

ARTICLE

The “empty womb” in the therapy room? The taboo and potency of the other than mother/childfree body

Emma Palmer 

Member of Psychotherapists and Counsellors
for Social Responsibility, UK

Correspondence

Emma Palmer, Bishopston, Bristol, BS7, UK.
Email: info@kamalamani.co.uk

Abstract

Choosing not to have children remains a quietly controversial decision. Curious about the increasing phenomenon of childlessness coinciding with a recognition of her internalised pronatal conditioning and her gradual realisation that she would not be a mother, the author started researching the parenthood decision in the late 1990s. Through auto-ethnography this paper explores pronatalism and prejudice towards those without child, particularly those who are voluntarily childless—now commonly known beyond academic circles as being “childfree” or “childfree by choice.” This exploration includes the lack of attention given to childfreedom in counselling and psychotherapy discourses beyond the therapy room, for example, in workshops, talks, books and papers. It recognises how therapists might offer spaces for creative dialogue about child-bearing—or not—as well as challenging implicit and explicit pronatalism in this intimate area of life. The chapter ends celebrating the “empty womb in the room,” reclaiming the potency of the childfree, other than mother body, and the importance of women without children reclaiming the sovereignty of their bodies. The author underlines the importance of creativity as well as procreativity in the anthropocene, as we face interrelated crises, for example the sixth extinction crisis and the climate emergency, and refers to the response of the budding field of ecopsychology.

KEYWORDS

childfreedom, elective childlessness, otherhood, pronatalism, voluntary childlessness

I began researching the parenthood decision in the late 1990s when I first realised that having children is a choice—for most people. I wanted to give myself the chance to reflect on the possibility of *not* being a mother, having always assumed I would become one. I wanted to reflect on the possibility of creating rather than pro-creating. I soon realised, through researching, talking and listening, that choosing not to have children was a taboo subject. It was also then barely talked about publicly. As time passed, I paid attention to my internalised pronatal conditioning as a result of the more explicit pronatalist assumptions and opinions coming my way. This article is a response to this taboo; it unpacks pronatalism, and explores how it is to be “other” (see Turner, Callaghan, & Gordon-Finlayson, 2016), in my case, other than a mother to human children. This othering is enhanced when those who are childfree embody an intersection of “othernesses,” for example in terms of colour, class, race and faith, among other identities. I close by exploring the potency of childfreedom, particularly in the anthropocene, reclaiming and building upon what Peterson and Engwall (2013, p. 387) call the “silent body.”

In parallel with researching academic literature, conversations were invaluable in my childfree decision making through my late 20s and early 30s, as I became curious about the increasing societal/demographic trend of childlessness. These conversations with friends and family were many and varied in how they related to the parenthood decision: the decision not to bear children, the regret of not bearing children, the ambivalence of being a parent, ambivalence towards engaging with the parenthood decision, the joy of childfreedom contrasted acutely with the immense sorrow of losing a child and finding oneself childless through unexpected and unwanted circumstances. These conversations continue with clients, supervisees and trainees, as well as friends and family. I feel much gratitude to everyone who has talked freely with me.

These conversations have offered the richest learning; perhaps because the parenthood/non-parenthood decision remains shrouded in assumptions and taboos, so that this subject is largely only up for discussion in intimate relationships—and for some is never or rarely discussed. It has not been surprising, then, to witness repeatedly the relief expressed when participants are able to talk about this theme during workshops I have facilitated. There is a dearth of contexts to talk about this intimate area of life and “making the hardest, loneliest decision” (Safer, 2015: p. 186). Whilst these conversations are bound to happen in our therapy rooms, there is a distinct lack of dialogue about this theme in the wider therapy field to date—hence “the empty womb in the therapy room.” This is a shame because the parenthood decision, or non-decision, is an everyday subject shaping all of our lives. My wish is that this article should be accessible enough to nonacademic, nontherapy readers, in both tone and content, while still drawing on the relevant literature and learning, to encourage more dialogue and action.

1 | RECONCEIVING WOMEN

The UK childfree movement is in its infancy, with childfree voices within counselling and psychotherapy being virtually nonexistent. This is in sharp contrast to the United States where writers of the childfree movement span academics through to popular writers, with a wealth of resources and groups.

