

Mothering beyond motherhood

A narrative study on how childfree women construe mothering and their role in the lives of children



Talitha Koopmans

1023861

talitha.koopmans@uvh.nl

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University of Humanistic Studies

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Thesis supervisor: Prof. Dr. Inge van Nistelrooij

Second Reader: Rodante van der Waal, MA

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“ In leaving no descendants, however, childless aunts do tend to vanish from memory after a mere generation, quickly forgotten, their lives as transitory as butterflies. but they are vital as they live, and they can even be heroic. Even in my own family's recent history, there are stories on both sides of truly magnificent aunties who stepped in and saved the day during emergencies. Often able to accrue education and resources precisely because they were childless, these women had enough spare income and compassion to pay for lifesaving operations, or to rescue the family farm, or to take in a child whose mother had fallen gravely ill. I have a friend who calls these sorts of child-rescuing aunties "sparents" -- "spare parents" -- and the world is filled with them.”

- Elizabeth Gilbert, *Committed*

PREFACE

Mothering beyond motherhood is the final product of an intensive, exciting year in which I did the Master Care Ethics and Policy at the University of Humanistic Studies. If I had to name the crux of this study, it would be that we are all dependent on each other to make the big things, but also the small things possible. This insight also applies to the subject of this study, the mothering of childfree women and the role they play in the lives of children. Parents do not care for their children in isolation and require support to be able to care. This sentiment is also expressed in the art on the cover of this thesis: different mice with different roles who all support each other and make it possible for the child mouse to flourish.

The reason I became interested in this topic, is because as a childfree woman myself, I did not understand the common assumption that if you do not want children, you must hate children. In fact, in real life and online, I saw many people that adored children but still did not want any children of their own. Interestingly, in the preface of my bachelor thesis from two years ago, I had already expressed this sense of wonder. This led me to think that maybe certain realities of childfree people were not being heard by most and needed to be addressed.

To return to the notion of dependency, the process of doing my thesis also made me realize how important other people are in making this thesis possible. Firstly, I want to thank my thesis advisor Inge who believed in me wholeheartedly and challenged me to bring my thesis to the next level. Your faith in me helped me have confidence in myself. Secondly, I want to thank the participants of this study for being so open and vulnerable with me. Your voices deserve to be heard! Thirdly, I want to thank my parents for taking care of me. I often do not appreciate it enough, but it is very easy to have a homecooked meal every day that I do not need to make myself. Fourthly, I want to thank my friends Emma, Jolinda, Bia and Morgan who gave me much needed entertainment during this process. Lastly, I want to thank my friends Elise and Jess who both checked my work and helped me with questions I had about this thesis. While this thesis is written by me, it is within the context of many people who knowingly or unknowingly supported me.

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SUMMARY

Throughout the past few decades, there has been a noticeable increase in people who choose to remain without children. One area of childfree studies is the stigma that comes with this choice. Society tends to perceive childfree people as broken, selfish and uncaring. Especially childfree women are judged because they defy the idea that all women should be (come) mothers. One public opinion that triggered this study is that the childfree must dislike children. This ignores the fact that childfree women can play an important part in the care of children and even could be mothering. Specifically early care ethicists have thought a lot about mothering, but up till now, there has been no research on childfree women and the possibility that they mother. The purpose of this thesis is to challenge the stigma of childfree women as cold, selfish and uncaring towards children, and to reconsider the practice of mothering within care ethics by applying the insight of childfree women and queer theory.

This study uses narrative inquiry to look at the way childfree women construe mothering in their own life. This consists of both a theoretical and empirical component. The theoretical component uses insights from care ethics and queer theory that reveal mothering to be a collective, public and relational practice. The empirical component consists of semi-structured interviews with six childfree women from Europe or North America. Six narratives emerge from the empirical data that lead to several insights. One conclusion is that while participants perceive themselves to meet certain demands that make up the practice of mothering, they do this in unique ways and do not always call this mothering. Another insight is that mothering happens within nested dependencies, where parents rely on the support of others to be able to care for their children or even have their children be cared for by others. This mothering with multiple mothering figures in a complex web of relations creates a unique demand: attunement. Mothering figures will have to attune to each other's values in raising a child, while simultaneously they have to do justice to their own specific values.

Three recommendations for future research arise from this. One recommendation is to study the way mothering figures maintain relationships with other mothering figures. Another recommendation is to look at what childrearing tasks mothers want to delegate to other mothering figures and which ones they want to solely do themselves. The last recommendation is to study what terms childfree people would use to describe the way they care for their children, whether that is mothering, care or something else.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 MOTIVATION

“But you would be such a great mom!” is what a friend responded in mild outrage when I told them I did not want children. While I do not doubt my friend’s good intentions, something bothered me about this statement. Apparently, I should be a mother, simply because I meet the requirements to be one. My non-existent desire to have children should be overruled by the supposed mothering qualities I possess. Implicitly, my friend expressed “the motherhood mandate”, which is the pervasive belief that the most meaningful thing a woman can do is become a mother, and that all women should want to be mothers (Russo, 1976, pp. 144, 148). I wondered if my mothering qualities could be of use outside the context of raising my own child. Could I not just be a wonderful aunt? Could I not be the best pet mom?

More broadly, I wondered how other childfree women – those who consciously make the decision to remain without children (Heaton et al., 1999; Kelly, 2009) – make use of their qualities that society deems maternal. Do they actively reject these qualities in themselves? Or do they make these qualities of value in ways different than motherhood?

Through following the Master Care Ethics and Policy at the University of Humanistic Studies, I have learned that general theoretical concepts such as mothering can only be understood through particular practices. By studying these practices, marginalized and unheard voices can be amplified. With the knowledge and insights this master’s has provided me, I will be able to do justice to mothering in the lives of childfree women.

1.2 SOCIETAL RELEVANCE

Childfree people, also known as “voluntary childless” and “intentionally childless” (Shapiro, 2014), are those who make the voluntary decision to not have children in their lifetime (Heaton et al., 1999; Kelly, 2009). Childfree people are often distinguished from childless people by one having a choice while the other does not (Moore, 2014; Harrington, 2019). Neither the term “childfree” or “childless” is ideal. On the one hand, childfree assumes a

negative perception of children (Harrington, 2019), while research suggests childfree people may still enjoy close relationships with children (Gillespie, 1999; K. Park, 2002; Allen & Wiles, 2013; Blackstone, 2014). Another issue with the term “childfree” is how it assumes people consciously made the decision to remain without children, whereas several studies have found childfree people perceive differing degrees of choice (Gillespie, 1999; Moore, 2014; Harrington, 2019) or not even as a choice at all (Morison et al., 2016). In the case of the latter, childfree people may perceive their childfree status to be “natural”, similar to how mothers may have the “natural” desire to have children (Morison et al., 2016). On the other hand, the term “childless” suggests a loss and an absence, often resulting in perceiving those without children as broken and requiring feelings of pity (Bays, 2017; Harrington, 2019). Nevertheless, “childfree” will be used within this thesis to avoid confusion with those who cannot have children, while remaining conscious of the ambiguity that this term may hold.

While there are no clear statistics, academics claim that childfree people are on the rise in both Europe and North America (Beaujouan et al., 2017; Z. P. Neal & J. W. Neal, 2022). This rise may be explained by social developments: an increase in women’s reproductive choice, women’s access to the labor market (Gillespie, 2003) and an increase in environmental concerns making people reconsider having children (Schneider-Mayerson & Leong, 2020; Krählenbühl, 2022). It can also be explained by more individual developments, such as perceiving advantages of remaining childfree and sometimes even radically rejecting motherhood (Gillespie, 2003).

At the same time, childfree individuals are stigmatized and assigned a deviant status by society (K. Park, 2002; Wilson, 2014; Harrington, 2019). This may stem from the fact that society assumes that having children is natural, even crucial for the individual, familial and social well-being of people (Heitlinger, 1991; K. Park, 2002; Turnbull et al., 2016). These assumptions naturalize parenthood, and thus result in non-parents being seen as unnatural (Wilson, 2014; Harrington, 2019). Childfree people are perceived as not quite human, categorizing them as “the Other” (Harrington, 2019). Various manifestations of othering occur where childfree people are either looked up to or looked down upon. For example, Bays’ study (2017) revealed that childfree people elicited feelings of envy among participants. Bays (2017) suggests this envy may be evoked by the often high educational, occupational and economic success of childfree people and how childfree people do not have to pay the high costs (financially and emotionally) of childrearing. Another way of othering is where society assigns false negative traits to childfree people such as being cold-hearted, uncaring and

materialistic (K. Park, 2002). Society also assumes childfree people are less psychologically fulfilled than parents (Ashburn-Nardo, 2016). Lorey (2011) argues that othering also becomes visible in denying the Other certain privileges that those who fit the norms enjoy. For example, childfree people's needs are less likely to be taken into consideration: childfree people are more often expected to work overtime and take on more tasks than co-workers who are parents, their sterilization is denied in case they may change their mind (Bays, 2017) and unhappiness is deemed their own fault, often resulting in inadequate mental health facilities for childfree people (Gold, 2012; Harrington, 2019).

Within the discussions about childfree lives, childfree *women* are uniquely situated in an essentialist discourse (Gillespie, 2000; Koropeckyj-Cox et al. 2007; Shapiro, 2014). Unlike childfree men, womanhood and motherhood are often equated (Russo, 1976; Gillespie, 2000; Shapiro, 2014). Mothering is not solely something women do, but what women are (Gillespie, 2000). Women who have children are deemed "natural" by following through with what their bodies were made for and the roles they are supposed to fill according to society, while women who do not have children are "unnatural" and "unfeminine" (Letherby & Williams, 1999; Gillespie, 2000; Peterson & Engwall, 2013; Shapiro, 2014). Society often vilifies and stigmatizes women because of their childfree status. They are not just perceived as the Other in relation to their parental status, but also as the Other in relation to the feminine ideal (Gillespie, 2000; Peterson & Engwall, 2013).

The increase of childfree people in a society that tends to stigmatize them, especially childfree women, requires more attention to accommodating and validating their needs within this society.

1.3 SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

This needed attention for childfree people has been growing since the late 70s in the form of academic interest in the lives of childfree people (Ashburn-Nardo, 2016). Studies about childfree people can be broadly categorized in four debates: (1) the characteristics of those who are childfree, (2) the motivations to be childfree, (3) the consequences of being childfree and (4) the stigmatization of childfree people and the responses to this stigma (Shapiro, 2014). Quantitative studies mostly focus on the first and third debate. They estimate the number of people to be childfree (Beaujouan et al., 2017; Z. P. Neal & J. W. Neal, 2022), the effects on

physical and mental well-being and marital satisfaction (Somers, 1993; Mueller & Yoder, 1999; Z. P. Neal & J. W. Neal, 2022; Stahnke et al., 2022), which demographic characteristics childfree people hold (Heaton et al., 1999; Abma & Martinez, 2006; Z. P. Neal & J. W. Neal, 2022) and the perceived personality traits of childfree people (Mueller & Yoder, 1999; Ashburn-Nardo, 2016; Bays, 2017). Bays (2017) confirms earlier findings that childfree women are perceived more negatively than childless women and mothers. Childfree women were seen as less warm than mothers and arose feelings such as disgust and harmful intent (e.g. discrimination) among participants. Bays (2017) suggests these feelings may stem from a view of childfree women as violating social and gender norms, as well as not contributing to the next generation by raising children.

Qualitative studies focus on the second and fourth debate: the motivations to be childfree (Houseknecht, 1987; Gillespie, 2003; Blackstone & Stewart, 2016) and the experience of being childfree in a pronatalist society (K. Park, 2002; Kelly, 2009; Morison et al., 2015). By using insights from queer theory, Harrington (2019) proposes that the stigmatization of childfree people has to do with wanting to force people into rigid categories – you are either a parent or not –, while in reality, childfree people may engage in mothering activities. This hypothesis is made plausible by other studies (Gillespie, 1999; K. Park, 2002; Allen & Wiles, 2013; Blackstone, 2014; Volsche, 2018). Gillespie (1999) makes a distinction between those who radically reject motherhood and those who just prefer a childfree lifestyle. In the case of the latter, many childfree women stated that they had close relationships with other people’s children (Gillespie, 1999; K. Park, 2002), indicating there is a possibility of “mothering” among childfree women.¹ The study of Allen and Wiles (2013) offers several examples of childfree/childless participants playing different roles in the lives of children throughout their life. To do justice to these experiences, they propose a queer/nonnormative understanding of parenthood. On top of the mothering of children, both Blackstone (2014) and Volsche (2018) suggest the possibility of “pet parenting” practiced often (but not solely) by childfree people. While Volsche (2018) does emphasize that the participants in her study did not think the

¹ The use of the term “mothering”, instead of for example “parenting”, is a choice that requires justification. I follow Van Nistelrooij (2022) in claiming this is a socio-political statement: it amplifies the voice of women and particularly mothers in a tradition where it is these voices that have been systematically ignored (Ruddick, 1989; 1995; Tronto, 1993). Another reason I use “mothering” is to recognize that most of the childrearing tasks have been and are done by women, even now that fathers are becoming more involved (Kittay, 1999; Budds, 2021). This does not mean that I aim to exclude men and devalue the importance of their care for children, but using a gender-neutral term such as “parenting” would falsely suggest that there is an equal distribution of childrearing tasks (See Budds, 2021). However, I recognize the controversial nature of choosing the term “mothering” and remain open to the possibility that a better term might be out there. This term would have to value both the care work of mothers, fathers and other caregivers while simultaneously recognizing its gendered distribution.

parenting of a child and the parenting of a pet were the same, it does offer the possibility that childfree people may be using their nurturing qualities in different ways. These studies all implicitly offer a perspective on the mothering of childfree women, and studying the mothering of childfree women may help in defying stereotypes of this group as cold, selfish and uncaring towards children. However, a potential criticism that may arise in taking this train of thought seriously is that the acceptance of childfree women then relies on them fitting within the norms of society. I think this criticism is only legitimate if this study would take the childfree women as a monolithic group, thus essentializing childfree women as necessarily having and practicing mothering qualities. I recognize that there are childfree people who do not mother at all or who may dislike children. Additionally, in no way do I want to suggest that mothers and those who are not mothers play the same role in the lives of children, believing them to be different and historically being assigned different levels of responsibility (Ruddick, 1989;1995; Budds, 2021). Rather, this study aims to contribute to understanding the complexity and diversity of childfree people

This study uses a care ethical framework, and this requires justification by naming the added value of care ethics to this topic. While care ethics does not seem to make any mention of childfree people, motherhood was used as an ethical paradigm by early care ethicists (Adams, 2014). Care ethicists have been of great importance in making the voices of women and mothers heard in the public and academic sphere (Adams, 2014; Van Nistelrooij, 2022). They amplify the moral and political significance of motherhood and/or mothering in showing the unequal distribution of care responsibilities (Kittay, 1999), the importance of care for the functioning of society (Held, 1987; Kittay, 1999; Noddings, 2013) and the interdependence of human beings as a starting point for moral thinking (Held, 1987). Especially Ruddick's (1989;1995) understanding of mothering is important for this study; she argues mothering is a practice that can be done by everyone after the child is born. Ruddick (1989;1995) thus distinguishes motherhood (identity and ideology) from mothering (practice). While Ruddick (1989;1995) does not mention childfree women, her distinction does leave space that mothering may be done by childfree people. However, most of the care ethicists who wrote about motherhood and/or mothering have been criticized for their essentialism and refusal to think outside the nuclear family (Hoagland, 1990; Tronto, 1993; Marvin, 2019; Gary, 2022). In the 90s, a political turn occurred where theorizing within care ethics focused less on specific acts of caring by women, and more so on how care – historically primarily done by women – could bring a more genderless moral and political theory about (Hankivsky, 2014;

Gary, 2022). Care ethicists such as White (2015), Kittay (2019) and Van Nistelrooij (2022) do still engage with the topic of mothering while aiming to avoid essentialism and romanticization. Adams (2014) argues that in order to avoid reinforcing injustices within mothering, care ethicists should draw upon as many diverse experiences of mothering as possible. This study aligns with this ambition by drawing upon the mothering of childfree women.

