POWELL, RACHEL ELAINE. “It Was the Single Most Important Decision in My Life”: The Use of Liberal Feminist Accounts among Childfree Women. (Under the direction of Sinikka Elliott.)

In contemporary Western societies, the percentage of childfree women is increasing. As women’s participation in the paid workforce has changed, and as women continue to do more unpaid labor in the home than men, some women are choosing to remain childfree. Yet choosing to remain childfree disrupts a normative life path for women, one that continues to include motherhood. In this paper, I draw on interviews I conducted with 17 white, middle-class women invested in education and careers who have chosen to remain childfree. I examine the pressures they face to have children and the accounts they offer to others to explain their childfree status. I find that their accounts reflect a mainstream liberal feminist ideology. Drawing on liberal feminism to account for their childfree status, the women appeal to their investments in education and careers, both of which are highly respected in the U.S. Their accounts also include not seeing motherhood as fulfilling, feeling proud to have made a decision about their own fertility and feeling entitled to self-fulfillment, and not feeling able to work and mother simultaneously. Yet the women find that others do not entirely accept these accounts and still expect them to participate in the normative life path for women. That is, they are still sanctioned for not becoming mothers. Throughout the analysis, I discuss why liberal feminism appeals to these women and how it is reflected in their accounts. In addition, I discuss the shortcomings of such an approach, namely that liberal feminism encourages women to use an individualistic approach to negotiate gender inequality rather than a collective approach to challenge it.
“It Was the Single Most Important Decision in My Life”: The Use of Liberal Feminist Accounts among Childfree Women

by
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Science

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DEDICATION

For Michelle, who “encouraged” me to attend graduate school.

Thank you for reminding me that I can work through anything
and for bravely living as an authentic example of that process.
BIOGRAPHY

Originally from Eunice, Louisiana, Rachel attended Centenary College of Louisiana in Shreveport as an undergraduate, where she took classes with Michelle Wolkomir. Michelle promptly challenged Rachel to throw away her rigid life plans in favor of a more flexible learning experience, which eventually led her to graduate school. As an undergraduate, Rachel was a member of the first ever Soulforce Equality Ride (at Michelle’s urging), which, in addition to teaching her about the process of social change, taught her the value of committing to study that process and striving to create new knowledge. Rachel’s advanced studies at North Carolina State University reinforce these values. She resides in Raleigh with her three beloved cats and her partner, Clark (who is kind enough to oblige when Rachel frequently exclaims, “Look quickly! One of the cats is doing something really cute!”). Her areas of concentration in sociology are family and inequality with particular interests in gender, sexuality, symbolic interactionism, and Marxist-feminist theory.
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Introduction

In contemporary Western societies, the percentage of childless and childfree women is increasing (Gillespie 2000), surging from 10 percent in 1976 to almost 20 percent in 1995 (Hird and Abshoff 2000:351). As the gender division of labor in the home and the paid workforce have changed, women are both delaying the age of childbirth (with some later finding they can no longer conceive) and choosing to remain childfree (Gillespie 2003). While there have always been women without children, the number of women who will never have children is higher than it ever has been (Hird and Abshoff 2000).

Until recently, white, middle-class women generally had one normative life path: marry, become mothers, and tend to house, husband, and children (Thistle 2006). When women began to enter the work force in greater numbers, the normative path opened up to include working. Though women’s labor force participation has changed dramatically—now, almost half of the workforce consists of women (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009)—the educational and occupational structures that women have entered into have not (Mason and Ekman 2007). The ideal worker is still seen as the unencumbered individual, and the ideal mother is still seen as the woman whose primary obligation is family rather than work. Because school and work have been added to family life rather than replacing family life in a normative life path, many women are getting crushed by the “second shift” that comes from having both a family and a career (Hochschild 1997).

As a result of new opportunities for women, women are told they can “have it all.” Yet Peggy Orenstein documents in Flux (2000) that many women—particularly white,
middle-class women who are likely to enter time-consuming white-collar careers rather than jobs—believe that “having it all” is not a practical goal. Rather, high-achieving women find themselves in a double bind: they often believe that they must postpone marriage and childbearing to invest in an education and a career, and they fear that having children means they will need to quit their jobs, reduce their workload to part-time, or take a demotion.

As the decisions play out, the choices are not so stark—many high-achieving women have children while continuing to work full-time. Yet as these women continue to try to “have it all,” the job structure has not changed significantly enough to accommodate middle-class women’s new found demands (Budig and England 2001). The onus is largely placed on women to determine how to structure their work and family lives in a way that is realistic. Increasingly, some women are becoming childfree to avoid the double-bind. That is, women are choosing not to have children in favor of having a career.

Are these childfree women creating a new normative path for adult womanhood? In other words, is it now acceptable for women to only have a career and not have children? In this paper, I interview 17 white, middle-class, childfree women to answer this question. These women are investing or have invested in higher education and professional careers. I show that these women are asked by friends and relatives to give accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968) for their childfree status, an indication that women are still expected to have children rather than forgoing them. I then show how the kinds of accounts women give are indicative of the current gender order. What I find is that their accounts are shaped by and perpetuate a liberal feminist ideology. The prevalence of liberal feminism in their accounts makes sense,
given that liberal feminism has been incorporated in mainstream ideology in the U.S. While liberal feminism has resulted in many gains for women, it is not a revolutionary ideology that fundamentally challenges the gender order (Lorber 1994) or the capitalist workforce. Its ability to protect childfree women by giving them accounts simultaneously encourages an individualistic approach to negotiating the double bind and narrows women’s vision about gender equality.

“Childfree” Versus “Childless”

In discussing women without children and their experiences, researchers often have a tendency to call them all “childless” women. This term may be pragmatic, as it is indeed easier and shorter to say “childless women” than “women without children,” and an alternative to “women without children” avoids repetition of that phrase. However, the word “childless” carries with it a negative connotation and implies that women without children are sadly missing something (children), leaving them unfulfilled. For that reason, women who do not want children and do not feel that their fulfillment depends on the existence of their “own” children prefer to use the term “childfree” to describe themselves, as do feminist researchers when talking about them (Gillespie 2003). Since the sample for this study consists entirely of women who have chosen (at least for now) to prevent pregnancy and live without children, and because language can reproduce gender inequality or promote gender equality, I employ the “childfree” designation. Many of the interviewees also referred to themselves in this way.
Childfree Women in Context: When Women Become Workers

While there have always been women without children in Western societies, the number of women without children in the U.S. has been steadily increasing. Noting that the rate of childlessness (including those who are childfree and those who are involuntarily childless) increased from 10 percent in 1976 to almost 20 percent in 1995, Hird and Abshoff (2000) theorize that both “childhood” and “motherhood” as we romanticize them now are relatively new concepts in our society. Up until the early 20th century, marriages were primarily economic arrangements and children were economic assets. Men needed and controlled women’s domestic labor, as women cooked, cleaned, bore children, laundered, and produced necessary items like soaps. Children were an important source of labor, so women’s work in child bearing and rearing was important to the household economy (Thistle 2006).

Only recently has marriage become about choice, love, and sentiment (Coontz 2005), and now that children are not economic assets, children have come to be seen as precious and as “psychosocial contributions” to families (Hird and Abshoff 2000:350). When children (i.e., heirs) were tied to political and economic realms, men had a vested interest in reproduction, because resources (wealth and power, among others) were at stake. Now, children are not as tied to those things, so men’s interest in reproduction has decreased. Yet men still have some resources at stake that made it desirable to keep women tied to the home—elite men have an interest in eliminating competition for their jobs and in maintaining dominance over women. Since men no longer had economic reasons to have children (since
children cost rather than generated income), and since women are the only members of the species who can have children, men created *ideological* reasons to have children. While fatherhood has shifted from a social role to a biological role, motherhood has shifted from a biological role to a social role. Thus, what Park (2002) calls “pronatalist” discourse emerged in the 1980s.¹

As Park defines it, “pronatalist” discourse, primarily directed at white, middle-class women, defines childbirth/childrearing as good for “individual, family, and social well-being,” emphasizes that motherhood is natural and central to a woman’s identity, positions motherhood as a patriotic and eugenic obligation, and identifies childbearing/rearing with women’s reason and emotions (2002:22). Gillespie (2000) discerned some social institutions that espouse “pronatalist” discourse. Religion, for instance, mandates reproduction and often confers a divine mandate upon women to rear children and keep peace in the home. Political perspectives, especially those of the New Right, have served to reinforce these religious edicts. Modern science, by providing new technologies that enhance women’s ability to conceive (e.g., in vitro fertilization), underscores the importance of women having biological children. In other words, “pronatalist” discourse is enmeshed in powerful institutions.

What is clear, then, is that the discourse is not actually “pro children.” That is, it is less about children and more about policing women (especially in the context of a society where poor children, working-class children, and black and brown children are often not treated as well as white middle- and upper-class children). “Pronatalist” is a bit of a

¹ The 1980s was not the first time this discourse had been employed—in the 1800s, for example, the eugenics movement used “pronatalist” discourse as a reaction against a growing immigrant population (Mohr 1978).
misnomer for the discourse. The importance of the discourse lies in the dimension that
esentializes women by referencing a past in which women’s primary livelihood was through
marriage and the family. The discourse mandates motherhood and creates a venue for
stigmatizing women who do not have, and do not want to have, children.

As noted above, the discourse is primarily directed at white, middle-class women.
Black, poor, and working-class women have all worked outside the home long before white,
middle-class women’s rush to the labor force (hooks 2000). Though black women’s
employment has not concerned elites to the same extent that white women’s employment
has, conservative elites have typically been very concerned with black, poor, and working-
class women’s fertility. Eugenics movements were based on the belief that these women
were the “wrong” type to reproduce, while wealthy white women were the “right” type
(Luker 1984). The new discourse, then, is specifically directed at white, middle-class women
since they pose a new challenge by abstaining from reproducing at the same rates they were
before 1970.

By the 1960s, white, middle-class women were entering the workforce in greater
numbers than they had before. With the invention of birth control pills, women could delay
their fertility by a few years and work instead of stay home. Once they had children (as most
did) who went off to school, many women found themselves bored at home (Friedan 1963).
With new technology for cleaning and maintaining the home, the women did not have to
spend as many hours as they used to taking care of the house. The women who worked
generally liked it and found they wanted to continue doing so, but by and large, women’s work was not yet an economic necessity for white, middle-class families (Thistle 2006).

By the 1980s, the economy was in poor condition. As the shift from a manufacturing economy to a service economy began to take place, men found that their family wages disappeared and support programs for women and children, like Aid to Families with Dependent Children (welfare), were cut by the Reagan administration and subsequently cut further by the Clinton administration (Hays 2003). These changes drove even greater numbers of women, particularly mothers, into the workforce. By the early 2000s, more than 70 percent of women in their prime adult years [were] employed, and most mothers return[ed] to work before their child [was] 1 year old. All in all, today’s young women will spend more years of their life in the workforce than in marriage, and more hours of their day at a job than in unpaid labors of love for their families (Thistle 2006:114).

In addition to working outside the home, women now receive less support for the work they do in the home. Even welfare, since the 1996 reform, includes a “work first” provision (Hays 2003). As state support, lifelong marriage, and the family wage have dwindled, more women have turned to work, many postponing or forgoing motherhood temporarily or permanently.
The Maintenance of the Gender Order: Accounts, Liberal Feminism, and the Motherhood Mystique

The new discourse that Park (2002) identifies is part of a larger narrative about the role of motherhood in women’s lives. White, middle-class women face the prevalent ideology of the “motherhood mystique.” The motherhood mystique says that women achieve their ultimate fulfillment by becoming mothers (McBride 1973)—as such, they should be involved in every aspect of their children’s lives and should be intently devoted to the children’s mental and physical well-being (Hays 1996). Mothers who fail to intensely parent are not seen as the “ideal mother” because intensive mothering has become the standard set for all women.

