

**EXPLORING OLDER ADULTS' EXPERIENCES OF INTENTIONAL
CHILDFREEDOM**

By

KATIE FREIHEIT

Bachelor of Arts, University of Alberta, 2021

Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY

in the

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

TRINITY WESTERN UNIVERSITY

October 2025

© Katie Freiheit, 2025

DECLARATION OF COMMITTEE

The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, the thesis entitled:

Exploring Older Adults' Experiences of Intentional Childfreedom

submitted by Katie Freiheit in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology.

Degree Committee Members

Marvin McDonald, PhD, Counselling Psychology, Trinity Western University

Thesis Advisor

Larissa Rossen, PhD, Counselling Psychology, Trinity Western University

Degree Committee Member

Hannelore Stegen, PhD, Adult Educational Sciences, Thomas More University

Degree Committee Member

Jennifer Neal, PhD, Social/Personality Psychology, Michigan State University

Degree Committee Member

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Marvin (Mac) McDonald, for your support, guidance, expertise, and infinite wisdom. Your mentorship has been invaluable, and I am grateful for all that I have learned under your supervision. I also wish to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Larissa Rossen, Dr. Hannelore Stegen, and Dr. Jennifer Neal for their thoughtful feedback and guidance.

I am grateful to the participants who generously shared their time and experiences, without whom this research would not have been possible. I also extend my thanks to the key informants who kindly offered their insight and expertise.

Finally, I am grateful to my family and friends, whose patience, love, and encouragement has sustained me throughout this journey. In particular, I would like to thank my amazing Oma, whose support was critical in connecting me with the wonderful participants who shared their stories.

ABSTRACT

Canadians are increasingly choosing to remain childfree, meaning there will likely be a larger cohort of intentionally childfree older adults (ICFOAs) in the future. While research indicates that ICFOAs often live satisfying lives, prevailing social narratives rooted in pronatalism still portray parenthood as the only fulfilling life path. Possibly influenced by pronatalism, research on childfreedom has remained an encapsulated topic, leaving policy makers and mental health professionals underinformed about ICFOAs' experiences and needs. The purpose of this study was to (a) gain a rich understanding of ICFOAs' experiences and (b) inform policy makers and mental health professionals about the experiences and needs of ICFOAs. Using reflective thematic analysis of participant interviews and photo-diaries, six themes were identified: (a) maintaining childfreedom, (b) sharing characteristics and values, (c) living satisfying lives, (d) living expansively, (e) fostering social connection, and (f) serving community.

Keywords: childfreedom, pronatalism, photo-diary, older adults, experience

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION OF COMMITTEE	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	III
ABSTRACT	IV
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	4
Impacts of National Context on the ICF and Childless	4
The Impact of Social Support on The Experiences of Childless and ICFAs	5
The Moderating Impact of Gender on Social Support	7
Differences in Social Networks Between the Childless, ICF, and Parents	8
Different Kinds of Support and Their Impact on Wellbeing	9
Ratings of Well-being and Life Satisfaction Among the Childless, ICFAs, and Parents	10
Pathways to ICF.....	12
Stigmatization of Childless and ICFAs.....	14
Summary and Research Question.....	16
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	18
Position of the Researcher	18
Paradigm	19
Feminist Standpoint Theory	19
Hermeneutic Phenomenology	20
Design & Procedures	21
Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)	23
Rigour and Quality	26
Information Power.....	27
Ethical Considerations	28
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....	30

Theme A: Decisions in Motion: Maintaining a Childfree Life.....	30
Theme B: ICF Identity: Shared Characteristics and Values	32
Independence.....	33
Pragmatism.....	33
Resilience	34
Curiosity: An Invitation to Seek Novelty	35
Zest for Life.....	36
Theme C: Childfree and Happy: Life satisfaction amongst ICFOAs.....	37
Living Out Desired Lifestyle.....	38
Lack of Regret.....	39
Theme D: Broadening Horizons: Living expansively	40
Living Differently.....	40
Fitting In.....	41
Theme E: Beyond Blood: Fostering Social Connection.....	43
Romantic Partnership	43
Theme F: Born to Serve: Dedication to Community.....	44
“Born to Serve”	45
Legacy and Generativity	46
Stigmatized Beliefs Faced by ICFOAs.....	47
Integrative Summary of Theme Patterns	49
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION	51
Reimagined Pathways to Childfreedom	51
Personality and Childfree Choice: A Reciprocal Dynamic	51
Parenthood: An Incompatible Lifestyle	53
From Choosing Childfreedom to Cultivating Contentedness.....	54
Cultivating Contentedness: The Importance of Relationship and Belonging	56
Practical and Social Implications.....	58

Community Implications	58
Limitations of This Study	59
Strengths of This Study	60
Future Research	61
Structural Features Limiting Access to ICFAs	61
Conclusion	62
REFERENCES	63
APPENDIX A	72
APPENDIX B	75
APPENDIX C	76
APPENDIX D	77
APPENDIX E	81
APPENDIX F	83
APPENDIX G	85
APPENDIX H	86
APPENDIX I	94
APPENDIX J	97
APPENDIX K	98
APPENDIX L	100

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Canada's demographics are changing, with fertility rates declining and a growing number of individuals intentionally choosing child-free (Barroso, 2021; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Stegen et al., 2021). For instance, between 6% and 9% of Canadians aged 20–34 indicate that they are not planning on having children (Matthews & Desjardins, 2017). Statistics Canada (2017) found that between 2011 and 2016, the number of Canadian couples living without children grew by 7.2%, whereas the number of couples living with children grew by just 2.3%. However, not all individuals are intentionally child-free (ICF); some individuals are involuntarily childless due to factors like infertility. So, even though survey data indicates that 17.4% of women aged 50 and older report not having biological children, this data does not tell us what percentage are ICF and what percentage are involuntarily childless (Statistics Canada, 2024). Regardless, we can infer that at least a proportion of these individuals have made the intentional decision to remain child-free.

Despite trends which suggest increases in ICF (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Park, 2002, 2005; Stegen et al., 2021), a dominant pronatal discourse remains prevalent, implying that parenthood is the only natural, acceptable, and fulfilling path in life (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Corbett, 2018; Park, 2002). Pronatalism suggests that adults without children—by choice or circumstance—are deviant and unnatural (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Hintz & Brown, 2020; Letherby, 2002; Peterson, 2015; Tanaka & Johnson, 2016). This discourse presumes that by violating the norm of parenthood, individuals without children are destined to languish in old age (Dykstra & Wagner, 2007; Penning et al., 2022; Zhang & Hayward, 2001).

Contrary to these pronatalist assumptions, the extant literature offers a more complex portrayal of ICF (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Corbett, 2018; Penning et al., 2022; Stahnke et al., 2022; Wu & Hart, 2002; Zhang & Hayward, 2001). Although pronatalism suggests that intentionally child-free adults (ICFAs) will experience greater declines in psychological well-being in old age than parents, research has demonstrated that there are no statistically significant differences in psychological wellbeing between the two groups when controlling for demographic variables and relationship status (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Letherby, 2002). The pronatalist perspective also suggests that childless adults and ICFAs will lack adequate social support in old age; however, research indicates that both groups report

support levels comparable to parents (Albertini & Mencarini, 2014; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Klaus & Schnettler, 2016; Wu & Hart, 2002).

Nonetheless, context appears to play a significant role. Relationship status, gender, and societal attitudes have been shown to moderate well-being among both childless (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Dykstra & Wagner, 2007b; Neuberger & Preisner, 2018; Penning et al., 2022; Wenger, 2009) and ICFAs (Neal & Neal, 2021). A particularly important—but often overlooked—determinant of well-being among ICFAs is whether their childfree status is voluntary (Doyle et al., 2012; Jefferies & Konnert, 2002; Neal & Neal, 2021; Park, 2002). Research shows that individuals who are involuntarily childless tend to report poorer outcomes in later life than ICFAs (Jefferies & Konnert, 2002; Neal & Neal, 2021; Stahnke et al., 2020; Zhang & Hayward, 2001). Unlike those who are involuntarily childless, ICFAs tend to be satisfied with their choice and report a range of reasons for remaining childfree (Jefferies & Konnert, 2002; Neal & Neal, 2021; Stahnke et al., 2020). For instance, a highly cited reason for remaining ICF is the desire for freedom (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Brooks, 2019; Corbett, 2018; Gillespie, 2003; Höglund & Hildingsson, 2023; Park, 2005). This includes preserving meaningful activities and seizing new life opportunities, such as travel and career advancement (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Doyle et al., 2012; Peterson, 2015). Some ICFAs question their fitness for parenting or see child-rearing as misaligned with their values, feeling that raising children would not be rewarding (Gillespie, 1999; Hintz & Brown, 2020; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Palmer, 2019). Other ICFAs choose childfreedom to preserve relationships with partners who do not want children. Overall, there are many reasons for choosing childfreedom, and many ICFAs report more than one reason for doing so (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Doyle et al., 2012; Höglund & Hildingsson, 2023; Jefferies & Konnert, 2002; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Park, 2005; Stegen et al., 2021).

Pronatalist advocates, however, argue that individuals should balance career and family—even at the expense of personal aspirations—positioning service to family above individual fulfilment (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Gillespie, 2001; Park, 2002, 2005; Peterson, 2015). As a result, ICFAs are frequently perceived as selfish, with their decision viewed through a negative lens (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Calhoun & Selby, 1980; Corbett, 2018; Gillespie, 2001; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Park, 2005; Peterson, 2015; Stahnke et al., 2020). Moreover, when ICFAs note their reasons for

remaining child-free, these reasons tend to be quickly dismissed with common responses such as, “But it’s different when they’re your own!” or “What if your parents didn’t have kids?” (Hintz & Brown, 2020; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Neal & Neal, 2022; Park, 2002). These kinds of responses suggest that individuals who choose ICF are foolish or wrong.

Given that a substantial body of quantitative research has failed to support the pronatalist claim that ICFAs will languish in old age, there is a need to explore the experiences of ICFOAs more deeply through qualitative inquiry. Despite societal pressure to conform to traditional life paths, many ICFAs lead deeply satisfying and meaningful lives (Betancur et al., 2022; Brooks, 2019; Gillespie, 2003; Hintz & Brown, 2020; Stahnke et al., 2020). Rather than presuming that child-freedom leads to dissatisfaction, researchers must recognize that individuals are the experts of their own lives and can be empowered to make decisions aligned with their values (Mollen, 2006; Stahnke et al., 2020). Supporting this autonomy requires acknowledging that life satisfaction may take different forms for different people. Therefore, to better understand the lives of ICFOAs, I asked: What are the lived experiences of intentionally child-free older adults? Through thematic analysis of participant interviews and photo-diaries, I explored the challenges, satisfactions, and values that shape their experiences in later life.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review briefly examines how national, societal, individual, and contextual factors—as well as pronatal stigma—shape the experiences of ICFA and compares these experiences to those of involuntarily childless adults and parents. Comparing these experiences is important, as a growing body of evidence indicates that the experiences of ICFA differ in meaningful ways from involuntarily childless adults (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Jefferies & Konnert, 2002; Neal & Neal, 2021; Park, 2002). However, existing research often fails to distinguish between ICFA and involuntarily childless adults. Terms such as “childless” and “non-parent” have frequently been used interchangeably, grouping together potentially distinct experiences (Blackstone, 2014; Doyle et al., 2012; Křenková, 2019; Park, 2002, 2005). Due to this imprecision, the unique characteristics and experiences of each group have likely been obscured. Given the importance of this distinction—and the persistent imprecision in how terms are used—this literature review will carefully differentiate between involuntarily childless and ICFA. When referring to studies that do not differentiate between the involuntarily childless and ICF, the term *childless* will be used. In contrast, *ICF* will refer specifically to research that has distinguished the ICF from the involuntarily childless. Findings from studies that have not differentiated the involuntarily childless from the ICF must be interpreted cautiously, recognizing that they may obscure meaningful differences between the experiences of ICFA and involuntarily childless adults.

Impacts of National Context on the ICF and Childless

The experiences of involuntarily childless adults and ICFA are shaped by various contextual factors, including societal norms, political climate, economic conditions, and personal lifestyle (Koropecj-Cox & Call, 2007; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Neuberger & Preisner, 2018). Although everyone experiences certain declines with age, the nature and degree of these declines differ across social groups, including parents, the involuntarily childless, and the ICF (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Dykstra & Wagner, 2007; Koropecj-Cox & Call, 2007; Wenger, 2009; Wu & Hart, 2002). Importantly, ICFA may face distinct challenges or advantages later in life compared to parents and vice versa.

At the macro level, research indicates that childless older adults in highly pronatalist societies often report lower psychological well-being than their parental counterparts (Stahnke et al., 2020; Tanaka & Johnson, 2016), potentially due to the stigma surrounding childlessness and

ICF. Although Tanaka and Johnson (2016) classify Canada as weakly pronatalist, Canadian ICF and childless adults are not necessarily free from such stigma. In their cross-national comparison, the authors found that in countries with low total fertility rates (TFRs)—including Canada (TFR = 1.5, below the replacement level of 2.1)—childless adults reported lower life satisfaction, even when controlling for age, sex, marital status, and health. These findings suggest that life satisfaction among childless adults may decline in low-fertility societies, perhaps due to heightened societal pressure to contribute to population growth. As national TFRs decrease, cultural anxieties around reproduction may intensify, amplifying scrutiny toward those who are ICF or childless.

However, Tanaka and Johnson (2016) did not differentiate between ICFA and involuntarily childless adults. As such, it is unclear whether pronatal stigma surrounding childlessness impacts ICF and involuntarily childless adults in the same way or to the same degree. Given that many studies have found that ICFA experience increased stigma than those who are involuntarily childless—presumably because they are perceived as actively rejecting pronatalist norms (Albertini & Brini, 2021; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Calhoun & Selby, 1980; Corbett, 2018; Hintz & Brown, 2020)—these distinctions are crucial. There are also methodological limitations to consider in Tanaka and Johnson's study. These authors assessed national pronatalist sentiment using a single item: "Is it necessary for a woman to have a child?" While only 18% of Canadian respondents endorsed this statement, the question may oversimplify cultural attitudes. For example, some may reject the idea that motherhood is necessary yet still believe women ought to have children under normative circumstances. As such, this measure may not fully capture the subtleties of pronatalist beliefs in Canada.

In summary, national context plays a significant role in shaping the experiences and life satisfaction of childless individuals and ICFA. Although Canada may be classified as weakly pronatalist based on a single survey item, the interaction between low fertility rates and enduring social expectations may still contribute to the stigmatization of ICFOA and negatively affect their psychological well-being. This raises the question of how ICFA navigate stigma in later life and the strategies they employ to sustain well-being.

The Impact of Social Support on The Experiences of Childless and ICFA

Pronatalist ideology suggests that ICFA will experience declines in psychological well-being in later life due to the absence of social and instrumental support typically presumed to

come from adult children (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002; Koropecj-Cox & Call, 2007; Park, 2005; Penning et al., 2022; Wu & Hart, 2002; Zhang & Hayward, 2001). These concerns are especially pronounced for ICFOAs, as limited social support is already associated with increased risks for depression and early mortality among older adults (Albertini & Mencarini, 2014; Arpino et al., 2022; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Klaus & Schnettler, 2016; Wu & Hart, 2002; Zhang & Hayward, 2001).

However, several studies challenge these assumptions. First, having children does not guarantee care in later life (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002; Keith, 1983; Klaus & Schnettler, 2016; Wu & Hart, 2002). Second, both involuntarily childless adults and ICFOAs may develop more diverse and intentional support networks compared to parents (Albertini & Kohli, 2009; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Klaus & Schnettler, 2015; Křenková, 2019). Third, research suggests that relationship status—such as being partnered—may play a more significant role in well-being in old age than parental status (Keith, 1983; Mikucka, 2020; Neal & Neal, 2021; Penning et al., 2022; Ross et al., 1990; Stahnke et al., 2022; Wu & Hart, 2002; Zhang & Hayward, 2001). Many studies have found that intimate partner relationships may benefit from remaining intentionally childfree, a potentially protective factor in old age (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020; Dimitrova & Kotzeva, 2022; Gillespie, 1999, 2003; Mollen, 2006; Shapiro, 2014; Somers, 1993). Given this evidence, the assumption that ICFOAs are destined to experience loneliness and dissatisfaction in later life appears increasingly unfounded.

One possible reason researchers have assumed that childless and ICFOAs experience loneliness and dissatisfaction in later life is the well-established link between social connection, relationship satisfaction, and psychological well-being. From a pronatalist perspective, the absence of children is seen as a loss of important social connections that children are presumed to provide. Acknowledging the value of social ties, Mikucka (2020) examined whether the disadvantages associated with being single or childless change with age. Drawing on data from the Swiss Household Panel—a longitudinal survey tracking social change in Switzerland—Mikucka analyzed responses from two cohorts: a younger group (aged 60–74; 723 men, 919 women) and an older group (aged 75–89; 255 men, 386 women). Using covariance analysis, they assessed differences in life satisfaction by partnership and parenthood status, controlling for age-related health declines and tracking changes over time. Life satisfaction was measured by the

item, "In general, how satisfied are you with your life if 0 means 'not at all satisfied' and 10 means 'completely satisfied'?" The mean score was 8.

Mikucka's (2020) findings indicated that life satisfaction did not differ significantly between parents and childless adults when matched by relationship status. However, among the childless, gender emerged as a meaningful variable: divorced, widowed, and never-married childless males reported higher rates of loneliness and depression than their female counterparts with the same relationship status. These findings suggest that in old age, unpartnered childless men may represent a particularly vulnerable group.

The Moderating Impact of Gender on Social Support

Mikucka's (2020) study is not the first to identify the moderating role of gender in the relationship between partnership status and life satisfaction. Similar findings have been reported by Dykstra and Hagestad (2007), Penning et al. (2022), Wenger (2009), and Zhang and Hayward (2001), who observed that widowed, never-married, and divorced childless men tend to experience greater declines in life satisfaction than women in comparable circumstances. This gendered disparity may offer valuable insight into strategies that could support men's well-being in later life (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Koropecjy-Cox & Call, 2007; Křenková, 2019; Penning et al., 2022).

One possible explanation for women's comparatively better outcomes is their tendency to actively maintain and expand their social networks (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Klaus & Schnettler, 2015; Wenger, 2009). For instance, Brooks (2019) found that some ICF women made intentional arrangements with friends and family to ensure care in later life. Similarly, Křenková (2019) reported that gender strongly predicted the quality of social relationships in later life, with childless women experiencing less social loneliness than men. Moreover, gender was found to moderate the relationship between marital status, childlessness, and mental well-being. Specifically, divorced, widowed, and never-married childless men reported greater loneliness and higher rates of depression than women in comparable circumstances.

Together, the findings from Mikucka (2020) and Křenková (2019) suggest that social well-being in old age may be shaped more by the interaction of gender and relationship status than by parental status. However, two important caveats should be noted. First, Mikucka did not report effect sizes, and Křenková was unable to do so, which limits conclusions about the strength of these interactions. Second, Křenková did not distinguish between involuntarily

childless and ICFAs, making it unclear whether the findings apply equally to both groups. Thus, it is plausible, based on Mikucka's (2020) findings, that connections between gender and network size exert greater influence on life satisfaction than those between parental and relationship status. This aligns with prior research suggesting that men and women differ in both the size and function of their social networks, which in turn affects psychological well-being (Dykstra & Wagner, 2007; Penning et al., 2022; Vikström et al., 2011; Zhang & Hayward, 2001). Though some studies report no significant differences in life satisfaction between parents and the childless, the mechanisms underlying these outcomes remain insufficiently understood.

Differences in Social Networks Between the Childless, ICF, and Parents

Whether couples become parents, choose to remain ICF, or experience involuntary childlessness, their social networks inevitably evolve. It is therefore unsurprising that research consistently shows differences in the social networks of ICFAs, childless adults, and parents (Albertini & Kohli, 2009; Albertini & Mencarini, 2014; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Klaus & Schnettler, 2016; Křenková, 2019; Wu & Hart, 2002; Zhang & Hayward, 2001). These variations in social network composition could be reflective of differing life course trajectories that generate different contexts and opportunities for support.

To examine differences in network development over time, Klaus and Schnettler (2016) analyzed data from the German Ageing Survey, which surveyed adults aged 40–85 (excluding those in institutional care) in 1996, 2002, 2008, and 2011. They assessed data from the 5,782 participants who completed the survey in both 1996 and 2002, aiming to determine whether the social networks of childless adults declined more rapidly than those of parents. Network size and support were assessed across four dependent variables: (a) the number of people with whom participants had regular, meaningful contact (up to eight), (b) network composition by relationship type (e.g., family, friend), (c) emotional and cognitive support, measured by the number of people participants could turn to for comfort or advice (up to six), and (d) types of support received in the past year (emotional, cognitive, financial, or instrumental). Klaus and Schnettler found no significant difference in the rate of network decline between childless adults and parents after controlling for partnership status ($b = 0.44, p < .01$), volunteer activity ($b = 0.37, p < .01$), and active leisure time ($b = 0.10, p < .01$). They concluded that relationship status, career involvement, and leisure pursuits mediate the stability of social networks over time.

Interestingly, Klaus and Schnettler (2016) found that only parents experienced a decline in the number of friends and collateral kin with age, even though overall network size remained relatively stable. Conversely, childless adults were more likely to maintain close ties with friends and extended family. Klaus and Schnettler argued that childless older adults continue to access support comparable to that of parents and that their networks may even provide more efficient support. For example, while adult children often live at a distance and may be unable to provide consistent support, childless adults tend to rely on geographically closer and more accessible ties.

