willing and able to provide (Dennis, 1992; Edgar, 1997; Morton, 1997). However, the current study supports other research data that suggests it is this gap, rather than women’s disinterest in partnering, that is behind some women’s delayed or failed partnering efforts (Birrell & Rapson, 1998).

It is imperative that feminists recognise the phenomenon of circumstantial childlessness, differentiating it from childlessness resulting from choice and from infertility. Feminist researchers have a responsibility to ensure their research findings accurately reflect women’s experience and understandings of their lives. The conclusions researchers draw from their data often (and rightly) serves as the basis for feminist theory. If these conclusions do not accurately reflect women’s experiences, the theory that will be generated from them will fail
to be connected, and thus relevant to, women’s lives. Moreover, accuracy honours the trust women who participate in such research place in researchers: trust that their lives will be described as they are, not as researchers want or believe they “should” be.

Naming circumstantial childlessness is also a necessary first step to redressing the attitudinal and social circumstances that constrain some women’s freedom to choose childlessness. A problem must be named before it can be addressed. Moreover, the way it is named will determine the types of redress that will be deemed appropriate.

11.5 WAYS FORWARD

If the problem is that women want to compete in the workforce on equal footing with men, and motherhood gets in the way of their doing that then, in the absence of a comprehensive social net of services to support working parents, it makes sense for women to avoid motherhood and for feminists to support that choice. While feminists should – and many currently do – push for such a social net, such demands clash with liberal views of parenthood as an individual choice and thus children as the sole responsibility of individual parents. In addition, the extensive hourly demands of corporate Australian and North America has seen some feminists call for extended childcare hours and support individual solutions to the work/family conflict (like nannies) only available to wealthy women. Unless and until feminist calls for better social provision like
childcare be made for working parents, however, motherhood will continue to constitute an extreme sacrifice for the majority of women, requiring a woman to abandon for a considerable period of time both her individual identity and her employment ambitions. Consequently motherhood will continue to be seen by many women as an irrational choice.

Defining the problem as the State’s lack of support of the desire of men and women to have children and share the work of raising them with one another and society as a whole suggests a different approach. This definition, which challenges the libertarian emphasis on enhancing individual choice by removing external constraints (Hewlett & West, 1998), assumes that this form of liberalism can go too far, degenerating – to quote Michael Lerner – into selfishness and materialism (Hewlett & West, 1998, p. 96). It contends that that children are not just the responsibility of their parents but also of the State, that decisions to have children are socially situated rather than the outcome of idiosyncratic choice and that the State must support the reproductive freedom of its citizens both to avoid and to pursue parenthood. There is no tension between such a philosophy and welfare feminist demands that the State support the right of parents to choose by providing, for instance, heavily subsidised workplace-based quality childcare, extensive non-means tested coverage of family allowances with special allowances for single mothers and
tax systems that are not punitive to the earnings of second earner.\textsuperscript{34} In this scenario, social rather than individual solutions to the work/family crunch are emphasised and men and women’s interests (as prospective and actual parents) in achieving family-friendly work provisions are seen to be aligned rather than in competition with one another (Roiphe, 1996). \textsuperscript{35} Children are also seen to benefit and therefore to be the partial responsibility of the State. Feminist demands for an official eight-hour working day for all workers, for job-sharing and career track part-time work would implicitly challenge the exclusive mental commitment and excessive hours demanded by Australian and North American corporate culture (Cannold, 1999b). The focus here would be on liberating all workers, in particular parents, rather than on resolving the problem children pose to women’s participation in the existing workforce on an equal footing with men. Such attitudinal and policy changes would be likely to reduce women and men’s perception that childbearing is irrational given the practical demands and normative values of the society in which they live. Underlying this

\textsuperscript{34} Cross-cultural demographic analyses have demonstrated the positive impact such policies have on fertility rates (Chesnais, 1996; Finzel, 1999; McDonald, 1997). For instance, the fertility rate of the former German Democratic Republic declined by fifty per cent in the space of only two years after the country’s highly socialized family protection system was abolished after reunification in 1990. Finzel, E. (1999). “Equality” for women and the responsibility for rearing young children in the former German Democratic Republic., \textit{Annual Postgraduate Students’ Conference, The University of Melbourne}. Melbourne: unpublished.


\textsuperscript{35} The view that men and women are in competition rather than on the same side when it comes to family friendly work arrangements was most recently evidenced in government and media discussions of men’s and women’s relative access to teleworking provisions. The greater access of “executive men” to these family-friendly provisions relative to women of childbearing age was interpreted to mean that the workers who really needed such provisions to balance their work/family responsibilities – namely mothers – were being denied access relative to workers (namely fathers) who did not need such family-friendly provisions (See Chapter 7).
focus would be an acceptance of what most large and small scale studies suggest, that most people would eventually like to couple and to have children but that social policies that make the cost of childbearing too high constrain their freedom to make this choice and result in circumstantial childlessness.