Women who do not want children are considered deviant in the face of these ideologies and are called upon for an account to preserve their moral identities. A moral identity is one that provides a basis for feeling good about oneself as it signifies who a person is, what kind of person she is, and that she has worth (Kleinman 1996; see also Katz 1975). Until women could derive a moral identity from work the way men could, the primary moral identity available to white, middle-class women was mother. In this way, “motherhood” and “womanhood” became conflated, a process evidenced by people assuming that all (“real”) women want children (Park 2002). Those who do not must find another venue through which to achieve a moral identity and offer an account to save face.

Accounts are “linguistic device[s] employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry” (Scott and Lyman 1968:46). When a person’s actions deviate from
expectations or norms, she may use an account to explain her behavior. “By an account, then, we mean a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior…An account is not called for when people engage in routine, common-sense behavior” (Scott and Lyman 1968:46-47). Women without children may use accounts to explain why they deviated from the norm of childbearing. Because accounts are used when people face “valuative inquiry,” childfree women employ accounts to prevent the discrediting of their identities as women and to show that, despite deviating from expectations, they are still “good” women (Park 2002).

Scott and Lyman (1968) outline two types of accounts: excuses and justifications. Excuses—or accounts in which one accepts that her actions are bad or wrong but denies responsibility—may include neutralization techniques like appealing to accidents, biological drives (e.g., “I was born gay,” an account that Whisman [1996] analyzes), defeasibility (not having proper knowledge or free will before acting), or scapegoating. Justifications—accounts in which one accepts responsibility for an action but denies that the action is bad or wrong—include denying injury (e.g., “no one was hurt”), denying the victim (e.g., “he may have been hurt by what I did, but he deserved it”), condemning the condemners (e.g., “you are no better than me because you do this other bad thing”), or appealing to loyalties (e.g., “I owed it to so-and-so to do this action”). Claiming a right to self-fulfillment and reciting sad tales—presenting and possibly distorting facts to highlight a dismal past—are other types of accounts by justification. It should be evident from the previous statement that accounts may be honest (e.g., explaining why you really were late for a meeting) or dishonest (i.e.,
constructed, false). Regardless of the type of account given, “every account is a manifestation of the underlying negotiation of identities” (Scott and Lyman 1968:59) since accounts are used to prevent oneself from being discredited as good or authentic.

When a childfree woman’s non-mother identity (i.e., her easily available—and easily targeted—moral identity) is foregrounded, she must find a way to deflect or manage the stigma she incurs and save her identity. Park (2002), in a study of 24 childfree men and women, found that childfree women master techniques of information control, like “passing” as women who are planning to have children in the future (especially useful for younger women), or substituting their identity as childfree for an identity as biologically, involuntarily childless (understanding that opting out of motherhood within the “rules” can garner sympathy, rather than the anger or disgust that childfreeness may incite). Some women also redefine the situation to highlight other things they do that, like childrearing, contribute to society. Finally, Park describes how childfree women explain their childfree status by making excuses that absolve them of responsibility (“I just never felt a maternal drive”), or justify their decisions by either condemning their condemners (“People call me selfish, but it is really they who are selfish for feeling the need to pass on their genes”), or by claiming a right to self-fulfillment (“I think we should each get to choose how to be happy”).

In my research here with 17 white, middle-class, childfree women, I found their accounts to be different from those of the women in Park’s research (although some techniques, like “passing,” were the same). In my interviews, it became apparent that women’s accounts for their childfree status have been greatly shaped by a pervasive liberal
feminist ideology, situated in the context of the achievement ideology and individualism.

Liberal feminism *reflects* the achievement ideology and individualism through its emphases on equality of opportunity and rights, natural rights, and the centrality of the individual; in that way, liberal feminism is a *subcultural* rather than a *countercultural* ideology, like radical feminism (Buechler 1990).

While liberal feminism rests on the assumption that men and women are capable of many of the same achievements and therefore should share equally the rights and responsibilities of social life, radical feminism incorporates the belief that the most fundamental category of oppression is sex. The sex category of women is seen as a potential political group based on shared experiences and common interests. According to radical feminism, “norms of romantic love, compulsory heterosexuality, and the motherhood mandate compris[e] the socially rewarded path that perpetuate[s] the sex-role system of patriarchy; hence all these norms nee[d] to be analyzed, critiqued, and overthrown in the struggle to liberate women” (Buechler 1990:114).

Given that liberal feminism allows for and encourages women’s aspirations to be successful in academic and professional terms, the liberal feminist ideology is especially appealing to white, middle- and upper-class, educated, and professional women. These women receive advantages through participating in education and careers: they undergo self-development, are awarded prestigious jobs, and earn comfortable incomes. To continue to receive these benefits, these women must deflect the belief that social life could be organized differently.
How women talk about motherhood is also influenced by their race and class. Through those inequalities, women have differential access to resources. That is, race and class have historically been used to grant or deny material and social rewards. McMahon (1995) found that middle-class women generally associated motherhood with heterosexuality, marriage, and adulthood—motherhood was part of a “package.” They spoke of trying to mature before they had children, emphasizing “readiness” (financial and emotional) before conceiving, embracing what Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) call a “self-development imperative.” For women who have greater access to financial security, home ownership, and steady jobs, children are viewed as something that comes later, after all these things are secured.

The working-class women McMahon interviewed (who were more likely to become pregnant earlier than the middle-class norm, and by accident), in contrast, understood themselves as becoming mature through having a child rather than before. They felt that through motherhood they underwent a moral transformation that allowed them to stand apart from women who did not have children. For these women, who more often lacked alternative claims to adulthood, “motherhood is expressive of an identity, a claim to being a responsible, loving, caring, grown-up person” (McMahon 1995:110). Similarly, Edin and Kafalas (2005) show how poor women understand marriage as something to be “ready” for, but not children—children can be provided for as needed, and they are a worthy sacrifice. If a woman believes it is likely she will not own a home, secure a steady job, and otherwise
achieve middle-class success, children are viewed as one avenue through which she may feel successful (as a mother).

This project will complement the work of McMahon (1995), Edin and Kafalas (2005), and Orenstein (2000), among others, on the reproductive “choices” women make. Though the word “choice” often implies a decision freely made, those authors and I understand choices as being enabled and constrained by preexisting societal structures and ideologies. Previous research has shown that women’s choices about motherhood are shaped by the conditions of their lives and the possibilities they can imagine. In this research, women’s decisions to abstain from motherhood are similarly shaped. Specifically, I will show how the liberal feminist movement has made it possible for white, middle-class women to choose careers over children and has provided these women with accounts that position their choice as in sync with the current gender order. By situating their choice in the context of the achievement ideology and individualism, the accounts reflect rather than challenge mainstream beliefs.

Methods

Blumer’s (1969) methodological position began with the belief in an “obdurate reality.” He believed that both theories and methods used by social scientists should reflect and respect this obdurate reality. As such, Blumer advocated that the empirical world “must forever be the central point of concern. It is the point of departure and the point of return in the case of empirical science. It is the testing ground for any assertions made about the
empirical world” (1969:21-22). Because he emphasized the meanings of objects to actors, Blumer asserted that the researcher must understand the meaning of an object as it is for the actor, not for the researcher. In other words, the researcher must be able to place herself in the subject’s shoes.

Is it ever possible for a researcher to see the social world exactly as a research subject does? Of course, it is not. Still, a primary correlate of symbolic interactionism is that the best way to do research is to take an inductive approach. Rather than relying on conventional scientific methods, researchers should go directly to the social world (Blumer 1969). As a white, middle-class, childfree woman myself, the social world under investigation in this project was fairly easy for me to access.

Data for this study were collected through 17 loosely structured, in-depth interviews with childfree women. (See Appendix A for the interview guide.) All names have been changed to protect the identities of the participants. Five interviews were scheduled through personal connections. Two interviewees were friends who had heard about my research through casual conversation with me. Through one of those women, I received three referrals. Of those five interviews, I conducted three face-to-face and two via telephone. All five women were sociology graduate students in other colleges and universities.

The remaining 12 interviewees were recruited via online advertisements. Eight of the 12 interviewees were recruited through an international email Listserv strictly for men and women who have chosen to be childfree. Though I am a childfree woman, I was not aware of the Listserv until I searched for a place to recruit for this project; I joined the list specifically
to recruit interviewees. In my recruitment post, I identified myself as childfree. I remain a member of the Listserv today, although I usually do not post to it. Many of the posts for this group are related to not having children, but most posts are off-topic “social” posts as many of the core members post frequently and “know” each other (i.e., they may never have met, but they communicate often via the Listserv and know about each other’s histories, families, and daily lives). The Listserv provides a site where members may complain about friends or relatives who are pro-children, vent their frustration after what they perceive to be a negative experience with a child, or seek support when faced with pressure to have children. Though members by no means agree on everything, their support around childfreeness may create a shared narrative that homogenizes my sample even further. Initially, I posted a recruitment advertisement asking female members who lived in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill Triangle area of North Carolina to contact me if they were interested in participating in an interview, but I received so many emails from long-distance women that I opened the advertisement up to include phone interviews. Of the eight interviews I conducted from this recruitment site, I was able to interview two local women in person and interviewed the remaining six via telephone. All six lived in the United States.

The remaining four interviewees were members of a Triangle-area social group for couples currently living without children. Similar to the childfree Listserv, I found the group when looking for recruitment sites and joined for the purpose of recruitment; in this case, however, my membership ended once my recruitment efforts were finished. Because it is a local group, I was able to conduct all four interviews in person. Unlike the Listserv, the
group is not restricted to those who have chosen not to have children. Some members of the
group are young couples who are ambivalent about having children or simply do not have
children yet but plan to in the future; other members are intentionally and permanently
childfree; still others are older couples whose children have moved away from home. The
group meets occasionally for various adult-only social events, like hikes, wine tastings, game
nights, and potlucks, all coordinated through one central website with a calendar and RSVP
section. It was in that website’s message board that I posted a recruitment advertisement
asking childless and childfree female members to contact me if they were interested in
participating in an interview (regardless of the reason for not having children). I identified
myself as a woman without children but did not say why.

My recruitment efforts yielded 17 participants. Each of the women had chosen, for
now, to prevent pregnancy, and 13 of the 17 hoped to never have children. The remaining
four were open to a small degree to having children should their partners come to strongly
desire having children, but only one woman thought that might ever happen. Essentially, all
17 of these women believed they would never have children and were planning their lives
accordingly.

While my sample is not representative of all childfree women, they are fairly typical
in that childfree women are most likely to be white, educated, middle-class, and full-time
workers (Abma and Martinez 2006). To begin with, 15 of the 17 (88%) identified as white,
while the remaining two identified as mixed race, although their understandings of race do
not mesh with Census racial categories (one Greek and Puerto Rican, one Arab and white). In
addition to being largely white, my sample is also highly educated: ranging in age from 21 to 63, all but one had at least an undergraduate degree (she was due to graduate from college soon), and 11 either had or were acquiring at the time of their interview an advanced degree such as a Master’s, a Ph.D., or a medical degree. Not surprisingly, then, the participants also had high annual household incomes (AHIs): many ranged between $50,000 and $80,000, though five interviewees’ AHIs were in the $100,000s and two interviewees’ AHIs were above $200,000. Even during the “Great Recession” of the 2000s, these women were solidly in the middle and upper-middle class. Geographically, the women were drawn from most areas of the country. While none were from the Deep South, many of the respondents lived on the coasts (12 on the East Coast, two on the West Coast), while the remainder lived in the Southwest (one), the Midwest (one), and the central U.S. (one). Most (approximately 70%) lived in large cities.