Other studies report similar results. For instance, Albertini and Kohli (2009) found that childless older adults often have more diverse networks than parents, comprised of kin and non-kin. In terms of the size of social network, several studies report that childless adults tend to have smaller networks than parents (Klaus & Schnettler, 2016; Křenková, 2019; Wu & Hart, 2002). However, a small network does not imply dissatisfaction, as research consistently shows that childless adults and parents report comparable levels of satisfaction with their social networks (Albertini & Kohli, 2009; Albertini & Mencarini, 2014; Klaus & Schnettler, 2016; Park, 2005; Wu & Hart, 2002; Zhang & Hayward, 2001).

These variations in network size and composition may reflect the distinct social contexts in which parents and childless adults age. However, they also prompt a broader question: Regardless of network size, are both parents and childless adults receiving the social, emotional, and instrumental support needed to thrive in later life?

Different Kinds of Support and Their Impact on Wellbeing

Research indicates that older adults may not always have their social, emotional, and instrumental needs met regardless of parental status. It is plausible, however, that parents, the involuntarily childless, and ICFAs experience these deficits differently. For example, Křenková (2019) found that childless adults reported higher levels of social loneliness compared to parents; though it remains unclear whether this applies specifically to ICFAs. Wu and Hart (2002) proposed that intentionality may be a key distinction: ICFAs are more likely to have consciously accepted their childfree status early in life and appear to take deliberate steps to meet their social needs. As a result, they may be more satisfied with their social support than those who are unintentionally childless. Similarly, Zhang and Hayward (2001) suggest that ICFAs take intentional steps to build robust social support networks that enhance psychological well-being. In contrast, parents may feel less urgency to do so and instead rely on pronatalist assumptions

that their children will support them in old age (Albertini & Kohli, 2009; Gillespie, 2000; Koropecj-Cox & Call, 2007; Wenger, 2009; Wu & Hart, 2002). These findings underscore the need to critically re-examine the common assumption that children are the primary source of support for older adults (Keith, 1983; Letherby, 2002; Mikucka, 2020).

In terms of instrumental support, Klaus and Schnettler (2016) found that support was highest in midlife (ages 40–50), declined in older adulthood (ages 60–75), and rose again in very old age (ages 75 and older). Wu and Hart (2002) reported a similar pattern and noted that individuals aged 60–64 experienced greater psychological distress than those aged 80 and older. A range of studies point to the critical role of social support in maintaining older adults' mental health (Corbett, 2018; Koropecj-Cox & Call, 2007; Křenková, 2019; Ross et al., 1990; Wu & Hart, 2002; Zhang & Hayward, 2001).

Wu and Hart (2002) suggest that this U-shaped pattern in mental health reflects fluctuations in both perceived and received support. As physical health declines in very old age, individuals may perceive higher levels of support as they begin to receive more direct care. Social and instrumental support therefore appears to ebb and flow across the life course; nonetheless, by very old age, parents, childless adults, and ICFAAs report similar levels of satisfaction with their perceived support. Importantly, studies that do not distinguish between ICFAAs and the involuntarily childless risk obscuring meaningful differences between the groups. Although this limits our understanding of their distinct needs, existing research clearly demonstrates that a range of factors—including health status, gender, cultural norms, education, employment history, and age—interact to shape well-being in later life.

Ratings of Well-being and Life Satisfaction Among the Childless, ICFAAs, and Parents

Existing research suggests that reports of well-being, life satisfaction, and happiness do not differ significantly between ICFAAs and parents (Doyle et al., 2012; Neal & Neal, 2021). In some cases—such as marriage and employment—childless adults and ICFAAs report even greater satisfaction than their parental counterparts (Corbett, 2018; Dimitrova & Kotzeva, 2022; Keith, 1983; Park, 2002; Stahnke et al., 2022; Vikström et al., 2011). In fact, ICFAAs often report a range of positive outcomes, including (a) a sense of belonging (Brooks, 2019); (b) meaning and purpose (Betancur et al., 2022; Brooks, 2019); (c) time for desired activities (Doyle et al., 2012; Höglund & Hildingsson, 2023; Jefferies & Konnert, 2002; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Stegen et al., 2021); (d) meaningful relationships (Gillespie, 2003; Stahnke et al., 2022); and (e) career

satisfaction (Gillespie, 2003; Mollen, 2006; Park, 2005; Peterson, 2015). Child-freedom may create space for these kinds of outcomes in ways that family life does not always permit.

Despite these findings, traditional models of development often suggest that parenthood is a critical milestone in the life course, implying that individuals without children are somehow “incomplete” (Doyle et al., 2012; Jefferies & Konnert, 2002; Mollen, 2006; Park, 2002, 2005; Stahnke et al., 2020). However, studies have shown negligible differences in psychological adjustment between parents, the childless, and ICFAAs (Doyle et al., 2012; Koropecj-Cox et al., 2007b; Stahnke et al., 2022; Vikström et al., 2011; Zhang & Hayward, 2001). Further, research suggests that life satisfaction and well-being may be more closely tied to agency and self-fulfilment than to parenthood per se (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Corbett, 2018; Dimitrova & Kotzeva, 2022; Park, 2005; Peterson, 2015; Shapiro, 2014). Life satisfaction often reflects how closely one’s life aligns with their values and goals (Stahnke et al., 2022; Tanaka & Johnson, 2016). Compared to parents, ICFAAs report a stronger sense of autonomy, which may contribute to their perceived control over life choices and, in turn, to psychological well-being (Brooks, 2019; Corbett, 2018; Shapiro, 2014). Further, many ICFAAs identify freedom as a core value (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Corbett, 2018; Doyle et al., 2012; Gillespie, 1999, 2003; Höglund & Hildingsson, 2023; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Mollen, 2006; Park, 2005). In this sense, ICFAAs describe full and meaningful lives, albeit with a definition of “meaning” that may differ from that of parents. Given that ICFAAs often make intentional lifestyle decisions, autonomy may serve as a key mechanism supporting their long-term mental health.

Building on consistent quantitative findings, Stahnke et al. (2022) used qualitative methods to explore life satisfaction among older child-free women, focusing on: (a) the level of life satisfaction among older child-free women, (b) how they describe their life satisfaction, and (c) how their narratives offer a deeper understanding of life satisfaction beyond quantitative measures. Using purposive sampling, the authors recruited 14 U.S.-born women over age 65 who had not raised biological or adopted children. All participants were White, retired, heterosexual, and most held a bachelor’s degree. Semi-structured interviews were thematically analyzed, with themes defined as ideas mentioned by two or more participants. Participants also completed a quantitative life satisfaction scale.

The median life satisfaction score was 30 out of 34, notably higher than the U.S. national average for older adults (24.2). Participants attributed their satisfaction to the opportunities

afforded by child-freedom, including deep relationships, travel, career achievements, and financial stability. Life satisfaction also appeared to increase with age—consistent with Wu and Hart's (2002) findings—potentially reflecting how child-free women actively reflect on the gains associated with their choices. These results highlight that intentional child-freedom can support high levels of well-being and life satisfaction in later life, challenging pronatal assumptions that parenthood is a prerequisite for a fulfilling life.

A major limitation of Stahnke et al.'s (2022) study is the homogeneity of their sample: all participants were retired, White, heterosexual women with middle to high income levels. Some of these characteristics are associated with higher psychological well-being (Ross et al., 1990; Wu & Hart, 2002) and may not reflect the broader ICFOA population. Consequently, their findings may reflect socioeconomic advantages rather than advantages that child-freedom may beget. This is particularly relevant given that previous research indicates childless adults and ICFOAs tend to have higher education, income, and occupational status than parents (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Gillespie, 2003; Koropecj-Cox & Call, 2007).

Together, these findings suggest that the relationship between ICF and mental well-being is complex and influenced by relationship satisfaction, the quality of one's social network, personal agency, and the effects of pronatalist stigma (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Betancur et al., 2022; Jeffries & Konnert, 2002; Neal & Neal, 2021; Stahnke, 2020). Social context also appears to influence well-being, as the pressure to conform to pronatal norms may shape when, how, and why individuals pursue child-freedom, and how they experience child-freedom into old age.

Pathways to ICF

The pathway to ICF is often a nuanced interplay of lived experience, personal values, and life circumstances. Rather than a single, definitive moment, the decision to remain child-free is more accurately conceptualized as a series of decisions made over time. Despite this complexity, two general pathways have emerged in the literature: “early articulators” and “postponers” (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020; Höglund & Hildingsson, 2023; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Neal & Neal, 2022; Peterson, 2015). These categories were first introduced in the 1980s, yet little empirical work has examined their boundaries, definitions, or the nuances within and between them. As such, future research may uncover additional pathways or refine our understanding of existing ones. At present, our conceptualization of these categories remains relatively underdeveloped.

Early articulators are individuals who, from a young age, express a clear and enduring desire to remain child-free (Betancur et al., 2022; Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020; Brooks, 2019; Doyle et al., 2012; Höglund & Hildingsson, 2023; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Neal & Neal, 2022; Peterson, 2015). Some recall not engaging in childhood play that emulates parenting, such as playing with dolls or pretending to have families. Despite the clarity of their intentions, early articulators frequently report being denied reproductive interventions due to assumptions that they are “too young to know” or will “change their mind” (Doyle et al., 2012; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017). Later in life, many express frustrations at these dismissals, having felt confident in their decision all along.

The life trajectory of early articulators often diverges from the socially normative path, which includes marriage and parenthood (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017). Instead, their pathway typically includes a process of making the child-free decision, resisting external pressure and stigma, fostering a child-free identity, building supportive networks, and cultivating a legacy (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020; Corbett, 2018; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Park, 2005).

Postponers, on the other hand, are individuals who do not hold strong feelings about parenthood early in life but delay the decision until having children is no longer viable or desirable (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020; Brooks, 2019; Neal & Neal, 2022; Park, 2005). Postponers differ from individuals who try to conceive later in life, as they do not view their child-free status as a loss. Like early articulators, they report an acceptance of their child-free status (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017).

Numerous factors may influence one's pathway to child-freedom. Commonly cited reasons include difficult or abusive childhoods (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Doyle et al., 2012), difficulty envisioning oneself as a parent (Blackstone & Stewart, 2016; Mollen, 2006; Stokley & Sanders, 2020), or a perceived mismatch between one's personality and what is believed to constitute “good” parenting (Hintz & Brown, 2020; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Shapiro, 2014; Stokley & Sanders, 2020). Despite variations in timing, rationale, and context, one pervasive experience among ICFAs is the judgement and questioning they face for deviating from pronatalist expectations.

Stigmatization of Childless and ICFAs

Choosing to remain ICF continues to be positioned as an alternative lifestyle relative to the dominant social expectation of parenthood (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Corbett, 2018; Gillespie, 2000; Mollen, 2006; Park, 2002). Because ICFAs deviate from powerful pronatalist norms, they are often subject to stigma (Corbett, 2018; Doyle et al., 2012; Hintz & Brown, 2020; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Neal & Neal, 2021; Park, 2002; Peterson, 2015). In the Canadian context, pronatalism manifests as hegemonic assumptions about family, which silence alternative paradigms that emphasize autonomy and critical self-reflection (Doyle et al., 2012; Hintz & Brown, 2020). By assuming that all adults desire children, pronatal discourse undermines individual agency and self-knowing. This is why the term “intentionally childfree” may be more appropriate than “childless,” as the latter term lacks connotations of choice or volition and may imply something is missing (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Brooks, 2019; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Gillespie, 2003). In contrast, “childfree” conveys intentionality and agency, accurately reflecting the experiences of those who consciously choose not to have children.

Due to their active rejection of pronatalist norms, ICFAs often encounter resistance and judgement from others (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017). Studies show that ICFAs are perceived negatively and are frequently viewed as undeserving of social acceptance (Calhoun & Selby, 1980; Corbett, 2018; Hintz & Brown, 2020; Mollen, 2006; Neal & Neal, 2022; Park, 2002; Shapiro, 2014; Somers, 1993). Hintz and Brown (2020) coined the term *bingos* to describe common pronatalist remarks, which operate as linguistic reinforcements of the idea that parenthood is natural and childfreedom is deviant. The term metaphorically evokes a “bingo card” filled with stigmatizing phrases such as “You’ll change your mind,” “You’re too young to decide,” or “What if your parents hadn’t had kids?”, each reinforcing the assumption that everyone should, and does, value parenthood.

In their study, Hintz and Brown (2020) analyzed 424 posts from the subreddit /r/childfree, Reddit’s most active forum for discussing childfreedom. Using contrapuntal analysis, they examined power struggles between dominant pronatalist discourses and counter-discourses rooted in reproductive autonomy. They identified six central discourses: (a) parenthood as biological inevitability, (b) parenthood as moral imperative, (c) parenthood as fulfilment, (d) childfreedom as intentional, (e) childfreedom as a personal decision, and (f)

child-freedom as fulfilment. They also identified various rhetorical strategies, as well as practices like the refusal to engage with “bingoers.”

Though insightful, their analysis is limited by the absence of demographic data. Reddit is an anonymous platform, making it unclear whether users fit the standard research definition of ICF (e.g., having not raised biological, adopted, or stepchildren). Further, the users are likely young to middle-aged adults, limiting the applicability of findings to older ICF populations.

It also appears that the nature of pronatalist stigma may shift over the life course. While younger ICFAs are frequently told that they will “change their mind,” ICFOAs are more likely to encounter assumptions of regret or pity. For example, ICFOAs may experience surprise or unsolicited sympathy when others discover they have neither children nor grandchildren. This indicates that while the language of pronatalist stigma may evolve, its underlying function of invalidating child-freedom persists across the lifespan.

Even within academic literature, “bingoed” sentiments persist, framing childlessness and ICF as a deficit, an error in judgment, or a form of deviance (Doyle et al., 2012; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Gillespie, 1999, 2003; Jefferies & Konnert, 2002; Koropecj-Cox & Call, 2007; Penning et al., 2022). The assumption that ICFAs will inevitably experience loneliness or lack satisfaction has been increasingly challenged by feminist scholarship and emerging empirical work (Brooks, 2019; Doyle et al., 2012; Gillespie, 2000; Mollen, 2006; Park, 2005; Stahnke et al., 2020, 2022). Some studies even suggest that these stigmatizing narratives may act as catalysts, motivating ICFAs to actively cultivate social connection, pursue meaningful goals, and maintain a positive outlook to avoid the very outcomes society predicts for them (Doyle et al., 2012; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Stahnke et al., 2022).

Resilience emerges as a prominent trait among ICFAs, who often recount navigating stigma, overcoming challenges, and adapting through life transitions (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Park, 2002, 2005; Stahnke et al., 2020, 2022). This resilience may be partly attributed to the freedom to structure one’s life according to personal values—a freedom closely tied to life satisfaction through its links to autonomy, engagement, productivity, and meaning (Corbett, 2018; Meyers, 2001; Peterson, 2015). In resisting cultural expectations that impose a singular life trajectory, ICFAs assert identities rooted in self-determination and critical self-awareness (Corbett, 2018; Stegen et al., 2021). Despite prevailing pronatalist norms, the child-free choice remains a deliberate and meaningful assertion of agency.

Although societal perspectives on sex, sexuality, and reproduction have evolved—partly through developments such as contraception, feminist advocacy, and a growing emphasis on individual choice—many ICFOAs continue to encounter stigma (Stegen et al., 2021). Despite the perception that pronatal attitudes have reformed, ICFOAs frequently report hearing pronatalist remarks such as, “You’re bound to regret that,” “You’re too young to say you don’t want children,” or “You only find true happiness when you have a baby” (Hintz & Brown, 2020; Palmer, 2019). This dynamic creates a tension: ICFOAs make life choices aligned with their own definition of happiness and meaning, while pronatalist ideologies deny the legitimacy of those choices. The repeated questioning of their decision and the implicit notion that child-freedom should be hidden or justified may erode well-being over time. Alternatively, it may encourage resilience and bolster choice, potentially promoting wellbeing.

Nonetheless, research suggests that regret does not dominate the narratives of ICFOAs (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Brooks, 2019; Doyle et al., 2012; Stahnke et al., 2020; Stegen et al., 2021). Instead, many ICFOAs report constructing lives that feel meaningful and congruent with their values, finding ways to navigate or reject pronatal judgment. For these individuals, parenthood is undesirable. As such, they often report feelings of liberation, completeness, and even relief in having chosen child-freedom (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020; Peterson, 2015; Stahnke et al., 2020; Stegen et al., 2021). Despite persistent societal messaging that equates fulfillment with parenthood, ICFOAs appear resilient, reporting levels of life satisfaction equal to or greater than those of parents (Höglund & Hildingsson, 2023; Stahnke et al., 2022).

Summary and Research Question

As pregnancy rates continue to decline in many countries, research into the lives of childless and ICFOAs has grown. However, as this literature review has demonstrated, much of the existing scholarship fails to adequately distinguish between the experiences of the involuntarily childless and the ICF. This lack of differentiation has created ambiguity regarding potential differences in the lived experiences between them. Moreover, although studies consistently report that ICFOAs are generally satisfied with their decision, much of the research has been shaped—implicitly or explicitly—by pronatalist assumptions. As a result, the literature has disproportionately focused on loneliness, dissatisfaction, and isolation among childless populations, often overlooking research that highlights the satisfaction, purpose, and vitality found in the lives of ICFOAs.

As community members, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers, it is important to recognize that ICFOAs may experience the world differently than parents. Factors such as relationship status and prevailing social attitudes uniquely affect their well-being. Thus, developing a deeper, more accurate understanding of their experiences is essential to moving beyond pronatalist assumptions and toward more inclusive and supportive social frameworks.

This study sought to address this gap by asking: *What are the experiences of intentionally childfree older adults (ICFOAs)?* In doing so, it aimed to uncover the nuances of ICFOAs' lives without allowing pronatalist ideologies to shape the data collection, analysis, or interpretation. By drawing on phenomenology and feminist standpoint theory, I prioritized participants' lived experiences and subjective truths. Thematic analysis allowed for both the recognition of individual uniqueness and the identification of commonalities across narratives.

By approaching this research from an advocacy-oriented perspective, I aimed to counteract the biases that often permeate studies on ICF. My hope is that this work contributes to a more balanced understanding of the experiences of ICFOAs and informs the ways in which we—as a society and as professionals—support and affirm this growing demographic.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to explore the experiences of ICFOAs. It begins by situating me, the principal investigator, within the research through a discussion of positionality and the guiding research paradigm. The chapter then details the design and procedures employed, including the analytic process used to interpret the data. Finally, it addresses the strategies which helped ensure rigour and quality, as well as ethical considerations relevant to the study.

Position of the Researcher

As the principal investigator, my situated perspective has inevitably shaped the research process, including data collection, interpretation, and dissemination. My perspective is reflected throughout the study, from the guiding paradigm to the findings presented. Thus, ongoing reflexivity was essential to maintaining the quality and integrity of the work.

I approach this research from the belief that reality is individually constructed and that language, though essential, is an imperfect tool for conveying lived experience. Accordingly, I recognize that I can only approximate an understanding of participants' subjective realities. My personal investment in the experiences of ICFOAs stems from my identity as a woman who has chosen to remain ICF. Like many ICFAs, I have encountered social pressure and criticism—rooted in pronatalist beliefs—that question the possibility of a meaningful or satisfying child-free life. I reject the idea that parenthood is the sole or superior path to fulfilment. While ICF, like any life path, is sure to involve challenges, I maintain that meaning and purpose emerge from alignment with one's values and goals, whether through parenthood or through an ICF life.

My recognition of pronatalist cultural influences, and my resistance to them, informs both my interest in and approach to this research. Rather than hindering the study, my personal position has served as an asset. It has helped me attune to nuances in the data that may be overlooked by researchers without a personal connection to the topic. Further, my shared positionality helped foster openness among participants. In research contexts where pronatalist assumptions are unexamined, participants may fear judgment or withhold aspects of their experience. In contrast, my transparency about my own stance seemed to promote a sense of recognition and trust, encouraging rich, candid accounts. Given that the experiences of ICFAs are often marginalized or dismissed, I hope this work contributes to expanding both scholarly and clinical understanding of this population.

Paradigm

The tenets of feminist standpoint theory (FST) and hermeneutic phenomenology informed my perception of reality, my understanding of knowledge, and my process of inquiry. These frameworks guided the research process, influencing the questions posed, as well as the methods of data collection and interpretation. Remaining grounded in these frameworks helped ensure that my approach remained coherent and aligned with the goals of the research.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist research emerged as a critique to positivist empiricism—a stance that has traditionally claimed objectivity while remaining embedded within sociopolitical structures of power (Letherby, 2003, pp. 45; Willsher & Goel, 2017). Feminist research methodologies are grounded in three central tenets: (a) knowledge is co-constructed, (b) researchers must engage in *reflexivity*—consciously noting assumptions and engaging with them critically—and (c) hierarchical power dynamics in research can be flattened when reciprocity in relationship is encouraged (Cohen et al., 2021; Johnston & MacDougall, 2021). Within this framework, Cohen et al. (2021) note that FST promotes research practices that: (a) validate the experiences of minoritized groups, (b) accept a view of reality that accounts for the personal and political, (c) focus on choice and autonomy, (d) name and understand power relations, and (e) highlight the importance of empowerment and respect for dignity.