It should not be surprising that many feminists have come to accept the former definition of the problem. Libertarian rather than welfare feminist understandings of choice undergird both Australian and North American societies and perhaps relatedly, mainstream feminist discourse on the nature of and solutions to the work/family crunch. Labelling childlessness (and indeed any social behaviour) as chosen validates it as “normal.” However, it also defines it as an individual preference rather than a social “problem” that may be in need of political action and (sometimes costly) social redress. One reading of the history of the Women’s Movement would suggest that defining both motherhood and childlessness as a choice has effected a compromise – however uneasy – between different factions of the women’s movement, as well as reduced the tension between the Movement and those mothering women alienated by the early “demon texts” and the on-going perception that feminism only cares about working women (Cannold, 2000b; Seidenman, 2000).

The effectiveness of this strategy, however, can be questioned. The current study is not alone in suggesting that despite the women’s movement emphasis on reproductive “choice” some women still associate feminism with anti-
maternalism (Albury, 1999; Bulbeck, 1997; Seidenman, 2000). Some feminist mothers and voluntarily childless feminists have also not been persuaded of the neutrality of the rhetoric of choice. Recently, numerous high profile feminists have criticised the women’s movement for failing to reconcile with motherhood and to actively struggle to improve the lot of working mothers (Bagnall, 1996; Denfield, 1995; Roiphe, 1996). At the same time, voluntarily childless women speak of being abandoned by a “maternalist” woman’s movement (Morell, 1994; Snitow, 1992). They have recently been joined by disgruntled childless by choice activists angry about tax breaks for families and the use of childless tax dollars to subsidise schools, hospitals and other public infrastructure and services not used or used less intensively by the childless than those with children (Fost, 1996; No Kidding, 1999). It may be that it is impossible for the women’s movement to support any policy or service that supports women’s choice to pursue motherhood or childlessness (childcare and abortion, for example) without appearing, at least to some constituents, to be blessing one particular choice at the expense of the other.

There are two solutions to this problem. The first, as alluded to briefly above, is for the movement to “take sides” and either support voluntary childlessness in line with a libertarian feminist perspective or to support parenthood in line with a more liberatory welfare feminist approach. The second is for a new mixed-gender political organisation to take up the fight for a more liberated and family friendly society. While far more research and reflection would be necessary to conclude which approach would be better suited to furthering the aims of both
women and parents as particular interest groups, I have argued elsewhere that the second approach may have advantages both for the women’s movement, and for working mothers. Hiving the fight for a more family friendly society off to group particularly dedicated to achieving those ends would free the women’s movement from seeking to negotiate a stance on parenting and childlessness that doesn’t offend or alienate any of the diverse women that comprise its constituency. It would also free up resources in the women’s movement to fight unquestionably gender-based issues like equal pay, sexual harassment and glass ceilings. Mothers and potential mothers would not only have a movement solely dedicated to furthering their family-friendly aims, but it would be a far broader-based movement than if it was conducted under the umbrella of the women’s movement; able to comfortably accommodate the interests of working fathers and potential fathers and stay-at-home parents interested in more family-friendly provisions for their employed partner (Cannold, 2000b).

Parenthood is harder for a society to support than childlessness. But there are numerous arguments that can be made in favour of social support for parents and children. For demographers, those arguments revolve around the social disruption caused by rapidly declining fertility levels, and the costs to existing parents and children of the resulting loss of infrastructure supportive of children and families (see, for example, McDonald, 1997). Some feminists, both conservative and liberal, have argued in favour of motherhood for reasons that range from the belief that the mother-child relationships is a paradigm for pro-social behaviour (Griffin, 1981; Ruddick, 1989) to contentions that
childlessness, and the libertarian philosophy that supports it, downplays connections between people and encourages selfishness and materialism (Hewlett & West, 1998). But the most compelling reason for all feminists to support motherhood (whether through traditional feminist or a parent specific organisations) is the longstanding feminist recognition that reproductive rights – like all human rights - are central to women’s dignity and freedom (Cooper, 2000 #551; Reproductive Freedom News,1996; Center for Population and Family Health, 1995 #552).

Women are entitled to the freedom to decide when and whether to mother. Significant feminist effort has gone into fighting laws and policies that constrain women’s freedom to avoid motherhood, and into ensuring the availability of the products and services necessary for women to put their decisions not to mother into effect. This effort was right and necessary, and the freedoms most women now exercise in Australia and North America to avoid or to terminate unwanted pregnancies have been hard fought and remain in contention.

But in post-industrial Australia and North America, it may be that the biggest threats many women of childbearing age perceive and experience are to their freedom to choose, not to avoid, motherhood. These threats are not largely the result of legal/policy restrictions on women’s freedom to become and remain pregnant (although some groups of women do face such difficulties) but the consequence of a lack of positive attitudinal and structural support for all
parents, and working parents in particular. Petchesky argues that it is these “social and material conditions” that ought concern feminists, not the “context of women’s choices, or even the `right to choose’”(Petchesky, 1985, 11). The constraining influence of social and material conditions on women’s reproductive freedom is rightly a source of feminist concern and anger, regardless of whether the outcomes of such constraints are forced motherhood or forced childlessness.
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