While most of the women identified as heterosexual, five of the 17 women (almost 30%) identified as bisexual, although all of the women but one (who was single) were partnered with men at the time of the interview, perhaps indicating the strength of compulsory heterosexuality as “the” legitimate lifestyle (Rich 1980). In terms of the women’s relationship status, one was single, one was in a long-term relationship with a man though living alone, six were living with their male partners, and nine were married to men. Before each interview, I asked respondents to fill out a questionnaire that included political orientation. Seven identified as “very liberal” and five identified as “somewhat” liberal. The remainder identified as “moderate” (four) or “not political” (one); none identified on the
conservative end of the spectrum. These political orientations might explain the participants’ willingness to openly identify as bisexual and/or live with their partners before or as an alternative to marriage.

The interviews were typical of a qualitative research project. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to three hours. During the interviews, I loosely followed an interview guide that included questions about the participant’s family of origin, her relationship with her mother, how she came to be without children, if she ever felt pressure to have children or felt stigmatized for not having children, what she saw as the advantages and disadvantages of having children or being childfree, and whether she identified as feminist. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

After each interview, I wrote a brief reflection highlighting any significant revelations during the interview so that I could “tweak” my interview guide and begin identifying patterns (Charmaz 1983). I used a grounded theory approach to analyze the interview data (Charmaz 1983; Glaser and Strauss 1967), undergoing an iterative process between reading literature and reviewing data to identify, (dis)prove, and modify theories. I coded both the interview transcripts and the notes I took after the interviews for emerging themes and processes.

I coded the interviews for several themes. For example, one was the interpretation of motherhood, the motherhood mystique, and/or intensive mothering, when women spoke about the pressure they felt to become mothers, whether they viewed motherhood as a positive or negative force in a woman’s life, and their perceptions of their female friends and
relatives who mothered. Another theme was their gender identity/ideology, when a woman expressed beliefs about gender expectations, how she “does” gender (West and Zimmerman 1987), and/or feminism. A third theme was calls for, giving of, and reactions to accounts, when women were asked by others, or explained, why they did not have children and interpreted the feelings they felt as the audience responded. Finally, my last themes were moral identity, when a woman spoke of what made her feel good or bad about herself, and choice, when the women talked about their own or others’ decisions to mother or not. Afterwards, writing analytic memos on these themes helped me to understand how these women’s accounts of being childfree are shaped by liberal feminism and further shape the contemporary gender order.

**Giving Accounts for the Childfree Lifestyle:**

**Borrowing From and Reinforcing Liberal Feminism**

The path to giving an account for one’s behavior begins with internalizing expectations and thus recognizing deviance from a norm. It is only through failing to meet expectations that accounts must be constructed. In other words, before the childfree women in this research constructed their accounts, they shared an understanding about what is expected of women, an understanding that included the notion that women are expected to become mothers. As their peers increasingly met these expectations, and as the women themselves appeared increasingly “ready” to have children (e.g., they finished school, married, or purchased homes), questioning from others prompted the women to give accounts
to explain their deviance. In this section, I examine the childfree women’s perceptions of expectations for women, how they receive and perceive inquiries about when they will have children, the accounts they give for their childfree status, and the reactions their accounts elicit. I will pay particular attention to how liberal feminism has shaped these interactions.

I should clarify: an account is a story that one person chooses to tell another when the person feels that the other is judging her as deviant. In this research, are the women offering me, the interviewer, an account? Did they feel judged by me? While I cannot say for certain that they did not feel judged by me, I tried to safeguard against those feelings both by using neutral language throughout the interview and by being honest with them about my childfree status. I offered tales of my own experience with stigma in order to elicit more stories from the participants and to share in the frustrations we both felt with relatives and peers who want us to have children. The women seemed to accept my genuine sympathy, yet occasionally they prefaced their statements with unsolicited defenses, as though I might still judge them. For the purpose of selecting data to present in this paper, I have included those unsolicited defenses as accounts, as at those points I appeared to be a hypothetical judge. For the most part, however, the accounts presented below are confined to stories that the respondents told me they tell other people (e.g., their parents, in-laws, friends, colleagues).

*Expectations and Inquiry*

To begin, many of the childfree women made statements about what they feel is expected of women. Claire’s statement was typical:
I think women are still expected to be beautiful or to try their best…Women are expected to care about their appearance and to try to be thin, try to be beautiful, make an effort… I do think that there is still this expectation that women should nurture and should do emotion work for other people…that they’re naturally good at these things.

Claire focused on the traditional expectation that women be beautiful and maternal.

However, many of the interviewees also incorporated an indication that women should have a career now as well. Adena expressed this when she said:

I think [women are] expected to be superwoman. They’ve got to be the perfect mother who goes to all their kids’ games and is really involved, and she’s supposed to have a career as well. With working men who happen to have kids, they never get asked, “Oh, well, are you going to stay home with the kids? What are you going to do?” It’s like that decision solely falls on the woman. I think that’s what’s expected of women. You’re supposed to do it all.

Adena expanded upon Claire’s statement by adding a career dimension to expectations for women. She essentially described the “soccer mom” who works all day and shuttles children around to various extra curricular activities all evening.

As the oldest of the interviewees at age 63, Hannah had the benefit of witnessing the shift in gender expectations throughout the last several decades. She explained that the pattern Adena articulated above is a fairly new phenomenon:
I think it grew into the “you can have it all” mode. From women being expected in the ’50s to be housewives and mothers, and then in the ’60s, well, “they’re [young women are] kids, they’re going to rebel”…By the time you get into the ’70s and ’80s, it was the “you can have it all” mode. Hannah’s mother, and most of her mother’s friends, did not work outside the home. Now, most grown women that Hannah knows are employed. Hannah and the other childfree women recognized that as more households needed two incomes to sustain a middle-class way of life, middle-class women have entered the workforce, yet they believed that most women do not sacrifice having children to do so. Caitlin said:

I feel like there is still that mentality of “women have to have it all,” or you have to at least try to have it all. You have to try to have the career and the family and attain a middle-class status. Care about your appearance, care about your weight, specifically. Heterosexual marriage still has a really strong identity, um, having a ring on your finger…I definitely think motherhood is traditionally expected of women, and I think women that do opt out are sort of seen as either they’re infertile or they have some sort of issue or maybe they can’t keep a man or something like that…Just, yeah, having it all.

One interviewee, Bailey, is worth quoting at length here because of her keen awareness of the gender order from an early age. Her perception included not just a
revelation of what men and women are “supposed” to do in society, but a desire to resist those expectations:

By the time I was three, I had observed, men get up and they go off to work. They have the money. They have the control. And they have the best cars. Women have to stay home with the kids. They have to ask for money. They have the worse cars, if they have one. And they have to wear god-awful clothes, like dresses. (laughs) So I decided that I was going to grow up to be a man. I even figured I would have a little mustache and I would part my hair in the side…[I decided then] I don’t want to just stay home with kids. I want to get out and see the world. My parents always said, “You can be whatever you want to be.” When I was 10, my brother and I were going to play a game and we were trying to decide who everybody was going to be; it was like an imaginary game. And they kept naming off female characters for me to be. And I finally said, “No! I’m not going to be a woman!” And my oldest brother said, “One day you are.” And I said, “No, I’m not.” He said, “Yes, you are. When you grow up—” I said, “Nuh uh! I’m going to be a man!” (laughs) And my cousin was there and she was much, much more of a tomboy than I was. She was a couple years older than me and I said, “Is that true?” She got this sad look on her face and she said, “Unfortunately so. You’re going to grow up to be a woman. Nothing you can do about it. It’s just nature.” (laughs) I was bummed and I still, for
several years, thought, “Well, maybe nobody’s tried hard enough. Maybe they’re just all told that.” So I kept that image in my mind. It didn’t work out.

Bailey decided early on that she did not admire the traditional path for women. To her, adult womanhood equaled motherhood, and motherhood equaled the source of oppression for women. She wanted to have what men have—money, luxury items, power. Women today may work for those things alongside men, but they are still not free to “get out and see the world” as long as they have to “stay home with the kids” (or at least be home more often than men).

This sample of white, middle-class women shared an understanding of what they are supposed to be and do as women. The fulcrum upon which liberal feminism rests—that women should have equal rights to work outside the home—is clearly present in these women’s articulations. However, the liberal feminist expectation to work has not overtaken the expectation to become a mother. Rather, women should do both, should “have it all.” Despite what appears to be liberation through liberal feminism, most of these women perceived that, because they are still expected to be mothers, women are not liberated, but overburdened. In fact, some, like Claire and Danielle, believed that true liberation for women comes through not having children:
Some [women] in our department that I’ve become friends with, we sort of talk to each other about how it’s great not to have kids! It’s empowering! (laughs) Women power, you don’t have to just be mothers! (Claire)

It’s about having that freedom and that independence and that sense of knowing who I am. And I feel like everything that we do, as much as we can, we need to work toward a greater level of empowerment, and I feel like this is something that we have to take on ourselves. Women are incredibly strong and incredibly powerful and need to keep fighting these stereotypes about what we should be and what we should do with our lives. (Danielle)

Claire and Danielle’s strong feelings about empowering women through disentangling womanhood from motherhood developed as they neared the end of their graduate school careers. As they and the other women reached their twenties and thirties, finished school, married, acquired careers, or purchased homes, they particularly felt the increasing pressure from others to make room in their busy lives for children. Gabbie lamented those expectations:

I feel annoyed that people are putting expectations on me in some way, like because I’m 30 or because we got married recently, that now we need to have children. I really dislike having those expectations placed on me.
Samantha believed the increasing pressure was taking place not just at personal levels but at societal levels:

I guess the media and what seems to be the whole baby worshipping thing that’s been going on the last few years—I think that’s a script that women are trying to be pushed into. The media is glorifying and hyping every time anyone has a baby, regardless of the situation, and I think women are still expected to follow that script.

Media controlled by the elite—with an interest in selling advertising space to companies who profit from women buying stuff for children—continues to be a mechanism of transmitting ideology. In this case, women and their peers receive cues about appropriate gender scripts. The media alone is not responsible for creating the motherhood mystique, the standard of intensive mothering, or the discourse that Park (2002) calls “pronatalist” discourse, but it does have a prescriptive nature, as do political and religious ideologies. The women pointed to the media, among other institutions, as a tool for teaching gender expectations.

The women encountered many friends, relatives, and even strangers who asked when (not even “whether”) they will have children. The inquiry sometimes came as a result of the women appearing “ready,” reflecting white, middle-class mothering norms. Danielle, who was married, told her story of being a newlywed:

In the beginning of our relationship when we were engaged, the assumption [from my in-laws] that we would have children was absolutely there…The couple of years after we got married [they were] saying, “Well gee, where
are they? You’ve been married two years, three years, four years”…My husband’s the oldest brother of four boys in his family, and two of his younger brothers already have children…They’ll constantly say things like, “What are you going to do? You’re going to be 60 when you’re teaching that kid to drive.”