In the US the earliest psychoanalyst authors to write on this theme were Mardy Ireland in *Reconceiving Women: Separating Motherhood from Female Identity* (1993) and Jeanne Safer in *Beyond Motherhood* (1996). Discovering

Ireland's work was extremely influential in my childfree decision making, of which more later. Two other prominent voices in the childfree movement are active or past psychologists: Laura Carroll, author of *Families of Two* (2000) and *The Baby Matrix* (2012), and Ellen Walker, a clinical psychologist in Washington State and author of *Complete without Kids* (2010). Amy Blackstone, Professor of Sociology at the University of Maine is another visible childfree advocate and author of *Childfree by Choice: The Movement Redefining Family and Creating a New Age of Independence* (2019).

On being named Childfree Person of the Year in August 2018 I became more acutely aware of the scale of the childfree "industry" in the US, being sent merchandise and an array of books by childfree authors. Bi-annual childfree cruises are even part of this movement, organised by Marica Drut-Davis, another pioneer in the childfree movement (see Drut-Davis, 2013). Winning this award has been an eye-opener in realising how childfreedom has taken root in US culture in a way it simply has not in the UK. Despite this, I know from fellow authors and my colleague Melanie Holmes (author of *The Female Assumption* [2014]) that pronatal views are still prevalent in the US, with the same taboos and "othering" of the childless and childfree as in the UK. The difference is that the countering voices are seemingly more vocal and organised.

The very title of Blackstone's book, *Childfree by Choice: The Movement Redefining Family and Creating a New Age of Independence* reflects what is happening in the US, which is nowhere near happening in the UK. Here in the UK the childless not by choice movement is much more prominent and established, with pioneers like Jody Day founding the now international "Gateway Women" network and writing on the subject (Day, 2016). Day has also gone on to recently train and qualify as a psychotherapist. Other childless not by choice pioneers and colleagues who come to mind are Stephanie Phillips founder of World Childless Week, and Kirsty Woodard who founded Ageing without Children; they and their organisations support those who cannot or do not have children by circumstance, happenstance, and loss, at the same time raising awareness of the public and private implications.

In the past five years a handful of counsellors, psychotherapists, and coaches have emerged specifically naming their work with the childless and childfree. I have no doubt many therapists do in-depth work on this theme—and some have been referred clients to me in the aftermath of the publication of my second book *Other than mother: Choosing childlessness with life in mind* (Kamalamani, 2016). I also received a flurry of emails when I published my first childfree piece *Choosing to be childfree* in the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy's *Therapy Today* (Kamalamani, 2009). But little is written about either childfreedom or childlessness academically or more popularly in therapy publications. Is there an "empty womb in the room" going on here, in terms of therapy practice and therapy research? Is this because many therapy models include childbearing and rearing as normalised aspects of adulthood, assumptions which often go un-noticed and un-questioned? Is this because parenthood has been a vital part of many therapists' lives and they find it hard to imagine a life without children, inadvertently assume that that is the case for everyone?

In that first published piece on childfreedom for *Therapy Today* (Kamalamani, 2009) I sought to name the growing phenomenon of childfreedom. I also raised questions for action and reflection: What are the implications of this social and cultural trend in our work as therapists? How do we best understand and support those who decide to remain childfree? How do we support the decision-making process "the agony and the ecstasy of choicefulness" (quoted in Lisle, 1996, p. 33)? How do we work with female clients in the face of the wide-reaching—although now perhaps more implicit and covert—societal assumption that motherhood remains central to adult female identity and notions of femininity and maturity? How do clients respond to those of us who have decided to remain childfree if it is a markedly different path from the one they have chosen (Kamalamani, 2009, p. 31)? These remain live, important, and often unanswered questions. In attempting in my personal experience to answer the first question "How do we best understand and support those who decide to remain childfree?", I ended up researching the area of childfreedom and encountering pronatalism—inner and outer.