While both care ethics and childfree studies offer important insights on respectively mothering and being childfree, up till now no study on the relationship between the two has been conducted. Mapping this relationship may offer unique insights about mothering and being childfree that have been previously neglected.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research is twofold: (a) to challenge the stigma of childfree women as cold, selfish and uncaring towards children, and (b) to reconsider the practice of mothering within care ethics by applying the insights of childfree women and queer theory.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

MAIN QUESTION:

How do six childfree women from Europe or North America construe mothering, and how can their insights and queer theory contribute to the understanding of practices of mothering within care ethics?

SUBQUESTIONS:

1. What are the main theoretical insights about mothering care ethics and queer theory provide that suggest the possibility that childfree women may mother?
2. How do six childfree women from Europe or North America construe their narratives regarding mothering?

3. What insights do the narratives of six childfree women and queer theory add to the understanding of mothering within care ethics?

2. STUDY DESIGN

2.1 RESEARCH APPROACH

This study uses two research approaches: the Utrecht care ethics approach and queer theory. Within the Utrecht care ethics, the concept of care is central, understood primarily as a social and political practice (Leget et al., 2019). The former means that care is known to be relational, practiced between one or more care givers and one or more care receivers in which their mutual presence has implications for the actions that follow. The latter means that care is practiced within a society which has implications for the way people can care. Unique within this care ethics approach is the dialectical relation between theoretical insights and empirical research; theoretical insights are a lens through which one looks at a care practice and in turn, the practice hones and complements theoretical insights. This approach claims that understanding a phenomenon requires looking at the everyday lives of people and their social and cultural embeddedness. Only through departing from these everyday lives, studies can be relevant and applicable to ordinary people (Leget et al., 2019). This research approach lends itself well to this study because the dialectical relation allows for empirical insights from everyday lives of childfree women to be of relevance and enhance the understanding of the concept of mothering within care ethics.

Similarly, queer theory draws upon everyday lives of people, but uses this to challenge and deconstruct normative understandings of concepts and identities, in essence, an anti-normative approach (Gamson, 2000; Browne & Nash, 2010). Most queer theorists challenge a binary understanding of concepts and identities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather, they argue that concepts and identities are historically and socially constructed through power and identity struggles (Gamson, 2000; Cresswell & Poth, 2018). This view of reality is not supported by all queer theorists, especially not by those who argue that identities exist independently from human thinking (Sullivan, 2003; Browne & Nash, 2010). However, for this study, it suffices to know that queer theorists perceive “queer” to be primarily a deviation from societal norms and use this to challenge dominant discourses in society (Gamson, 2000). Queer theory values the voices and experiences of those who have been suppressed (Gamson, 2000). This approach is useful to this study because it challenges a binary approach, through

which it allows for mothering to be separated from motherhood and thus creates the possibility that childfree women may mother. Additionally, it allows for non-normative understandings of mothering and in this way can give a voice to the perspectives of childfree women on mothering that have mostly gone unheard.

2.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses the method of narrative inquiry. Through narratives, people construe identities, make meaning, connect with others, position themselves in the world and bring about change (Riessman, 2008). Similar to the Utrecht care ethics and queer theory, narrative inquiry is grounded in the study of the particular. Narrative inquiry proposes that narratives do not only say something about the individual, but also about their social, institutional and geographical context (Riessman, 2008). This makes it possible to gain a fuller picture of a phenomenon by studying the particular (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Visse, 2014). Considering that childfree women often live in pronatalist societies (Turnbull et al., 2016; Harrington, 2019), it is interesting to see how they construe mothering within that context and how they relate to motherhood. Another characteristic of narrative inquiry is that it is a social endeavor; the narratives and the meaning of these narratives come about in a dialogue between the participant and the researcher (Riessman, 2008; Visse, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This means that narrative inquiry does not propose a universal truth but allows for shifting meanings in understanding a phenomenon (Visse, 2014). On top of this, the particular focus of narrative inquiry is an especially fitting method for allowing (unheard) voices to be heard (Riessman, 2008). In the case of this study, this applies particularly to the voices of childfree women. This methodology brings a fuller picture of mothering into view.

2.3 SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

Six participants have been gathered through various channels: childfree communities and organizations such as *We Are Childfree*, *Conceivable Future*, *Reddit's Childfree* and the closed Facebook group *Childfree and Sterile/Seeking Sterilization*, and my own network. With *We Are Childfree*, *Reddit's Childfree*, and *Childfree and Sterile/Seeking Sterilization* I received no

or a negative response from either the moderators or members within those communities. My own network allowed me to gather two participants, while *Conceivable Future* yielded four participants.

To identify information-rich cases (Patton, 2014), purposeful random sampling has been used. The selection of cases is still random, but participants did need to meet a few criteria:

- Identifies as childfree in order to prevent the merging of those who are childfree and those who are childless, to who different experiences apply (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012)
- Identifies as a woman to limit the scope of this research and evidence showing that the position of childfree women differs from that of men (Gillespie, 2000; Koropecykj-Cox et al. 2007; Shapiro, 2014).
- Lives in Europe or North America, because it is mostly within these countries women make the decision to remain childfree (Beaujouan et al., 2017; Z. P. Neal & J. W. Neal, 2022).
- Is at least 25 years old, assuming it is around this age women tend to make reproductive choices in the West and are more likely to be engaged in mothering.²

2.4 DATA COLLECTION

The data collection consisted of two elements:

1. Literature Review

A literature review has been conducted on the practice of mothering within care ethics and queer theory. This has helped to understand the field in which this study takes place (Patton, 2014). Through the use of *Google Scholar* and course literature of the master Care Ethics and Policy, relevant literature has been identified. Additionally, *snowballing* has been used to identify other relevant literature that is mentioned by key articles (Wohlin, 2014). To limit the scope of this literature review, selection criteria have been applied:

² World Population Review (n.d.). *Average Age of Having First Child by Country 2023*. Retrieved February 27, 2023, from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/average-age-of-having-first-child-by-country>

- Only qualitative studies and theoretical studies will be used, thus excluding quantitative studies.
- Only literature that is written in English has been selected to make this literature review as traceable as possible.
- Only care ethical and queer literature have been selected that offer room for non-normative (read: non-nuclear and non-monomaternal) understandings of mothering, thus allowing the possibility that childfree women may mother. This means literature that opposes or makes no mention of the existence of mothering outside the nuclear family has been given less attention.
- Only literature has been selected that offers general insights into what the practice of mothering entails, thus excluding judgment on whether mothering is done well or badly.

Search terms that have been used and combined are “mothering”, “mothering queerly”, “queer mothering”, “othermothering”, “nonparental care”, “non-motherhood”, “community mothering”, “motherhood”, “monomaternalism”, “care ethics”, “pronatalism”, “childfree”, “voluntarily childless” and “intentionally childless”.

2. Interviews

The empirical data consist of six semi-structured interviews about the practice of mothering within the lives of childfree women. The advantage of semi-structured interviewing is that it allows focusing on certain topics while offering enough freedom to participants and the researcher to elaborate on topics that are of particular interest (Alamri, 2019). Semi-structured interviewing also aligns with the goal of narrative interviews: to receive as detailed and in-depth accounts as possible instead of short answers or general evaluations (Riessman, 2008). However, to keep the focus on the topic of mothering a topic list has been used (See Appendix 1). In the case of narrative interviewing, it is crucial to center the perspective of the participant instead of sorting the narratives to what the researcher wants to hear (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2015). To center the perspective of the participant, attentive listening is crucial (Riessman, 2008). This is made possible when the interviewer lets go of control and allows themselves to be open to the different possibilities presented by the participant. In line with this, I followed Anderson and Kirkpatrick’s (2015) advice to let the direction, content and pace of the interview be guided by the participant. I have refrained from formulating specific

questions beforehand, besides the first question, as well as writing down my thoughts and feelings before each interview to be able to focus fully on the participant during the interview. These notes are used to explain how I interpret the data and what may have affected its validity.

2.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Two forms of analysis have been applied to the interviews: a thematic analysis as explained by Riessman (2008) and a narrative analysis through the lenses of McCormack (2000).

A thematic analysis focuses on content and the comparisons of themes among participants, attributing less attention to the way a narrative is spoken (Riessman, 2008). Unlike the way thematic analysis is used in grounded theory, narrative inquiry emphasizes the importance of keeping the story as intact as possible, instead of pulling it apart into themes. This requires revealing each individual narrative (Riessman, 2008). Following Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), I have created portraits to reveal both each individual narrative and reveal different aspects of mothering. Until now, I have not been able to find any studies about the mothering of childfree women. This makes thematic analysis useful in exploring initial themes. All interviews have been transcribed and coded in *Atlas.TI version 9* by open and axial coding (Patton, 2014).

However, thematic analyses are often criticized for their inability to take the context of the narrative into account (Riessman, 2005). To address this concern, the lenses of McCormack (2000) are used. Her five lenses are as follows:

1. Active listening: I have listened to and read the interview several times to identify the characters in the narratives, the main events that happen, my position regarding the participant, and the way I respond in the interview.
2. Narrative processes: I identified the main point the participant is trying to make, the reason a specific story was told, the scenery of the story (who, what, when), the events and actions that occur in the story and how they are linked, and the way the story is closed.
3. Language: I identified what is said, how it is said and what remains unsaid.

4. Context: I identified how the story relates to the broader cultural context and the context of the interview.
5. Moments: I identified moments that were meaningful to the participant, whether that are turning points or self-reflective moments.



Figure 1 The Five Lenses of McCormack in Foxall et al. (2021)

The data analysis has been guided by sensitizing concepts that arose from the societal and scientific relevance, and the literature review (See Chapter 3). Sensitizing concepts are terms used by the group of people that is studied and that alert the researcher that something important is happening (Patton, 2014). The sensitizing concepts that have been used are: “caring”, “providing”, “emotional support”, “social acceptability”, “mothering”, “motherhood”, “respecting values”, “vulnerability”, “caregiver”, “judgment”, “choice”, “womanhood”, “femininity” and “relationality”.

2.6 QUALITY CRITERIA

The quality of a study relies on its validity and reliability (Boeije, 2014; Verhoeven, 2014). Validity is about measuring all that needs to be measured, and thus validity is about the accuracy of the measurement tool (Verhoeven, 2014). Reliability is about the consistent application of methods and measurement tools (Boeije, 2014).

Within qualitative research, the researcher themselves is the measurement tool (Patton, 2014). First, I have kept a reflexive journal for the entirety of the research process to write down my thoughts and assumptions to increase my own credibility. Parts of these reflections before and after the interviews and during the analysis are found in the appendix (See Appendix 2). Being aware of thoughts and assumptions helps with lessening the effects of a researcher's bias (Riessman, 2008). Second, two member checks (Patton, 2014) have been done to make sure the formulated narratives represent what the participant intended. One member check was a week after the interview where I gave a summary of the most important insights in the interview. The second member check was after I formulated the portraits. Thirdly, both data and theory triangulation are used to corroborate and question findings (Patton, 2014). For data triangulation, both a literature review and interviews have been conducted. For theory triangulation, the literature review offers various theoretical perspectives on mothering, primarily those of care ethics and queer theory. On top of this, multiple lenses have been used to analyze the interviews, offering room for ambiguity and different understandings (McCormack, 2000). Lastly, I have received feedback on the research proposal and this study from several peers and my supervisor. This allowed for diverse interpretations and corrections of errors.

The reliability of this research is partly enhanced by detailed explanations of the used methods, the used channels for data collection, the approached participants, the used types of analysis and the reflexive journal entailing my position within the research process (Riessman, 2008). This makes it less likely that methodological errors go unnoticed. Additionally, the interviews were recorded to ensure greater accuracy and enhance the persuasiveness of the narratives (Riessman, 2008).

While generalization of findings is unlikely due to the limited scope of this study, using *thick descriptions* does make the transferability of findings more likely and thus increases the validity of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

2.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Narrative inquiry is considered to be grounded in a relational ethic (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). The researcher and participant collaborate in shaping the participant's narrative, thus having a relationship that gives the researcher responsibility. In part, this responsibility is reflected in the researcher taking into account the needs and vulnerability of the participant (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). I have addressed this responsibility by making sure participants are well-informed about the study and their rights beforehand, and by having each participant sign an informed consent form (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This also offers participants the chance to withdraw at any moment. On top of this, two member checks have been done which gave participants the opportunity to request a different way of formulating or to delete specific information. Their data has been protected through a data management plan in which their data are anonymized and safely stored. The research proposal has been checked by the Ethical Board of the University of Humanistic Studies.