Other times, the inquiry came well before the woman was “ready,” as in Denise’s case:

I remember when I was 19, and my brother was engaged. [My mother] said, “When do you think you’re going to have children?” I was like, “I’m 19 years old, I have no prospect on the horizon, and [my brother]’s the one who’s engaged to be married. I think you should be having this conversation with him.” I think she assumed that I would have children. She once asked if it was a daughter to name it after her…But like I said, [at the time I] had no prospects on this horizon, had no serious boyfriend or anything like that.

“Readiness” was not always a factor. Sometimes, it seems, the women were asked about children just because they were women. Consider Danielle’s story about a woman at her bank—a stranger who knew nothing about Danielle or how “ready” she might be:

I used to go to the bank and there was this sweet little blue-haired old lady. Every time I would walk in there, she would look down and say, “No baby yet!” And it used to irritate me so much. And one time, I had been going to a different bank, and I went back in there after like eight months or a long
time, she was so appalled that I still didn’t have the baby, that I found myself saying, “Oh, soon, we’re trying.” I actually lied to this woman at the bank! Because it was easier than trying to just justify my choice.

The women reported that they were mostly asked by other women (rather than men) when they were planning to have children. Generally, these were female friends or relatives who would either have a stake in the child’s life (such as being a grandmother) or who had recently had children themselves. Yet the childfree women found that, particularly with the latter group, the questioning would not let up because those women simply could not understand their decisions not to have children. As Calista said:

I try to reiterate…that [children] just really are not for me, but many of the women that I speak to, they are mothers, so they can’t really relate to where I am and they think that I’m going to change my mind, that my [“biological”] clock just isn’t ticking yet. The clock. Where is the clock? I don’t know. I didn’t even have to hit the “snooze” button on mine. Mine’s just broken. (laughs) I just have a broken clock, okay?

Calista tried to deflect the inquiry with a joke. In doing so, she made an explicit connection between not wanting children and being “broken,” suggesting there is something inherently wrong with a woman who does not want to have children. These women found themselves being asked in seemingly benign ways when they were going to have children, yet neither the inquiry nor the answers are mundane when both function to reinforce the notion that women should want and have children. These questions came often as the women got older or
reached significant milestones in their lives, and as several of the women articulated, the pressure can feel intense, uncomfortable, and unwelcome.

I have chosen the above excerpts based on their non-malicious content. However, questions about when the women were going to reproduce were not always so seemingly benign. Sometimes, the questions implied harsh criticism of the women. For example, Carley met a man during a speed dating event who, upon hearing that she did not want to have children, asked her, “What kind of a woman doesn’t want children?” Adena was once asked by a male acquaintance, “Why are you on this earth?” Danielle’s (male) friend said of women, “It’s just natural to bring children into the world. It’s what we’re supposed to do. It’s what we’re here to do.” Danielle found “these stereotypical perceptions of what women are supposed to do to be really infuriating.” These types of questions and statements (in these cases, from men) are not phrased in such a way as to merely gather information about a woman’s plans for her life. Rather, they have the effect of making the women feel like bad women for not wanting children. In an act of “oppositional othering” (Schwalbe et al. 2000), hostile others create a category of inferior women by implying that these particular women are insufficient in nature and may as well not have a reason to live.

These hostile comments have a negative effect on the women’s psyches. Patricia said during her interview:

It really used to upset me quite a lot. There’s such a societal norm that something is wrong with me because I didn’t want them, is what a lot of people would say….Their tone and the way that they phrase the question
when they [ask], it’s like they’re really judging you because you’re different.

Another woman, Christina, felt that situations in which she was questioned (and stigmatized) made her “uncomfortable, having to defend myself for what I know is right for me.” The comments that others made implied to the women that having children is natural and very important. If having children is what women are meant to do, then being childfree is deviant. Those who believe strongly in conservative or religious dictates might even see being childfree as violating a sacred order. When others implied that the women are deviant, the women felt obligated to give an account for their childfree status.

The Accounts

This section explores the particular accounts these women give when confronted with inquiry about their childfree status. As we have seen above, the childfree women were asked by friends, relatives, acquaintances, and even strangers when they are going to have children. These questions sometimes implied negative judgments about the women’s choices, relaying the message that it is in women’s nature to bear children and therefore women who do not reproduce do not really have a place in the world. In response to these questions and judgments, women offered accounts for their childfree status.
“It Sounds Awful”: The Account of Not Wanting to Mother

I begin the analysis of the accounts with one that informs the reader how the childfree women felt about motherhood. As the reader will see, the women, through observing their female friends and relatives who are mothers, developed a negative interpretation of what it means to be a mother. In this section, I analyze the women’s accounts that, essentially, they chose to be childfree because they do not want to end up like mothers they know. This account is an honest one (as opposed to other accounts they give that do not reflect their genuine feelings, to be analyzed later) that forms the basis of most of the women’s decisions to be childfree. That is, most of the women I interviewed held negative perceptions of what it would be like to be a mother. As such, they chose not to become mothers (I will discuss “choice” soon). This account is special: unlike the other accounts the women give (below), this one is not shared with most other people. Because women are usually taught to be sensitive to others’ emotions (Bartky 1990), the women do not want to offend others (usually mothers) by explaining that they believe motherhood would leave them unhappy. They reserve such conversations for other childfree men and women or those they think they can speak honestly to without offending.

All of these childfree women knew other women who are mothers. The childfree women tended to describe these women in terms of adherence to the intensive mothering standard. In fact, these women said they decided or confirmed that motherhood was not for them by observing the sacrifices and changes their friends and relatives who are mothers
have faced. Consider how Caitlin and Danielle responded when I asked them to define “mothering”:

I think being a mother involves an incredible amount of self-sacrifice. I just think about my mother and how many things she had to give up. She wanted to be a doctor and she was taking classes but she never finished. She had to put a lot of things on hold for me and my brother and I see motherhood as being a huge sacrifice. (Caitlin)

I think being a mother is just the ultimate sacrifice. I don’t know if giving up your life is too strong an expression, but I think in a way it is. It’s transforming your entire identity to become something in relation to somebody else. All of a sudden you are the caretaker, you are the protector, you are the ultimate source of support. And it just seems like the biggest sacrifice you could make in life. (Danielle)

Most women gave their own definitions of motherhood that were similar to the two above. Over and over, the word “sacrifice” came up in women’s definitions of motherhood. Indeed, “sacrifice” is what intensive mothering rests on (Hays 1996). To these women, however, the sacrifices are not joyously made.

In large part, these women reinterpreted the meaning of motherhood (from a fulfilling sacrifice to a consuming and demanding sacrifice) through watching their friends and sisters mother. Denise understood motherhood as restrictive for women (as opposed to fulfilling for
women) because her female friends who had children worked harder at parenting than their male partners: “It seems from looking at my friends who have children that the core responsibility always falls to the woman and not to the man.” Again, Caitlin and Danielle expressed their interpretations of motherhood:

[Motherhood] sounds awful. I just think [my friend]’s insane…I’ve been over to her house and…the grass in the front yard was up to my knees. And it looked like a beautiful house hidden underneath years of neglect. And it was mass chaos. There were kids running everywhere, dogs—it was crazy. It was out of control. I just was thinking, oh my god, how do you manage all of that stuff? I could just have panic attacks just being in that house and sitting there and watching the chaos because it was really crazy. Everywhere you looked there were animals or kids or food. (Caitlin)

[My friend] is living in a more patriarchal household where her husband is very much the breadwinner and she stays at home. She’s in an artistic [school] program right now, but she does not have a job and she hasn’t since she’s had her children… I think it’s been damaging to her on a lot of levels. I think that I’ve seen her self-esteem really suffer…[Her husband] really reinforces this, “well, I contribute, you don’t” sort of mentality to the household. And I think that her self-esteem has really plummeted because
she feels like being a mom is not a real career and she feels like her career as an artist has really suffered. (Danielle)

These particular quotes are important—Caitlin and Danielle learned from others that mothering results in “mass chaos” or “damage on a lot of levels.” They do not want to experience a loss of control over their lives or feel their self-esteem or careers “suffer” or become “damaged.” Having to tend to children can be particularly trying when one is working towards establishing a career, which most of these childfree women were doing. Christina said of her boss: “My manager is a woman who has three kids. And I’ll see her—I’ll log on in the morning, and there she is, up [at] 11:00, 12:00 at night, sending emails to people because that’s the only time she has.”

Despite the pervasive cultural notion that motherhood is fulfilling for women, my interviewees viewed motherhood as detrimental to women’s happiness and therefore rejected mothering. They viewed the sacrifices expected by the motherhood mystique to be at best inconvenient to their intellectual or career pursuits and at worst destructive for their sense of identity and intimate relationships. Consider Claire’s distaste for motherhood:

Not having [children] lets me imagine that I have more freedom, that I have more of an ability to be the person I want to be, to not have to consider kids in making decisions all my life…How do you reconcile being a parent with the idea that being a parent can be restrictive for women and that it does close off opportunities?
Claire, when comparing herself to other women with children, believed that she had more freedom and more opportunities. Other women, like Gabbie, interpreted the meaning of mothering by considering their own parents:

I came up in a house where we were everything, like, Mom and Dad wanted everything great for us and learned how to do things the right way, and they even called themselves “Mommy” and “Daddy,” like they quit using their first names because we were starting to use their first names, and we shouldn’t do that. We need to learn them as “Mommy” and “Daddy.” It just seemed like such a loss of self. I’m not sure it [having kids] could happen and not change [you] in some way or lose who you are.

Gabbie felt that the decision on her mother’s behalf to call herself “Mommy” and call her partner “Daddy” (what Gabbie recognizes to be part of the cultural standard for the “right way” to parent) was equivalent to a loss of self, since names are attached to identities. While Gabbie looked to her mother to interpret motherhood, Denise interpreted the meaning of motherhood by considering her friend:

I find it very, very sad that [my friend] and her husband really don’t have a relationship. And that once the children have gone to college, they’ll probably split up…I think for my friend, she’s chosen to be a stay-at-home mom, and that puts an additional stress. I think that her husband feels like he goes out and has to be the breadwinner and has to provide for the family and he somewhat resents her, and in the same way…she feels like she needs
to be there for the children to provide them with the experience that she
didn’t have growing up.

Because these women believed that ideal mothers are those who meet the criteria of the
motherhood mystique, and because they saw those criteria as incredibly burdensome for their
friends and family members—from losing their names to losing their marriages—they
interpreted motherhood as negative, despite the prevalence of the motherhood mystique.

In fact, many of my interviewees’ decisions were reinforced by female friends and
relatives becoming “consumed” by childrearing. They cited examples of how their
relationships with other women suffered once those women had children. Over time, they
had less in common and less to talk about with their mothering friends. Moreover, the
childfree women were often not interested in hearing about others’ children for long periods
of time. Gabbie commented:

Because some of these people, I just love them so much and then they have
a baby and then that baby consumes them. It’s hard to connect with a friend
on some type of level when the only thing that person is giving you to
connect with is stuff about a baby…It’s hard for me to connect with that.

Gabbie learned that mothers become “consumed” by babies and disconnected from other
aspects of their lives or personalities. Christina felt much like Gabbie did:

When we get together with [my husband’s] sister, all she talks about are
kids. Yeah, her kids are great, I love them, they’re my nieces. But that’s all
they talk about. It’s like, “Well don’t you have anything [else to talk about]? What about your life?”