Behind these practices lies a foundation which emphasizes advocacy and reflexivity. FST encourages researchers to name and consider how their positionality may influence all aspects of the research, prompting them to explore, understand, and take accountability for their own subjective position (Cohen et al., 2021). As such, the researcher's self is considered to be part of the research process, consistent with the belief that knowledge is co-constructed (Seibold, 2000). Since the researcher is part of the research, the exploration of experience and voice must be carefully balanced to support a nuanced, multi-dimensional interpretation of situated experience (Cohen et al., 2021). Reflexivity supports this balancing act by allowing the researcher to both interpret participants' meaning-making processes and examine how power dynamics shape interpretations (Cohen et al., 2021). Importantly, reflexivity supports the flattening of power hierarchies that inherently exist within research. Reflexivity tasks researchers with naming their position of power in research and their subsequent influence on how research is collected, interpreted, and disseminated (Johnston & MacDougall, 2021).

Finally, feminist research argues that combining methods can deepen the understanding of lived experience and more effectively address research questions (Cohen et al., 2021). When embraced thoughtfully, differences among paradigms can enrich interpretations of human experience (Cohen et al., 2021). Accordingly, this study drew upon the tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology alongside FST.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology holds that individuals interpret and make meaning of their subjective experiences, and that these interpretations can be meaningfully studied (Jones et al., 2012; Mertens, 2015). Rather than assuming what an experience is like, phenomenological researchers aim to understand how individuals perceive and make meaning of their lived realities within the context of their social and cultural worlds (Mertens, 2015; Rennie, 2012). This approach prioritizes participants' perspectives and avoids imposing predefined definitions of experience. Thus, knowledge is inherently interpretive as it is filtered through personal biases, assumptions, and context (Jones et al., 2012; Rennie, 2012). Rather than seeking objective truth, as described in empiricist research, phenomenologists aim to interpret and understand meaning as experienced by participants. Achieving this requires researchers to engage in reflexivity—a process central to hermeneutic phenomenological rigor—allowing participants' descriptions to guide interpretation (Cohen et al., 2021; Jones, 2012; Mertens, 2015). Reflexivity is iterative, occurring throughout the research process, and enhances the credibility of findings while preserving the integrity of the participants' lived experiences.

At its core, hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to interpret and describe the essence of an experience from the participant's point of view (Jones et al., 2012; Rennie, 2012). This requires deep attentiveness to language, context, and emotion. Researchers must approach narratives with *empathic wonderment*, seeking to understand participants' perspectives as if encountering them for the first time (Wertz, 2005). In phenomenological research, interviews are a primary tool for accessing these subjective accounts. Through in-depth, open-ended dialogue, participants articulate the significance of their experiences, often revealing insights that move beyond surface-level understanding (Mertens, 2015). Just as a kaleidoscope rearranges the same elements into new patterns, each participant brings a unique configuration to their *lifeworld*—the everyday world in which people live, act, and make sense of their experiences (Heidegger,

1962). These differences highlight the importance of reflexivity to minimize misinterpretation and honor the meaning inherent in participants' experiences.

Ultimately, phenomenology rests on three core assumptions: (a) we cannot assume to know another's experience, (b) subjective experience may vary or overlap across individuals, and (c) we can access the nuance of lived experience more fully by recognizing our own assumptions (Mertens, 2015). Phenomenology offers a rigorous and deeply human framework for understanding meaning beneath the surface, one that demands both intellectual precision and ethical attentiveness.

Design & Procedures

I recruited six Canadian men and women in old age (i.e., older than 70) who identified as ICF. Capturing participants in diverse relationship statuses was central to recruitment, as relationship context is known to influence life satisfaction in older adults (Koropecj-Cox, 2007; Křenková, 2019; Mikucka, 2020; Penning et al., 2022). Thus, participants had varied relationship statuses: some were currently married, some had married later in life, and some were widowed (see appendix A). However, reaching this demographic proved challenging, and snowball sampling emerged as the most effective strategy. My grandmother played a pivotal role by connecting me with individuals who she thought might be interested in participating. She provided me with the contact information of folks she knew who did not have children. In my initial outreach, I shared information about myself, the study's aims (see Appendix D), and the inclusion criteria: identify as ICF by choice and not biological incapacity, be 70 years or older, and have no health concerns that might hinder completion of all three study components. Interested individuals were then informed about their role in the study and I sent the informed consent document for them to review (see Appendix E).

The procedures described above—engaging with participants relationally, encouraging review of informed consent documents, and sharing information about myself as the principal investigator—align with FST. The relational connections facilitated by my grandmother allowed me to engage meaningfully with participants, fostering trust-based relationships and supporting informed decision-making. This purposeful approach also aligns with the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology. Consistent with ethical research standards, my priority was to ensure that participants were informed, supported, and consenting throughout the study.

All interviews were conducted virtually or by phone. I used semi-structured scripts for the first (see Appendix F) and second (see Appendix G) interviews, making slight adjustments as the study progressed to incorporate emergent topics. The one-week gap between interviews—during which participants completed their photo-diaries—provided an opportunity to address unclear or missing information from the first interview. This process functioned as a form of member checking, allowing me to clarify and deepen my understanding of participants' experiences in the second interview. This approach aligns with FST and phenomenology's emphasis on the co-construction of knowledge.

A key aspect of this study was the participants' photo-diaries (see Appendix H). My aim was to capture a visual representation of participants' experiences. Thus, at the end of the initial interview, I explained what a photo-diary is (see Appendix I), what it aimed to capture, and ways participants could complete it. The use of photo-diary complemented participants' verbal accounts by offering a visual, emotive layer of meaning (Dowling et al., 2016). The photo-diaries offered snapshots of participants' daily lives, reflecting what they deemed meaningful—such as the places they frequented, the people they connected with, and the rhythms of their routines (Bartlett, 2012; Latham, 2004). As such, the photo-diaries provided participants with interpretive agency and autonomy to shape their narratives (Bennett, 2014; Latham, 2003). The photo-diaries offered a holistic and grounded view of participants' worlds, supporting a richer understanding of their lifeworld. While interviews focused on significant life events, the photo-diaries captured the subtleties of everyday life, allowing me to explore both the ordinary and extraordinary experiences of ICFOAs.

However, simply collecting participants' photo-diaries would not have allowed me to adequately interpret them as I would be responsible for defining the meaning of the photos. Thus, to co-construct my understanding with participants, I conducted a second interview to focus on what photos were taken and why (see Appendix G). In this interview, I asked participants to revisit the photos they took and consider the meaning or significance they ascribe to the photos, if any. A semi-structured approach allowed me to compare the similarities and differences among participants (Latham, 2003). Studies that have used the photo-diary technique with older adults have suggested that participants keep a small written diary so that upon revisiting the photo, they can easily recount their thoughts on it (Bartlett, 2012; Bennett, 2014). Thus, I suggested this technique, informing participants that they would be asked to discuss the photo, its context, and

its significance in our final interview. As a result, many participants included a small write-up with each of their photos. In many cases, I used their writing to lead the final interview and facilitate my understanding.

After completing the interviews and collecting the photo-diaries, I consulted with participants to obtain consent for uploading their anonymized data to a public archive for use by other researchers. To clarify the implications of this process, I provided a document explaining what a data archive is, how their data would be used, and the potential risks and benefits (see Appendix K). Most participants agreed to upload their data as it was, while a few requested minor changes to their interview transcripts.

With data collection complete, I began the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). I chose to handle the data manually which has been argued to increase the researcher's understanding of the data (Bartlett, 2012). The use of member checking and consultation with my research team helped guide my interpretations (Bartlett, 2012; Glaw et al., 2017).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

RTA offers a flexible means of analysing, interpreting, and describing interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). While a strength of RTA is its flexibility, Braun and Clarke (2021) have noted ways in which its flexibility can become a liability if its tenets are not closely attended to. As such, Braun and Clarke note (a) that RTA is more than descriptive, it is interpretive; (b) that researchers who employ RTA must clearly distinguish between codes, topics, and themes; (c) that themes do not “emerge” from the data but are discovered and named by the researcher; and (d) that RTA is not a rigid prescription for analysis. Given RTA's flexibility, there is an onus on the researcher to engage in reflexivity throughout the analytic process since it is at the researcher's discretion to determine what constitutes a theme, and to decide how to expand and collapse themes, among other processes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thus, the researcher becomes highly agentic in their analysis, interpretation, and description of the data.

Braun and Clarke (2021) identify six phases of RTA that I used to guide my analysis: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) coding the data in a systematic way, (3) generating initial themes from coded data, (4) developing and reviewing themes, (5) refining, defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the final report. However, before I could begin analysis, I was tasked with organizing the data. First, I organized the photos by participant and transcribed their interview data, including any non-verbals that helped communicate the meaning of what was

said. Once the interviews were transcribed and the photos were organized, I entered the first phase of analysis: familiarization.

To familiarize myself with the data, I reviewed the interviews and photo-diaries multiple times. This aspect of the RTA was not a rigid, linear process. In fact, examining the data multiple times is described by Braun and Clarke (2021) as an analytic process that immerses the researcher in the data, allowing them to question, imagine, reflect, and return to it repeatedly. The process of immersing myself in the interview data involved reading and re-reading the transcripts, as well as listening to the recorded audio multiple times until I was sufficiently familiar with the content. Returning to the data allowed me to actively search for patterns and meanings, as well as to ask myself questions such as, “Why did the participant choose to share this experience?” and “What does this perspective say about the experiences of ICFOAs?”

To familiarize myself with the photo-diaries, I used several strategies. First, I considered what was captured. I considered what the participant chose to frame and how they framed it. I considered how the photo was captured: was the picture zoomed in? Where was the focal point? What were my eyes drawn to? As I looked through the photos, I considered which interested me and which felt less intriguing. I considered for myself what I would choose to capture if I was a participant. At this stage, I aimed to have the photos speak for themselves, not allowing the interview data to inform my interpretation.

Moving into phase two, I began to develop initial codes that I labelled as *meaning units* (Applebaum, 2012). These constituted ideas, values, traits, beliefs, and assumptions that seemed to stick together. For instance, I deemed a moment where a participant spoke about being pragmatic as a meaning unit. To generate meaning units, I first analyzed each individual participant's data, beginning with the initial interview, then the photo-diary, and lastly the second interview. I conducted a preliminary analysis with each participant's data, searching for explicit and latent ideologies, values, beliefs, conceptualizations, and assumptions that felt salient (Braun & Clarke, 2021), before I broadened my scope to consider themes across the data.

Once I systematically organized the meaning units, I was able to move into phase three and begin generating themes. In this phase, I took the codes from phase two and considered if there were broader categories that they could fit under, called themes. For example, within the photo-diary analysis, the image of a bee on a flower became a metaphor for community and care; the metaphor of the bee was labelled as a meaning unit and “dedication to community” was

labelled as a theme. Themes were tethered to how participants constructed their experiences, and the meaning they ascribed them (Braun & Clarke, 2021). RTA describes a theme “like multi-faceted crystals—they capture multiple observations or facets” (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thus, I carefully searched for patterns, shifts in tone, metaphors, and veiled meanings not only in the interviews, but also in the photo-diaries to generate my initial codes.

Once I organized the codes under preliminary themes, I moved onto phase four: the dynamic process of reviewing themes. In this phase I revised how my codes fit together. I cautiously assessed each of my preliminary themes for adequate “thickness”, not wanting to mislabel a code or a topic as a theme (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This stage required constant arranging and re-arranging. Braun and Clarke (2021) note that “themes in reflexive TA are patterns of shared meaning, united by a central concept or idea.” Thus, my aim in stage four was to develop a coherent representation of each theme by integrating quotations and photos that the participants provided. This process involved assessing the quotations and photos that I nested within each theme to ensure that the data formed a coherent pattern. If there were any misnomers, I searched for a better fit for that data. Braun and Clarke (2006) note that the process of refining themes can be considered “good enough” when refinements no longer offer anything substantial to the accuracy of the portrayal.

Once I placed the data into accurate themes, I moved onto phase five: defining and naming themes. Braun and Clarke (2021) purport that defining and refining is a process of uncovering the nature or essence of that theme. I asked myself, “What aspect of the data does this theme capture?” Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) caution that themes should not speak for the data and argue that it is important to recognize when the data may fit better under two themes or split into sub-themes. I ensured that the themes demonstrated internal consistency and remained representative of the narrative. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that a good marker for the adequacy of a theme is to try to describe it in a few sentences. I was able to do this for all my themes, indicating that no further refinement was necessary.

Lastly, I entered phase six: producing a report of the data. I began to communicate the findings and offer evidence for how I made conclusions, choosing vivid and concise data extracts to demonstrate the merit of the themes. This phase avoids abstract description of the data by addressing those meanings that answer the research question.

The processes and assumptions underpinning RTA align closely with the tenets of my research paradigm, fostering strong conceptual coherence (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Central to this study has been my reflexive engagement with my own positionality as a researcher, acknowledging how my subjective standpoint has shaped everything from the analytic process to the production of knowledge. RTA actively supports this orientation, positioning researcher subjectivity as a resource to be harnessed, rather than a bias to control. In this way, RTA allowed me to meaningfully engage with my interpretive lens as a strength, rather than a limitation. The themes that emerged (i.e., patterns of shared meaning underpinned by central organizing concepts) became discernible once the initial analytic phases were complete, suggesting that alternative analytic strategies may not have afforded the same degree of congruence or depth.

Rigour and Quality

Qualitative research is an iterative process in which rigour and quality are built into the study design through checks and balances. While qualitative analysis is self-correcting, several strategies can enhance methodological integrity (Mertens, 2015). One such strategy is a *bricolage approach*, which combines methods from the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences to create a multifaceted model of inquiry (Yee & Bremner, 2011). Bricolage employs diverse data sources, reducing the risk of systematic bias. It is a pragmatic, strategic, and reflexive approach that allows researchers to incorporate multiple perspectives and better address the complexity of their research questions.

In this study, I used the bricolage approach by incorporating two primary data sources: interviews and photo-diaries. This offered participants multiple avenues for expressing their experiences. Further, my phenomenological framework is grounded in FST, which supports bricolage by encouraging an awareness of social impact and researcher positionality. My advocacy for the ICF community as well as personal position within it aligns with both the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of FST.

An additional strategy I used to promote rigour was member checking, which involves seeking participant feedback to clarify or expand on ambiguous or complex data (Maxwell, 2009). This strategy helps prevent researcher misinterpretation and reinforces the authenticity of participants' intended meanings. I also supported my interpretations using thick descriptions, contextualizing participant experiences in rich detail to facilitate deeper understanding.

Throughout the research process, I maintained a reflexive journal that helped me name my implicit assumptions and biases (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Levitt et al., 2017). I also noted salient conversations that emerged in meetings with my research team, with friends, and novel ideas and perspectives that I felt were important. This practice supported the transparency of my research and helped safeguard the integrity of the reported findings.

Finally, in alignment with my advocacy stance, I aim to upload the final dataset, including anonymized transcripts and selected photo-diary entries, to a public data archive. This enhances transparency, fosters trust, and allows others to build on this work, potentially reducing participant burden and expanding the reach of the data. It also preserves a historical snapshot of some attitudes toward childfreedom at this situated place in time.

As a qualitative researcher, I sought to remain responsive and adaptable, continuously evaluating my methods to ensure alignment with participants' realities. Reicher and Taylor (2005) emphasize that "rigour lies in devising a systematic method whose assumptions are congruent with the way one conceptualizes the subject matter" (p. 549). Using bricolage, I adapted and extended existing methods, allowing me to respond to the topic of ICF, a topic that has been a subject of selective inattention within the discipline. This methodological flexibility enabled me to construct an approach that was uniquely suited to my research aims.

Information Power

In qualitative research, information power asks us to consider how much data—including how many participants—is enough to adequately capture a substantive answer to the research question. Malterud et al. (2016) suggest that qualitative researchers intending to utilize participant interviews can aim for what they term "information power". The concept of information power suggests that the more data we glean from each participant, the fewer participants we need to inform our understanding. In other words, in gaining a sufficiently rich account from a few participants we can reach ample understanding. This estimation strategy relies on several factors, including (a) the aim of the study, (b) the specificity of the sample, (c) the use of theory, (d) the quality of dialogue, and (e) the degree of variation across the data.

To evaluate information power, I considered how my study aligned with the five dimensions proposed by Malterud et al. (2016). First, I reflected on the broad aim of my research: to explore the general experiences of ICFOAs. As Malterud et al. note, broader study aims typically require larger samples to achieve information power. Second, I accounted for the

high specificity of my sample, which included participants over age 70 and identify as *intentionally* childfree. Greater specificity allows for a smaller sample. Third, my study was theoretically informed, drawing on feminism and phenomenology. The authors suggest that this approach also supports the use of fewer participants.

Fourth, the quality of my data was strong. I employed a RTA of both interview and photo-diary data to co-construct rich narratives. My training in counselling psychology—with its emphasis on curiosity and attentiveness—further supported in-depth engagement with participants' stories. This focus on both *what* was shared and *how* it was shared contributed to the depth and richness of the data, justifying a smaller sample size.

Finally, my study employed primarily case-based analysis, with cross-case analysis used to identify shared themes. It was through cross-case work that convergence across themes became most apparent. Thus, with a data set informed by two key informants, and grounded in interview and photo-diary data of six participants, information power was achieved.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations for this study began well before I sought formal approval from my university's ethics board (see Appendix J). As someone who has personally experienced stigma for identifying as ICF, I was sensitive to the possibility that participants might feel hesitant or vulnerable about discussing their experiences. Additionally, as a master's student in counselling psychology, I was aware that aspects of the study—particularly the photo-diary and interviews—could evoke uncomfortable emotions. To ensure ethical integrity, I regularly consulted with peers, participated in seminars and lab meetings, and sought guidance from my research team throughout the study design process.

Participant rights were clearly communicated at every stage. I shared the informed consent document in advance of the first interview, allowing participants to review it at their own pace. During both interviews, I paraphrased key elements of the consent form and repeatedly checked participants' understanding of their rights. I also created space for questions, particularly around anonymity, which varied in importance among participants.

To support autonomy and informed decision-making, participants were given two weeks following their final interview to withdraw any or all of their data. I transcribed the interviews promptly and returned anonymized transcripts for their review, allowing them the opportunity to

amend or clarify their contributions. For confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and identifiable details (e.g., names of people or places) were altered or removed.

I found it useful to conceptualize informed consent as a meaningful process of the study, as opposed to a singular event. FST posits that recognizing the importance of informed consent promotes reciprocity in research. The research community, the field of psychology, and myself as a researcher and fellow ICFA have benefited enormously by bearing witness to the details that participants shared in this study; thus, actively promoting participants' autonomy and comfortability throughout the process demonstrated respect. It allowed participants time and space to consider what it would mean to partake, what they would like to share, how they would like to share it, and more (Johnston & MacDougal, 2021). Importantly, it allowed them to consider if taking part in the study would be useful, meaningful, or important to them.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the study—results that emerged from the rich and dynamic dataset of interview and photo-diary data. Using the principles of RTA as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), six central themes were identified: (a) decisions in motion: maintaining a child-free life, (b) IC-F identity: shared characteristics and values, (c) child-free and happy: life satisfaction amongst ICFOAs, (d) broadening horizons: living expansively, (e) beyond blood: fostering social connection, and (f) born to serve: dedication to community.

These results are critical to our growing understanding of the experiences of ICFOAs—experiences that, to date, have been largely overlooked. In addressing the question, “What are the experiences of ICFOAs?”, the challenge of meaningfully capturing these experiences quickly arose. While interviews are commonly used to explore lived experience, their effectiveness can be enhanced when paired with other data sources. As such, a photo-diary was included to supplement, contextualize, and ground the interview data.

The photo-diary proved to be a valuable and meaningful component of the study. It enabled participants (see Appendix A for profiles) to share their lived experiences in ways that extended beyond verbal accounts. The images revealed not only what participants did in their daily lives, but also who they are. This visual insight deepened understanding of their experiences, illuminating how they saw the world and their place within it.

Theme A: Decisions in Motion: Maintaining a Child-free Life

Participants shared how they continued to intentionally choose child-free throughout adulthood. Many prioritized travel, education, career, and relationships above parenthood. They valued independence, autonomy, and freedom—perceiving parenthood as a potential constraint on these aspects of their lives. Their ongoing child-free choice was influenced by a combination of personal values, life goals, and formative early experiences.

The early lives of all participants appeared to influence their decisions to remain child-free. Several participants reflected on difficult childhood experiences that shaped their views on parenting and heightened their awareness of the significant emotional and practical demands involved in raising children. For example, both Charles and Adina experienced abusive upbringings that forced them to adopt adult responsibilities at a young age. Adina recounted how she “still has nightmares” about her childhood, noting how “that kind of stuff doesn’t go away ever.” Her traumatic experiences made her acutely aware of the risk of perpetuating the cycle of

abuse. She voiced deep concern about subjecting a child to the kind of upbringing she had endured and concluded that she would not make a suitable parent. In addition, Adina shared that having children “was never something [she] wanted” and that “nothing in [her] life made having children seem like a good idea.” Her emphasis on the word *wanted* is particularly significant, as it reinforces the idea that parenthood is a choice, not an inevitability. For Adina, child-freedom was the lifestyle that most closely aligned with her values, desires, and circumstances.

