

ADVANCED SUBSIDIARY GCE

SOCIOLOGY

Exploring socialisation, culture and identity

G671/SM

PRE-RELEASE STIMULUS MATERIAL

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Gillespie, R (2003) Childfree and feminine: understanding the gender identity of voluntarily childless women, *Gender & Society*, Vol. 17 No. 1 122-136

The notion of motherhood as a key aspect of feminine identity is firmly entrenched in all societies. Most women become mothers at some point in their lives and for many, the urge to have a child is both a powerful and a complex force. However, one noticeable change in recent years is the increasing numbers of women who do not become mothers. In the UK, it is estimated that as many as 25% of women born in 1973 will not have children. In this research, Gillespie wanted to focus on the experiences of voluntarily childfree women; her aims were to examine why individual women choose to remain childfree, and how this might inform broader understanding of gender identity. 5

Gillespie carried out semi-structured interviews with 25 participants who had actively decided to be childfree. They were recruited from an initial survey she carried out on the childbearing intentions of 269 clients of a family planning clinic in 1997. The clinic was based in a city centre location in a large, ethnically diverse city on the south coast of England. Participants in the survey were largely self-selected as they were asked on arrival at the clinic if they would be willing to participate in the survey. Out of a total of 269 survey respondents aged between 15 and 56 years, 33 (12.3%) defined themselves as having no desire for motherhood and stated their intention to remain childfree. These respondents were asked if they were prepared to be contacted at a later date for an interview, and of the 33 childfree respondents, 25 agreed to be interviewed. All 25 participants were white (although 2 of those who declined to be interviewed were from ethnic minorities) and ranged in age from 21 to 50 years. Of the 25 childfree interview participants, 20 held paid employment, 1 was economically inactive and 4 were students. All but two respondents were interviewed in their own homes, with one interviewed at Gillespie's house and one at the university. Interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours. Participants were asked why they had chosen to be childfree and they were asked to describe their childfree lives. To collect qualitative data. Gillespie used semi-structured interviews to ensure coverage of key areas including why the choice was made, what it meant to them, and how this shaped their identity. 10
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The first main theme which emerged was the attraction of remaining child-free. Many women described the specific factors that drew them towards a childfree lifestyle, many of which linked to the increased opportunities and autonomy enjoyed by women today:

"I want to travel a lot more. I like a lot of time to myself, I like to read. I like to sew. I design my own clothes. You can't do that when you've got children" (Vicky, 48 year old secretary). 30

The second theme to emerge from the interviews was a more fundamental rejection of motherhood and the activities associated with mothering. For several of the interviewees, motherhood represented a sacrifice, a duty and a burden, involving demands that they simply were not prepared to take on. Some participants described the nurturing and caring roles associated with motherhood as unfulfilling or even repellent to them: 35

"It [motherhood] conjures up dreariness ... For example, the girls who I meet with at work, all they become is this ... child. They become the mother, and the whole of the rest of their personality is just gone. Some girls can't talk about anything else." (Lisa, 34 year old, local government officer). 40

In conclusion, Gillespie notes that her findings have identified a change in the significance of motherhood to feminine identities. The recent, more radical, rejection of motherhood by some women has now created possibilities for a new childfree femininity.

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