Christina and others believed that childrearing was synonymous with a loss of self, replacing the self with a child. The motherhood mystique, in which children are the ultimate fulfillment, became translated into something negative and sinister for childfree women when they considered others’ experiences with motherhood. These women developed a powerful critique not just of the motherhood mystique but also of the intensive mothering standard that appears to “logically” follow from the motherhood mystique.

Further, the women in my sample were critical of the decision many of their female friends and sisters made to quit working upon becoming parents. While they valued women’s work outside the home, they devalued women’s work inside the home. Devaluation of carework is a larger cultural pattern (England et al. 2002), one that was present in the women’s interviews. While the devaluation of carework is largely a product of men’s oppression of women, it should be noted that the liberal feminist movement—the movement to get women out of homes and into the public—also encourages women to believe that carework is inferior to, or at least no better than, working outside the home. In talking about their friends or sisters who became stay-at-home mothers, Claire and Danielle said:

I resent it. I look at [my sister] and feel like she should be working, she should be doing something more than—I do see her as investing a lot of energy into being a mother. She, at one point, was home-schooling her kids
and I’m like, “Oh my gosh, just get a real job! Get a job as a teacher!” So I know I’m like, diminishing motherhood. (Claire)

Their own needs seem to have become second to their children, which I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that, it’s just something that I don’t really want for myself…I look at [my friend’s] lifestyle, the whole package, and it doesn’t appeal to me on any level. It’s sort of my personal nightmare, actually. (Danielle)

Some of these women, like Claire, “knew” they were “diminishing motherhood.” Others, like Danielle, tried to minimize how they felt by saying things like “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with” intensive mothering. However, it is clear that, for these women, carework that women disproportionately do for children was “resented” as a “personal nightmare.” To them, caring for children is not a “real job.” As the childfree women devalued their friends’ and relatives’ choices, they interpreted motherhood not as a fulfilling accomplishment itself but as destructive for previous, more meaningful accomplishments. As the women saw it, the intensive mothering standard is actually closer to mothering-out-of-control. Their view of intensive mothering is not unfounded: they have seen how intensive mothering consumes and overwhelms their female friends and relatives.

There is more to the account than not wanting to quit jobs and careers—these women did not feel comfortable being responsible for another person. Women are often judged as “good mothers” or “bad mothers” based on children’s outcomes (e.g., personal happiness,
school success, and so on). The childfree women I interviewed sought to avoid that judgment. Furthermore, because they were aware that women do more childrearing than men, they believed they would have even more responsibility for the child than their male partners. Thus, that responsibility for children symbolized both a loss of freedom and a potential for judgment based on the specter of the bad mother. Gabbie explained:

We live in a culture where women do more of the work with child rearing. I am not so into that. I don’t want to feel confined. I don’t want to feel like I’m tied down. I think that children often make it harder to leave a bad relationship should it become soured. You also have to think about this other person that you need to provide care for. I think it’s very hard to pick up and travel when you would like to. I personally like just having to find someone to sit the dog. I think you have a whole other set of problems to deal with. You’re not only dealing with your own problems every day, but you have to worry about what’s going with your kid at school, and whether or not he or she’s developing, whether or not he or she’s getting into trouble, and there’s probably lots of conflicting feelings an individual would go through—and working—but, you know, “Am I doing the best thing for this child who’s now the center of my life?”

Here, Gabbie drew on several themes. The first is the inequitable gender order in our society. As a woman, she believed that if she were to become a mother, she would end up doing more of the work for the child than her husband. She would then be “confined” and “tied down,”
which likely translates into losing a career or cutting down to part-time work. Then, she would have to worry very much about her child—is s/he doing okay? Will Gabbie be judged by others if the child is not succeeding by conventional terms? Gabbie’s account signifies that she was uncomfortable with the level of responsibility that she would be forced to accept by becoming a mother. By avoiding motherhood, she perceived that she was more likely to be free and happy than women who mother.

To explain their childfree status without having to explain that they viewed motherhood negatively to people who might be offended, many of the childfree women in my sample developed liberal feminist critiques of gender expectations in a way that allowed them to explain that every woman has a right to choose how she lives. They essentially defined feminism as a belief system involving women’s right to choose what to do with their lives. Patricia’s definition of feminism is exemplary of the other childfree women’s definitions: “I still get to decide what I do. [My husband] doesn’t own me. I say where I go when I go, that kind of thing. I think that women being able to choose things they didn’t get to choose 30 or 40 years ago would be my definition of feminism.” Most incorporated in their definitions not only the ability to choose but the right to be protected for their choices. When I asked her to define what feminism meant to her, Caitlin said, “It’s really getting equal rights, civil rights.” Similarly, in response to my question, Carley said, “Believing that men and women are equal. You know, that they all have the same rights and responsibilities and standing in the world.” Note that these definitions—surrounding choices and rights—reflect a predominant shared notion of liberal feminism.
Those definitions of feminism do not launch major challenges to fundamental social arrangements. That is, the definition of feminism the women adhered to—a definition centered on individuals and rights—did not encourage the women to critically view their shared experiences as a mobilizing political force that could radically restructure the social order. Rather, that ideology functioned to provide women with an account that appealed to the right to self-fulfillment, a right that is in sync with mainstream values. While the women extolled the virtues of women being able to make choices about their lives, they were asserting their own right to opt out of a relationship (motherhood) that they believed could be, and likely would be, oppressive and burdensome. The women’s observations of their friends and relatives thus held a place in the women’s accounts of being childfree, though they were not as widely shared with audiences as the following accounts.

“I Am Not a Sheep”: The Role of Choice in the Accounts

In the section above I used the language of choice unproblematically. I allowed the reader to take for granted that the women actively made decisions to be childfree. Mostly, they have; but it is important to understand the context in which they made those decisions (decisions that, for some women, involve ongoing evaluation). Thus far, I have focused on providing that context and have not yet discussed the complex process that is “choice.” Now, I turn to a discussion of most of the women’s primary accounts (the one that they usually offer first when others ask if they will have children): that they made a decision to be childfree based on a lifelong desire not to have children.
The childfree women’s accounts most often included the notion that not having children was a choice they made and that they were glad to have made it. Simply put, most of these women accounted for their childfree status by stating they had believed since childhood or their teenage years that they do not want children, and they have taken steps to ensure that they will not reproduce (e.g., using contraception, having abortions, only dating those who also do not want children, or undergoing or convincing a partner to undergo sterilization).

Gabbie began her interview:

I don’t feel that need to have a child. Maybe these are just like cultural definitions that we have that we’re supposed to feel this way and nobody really does, but I honestly just don’t feel that need to mother another human…I also think my education has probably contributed to realizing how oppressive these conditions are and making an informed judgment about not engaging in this practice…I consciously made that decision. I do not want to have children. It’s not because I can’t. I just don’t want to.

There are a couple of important elements to this account. First, most of the childfree women felt different from other women because they never “felt that need” to bear children. The women often articulated, as Gabbie did, some realization that those notions of girlhood dreams are probably not as prevalent as people believe—that in fact, it may be a socially constructed myth. Still, because there exists a narrative that says most women do “always” want children, the childfree women felt different from other women because they never dreamed of having children. Secondly, Gabbie concluded her account with the assertion that
she can in fact have children but chose not to, thus deflecting any sympathy that may have been coming her way.

Almost all of the women were like Gabbie in that they offered the account of never having wanted children. Yet the account did not simply end with never wanting children. After all, not all women who become mothers always wanted or planned to have children. A decision still had to be made on the part of these women to prevent pregnancy and birth. Some women had abortions, most used birth control, and many women made very final decisions by getting tubal ligations. One woman, Carley, did not inform her partner or her family that she was going to have a tubal ligation performed: “I didn’t feel like it was anybody else’s business. That was my choice. It was my life. And I had to protect my interests. Because I didn’t want to have an accident and get stuck with a child.” Carley actively made a decision to schedule a tubal ligation and did not tell anyone else who may have interfered with her decision. She was able to say that she made a choice and that it was good to do so: “It was the single most important decision in my life. It changed the whole direction of my life. You know, if I’d had a child, I would have a completely different life.”

It is a powerful testament to liberal feminism that the choice account is the primary account given by these childfree women. Individualism and choice are integral to liberal feminism. When these women asserted, without confusion, that not having children was a choice, their accounts were shaped by the liberal (feminist) tenet that choice is good and that to make a choice is good. Further, these women believed that they had gotten where they were because of their life choices. They “chose” to do well in school, to acquire advanced
degrees, to work in their current fields, and to advance their careers. Choosing not to have children affirmed a view of themselves as in control.

These women did not simply believe that they made a choice not to bear children. Several implied that by being reflective and deliberate, they felt they were better than the women who have not made deliberate decisions about their fertility. Their feelings resulted in an account that Scott and Lyman (1968) call “condemning the condemners.” Many of the women claimed that those women who get pregnant do so simply because they are following gender expectations for women. Denise and Patricia offered critiques of mothers similar to statements most of the women made:

The problem that I have is so many people get pregnant by mistake or they do it because they think that that’s just the natural progression—you know, you get married, you have children, your parents bug you for grandchildren, that sort of thing—and I’m glad that there’s a choice. I just want to see women really contemplating the choice factor and making sure that it’s their own choice. (Denise)

I think that a lot of people have kids just because they think they should. And then they are one of those bitter moms that abuse their kids at the grocery store ’cause they’re running bad down the aisles. I don’t want to be that person. (Patricia)
By claiming to have made a choice while positioning other women as having made no choices (they mother “just because they think they should”), these women set themselves apart from other women. According to these women, other women have children because that is what is expected of them. Then, they end up unhappy (“bitter”) thanks to their lack of control.

This excerpt from Samantha’s interview shows clearly the connection between making a choice and feeling good about oneself for it. I asked her what it meant to her to be childfree:

I don’t know if enlightened is the right word, but I feel that I am not a sheep. That I was able to evaluate and think on my own and make the decision without just following what everybody else has done. I’m proud of myself that I realized I didn’t want children before I had a couple of them…I’m just proud of myself that I figured that out before I made the mistake and that I was strong enough to stand up against what society, especially back in the late ’80s, early ’90s, when [being childfree] wasn’t as prevalent, to be able to say, “No, [having children] is not what I want.” And I was independent enough to make my own decisions, not get trapped by that with no education and being dependent on the government or a man to help support me and children. And I’m happy that I escaped that.
Samantha prided herself on making a decision about her fertility. She set herself apart as an individual and from other women (she is “not a sheep”). She also believed she was better off for her decision: she received an education (appealing to liberal feminist and mainstream American ideas that women can and should be educated) and she was not dependent on the government or men for support because she was self-reliant. Being self-reliant, especially from men and the government, is a central component of liberal feminist ideas of success, reflecting individualism in our society more generally. Those goals reflect harsh social realities: the U.S. welfare system does not adequately support women and children, and many women cannot rely on men to take an equal part in parenting considering the high divorce rate and the rates of single mothering. Yet Samantha did not critique the government or men for women’s poor positions—she critiqued the women themselves.

Because individualism encourages individuals to look to themselves as the source of their successes and failures (rather than societal structures), the childfree women had a hard time sympathizing with other women who have become mothers. When their friends and relatives who are mothers felt burdened by the role, the childfree women felt little sympathy because these women failed to make the choice not to have children. Interestingly, when most of the childfree women spoke of mothers who complained about being mothers, they inverted their language such that by not making the choice to be childfree, the women made the choice to become mothers. This shift directly contradicts their earlier statements in which women who mothered were “sheep” who just went along with the gender expectations placed
upon them and did not make any choices at all. Christina was especially critical of stay-at-home mothers:

> Women that complain about things—if they’re stay-at-home moms—I say, “Well, you chose that life. Didn’t you know?” And people who complain and say, “Oh, children are so much work,” or, “Oh, children get into trouble, blah blah blah,” it’s like, “That was your decision, to have children.” And I’m thinking to myself, “Didn’t you know? Or were you brainwashed?”