Charles shared that he never had “a happy childhood to use as a basis for a family.” Raised in what he described as a “noisy and disruptive” environment, he developed a preference for quiet and control over his life. He explained that he never “developed a need to procreate or to have children” and came to deeply value the independence that child-freedom provided. This conviction eventually led him to undergo a vasectomy—which he noted is “a lot easier for a guy than a woman.” For both him and his wife, this decision eliminated “a lot of the risk,” suggesting that children would have disrupted the fulfilling life they built together.

Francis, Walt, and Barb also chose ICF, though they recalled having happy childhoods. They shared a passion for travel, exploration, and new experiences. Francis recalled feeling confined growing up on a farm and described an early, persistent desire to leave home and see the world. While some grow up dreaming of marriage or children, he explained that he always “wanted to explore.” Similarly, Barb shared that her father was a ham radio operator and from a young age she was “always intrigued” by the people he communicated with—individuals from distant countries with cultures vastly different from her own.

Participants’ reflections revealed that their ongoing decision to remain child-free was closely tied to deeply held personal priorities. Rather than centring their lives around parenthood, they invested their time, energy, and resources into pursuits that aligned with their values and brought them fulfilment. Whether through career, travel, creativity, or community involvement, each participant crafted a life that reflected what mattered most to them. Francis, for example, preferred to “live day by day and see what happen[ed],” expressing a desire for spontaneity that he believed children would constrain. “If I had got married and had kids... I would have to spend time with them,” he explained. For him, the stability and responsibility expected of parents were incompatible with the life he envisioned.

Observing friends who became parents reinforced their conviction that choosing ICF was the right choice for them. Charles noted that the lives of parents “became more introverted,” and

Rhonda remarked, “You lose your independence; you’re constantly in a caregiver situation.” As a result, participants continued to feel encouraged by their ICF choice. Barb’s confidence shone through when asked how her younger self might react to the many travel photos in her photo-diary (see Appendix H). Barb noted, “I don’t think I ever thought we wouldn’t travel... that was my goal... as soon as I finished school and started working, that was going to be my thing.” Further, she remembered a doctor once telling her, “If you want children, you’d better start.” But starting a family was far from her mind. She and Walt embraced the freedom of their lifestyle. As Walt put it, “[We] weren’t tied down... so it made it easy to pick a time where we wanted to go and when.” Adina shared a similar perspective, surprised at how much she would have missed if she would have had children: “I wouldn’t have been able to have those jobs... to go to college... to do that kind of traveling. Or go to all the concerts. We went out for dinner always... to plays, the [theatre], movies... I never gave it a thought.” Her ICF life allowed her to fully engage with the adult-centred activities she valued most.

Participants’ early life experiences began to shape their sense of identity and views on parenthood. As they matured into adulthood, children never became central to their life plans. Charles shared “children weren’t my focus ever in my life.” Instead, they invested in what mattered most to them: education, career, travel, independence, and freedom. Participants expressed that their lives felt full and meaningful without children and, critically, that their values were fundamentally incompatible with parenthood. For these participants, the autonomy and freedom to continuously make the ICF choice was deeply affirming, enabling them to build lives aligned with their values, passions, and priorities.

Theme B: ICF Identity: Shared Characteristics and Values

The analysis revealed that participants shared several defining characteristics and values, including independence, pragmatism, resilience, and a zest for life. They emphasized a desire for freedom and autonomy—the ability to move at their own pace and make choices on their own terms. In this way, the decision to remain childfree emerged, in part, from an alignment with these characteristics, values, and priorities. Rather than conforming to societal expectations of parenthood, participants engaged in critical self-reflection and intentionally embraced a childfree lifestyle. This choice afforded them greater freedom to travel, explore, save money, and pursue personal interests. Over time, they continued to make decisions consistent with their values, actively shaping a lifestyle that reflected the lives they envisioned for themselves.

Independence

Many participants cultivated a strong sense of independence from an early age. Adina, Barb, and Charles recalled early experiences of self-reliance. Charles noted that “even as [a] child, [he] became very self-reliant.” Similarly, Walt described how growing up on a farm fostered independence: “Dad would be seeding and ... I would take over the tractor and the drills and stuff ... So, you were sort of independent and working on your own. You build up [a] dependency on yourself to be able to handle situations.” These formative experiences laid the foundation for their subsequent embrace of child-freedom, which often welcomes independence.

Participants valued the independence that came with the child-free lifestyle. Charles explained that remaining ICF, you can “control your own life and take care of things the way you want.” For him, the quiet independence of a child-free life became a clear preference. Similarly, Rhonda summed it up powerfully: “I did it my way.” Her words reflected a broader sense of empowerment, taking ownership of her life, her choices, and her happiness.

Importantly, independence did not equate to loneliness. On the contrary, participants described strong support networks and close, fulfilling relationships. Barb shared, “I was always that way. I liked to be independent and a caring person, interested in other people.” In fact, participants’ independence seemed to enhance their capacity for connection. With more time and freedom, they could nurture meaningful relationships with romantic partners, friends, and loved ones. For these participants, independence wasn’t just a value, it was a source of deep fulfillment and an integral part of their ICF lives.

Pragmatism

All participants expressed a pragmatic outlook on life. While Charles was the only one to explicitly label himself a pragmatist, saying, “I’m a pragmatist and I don’t have this airy-fairy-gee-golly I wish it was like this,” others conveyed similar sentiments. Walt reflected, “things happen, and [you] just make the best of it and go.” Underlying these reflections was a shared sense of realism and resilience—an ability to face challenges without becoming immobilized.

Rhonda’s photo-diary offered a vivid example of this mindset (see Appendix H). One of her images was a bouquet of roses, not a photo she took herself, but one she sourced online. Rather than seeking help with photography, Rhonda pragmatically and independently found a workaround that suited her. The symbolism of the roses further illustrated her pragmatic outlook—they represented her “path in life,” with thorns marking difficult moments and

blossoms symbolizing the joy and meaning she found along the way. Her story—like those of the other participants—reflected a grounded, realistic approach to life. None of them expected perfection; instead, they acknowledged life's difficulties while actively seeking its beauty.

Pragmatism also shaped how participants approached work, finances, and planning for the future. Each learned to manage expenses wisely and save for old age. Financial literacy was seen as key to maintaining autonomy and comfort later in life. Several participants emphasized the importance of being able to afford a lifestyle that allowed for choice, whether in travel, hobbies, or living arrangements. The participants reported living comfortably in strata communities or modest homes, supported by the pragmatic decisions they made throughout their lives. These choices helped them sustain a fulfilling quality of life well into older age.

Just as some parents make choices that reflect their values and lifestyles, so too did these participants. Their decision to remain child-free was, in many ways, a practical one. They pursued what engaged them, adapted to life's unpredictability, and cultivated happiness in the present moment. Collectively, their stories reflect not only pragmatism, but also resilience.

Resilience

Participants demonstrated resilience in various ways. For Charles and Adina, resilience appeared to stem from difficult childhood experiences. As a child, Adina had little control over her circumstances. Over time, however, she came to believe that she was the maker of her own destiny, a core element of resilience. She shared, "I feel very strongly it is my responsibility to live the best life I can, and I do that." As an adult, Adina intentionally built a life centred on her health and happiness. She now engages in personally fulfilling activities such as painting, reading, and spending time with friends.

Participants expressed a strong sense of appreciation for what they had, and a commitment to moving forward, even in difficult times. Barb and Walt spoke favourably of the resilient people they have met travelling. Adina echoed this appreciation for resilience in others, stating, "Everybody has their own circumstances that you have to survive, deal with, and move on from, [and] thrive in spite of. Those are the kinds of people I like." In contrast, she expressed frustration with those who complain about minor inconveniences: "People who whine... I have no patience with them."

Participants often fared well even when faced with unexpected challenges. For instance, Walt and Barb described how they successfully adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflecting

on their experience, Barb remarked, “It’s amazing how we coped, didn’t we?” Realizing their adaptability, they noted positive outcomes that emerged during that time, including developing a habit of walking and resuming travel as soon as it was possible. Barb concluded, “I can’t remember any bad times, really.” Her optimistic perspective was evident, as she consistently focused on the positives even through adversity.

Resilience may be particularly important for ICFAs because—unlike parents—they must carve their own life paths. Where parents are socialized to envision futures intertwined with their children’s and later, their grandchildren’s lives, ICFAs lack a roadmap for the future and must rely on resilience to navigate life’s uncertainties and transitions, its challenges and its rewards. The participants acknowledged the highs and lows of life and believed that how one responds to those fluctuations ultimately shapes your quality of life. They expressed humility and a willingness to learn from challenges, often using these moments to recognize the blessings in their own lives. This is not to suggest they minimized their struggles, but that they were able to encounter difficult moments without being overwhelmed by anger, resentment, or frustration.

Curiosity: An Invitation to Seek Novelty

Participants viewed life as rich, beautiful, and abundant. Each found joy in what the world had to offer and actively sought out new experiences in their own way. Many valued exposure to diverse cultures and perspectives as a means of broadening their understanding and enriching their lives. Francis, for example, described himself as “a very curious person,” always wanting “to see what’s on the other side of the hill.” This curiosity fueled a life filled with travel and exploration. A passionate lover of nature—a sentiment echoed by other participants—Francis’ photo-diary featured many outdoor scenes (see Appendix H). He felt most drawn to images of himself atop mountains, gazing out at stunning views. For Francis, curiosity was a driving force behind his sense of adventure and love for the natural world.

Barb expressed a similar sense of curiosity. She recalled working at an international travel clinic, where she administered vaccines to people journeying abroad. Through that role, she said, “that’s how I learned a lot about geography... I was always interested in it.” Her curiosity about where her clients were travelling deepened her interest in global cultures. For Barb and her partner Walt, the appeal of travel lay in “the culture and the different countries and the people.” Their photo-diary reflected this, capturing scenes across diverse locations, from humid tropics to windswept shorelines (see Appendix H).

A recurring theme among participants was a desire to engage with different people and perspectives. Barb said, “I really quite enjoy the different cultures... meeting people.” Walt emphasized the value of learning through travel: “expanding [our] feeling for other people around the world. We’re not tunnel visioning into our problems... we like to go see other things and, uh, see how they do things, learn things.” Barb added, “there’s more to life than living right here.” Similarly, Francis noted that curiosity led him to connect with people who held diverse worldviews and life experiences.

For these ICFOAs, curiosity extended beyond mere inquiry. It was about exploring, experiencing, and appreciating other ways of living. It fostered gratitude and openness to the wisdom of others. Importantly, their child-free lifestyle seemed to catalyze their curiosity, giving them the freedom and flexibility to pursue exploration in ways that parents may not be able to.

Zest for Life

A zest for life reflects a vibrant and energetic approach to living, marked by enthusiasm, curiosity, and a deep appreciation for everyday experiences. It means greeting each day with excitement and fully engaging with both opportunities and challenges. Participants in this study embodied this spirit, finding joy in both the ordinary and the extraordinary—from tending gardens to spotting elephants on safari (see Appendix H). Their zest for life was vividly reflected in their photo-diaries and their narratives.

For many of the participants, a zest for life manifested itself in small, personal thrills. For example, Charles, Rhonda, and Adina shared a love of driving. Although Rhonda was preparing to give up her car at the time of the interview, she still included it in her photo-diary, reflecting how significant driving had been throughout her life. Adina described driving as a symbol of freedom and independence, while Charles and his wife enjoyed spontaneous drives to nearby towns (see Appendix H).

For these participants, driving wasn’t just about getting from one place to another, it was about savoring the journey. Adina explained, “I take side roads... All the way down to [this little town] on backroads, higgledy-piggledy. I know them well because I’ve done it a lot. Past the beautiful scenery, the lake is gorgeous, the farms, the orchards... the colors, the greens, the soft wheat colors where the wild grasses are... Oh! It’s all so beautiful. I drive the speed limit... I’m there to enjoy what I’m looking at.” Her description highlights a deep appreciation for the simple pleasures of life.

This deep engagement with life seemed to contribute to participants' rejection of more traditional roles. Adina shared, "I'm not a housewife. I don't get my joy out of cooking and cleaning and that kind of stuff." She was highly attuned to what brought her joy, and life as a housewife would not have sufficed. Walt shared a similar outlook stating, "Well, there's nothing saying you can't do something that you want to." He and Barb embraced this philosophy, seeking out new and novel experiences. Their photo-diary was brimming with exhilarating adventures, while at the same time capturing equally meaningful nights at home together. They expressed a reluctance to age, describing ageing as "scary", not because of the fear of death, but because they continued to feel like there was so much left to experience.

Charles, summing up a zest for life, offered a grounding insight: "Life changes. People adapt and thrive. The thing is to be happy while you're doing it. Be satisfied when you're doing it." Across participants, there was a clear pattern of taking ownership of their lives and prioritizing the things that mattered most, including the pursuit of joy and vitality.

Theme C: Childfree and Happy: Life satisfaction amongst ICFOAs

Life satisfaction can be thought of as one's subjective evaluation of their quality of life. Often, the more one's life aligns with their standards, expectations, and values, the higher they will rate their life satisfaction. While participants were not asked directly about life satisfaction, it emerged frequently in direct and indirect ways throughout their narratives. The analysis revealed that participants experienced a notable degree of life satisfaction, expressing feelings of peace, contentment, and joy. For participants, choosing childfreedom allowed them to create lives that were both meaningful and fulfilling, reflected by both their narratives and their photo-diaries. Their lives appeared to be aligned with their personal visions of a satisfying life.

Many of the participants appeared acutely aware of what contributed to satisfaction in their lives. They oriented themselves towards career moves, partnerships, and experiences that felt fulfilling and meaningful, trusting their intuition. Participants seemed to recognize that what beget meaning and satisfaction in their lives were the very things that were absent in the lives of parents. For instance, they noted how parents lacked a significant amount of autonomy and were often unable to be led by a zest for life or curiosity. The experiences shared by these ICFOAs suggest that there is no singular path to a satisfying life, and that childfreedom can be just as rewarding as parenthood—if not more so for some individuals.

In fact, participants seemed so fulfilled in their chosen lives that most had not even entertained the idea of an alternate path involving children. When asked how their lives might have been different if they had become parents, they focused almost exclusively on the limitations, challenges, and potential dissatisfaction that parenthood would have brought.

Not only were participants able to clearly distinguish the ways their life satisfaction differed from that of parents they knew, they also expressed deep appreciation for the lifestyle that childfreedom afforded them in the present. For instance, Charles reflected on some of the challenges he observed among parents his age: “Some old people I’ve seen, they miss their children but all they do is complain to the children about missing them when they do show up. And [it’s] not something—when you’re young and you have six kids because they’ll take care of you when you’re old—it doesn’t work out that way.” Charles recognized stressors that many parents experience in later life, ranging from strained intergenerational dynamics to concerns about inheritance and caregiving—stressors that ICFOAs often avoid.

Overall, participants reported high levels of life satisfaction. While they sometimes felt their chosen path was judged, criticized, or misunderstood by parents, these attitudes did not deter them from continuing to live in accordance with their values. By remaining committed to what they found personally meaningful, participants reflected with clarity and confidence on the many ways their lifestyle continued to contribute to their well-being.

Living Out Desired Lifestyle

For these participants, their desired lifestyle was not compatible with parenthood. They valued freedom and prioritized aspects of life that were at odds with the demands of parenthood. They believed children need consistency and the space to fully experience childhood. For some—having lacked a stable and loving home environment themselves—they sought to cultivate autonomy and stability in their adult lives. Protecting their freedom and independence became a priority. Choosing childfreedom afforded them the flexibility to follow opportunities as they emerged, without needing to prioritize the well-being or demands of children.

The participants’ photo-diaries vividly reflect how they shaped their lives to suit their values. Charles remarked that his photo-diary made him feel “calm, and relaxed, and engaged” (see Appendix H). Francis described a deep sense of freedom, gratitude, and luck: “I’m very lucky to be alive... to live in a country like Canada... to be able to do what I am doing.” While

both men described themselves as fortunate, their narratives suggest that their contentment was not accidental, but the result of intentional choices that prioritized personal values.

For Adina, the process of reflection was particularly emotional. When asked what feeling arose from viewing her photo-diary, she answered simply: "Content." The word implied not only peace with her current life, but an absence of longing. When asked how her younger self might respond to seeing her life today, she replied, "Amazed... I don't think I could have imagined having had as good a life as I've had." Despite the severe hardships she endured, Adina created a life of profound alignment, and child-freedom was essential to that outcome.

Across the photo-diaries, participants depicted lives that were rich, comfortable, joyful, and deeply satisfying. They reveal strong connections to community, reverence for nature, and meaningful experiences that span both past and present. Their visual and narrative accounts suggest that these ICFOAs are not simply aging, they are flourishing. Their lives reflect not only the absence of regret, but the active cultivation of a lifestyle that remains meaningful and true to who they are.

Lack of Regret

None of the participants expressed regret about their decision to remain child-free. For some, their lack of regret emerged unprompted. Adina, for instance, stated emphatically: "I have never in my life missed having a child. Never. Not once." Others spoke to the absence of regret in response to specific probes. When I asked Francis about the impact of being child-free, he reflected proudly on the opportunities it had afforded him: "Well, being child-free... I'm kinda proud of myself that I was able to travel like I did and experience, ah, you know, different cultures. ... [I] had the freedom to do whatever I want, when I want it, and the way I want it." Charles expressed a similar sentiment, noting that "kids would have detracted from the things [he] enjoyed in life, not added to it." Walt and Barb echoed this perspective, emphasizing how much they enjoyed their lifestyle and how they had no desire to alter it by introducing children. Walt noted candidly, "I don't think there's any doubt [that life] would be" extremely different if they had chosen parenthood.

For Adina, parenthood was so distant from her desires that she had never imagined a life with children: "I never thought of it. [I] never had a moment's thought because it's not what [I] ever wanted." Similarly, Walt and Barb emphasized that they "don't regret it at all" and "can't imagine having kids right now," let alone having their lives revolve around grandchildren. "This

is us,” they said, affirming that their current lifestyle is not only fulfilling but possible *because* they chose childfreedom. “We have... made this the way we want to enjoy life.”

Because their lives were so satisfying, many found it difficult to imagine how life could have unfolded differently. Francis put it simply: “No, I don’t think I’d change anything.” Rhonda, too, shared a powerful perspective on acceptance and self-trust: “I always promised myself that what I would never do is regret anything... because every choice you make results in who you are. ... I don’t regret it because I am who I am now. You know, and I like me!”

This lack of regret does not mean their choices were always supported. Some participants recalled facing judgment or criticism from others. Barb remembered hurtful remarks from family members, including: “You’ll be sorry” and “There’ll be nobody to look after you.” But rather than express resentment, Barb laughed at the irony; she and Walt had disproven those assumptions through the meaningful, connected lives they now lead. “Never had a regret or felt bad that we didn’t have a family,” they affirmed.

None of the participants expressed regret over remaining ICF. Instead, they spoke with pride, gratitude, and clarity about how childfreedom had enabled them to build lives that were rich with meaning, autonomy, and joy. Because they were so deeply content, many had never even entertained an alternate version of their lives. They had no desire for it, so there were no regrets over choosing childfreedom.

Theme D: Broadening Horizons: Living expansively

To live expansively is to seek new experiences, embrace change, and remain open to ways of life that differ from your own. The ICFOAs in this study shared remarkable stories that reflected how expansiveness shows up in their day-to-day lives. For many, living expansively seemed to bring richness, vitality, and a deep sense of satisfaction.

Living Differently

To understand how these participants live expansively, it is important to first consider the differences they perceive between themselves and other older adults—particularly those who are parents. Participants often described the lives of parents as more insular. Rhonda, for example, shared how “as you get older [you] really start to get introverted,” reflecting on how many older parents seem to focus almost exclusively on their children, grandchildren, and their next visit. “Everybody is just- it’s their kids, and that’s all they can talk about,” she noted. Rhonda shared she does not “want to be like that.”

Participants also described how, for parents, personal identities and interests sometimes fade into the background since children occupy substantial space in one's life. For Walt and Barb, this loss of self was unappealing and somewhat concerning. As avid travelers, they seemed to relish learning and keeping their minds and spirits active. They remarked that through travel, they had "met a lot of wonderful people," whereas the parents they knew seemed indifferent towards "enlarging their knowledge and their feeling for other people." While the lives of many older parents appeared to shrink inward, the lives of these ICFOAs seemed to expand outward. They described cultivating lifestyles that prioritized connection, curiosity, and personal growth. In some ways, they appeared to resist conventional expectations of what aging looks like. They were active, vibrant, and curious.

Walt reflected that many of the parents they knew lacked a "will to expand"—a will to seek new experiences, learn, and grow as people. In contrast, without children or grandchildren anchoring them to one place, he and Barb felt uniquely free to do life on their own terms. Barb expressed confusion over those who relocate just to be near grandchildren. For them, reducing one's world down to children alone seemed to come at the cost of identity, longing, and broader life aspirations, something that felt completely at odds with their values and worldview.

Participants seemed to differentiate themselves from others who they saw as having a narrow perspective. While some older adults focus on what they lack—be it attention from children or control over their daily routines—these ICFOAs appeared to consider their many blessings. Rather than dwelling on what felt missing, they leaned into possibilities.

Fitting In

Participants shared that they sometimes struggle to fit in with other older adults. Barb expressed that she no longer feels a strong sense of connection to those around her, stating she does not "have much in common anymore" and has "kind of outgrown" the people in her community. She added that she is "not really involved with [the] people [in her strata]," describing them as "cliquey" and "catty"—social dynamics she prefers to avoid. Her interests and values lie elsewhere.