2 | “BEFORE ALL ELSE, YOU ARE A WIFE AND A MOTHER”

A woman's capacity to create, bear and nurture a child is the very essence of her womanhood, her unique and special capacity—prized, feared, envied, protected, and celebrated. (Ashurst & Hall, 1989, p. 97)

I was so indoctrinated by pronatalism until my late twenties that I did not actually realise that having children—or, at least, the desire to bear a child—was a choice. Unthinkingly, I would probably—I am embarrassed to admit—have agreed with both Ibsen's character from *A Doll's House*, Torvald Helmer, quoted in the title of this subsection (Ibsen, 2003, p. 228), that, above all else, I would be a mother, and with Ashurst, as quoted in the epigraph, since I upheld pronatal views myself. In my teens I was told by a neighbour that I would make someone a “lovely wife and mother.” I remember my inner recoil—perhaps my body was already decided and my head had yet to catch up. A decade later I was told I was “sad and selfish” for thinking I would not have children, even though I rarely talked openly about my growing conviction about this. Overall's words resonated when I read them years later:

In contemporary Western culture, it ironically appears that one needs to have reasons not to have children, but no reasons are required to have them. People who are childless are frequently and rudely criticized and called to account for their situation ... the choice to procreate is not regarded as needing any thought or justification. (Overall, 2012, p. 2)

Realising that child-bearing and rearing was not compulsory led me to decide not to think about having children for a year; a provisional decision not to have children. Ironic, then, that I should spend the next 21 years (so far) researching the parenthood decision, the situations of both the childless by choice and the childless by circumstance, and the increasing trend of people choosing to be childfree.

I remember the moment I discovered how voluntarily childless women—as they were then called—were sometimes reported in the very limited academic literature. In particular seeing the title of Veever's article in the *Family Coordinator* journal: “The moral careers of voluntarily childless wives: Notes on the defense of a variant world view” (Veevers, 1975), it was shocking to realise that the childfree were viewed as “deviant,” threatening the status quo (Veevers, 1975). I remember kidding myself that things would be much changed by now, given that this title was from 1975. I was sadly mistaken. Plenty more recent research points out the perceived weaknesses of the childfree. For example, from Turkey, research notes how parents are perceived as warmer than non-parents (Copur & Koropecjy-Cox, 2010), and how childless men and women see themselves as negatively stereotyped (Somers, 1993).

Talk of the childfree as variant and deviant is the result of pronatalism, its shadow cast over the childfree. I am sobered still by the stereotyping of those of us without children as “selfish, shallow and self-absorbed” (Daum, 2015), and “selfish,” “career-driven,” “immature,” “bound to regret it,” “cold,” and “child-hating” (Ratner, 2000, p. 1, see also Casey, 1998, p. xiii). Mollen (2006, p. 279) points out how the childfree in her research reported regularly experiencing stigmatisation, taking the form of largely subtle but still hurtful remarks, questions and assumptions. These assumptions, and less critical and hurtful comments, are not unheard of in therapy circles. I am reminded of a therapy colleague feeling that love and life are interrupted when people do not have children, without knowing much about the specific circumstances of the person being discussed.

As Kelly (2009, p. 165) notes, the childfree are often “managing a deviant and stigmatized identity . . . confronted [with] negative responses from friends, relatives, acquaintances and medical professionals (especially in cases where sterilization was sought).” She goes on to observe how the childfree—referred to as voluntarily childless women in her paper—face the assumption that we will change our minds, the charge that we will regret our decision, the accusation of selfishness, and the perception that we are unfeminine (Kelly, 2009, pp. 165–166).

Thinking personally about Kelly's four points in turn, I know friends and family members who have assumed that I will change my mind (Kelly's first point) and have stated that I would regret my decision (her second point). In truth,

well into my thirties I had internalised these fears myself. Thirdly, I have, as already reported, been called selfish, and, fourthly, I have struggled with my own relationship with “femininity”—I still do, not being a fan of the oversimplified polarity and essentialism of “masculine” and “feminine.” I am reminded of Ireland’s point about alternative metaphors for the feminine:

Childless women embody a different kind of female energy that represents a “bodily” basis for the entrance of female “signifiers” besides maternal ones into the collective language of our culture. They bring with their female experience an alternative reading of Freud’s “anatomy is destiny.” This is possible because they are indeed doing positive things with their lives outside of motherhood, but also because they are physically negating the equivalency that daughter = (is the same as) mother, thereby providing alternative metaphors for the feminine. (Ireland, 1993, p. 134)

3 | TRADITIONAL, TRANSITIONAL AND TRANSFORMATIVE WOMEN

There was little literature to read when it first started to dawn on me that I might not become a mother. I realise now that I had, nevertheless, begun to imbibe and internalise the stereotyping of those who are other than mother. There has been an eruption in the literature about the childless and childfree in the past 20 years. A personal and professional breakthrough moment was discovering the work of the afore-mentioned psychoanalyst Mardy Ireland in her 1993 book *Reconceiving Women: Separating Motherhood from Female Identity*.