Christina blamed the stay-at-home mothers for their own situations because, after all, by having children, they necessarily created the potential for such situations. Christina and other women who expressed similar sentiments did not sympathize with other women who made a “bad decision.”

While the women’s primary account was that they made a decision to be childfree because they did not want children, they did not always share this account with others who might have been hostile. This account was mostly reserved for close friends and relatives, those who the women believed would be understanding and kind. Sometimes, though, even those closest to the women were not so understanding. Danielle and her husband made the decision together not to have children. When her husband’s mother-in-law asked when she should expect grandchildren from then, Danielle told her that she was not going to bear any children. As Danielle told the story, “[My mother-in-law] said, ‘It’s such a shame you, Danielle, don’t want children. [Your husband] would be such a great dad.’” Danielle’s
account of choosing to be childfree was unacceptable to her mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law instead tried to make Danielle feel guilty for not allowing her husband to develop his potential to be a great father. Danielle no longer gave her that account; rather, she did not talk about the topic with her mother-in-law anymore.

“I’m Still in School”: Buying Time with Accounts

When women did not feel comfortable offering the account of being childfree by choice, either because that account had been rejected (as in the case of Danielle), or because they did not trust that the person would be kind in response, what other account(s) did they offer? One account that many of the women in this sample had access to was that they simply could not have a child while grappling with higher education. This account is similar to the women “passing” in Park’s (2002) research. An important difference, however, is that the women did not always explicitly say they would have children later; sometimes they just said, “I’m still in school,” and left it at that.

Six of the 17 women I interviewed were in either college or graduate school at the time of their interviews. Several of them, when confronted about having children, said that they cannot have a child yet but will focus on having a child after graduation. None of the women who used this account believed it themselves. As noted above, most of them knew for a long time that they never wanted children, and they do not plan to conceive or raise children after graduation. However, they used the account both to save face and to change the subject (which they felt would only be done once they “satisfied” the audience).
The “I’m still in school” line was offered in two different forms among the women in the sample. In one form, the woman, when asked when she will have children, said that she was still in school, yet made no promise to have children after completing her education.

Gabbie told her husband’s friends:

I just kind of joke about it. “I’m still in school.” [My husband] will chime in and say, “Oh, she’s got so much going on at school, there’s no way she could have a baby right now.” So we kind of just laugh it off and try to change the subject really quickly. But it’s becoming annoying, so I feel like I have to do that every time I see people.

Gabbie did not claim she would have children after graduation. Yet her account worked to change the subject because people assumed that when she said she was still in school, she meant she would have children later.

Other times, especially when talking to strangers or acquaintances, the women said they were still in school and followed up with a promise to have children later, like Danielle:

It’s come to a point in my life where I lie to people. And I tell them, “Oh, you know, just waiting till I finish my degree. I just can’t wait. I’m just hoping once my degree’s done, then we’ll have a family.” Or, they’ll say, “When are you going to have a baby?” and I say, “Oh, not yet, not yet, soon though.” Because I’m so tired of dealing with the hostility.

Danielle does not intend to have a child after her degree is finished, despite having given a contrary impression. She had experienced more “hostility,” as she put it, surrounding her
reproduction than most other women in the sample reported encountering. She was married and almost finished with school. Her colleagues in her academic department were excited about children and frequently asked her if she is pregnant yet. Her in-laws wanted grandchildren, and, as we’ve seen above, her husband was in agreement with her but was not always willing to speak out about his part in the decision. For Danielle, it was not enough to merely say, “I am still in school,” because for her audience, that was not an answer to the question of when she would have children.

At best, the “I’m still in school” account bought women time. Again, thanks to the gains made by the liberal feminist movement, women now have a stake in higher education. It is acceptable and expected that they too will go to college and even graduate school. Further, higher education is seen as an investment in a career, and at a time when many households need two incomes to achieve or maintain a middle-class standing, women are encouraged to invest in careers to contribute to household incomes. Because the women’s peers and families expected them to go to school and have careers (as I discussed earlier), their time in school was respected. The audience asking for an account usually wanted the woman to have children, but they did not want her schooling to be interrupted, so this account functioned to give women the appearance of conformity and to give them more time.

This account is also well-situated within the self-development imperative and achievement ideology. The women were taking responsibility for their education and careers, and so far they were successful. Since many of them were married and had homes, they were proof, so far, that women can have jobs and family responsibilities at the same time. If these
women finished their degrees, they would help to paint a rosy picture of the success of modern American women. Allowing education to take precedence over children for a short period of time is good for mainstream ideology.

“I Don’t Think I Could Give One Hundred Percent to Both Things”: Accounts and Work

Where childfree women’s accounts disrupt mainstream ideology is with the next one: once done with school, the women responded to questions about when they would have children by saying that they could not have children and work. Confronted with the pressure to “have it all,” these women figured out long before even starting their careers that it did not seem practical to have children while they were working. For some, it was the idea that their careers might suffer that scared them; for others, it was ambivalence about child care arrangements, both in terms of what might be best for a child or what might be best for the women and their partners.

What made children incompatible with work for these women was that most of them shared a belief that the proper way to parent is through intensive mothering, the standard for white, middle-class mothers. Notice that I did not put the word *proper* in quotation marks; they were not expressing that they believed the standard for “proper” (read: acceptable) mothering is the intensive mothering standard. Rather, they believed the hegemonic ideology that intensive mothering *is* best for the child (if not always best for the mother). Calista said:

I think if you’re going to raise children this day and age, there should be someone at home full-time…[Working mothers are] really harming the
kids. The ones that I see the most are ones where I was a pre-school teacher and they would drop their kids off at seven a.m. and pick them up at six p.m. and the people who are raising their kids were me and the other teachers...Many of them, I find that they aren’t as invested in their children’s lives. They’re more invested in how to further their career and to make more money…And the relationships between the children and the parent were so negative because the child just wanted the attention of the parent who just couldn’t give it to them or chose not to.

Calista believed that children need full-time caregivers in the home. She spoke above of mothers, but also said in her interview that she approves of stay-at-home fathers, as long as someone is home. Being a full-time caregiver was, however, also understood by the women as a big sacrifice (what Danielle called “the ultimate sacrifice”), and these women did not feel they wanted to make such a sacrifice. They were used to being successful at most things they did. Yet, they could not realistically see themselves being successful at both work and parenting simultaneously, since both would be full-time jobs. Rae-Ann and Patricia elaborated:

[Having children] would sure make [work] a lot more difficult. Things that I do, I like to do well, and I don’t think I could work extremely hard and do a good job, and be a good parent. And so it’s sort of a trade-off. (Rae-Ann)
I don’t think that I could give 100% to both things and do it well. I think I would have a lot of guilt if I tried to do it other ways. I wouldn’t have volunteered to do something if I didn’t think I’d be able to give my full effort to it. And I think that I would go into motherhood in the same way.

(Patricia)

The women believed they could either work or raise children well, but not both. They were not willing to give less than 100 percent to their careers, yet, like the women in Stone’s (2007) *Opting Out*, they were also not willing to give less than 100 percent to a child. When her father asked when she would have children, Hannah told him, “Then I’ve got to stop work; either that or I can’t give everything to either a child or work.” Belinda explained to me:

I just get the sense that women almost have to work twice as hard to be just as good. There’s always a reason you can put the pieces together and come up with that conclusion. But I see that a lot with various women I talk to, and it does seem to make them unhappy sometimes. They feel like they kind of achieve success in one area of their life and one other area has kind of fallen by the wayside.

Given the investment in their education and careers, the childfree women did not want that aspect of their lives to “fall by the wayside.” Generally speaking, they liked
working and were happy in their fields. And many, like Samantha, spent years preparing to work:

I devoted a lot of years to improving myself and my work. I worked a lot of overtime hours, again with the flexible schedule. I appreciate the freedom, the quietness—I don’t like a lot of havoc.

On top of wanting to work, they did not want to stay at home. Caitlin stressed:

I don’t think I could stay home for a really long time without wanting to harm myself. I think I need to be outside productively doing something. Not that childcare isn’t productive, but I don’t think it would be wise for me to switch from being career-oriented to being a stay-at-home parent. I think I would probably go crazy…I think a lot of the stuff that you want to do just fades away, like a good night’s sleep is more important than going to the protest the next day, or getting the laundry done is a major achievement when you’re changing twelve diapers a day.

Recognizing the dominance of the gender order and the gendered reality of women’s lives, the women believed, if someone needed to stay home with the child, it would have to be them and not their (male) partners. Calista, who expressed a strong belief in stay-at-home parenting above, believed that, if she and her husband had a child, she would be the one who would have to stay at home:

The ideal arrangement would be that [my husband] would stay with the child. The arrangement that would end up potentially happening would be I
would [stay home] because he is not someone who helps take care of household duties so I would not want to be out of the home and then come home and have to do all the things that he should have done because he was too busy playing with the child than doing his grown-up duties. So for my sanity, I would have to stay home. I would prefer to work. I very much enjoy working, and if the choice were out there…I would work if I could and he could totally stay home.

I have explained thus far that the childfree women said they would want to adhere to an intensive mothering standard set forth for women if they became mothers, even though they were critical of the intensive mothering done by their friends who have children. Because they were used to doing things well, they believed that they would have to mother well, and to mother well is to follow the intensive mothering standard. However, they saw that standard as incompatible with work. Because they were invested in their careers, enjoyed working, and believed they, and not their partners, would be the one to quit working should they have a child, they had another powerful reason to be childfree.

What does that story look like in the form of an account? When asked by friends and acquaintances why she did not have children, Adena responded honestly:

I guess as a teenager I kind of wondered, “How am I going to balance work with having kids? Am I going to take a couple years off of work or will my husband take a couple years off? Whoever makes the least money? Or, will we find a”—I guess I just never was really sure how I would handle that.
She explained that for a long time she was unsure how to make having children coincide with having a family, and because she never solved that problem, she was never ready to have children.

For the account of being unable to mother and work simultaneously to effectively deflect stigma, the woman had to uphold the intensive mothering standard. If she was critical of the standard, her audience might judge her. By acknowledging the standard and recognizing her own inability to meet it, her account became more palatable. Renee said that when her friends and relatives ask her to explain her childfree status, she tells them:

I’m too anxious. I would always feel guilty for not being able to be with my child full-time. I would feel guilty because I know that I would not be willing to take the time that [mothers] do to invest into something that is not work-related.

Renee squarely placed the unwillingness to have children in her own corner (“I’m too anxious”) rather than saying the standard demands too much of women by expecting them to mother exceptionally well. Reflecting a society that blames individuals for their failures, Renee constructed an account using a “deficiency” of hers, knowing that it will likely be well-received because it fits with dominant discourses. An audience member who receives this account—who wants children reared in a certain way—may decide that it is better that she does not have children and become a “bad” mother.
But is becoming a bad mother worse than not becoming a mother at all? In other words, is the account of being unable to give 100 percent to a child still a dangerous one with the potential to be rejected, or can women safely explain that they would prefer to work? I advance the position here that work provided a moral identity for these women that was an alternative to motherhood. These women’s comments illustrated that they felt the same way about work that other women are expected to feel about motherhood—that it is important and fulfilling. Work became meaningful to these women and was an avenue through which they felt good about themselves.