This is not to say that Barb and Walt feel lonely. Rather, they feel a stronger connection with people they meet through travel or with others who share similar values. When asked if they currently have close friends, Barb replied, "not now," and Walt added, "not as much as we used to." He reflected, "I don't want to say we've matured beyond what they are, but our scope and

what we see opens our minds up. We're more willing to try new adventures in different parts of the world." Despite this sense of disconnection, when Walt and Barb do find like-minded individuals, they connect easily. They joked that "Barb always finds a friend somewhere," and Walt shared how, during their travels, "people, a lot of times, seem to click together... And we like to circle around with people if we can and talk with them." Unlike others who might gravitate toward a familiar circle, Walt and Barb enjoy the novelty of meeting new people and hearing their stories. Similarly, Rhonda shared that she often feels like she does not fit in with most older adults. Yet, like Walt and Barb, she has cultivated meaningful friendships with those who resonate with her values. She described her close-knit group with joy, laughing as she recounted how they "have such a good time". With one friend in particular, she shared, "we've got this thing going on... just one-liners- it's hilarious!" For many participants, not fitting in seemed to stem from differences in values, beliefs, and priorities.

Adina noted how some parents view their children as a form of security in old age. She expressed concern about the way many parents "infringe on their children's lives," expecting "constant attendance." This expectation clashes with her own belief that personal happiness is an individual responsibility. Charles echoed this sentiment, rejecting the idea that children should serve as a retirement plan. "We discussed the part about when you get older, you have kids to take care of you," he reflected, "but I knew lots of people who had kids, and the kids didn't take care of them." He added, "I don't think you should rely on [having] children just so you have someone to take care of you." In fact, Charles has often witnessed adult children abandon their aging parents, a pattern that has affirmed his child-free choice. Charles emphasized that he never saw having children as a "viable option of survival." Instead, he accepted early on that caring for himself in old age would be his own responsibility. It appears that many ICFOAs arrive at this realization sooner than their parenting peers; some of whom are later disillusioned by the absence of support they assumed would come. As Charles put it, he believes parents should "diversify their lives" and find fulfillment beyond family.

Participants described leading rich, expansive, and meaningful lives; however, this lifestyle is also what sets them apart from many of their peers. Their difference in values—like a commitment to continual growth and exploration—sometimes act as a social barrier. It appears to create a sense of "otherness" from those who may be more rooted in family roles or less inclined to step outside of their comfort zones.

Theme E: Beyond Blood: Fostering Social Connection

Contrary to pronatalist assumptions that ICFOAs are lonely and isolated in old age, participants in this study described fulfilling social lives. For them, the *quality* of relationships mattered far more than the *quantity*. They maintained friendships across a range of ages and shared many ways they cultivated meaningful connections. For many, their romantic partnerships were particularly impactful, providing deep emotional and social support.

Romantic Partnership

For participants in romantic partnerships, this relationship was a central source of connection, satisfaction, and joy. This echoes existing research on the importance of companionship in later life. Many participants mentioned their spouse within the first few minutes of their interview, naturally blending their stories into a shared narrative.

Charles, for instance, described a balanced and fulfilling relationship: “She’s very stable. She has her own interests. I have my interests. We spend a lot of time together, but we also do things on our own or with friends.” His photo-diary reflected this dynamic, showcasing moments of shared joy alongside independent activities (see Appendix H). Charles emphasized how his wife is both his closest friend and most dependable source of support: “We give each other the most support, right? And it’s by choice.” In times of illness, he felt reassured knowing she was by his side. He added, “She and I get along so well because we’re both independent and we choose to be together.” Their relationship is built on shared values and the understanding that when one of them reaches their limit, the other steps in.

Both Charles and Francis found their partners later in life, yet each described a sense of certainty when they met. Charles noted that his partner “wasn’t that interested in having children,” which strengthened their compatibility. Similarly, Francis shared: “It was time to settle down and say... this is it. I’ve traveled, which is always what I wanted to do... Whatever I do now, I wanna do it with a partner.” Barb and Walt also shared the depth of their long-standing connection. Now approaching 58 years of marriage, they reflected with humor on their early years and noted the occasional pushback they received for their child-free choice. Their photo-diary revealed a life built on shared values and mutual enthusiasm: for travel, for hockey, and for each other. They laughed easily together and often finished each other’s sentences throughout our interviews.

Adina's relationship with her late husband emerged as a deeply moving part of her story (see Appendix H). Although he passed away ten years ago, his presence in her life persists. Adina spoke with tenderness about the care she provided as his health declined, recalling how she stayed by his side through it all: "He went into hospital because I asked him to. He was just going to quietly die... I sat with him every day, hours and hours. I don't regret that for a minute... He's still with me every day of my life." Adina's reflections revealed enduring love and a profound friendship: "Not just romantic love—he was my best friend." To this day, she shares, "I think of him countless times a day." Louis remains, as Adina said, her "guiding light."

Across all participants, social support appears to play a vital role in their well-being. Most reported being satisfied with their community of friends and loved ones, and they deeply valued shared experiences and meaningful connections. While they sometimes felt distant from other older adults, they consistently found people they could truly connect with. Importantly, their commitment to community and their ongoing desire to contribute to the lives of others emerged as core sources of satisfaction.

Theme F: Born to Serve: Dedication to Community

Community emerged as a central theme in the photo-diaries and interviews. Participants described volunteering, checking in on neighbours, donating to charities, and offering acts of service to those in need. Their contributions were foundational to how they understood their role in the world. In Charles's photo-diary, a picture of a flower with a bee resting on its petals stood out (see Appendix H). At first, it seemed disconnected from his experience as an ICFOA. However, as participants shared their values and commitments, the image became powerfully symbolic. Like worker bees, who do not reproduce but support the hive, these individuals nurtured their communities through care, advocacy, and service. Their "hive" was not defined by biological family, but by the broader social fabric around them.

For many, dedication to community was driven by a deep moral imperative: a belief that everyone must contribute to maintain the wellbeing of community. Rhonda, who had a remarkable career in health care, expressed frustration with societal apathy: "People say, 'Well, there's nothing I can do about it,' and that is not true!" She described running petitions, acting as a spokesperson, and developing strategies to ensure her voice was heard. Her actions speak to a fierce belief in civic responsibility.

Rhonda also framed her life's purpose around her ability to make a difference: "The day I stop contributing something to society—what's the point?" For many participants, life garnered meaning through volunteering and community engagement. Charles echoed this, predicting: "I think it's going to be more common for people to get married and not have kids and be part of a community and be effective." His statement carries an implicit critique, suggesting that parents may be too absorbed in family life to fully participate in broader community efforts, whereas ICFOAs may have more capacity and motivation to give back.

Rather than limiting their care to an immediate family unit, participants took pride in serving the wider community and seemed to find deep connection through altruistic acts of service. As Charles described it, "the neighborhood and the community becomes an extended family." This dynamic appeared reciprocal: "We're getting social support and we're providing social support." For ICFOAs, this kind of mutual exchange may be especially valuable, as they anticipate aging without the traditional safety net of adult children. Investing in community became not only a moral act but also a pragmatic one, building relationships and interdependence that may sustain them as they continue to age.

"Born to Serve"

While some may support their community in hopes that today's help might be reciprocated later, most participants appeared to support their community purely out of love and care. They spoke of supporting others not as a strategic choice, but as a deeply fulfilling act rooted in identity. Francis captured this well when he said: "I'm a people person. I [was] born to serve." For him, service is not an obligation but a part of who he is (see Appendix H).

This core disposition was echoed by others. Their drive to serve emerged across life domains: in response to their upbringing, through their work, and even in how they cared for pets. Charles shared, "Ever since I was a kid, I would help people... Because the only... response to being brutalized by your parents is to not repeat that behavior and model good behavior." The word *brutalized* reveals the severity of his early trauma, and how he deliberately chose a life of care and protection in response.

For many participants, their careers were a key outlet for this ethic of service. Most worked in roles centred on public good, serving clients, mentoring others, or supporting vulnerable groups. Charles, for example, explained how his personal and professional lives were intertwined: "I was [in] risk management ... and I used to do seminars... I didn't talk about the

individual events in my family, but I talked about how family events shape and mould students, and how that shapes the path they take. My path was to learn how to protect people.”

Across their careers, in their relationships, and in their communities, these ICFOAs expressed a consistent commitment to service. This theme is significant given that ICFOAs are often stereotyped as selfish and uncaring. Contrary to these assumptions, participants revealed immense capacity for love and care but did not focus this energy on children. Instead, they poured that care into their partners, friends, neighbors, and communities. Their lives reveal that care is not exclusive to parenting; it is a human quality that can flourish in many forms.

Legacy and Generativity

For these participants, legacy, generativity, and community were closely tied. While parents may pass down wisdom and knowledge to kids and grandkids, these ICFOAs are thinking bigger, looking to give back to the community and share their wisdom. Their experiences demonstrate that generativity—the desire to leave something meaningful behind—does not depend on having children. You can leave your mark on the world and choose childfreedom.

Rhonda, for example, expressed a strong belief that older adults, regardless of parental status, have a duty to share their wisdom; “Morally, seniors have an obligation to step in and share their wisdom.” Two elements of this quote are especially striking: the use of the word *moral* and the phrase *step in*. In framing this as a moral obligation, Rhonda suggests that sharing one’s wisdom is not just beneficial, it is the *right* thing to do. This moves the conversation beyond personal preference and into the realm of ethical responsibility. While we might typically associate moral imperatives with actions like following the law, Rhonda places the active, intentional sharing of life experience on the same level of importance. Her use of *step in* also implies an intentional, engaged role, one that requires conscious effort. Francis offered a similar perspective sharing: “I think it’s definitely, ah... duty? Well, partly, but responsibility. [I] think [it’s] a big thing for [me] is to give back to society.” His distinction between *duty* and *responsibility* highlights a nuance. Where *duty* can feel externally imposed, *responsibility* suggests internal motivation. It implies a willing, active choice. If moral obligation says “I have to,” responsibility says “I want to.”

Taken together, these perspectives challenge the assumption that legacy is bound to lineage. The commonly held belief that an ICFOA’s legacy ends with them is—for these

participants—far too narrow. While it may be true that ICFAAs do not pass on a genetic lineage, they are still actively shaping the world around them through their work, their relationships, their activism, and the wisdom they pass on. Legacy, in this context, is not biological but relational, moral, and social. It lives in the stories told, the values shared, and the communities strengthened. These participants remind us that there are many ways to build a lasting impact and that childfreedom does not limit one's ability to create meaning for future generations.

Stigmatized Beliefs Faced by ICFAAs

Pronatalism posits that parenthood is necessary, promoting the belief that having and raising children are the most meaningful things you can do in your lifetime (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020; Corbett, 2018; Park, 2002). Pronatalism encourages the image of the traditional nuclear family (i.e., mother, father, and one or more children) and places the family at the centre of social wellbeing (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Park, 2002). For ICFAAs, the impact of pronatalist stigma appears to transform throughout the life course. In childbearing years, ICFAAs tend to face pronatalist pressures and judgement. In these years, parenthood traditionally serves as a central organizer of one's life course; thus, forgoing this transition contextualizes ICFAAs as "other". Labelling lifestyles that do not follow the normative pronatal path causes us to overlook diverse life paths, promoting the notion that one way of living is superior to the other (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007).

Due to this kind of thinking, many ICFAAs remain culturally and socially othered, worried about the stigmatization they may face due to their childfree choice; a choice that starkly opposes the social norm of parenthood (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Park, 2002). Research has found that ICFAAs face a variety of negative stereotypes. They are labelled as selfish, materialistic, cold-hearted, and deviant (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020; Mollen, 2006; Park, 2005; Veevers, 1973). Further, having children has been framed as an aspect of healthy adult development, promoting the idea that the childfree choice is irrational, temporary, and foolish (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Gillespie, 2000; Mollen, 2006). These stereotypes diminish the voices of ICFAAs who speak to the reasons why this choice is perfectly natural and acceptable (Gillespie, 2003). Stereotypes also promote a vision of childfreedom which frames it in terms of suffering, tragedy, and regret (Gillespie, 2003). Stereotypes around the ICFA and the childfree lifestyle appear to perpetuate one another, leading to the belief that they are lonely and unhappy, living isolated and unsatisfactory lives (Höglund & Hildingsson, 2023).

As a result of the negative stereotypes that colour our perception of ICFA's and the experience of childfreedom, many studies have found that parents feel significantly warmer toward other parents than toward ICFA's (Mollen, 2006; Neal & Neal, 2022; Park, 2005). Interestingly, this bias does not work both ways, as ICFA's do not report feeling warmer towards other ICFA's than parents (Neal & Neal, 2022). ICFOAs in the current study reported that they felt othered by parents in their community and often felt that their choice and their lifestyle was not understood or accepted by others. Barb shared that she sometimes feels like parents in their community are "putting [her and her husband] down a little bit." Parents do not face this kind of judgement because their path is normative and aligns with pronatalist ideology.

Another common stereotype that ICFA's face is that they dislike children and eschew family bonds in favour of individualism (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Corbett, 2018; Park, 2005). However, the participants in this study shared a fondness of children. They all reported interactions with children during their childbearing years and some of them described their work with children as a supplement for not having had any. However, while participants did not dislike children, they all reported how they were glad to be in control of when and for how long they interacted with kids. This meant that they could come back home to their own space, did not have to discipline children, and could enjoy all the fun parts of being around children without having to worry about them full time. Thus, in line with what other studies have found, the participants reported that a dislike of children was never the primary reason for not having them (Corbett, 2018). In fact, one of the less salient reasons that participants named for not wanting children was a genuine concern for the wellbeing of their potential children. They reported feeling like they would not make adequate parents, or that they would not be able to provide a thriving environment for a child. Other studies have found the same, with ICFA's reporting an awareness and concern for the wellbeing of a potential child (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Salgado & Magalhães, 2024).

These kinds of sentiments portray the truly altruistic, empathetic, and collective motives for not wanting children, directly contrasting what is often claimed about ICFA's (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). However, this is a finding that we must also hold with caution. There is no wrong reason for choosing childfreedom. If someone decides that childfreedom is right for them then they ought not face judgement. No matter the reason for childfreedom, ICFA's are deserving of

our respect, regard, and kindness. They are not required to present a long and justifiable list of reasons for their choice to afford them these basic entitlements (Salgado & Magalhães, 2024).

Integrative Summary of Theme Patterns

The themes in this section showcase the lived experiences of six ICFOAs, demonstrating the rich, meaningful, and plentiful lives that they have actively and intentionally fostered. Participants conveyed their experiences verbally, through interviews, and visually, through photo-diaries. Their stories revealed experiences marked by complex features of independence, social connection, meaningful community engagement, and a zest for life.

Across interviews, freedom and independence consistently emerged as core values, central not only to participants' ongoing decision to remain child-free but also to how they continued to shape their lives. Traits such as independence, pragmatism, resilience, and curiosity were not only foundational to their child-free choice but also fueled the vibrant, expansive lives they lived. Participants described child-freedom as an intentional, empowering choice that enabled them to live authentically and in alignment with their priorities and identities. This choice allowed them to cultivate meaningful careers, develop fulfilling relationships, and pursue their passions.

Participants shared their rich life experiences which differed from pronatal cultural narratives that they encountered—narratives that depict ICFOAs as isolated or regretful. Instead, participants reported rich and meaningful social connections. For those in long-term romantic partnerships, their spouses were central sources of joy, support, and companionship. Although participants sometimes found it challenging to find like-minded peers with whom to connect, they did not retreat from care or community. Rather, they actively cultivated relational lives, forging meaningful friendships, and investing in community well-being.

These participants lived expansive lives, where they yearned to learn and explore as much as possible. Participants viewed themselves as active contributors to society, expressing care not only toward their immediate circles but also toward broader national and global communities. Many volunteered, advocated for social change, and provided support or mentorship within their communities. The image of the *worker bee* emerged as a compelling metaphor: like non-reproductive bees in a hive, these individuals played vital roles in sustaining the social fabric around them.

Participants also demonstrated a reimagined sense of legacy and generativity, one unbound by biological lineage. They expressed strong moral and personal commitments to sharing knowledge, mentoring others, and contributing to their communities in the hopes of bettering life for the next generation. They positioned themselves as stewards of experience, actively shaping the world through service, storytelling, and example.

Together, these findings offer a broader understanding of aging and family, one that decouples meaning and satisfaction from reproduction. The experiences of ICFOAs demonstrate that autonomy and community are not mutually exclusive but can coexist in deeply fulfilling ways. They show that childfreedom is not a rejection of care but is instead a strong reorientation of it. Ultimately, these results affirm that the lives of ICFOAs are not defined by absence, but by presence: they lead lives that are rich, engaged, intentional, and contributory. Their narratives invite us to honor diverse life courses and to recognize that connection, meaning, and legacy are available to all, regardless of parental status.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I discuss the results of this thesis in greater detail, situating participants' experiences within existing scholarship and reflecting on their implications for how we understand aging, care, and community among ICFOAs (see Appendix L for a diagram showing relationships among themes). Much of the existing literature on childfreedom has centred on explaining or defending the childfree choice (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020; Corbett, 2018; Park, 2002). In contrast, this study shifts attention towards the lived experiences of ICFOAs. In so doing, it offers a more expansive understanding of how ICFOAs live well, and how aging unfolds outside the normative family structure.

The findings also challenge persistent pronatalist stereotypes and amplify the voices of the ICF—a group historically underrepresented in both public discourse and academic research. Rather than viewing childfreedom as a loss or absence, participants framed it as an intentional choice that opened space for personal growth, community engagement, and meaningful connection. Their accounts revealed lives marked by satisfaction, purpose, and relational depth.

While some results echo earlier research—particularly the emphasis participants place on independence and freedom—this study also introduces new insights, especially regarding how personality traits shape the decision to remain childfree and contribute to lasting life satisfaction. Accordingly, the discussion is organized to (a) revisit previously held understandings about ICFOAs, (b) explore congruencies between these understandings and the present findings, and (c) delineate novel contributions to the literature.

Reimagined Pathways to Childfreedom

How do ICFOAs come to childfreedom? Previous research has generally outlined two pathways: early articulators, who decide early in life not to have children, and postponers, who delay parenthood until it becomes undesirable (Brooks, 2019; Neal & Neal, 2022). However, the current study suggests that this binary framework oversimplifies a far more complex process. Participants described multiple intersecting factors contributing to their childfree choice—an outcome shaped by identity, values, and pragmatism—revealing paths to ICF that resist binary categorization.

Personality and Childfree Choice: A Reciprocal Dynamic

When does the decision to remain childfree begin, and when does it end? The narratives shared by participants in the present study suggest that the childfree choice is one without a

marked beginning and end. What emerged instead was a reciprocal exchange between personality and child-free choice. The findings suggest that as personality traits like independence and pragmatism developed, so too did a desire for child-free freedom. A reciprocal effect began to take place whereby personality influenced choice, and choice bolstered personality. These participants did not make the decision to remain child-free once when they were younger, or once when they were older; they made their child-free choice repeatedly.

Participants' child-free choice was deeply rooted in five enduring characteristics: independence, pragmatism, resilience, curiosity, and a zest for life. Among ICFAAs, independence and resilience have been widely documented (Höglund & Hildingsson, 2023; Peterson, 2015; Salgado & Magalhães, 2024; Stahnke et al., 2022). What has not been as clearly recognized, however, is the potential interaction between personality and choosing child-free freedom.

ICFAAs often conduct a pragmatic evaluation of how parenthood could impact their lives. Bhambhani and Inbanathan (2020) found that “the motivations conveyed by the participants to forego parenthood, such as the freedom to pursue their interests and newer opportunities, indicates a rational assessment of how and why complying with the norm of procreation could lead to a denial of their aspirations” (pp. 361-362). The findings of the present study align closely with Bhambhani and Inbanathan's conclusion. A pragmatic assessment of needs and values led to the rejection of a path toward parenthood, and choosing child-free freedom meant they could lean into their desired lifestyle; one hallmarked by freedom and ardent curiosity.

Some participants reflected on how their early life experiences, such as exposure to abuse, poverty, or early caregiving responsibilities, influenced their child-free decisions (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Betancur et al., 2022; Doyle et al., 2012). As Betancur et al. (2022) suggest, formative childhood experiences can profoundly shape beliefs about parenting. However, it was not purely formative experiences that shaped these participants' child-free choice. As they matured into adulthood, they were developing traits like independence, pragmatism, and curiosity. They pragmatically assessed their lives, observed the changes in lifestyle that parents around them were enduring, and chose to forge their own non-normative path forward, resiliently encountering life's challenges and maintaining their love of life all the same.

Thus, independence, pragmatism, resilience, curiosity, and a zest for life were not merely personal proclivities; they actively shaped participants' priorities and life trajectories. These traits and values informed their decisions, sustained their growth, and supported a deeply

satisfying life path outside the bounds of traditional family structures. Further, their childfree choices fortified these traits, leading to the emergence of a dynamic interplay between personality traits, values, and lifestyle choices.

Parenthood: An Incompatible Lifestyle

Participants consistently described parenthood as incompatible with the lives they envisioned for themselves. Where parenting children required structure, stability, and self-sacrifice, participants sought novelty, spontaneity, and personal freedom. Adina summarized this perspective clearly: “There was nothing in my life that made having children seem like a good idea.” Similarly, Rhonda reflected, “As I lived it, [my life] would not be conducive to having a family.” Their comments reflect a strong awareness of the mismatch between their authentic lifestyles and the demands of parenting, an insight echoed in more recent studies (Doyle et al., 2012; Salgado & Magalhães, 2024).