Another way the relational ethic is given shape is by me recognizing the power-imbalance between the participant and the researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Efforts were made to create a safe space for the participant through my adjusting to the participant's needs and requirements (e.g. when they wanted the interview, when they wanted a break), and by reminding the participant they are in control (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2008).

3. THE MOTHERING IS COMMUNAL: A LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will provide an answer to the first subquestion: *What are the main theoretical insights about mothering care ethics and queer theory provide that suggest the possibility that childfree women may mother?* The main purpose of this chapter is to define what mothering entails and offer care ethical and queer insights that allude to mothering going beyond the nuclear family. I will start by arguing that the works of care ethicists, such as Ruddick (1989;1995), Kittay (1999) and White (2015), bring about a view of mothering as a practice that can be separated from the identity of the mother, and that the mothering by mothers often relies on the support of other people who mother their child. Then, using critics of Ruddick's work and queer theory, I will attempt to fill the gaps that a care ethical understanding of mothering leaves open. This will reveal the diversity of mothering and the relationality of mothering that defies societal norms, while also delving deeper into the implications of this relationality. Studying mothering in both care ethics and queer theory makes mothering emerge as a collective, public and relational practice. This defies a solely nuclear and individualized understanding of mothering that often dominates its common conception (S. M. Park, 2013) and opens space to the possibility that childfree women may mother.

3.1 MOTHERING ≠ MOTHERHOOD IN CARE ETHICS

One of the most well-known theorists about mothering in both care ethics and maternal studies is Sara Ruddick. In her book *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*, Ruddick (1989;1995) challenges the naturalized and sentimentalized understanding of mothers. Motherhood is often regarded as something mothers instinctually know how to do, with women supposedly possessing a unique ability to care for children. A consequence of this is that the burden of childrearing tasks is mostly put on the shoulders of women. Additionally, mothering is often characterized by irrational emotions such as love and a natural inclination to mother, thus opposing mothering to any kind of rationality and logic (Bailey, 1994). Ruddick (1989;1995) abandons this view by claiming that out of the practice of mothering, maternal thinking arises. A practice is a range of activities that have shared aims and means through which those aims should be met according to society which makes it

possible to distinguish this specific practice from other practices. Studying a practice does not explain whether the practice is done well or bad, but it simply brings out the different elements of that practice. In the case of maternal thinking, Ruddick (1989;1995) gives the example of an older child pushing their younger sibling out of the way to get on top of the slide first (p. 23). Various options emerge for the mother: Does the mother praise their older child's competitiveness? Does she reprimand her older child by telling them to be nicer to their younger sibling? Does she stay silent so her younger child can learn to stand up for themselves? These are decisions mothers reflect on every day and are in no way natural or simple. A certain way of thinking arises (Ruddick, 1989;1995).

By focusing on mothering as an activity that one can partake in, Ruddick (1989;1995) is able to detach mothering activities from the identity of being a mother. In fact, Ruddick (1989; 1995) claims that mothering can be done by everyone, regardless of gender. This allows for a rich diversity of mothering figures, as this quote from Ruddick (1989;1995) echoes:

Mothers can care for one, few, or many children. Some may work so closely with others that it is impossible to identify one "mother," others share their work with many mothering persons, some work primarily in couples, and some work alone. Mothering in households is joined in many ways with mothering day-care centers, school, clinics, and other public institutions. (p. xii)

Mothering understood in this way goes beyond the nuclear family by showing mothering can also happen outside the household and thus creates a more collective practice of mothering. Although Ruddick does not elaborate enough on this idea and largely remains within the mother-child dyad (Rumsey, 1990), a similar sentiment can be found in the work of care ethicist Eva Feder Kittay (1999). Kittay (1999) states that people live in "nested dependencies" (p. 107), where those who care for others, the dependency workers, are dependent on the help of others to be able to care for those who are vulnerable. In fact, to meet the needs of another, one's own needs must be met to make the care relationship sustainable. A child is an example of those who require care from others because of their perceived vulnerability. More specifically on mothering, Kittay (1999) draws upon her own experience as a mother of a child with disabilities. Through this experience, she arrives at the concept of "distributed mothering" (p. 156): while she may be the mother of her child Sesha, mothering activities have been distributed among herself, the father of Sesha and various caregivers. While this is specific to the mothering of a child with disabilities, it does offer the

possibility that the mothering of a child can go beyond one mothering person. Once again, mothering emerges as a collective activity.

Up till now, this chapter has mostly spoken of mothering in abstract terms, but Ruddick (1989; 1995) also goes into more detail about what mothering is. Mothering is when someone takes up the responsibility of child care, making the practice a regular and substantial part of one's working life (Ruddick, 1989;1995, p. 17). Ruddick (1989; 1995) claims this responsibility consists of three demands that all mothering shares. The first demand is preservation: children, especially young children, are seen as notably vulnerable and depend on others to continue surviving. This requires someone to be aware of the needs of the child and more importantly, to respond with care to the vulnerability of that child. Someone may recognize a child is vulnerable but may still not take responsibility to meet the child's needs. This emphasizes the optional character of mothering. The second demand is growth, meaning children need to develop emotionally and intellectually. Opinions differ on what amount of interference this demand requires with some people saying children develop on their own. According to Ruddick (1989;1995), all children are complex and needy in a way that requires conscious nurturance. The third demand is social acceptability: the growth that is nurtured needs to be done in acceptable ways to society and the social groups the mothering person belongs to. In different ways, the mothering person may confirm the values of their social groups by instilling them in the child, but they also may reject certain values, like when they contradict their own values or the child's need for protection and nurturance. Meeting these demands is in no way an easy feat, with demands often conflicting with each other. Ruddick (1989; 1995) does state that these demands, especially those of growth and social acceptability, are given shape in unique ways through culture and society, and that the examples she offers for mothering are informed by her own white, Anglo-American, middle-class experience. However, she still claims that while these three demands are not meant to be exhaustive, they are at least crucial to all maternal work.

This last bit has often been a point of criticism on Ruddick's work with several critics claiming Ruddick's understanding of maternal thinking is ethnocentric (Diquinzio, 1993; Bailey, 1994; Lugones, 2003). Critics question how Ruddick can arrive at universal demands when they are partly based on her subjective experience. According to feminist thinker Patrice Diquinzio (1993), these universalizing tendencies lead to an essentialist understanding of mothering through normalizing certain kinds of mothering and ignoring others. In line with Patricia Hill Collins' work on black mothering (1990), feminist thinker Alison Bailey (1994)

emphasizes that racial-ethnic mothering consists of other demands like survival, identity and empowerment. These should not be reduced to the demands Ruddick proposes, mainly because this conceals the distinctness of racial-ethnic mothering in favor of commonalities. Bailey (1994) states: “This approach often leads to an insulting intellectual “division of labor”: white middle-class women come up with the theories, leaving women of color to provide lively narratives and entertaining experiences to support them.” (p. 195). For example, the survival of a white child is radically different from that of a black child. Also, the way children of color have to retain their identity in a predominantly white environment is central to racial-ethnic mothering. This makes Ruddick’s categories not as universal as she assumes.

Another critique Ruddick’s account of mothering has received is its focus on the demands of children, and by this, it fails to take into account that many mothers have a support system and their own demands (Rumsey, 1990; Ferguson, 1991). While Rumsey (1990) does agree that Ruddick is right in stating that a lot of mothers are isolated from help and are required to carry most of the weight of mothering, it is not necessarily the norm. It turns out a lot of cultures see mothering as a collective activity. Care ethicist, Julie Anne White (2015), illustrates this by analyzing the practice of other-mothering often done within marginalized communities that defies an individualized and domestic form of mothering. White (2015) claims that in a society where care is increasingly commodified (needs should be met through the market), the fact that care access is distributed across racialized and classed lines remains out of view. For African American mothers, this meant that they had to find other ways to make sufficient child care possible. In their case, having only one person to care for a child did not make sense, and a common response was that several women cared for a child. This conveys a much broader shared responsibility for the well-being of children and the well-being of mothers. Mothers must actively maintain relationships with other women and the community to take care of their children (White, 2015). Mothering understood in this way amplifies the diversity of mothering, that not just the needs of a child are important but also those of a mother, and the important role the community can play in meeting these needs. At the same time, White (2015) does not elaborate on how relationships are maintained when mothering is more communal.

These different demands, even coming from others than the child, show that Ruddick’s work (1989; 1995) is not without fault. Philosopher Jean Keller (2010) offers a way to deal with both the critique on Ruddick’s nearly universal demands and her child-centric focus by

bridging the divide between Ruddick's universalism and localized understandings of mothering. Keller (2010) reworks Ruddick's theory by partly aligning herself with the suggestion to make the categories that are used in mothering explicit, relational and unstable and thus open for revision. She suggests that Ruddick should take differences in mothering seriously and consider the implications they have for the categories Ruddick uses. These other mothering practices may identify goals of mothering that would have otherwise remained undiscovered. On top of this, Keller (2010) proposes to defer from a child-centric view of mothering, as Ruddick holds, and have a relational view that addresses the demands made by the relationship between the child and the person that mothers. This allows us to consider the needs of both parties, understood in their relationality (Keller, 2010).

3.2 ALL THOSE DIFFERENT MOTHERS IN QUEER THEORY

This relational view on mothering also becomes visible within queer theory. Queer theorist Shelley M. Park (2013) proposes that a queer understanding of family will help in moving beyond monomaternalism as the sole correct view of motherhood and reveal the complex interplay of several caregivers whose relationship with the child and other caregivers is important. Monomaternalism is the belief and ideology that a child can only have one real mother and that this real mother should hold the primary responsibility for the child. As S. M. Park (2013) argues, this belief hides the various realities of children with two or more mothers, in the case of adoption, lesbian parents, stepmothers, polyamorous parents and surrogacy mothers. Through this, it diminishes the work done by other mothers in their childbearing and/or childrearing.

To reveal the implicit assumptions that hide in a monomaternalistic perception of motherhood, S. M. Park's (2013) critique needs to be elaborated on in more detail. The monomaternalistic thought process is as follows: the biological mother bears the child and through this process of pregnancy and childbearing creates a unique and almost spiritual connection with the child, becoming the sole real mother. Two implicit claims arise within this way of thinking: no real mother would give up their child because of this connection so those mothers who do give up their children are not real or good mothers, and real mothers should be able to carry the responsibility for their child devoid of any support. According to S. M. Park (2013), monomaternalism fails to acknowledge how mothers sometimes have to and do mother

cooperatively. This failure leads to child welfare policies and custody laws that only recognize one real mother and thus inadequately support the relationship between children and the different mothers they may have and the relationship among mothers themselves, related and non-related caregivers. Additionally, sociologists Karin Sardadvar and Katharina Miko (2014) mention that the essentialist belief in this unique connection between the one who births and the child legitimizes an unequal, gendered distribution of childrearing tasks. They give the example of breastfeeding: most mothers can breastfeed while the father cannot, which then leads to mothers being perceived as best suited to take care of the child in the early months. During these months, a routine is created where most childrearing tasks are assigned to the mother due to her biological capacities. So even when the child grows more independent and has needs the father can meet, the created division of labor and routines still maintains the mother as the primary caregiver (Sardadvar & Miko, 2014).

To move away from monomaternality, S. Park (2013) proposes a polymaternality view: a child can have more than one mother and childrearing is the responsibility of several people, instead of just the “real” mother. This is made possible through queering motherhood and mothering queerly, which reimagines the boundaries of motherhood and who can mother by making visible the mothering of marginalized maternal bodies, such as adopted mothers, stepmothers, surrogate mothers, mothers of color and mothers who are not heterosexual. Queer, in this case, should not be understood as signifying a person’s sexual identity, but rather that their mothering challenges normative understandings of motherhood and mothering. In this case, a heterosexual, adoptive mother can still be considered queer because she defies the normative belief that a biological relation is needed for her to be the mother of her child. A stepmother may also be queer in how she defies the understanding of mothering only occurring in a single household. Similarly, a queer woman can still be committed to a heterosexual, nuclear understanding of mothering, where one woman takes a motherly role – meaning she does most of the childrearing – and the other woman takes a more fatherly role – meaning she may provide for the family but barely does any childrearing tasks. A queer understanding of mothering thus questions notions of mothering only occurring within the boundaries of the household and offers the space to argue that mothering is relational. This relationality exists not just between a mother and a child, but also between a mother and the other mothers and caregivers of children.

Queer mothering then requires “to move toward a nation of families as coalitional entities requiring practices of solidarity among and between the various inhabitants of diasporic

homes” (S. M. Park, 2013, p. 13). Within this quote, S. M. Park (2013) emphasizes the public nature of childrearing that may be the responsibility of several caregivers from different homes. This way of mothering requires solidarity, that is, mothers recognize they are different from each other but also commit to working through and across these differences. Unlike the common understanding of solidarity, this requires respecting, valuing and openly negotiating the differences between mothers, without demanding adherence to the same principles and norms. Crucial is that different caregivers recognize their interdependency and shared vulnerability in caring for the child. While S. M. Park (2013) mainly applies her insights to mothers, they can be of relevance to all people who mother in showing that the care for a child is carried beyond the household and legitimizing those queer kinds of mothering that are not typically recognized.

There are also queer theorists who do focus on queer as a sexual and gender identity, and the specific types of mothering it gives rise (Marvin, 2018). While feminist thinker Amy Marvin (2018) uses primarily a care ethical lens, her focus is on a queer group, specifically trans children. Two lines of argument exist within Marvin’s article. Her first argument is that Ruddick’s categories of preservation, growth and social acceptability are often more in conflict in mothering trans youth than Ruddick accounts for. Especially when subscribing to a view of what society considers ‘natural’ growth, this may not be aligned with the demands of a trans child, often requiring hormones to become who they are. Her second line of argumentation is that the mothering of trans youth often consists of community caring and mutual caregiving, which Ruddick barely touched upon in her book (Marvin, 2018). It is this argument that interests me here because of how it offers insights into a non-normative understanding of mothering that is needed to argue that childfree women can mother. Many trans people have unsupportive families and what may happen is that trans people turn to other people than their birth or adoptive parents for mothering (Marvin, 2018). People from trans and queer communities are often those who step in to provide that care, where they feed, clothe, house and educate trans children. This is not done by one single person, but often by multiple people who take on mothering tasks. Mothering understood in this sense is community-oriented. Another specific element of trans mothering is how it is often a mutual endeavor. Trans and queer youth are cared for, but they may also mother their fellow trans and queer people in the communities by sharing resources and knowledge, regardless of the age difference (Marvin, 2018).