Ireland draws distinctions between three categories of women who are without child; those who are traditional, transitional and transformative, as quoted in the title of this section. In Ireland’s “traditional” category are those who are not childless by choice, but, in her words and emphasis, childless (Ireland, 1993: pp. 17–40). These women have been unable to have children for biological reasons. “Transitional” women are, in Ireland’s words, “living in the stream of social change. They want to pursue the social and career possibilities that are now open to women, but they also want, or think they might want, to have a family” (Ireland, 1993: p. 41). For a whole variety of reasons, “transitional” woman delay childbearing until it is too late to conceive. Ireland refers to this category of women as “child-free and childless.”

“Transformative” women are those women who positively chose a childfree life (or, in her words, a “child-free” life) and can be defined as active decision makers, often deciding in childhood not to have children. Ireland’s work reflects how women arrive at their decision in different ways, from ambivalence, through to a definite decision and a rejection of motherhood; in the case of “transformative” women:

When the transformative woman decides to remain child-free, she is saying to the world that she is on a personal quest in which motherhood plays no part. (Ireland, 1993: p. 71)

Reading Ireland’s work sowed many seeds for me. Her discussion of “transformative women” gave me the permission to be childfree and not a freak, to birth things other than human babies, to create rather than to procreate. I realised that I had, according to Ireland’s classification, been a traditional woman in my early twenties. Thinking of the words of writer Natalie Goldberg in her book *Wild Mind: Living the Writer’s Life*, who asks the question about writing: “Who gave you permission?” (Goldberg, 2009: p. 123), I realised that Ireland is one of the people who did that for me. I ended up following in her wake as a childfree writer, which helped legitimise my research into childfreedom at a time when it was still sometimes met with raised eyebrows and polite but disapproving British purse-lipped silence.

Ireland’s use of the word “transformative” was significant, too. Transformation was a word and an invitation I loved at the time, with that “personal quest” of the transformative woman (quoted above) leading me on a quest

which reminded me of, and returned me to my love for other-than-human and more-than-human life—more of which later. Most significantly, her writing not only gave me the permission to not become a mother, it also offered a chink of light in encouraging me to start reconceiving my notions of womanhood and offering broader possibilities in how I might live, without motherhood as the heart of my identity. Her work also influenced my decision to train as a therapist. At 22 I decided I would become a counsellor “one day” when I was “old enough.” A year after encountering Ireland’s work I began training.

4 | OTHER THAN MOTHER: WATERSHED MOMENTS

A lifeline for me in my late twenties, as I said in the introduction, were the conversations I was having about whether or not to have children, as well as the virtual accompaniment of writers like Mardy Ireland and Rosemary Gillespie in their work defining and contextualising childfreedom (see Gillespie, 1999, 2000, 2001). It became clear to me early on in researching the increasingly prevalent phenomenon of childlessness and failing to find much literature in the 1990s that I would write a book on the subject. *Other than Mother: Choosing Childlessness with Life in Mind* was the result, published in 2016 (Kamalmani, 2016). It took more than 15 years of discontinuous research and writing to complete, with my first book *Meditating with Character* (Kamalmani, 2012) pipping it to the post. The early days of writing *Other than Mother* paralleled my training as a therapist, one informing the other.

The experience of writing *Other than Mother* highlighted the ugly, lived realities of pronatalism and feeling “other” as a result of not having chosen to have children. An early experience was trying to decide on the language it felt most fitting to use in discussing childfreedom. Nowadays it is the received wisdom that “childless” refers to those who are unable to have had children or who have not had them due to circumstance or lack, or who had a child or children who died, whilst “childfree” refers to those who choose not to have children. In the early days of writing *Other than Mother* the language was not so clear-cut.