Participants also demonstrated acute awareness of the importance of stability in childrearing and recognized when their own lives lacked that foundation. Rhonda noted, “When you have children, you have to have a stable environment [and] my environment was not stable... I don’t think that that’s a healthy thing.” Her statement reflects an important ethical dimension to the childfree choice: choosing childfreedom not out of selfishness, but out of respect for what she believed children need to thrive.

Interestingly, Park (2005) found that fewer than one-third of studies reported early socialization experiences or doubts about parenting abilities as key influences on childfree choice. Yet, these concerns surfaced repeatedly amongst participants in this study. Nearly all described doubts about their ability to parent well, suggesting that, particularly among ICFOAs, self-awareness regarding parenting suitability may become more salient over time or in specific generations.

While these results differed from Park’s (2005) findings, some parallels also emerged. For instance, in Park’s study, participants saw parenthood as an all-consuming endeavour that would diminish opportunities for travel, partnership, leisure, spontaneity, and freedom. Many also feared perpetuating cycles of trauma, reflecting a strong ethical self-assessment rather than a simple rejection of responsibility over children. Moreover, participants were deeply aware of the challenges faced by parents in their social circles. Charles observed, “I’ve had friends who have children and they’re worn out and they’re tired and have financial problems... the stress level’s

amazing! And I've missed all that. I didn't miss it- I avoided it." His statement highlights an active, not passive, avoidance of the stresses associated with parenthood.

Participants also expressed doubts about their personal suitability for parenting, not out of self-criticism, but out of honest recognition of their history and personhood. As Rhonda shared, "I really don't think I would have been a good mom... it wasn't kids. It was me." Rather than move forward with pronatalist norms, participants made the childfree choice grounded in self-knowledge, care, and responsibility.

In this section, we begin to see an unfolding interaction between formative experiences, personal values, and an evolving understanding of what parenthood means and entails (see Appendix L). Self-knowing and intuitive self-reflection prompted initial considerations of childfreedom, an appealing choice that participants continued to circle back to throughout their childbearing years. As their personalities developed, so too did their commitment to a childfree life. Traits such as autonomy and pragmatism aligned with the freedom to pursue careers, relationships, travel, and personal growth. They came to conceptualize parenthood as fundamentally incompatible with their desired lifestyles, posing obstacles to their goals and values. Ultimately, it was the interplay between internal dispositions, lived experience, and a pragmatic assessment of childfreedom's advantages that reinforced their ongoing choice to remain childfree.

From Choosing Childfreedom to Cultivating Contentedness

So far, we have explored the interwoven relationship between personality traits that ICFAAs tend to exhibit and the path to choosing childfreedom. What remains is a complex interplay between how their choices and traits appear to work together to promote life satisfaction and well-being across the life course. At first glance, pragmatism, resilience, curiosity, and zest for life may seem like distinct traits. However, participants' stories reveal how these qualities work together in complex ways. A zest for life attuned them to dissatisfaction and propelled them toward change. Curiosity encouraged openness to new experiences. Pragmatism helped them assess realistic paths forward. Resilience enabled them to adapt and persevere through challenges. Together, these traits formed a dynamic system of values and choices that promoted flourishing.

Resilience, for instance, has consistently been associated with ICFAAs (Höglund & Hildingsson, 2023; Stahnke et al., 2022). This study further illustrates how resilience is

intertwined with other traits, particularly independence. Participants often conveyed that being resilient meant taking personal responsibility for their happiness and their responses to adversity. Charles exemplified this connection. Reflecting on his traumatic upbringing, he shared: “You end up being self-reliant by necessity. You either collapse into a nervous wreck or you be stable.” Deprived of reliable support from his parents, Charles pragmatically assessed his options and chose stability. He found joy and solace in reading, spending time outdoors, and participating in clubs; activities that aligned with his emerging zest for life. Maintaining this stability into adulthood meant protecting the conditions that nurtured his well-being, including his choice to remain child-free.

Prior studies have often described how child-free individuals value travel, nature, hobbies, and community engagement (Blackstone & Stewart, 2016; Doyle et al., 2012; Park, 2005). While these pursuits have traditionally been attributed to independence, this study suggests that independence alone does not account for the dynamic, expansive lives participants reported. Independence may provide a foundation, but curiosity and a zest for life appear to be the driving forces behind the active, expansive, and richly connected lifestyles that ICFOAs pursue. This interplay of traits supports the idea that thriving as an ICFOA involves far more than simply avoiding constraints, it involves actively embracing and expanding life’s possibilities. For example, when Adina reflected on leaving her first marriage, she described recognizing her lack of contentment and swiftly acting to change her situation. Adina could see that her life lacked joy and that she “wanted to change it ... I was ready to go in no time.” Her zest for life helped her identify that her circumstances were no longer aligned with her values. In a pragmatic and independent fashion, she quickly secured employment and built a new life for herself. She did not perceive setbacks as barriers but as cues to realign her life with her aspirations. In doing so, she demonstrated both resilience and agency.

In many ways, child-freedom became an extension of participants’ characteristics and core values. The lifestyle that accompanied their child-free choice was highly reflective of who they were as people, and who they were as people made child-freedom the natural choice. While extant research has repeatedly named independence as a trait that ICFOAs tend to exhibit, these findings suggest that there is a complex, interwoven relationship between personality, child-free choice, and enduring life satisfaction (see Appendix L).

Cultivating Contentedness: The Importance of Relationship and Belonging

Not every older adult will experience the same degree of satisfaction, connection, and meaning in their lives. This is true regardless of child-free choice. However, research has found that above all, it is relationship status that seems to exert the greatest influence on ratings of life satisfaction and wellbeing (Dykstra & Wagner, 2007; Mikucka, 2020).

Consistent with prior research on aging and relationship status, romantic partnership offered participants a primary source of companionship, emotional support, and relational connection, allowing for shared experience (Arpino et al., 2022; Krenkova, 2019; Wu & Hart, 2002). Many participants described their spouses as partners, best friends, and co-adventurers. For Charles, romantic partnership meant stability, independence, and reciprocal support: “We give each other the most support... and it’s by choice.” Similarly, Francis emphasized the importance of sharing life experiences with someone aligned in values and vision.

Despite the large influence that relationship status has on life satisfaction, with divorced, widowed, and single folks tending to fare worse than those coupled or married, the results of this study highlight how personality traits like resilience, independence, and a zest for life may protect ICFAs from the otherwise potentially harmful impacts of certain relationship statuses.

The prevalence of rich relational ties, from friendship to partnerships directly contradicts recurring pronatalist assumptions that ICFAs will face loneliness and social isolation in old age. Rather than relying only on familial networks, participants cultivated relationships based on shared values, mutual respect, and emotional reciprocity.

In line with the conscious attention that participants placed on relationship, the value of community emerged powerfully across interviews and photo-diaries. Participants consistently described a strong sense of commitment toward the broader social fabric, often engaging in volunteering, advocacy, and everyday acts of neighborliness. Existing research similarly identifies community involvement, including stewardship and volunteering, as central to meaning and purpose in the lives of ICFAs (Brooks, 2019; Doyle et al., 2012; Mollen, 2006).

A photo from Charles’s photo-diary, featuring an image of a flower and a bee, became a central metaphor: like worker bees in a hive, participants thrived not through reproduction, but through service to the greater whole (see Appendix H). Their contributions were not centred around procreation, but around nurturing community health and caring for those in need.

Participants viewed community service as a moral imperative. Rhonda passionately argued that “morally, seniors have an obligation to step in and share their wisdom.” Her emphasis on morality highlights an important cultural critique: while aging is often framed in terms of personal decline and dependence, participants framed it as an opportunity for contribution and leadership.

Similarly, Francis spoke about community involvement in terms of responsibility rather than duty, suggesting an intrinsic desire to give back: “[I] think [it’s] a big thing for [me] is to give back to society.” While some participants acknowledged that contributing to community might one day benefit them personally, most emphasized that their motivation was internal. Service was an expression of who they are, not a strategic investment.

This theme of community contribution directly challenges stereotypes that depict child-free individuals as selfish or disconnected. Participants demonstrated care, empathy, and responsibility, not directed only toward a nuclear family, but extended to broader social networks. As Charles noted, for ICFOAs, “the neighborhood and the community becomes an extended family.” This reciprocal relationship provided both social support and opportunities for participants to offer their skills, wisdom, and care to others.

Pronatalism presumes that parenthood is the only path towards meaning, satisfaction, and happiness in life. It implies that without kids and grandkids, ICFOAs are lonely, dissatisfied, and unsupported. However, these pronatalist perceptions are merely assumptions about the lives of ICFOAs; assumptions that promote a normative path toward parenthood. These assumptions have been promoted as truth for many decades making them resistant to reassessment. However, the participant voices in this study demonstrate that ICFOAs are capable of living satisfying, fulfilling, and meaningful lives into old age, extolling a new way of conceptualizing what child-free life is like in one’s older years. What they shared demonstrated the many ways that life felt congruent, meaningful, and incredibly fulfilling.

In many ways, choosing child-free was a way that participants cultivated contentedness in their lives. Participants framed their child-free choice as an opportunity to live expansively: to invest energy in relationships, communities, causes, and pursuits that resonated deeply with their values. The aspects of their lives that they shared reveal that contentedness and life satisfaction are states of being that we can take intentional steps toward. Further, this section

speaks to the intentional attention that ICFOAs seem to place on living well, a mindset that parents may not be oriented towards in the same way.

Practical and Social Implications

The number of people choosing childfreedom is rising, and it is predicted that ICF will continue to rise in the future (Brooks, 2019; Stahnke et al., 2020; Stegen et al., 2021). Despite this growing trend, ICF has remained an encapsulated topic. Some argue this could be due to pronatalist influence, suggesting that we know the outcome of ICF: loneliness, regret, and dissatisfaction (Sapleton, 2018; Veevers, 1973). Despite the presence these misconceptions, research suggests that most ICFAAs lead fulfilling, satisfactory, and meaningful lives, even in old age (Brooks, 2019; Doyle et al., 2012; Park, 2005; Stahnke et al., 2022). Thus, it becomes important to consider the beliefs we hold about the lives and experiences of ICFAAs, because they may be outdated, unfounded, and untrue.

Community Implications

Neal and Neal (2023) comment on the many ways that our communities are shaped by pronatalism. First, Neal and Neal examine how there is often an imperative to make spaces more “family friendly”, in this case, “nuclear family friendly.” Often, this means making efforts towards improving the lives of children and parents. Once children and parents are looked after, older adults are considered, and in last place, come considerations for singles and couples without children. Thus, neighbourhoods and communities are often constructed for the pronatalist nuclear family, not for ICFAAs or ICFOAs.

More than this, despite pronatalism’s voiced concerns over how ICFOAs will fair in old age, we continue to find that financial planning and program initiatives are oriented towards parents. These kinds of pronatalist incentives are long-standing and since the mid 20th century, increasingly concrete representations of such changes have emerged with the advent of age-restricted housing and the rise of planned communities. So, whose desires are recognized in these initiatives and where do ICFAAs fit in? It is possible that right now, ICFAAs do not fit in. In fact, research has found that ICFAAs feel less satisfied with their neighbourhoods than the average respondent (Neal & Neal, 2023).

In the present study, community related dissatisfaction stemmed from a desire to see greater diversity and less age or family-status based segregation. Research has found that ICFAAs appear to enjoy “family friendly” spaces, and making spaces “family friendly” does not have to

necessitate having children. Family is created, not pre-determined, and one way to facilitate the creation of family is through intersectional communities.

Childfreedom is a perfectly acceptable choice that need not come with an explanation or a long list of justifications. However, because we live in a culture that reflects pronatalist values, it can be difficult to feel free to choose childfreedom. Thus, it is my hope that research like this helps promote a realistic, well-rounded perspective of intentional childfreedom. Further, that it helps support individuals in developing their voice around childfree desires if they have them.

Limitations of This Study

A primary limitation of this study was the lack of diversity in the sample with respect to race, ethnicity, sexuality, physical ability, socioeconomic status, and religious beliefs. The use of snowball sampling may have contributed to these limitations, as participants lived within the same vicinity. Similar limitations have been noted in other studies, which often highlight the voices of White, middle-class, English-speaking ICFAAs (Blackstone & Stewart, 2016; Doyle et al., 2012).

This prompts an ongoing question within childfree research: is childfreedom a privileged phenomenon? Are individuals with higher education, greater incomes, and from Western, urban communities able to choose childfreedom more easily than those who face systemic disadvantages related to race, class, or other intersecting factors (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008)?

Given the Western (specifically Canadian) context of this study, it is important to consider how culture, politics, and law shape one's ability to choose a childfree life (Salgado & Magalhães, 2024). Access to reproductive resources such as contraceptives and abortion varies widely, not only across North America, but globally. Unequal access to reproductive rights persists, and the Western feminist movement has historically prioritized gains for White women over those of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC; Vayo, 2024). These systemic inequalities suggest that factors such as culture, racism, and classism influence who can, and will, make the choice to remain childfree.

In recruiting participants, it may be that a larger visible pool of White ICFAAs exists compared to BIPOC ICFAAs, though this may reflect systemic barriers rather than actual differences in childfree intentions. The effects of race on childfree decision-making are difficult to isolate. Some research suggests that when controlling for socioeconomic status, Black and White individuals are equally likely to choose childfreedom (Park, 2005; Agrillo & Nelini,

2008). However, given that Black individuals are disproportionately impacted by lower socioeconomic status in North America, it follows that fewer may be able to make the child-free choice, or be visible in research samples, despite similar intentions. Few studies have explicitly sought out the voices of BIPOC ICFOAs, leaving the impact of race on child-free choices underexplored and inconclusive.

Additionally, child-free continues to be stigmatized, which may have deterred some ICFOAs from participating in the study (Stegen et al., 2020). While stigma has declined in recent years and child-free is increasingly seen as a legitimate life choice, the cohort targeted in this study, born between 1943–1955, likely experienced greater social pressure and disapproval when making their decision.

It is therefore important to situate these findings within a Western, Canadian context shaped by feminist movements and changing gender roles. While this study gives voice to a specific group within the intentionally child-free community, it does not claim to represent all ICFOAs.

Strengths of This Study

Despite the relatively small and homogenous sample, the participant interviews and photo-diaries generated rich, nuanced data. This study offers much-needed insight into the lived experiences of ICFOAs and contributes to a broader understanding of the child-free experience. By employing a comprehensive research design, this study allowed ICFOAs to share their experience of child-free freely. Adina noted how she had “really enjoyed” participating. She had “*never* spoken as freely about [her experiences] in [her] entire life” as she did during our interviews. Other participants noted their comfortability during the interview as well, speaking to the rigor and quality of this data.

Additionally, this data contributes greatly to the existing literature given that it included perspectives from both men and women. Previous research has called for an increase in perspectives from men, noting that the research has predominantly included the voices of women (Park, 2005). Further, including the voices of men and women offered an understanding of the impact of child-free on heterosexual couples' experiences (Doyle et al., 2012).

An additional strength of the study was the use of an evolving interview guide which touched on the same primary threads but expanded to include emergent topics and themes (Höglund & Hildingson, 2023). At the end of the recruitment period, any differences that

emerged within the data were individual in nature, whereas the themes continued to repeat themselves.

Sufficiency of the data was analyzed continuously, considering the tents of information power as delineated by Malterud et al. (2021). The richness of my interviews coupled with the variation in participants' personhood and lived experiences of this highly specific demographic meant that fewer participants were required to reach sufficient information power. By applying a comprehensive approach to data collection, this study allowed participants to share their unique understanding of their childfree experience (Salgado & Magalhães, 2024). What emerged was a rich insight into the experiences of ICFOAs.

Future Research

While the results of existing studies are important, there is still much to be discovered about ICFOAs and their experiences. For one, much of the existing research on ICF has been limited to women's experiences. While there are nuanced cultural associations between womanhood and motherhood that make their experiences important, men's experiences are also critical as they make up significant portion of the ICF population. By drawing on the voices of ICF men and women, the present study has opened an important conversation about the similarities and differences amongst their experiences.

However, gender related gaps in the literature are not the only ones that remain. Research has been unintentional in distinguishing ICFOAs from those who are unintentionally childless. This has confused the data and made it difficult to ascertain important distinctions between the two groups. Thus, as we move forward, it is important to be intentional in the language we use to categorize and name the population that we are addressing, whether this be ICFOAs or unintentionally childless adults.

Structural Features Limiting Access to ICFOAs

In our world today, reproduction remains a politically and socially controlled phenomenon. Thus, the question of who can and who cannot reproduce is often a question that is determined by laws, social norms, and societal systems. For example, the eugenics movement forced sterilization on many individuals, removing their choice in the matter of reproduction. At other times, reproduction is strongly encouraged, such as amongst the Royal Family or within certain religions. Thus, there are subtle messages and norms that indicate who should and should not reproduce.

Reproduction, like so many other things, is experienced differently by those who are subject to oppression. For instance, those who face racial oppression may face different messages about their reproductive freedom than those who do not. Thus, it becomes important to consider who can choose child-free.

The demographic narrowness of my own and other child-free studies may be representative of the ways that reproduction is experienced differently depending on demographic factors like race, ability, and socioeconomic standing. Perhaps there are a larger population of White, educated, middle class ICFOAs because they have the freedom to choose child-free in a way that those impacted by structures of oppression cannot. If it is not structures of oppression affecting whose experiences we can access, then there is an impetus to understand what is making it challenging to hear the voices of those from a diversity of backgrounds.

Conclusion

What are the experiences of ICFOAs? Participants described a broad range of meaningful engagements, including travel, community involvement, hobbies, and vibrant social connections. Their experiences challenge dominant cultural narratives by illustrating that aging without children is not synonymous with isolation or regret, but rather can be grounded in autonomy, fulfillment, and vitality.

In alignment with existing research, themes such as freedom, independence, and life satisfaction were reaffirmed. However, this study also uncovered novel insights, including the interplay between personality and the child-free decision, the central role of community connection, and the proactive cultivation of joy and purpose that appears to sustain well-being over time.

Importantly, participants did not simply recount their experiences, they shared their inner worlds: their values, griefs, and enduring joys. Their stories affirm that child-free aging is not a deficiency to be remedied, but a legitimate and meaningful life path. In centering these voices, this research contributes to dismantling pronatalist assumptions that continue to shape social, cultural, and academic discourses. It is my hope that these findings will foster a more inclusive and expansive understanding of aging, one that honors the diverse ways in which people craft satisfying lives, regardless of parental status.

REFERENCES

- Abma, J. C., & Martinez, G. M. (2006). Childlessness among older women in the United States: Trends and profiles. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68(4), 1045–1056.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2006.00312.x>
- Agrillo, C., & Nelini, C. (2008). Childfree by choice: A review. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 25(3), 347–363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873630802476292>
- Albertini, M., & Brini, E. (2021). I've changed my mind: The intentions to be childless, their stability and realisation. *European Societies*, 23(1), 119–160.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1764997>
- Albertini, M., & Kohli, M. (2009). What childless older people give: Is the generational link broken? *Ageing & Society*, 29(8), 1261–1274.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X0999033X>
- Albertini, M., & Mencarini, L. (2014). Childlessness and support networks in later life: New pressures on familistic welfare states? *Journal of Family Issues*, 35(3), 331–357.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X12462537>
- Antes, A. L., Walsh, H. A., Strait, M., Hudson-Vitale, C. R., & DuBois, J. M. (2018). Examining data repository guidelines for qualitative data sharing. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 13(1), 61–73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1556264617744121>
- Applebaum, M. (2012). Phenomenological psychological research as science. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 43(1), 36–72.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/156916212X632952>
- Arpino, B., Mair, C. A., Quashie, N. T., & Antczak, R. (2022). Loneliness before and during the COVID-19 pandemic—are unpartnered and childless older adults at higher risk? *European Journal of Ageing*, 19(4), 1327–1338. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-022-00718-x>
- Bartlett, R. (2012). Modifying the diary interview method to research the lives of people with dementia. *Qualitative Health Research*, 22(12), 1717–1726.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732312462240>
- Bennett, J. (2014). Researching the intangible: A qualitative phenomenological study of the everyday practices of belonging. *Sociological Research Online*, 19(1), 67–77.
<https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.3187>

- Betancur, H. M. R., Hernández-Quirama, A., & Rubio, C. R. (2022). Voluntary childlessness in a society reluctant to change. *Sociology Compass*, 17(17), e13040. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13040>
- Bhambhani, C., & Inbanathan, A. (2020). Examining a non-conformist choice: The decision-making process toward being childfree couples. *International Journal of Sociology*, 50(5), 339–368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207659.2020.1797265>
- Blackstone, A. (2014). Childless... or childfree? *Contexts: Sociology for the Public*, 13(4), 68–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504214558221>
- Blackstone, A., & Stewart, M. D. (2012). Choosing to be childfree: Research on the decision not to parent. *Sociology Compass*, 6(9), 718–727. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2012.00496.x>
- Blackstone, A., & Stewart, M. D. (2016). "There's more thinking to decide": How the childfree decide not to parent. *The Family Journal*, 24(3), 296–303. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480716648676>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, 9(1), 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196>
- Brooks, C. (2019). Meaning-making among intentionally childless women. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 38(1), 140–153. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2019.38.1.140>
- Calhoun, L. G., & Selby, J. W. (1980). Voluntary childlessness, involuntary childlessness, and having children: A study of social perceptions. *Family Relations*, 29(2), 181–183. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/584069>
- Cohen, J. A., Kassan, A., Wada, K., & Suehn, M. (2021). The personal and the political: How a feminist standpoint theory epistemology guided an interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 19(4), 917–948. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2021.1957047>
- Corbett, L. (2018). Other than mother: The impact of voluntary childlessness on meaning in life, and the potential for positive childfree living. *International Journal of Existential Positive Psychology*, 7(2), 20–39. Retrieved from: <https://www.meaning.ca/ijepp->

[article/vol7-no2/other-than-mother-the-impact-of-voluntary-childlessness-on-meaning-in-life-and-the-potential-for-positive-child-free-living/](#)

DeOllos, I. Y., & Kapinus, C. A. (2002). Aging childless adults and couples: Suggestions for new directions in research. *Sociological Inquiry*, 72(1), 72–80.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-682X.00006>

Dimitrova, E., & Kotzeva, T. (2022). Contested parenthood: Attitudes toward voluntary childlessness as a life strategy in post-socialist Bulgaria. *Social Inclusion*, 10(3), 172–183. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v10i3.5065>

Dowling, R., Lloyd, K., & Suchet-Pearson, S. (2016). Qualitative methods 1: Enriching the interview. *Progress in Human Geography*, 40(5), 679–686.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515596880>

Doyle, J., Pooley, J. A., & Breen, L. (2012). A phenomenological exploration of the child-free choice in a sample of Australian women. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 18(3), 397–407.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105312444647>

Dykstra, P. A. (2018). Childlessness and parenthood in two centuries: different roads—different maps? *Journal of Family Issues*, 39(1), 3–30.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07303881>

Dykstra, P. A., & Hagestad, G. O. (2007). Roads less taken: Developing a nuanced view of older adults without children. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(10), 1275–1310.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07303822>

Dykstra, P. A., & Wagner, M. (2007). Pathways to childlessness and late-life outcomes. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(11), 1487–1517. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07303879>

Gillespie, R. (1999). Voluntary childlessness in the United Kingdom. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 7(13), 43–53. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080\(99\)90111-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080(99)90111-8)

Gillespie, R. (2000). When no means no: Disbelief, disregard and deviance as discourses of voluntary childlessness. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 23(2), 223–234.