These two accounts of queer mothering already show two things: there is a large diversity of mothering and queer mothering is understood differently among different thinkers. According to queer thinker, Margaret Gibson (2014), the various definitions of queer mothering that exist and the inability to have a clear definition of what queer mothers are already show that 'mothers' is not a static, unambiguous group like the ideology of motherhood presumes. Are only those who are women queer mothers, or can they also include men, intersex, genderqueer and trans individuals? Queer mothers challenge the presumed gender, family and sexual relations of the dominant culture. Drawing upon the work of Doucet (2006), Gibson (2014) notes that most men, regardless of their sexuality, may practice mothering, but do not identify themselves as mothers. The practice of mothering once again is separated from identity.

However, this non-normative approach to mothering does run into certain problems in a society that often upholds the ideal of a nuclear family. Queer families take different strategies to be seen as legitimate by society. One of those is normalization: this is about emphasizing that there is barely any difference between their family and families who are part of the status quo. Often white, middle-class, monogamous, queer mothers have the opportunity of being accepted as normal mothers if their mothering practices fit the mold of their local community. However, there is a downside to this strategy of normalization: it frames difference as a problem and reinforces the belief that everyone should accept dominant values and lifestyles. In turn, this exacerbates the stigmatization of those who cannot ever be considered 'normal' according to society's standards. So, another way queer families try to have themselves be accepted by society is by challenging discourses about families and parenting and sharing their stories to allow for a broader understanding of family and parenting. This focuses more on differences and how current categories often do not account for queer realities (Gibson, 2014).

3.3 PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION

In short, this chapter has shown how care ethics and queer theory provide several insights into mothering. Care ethics perceives mothering to be a practice that can be separated from motherhood as an identity, opening up the possibility that childfree women can mother. Ruddick (1989;1995) has argued that all mothering consists of at least three demands: preservation, growth and social acceptability. Receiving quite some criticism on the presumed

universality of these demands, thinkers have shown several other demands that are relevant in certain types of mothering. Childfree mothering can build upon the demands Ruddick gives, but also has to remain open to unique kinds of demands that may become visible in childfree mothering. Another insight care ethicists formulated is that mothers are often dependent on other mothering figures to care for their children. It is possible that childfree women can be the ones fulfilling those roles. This gives rise to a certain relationality in mothering, not just between mother and child, but also among mothering people. That relationality is elaborated on within queer theory and given more substance. Queer theory demonstrates that children can have several mothers and mothering figures in their lives, and that denying this reality fails to account for the work done by others in childbearing and childrearing. Furthermore, queer theory shows the diversity of mothering and how they challenge individualized, nuclear understandings of mothering. Childfree mothering could be one of the ways to question society's assumptions.

4. THE NARRATIVES OF CHILDFREE WOMEN ON MOTHERING

This chapter provides an answer to the subquestion: *How do six childfree women from Europe or North America construe their narratives regarding mothering?* Through both a thematic analysis and a narrative analysis of the six interviews, six narrative portraits have been formulated. While every participant had several narratives they drew upon to formulate their understanding of mothering, only one narrative for each participant has been picked to limit the length of this chapter. Guided by the thematic analysis, I elaborate on the different elements this narrative consists of. These specific narratives have been picked because they were exemplary of the themes and narratives that other participants either also used or that they resisted in construing their own understanding of mothering. I argue that it is these narratives that are most important for these six childfree women in construing their understanding around mothering and are thus most apt to answer the subquestion of this chapter.

Two practical remarks deserve to be mentioned. First, all the names of participants are pseudonyms, and specific locations and job titles have been generalized to guarantee that data will not be traceable to them. Second, figure 4.1 provides an overview of the participants and whether they consider themselves to be mothering or just caring for children. This is important, because while participants may be engaging in the same behaviors, they may categorize it differently.

Name	Mothering or caring for children
Carmen	Caring for children and mothering her dogs
Jessica	Caring for children
Karen	Caring for children
Megan	Mothering
Natalie	Mothering
Valerie	Mothering

Figure 4.1 Participants and whether they consider themselves to be mothering or not

The way this chapter is presented is as follows. I start by elaborating on the participants' narrative around motherhood as something that is a permanent, full-time responsibility. For many participants, this view on motherhood informed their reasons to be childfree which will be the next part of this chapter. After this, I will illustrate how participants understand mothering on two different levels: what is mothering and who can you mother. The last two portraits will show how participants conceive of their own mothering or not mothering, and how non-mothers can mother in unique ways. Figure 4.2 presents an overview of the narratives, their aspects and how the narratives relate to each other.

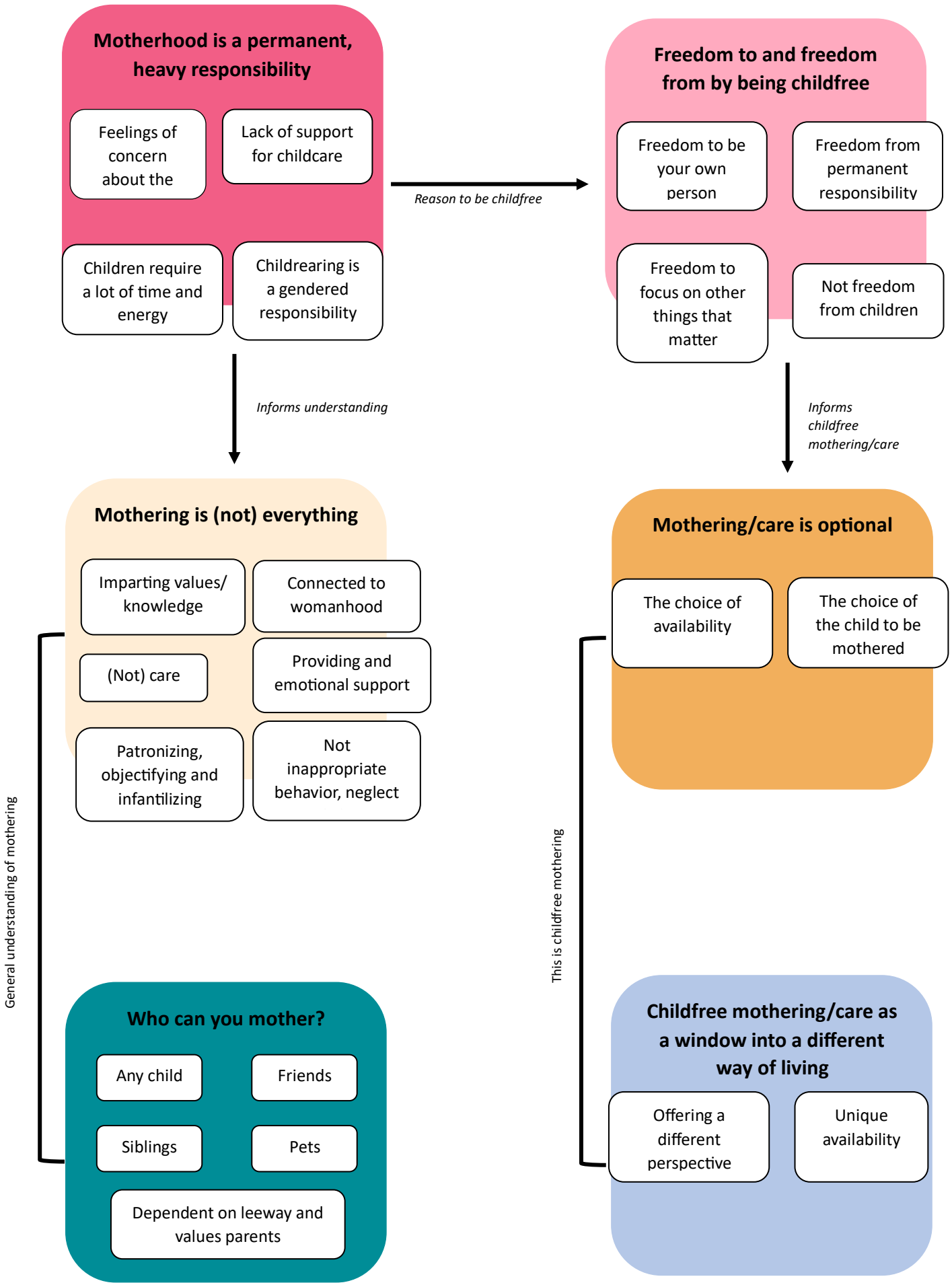


Figure 4.2 Narratives of childfree participants

4.1 MOTHERHOOD: “IT’S EVERY DAY AND IT’S EVERY MINUTE EVERY DAY”

One of the narratives all participants draw upon is motherhood as a permanent, full-time responsibility. Participants all highlighted different aspects of this narrative: the unique capacities a mother is required to have to raise a child, the burden of childrearing tasks falling primarily on the shoulders of women, mothers being overwhelmed by the concern they feel for their child’s wellbeing, and the need to put your child’s needs first at all times. This narrative has in parts been illustrated by Valerie, while other participants emphasize both similar and different aspects.

Valerie is a childfree woman, living with her husband and her two dogs. Her favorite activity is when the family gets together at her mom’s house, and they just have fun together. Not only are her siblings there, but also her nieces and nephews, aged from nine months to five years old. With clear adoration in her voice, she calls them her “niblings.” The niblings are everything to Valerie: “The niblings, like, I feel so much love. I would take a bullet for them. I would do anything, you know?” Valerie does perceive herself as someone who mothers her niblings: she feeds them, she changes their diapers, but she also cares for them emotionally, and most importantly, makes sure they feel loved and secure.

However, Valerie is quick to nuance that she “mothers”: she in no way wants to suggest that the mothering she does is the same amount of work their actual mother does, which is every day and all the time. “I participate in the big picture, the ‘it takes a village’-mothering, but I would never detract from what, for example, my sisters or my best friend do every day, all the time.” Mothers spend much more time mothering, and also have less of a choice to mother or not, Valerie argues. As an example, she compares when she changes a diaper and when her sister who is a mother changes a diaper. Valerie can choose when she wants to do these activities as a non-mother, while her sister wakes up and *must* do these things for her children. These 24/7 mothering responsibilities are part of the reason why Valerie remains without children. She realized at a young age that children were a lot of work. In her late teens, Valerie would nanny two children three days a week, eight hours a day, and this already tired her out. How would she then be able to handle the

full-time responsibility for children as a mother? Valerie rather sees herself as engaging in part-time mothering where she can choose when to do it and when to stop doing it.

When Valerie reflects on why being a mother takes up so much time and energy, she figures it partly has to do with a culture where dads are often less involved in raising children. Another reason she offers is that parents seem to be so used to doing things themselves that it is hard for them to break that routine. For example, Valerie is quite willing to feed the nibblings lunch or change a few diapers, but her sister does not realize she can ask this from Valerie. So then, her sister just continues like normal and does not hand off any tasks. Motherhood is understood by both Valerie and her sister as a permanent responsibility. “I think mothering for actual mothers is a bit more complicated. It’s every day and it’s every minute every day.”

The same narrative of motherhood as something that is a 24/7 responsibility can be found among all participants. This narrative breaks down in several elements. For example, Karen and Carmen emphasize that children are complex and require a lot of attention and energy. Both of these participants indicate that they have doubts about whether they would be able to adequately handle this. Carmen is unsure: “I don’t know if I have that capacity to handle that complexity or that I just don’t want to.” Motherhood in this case requires certain competencies, adding to the perceived burden of being a mother.

Other participants, such as Megan, also draw upon a more feminist framework to argue that childrearing tasks are unequally carried out by women. “The dads will sometimes say, ‘I am babysitting my kids,’ but a mom would never say that cause it’s the mom’s job.” Megan’s feminist friends would all be for equality, but the minute they got children, the women would be the ones doing most of the childrearing tasks. Megan argues this is the result of patriarchal culture and how ingrained this is in our society. Childrearing is a gendered responsibility.

Something that Valerie does not mention, but Natalie and Jessica both propose, is that the burden of motherhood may also have to do with the concern you feel as a parent for your child’s wellbeing. Natalie compares the concern she can feel for her cat to the concern her mother would feel when Natalie was young. “And sometimes I hear my mother, ‘Oh, she is

home, I can sleep now, ' that kind of thing" (transl. TK). There seems to be a parental concern that is so intense that it keeps one awake.

Another thing other participants add to this narrative around motherhood is that mothers are expected to put their child's needs first, devoid of any support. On the one hand, several participants agree that the child should come first and that this might mean the mother has to ignore her own needs and desires, but on the other hand, they recognize that the burden put on mothers is made unnecessarily heavy by a lack of personal and public support. Jessica talks about a myth where the mother loves her child so much, she can lift a car to save them. While this is culturally meaningful, it is still a myth that makes the mother into an almost supernatural being who can do anything, and fails to recognize the support a mother needs. Megan makes a similar point. She initially thinks you are not a good mother when you are putting yourself first, but rather quickly corrects herself when she concludes that to be able to care for a child, a mother needs to be taken care of.

In any case, all participants saw motherhood as a big responsibility, and for many, it was one of the reasons they decided to remain without children. Megan makes a fitting comment when she talks about mothering and not being a mother: "I get the best of both worlds: I can show up and have these kids and then also have my life."

4.2 CHILDFREEDOM TO AND CHILDFREEDOM FROM: "IT'S JUST AN INFINITE AMOUNT OF TIME AND ENERGY"

This freedom by being childfree is opposed to the permanent responsibility that comes with being a mother. However, the way participants give shape to that freedom varies and can broadly be categorized in philosopher Isaiah Berlin's (2017) distinction between two types of freedom: positive freedom (freedom to) and negative freedom (freedom from). In freedom to, the participants mention the freedom to spend their energy and time on other things that are important to them and the freedom to be their own person. In freedom from, several participants mention the freedom from responsibility for a child. One way of thinking that is

weaved to all participants' narratives is that being childfree does not mean freedom from children. In Carmen's narrative, all these different elements become visible.