Most of the childfree women had (or believed they would have once they finish school) prestigious and high-paying jobs. The five women in graduate school looked to professorship; one woman was a director of a tutoring company, another a retired librarian, and another an out-of-work math educator; one was a physician’s assistant, one was a veterinarian in a high-ranking government position, and one was a scientist (the undergraduate also aspired to being a scientist); and five women enjoyed high-level, autonomous positions in government, real estate, research, and business.

The women believed they worked hard to achieve the comfort and autonomy these careers afforded them. Most invested or were investing in advanced degrees, and those who worked did so full-time. When one invests so much, it makes sense to highlight how much one likes what one is doing. For example, Patricia, a physician’s assistant who had her own practice after finishing medical school, said, “I went to school for a long time to do what I
do. I enjoy it and I find it fulfilling, satisfying to feel like you help other people.” Rae-Ann, an undergraduate student, said of her current project in her lab,

I work a lot, and when I actually see something flourish from my efforts, I feel very fulfilled. I did data analysis on 24 plants, and it took me about five hours, and that’s a lot of work. And I still have to do hundreds and hundreds of plants. I feel like I’m making a difference by contributing to science.

Because these women got fulfillment from work that they considered important for society, they could not imagine forgoing that work to have children (which, as we saw above, they believed they would need to do). Therefore, they told others that they worked too hard to achieve what they had and they would not feel good about themselves if they gave it up. Most of the women said something similar to this statement from Denise, a veterinarian, who observed her peers quitting their jobs to become mothers:

I mean, they’re doctors, and within five years of graduating from vet school have become stay-at-home mothers and maybe work one day a week in practice or not at all. And I do think, “god, what a waste,” you know? “What a waste of your education. If, if you wanted to be a stay-at-home mother, why did you go to vet school?” I just find it kind of baffling. I know also from my own perspective that I would go crazy to be at home all day. Even on the days that I work at home, occasionally one day a week, I
I really miss the interaction with my colleagues. I think I would probably

stick a sharp stick through my eye if I had to do it [stay home with a child].

Denise enjoyed her work on multiple levels—she enjoyed the job and she enjoyed interacting with her colleagues. She could not imagine “wasting” her degree, time, and effort by becoming a parent, and she believed she would not enjoy her life if she sacrificed her work. Denise felt about her job the way that women are supposed to feel about motherhood: that it was important and fulfilling. It is important to note that this type of account is shaped by and reflects liberal feminism (which is itself shaped by and reflective of individualism and the achievement ideology). These women were able to view their work positively because it was validated by society. Further, they were able to do so without mounting a significant challenge to either the gender order or the labor force.

*The Rejection of Accounts*

This analysis section would not be complete without discussing the acceptance or rejection of the women’s accounts for being childfree. Granted, I did not interview those to whom the accounts were given; rather, I asked the women how their friends and relatives (and acquaintance and even strangers) responded to their accounts and how those responses made them feel. While some women said they believed their accounts were accepted, others felt they were not.

Most of the women knew early that they did not want children and were vocal about their early decisions to be childfree. However, their ideas were generally discredited because
they were young. Over and over, they were told that, as they got older, they would begin to feel differently. Samantha lamented, “I also remember being 18 or 19 and being at work and telling people that I don’t want any kids, and they’re, ‘oh, you’ll change your mind’—the typical bingo thing that everybody hears. And I was like, ‘No, actually I won’t.’” Rae-Ann, then an undergraduate at age 21, was told the same thing as Samantha. Her partner shared her desire to be childfree and had a vasectomy. Still, Rae-Ann could not avoid people constructing ways for her to still have children when she “inevitably” decides she wants them:

I was actually in class a few weeks ago, and someone told me, “What if you accidentally get pregnant?” I said, “That’s not going to happen because my boyfriend got a vasectomy.” And they said, “Well, you can, you can reverse those, you know?” And I thought, “I’m never going to hear the end of this crap.”

The women in my sample who were in their late 20s and early 30s were reaching the age at which others expected them to change their minds about being childfree. When the women still did not want children, some of their friends and relatives became increasingly eager to convince the women to change their minds. Calista frequently explained to others that she did not want to have children of her “own” because she practically raised her younger siblings when she was young and because, as a tutor, she worked with children:

Most that I tell say, “Really? I just don’t see that. You’d make a great mother. Maybe you’ll change your mind. It’s not anything that you can
exp—.” I said, “I’ve mothered before.” “It’s not the same thing.” That’s always the answer. “It’s not the same thing. It’s nothing that you’ve ever experienced before.” “Okay, well, explain it to me.” “I can’t explain it to you. It’s something that can’t be explained in words. It’s just so amazing and precious and beautiful and blah blah blah blah.”

Calista, married with an established career, appeared ready to have children, yet she still did not want them. Her friends appeared desperate to convince her to change her mind, even though they seemed to be unable to say exactly why she should. It was women like Calista—mature, responsible, married, appearing financially stable—whose accounts were least accepted by audiences. Even though the audiences valued what the women valued (education, careers, the right to self-fulfillment, and so on), most of them could not get past these would-be-great-moms not feeling any maternal drives. Calista continued:

[My husband] mentioned to my father, “I don’t understand why she doesn’t want to be a mom. She would be a really great mom.” And my dad said, “She will. One day. She just doesn’t want them right now because she’s not ready.” And I don’t think that he realized that I don’t want to have them at all. He still thinks that, “You’ll change your mind. You’ll want [kids], you’ll get there.” “You’re just not ready yet” is the way my father speaks and spoke to my husband as well.

These audiences tried to pull out maternal drives, as Carley experienced:
[My] parents tried everything to talk me into it. My father even bribed me, saying that he would give me money and support me even when I was married so I could stay home and didn’t have to go to work and all that. But there was no enticement in the world that would get me to have kids. My ex-husband and my father both tried every tactic in the book to try and get me to have a kid, but there was no way.

When the audiences could not elicit desires to mother from the women, they settled for accepting the *content* of their accounts. For many of them, it at least made sense that a woman would want to get an education and a job. These accounts resonated with individualism, achievement ideology, and liberal feminism. However, the audience members’ acceptance of the content of the accounts rarely looked like affirmation for a childfree lifestyle. Again, Danielle talked about her in-laws:

As far as my in-laws go, who have been the biggest source of pressure over the years, for better or worse, they’ve come to accept [my decision], so I don’t feel like I need to change my tune for them once I finish my degree. Cause I feel like they’ve already kind of come to the bitter conclusion that it’s not going to happen.

Danielle’s in-laws gave her a rejection that almost looked like acceptance. If an audience still saw a resolution not to have children as a “bitter conclusion,” the women at least get them off their backs, but they did not feel validated.
Rejection that looked like acceptance was perhaps the most common reaction the women received. Often, rejection that looked like acceptance came from family members and close friends who would have a stake in the future child’s life—thus, they were disappointed, but they gave up because they were not going to convince the woman to have children. They “accepted” the women’s decisions, but their implied judgment often did not go unnoticed.

Though most of the women encountered difficulty, occasionally the women felt that their honest accounts (i.e., “never wanted children”) were really accepted. When the women did feel their accounts were accepted, it was usually by strangers or acquaintances. Strangers or acquaintance may accept an account because they are not invested in it, or they may not accept it but simply not pursue it further out of respect for privacy. Rarely did the women feel that someone important to them truly accepted their accounts.

Perhaps the only woman who felt that her honest account was accepted by loved ones was Bailey, a woman who suffered chronic health problems and essentially chose not to have children for that reason, although she was also never really drawn to the idea of having children: “My parents certainly never did that [pressure me to have children]. And they both feel very much that you shouldn’t have kids unless you really want them. So they’re not going to pressure me when I said I’m not having kids.” According to Bailey, her parents believed that women should not have children unless they truly desire to. She said they do not feel that women who do not want children are strange or say that all women who do not want children will eventually change their minds. Bailey read their acceptance as an affirmation of her choice to be childfree. However, Bailey was an exception. Most of the
women I interviewed relayed some degree of rejection. Therefore, these women were sometimes guarded about their honest accounts. That they faced rejection from others for their decision to remain childfree illustrates the continuing pressures placed on women to mother, even as it has become more acceptable to prioritize a career-based identity.

**Discussion: Living as a Childfree Woman**

**Under Early Twenty-First Century Capitalism**

The childfree women in this study mostly knew from a young age that they did not want children. At the time, they were often told by older relatives that they would change their minds and desire children when they got older. As they reached their childbearing years, the pressure mounted as they dated, married, finished school, became employed, or purchased houses. Still not having changed their minds, friends and relatives (and sometimes acquaintances and strangers) began asking for accounts: why weren’t these women having children? In response to this question, almost all the women offered the honest account of having never wanted kids. Generally, this account was offered to close friends and family members, those with whom it was important to be honest because they might have a stake in the child’s life, and because frequent contact made it inappropriate to be dishonest. However, this account often was not accepted—women were told they would still change their minds, or their identities as women were questioned or judged.

Because they usually needed to offer secondary accounts upon the rejection of the “never wanted children” account, the women provided various other accounts depending on
their life circumstances. Those still in school, for example, sometimes told others that they could not have children until they finished their dissertations. Because education is respected, this account often got them off the hook, at least for a little while. Yet they could not rely on this account forever. Generally, this account was used with those to whom the women would likely not be accountable after graduation—strangers, acquaintances, colleagues, and friends with whom they were not very close.

Those who were in the work force, or expected to be in the work force soon, offered an account that they could not work and rear children—and do both well—at the same time. Their audiences could not wholly accept or reject that account—while the women were often told that they could indeed “have it all,” they also received nods of agreement from audience members that “having it all” is a tough arrangement for women. Like education, work is well-respected, urging the audience to be sympathetic to the account, but the women felt that the account was not completely successful: people still urged them to have children while working.

Finally, the women resorted to explaining that they did not want to end up like their female friends and relatives. All knew other women who, they believed, adhere to the intensive mothering standard and most expressed a belief that they would be unhappy with those lifestyles. They saw women struggling to work and have children, quitting their jobs, staying at home, losing time and energy for work and hobbies, becoming consumed by their children, and bearing a heavier workload than their male partners. The childfree women appealed to a right to self-fulfillment. They also expressed ambivalence about the gendered
arrangements of child care and fears about being responsible for another human being. Given the specter of the “bad” mother as selfish, incompetent, and uncaring, this account is a risky one for childfree women to give. They often tried not to use it at all out of fear of “offending” the listener, who was likely to be a parent.

Though the childfree women disagreed with most women’s “decisions” to become mothers (which they sometimes saw women as consciously making and other times did not), they emphasized that their own choice—to work rather than to have children—was still a good one. Liberal feminism provided the women with a moral identity through paid work, as they could see their devotion to education and careers as positive and useful for society.

The women use the rhetoric of choice and adherence to a classed self-development imperative in their accounts. Those accounts are in line with mainstream values, and since the accounts are meant to appeal to audiences, they should be successful. The choice not to have children and instead invest in education and a career should only elicit a shrug. Yet the choice to be childfree is still not a respected choice—why? Perhaps the reason that the women’s accounts are not accepted is because, despite the pervasive individualist ideology, childfree women are still defying deeply embedded expectations for women (i.e., the expectation to mother). The women are touching a deeper nerve for many people, and that deeper nerve is a loyalty to essentialist notions of gender. Because these women are women, people may still expect them to want, have, and be focused on children (Park 2002). The women may not call for a restructuring of the gender order with their accounts, but they still
do challenge an essentialist gender ideology through their mere existence as women who want to be and have chosen to be childfree.