[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395\(00\)00076-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(00)00076-5)

Gillespie, R. (2001). Contextualizing voluntary childlessness within a postmodern model of reproduction: Implications for health and social needs. *Critical Social Policy*, 21(2), 139–159. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026101830102100201>

Gillespie, R. (2003). Child-free and feminine: Understanding the gender identity of voluntarily

- childless women. *Gender & Society*, 17(1), 122–136.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243202238982>
- Glaw, X., Inder, K. J., Kable, A., & Hazelton, M. (2017). Visual methodologies in qualitative research: Autophotography and photo elicitation applied to mental health research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917748215>
- Grady, J. (2008). Visual research at the crossroads. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 9(3).
<https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-9.3.1173>
- Hagestad, G. O., & Call, V. R. A. (2007). Pathways to childlessness: A life course perspective. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(10), 1331–1368.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07303836>
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row. (Original work published 1927)
- Hintz, E. A., & Brown, C. L. (2020). Childfree and “bingoed”: A relational dialectics theory analysis of meaning creation in online narratives about voluntary childlessness. *Communication Monographs*, 87(2), 244–266.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2019.1697891>
- Höglund, B., & Hildingsson, I. (2023). Why and when choosing child-free life in Sweden? Reasons, influencing factors and personal and societal factors: Individual interviews during 2020–2021. *Sexual & Reproductive Healthcare*, 35, Article 100809.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.srhc.2022.100809>
- Huirem, R., Lognathan, K., & Patowari, P. (2020). Feminist standpoint theory and its importance in feminist research. *Journal of Social Work Education and Practice*, 5(2), 46–55. Retrieved from: <https://jswep.in/index.php/jswep/article/view/99/96>
- Jeffries, S., & Konnert, C. (2002). Regret and psychological well-being among voluntarily and involuntarily childless women and mothers. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development*, 54(2), 89–106. <https://doi.org/10.2190/J08N-VBVG-6PXM-0TTN>
- Johnston, K., & MacDougall, C. (2021). Enacting feminist methodologies in research toward reproductive justice. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, Article 16094069211016157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211016157>
- Jones, F., Rodger, S., Ziviani, J., & Boyd, R. (2006). Application of a hermeneutic

- phenomenologically orientated approach to a qualitative study. *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 13(1), 29–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11038120500239598>
- Keith, P. M. (1983). A comparison of the resources of parents and childless men and women in very old age. *Family Relations*, 32(3), 403–409. <https://doi.org/10.2307/583819>
- Klaus, D., & Schnettler, S. (2016). Social networks and support for parents and childless adults in the second half of life: Convergence, divergence, or stability? *Advances in Life Course Research*, 29, 95–105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2015.12.004>
- Koropecj-Cox, T., & Call, V. R. A. (2007). Characteristics of older childless persons and parents: Cross-national comparisons. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(10), 1362–1414. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07303837>
- Koropecj-Cox, T., Pienta, A. M., & Brown, T. L. (2007). Women of the 1950s and the “normative” life course: The implications of childlessness, fertility timing, and marital status for psychological well-being in late midlife. *Journal of Women & Aging*, 19(3–4), 43–61. https://doi.org/10.1300/J074v19n03_04
- Latham, A. (2003). Research, performance, and doing human geography: Some reflections on the diary-photograph, diary-interview method. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 35(11), 1993–2017. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a3587>
- Latham, A. (2004). Researching and writing everyday accounts of the city: An introduction to the photo-diary-interview method. In C. Knowles & P. Sweetman (Eds.), *Picturing the social landscape: Visual methods and the sociological imagination* (pp. 117–131). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203694527>
- Letherby, G. (2003). *Feminist research in theory and practice*. Open University Press.
- Letherby, G. (2002). Childless and bereft?: Stereotypes and realities in relation to ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ childlessness and womanhood. *Sociological Inquiry*, 72(1), 7–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-682X.00003>
- Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1753–1760. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444>
- Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2021). Information power: Sample content and

- size in qualitative studies. In P. M. Camic (Ed.), *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design* (2nd ed., pp. 67–81). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000252-004>
- Matthews, E. J., & Desjardins, M. (2017). Remaking our identities: Couples' experiences of voluntary childlessness. *The Family Journal*, 25(1), 31–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480716679643>
- Maxwell, J. A. (2009). Designing a qualitative study. In L. Bickman & D. J. Rog (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of applied social research methods* (2nd ed., pp. 214–253). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483348858.n7>
- McQuillan, J., Greil, A. L., Shreffler, K. M., Wonch-Hill, P. A., Gentzler, K. C., & Hathcoat, J. D. (2012). Does the reason matter? Variations in childlessness concerns among U.S. women. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74(5), 1166–1181. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.01015.x>
- Mertens, D. M. (2015). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Meyers, D. T. (2001). The rush to motherhood: Pronatalist discourse and women's autonomy. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 26(3), 735–773. <https://doi.org/10.1086/495627>
- Mikucka, M. (2020). Old-age trajectories of life satisfaction: Do singlehood and childlessness hurt more when people get older? *Swiss Journal of Sociology*, 46(3), 397–424. <https://doi.org/10.2478/sjs-2020-0020>
- Mollen, D. (2006). Voluntarily childfree women: Experiences and counseling considerations. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 28(3), 269–282. <https://doi.org/10.17744/mehc.28.3.39w5h93mreb0mk4f>
- Neal, J. W., & Neal, Z. P. (2021). Who are the childfree? *PLOS ONE*, 16(6), e0252528. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0252528>
- Neal, Z. P., & Neal, J. W. (2022). Prevalence, age of decision, and interpersonal warmth judgments of childfree adults. *Scientific Reports*, 12, 11907. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-15728-z>
- Neal, Z. P., & Neal, J. W. (2023). Childfree in a family-friendly neighborhood. *Social Science Research*, 104, 102661. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2023.102661>

- Neuberger, F. S., & Preisner, K. (2018). Parenthood and quality of life in old age: The role of individual resources, the welfare state, and the economy. *Social Indicators Research*, 138(1), 353–372. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-017-1665-6>
- Palmer, E. (2019). The “empty womb” in the therapy room? The taboo and potency of the other than mother/child-free body. *Psychotherapy & Politics International*, 17(3), Article e601. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1508>
- Park, K. (2002). Stigma management among the voluntarily childless. *Sociological Perspectives*, 45(1), 21–45. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2002.45.1.21>
- Park, K. (2005). Choosing childlessness: Weber’s typology of action and motives of the voluntarily childless. *Sociological Inquiry*, 75(3), 372–402. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.2005.00127.x>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Penning, M. J., Wu, Z., & Hou, F. (2022). Childlessness and social and emotional loneliness in middle and later life. *Ageing & Society*, 44(7), 1551–1578. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X22000824>
- Peterson, H. (2015). Fifty shades of freedom: Voluntary childlessness as women’s ultimate liberation. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 53, 182–191. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2014.10.017>
- Peterson, H., & Engwall, K. (2016). Missing out on the parenthood bonus? Voluntarily childless in a “child-friendly” society. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 37(4), 540–552. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-015-9474-z>
- Reicher, S., & Taylor, S. (2005). Similarities and differences between traditions. *The Psychologist*, 18(9), 547–549.
- Rennie, D. L. (2012). Qualitative research as methodical hermeneutics. *Psychological Methods*, 17(3), 385–398. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029250>
- Ross, C. E., Mirowsky, J., & Goldsteen, K. (1990). The impact of the family on health: The decade in review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 52(4), 1059–1078. <https://doi.org/10.2307/353319>
- Salgado, F., & Magalhães, S. I. (2024). “I am my own future”: Representations and experiences of child-free women. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 102, 102849. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102849>

- Seibold, C. (2000). Qualitative research from a feminist perspective in the postmodern era: Methodological, ethical and reflexive concerns. *Nursing Inquiry*, 7(3), 147–155.
<https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1440-1800.2000.00063.x>
- Shapiro, G. (2014). Voluntary childlessness: A critical review of the literature. *Studies in the Maternal*, 6(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.9>
- Somers, M. D. (1993). A comparison of voluntarily childfree adults and parents. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 55(3), 643–650. <https://doi.org/10.2307/353345>
- Stahnke, B., Blackstone, A., & Howard, H. G. (2020). “I’ve lived my life to the fullest”: Life satisfaction among childfree older women. *The Family Journal*, 28(2), 159–167.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480720911611>
- Stahnke, B., Cooley, M. E., & Blackstone, A. (2022). “I’ve lived my life to the fullest”: Life satisfaction among childfree older women. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 34(11), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2022.2139078>
- Statistics Canada. (2017, August 2). *Families, households and marital status: Key results from the 2016 Census* [The Daily]. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/170802/dq170802a-eng.htm>
- Statistics Canada. (2023, Feb 14). *Family matters: To have kids or not to have kids: That is the question!* [Infographic]. Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2023006-eng.htm>
- Statistics Canada. (2024, June 20). Table 3. Proportion (%) of women aged 50 and older with no biological children (selected years). *Fertility in Canada, 1921 to 2022* (Demographic Report). <https://doi.org/10.25318/91F0015M2024001-eng>
- Stegen, H., Switsers, L., & De Donder, L. (2021). Life stories of voluntarily childless older people: A retrospective view on their reasons and experiences. *Journal of Family Issues*, 42(7), 1536–1558. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X20949906>
- Stokley, M., & Sanders, V. (2020). “You’ve got children haven’t you...?”: Involuntary childlessness as a neglected aspect of therapist diversity in the professional context. *European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy*, 10, 53–67.
<https://doi.org/10.24869/ejqr.v10i0.87>
- Tanaka, K., & Johnson, N. E. (2016). Childlessness and mental well-being in a global context. *Journal of Family Issues*, 37(8), 1027–1045. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14526393>

- Vayo, A. B. (2024). The states of inequality: Methods for mapping legal pluralism in reproductive autonomy. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 49(1), 209–246.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/lsi.2022.61>
- Veevers, J. E. (1973). Voluntary childlessness: A neglected area of family study. *The Family Coordinator*, 22(2), 199–203. <https://doi.org/10.2307/582108>
- Vikström, J., Bladh, M., Hammar, M., Marcusson, J., Wressle, E., & Sydsjö, G. (2011). The influences of childlessness on the psychological well-being and social network of the oldest old. *BMC Geriatrics*, 11, 78. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2318-11-78>
- Wenger, G. C. (2009). Childlessness at the end of life: Evidence from rural Wales. *Ageing & Society*, 29(8), 1243–1259. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X09008381>
- Wertz, F. J. (2005). Phenomenological research methods for counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 167–177. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.167>
- Willsher, K. A., & Goel, K. (2017). Feminist research paradigms. In *Understanding feminist research: Power, ethics, and reflexivity in social work* (pp. 1-18). University of South Australia.
- Wu, Z., & Hart, R. (2002). The mental health of the childless elderly. *Sociological Inquiry*, 72(1), 21–42. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-682X.00004>
- Yee, J. S. R., & Bremner, C. (2011, May 23–25). *Methodological bricolage: What does it tell us about design?* Paper presented at the Doctoral Design Education Conference, Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Retrieved from:
https://researchportal.northumbria.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/3017524/313_Yee_Bremner_%282%29.pdf
- Zhang, Z., & Hayward, M. D. (2001). Childlessness and the psychological well-being of older persons. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 56(5), S311–S320.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/56.5.s311>

Appendix A

Participant Profiles

The experiences that provide the foundation for this study came from six participants who identified as ICF. While all participants were 70 years or older, had middle class incomes for most of their working lives, and were Caucasian, they varied in age, profession, relationship status, and life experience. These brief profiles aim to contextualize the thematic analysis.

Rhonda (82) is a retired pediatric nurse with a lifelong commitment to healthcare activism. Adopted as a child, she grew up witnessing her mother's struggles with mental illness while developing a close bond with her father who encouraged her to pursue higher education. Determined and deeply passionate, Rhonda put herself through nursing school and went on to lead numerous initiatives promoting health and well-being both nationally and internationally.

Following her prestigious career, Rhonda spent six years in a convent as a nun. In her fifties, she left religious life and entered a challenging marriage marked by periods of isolation and loneliness. After twenty-two years of marriage, her husband passed, and Rhonda moved to the community she resides in now.

Today, Rhonda continues her mission to combat medical malpractice, enjoys friendships with several women in her building, and finds peace in nature. In recent years, she shared that she has started to feel more like her former spirited self.

Francis (80) grew up in a small town on Canada's East Coast as part of a large Acadian family. During his formative years, he worked alongside his siblings on the family farm but felt pulled to travel West. Leaving his hometown at 20, he began to explore Canada. Throughout his working life, Francis was primarily employed outdoors; leading hiking tours and teaching others about the history of the land. In his sixties, Francis recalled feeling ready to settle down.

In his sixties, Francis felt ready to settle down. He met his wife; they married and moved to the town where they live today. They continue to travel extensively as a couple. Francis maintains a deep connection to nature, which was demonstrated in his photo-diary. He enjoys spending time outdoors, staying active, tending to his garden, travelling, and being with his wife.

Charles (70) endured a difficult childhood marked by emotionally distant and neglectful parents. His mother battled mental illness, and his father was abusive. Many of his early memories involve protecting himself and his two sisters from his father's abuse. Adding to the

instability, his father's military career often required the family to move, making it difficult for Charles to form lasting friendships or experience a sense of peace and consistency.

As an adult, Charles intentionally sought out a life marked by stability, calm, and connection. He found satisfaction in his career, developed a close-knit group of friends, and pursued a variety of hobbies. Charles had a brief marriage in his twenties, but when it ended, he realized that parenthood was not something he wanted for himself. Although he enjoyed spending time with his friends' children, he valued his freedom and was wary of repeating the troubled family dynamics of his own childhood. Later in life, Charles remarried and now enjoys a quiet, stable, and fulfilling life with his partner. They share a love of travel, nature, and adventure. They often spend time enjoying local wineries, cafés, and local markets.

Adina (80) endured an extremely adverse childhood, marked by pervasive abuse and the constant need to fight for survival. From a young age, she developed a strong sense of independence and resourcefulness. The library became her sanctuary and through working there, she saved enough money to move away and start anew.

In her twenties, Adina tried to pursue higher education but was held back by severe arthritis. During this period, she came to a firm decision to remain child-free, informed by her growing understanding of intergenerational trauma. Fearing that she might unintentionally repeat the cycle of harm she had experienced, she chose not to have children. However, Adina became pregnant after being misinformed by a doctor about the side effects of a prescription that interfered with her birth control. She gave birth to a baby girl, whom she placed with an adoptive family, taking great care to ensure the child would be raised in a loving and stable home.

Adina did not remain with the child's father, feeling unfulfilled in the relationship. After their divorce, she relocated and began a new job where she eventually met the love of her life, her second husband, Louis. Together, they shared a rich and joyful life, cherishing each other's company and the companionship of their beloved pets.

Although Louis passed away ten years ago, Adina continues to honor his memory. Her photo-diary clearly illustrated this. Today, she enjoys creating art, connecting with friends, and driving through the scenic countryside near her home. Reflecting on her journey, Adina expresses a sense of amazement and gratitude for the life she has built, despite the hardships of her early years.

Walt (83) and Barb (80) have been married for 58 years, having tied the knot in their twenties. From early on, Barb had a strong sense that motherhood wasn't for her; her heart was set on travel. Growing up, she developed a fascination with the world, culture, and communication, influenced by her father's use of a ham radio. This curiosity later shaped her career, including her work at an international travel clinic where she supported people preparing to visit other countries.

Barb admits she wasn't even sure she wanted to get married, she only knew she wanted to explore the world. However, when she met Walt and discovered that he shared her passion for travel, their path became clear. They got married and, together, decided to build a life focused on exploration and shared experiences.

Interestingly, Walt and Barb never had an explicit conversation about whether to have children before they married. Instead, the decision seemed to unfold naturally as they realized they were deeply content with their lifestyle. They enjoyed spending time with friends and the children of their friends, but they never felt a desire to have children of their own.

Remaining child-free, they say, allowed their relationship to flourish. They believe it brought them even closer as a couple, as they experienced little conflict and consistently aligned on their values, priorities, and goals.

Today, Walt and Barb continue to travel extensively, delighting in both discovering new destinations and revisiting favorite places. What they cherish most is the feeling each destination evokes: whether it's the vibrancy of Singapore or the rich culture of Turkey. They also enjoy spending time with friends, watching hockey together, and planning out new adventures.

Summary

The participants shared common values, including a love of travel, nature, and community. Each chose to remain child-free because it aligned most closely with their sense of self and the life they wanted to lead. None expressed a dislike for children; rather, they prioritized the freedom to pursue a lifestyle that they felt was incompatible with providing the stable and nurturing environment they believed children deserved. While each participant arrived at the decision to remain child-free in their own way, all expressed a deep sense of satisfaction with their lives as older adults and a contentment with the path they had chosen.

Appendix B

Invitational Recruitment Poster



75+ & RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS WANTED

CHILDFREE?

Looking for a space to share your experiences?

This is a three part study where you will:

- Participate in an initial interview
- Take pictures of your experiences
- Participate in a second interview about your pictures

If you are interested in participating, or know someone who may be, please contact me either by phone or email:

[Redacted contact information]

Appendix C

Facebook Recruitment Advertisement

STUDY PARTICIPANTS WANTED: The Experiences of Intentionally Childfree Older Adults

Are you 75 years or older? Did you make the intentional decision to remain childfree? You may be eligible to participate in this study.

I, Katie Freiheit, am conducting research for my thesis at Trinity Western University and I am interested in exploring the experiences of intentionally childfree older adults. That is, adults who decided that they were not going to have children (apart from biological or medical factors).

If you are interested, or if you know someone who might be please do not tag them in this post. Instead, to protect their anonymity, please either share this post with the person you have in mind or give them my contact information listed below. If you yourself are interested in participating, simply call me or send me an email.

Thank you for your interest!

Katie Freiheit

Phone: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Appendix D

Screening and Introduction Script

Hello, my name is Katie Freiheit, and I'm a master's student at Trinity Western University in Langley, currently completing my Master of Counselling Psychology. I'm contacting you because you've expressed interest in participating in my study which is hoping to explore the experiences of intentionally childfree older adults. I've never wanted to have children myself, but I've often been faced with stigma that suggests I should become a parent if I want to lead a fulfilling life. So, I'm hoping to use this study to better understand the experiences of ICFOAs. I was wondering if you have a moment to talk so that I can determine if you would be a good fit?

Thank you, this shouldn't take longer than 15 minutes. I'll take a moment to explain briefly about the study if that's okay? So, I'm the principal investigator of this study and I'm looking to get a better understanding of the experiences of intentionally childfree older adults. To understand your experiences, I would have you participate in three sections of this study. First, we would do an initial interview, where I would ask you a bit about your experiences. This would take 1-2 hours. Once that's done I would have you complete what's called a photo-diary on your own time, over seven consecutive days. A photo-diary is like a written diary, but instead of keeping a written record of important parts of your day, you would be taking photos instead. You would select just one photo to represent each of the seven days. I would have these final seven photos developed to include in a final portfolio. In the last interview, we would discuss the photos you took and what they mean to you. Again, this interview would take about 1-2 hours.

Now that I've explained everything a little bit, do you have any immediate questions?

After having your questions answered, do you feel like you would be interested in participating?