Carmen is an activist and a childfree woman, currently traveling with her husband and her three rescue dogs through North America. While for most people childfree means an absence of motherhood, Carmen is a mother, but not in the conventional sense. Carmen is a mother to her dogs. Having said that, being without 'human' children allows her the freedom *to* be an activist and travel with her campervan, but also freedom *from* certain responsibilities that come with having children.

This freedom is one of the main reasons why Carmen decided to have no human children. For example, she does not need to have a stationary home so her child can go to school, and she does not need to have a full-time job because she does not need to pay for a house. However, Carmen does have a house that she rents out when they are travelling. That Carmen has been able to travel away from home for six months now is only possible because she has no children. Granted, traveling with three dogs does limit her freedom to some extent: "I can't just walk and [...] go on a hike and watch the scenery ... I have to pay attention to my dogs because they could pick up and eat something off the ground, they could hurt another dog, or whatever it is." Still, Carmen argues that this offers more freedom than having a human child because of the freedom from being stationary.

Being without children also gives her the freedom to do certain things she would otherwise be unable to do. Carmen is an environmentalist and an animal rights activist, and considers activism and motherhood unlikely to go together. Through being childfree, Carmen can read up on research, make signs and go to protests, and further causes she cares about. "There are so many things I could do with all this time I have [...] because I am not mothering a child." Being without children gives Carmen the freedom to put all the time and energy into other things that are important to her.

This however does not mean Carmen dislikes children, and thus childfree is not freedom from children. In fact, Carmen loves children and considers children the future. She emphasizes the importance of caring for those who are already here on this earth, whether they are adults, children or animals, and especially the importance of teaching

children to be compassionate towards the climate. Carmen has many nieces and nephews and she will take them to her cottage in the woods to teach them about nature. By teaching them healthy habits and a love for nature, the world can become a better place. This is where Carmen sees an opportunity for herself.

One line of thinking that becomes visible in Carmen's narrative, but also in those of others is that being childfree gives the freedom to focus on other things that matter. Similar to Carmen, Jessica and Natalie draw upon a concern for the future of the child and through this feel the need to divert their attention beyond their own family. Both mention that they are concerned for the well-being of a child who has to grow up in this world and give this as one of the reasons to remain without children of their own. Jessica states that by being childfree she has the freedom to spend her energy and time addressing the climate crisis. Another thing Jessica mentions is that being childfree allows her to be her own person instead of a mother in service to a younger person. Natalie makes a similar remark when she talks about being childfree as a way to make her own path and live her life the way she wants to.

Another line of thinking is that of being childfree as freedom from responsibility for a child and the decisions that come with it. Megan gives an example: "I don't know when I would have the sex talk; I don't know if I would tell my kids that I use drugs. I'm so glad I don't have to do all of that." Karen explains that when she thinks about being responsible for a child, she gets feelings of anxiety. She is worried about doing something wrong and that the children will not like her. She sees motherhood not just as having to feed a child and send them to school, but also as having to make sure that they become a decent person. Karen feels a lot of relief that she is not responsible for this. Childfree is, in this case, also about the own well-being of participants by not being held responsible.

Nevertheless, what all participants directly or indirectly agree upon is that childfree does not mean an absence of children. To differing extents, the participants are involved in the lives of children: Megan and Natalie interact with children almost daily, whereas Carmen and Jessica only interact with children on occasion. Interestingly, especially those who consider themselves to be mothering children (Megan, Natalie and Valerie) tend to be actively involved in the lives of children, while other participants, where children play a smaller role (Carmen, Jessica and Karen), call this 'caring.'

4.3 MOTHERING IS (NOT) EVERYTHING: “JUST CALL IT CARING THEN”

This disagreement among participants on whether they mother or just care for children refers to a broader discussion of what mothering actually is. There is not one understanding of mothering that is used by all participants because it is many things, while at the same time, it is not everything. This is made even more complex by different understandings of participants about who you can mother (See §4.4): where some only think you can mother children, others think you can also mother adults and pets. To be as inclusive as possible to all of the possible people you can mother, I alternate between the term ‘living being’ and ‘child’. This paragraph presents all the elements of mothering the participants mentioned: mothering is about providing material things, about helping a living being grow, about supporting and accepting a person, and about imparting something you value. Negative aspects are also mentioned where mothering is understood to be infantilizing, patronizing and/or objectifying. To clarify what mothering is and what mothering is not, mothering is compared to the participant’s understanding of what caring is and what bad mothering is. However, a sentiment that is shared among all participants is that mothering can only be done by women. Karen’s narrative touches upon a broad variety of these elements.

Karen is a nurse and a childfree woman, living with her husband and her three cats. Mothering is “a dreadful word” (transl. TK) to her. As an example of this negative connotation, Karen draws upon her experience with fellow nurses. When meeting adult patients, they can put on a high-pitched voice as if they are talking to a baby or a pet. Often in combination with this, they will not recognize the adult parts of the patient but rather treat them like someone who is vulnerable and who requires their motherly doting. Karen argues that mothering in this sense becomes patronizing: the mothering person does not see the other as equal. For Karen, mothering is then not tied specifically to being a mother, but a kind of behavior a person can adopt.

Despite the negative connotation, Karen also associates mothering with positive adult women in her life. For example, her own mother taught her to be culturally engaged. This shows that mothering is also about imparting something. But also her two babysitters

when she was in preschool mothered her. Especially her babysitter, Katja, allowed her to have a lot of fun and make a mess, when Karen's own dad, who was the primary caregiver, was quite strict and expected Karen to follow a rigid pattern. As Karen got older and went into therapy, her therapist became a mother-like figure to her. This was not because her therapist was particularly motherly, but she was just always there to listen and to help Karen in her decisions for a choice of study, with her work and all the things she struggled with.

While Karen had several non-typical mothering figures, she does not consider herself to be mothering anyone. If anything, she feels she is more like an aunt to the few children she does have in her life. She sees them on occasion and takes them out places, like the cinema. The exception in this is her best friend's daughter, Frances, who she sees every week. Karen loves building up a relationship with her, but at the same time, she is not sure she would be able to handle being with Frances by herself. The responsibility for a child, even temporary, feels stifling to Karen. "I am scared to do something wrong" (transl. TK). With children, Karen prefers it if their mother is coming with, so if things get tough, the mother will be there to take care of the child. Mothering is about taking responsibility for a child.

Additionally, mothering is about a unique alertness. For example, Karen and her best friend were sitting in the living room, while Frances [her child] was taking a nap upstairs. Suddenly, her best friend stood up because she could hear her child crying, while Karen could not hear anything at all. Karen muses that there might be an alertness and a feeling of urgency that comes with mothering. This can also extend to mothering becoming overbearing and this is something that irks Karen. Sometimes mothers will keep giving their child attention where Karen imagines it is sometimes better to just let the child be.

What is most noticeable about Karen's narrative is its contrast between mothering being both something positive and something negative. Both the positive and negative elements are also mentioned by other participants. For example, mothering as supporting a being and helping them grow given by a less typical mothering figure is reflected in Megan's narrative. When Megan talks about her mother's mothering, it was mostly about providing her with food and a

roof over her head. But her teachers would see the potential in Megan and would encourage her to believe in herself, thus giving more of this emotional support and acceptance Megan needed. In a similar line of thought, Valerie draws upon the experience of her mother's best friend and her ability to listen to Valerie, reframe certain situations and offer her guidance.

Another element of Karen's understanding of mothering that gets echoed by other participants is the view of mothering as imparting something the mothering figure finds important. This can be values, but also certain knowledge and experiences. Among other participants, this becomes visible in Natalie's story. When Natalie muses about the definition of mothering, it seems to be about caring for her, but also about teaching someone something and imparting something to them. However, the opinions differ among participants whether imparting something you find important to a child is mothering or if it is just caring for a child. This interpretation seems to be connected to whether participants conceive of mothering negatively in some way. For instance, Karen, Jessica and Carmen all think mothering can be patronizing, but use different terms, such as "infantilizing" and "objectifying." With this negative aspect of mothering, it is also not strange that these participants do not consider themselves to be mothering anyone and rather just call it "caring." Imparting was something these participants only wanted to do if the child had a choice to accept or to deny what someone wanted to impart to them.

While thus only some of the participants consider themselves to be mothering, almost all participants perceive a distinction between caring and mothering. Valerie differentiates between how she mothers her niblings, but only cares for her husband:

My husband, I care for him tremendously, I do material things to care for him, and he takes care of me, but it's much more reciprocal. I don't feel like he's vulnerable to the extent that I have to protect him, right?

Several other participants also mention the importance of reciprocity in care and that those are behaviors you can both do to each other, while with a child it is mostly a one-way street. In the case of Carmen, it is also about respecting the role of a mother. "I don't feel like I'm mothering someone as in my niece, for example. If she already has a mother who is mothering

her.” Carmen is the only participant for whom mothering requires you to be their social mother.

For most participants, mothering is then not something only a mother can do, but for all of them, mothering is something only a woman can do. Just like Karen, participants only use examples of women who mother, and some participants even use the term “fathering” when talking about a male figure caring for a child. Megan considers the possibility of a genderless term, “I think we need to change these definitions so that mothering and father –both are parenting.”

Besides discussing what mothering is, some participants also talked about what mothering is not: inappropriate behavior, neglect and abuse. At the same time, Carmen and Megan were both conflicted on whether something like neglect is not mothering or if it is bad mothering. On the one hand, Megan muses that neglect is not mothering, but on the other hand, she figures some circumstances may make it impossible for a mother to avoid neglecting her child, like when the mother has to work to survive financially, but that means she has to leave her child by themselves. Megan remains unsure, but one conclusion she draws is it is important that those who mother, especially mothers, have a personal and public support network so they can keep mothering.

4.4 WHO CAN YOU MOTHER?: “I KIND OF WANT TO BE LIKE THIS SUPER AUNT”

The understanding of what mothering is or is not is also informed by participants’ understanding of who you can mother. Some participants argue that mothering is only something that can be done by the social mother of the child, where others have a broader understanding, where you can mother any child, siblings, friends, clients and pets. In case of a broader understanding, participants argue that it is not always easy to mother a living being that is not your own because of different degrees of involvement and different values. Megan’s narrative gives expression to a broad account of mothering: you can mother all children, friends and siblings.

Megan is a single, childfree woman and a professional babysitter. She considers herself to be mothering her nieces, the children in her neighborhood, the children she babysits, the children of friends, but also her friends and her siblings. Her goal in mothering children is as follows: “I kind of want to be like this super aunt.”

Megan conceives of mothering rather broadly: “supporting each other and [...] being there for each other and [...] making you feel special, and things that mothers are supposed to do, right?”. She adds to this by saying that mothering is also about providing. Megan only speaks of this last part in the context of how her mother mothered her, while all the other examples of her own mothering and how other people mothered her are about being emotionally supportive, having fun and being there for each other. Megan primarily identifies with this last part. This may be the result of how Megan was mothered when she was younger and mostly what she missed in how she was mothered. While her mother is lovely, Megan described her mother as a not particularly warm person. Megan’s mother grew up in the Depression Era and did not have all the opportunities Megan has, so Megan’s eccentric nature was often perceived as being too much. Some teachers and a neighbor did delight in this particular aspect of Megan and supported her and believed in her potential. These women were of great importance to Megan and offered that part she did not get at home. She wants to be that kind of mothering person to children and others. She muses that different kinds of mothering may then be needed for a child to flourish.

Megan also recognizes this difference in mothering in how she mothers. When comparing how she treats her nieces and how she treats the children she babysits, she finds that with her nieces she feels more of a right to be mothering them because they are related. While she respects her siblings’ space, she also puts more of herself and her own values into the mothering of her nieces. Whereas with children she babysits, she talks with the parents and tries to get a feel for what their values are and what they would do in certain situations, and then mirrors that to the children she babysits. This is not always easy. Megan will have different values than the parents, or the children may be less likely to listen because she is a stranger. One time, a parent told Megan that she could spank their child, and Megan really did not want to do that. Another difference Megan notes is that when she is babysitting, she is more likely to discipline a child than when she is just visiting someone. In case of the latter, she can just have fun and be playful.

The different possibilities of who you can mother and how you can mother becomes even more clear when bringing all the narratives together.

What stands out about the narrative of Megan is how aware she must be of the values of parents in her own mothering. Similar to Megan, other participants recognize that mothering a child that is not your own is not always easy. Valerie mentions that her niblings are changing so fast, but then their parents do not think to update her on what has been happening with her niblings. “Parents have so much going on, so I don’t blame them, but sometimes I am like, ‘Tell me all the things, like how’s she doing in kindergarten?’” Natalie also recalls that a dad once thought she was being too irresponsible with his children, while Natalie truly believed the children would be okay because children are quite flexible. There seems to be a difference in views here about what is right for the child. Still, all participants talk about the importance of respecting the parents’ values and choices. “They are not my children and [...] they are raised by their parents by their way, values and norms. I would never interfere in that. That is a limit” (transl. TK).

Besides Megan, Valerie also mentions how she mothers her sibling and one of her friends, even now when they are adults. Valerie thinks she sometimes takes on a more motherly role with her siblings because when they were younger, she was often the one who had to step up and take care of them when her parents were not available. Similarly, her friend was very ill in college, so Valerie took care of her. It seems to Valerie that by having this mothering relationship at a certain moment in time, it never fully leaves. In contrast, Jessica never mothers her friends. She feels this would be inappropriate because it would be infantilizing them.

A new element of mothering arises from the experiences of Carmen and Natalie, where they both mother their pets. In many ways, Carmen thought mothering a dog was similar to the mothering of a child: showing them love, feeding them, bathing them and teaching them things. At the same time, it is very different in the amount of complexity and amount of care that is needed.

Thus, different understandings of who you can mother exist among participants, but it does show a wide variety of possibilities.

4.5 CHILDFREE MOTHERING/CARE AS “A WINDOW INTO A DIFFERENT WAY OF LIVING”

The aspect of “difference” also arises in the specific ways childfree women mother or care for children.³ The narrative that arises is that childfree mothering or care can offer something different than the parents by not being a member of the child’s household. This narrative breaks down into two aspects: a trusted, outsider perspective and availability. Jessica’s narrative especially shows this first aspect, while lightly touching upon the importance of availability.