Challenging essentialist notions of gender thus strains childfree women’s interactions with their peers and relatives who are invested in the belief that all women want children. When a childfree woman works at a job she loves, travels, has date nights with her partner, and partakes in activities that women with children may not have time for, she is a constant reminder that she has, in some way, defied gender expectations. Perhaps women in the workplace who have children feel threatened by childfree women, given that the ideal worker is an unencumbered one and women with children do not fit this model. Most of the literature on childfree (and childless) women has studied women who have chosen not to (or cannot) have children. Future research should examine how women with children feel about childfree women, especially since my research shows that these women sometimes pressure childfree women to have children. Despite these tensions, the childfree women use accounts to find a way to get along with those with whom they have developed important relationships.

For example, when fellow graduate students bring their new babies to the office, most of the other students make an attempt to see the baby, tell the mother how cute the child is, and so on. I, in contrast, remain in my office, partially because I do not desire to see the child (especially if I do not personally know the mother) but especially because I do not want to be a part of the celebration of childbearing. Yet, if asked, I do not say that I did not go to see the child because I find babies uninteresting, because I think motherhood is oppressive, or because I see celebrating childbearing as a cornerstone of upholding gender inequality—I
want to get along in the community and feel as though those accounts would hurt that goal. I 
therefore provide a palatable account (‘I’m just swamped with work right now’) rather than 
one that poses too great a challenge for my audience.

Similarly, by using liberal rhetoric and appealing to mainstream values, the women 
try to get along in their communities without posing too big a challenge. Their attempts, in 
some ways, exert a cost on them: they are stigmatized, undermined (“you’ll change your 
mind”), teased, and pressured. These hurtful interactions may explain their desires to find a 
childfree community, like the childfree Listserv from which I recruited. There, they can be 
honest about their plans to be childfree and not face stigma, inquiry, or pressure.

But of course all this begs the question: What forces compel the desire to get along? 
The first may be an interest in appearing appropriately gendered. Women who defy gender 
expectations in one area may try to compensate in another area to make up for their gender 
transgression (Ezzell 2009): since childfree women may threaten normative notions of 
gender by not wanting children, enacting a successful gender performance through accounts 
may recoup lost femininity and make them appear less threatening. One element of an 
appropriate performance of femininity is to be polite and considerate of others’ feelings. 
Another is to avoid “rocking the boat” by, for example, being assertive about convictions 
deemed controversial. A final element is that, to “do” gender successfully, a woman must not 
challenge feminine rituals. In short, women have been socialized to “play nice.”

Along with the possibility that these women desire to enact successful gender 
performances, they may also have practical interests in getting along with their peers and
colleagues: if they do not attempt to diminish the tension that arises from their being childfree, they may lose important resources. They may be left out of work projects or lose critical sources of support. When I offer a “polite” account for not seeing someone’s child, I do so with the thought in mind that I rely on my colleagues to listen to my research ideas, review my papers, and study together for major exams. Access to those resources contributes to my success in my graduate program, which will hopefully make me a more promising job candidate when I finish. When an individual wants to acquire a middle- or upper-class job, the need to maximize success in the competitive job market intensifies gender socialization. As the childfree women interact with their peers, colleagues, and family members, they therefore continue to rely on what they hope are nonthreatening accounts that draw on and reflect liberal feminism.

While liberal feminism has turned out to be useful for these women in terms of their moral identities and accounts, it does not present a systematic challenge to the gender order. Rather, it provides the women with accounts centered on individualism and natural rights. An individualistic approach may be appealing to these women as white, middle-class professionals who are exemplars of the achievement ideology. They are aware of their own hard work and their desire to succeed through competition. They have a stake in our current system that rewards them for that work and in which they have invested both their finances and their emotions. To feel good about their success means to see it as self-determined, as the logical consequence of their efforts. In other words, these women are in many ways mainstream, so it makes sense that mainstream achievement ideology encourages them to
take an individualistic approach to solving problems. The interpersonal interaction of account-giving is shaped by a mainstream ideology that is situated within and reflects a patriarchal structure. The individualistic approach of account-giving benefits men and benefits capitalists: capitalists make money off of the women’s reinforcement of the value of working, while men in general are spared a revolutionary motherhood movement.

With its focus on the individual as the center and with its assumption of women’s sameness with men, liberal feminism prevents women from seeing how they might be connected to other women in ways that create a potential for revolutionary change. The women in this research lead comfortable, middle- and upper-middle-class lives, and thus do not need or are able to purchase the solutions to problems faced by minority and poor women. While most of these women seem to be aware of minority and poor women’s struggles to work and bear children, they do not perceive commonalities, or at least articulate any. When liberal feminism provides a language of choice, it also provides a language of blame. When the childfree women show why they are better than other women, typically by having made a superior choice to be childfree while other women made no choices and became mothers, they end up limiting or closing off their ability to sympathize with the plight of modern-day mothers. If white, middle-class women are inclined to blame other women for their circumstances, as we see that they sometimes do, then liberal feminism does not make evident a collective stance that might help them advocate for structural and ideological change.
Liberal feminism, coupled with these women’s relative economic and educational privileges, has given these women an account for their childfreeness. They are able to draw on the language of choice, the right to self-fulfillment, and the self-development imperative so prevalent in U.S. society. At the same time, the failure of liberal feminism is that it accommodates and even reinforces the status quo. Liberal feminism, with its emphasis on women’s paid employment, gives capitalists power as women attach themselves strongly to their jobs. The accounts also let men off the hook, centering the women at the core of decision-making around parenthood and failing to demand a change in heterosexual relationships. The accounts shaped by liberal feminism do not radically transform either the conditions and ideologies that structure working women’s lives or the conditions and ideologies that structure mothers’ lives. In these ways, liberal feminism allows women to enact positive change in their own lives while preventing them from developing a collectivist orientation to radically restructure the social world.

Of course, there are many childfree women who are racial minorities, who do not attend graduate school, and who hold working-class jobs. It is possible—indeed, probable—that the individualistic, liberal feminist orientation discussed here is a product of the sample characteristics. That is, a different sample might yield a more collective, radical feminist orientation that challenges the gender order. Future research should be undertaken to locate and interview those women who might insist upon changing structures to facilitate support for women who desire to mother while simultaneously supporting those who do not.
We can expect that the trend towards childfreeness will continue to grow, especially as the current recession pushes more women into higher education and demands more working hours to maintain middle-class lifestyles. How do we get women out of the double-bind in which they are placed? As white, middle-class women continue to opt out of motherhood, elites and policy makers will likely grow concerned that the “right” kinds of women are not reproducing while the “wrong” kinds of women are. Perhaps then, they will be motivated to change our current job structure which forces women into this double-bind. An ideological shift—among women and men—is also necessary, challenging the idea that women should “want it all,” should have children, should work, and should mother intensively. Not until both structural and ideological shifts have been made will women be released from the double bind.

Those shifts are not impossible; indeed, there are alternatives to the way society is currently organized. What can—and should—women do now? Angela Davis (1998:186) writes that

Within the present fabric of domination, the women’s movement is confronted with urgent oppositional tasks…Not only must there be agitation around the economic situation of women, but equally important, the entire superstructural nexus of women’s oppression must be met with constant criticism and organized assaults. Connell (2005:229-230) provides examples of what those “oppositional tasks” might include:
Pursuing social justice...means contesting men’s predominance in the state, professions and management, and ending men’s violence against women...changing the institutional structures that make elite power and body-to-body violence possible in the first place...ending the patriarchal dividend in the money economy, sharing the burden of domestic work and equalizing access to education and training...[and] ending the stigma of sexual difference and the imposition of compulsory heterosexuality, and reconstructing heterosexuality on the basis of reciprocity, not hierarchy.

While white middle- and upper-class women may be invested in capitalist and gender systems that privilege them (and may increase their own class standing by choosing to be childfree) and thus may not perceive an incentive for change, they are in a position to advocate for change. This group of women is likely to have substantial financial resources, networks, and, perhaps most importantly, an authority that comes from being white and middle and upper class. As the powers-that-be (e.g., banks and corporations) fall under criticism, women should stake a claim to gender equality while a new social order is debated and developed.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following questions will serve as an interview guide, though respondents’ answers may lead to unforeseen questions.

1. Tell me a little about yourself.

2. How do you see yourself?

3. How do you think others see yourself?

4. Describe a typical day for you.

5. The rest of this interview, in terms of content, is really driven by what you think is important. I’m asking people to describe their experiences with not having children, starting the story wherever they think that story begins for them.

Additional prompting and questions:

6. What does being a woman mean to you? What does being a mother mean to you? Have you always thought of these identities this way?

7. When you were a girl, did you ever think about what you’d be like when you were older? What did you imagine? Where do you think your ideas came from? Did you ever think about being a mother? Did you ever play “house”?

8. Tell me about your family. What was/is your relationship like with your mother? What was/is your relationship like with your father? Has it always been that way?
9. Do you know any women who are homemakers? What do you think about their decision to stay home? Do you know any mothers who are full-time workers? What do you think about their decision to work and have a child?

10. Do you consider yourself to be feminine? What does that mean to you (i.e., what does being feminine entail)?

11. Have you ever been pregnant? Hypothetically speaking, what would you do/how would you feel if you found out tomorrow you were pregnant?

12. Was there a particular time when you made a decision to be childfree?

13. What does it mean to you for a woman to be without children?

14. Have you talked with any friends or family members about your decision to remain childfree?

15. How have friends and relatives responded?

16. How do you respond when strangers or acquaintances ask why you do not have children?

17. Tell me what you think is expected of women today (e.g., to stay home with children, to contribute to the household income by working part- or full-time, etc.).

18. Do you have female friends/relatives who are mothers? What do you think of them as women? (How) do you think they are different from you?

19. Do you have female friends/relatives who also don’t have children? What do you think of their being without children? What do you think of them as women?

20. Growing up, did you envision yourself having children one day?

21. Would you like to be raising children right now?
22. Would you like to raise children in the future?

23. What do you think are the advantages of having children? Conversely, what are the advantages of not having children? What are the disadvantages of having children?

24. Did you consult anyone in your decision to be childfree?

25. Does your partner share the same desire to be childfree, or would s/he like to have children? If s/he would like children: Does your partner’s desire to have children create any conflict in your relationship? How is that conflict handled?

**Final questions:**

26. Do you currently have a chance to interact with other children (e.g., nieces or nephews)? How do you feel when you are with them?

27. Do you feel any pressure to change your mind about having children? From whom?

28. Has your mother said anything to you that leads you to believe she wishes you had children? Anyone else?

29. What do you say to other people who criticize your decision not to have children?

30. Does your job influence your decision to remain childfree?

31. What might make you want to have children (e.g., a more flexible work schedule; assurance of emotional, practical, or financial support; etc.), if anything?

32. Do you find fulfillment in any activities (e.g., work, hobbies)? If so, do you think having children would have prevented you from taking part in that? Why or why not?
33. Do you consider yourself a feminist? If so, what does that mean to you? Is there a particular time you can identify when you “became” a feminist?

34. Is there anything you’d like to add? Is there anything from the interview that you’d like to go back to or anything that you thought we’d talk about and we haven’t?