Either:

- (a) (yes) Since you're interested in participating, I'll take a moment to gather some information from you just to make sure that you're eligible to participate. Would that be okay with you?
- (b) (no) I understand. Thank you for your time and if you change your mind, you're welcome to reach out to me again.

If yes:

First, I'm wondering if you have any:

Biological children?

Adopted children?

Step-children? [Note: one participant did have step-children after marrying in later life, but did not raise these step-children and considered themselves to be ICF.]

If yes: Okay, so since you have [type of children] I won't be able to accept you into the study as a participant. I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me today. Before we hang up, are there any questions that you have?

Thank you. Next, this study is targeting individuals between the ages of 75 and 89. Are you within that age range currently, or will you be in the next couple of weeks? [Note: the age requirement was dropped to 70 due to difficulty with recruitment.]

Age:

If the individual reports that they are not 75 or older: Okay, since you're not within the age range that I am hoping to capture in this study, you won't be able to participate in the study at this time. However, since I may have to expand the age range that I am trying to select from, depending on how much interest there is in participating, is it okay with you if I keep your contact information on hand so that I can get in touch with you in the event that I do have to extend the age range of participants I could reach out to you?

Wonderful. Next, I'll ask about any medical conditions that may impact your ability to participate.

Have you been diagnosed with, or suspect you might have a disorder such as dementia that impacts your memory? (Y/N)

If yes: Due to your medical condition, you won't be eligible to participate. There is a risk that your diagnosis could impact your ability to fully participate in this study. Before I let you go, do you have any questions?

Do you have significant audio or visual impairments that prevent you from engaging in regular conversation or doing things such as taking pictures? (Y/N)

If yes: Due to your medical condition, you won't be eligible to participate. There is a risk that your diagnosis could impact your ability to fully participate in this study. Before I let you go, do you have any questions?

Are there any medical conditions that you have that you think might prevent you from taking part in two, 1–2-hour interviews which could be conducted at your residence? (Y/N)

If yes: Due to your medical condition, you won't be eligible to participate. There is a risk that your diagnosis could impact your ability to fully participate in this study. Before I let you go, do you have any questions?

Great, I'm wondering if you live in the Vancouver area or in the Lower Mainland. I am hoping to conduct interviews in-person. [Note: interviews were conducted online or over the phone.

Participant's demonstrated competence in using these platforms and were happy to conduct the interviews virtually]

Area of residence:

If not: Okay, would you be willing to work around location like commuting to Langley to conduct the interview or holding the interview online over a video communication platform like zoom?

Perfect, and are you a Canadian citizen? Are you fluent in both spoken and written English?

Language:

If not: Okay, do you have someone that you would feel comfortable translating for you? Someone like a niece, nephew, or friend?

Now that I know more about you and that you are eligible to participate, could I get your name and the phone number that is best to reach you on?

Name:

Number:

Thank you, and could I also get your preferred email address?

Email:

Is it okay if I also gather some demographic information?

First, what is your relationship status?

Married, single, divorced, widowed, partnered, other _____

Would you mind sharing with me your racial background?

Race:

And what level of education do you hold?

Education:

What would you say is the income bracket that you were in for the majority of your working life?

Income:

Lastly, I'd like to ask about what drew you to participate in this study?

Response:

Perfect. The interviews do not have to be held at your residence, but if that is more convenient for you then it's an option.

Now that I've explained the study and we know that you're eligible to participate, do you have any immediate questions?

After having your questions answered, do you feel like you would be interested in participating?

Either:

Wonderful! Would now be a good time to set up an interview? OR

No worries. I understand. All the information that you've just provided me will be deleted once I hang up the phone. If you change your mind, feel free to reach out to me. Do you have any questions before I let you go?

Appendix E

Informed Consent for Participation

1

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study on the experiences of intentionally childfree older adults. Below you will find information about this study, your role, your rights, and your responsibilities as a participant.

Principal Investigator: Katie Freiheit, MA Counselling Psychology Student, Department of Counselling Psychology, Trinity Western University, [REDACTED]

Faculty Supervisor: Marvin McDonald, PhD, Department of Counselling Psychology, Trinity Western University, [REDACTED]

Co-Supervisor: Larissa Rossen, PhD, Department of Counselling Psychology, Trinity Western University, [REDACTED]

Purpose: I am doing this study to better understand the experiences of intentionally childfree individuals. Stereotypes suggest that intentionally childfree individuals will be unhappy and lonely in old age, but this is not what most intentionally childfree older adults report. So, I am hoping to gain a better understanding of what your life looks like as an intentionally childfree older adult. My hope is that your participation will provide mental health professionals insight about the needs of intentionally childfree older adults, and to challenge existing stereotypes. Participants in this study must meet certain criteria (i.e., be 75 years of age or older; have no medical factors which will impair participation; be childfree; are residents of the Lower Mainland) to participate. If you do not meet these criteria, please do not provide your consent.

Procedures: This study contains three parts. The first part is an introductory interview where I will ask some general questions about your experiences. You will have the chance to share your own insights and understanding. This interview will take about 1-2 hours. Next, you will be asked to keep a photo-diary for seven consecutive days (about 30 minutes in total). You will be asked to take one photo each day of things that capture your experience as an intentionally childfree older adult. If you do not have a camera of your own, one will be provided (and instructions will also be provided). Lastly, you will participate in a final interview where we discuss the photos that you took (about 1-2 hours). In total, participation in this study may take 3-6 hours.

Interviews will be conducted in-person at three potential locations: (a) at your home, (b) at a private location of your choice, or (c) on campus at Trinity Western University. As a last resort, interviews may take place online over an online communication platform, Zoom. Upon your request, research findings will be available to you after the study is complete. For a copy, please email the principal investigator, Katie at ([REDACTED]).

Potential Risks and Discomforts: There are few risks associated with this research since you will be asked to share about personal experiences. At times, sharing may cause you some discomfort. If you are uncomfortable at any point during the two interviews, you have the right to stop the interview and wait until you are ready to continue. You also have the right to withdraw participation from the study until three weeks after your final interview. Once that interview has been scheduled, I will tell you the last day that you could withdraw your interview answers. Additionally, the photo-diary technique may cause you to realize things about your life

(19/03/2024)

that you had not considered before, and these realizations could be distressing. If this is the case, you have the right to withdraw your participation and resources for support will be provided. If you decide to withdraw your participation before this time, your data will be destroyed.

Confidentiality: Any information that is collected that could be used to identify you will remain anonymous. Further, myself, my research team, and anyone who comes into contact with interviews will be stored on an encrypted, password protected drive under a pseudonym assigned by the principal researcher. The transcripts will not include identifying information. All data from this study, including transcript data and photos, will be uploaded to a public data sharing database. This means that the data that you provide will be accessible to other researchers so that they may use it for their studies. So, while the hard copy of your data will be stored on an encrypted drive for three years before being destroyed, your data will remain available online forever. There is a risk that hackers could gain hold of this information. However, since I will be making the information anonymous, it is unlikely that hackers could use your anonymous information to identify you.

Contact for Information About the Study: If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Katie by phone () or email () or her supervisor, Marvin, at ().

Contact for Concerns About Participant Rights: If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Ethics Compliance Officer in the Office of Research, Trinity Western University at 604-513-2167 or HREB@twu.ca.

Consent: Your participation in this study is voluntary. At any point until three weeks after your final interview, you will have the right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study without consequence. At any time if you would like to end your participation you can speak with Katie at () or email (). If you decide to withdraw your participation, any and all data that you have contributed will be destroyed. Please keep in mind that once data collection has begun you will no longer be able to withdraw from the study; however, your anonymity will be maintained throughout the study using your provided pseudonym.

Your signature below demonstrates that you have read this document in its entirety and that you have asked any questions to understand your consent. You will receive a copy of this consent form for your own records. Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study and that your involvement in each of the three parts of this study may be associated with an anonymous pseudonym once this study is published.

Research Participant Name, Printed

Date

Signature

(19/03/2024)

Appendix F

Initial Interview Semi-Structured Script

Introduction Script: As you know, I am interested in understanding the experience of ICFOAs. Personally, I have never wished to have children, but those around me have tended to warn me against this choice, suggesting that I may miss out on a crucial aspect of life. In this study, I am hoping to hear about your experience as someone who has chosen not to have children, and the experiences that have come out of that decision.

Before we begin, I would like to take a moment to thank you again for offering your participation in this study, and remind you that your consent is ongoing, meaning that you are allowed to stop participating in this study at any time up until the data analysis process begins. I would also like to remind you that the information you provide in this study may be uploaded to a publicly available data base if you choose to offer your consent at the end of the study. Do you have any questions about this part?

Great, now I'm going to ask you some questions about your experience, and you are free to share as much or as little as you're comfortable with. If you are feeling uncomfortable at any point in the interview today, please let me know and we can pause for a break. The interview should take about an hour to an hour and a half. Are you ready to begin?

Research Question: What are the experiences of ICFOAs?

Interview Guide:

1. Is there anything about your experience as an intentionally childfree older adult that you think is especially important to share with me now, at the outset?
2. Can you briefly describe the process that led you to choose childfreedom?
 - a. Has your position on choosing childfreedom changed or evolved over time?
3. In your own words could you describe in as much detail as possible your experience of being childfree?
 - a. Follow up could touch on the impact - could you tell me more about the impact that remaining childfree has had?
 - b. If there is a hint of regret - asking as a probe
 - c. Are aspects of your life that you appreciate or find important that parents may not experience? If so, could you elaborate on that?
4. In your opinion, what impact has remaining childfree had on your experiences in life?

- a. Is there anything in your life right now that you would like to change?
- 5. Is there anything that we have not touched on yet today that you would like to share, or feel is important to share, before we wrap up?

Wrap up: Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. As you know, this is part one of a three-part study. Before I explain more about the next part, the photo-diary, are there any questions, comments, or concerns that you have right now that you would like me to address?

Next Steps: Now that we have completed the first interview I will explain the next part of the study, the photo-diary.

Do you have a camera of your own that you are comfortable using to take photos?

If no:

No worries, I can provide you with a disposal camera and we can practice using it here before I go.

If yes, or carry on:

What I would like for you to do is use your camera to take just one picture each day of your experiences for seven consecutive days. You may find that there is more than one thing in a day you want to capture, and that's fine, but in the end, you must pick just one picture to represent each of the seven days.

You have probably heard of keeping a written diary, and this will be similar except you'll be taking photos instead. I will provide you with printed instructions that you can take with you, but we will also go over them now briefly so that we can clarify any immediate questions if you have them. How does this sound to you?

Appendix G

Second Interview Semi-Structured Script

Introduction Script: Thank you for taking the time to complete the first interview and engage in the photo-diary. Again, I would like to remind you that you have the right to stop participating in this study at any time up until the end of today. What we'll be doing today is going over the final seven photos that you took to include in your diary. I'll start off with some process questions and then leave it up to you to guide me through the pictures you took and why. You are free to share as much or as little as you're comfortable with. If you are feeling uncomfortable at any point in the interview today, please let me know and we can pause for a break. The interview should take about an hour to an hour and a half. Do you have everything you need to feel settled before we begin?

Research Question: What are the experiences of ICFOAs?

Interview Guide:

1. I would like to begin by asking you to take the photos and rank them in order from the pictures that you feel the most attached to, to those that you feel the least attached to.
 - a. What made you order them that way?
 - b. What would you say it is about this first image that you feel attached to?
2. Looking over the photos now, what comes to mind?
3. Is there an overarching feeling you get from looking at them?

Wrap up: Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. As you know, this is the last part of a three-part study. What will happen now is that both of your interviews will be transcribed, and I will assess them for themes. Your interview will also be compared with that of others in this study. It is possible that I will use quotes from your interview to support the claims that I make in my final paper. I will use a pseudonym in place of your name to help maintain your anonymity. Additionally, the photos that you have selected here may be included in the final version of this study as well. Now that we have completed all parts of the study, do you have any questions, comments, or concerns that you have right now that you would like for me to address?

Thank you again for your participation. As I analyze the data, there may be parts that I have difficulty understanding from your perspective. Is it alright if I reach out to you with any questions I might have? – preferred contact method.

Lastly, when the study is published, I can send you a copy if you would like.

Appendix H

Participant Photo-Diaries

Walt and Barb





Rhonda



Francis







Charles

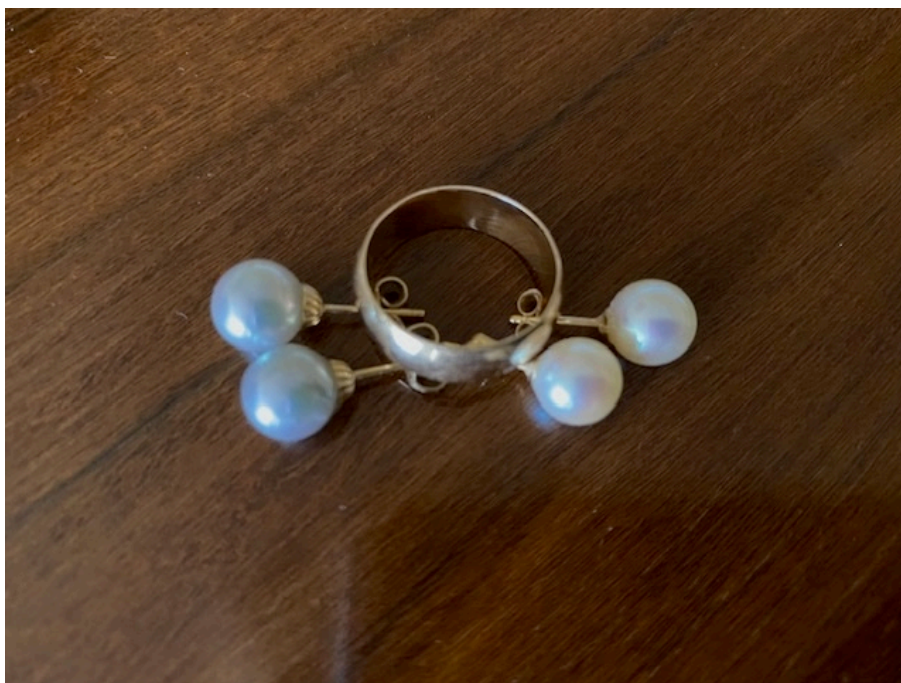








Adina



Appendix I

Comprehensive Photo-Diary Instructions

Section 1: Instructions for Completing a Photo-Diary

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this study. Please remember that your consent is ongoing, and you may stop participating at any time, up until data analysis begins. If you are ready to begin the photo-diary, read on.

Materials:

- 1 camera
 - Can be personal (i.e., digital, cellphone, etc.) or disposable (provided)
- A small notepad (provided)
- Pen

Beginning the Photo-Diary:

Step 1: Practice taking a few shots with the camera. Consider what you want within the frame. What is most important to capture? Is there a feeling associated with the picture? Take some time getting used to capturing what you want. Feel free to contact me with any questions.

Step 2: Go about your day as usual. Think about what you would like to capture, keeping in mind that you will end up selecting just ONE photo from each day to present in your final portfolio. Below are some questions that may help you think of what to capture:

- What is an essential part of your routine?
- What part of the day is your favorite?
- What are you looking forward to?
- If there was one image to describe you perfectly, what image would you take?
- What is something that you do, that is meaningful to you?
- If your day just didn't feel the same, what would be missing?

Step 3: Take photos! You may take as many as you like, but remember, being selective is important. You will only pick one picture from each day for your final portfolio.

Step 4: For each picture that you take, feel free to use your notepad to record a few notes about the photo. Why does it feel important to take that photo? Where were you when you took it? Why do you want to share it?

Step 5: Once you have photos from each of the seven days (please try to make them consecutive) I will collect them from you. I will develop them, and we will look over them at our final interview which I will reach out to you to schedule.

IMPORTANT REMINDERS

1. If you are taking pictures of people:
 - a. Gain their **written consent** using the consent form provided.
 - i. If they do not consent, do not photograph them.
 - b. If they do consent, keep in mind your own anonymity. Including pictures of others may be an identifying factor once the data is published.
 - c. Do not photograph ANY minors (younger than 18 years old).
2. If you are taking pictures of landmarks:
 - a. Again, keep anonymity in mind. Any landmark that is especially unique may prove to be an identifying factor.
3. If you took a photo that you do not want to be included in my study, don't panic. You will have the chance to decide which photos will be included in the study.
4. You do not have to use a notepad to take notes along with the pictures. It is an optional addition if you want some reminders for the final interview where we'll discuss the photos you took.

My Contact Information:

Phone: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Section 2: Written Consent for Photographing Others

I am participating in study about the experiences of older adults who intentionally chose to remain child-free. I have been asked me to complete a photo-diary. A photo-diary is similar to a written diary, but instead of keeping a written record of important parts of my day, I am keeping photos instead.

If you consent to having your photo take, it may appear in a publication of this research and in other academic settings related to this research, such as at conferences. If you agree to these conditions, understand the above in its entirety, have had all of your questions answered, and do not feel forced in any way to offer your consent, then please fill out the form below.

Please be advised that once you sign this form, you will waive your right to it. It will be stored on an encrypted, password protected drive until the study has been published, and then deleted.

If you would like to consent, but still have questions about the study, please contact the principal researcher, Katie Freiheit by calling her at [REDACTED], or emailing her at [REDACTED]

_____ (*Printed Name*)

_____ (*Signature*) _____ (*Date*)

Appendix J

Ethics Board Approval



Human Research Ethics Board
22500 University Drive
Langley, BC | V2Y 1Y1
HREB@twu.ca | 604-513-2167

HREB Certificate of Approval

To: Katie Freiheit

From: Bill Badke, HREB Co-Chair

Re: The Experiences of Intentionally Childfree Older Adults.

HREB File No.: 24G02

Effective: 2024 MAR 19 Expiry: 2025 MAR 19

Approval Period: ☒ One year ☐ Three years	Approval Type: ☒ New ☐ Continuation ☐ Amendment
---	---

Certification: William Badke

Digitally signed by William Badke
Date: 2024.03.19 09:39:11 -07'00'

The Trinity Western University Human Research Ethics Board (TWU HREB) has reviewed and approved the research proposal and concludes that the proposed research meets appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the current *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*.

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

1. Approval is granted for the research and purposes described in the application only.
2. Any modification to the research or research materials must be submitted to the HREB for approval before implementation.
3. Any deviations to the research or adverse events must be submitted to the HREB as soon as possible.
4. This approval is valid for the indicated approval period and a Request for Continuing Approval must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date.
5. A Final Project Report form must be submitted to the HREB when the research is complete or terminated.
6. Trinity Western University may request to review research documentation from this project to demonstrate compliance with this approved protocol and with the TWU Policy concerning Research Ethics with Human Participants.

Funded Research

If your research is funded by any of the Tri-Agency or any other research funding organizations, send a copy of this Certificate, with the HREB File Number in the subject line, to the Research Grants Officer at Sue.Funk@twu.ca.

Appendix K

Consent to Make Data Publicly Available

Why?

In more recent years, researchers have been called to make the data from their studies publicly available on online archives. “Data” refers anything that participants offer. In this case, data would include the written form of your interview data as well as the photos that you took for your photo-diary.

What?

An online archive is like a digital filing cabinet. In this filing cabinet there are many different folders. One of these folders could be labelled “The Experiences of Intentionally Childfree Older Adults”. This folder would contain all the data that was gathered from this study. However, instead of this being a physical filing cabinet with folders, this is an online archive with many filing cabinets and many folders containing the data of many studies.

Just like adding a folder to a filing cabinet, I would be adding the data from this study to an online “filing cabinet”. From here, other researchers would be able to pull out this file and potentially use it for their own studies. In the future, researchers may use it to compare past trends to current trends.

Risk & Benefits

There are some risks that can come with uploading data to an online archive since once data is uploaded (the file is put inside the filing cabinet) there is the potential that it could be hacked. “Hacked” means that the data from this study could get into the hands of an unknown third party who may not be responsible with the data.

However, there is great benefit to uploading data to a public archive. First, it greatly benefits current and future research. It also reduces the need to select and interview new participants if other researchers are interested in studying something similar, or who could benefit from this kind of data for a different research project. Since different disciplines can access this data, it also promotes inter-disciplinary research.

Further, there will be precautions in place so that your data remains confidential. First, all data in the study will be anonymized (i.e., pseudonyms in place of names, the words “TOWN” or “CITY” for places of residence, etc.). Second, any photos that are too revealing (i.e., demonstrate a street address, an easily recognizable landmark, etc.) will not be included in the data set.

Your Participation

You may take time to think about your consent in this aspect of the study. There is no pressure to give your consent to have your data uploaded to a public archive. You may take time to consider if you would like to do this. Further, to ensure that you have the most clarity as to what you may or may not wish to upload to the archive, you will have an opportunity to sign this consent only after you have participated in all parts of the study. This will help you have a clear understanding of what you have spoken to and if there are any parts you may want removed from the final folder that will be uploaded. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to myself, Katie Freiheit at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

At this time, I, _____ (*participant's full name*) have completed all three parts of this study. I have spoken with the principal investigator, Katie Freiheit, about any questions or concerns that I have. I understand that my responses may be put in an anonymous form and kept for further use after the completion of this study. To the best of my knowledge, any data that I do not want uploaded has been removed from the data set that is to be uploaded. I have read this document in full, and I consent to have my portion of the data from this study uploaded to a public data archive.

_____ (*Printed Name*)

_____ (*Signature*) _____ (*Date*)

_____ (*Principle Investigator Signature*)

_____ (*Date*)

Appendix L
Theme Diagram