Jessica is an activist and yoga instructor living with her husband. She also considers herself to be without children by choice. Some may call this “childfree,” but Jessica simply considers herself being without children as an aspect of her life and not her identity.

Growing up, Jessica was mothered by only her mother. Mothering in her case meant who makes your doctor’s appointments, who does your laundry and who makes you dinner. But Jessica’s parents were often not at home, traveling away for work. This meant other adults in her life sometimes took care of Jessica. For example, a babysitter who taught her a lot of things and genuinely loved Jessica. But also, several close women friends of her mother who were all without children and living in a big city cared for her. They were like an “auntie” to Jessica, which she understands to be “this other kind of adult woman who’s a little more carefree and shows you more about what life as an independent woman can be.” Jessica feels that, because they were not her mother and they were not mothering her, they could be on more equal footing. Jessica and her “aunties” had interesting conversations, and they taught her the responsibility you have towards each other to stay engaged in your civic life.

Jessica’s own role in the lives of children is similar to that of her aunties in hers. As an example, she thinks about her relationship with two teenagers, a brother and a sister that are a friend’s children. She has a close relationship with them, but she does not mother them. For Jessica, it is about mutuality. Where mothering goes in one direction,

³ Note how I use both “mother” and “care” here because some participants considered themselves to be mothering whereas others just saw themselves as caring for children.

mutuality means you can care for each other. Jessica does observe similarities between the practice of mothering and the practice of care, but reciprocity is only possible if it is not a mothering relationship. This “auntie” role is also something she would like to have with her little nephew. Jessica and his parents often do not see eye to eye on things, and Jessica would love to show the nephew “a window into a different way of living, if that should appeal to this young person, and that he has some options.” Just like her aunties, she would love to teach him how to live an engaged and creative life, and to have him know that there is always a place for him to stay and to feel free. The role of Jessica as a childfree person thus seems to be about teaching things that a child may not necessarily get at home.

This view of contributing something a child would not get at home, is shared among all participants. This could be the freedom to be irresponsible and dance on the couch to Madonna like Natalie did, or to teach children to be kind to animals like Karen did. Valerie also believes that, especially in the teenage years, non-mothers who love and care for the children are of great importance. At this time, teenagers are often butting heads with their parents while also dealing with a lot of challenging changes.

I feel like if there’s somebody else ... who feels safe to that kid, that they can come [to], and I won’t tell their mom necessarily, and they can have their emotional experience and not worry about setting off their mom or whatever, and I can meet them as a whole person rather than my kid. I think that’s really important and really valuable.

This quote also touches upon another element in which the participants saw themselves adding value: availability.

While Jessica does only mention the importance of availability in passing when she is talking about her nephew, other participants go more in-depth on availability. Participants see availability as being there for children and imagine knowing they have other adults than their parents they can rely on is important to both children and their parents. Natalie notes that because she freelances, she is a lot more flexible, which often means she takes care of her neighbors’ children where both parents have full-time jobs. Also, Valerie recalls how

important it was to her as a child to have an adult in the room because this meant she did not have to step up and take responsibility for her siblings as the eldest. She could just be a child. Megan mentions this availability is also reflected in a broader ability to care when you have no children of your own. Where parents often need to focus their love and energy on their own children, a person who has no children of their own can love a lot more children.

4.6 OPTING IN AND OUT OF MOTHERING: “I LEAVE AT SOME POINT, OR THOSE KIDS LEAVE AT SOME POINT”

Another narrative that becomes obvious in the way childfree women talk about their own mothering, is that mothering is optional. This narrative consists of two aspects: the choice of when to be held responsible as a mothering figure and the choice of the child who to be mothered by. While Natalie mostly emphasizes the first aspect, the other aspect is elaborated on by other participants.

Natalie is a married, childfree artist for whom children play an active role in her life. Childfree for Natalie means the ability to choose her own path and her own development.

Through the decades, Natalie has had many children that she has taken care of. This all started with a babysitter job in her small hometown when she was sixteen. The children adored her, and she was very popular. During the summer, three African children who only spoke French would come over, and to this day, she is still friends with one of them. As she got older and moved to the place where she is living now, she initially had neighbors who both had busy jobs and two young children. Natalie had just started freelancing, and this gave her a certain flexibility, so she offered to babysit them from time to time. “My partner and I actually consider us to have also raised them,” (transl. TK) Natalie laughs while telling this. The children are also fond of Natalie.

When Natalie thinks about why she is so popular with children, she attributes this to letting children do irresponsible things. She would hype up the children by saying that

they were going to do something that their parents would not do with them. Interestingly, Natalie notes that she would not do these things if she was their mother. She thinks this has to do with the responsibility you have as a mother for your child and the concern you feel about their safety. Because she is not their mother, Natalie also does not feel the need to instill certain values in them. This is the responsibility of the parents, and it is a responsibility she intentionally did not take up. However, this does not mean that Natalie feels no responsibility, but just that her responsibility is limited and ends when she or the children choose to. “I leave at some point, or those kids leave at some point” (transl. TK). Mothering in this case is about choosing when to take responsibility or not.

Similarly, Natalie also figures that if she had no children to babysit, she would not mind either. She enjoys being around the children and how spontaneous they are, but if the children were annoying or if she simply did not like them, she would not babysit them. Again mothering is an activity Natalie can choose to partake in or not.

For Natalie, mothering also changes with age. The young children that she babysat, that are now in their late teens or even adults, she now treats more like a friend. The mothering relationship has disappeared much more to the background, even though she does still occasionally have nostalgia from when they were young. The relationship changes, and the mothering does not seem to be permanent. It once again becomes optional.

Natalie conceives of mothering being about choices. For all participants, childfree mothering or caring for a child becomes something that is optional, because there is no burden of responsibility of being their actual mother. “I love being there for kids and then going home and being by myself,” is how Megan puts it. It is something you can opt in or opt out of. While not calling this mothering, Karen had considered babysitting the children of her friends on her day off and then she realized she did not actually want to spend her day off on children. In other words, she could choose to not take care of a child. Something that Valerie realizes is that because she is childfree, her mothering becomes more intentional. She can be available when she wants or needs to be, whereas a mother might be too busy with the other children or other things to be present. This is not to say that mothers cannot be intentional with their mothering, but it is more difficult when you are the primary caregiver. Instead, Valerie can choose how she wants to be in the lives of children, for what amount of time, in what way and

when she wants to stop mothering. Valerie is aware that this is something that a mother can only do to a more limited extent.

The choice of when to mother is also tied to the children as they get older, and they can choose if they want to be mothered or not by a non-mother. This becomes visible in the careful words Valerie chooses when she talks about possibly being someone that can give that guidance to a struggling teenager. “I feel like if there’s somebody else, hopefully me, but doesn’t have to be me, who feels safe to that kid, that they can come and I won’t tell their mom necessarily .” Jessica expresses a similar sentiment is expressed when she talks about how her gender non-conforming activist friend is “the babushka” to young activists which feels like the most authentic mothering to her. “It’s like when everybody’s choosing to be part of that kind of care relationship.”

4.7 CONCLUSION

In short, this chapter has shown the different narratives the six childfree participants construe their understanding of mothering around. It started with the idea of motherhood as never-ending work where women are permanently responsible for their children and how this burden may weigh heavier through a lack of personal and public support. For many participants, this was also one of the reasons to be childfree. The next two parts have been about how the participants generally conceive of mothering in both what is mothering and who you can mother. This has shown that mothering consists of different behaviors, such as providing and helping a child grow while also recognizing the possibly negative associations with mothering. Who can be mothered differs per participant, but it does show that participants can conceive of mothering in both small and big ways. The last two narratives have broadly shown two characteristics of mothering children that are not your own: the ability to contribute in other ways than children can get at home and the possibility to choose to participate in mothering or not.

5. DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the narratives of the participants are linked to both care ethical and queer literature, and reflections on and limitations of the study are mentioned to naturally lead to recommendations for further research. The question that is answered is: *What insights do the narratives of six childfree women and queer theory add to the understanding of mothering within care ethics?* This chapter follows the triad of care ethics: thinking with, thinking against and thinking beyond.⁴ To *think with* means that the narratives of the participants and their elements are closely considered in their relation to care ethical insights on mothering, while also representing these latter faithfully. After this, to *think against*, the insights that arise from both queer theory and the childfree people are brought in a critical discussion used to both question and elaborate on the understanding of mothering within care ethics. Finally, to *think beyond*, I will summarize what these new insights mean for a care ethical understanding of mothering and the way recommendations for future research can help gain more understanding. An important disclaimer is that I use “childfree people”, “childfree women”, and “childfree participants” interchangeably in this section, noting that while this is a sample of childfree women, it has broader relevance.

5.1 THINKING WITH CARE ETHICAL MOTHERING

In this section, I show how participants’ insights confirmed care ethical insights. The first insight that is confirmed is that Ruddick’s (1989;1995) demands are almost all visible among the mothering or care practices by childfree people but in their own specific way. The second part establishes childfree mothering or care as an example that makes visible that mothering occurs in “nested dependencies” (Kittay, 1999; p. 107).

Temporality and optionality as defining features of childfree mothering

Ruddick (1989;1995) distinguishes between different demands that define nearly all practices of mothering. One of those is preservation, which is about ensuring the survival of a child and

⁴ Vosman, F. (2017, April 28). We should look for fellow travelers. *Ethics of Care*. <https://ethicsofcare.org/look-fellow-travelers/>

supporting physical development. The second demand is growth, which is about helping a child develop both emotionally and intellectually. The last demand is social acceptability, which is about a child being raised in acceptable ways to society and the groups a mothering person is a part of. The mothering person can encourage social acceptability but also reject the norms and values of society if it impedes the other demands of survival and growth.

All demands are also visible in the empirical data. Participants saw themselves as meeting those demands in their own mothering or through the non-mothers in their own life who had mothered them. They talked about changing diapers, making lunch and putting the children to bed. These are all examples of preservation by meeting a child's dependency on them to fulfill their needs. At the same time, the participants recognized that they did not have to meet this demand in the same way as a mother would. A mother is permanently responsible to meet this demand, where the non-mothers have more of a choice when and to what extent to participate in situations where they are responsible for a child. Several participants stated they did not necessarily have to continue mothering or care for a child if they did not want to. Notice how this seems to signify that the difference between mothers and non-mothers meeting the demand of preservation is distinguished by time and the liberty to choose whether to be available to meet this demand. This does not mean that participants could opt out of responsibility when they were babysitting, but they could opt out of being the person ultimately responsible. Ruddick (1989; 1995) does claim that all mothering is defined by a choice to respond to the perceived vulnerability of a child, but this study suggests that for childfree people, the availability to meet this demand is defined more strongly by temporality and optionality.

Growth was the most prominent demand among the participants. Most of them emphasized that in growth of the child, the role of an adult that is not the parent became more important. For instance, several participants mentioned how important it was for themselves in their youths to have had other adults they could go to for guidance and support when their own parents could not provide this. One participant proposes that within the teenage years where the relationship between teens and their parents is often strained, non-mothers are especially helpful in being another adult teenagers can go to with their feelings without having to worry about it affecting their home life. Similar to the demand of preservation, there is an optionality there. The non-mother chooses to offer this emotional support, but also the child chooses this adult instead of any other to confide in.

What stands out is that the demand for social acceptability appeared in a unique sense among the narratives of the participants. Participants did not feel like they had to make a child be accepted by society. A possible explanation for this could be that the child is not their own. Different participants mentioned that they believed that the way a child is raised is the responsibility of the parents and not theirs. I imagine there could be less of a concern there about the way a child turns out because it does not rub off on their own image. Unlike mothers who are quickly deemed bad mothers through the mistakes of their children (S. M. Park, 2013). Instead, social acceptability became visible in the sense that some participants tried to show a different life to children than their parents did. While participants did not necessarily reject the values of the parents, they did try to show that there were other possibilities and other ways of understanding the world. Social acceptability for childfree people then seems to be about broadening the definition of what is acceptable.

Mothering within “nested dependencies”

Another care ethical insight that was reflected in the empirical data was that of nested dependencies. Kittay (1999) has argued that people live within nested dependencies; a dependency worker who cares for someone who is dependent on them also is dependent on the support of others to make sure their own needs are met. She has also applied this notion to the work of mothering, specifically that of mothering a child with a severe disability. She herself too was dependent on her partner and various caregivers to be able to care for her child, which she calls “derivative dependency.” By claiming that people live within nested dependencies, Kittay (1999) makes a political statement: to be able to care for a child, the dependency worker requires sufficient private and public support.

The participants see themselves as being able to answer that call. Various participants argue or show that by having no children of their own that they need to focus their time and energy on, a particular availability arises that a mother often does not have because she should prioritize her own children. One participant mentions that even with her own mother, her mother sometimes had to prioritize one of her siblings instead of her. Several participants saw themselves as having the freedom to show up whenever the parents or the children needed them. Whether the parents had busy jobs, other children they needed to take care of or just needed a break, women without children could be there because they had no responsibility to their own child. Through this emerges that those without children were not just able to care

for children, but also care for the parents; that is the dependency worker. Non-mothers may be fulfilling the role of what Kittay (1999) calls “doulia”, a play on the term “doula”, that means that the dependency worker hands off some tasks to those close to her and is cared for by them. This also reflects the need for personal support networks in family, friends, neighbors, etc., but several participants also mentioned the importance of public support systems specifically for mothers. According to them, there should be more services that make life easier for mothers and that would not make them feel guilty for taking care of themselves. Through all this, a notion seems to be expressed that mothering should not be, and often is not, done alone. This confirms Kittay’s view (1999) of the importance of supporting dependency workers. At the same time, a remark that was made by a participant is that parents seem to be absorbed in the daily routine of childrearing that it may be difficult for them to think of handing off tasks. While the participant did not mention this reason, S. M. Park (2013) argues that this also may have to do with mothers fearing their unique connection with the child will be severed by another party taking up a mothering role. Also, it should be noted that parents in certain contexts do not seem to mind professionals taking care of their children (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018) or their own parents (Arber & Timonen, 2012). It remains unclear in this study which parts of mothering mothers want to do with others and which parts they do not want hand off. More research on this is needed if we want non-mothers to be able to act effectively within this web of nested dependencies.

5.2 THINKING AGAINST: CRITICAL ADDITIONS FROM QUEER THEORY AND CHILDFREE PARTICIPANTS

In this paragraph, insights from queer theory and the empirical data are shown to bring into focus aspects that care ethics does not seem to pay sufficient attention to. I begin by questioning the applicability of the term “mothering” in the lives of childfree women. After this, I argue that Ruddick’s (1989;1995) demands are incomplete because of her focus on mothering primarily as an activity done by one person. I propose that in the mothering or care done by non-mothers a new demand arises: attunement.

Mothering or care?

Ruddick (1989;1995) separates mothering from motherhood, allowing the possibility that anyone can mother who engages in a certain practice through certain means to meet certain goals that make up that practice of mothering. However, despite fitting within the demands of mothering that Ruddick mentions, some participants still did not consider themselves or others to be mothering. They preferred to call it caring for a child.

This seems to have different reasons. Sometimes this had to do with a negative connotation, such as it being patronizing by not recognizing the person as an equal, which made it unappealing to them to perceive themselves as mothering. It also seems to matter whether the person perceives mothering broadly or not. For instance, one participant believed that only the social mother can mother and that it devalues the mother if they were to call their own actions mothering. Another example of this is that some participants understood mothering as something you can only do to children, whereas others believed you could also mother other adults and pets. This mothering of pets also confirms the findings of Blackstone (2014) and Volsche (2018) that childfree people may practice “pet parenting”. A last explanation might be that the degree of involvement in the lives of children determines whether participants saw themselves as mothering or not. Especially those who were interacting with children almost every day saw themselves to be mothering, whereas people who only interacted with children on occasion preferred to call it caring. This study does not offer sufficient grounds as to what term is most fitting for childfree women, but it does open up the possibility that it should be called something different than mothering.

The new demand: attunement

Thinkers such as DiQuinzio (1993) and Bailey (1994) have criticized the presumed universalism of Ruddick’s demands. They argued that something like racial-ethnic mothering cannot be done justice within Ruddick’s three demands and a more localized understanding of mothering is needed. Instead of choosing between the two extremes of universalism or only a localized understanding of what mothering is, Keller (2010) presents a compromise: Ruddick’s distinction is used, but the demands are open for revision and can be incomplete.

It has already been demonstrated that while the demands of mothering as Ruddick (1989;1995) constitutes them become visible in the mothering of childfree women, it is in a

specific way that is defined by temporality and optionality. Another specific element which I will set out here is that through the experiences of childfree women, mothering emerges as a collective practice. There are multiple caregivers involved in the life of a child to a lesser or greater extent. This seems to be about mothering as a community practice, which Marvin (2018) draws upon. While participants stress that they are not the mother of a child, they may still be of great importance to raising a child. This confirms other studies that seem to suggest childfree people can still play a significant role in the lives of children (Gillespie, 1999; K. Park, 2002; Allen & Wiles, 2013; Blackstone, 2014; Volsche, 2018). As I have stated before, different participants mentioned how the societal belief that mothers could raise their children devoid of any support was not realistic. This aligns to what S. M. Park (2013) claims to be one of the assumptions of monomaterialism. Through this view, the pressure mothers feel increases, while simultaneously it does not recognize the role of other mothers, related and non-related, as caregivers in childrearing. This second part was confirmed by a participant who struggled with how her role as an auntie was not really recognized by loved ones and society at large as important to a child. At any rate, a child may not just have one mothering figure, but several. This creates a complex interplay of several mothering figures who do not just have a relationship with a child, but also a relationship with all the other mothering figures. Ruddick (1989;1995) draws primarily on examples of mothering that is done by one mother and through this seems to forget the reality of mothering being a collective practice. If a mother mothers a child by herself, she will have most of the responsibility and can flesh it out as she sees fit. However, if mothering is something that is done by multiple mothering figures, that responsibility becomes shared and is given shape by multiple people. I believe this creates a unique demand: attunement.

Attunement is something that is expressed in the experiences of the childfree participants with mothering or caring for a child that is not their own. Almost all participants talked about the importance of respecting the values and decisions of the parents when it comes to their children. They felt it was inappropriate to go against what a child was taught by their parents and made an effort not to undermine the parents. Still, there are different amounts of leeway within this. For example, one participant explained that she was more likely to put more of her own values in the mothering of her nieces, whereas, when she professionally babysat children, she was more likely to mirror the parents and the way they handled things. But even then, more liberal parents would be more likely to let this participant do what she wants in the care for their child, while more conservative parents wanted her to be stricter with the

children. Mothering becomes not just about the relationship between the mothering figure and the child, but also between the mothering figure and the parents. This requires coordination. As Keller (2010) argues, the demands of mothering should not be child-centric, but relationship-centric, thus taking into account the needs of both child and parent within their relationality. S. M. Park (2013) takes this even further by arguing that, to allow the reality of multiple caregivers of a child, a move towards families as coalitional entities is needed. She claims that mothering requires solidarity where both the mother and other mothering figures recognize that they are different from each other but work through this difference by respecting, valuing and openly negotiating these differences. In the case of all participants, they made an effort to respect the values of the parents, while at the same time also wanting to impart values and knowledge that they considered important for the child. Both the recognition of difference and still having respect becomes visible here, and the participants coordinate accordingly. This could then be seen as an example of a coalitional entity as S. M. Park (2013) calls it. However, it should be noted that S. M. Park (2013) speaks of this notion of “coalitional entities” within the context of different mothers (biological mothers, adoptive mothers, social mothers, stepmothers). This is not the same context as childfree women who are not the child’s mother in any of these ways. I can imagine being one of these kinds of mothers does give you more of a right and a responsibility to decide what is best for the child, whereas as a non-mother, you do not have this right or responsibility. Regardless of this, both in mothering a child that is not your own and one that is requires attunement to other parental figures. In this study, the demand of attunement arises as finding the balance to give freedom to other mothering figures to mother differently than you, while simultaneously not undermining each other’s mothering.

5.3 THINKING BEYOND: MOTHERING, MOTHERING IN RELATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The previous section has shown that queer theory and the empirical data challenge care ethics to acknowledge mothering as something more radically collective that highlights the different relations that exist between mothers, mothering figures and the child, but also to question the appropriateness of the term mothering for the practice of non-mothers caring for children.

This first element, of mothering being collective, should be perfectly fitting within an ethics of care because care ethics already diverges from more principle-based ethics by claiming that humans are interdependent beings instead of autonomous actors and that everyone requires care to be able to become autonomous, as well as requires care over the course of our lives (Tronto, 1993; Kittay, 1999). The recognition of the collective is already there. Still, this relational view has not sufficiently been applied to mothering within care ethics. While care ethicist, White (2015), does claim that with the practice of other-mothering, mothers have to actively maintain relationships with other women who care for their child, she does not address the way the mothering figures will have to attune to the other mothering figures and mothers.

The second element of appropriateness of the term is more difficult. Many care ethicists use the term “mothering” when talking about the care of a child, partly to acknowledge that most of the child care is unequally distributed to women (Ruddick, 1989; 1995; Kittay, 1999; Van Nistelrooij, 2022). However, not all participants in this study are comfortable with the term “mothering” and do not see themselves as engaging in this practice. I can imagine that the way childfree participants care for children that are not their own is similar to that of the traditional father who is, to some extent, involved in the lives of children but is at the same time still able to have his own life outside this. It remains unclear what term is most fitting to describe the practice of child care for those who are not the mother.

Three recommendations for future research arise from this chapter. The first one is to study what mothering or the care for a child looks like if it is done by multiple people and the implications this has for the different relationships that will need to be maintained. This study has offered a first look into how maintaining relationships within mothering is about matching values and respecting differences, but people will do this in distinct ways, and this may give rise to other elements that the demand of attunement consist of. With childrearing becoming more of a practice that is done by multiple caregivers (S. M. Park, 2013), thought needs to go into how these realities can be adequately addressed. By extension, a second recommendation is to study what tasks mothers are likely to designate to others and who those others are (other parents, family members, professionals etc.) to be able to effectively navigate within this web of nested dependencies as someone who is not the child’s mother. The last recommendation is to study the terms childfree people identify themselves with when talking about the way they care for children that are not their own. In this care ethics could play an important role because it is based on a relational ethic that brings out the particular relationships people have

and the specific meaning and responsibilities that arise out of these relationships (Walker, 1989). It should be noted that these findings may not just apply to childfree people, but to all people who take care of children that are not their own. Through the empirical data within this thesis, it has been suggested that mothering may not be the right term for non-mothering people. A search for what term or even terms would be right is required to gain more understanding on the role of those outside the household in childrearing. The literature already offers some suggestions: “extensive mothering” (Christopher, 2012), “coalitional mothering” (S. M. Park, 2013), “dependency work” (Kittay, 1999), “caring” (see this study), “co-parenting” (Braithwaite et al., 2009). This list is not extensive, and all terms will have pros and cons, but it suffices to know that the search for the right term(s) does not need to start at the beginning.

6. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I provide a conclusion to this thesis by answering the main question of this thesis: *How do six childfree women from Europe or North America construe mothering, and how can their insights and queer theory contribute to the understanding of practices of mothering within care ethics?* The findings are summarized as well as the implications of these findings are mentioned.

In the construction of mothering among six childfree women, several narratives have emerged. Motherhood and the mothering that comes with it, is seen as a permanent responsibility by participants. By being childfree, participants do not have this responsibility, and instead have the option to do other things that are important to them. This does not mean they do not mother or care for children, but it is different than a mother caring for their own child. Participants noted that they have the luxury of choice, where they can choose when and how to care for a child. In some ways, they mother or care in the same way they imagine a parent would. They provide for a child, give a child emotional support and impart values that are important to them. In other ways, some participants are hesitant to call their own behavior mothering because they associate mothering with being infantilizing or objectifying. This is also influenced by their understandings of who you can mother. Can you only mother a child or also adults? In case of the latter, mothering is something that could be inappropriate as multiple participants stated. However, in the mothering of or care for a child, participants believed they made a unique contribution by offering something that the parents would not be able to give or only to a lesser degree: an adult outside the household they could come to for support and availability.

Participants partly confirmed insights from care ethics. The optionality of mothering (Ruddick, 1989;1995) is unlikely to become more visible than in the lives of childfree people who choose to care for a child that is not their own. Supporting mothers, who are what Kittay (1999) calls dependency workers, was also something participants saw themselves contributing to by caring for other people's children. At the same time, the empirical data abandons a care ethical understanding when half of the participants show that mothering may not be the right term for what childfree people do in the care for children. Also, both queer theory and the participants show that the demands of mothering Ruddick (1989;1995) proposes are given substance in unique ways by non-mothers and even require a different

demand that takes into account the relational nature of mothering and deviates from a solely child-centric view of mothering. Care ethics should pay more attention to the possibility of multiple mothering figures in one child's life and how they maintain relationships with each other, especially as family configurations are becoming more complex and go beyond a normative understanding (S. M. Park, 2013).

This study rejects the common view that childfree necessarily means an absence of children in one's life and that those who are childfree are uncaring. In fact, childfree people can play an active role in the lives of children and can bear a lot of love for children.

7. QUALITY OF THE STUDY

In this last chapter, I reflect on the research process and address the limitations of this study which should be seen as building upon the research design as set out in Chapter 2 (especially §2.6 and §2.7). To recap, the quality of a qualitative study is dependent on its validity, reliability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Boeije, 2014; Verhoeven, 2014). This requires the researcher to be attentive to the accuracy of the measurement tool, which in qualitative research is the researcher (Verhoeven, 2014); the consistent application of methods and the traceability of steps taken (Boeije, 2014); detailed enough descriptions so readers can perceive similarities between cases in a different context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability is chosen instead of generalizability because social phenomena happen within a specific context that cannot be easily controlled, but similarities between different contexts can be shown (Patton, 2014). I explain whether my study sufficiently protects the participant's identity, and how choices within this study affect the validity, reliability, and transferability of the data. On top of this, two limitations of this study are mentioned.

7.1 REFLECTION

Treatment of participants

In a narrative study, the participants and the researcher have a relationship, which gives the researcher a responsibility to be attentive to the needs and the vulnerability of the participant (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). One unexpected situation within this relationship was that one of the participants is a public figure who is more well-known to childfree people. The implication of this is that she could more easily be identified by others. Initially, I considered keeping her real name, because she had said she did not mind being non-anonymous.

However, in order to treat all participants the same, I did give her a pseudonym and deleted the name of the organization and locations in the transcript. In Chapter 4, her organization nor the specific work she does has been mentioned. Still, those who have access to the transcripts may be able to trace the data back to her. This has consequences for the protection of her

identity. Even so, I perceive it less as a problem because of her comment that she did not mind her identity being shared.

Another aspect that should be mentioned is that I initially only wanted to do one member check one week after the interview. This was a summary of what I felt were the most important points the participant made in the interview. All agreed with the way I represented their story except for one participant who said she trusted me to represent her in the right way and did not participate in a member check. As I was writing Chapter 4, the portraits of participants were more detailed, and my thesis advisor rightfully asked whether this affected the consent of the participants. To address this comment, I informed the participants that this was the way they would be represented in the study and that this would be accessible to everyone who would want to read my thesis, and I allowed them to do another check. This both increases the validity of the research and is conscious of the responsibility to the participant.

This last element also became visible when two participants stated how much they appreciated the opportunity to be able to tell their story on a topic that often went ignored. My thesis supervisor formulated it perfectly when she said that as a researcher you do not only take information from participants, but you are also able to offer them something by giving them a voice.

Validity

During the interviews, I quickly realized I had a bias about what mothering is and what mothering is not. Because I have been taught about mothering from a care ethical perspective where it is an activity instead of something connected to who you are (identity), I was inclined to call something mothering sooner than some participants were. Especially participants who considered themselves to be caring for a child instead of mothering, it did arise feelings of defiance within me. This affects the validity of the research tool. To combat this, I have tried to remain as close to the words of participants as possible and explicitly asked them if they considered themselves to be mothering or not.

There were also two parts of every interview I omitted from the analysis because they went beyond the scope of this study. One of them is the reason to be childfree. While I do name them when they relate to mothering, for example seeing motherhood as a permanent

responsibility, environmental or financial reasons to be without children have not been given much attention. However, there has been an increase in academic interest in how environmental concerns affect reproductive choices (Helm et al., 2021; Nakkerud, 2021; 2023; Krähenbühl, 2022) and the environmental reasons some participants in this study gave for being childfree fit within the scope of these studies. By including these, validity can be increased. Another element that is fascinating but in this study did not deepen the understanding of mothering, is the way the childfree participants dealt with discrimination and societal pressure because of their childfree identity. My intent with the questions I asked about this during the interviews, was to see if participants received difficult responses to being childfree in relation to their mothering (e.g. they should become a mother because they are so good with children). However, throughout the interviews I learned that some participants held a different understanding of mothering than I did and did not always see themselves as mothering, which made these questions less relevant. The connection that I expected to see between mothering and responses to their childfree identity was not there. I recommend that people who research the mothering of childfree people or any other non-typical mothering group who may deal with discrimination check whether your topic list already contains a certain bias beforehand and try to remove that bias.

Reliability

While McCormack's lenses (2000) were of great value in bringing about the narratives of participants and especially the elements that were often implicit (e.g. what a participant put a lot of emphasis on or whether the participant felt unsure), I realized during the analysis that an element of the lens of narrative processes did not entirely fit with my interviewing technique. McCormack (2000) proposes to look at the way a story is built up (e.g. orientation, abstract, evaluation, how is it closed), but reading back my own interviews I realized I had mostly asked further questions about opinions instead of the specific stories participants told me. The result was that stories were relatively short and could not be separated into segments the way McCormack (2000) suggested. What I learned from this is that to capture stories, it is good to ask participants specific questions about those stories, such as "and what happened then?" or "what did you feel at that moment?". The way I have interviewed does affect the reliability of this study because it raises questions about whether this specific element of McCormack's (2000) lens was applied correctly, but at the same time the steps I have taken in my analysis are traceable (See Appendix 3) and I believe offer sufficient insight.

Transferability

By giving as detailed descriptions as possible, I have increased the likelihood that readers perceive similarities between this study and cases in a different context. Jess, the person who checked my English grammar and spelling, said this thesis also made them reflect on their life and the people that mothered them when they were young. This shows that this study makes people think about mothering and what it means to them.

7.2 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations. One of those is the sample of this study. This sample consists of only white women from Europe or North America. Through this, it may falsely suggest that being childfree and mothering is something that only happens in the West and among women. There has been a bias in childfree studies to focus on those who are white and from the West, which ignores the experiences of women of color in another context (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016; Marutlulle, 2020). A bigger sample that draws upon more diverse subjects (read: differently raced, cultured, classed and gendered) can offer a more realistic perspective on the possible mothering of childfree people without repeating the erasure of other voices.

Another limitation of this study is that I am doing this research by myself. Because no other people have worked with the raw data besides me, unfounded interpretations may have gone unchecked. I have tried to address this concern by doing two member checks, having my thesis supervisor read along with the chapters of this thesis and having a fellow student show me how she would code one page of my (anonymized) interview. Still, interpretations are my own and the validity would have increased with more people working on the same data.

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APPENDIX 1: TOPIC LIST

First questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Who are you and what do you do in your daily life? • When you hear the word “mothering”, what kind of thoughts come up for you? 	
Theme’s	Examples of questions I asked
1 Experience with being mothered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me more about the person that mothered you? • Who were important figures that mothered you? • How come you consider that mothering?
2 Experience with mothering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who did you mother? • Is this mothering to you or something else? • What are difficulties in mothering?
3 Being childfree and mothering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does being childfree mean to you? • How does your mothering relates to you being childfree? • How do other people react to your mothering and your childfree identity?
4 Opinions on mothering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think mothering is (not)? • What is the difference between caring and mothering?

APPENDIX 2: EXCERPTS REFLEXIVE JOURNAL

Pre-interview 18-4-2023

(originally written down in real notebook)

The last interview went so well that I am even more excited about this one!

From the last interview I learned my two starting questions have to be more specific to give the participant some guidance.

I do wonder if this participant will have a different view on mothering or not. I think it is most important to stay with the words of the participant and stay out of my brain as much as possible. I have to remind myself to stay with her story.

After interview 21-4-2023

(originally written down in real notebook)

This was the first interview I found hard. The participant tended to give relatively short answers. On top of this, she did not always get my questions, so I was clarifying a lot of the time. This resulted in often closed questions or biased questions.

I also felt a lot of pressure in my body during the interview. This may partly be due to my train running late and being 30 minutes later than anticipated, which left me only 10 minutes to prepare the interview.

I do think this may affect the validity of the research, because I was not at my best and probably have not captured the participant's story well enough.

During analysis 17-5-2023

(originally written down in real notebook)

I find it so hard to keep the distinction between mothering and caring in my analysis. Where some participants consider themselves to be mothering, others who do the same behavior call it caring and think it is NOT mothering. I feel a lot of reluctance describing some things as not mothering, because to me it feels like it is mothering.

I have to try to stay close to the words of the participants and not push my own opinions on their narratives. But what if my bias affects the way I present the data and the way I interpret the data? Sometimes I wish I did this with other people so they could correct my bias.

APPENDIX 3: SNAPSHOTS NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Snapshot narrative analysis Valerie

1. Active listening: I have listened to and read the interview several times to identify the characters in the narratives, the main events that happen, my position regarding the participant, and the way I respond in the interview.
2. Narrative processes: I identified the main point the participant is trying to make, the reason a specific story was told, the scenery of the story (who, what, where, when), the events and actions that occur in the story and how they are linked, and the way the story is closed. I use a star for significant moments.

Kind of event	Event (What)	Characters (Who)	Time (When)	The reason it was told (Why)	My position and reaction
	Her siblings and niblings will come visit her mom, who lives next door to Valerie, and they all hang out as a family and have fun.	Valerie Mom Siblings Niblings	Undefined	To show that she loves her family and especially the niblings	n/a
★	Two aunts were actively involved in Valerie and her siblings lives. They showed up to school things and, loved and cared for Valerie.	Valerie Aunts Siblings	When Valerie was young	To show that other mothering exists than household mothering	I am intrigued that Valerie does consider her aunts behavior mothering, when many of the people I interviewed did not. Through my questions I try to understand how broadly

					Valerie conceives of mothering.
	The best friend of Valerie's mom did not get married until she was in her 40s and she was always available to Valerie and especially as Valerie got older helped her emotionally in a time where Valerie's mom could not provide that.	Valerie Mom's best friend	When Valerie was young	To show that other mothering exists than household mothering and show the uniqueness of mothering that is not done by a mother	n/a
	A babysitter, that is more like a family member to Valerie, often stayed with Valerie and her siblings, watched movies with them and ate popcorn, helped Valerie with her math homework and was the adult in the room so that Valerie would not have to step up.	Valerie Siblings Babysitter	When Valerie was young		
	Valerie's homelife with her parents was not easy. Her dad had crippling depression and her mom had generalized anxiety, and this made Valerie often feel unsafe or feel like she had to step up to take care of her siblings.	Valerie Parents Siblings	When Valerie was young	To make even more clear that sometimes her parents were unable to provide what she needed and how those other mothering figures did help	I notice Valerie is not entirely comfortable talking about this. I try to steer the topic away from her parents.
	When Valerie is around her niblings, she makes an effort to be a safe adult. She watches her languages, her moods and communicates clearly to the niblings. Even so far that her sister says that she does not have to explain everything.	Valerie Niblings Sister	Undefined	To show that making children feel safe is one of her most important tasks in mothering	Valerie talks with so much love about her niblings and like she is really trying her best, but is that mothering to her?

Snapshot narrative analysis Karen

3. Language: I identified what is said, how it is said and what remains unsaid.

What is said

Words around mothering

- Terrible word
- Patronizing
- Woman [It is connected to womanhood]
- Playing with babies
- No positive association
- Focused on children
- Care
- Availability [It requires you to be attentive and present all the time]
- Fun
- Freedom
- Support
- Listening
- Scary
- Stifling
- Exhausting
- Permanent responsibility
- A heavy burden
- Responsibility to care well, feed them and go to school
- Responsibility to make sure they become a good person
- Unequal

Words around childfree

- Conscious choice
- Free
- Not having to carry that heavy burden [of being responsible for children]

Words that are frequently used

- Maybe
- So to speak

Words that make space for thought

- Uh
- So to speak
- Yeah
- You know
- Right

Words that assume a common understanding

- Right:
 - “Because it is mothering, right, it is a little bit like “stop mothering me” “ → That it is not weird that Karen has a negative connotation with mothering
 - “You are also not fathering, right? → Karen does not use the term mothering, but the term fathering for men. This means mothering is connected to womanhood for her.
 - “Your children are, they are meaningful indeed, right?” → Karen believes children give meaning to your life
- Duh:
 - “But you don’t have to be 100% sure. And I thought: Ah, duh!” → Karen now knows that of course you do not have to be fully sure about things, you can still feel doubts and miss things about the choice you did not make

Words to describe self

- Nurse
- Not mothering
- People-pleasing
- Feisty

Terms she uses that signify a certain group:

- Art retreat/”Buitenkunst” → Artist group
- “BOM” = intentionally single mother, “Overlegmoeder” = gentle parenting → Knowledge about mothering and parenting
- FOMO = fear of missing out → Slang

Snapshot narrative analysis Jessica

4. Context: I identified how the story relates to the broader cultural context and the context of the interview.

Broader cultural context

Only a mother can mother or a parent can parent, other people can just care for children: Jessica confirms this view and says that the mothering ideal is not meaningful to her identity, so she does not mother

The mother as an icon and the universal ideal of mothering: Jessica does not subscribe to this view and does not feel her own experience with being mothered fits within this, but understands it to be culturally meaningful

People think there is a biological impulse with having children: Jessica tries to unhook this from her decision to have children or not, cause what is so great about her genes and denies that biological impulse

Young girls are encouraged to think about marriage and their future family from a young age: Jessica did not do this and also did not feel the pressure to do this, but does feel it is a societal expectation

Childfree people will regret not having children: Jessica does not agree and feels regret is a natural part of being human, a way of checking back on the things we have done

Womanhood is your identity: Jessica feels it is not important to her, she does not really care about the bride stuff and the little things about being a women.

Childfree is your identity: Jessica feels it is just a small aspect of her, but not her identity

Motherhood is an identity: Jessica agrees and feels it takes up your entire being when you are a mother.

Childrearing tasks are unequally distributed in society: Jessica agrees with this

Context of the interview

I did know Jessica's organization so some things she assumed I would already understand.

Also I use the term mothering so that may have influenced her to call some things mothering that she wouldn't have called them otherwise, but on the other hand there is a very limited amount of things that she considers mothering.

Snapshot narrative analysis Carmen

The Stories

1. “Oh we had a huge fight. I won anyways” Bad mothering and the relationship with her mom
2. “I’m trying really hard to be a good mom. I think I’m doing all right.” Being a mother to her dogs
3. “This homeless woman, she gave her everything she had in her heart, all the love she could give to these kids” Good mothering as unconditional love
4. “I don’t feel like it’s fair to bring more children into this world when there’s so many –, so many people that need help, so many animals that need help” Being childfree because of the state of the world
5. “And I love nature so I’m always surrounded by it and I want to share that with them” Taking care of human children
6. “There are so many things I could do with all this time I have [...] because I am not mothering a child” Childfreedom as a way to do other important things
7. “Show them what I feel are my successes and everyone’s always , you know, supportive, proud and happy” Creating her own values and sense of self separate from her mother
8. “and a lot of parents feel like their kids need to [...] mold and accommodate to our lifestyles as the parents” Mothering is child-centered

APPENDIX 4: CODEBOOK

Theme	Codes
Childfreedom to and childfreedom from	Being childfree, but also being a mother to a pet
	Childfree allows you to be your own person
	Childfree allows you to contribute in other ways
	Childfree allows you to not be responsible for children
	Childfree for financial reasons
	Childfree is not a conscious decision
	Childfree not as an identity
	Childfree out of a concern for the earth
	Childfree out of a concern for the well-being of children
	Childfree out of own well-being
	Childfree out of relational reasons
	Considering adoption
	Difficulty being childfree
	Discrimination of childfree people
	Having children is still a possibility
	Having children, but not having that motherhood responsibility
	Love children
Only want children in certain conditions	
Mothering is (not) everything	Mothering is not care
	Mothering is not motherhood
	Mothering is not reciprocal
	Mothering is optional
	Mothering is selfless
	Mothering is supporting children in their choices
	Mothering is unconditional love
	Not mothering: inappropriate behavior
	Not mothering: neglect
	Not mothering: not putting the child at the centre
	Not mothering: treating kids like an equal, whole person
	Not mothering: violence
	Traditional view on mothering
Opt in and out of mothering	Childfree results in a broader ability to care for children
	Childfree results in mothering becoming more conscious
	Childfree gives you the right to be free and more irresponsible with a children
	Childfre allows you to not be responsible for children

	Different amounts of leeway in mothering
	Different mothering among kids and at different ages
	Letting children choose to be cared for/mothered
	Motherhood is a choice
	Mothering is having responsibility
	Mothering is optional
	Only wants children in certain conditions
The difficulty and the benefits of mothering those who are not your own	Childfree: Availability
	Childfree: Broader ability to care for children
	Childfree: Helping parents with childrearing tasks
	Childfree: Right to be free and more irresponsible with children
	Childfree allows you to not be responsible for children
	Childfree: challenging what is acceptable
	Different values than parents
	Difficulty mothering children that are not your own
	Mothering is optional
	Respecting boundaries
	Respecting the parents
	Different amounts of leeway in mothering
The never-ending work of motherhood	Burden of childrearing primarily on women
	Children are heavy work
	Motherhood is a choice
	Motherhood is full-time
	Motherhood is womanhood
	Mothering closely connected to being a woman
	Mothering closely connected to motherhood
	Parental concern
	Parenting is having a lot of responsibility
	The mother is not always available
There are as many kinds of mothering as there are people	Communal child care
	Different mothering among kids and at different ages
	Mothering babysitting children
	Mothering friends
	Mothering friend's children
	Mothering from outside the household
	Mothering nibblings
	Mothering pets
	Mothering siblings
	Mothering therapist