One certainty is that until recently the language around childlessness has generally been concerned with lack; the words and names speak of lack: elective childlessness, voluntary childlessness, intentional childlessness. Note the repetitive “less.” These days I tend to favour using the term “childfree,” purely because I have chosen not to have children and use this term to avoid causing confusion for childless readers. Despite this choice, I do not like it; the term leaves me cold, implying that freedom from children is automatically a good thing for one’s health, a bit like something which is sugar-free or caffeine-free, or is used to refer to childfree environments.

In reality, my life is pretty “child-full” at times, thanks to being an auntie to a nephew and three nieces, as well as friends with friends’ and relatives’ children. I am more likely to think of myself as “other than mother.” Whilst it is rather a mouthful, it has become familiar and feels more accurate in that I chose not to become a mother—I did not specifically choose a life without children at all. While I do not especially like the term, and noting that it does not always reflect the reality of having children in my life, I agree that being childfree seems to suggest a greater sense of freedom and choice (Stobert & Kemeny, 2003), whereas “childless” can sound negative or missing out on something special (Walker, 2010, p. 3). Other childfree women identify as being an “anti-Mom” (Shriver, 2005). As I am definitely not anti-mom/s, or anti-mum/s, this term does not apply to me. In fact, I hope to be child- and parent-friendly. I would rather we were not named in accordance with our parental status. Perhaps the difficulty of finding a more neutral childfree name/label points to the strength of pronatalism at work?

A few years before *Other than Mother* went to print, I went through a stage of finding it impossible to write, becoming stuck for weeks. I knew it was not writer’s block, as my creativity was flowing in other ways. One morning, my frustration and upset peaking, I remember seeing a great brick wall ahead of me, in my mind’s eye. I was immobilised. I read the draft of my book again. I looked at the title—back then it was called the rather lengthy and clunky “Giving Birth without Having Children.” It dawned on me that I was trying to explore and write about something I was *not* doing—not having children, expressed in the title: “without having children.”

I realised I needed to reframe the book, to rename the work. My lived experience is that this project was/is about life, living, agency, moving on and moving through, rather than focusing primarily on what I was *not* doing. I reread some of the literature around lack and being without child, referenced above, and realised I had imbibed and embodied that sense of lack, lurking in the shadows of pronatal culture. The feeling of lack was overwhelming; it literally immobilised my writing and I almost gave up on the book project. After a while, my sap rising, I felt determined to carry on, realising that it was precisely *because* of the strength of this immobilisation that I needed to keep on writing. I renamed the book *Other than Mother: Choosing Childlessness with Life in Mind* and referred to choosing in the title, because choosing is an active, not a passive thing (even though it is a problematic term in many other ways, not least because not everyone can choose to have a child . . .). I reconsidered the byline for *Other than Mother* which became “*Choosing Childlessness with Life in Mind*.” Being childfree is not about the end of something, it is about the beginning of something other than parenthood, but the territory is far less well mapped and chartered.

5 | POTENT BODIES

The space in the child-free woman's life is not empty and barren, but full of potential. (Bartlett, 1994, p. 233)

A body that has never been pregnant can be regarded as potent, still in anticipation, invested with self-potential and self-possession. (Lisle, 1996, p. 180)

Yet, whilst reproduction occupies a significant place in both knowledges of women and in women's lives, it is also important to attend to the fact that many women find themselves placed or (increasingly) choose to place them/ourselves outside of that hetero-patriarchally prescribed, reproduction-oriented “feminine” realm. (Malson & Swann, 2003, p. 199)

Although childfreedom continues to be the “empty womb” in the room in wider therapy circles, an acknowledgement of the potency of those without children is slowly increasing. Interestingly, noting the publication dates of the quotes opening this section, this message has been around for over 25 years. The change in recent years is that the message is getting louder, with more voices joining in, a bit like the phenomenon in the US to which I referred earlier. I agree with Furstenberg (2014) that the media attention childfreedom attracts is, in part, due to the rising number of childfree people, as well as their growing visibility. Felkin's photo book *Mum's Not the Word: Childless, Childfree* (2019), published this year, is an excellent example of this phenomenon. It is increasing the visibility of both the childfree and childless in no uncertain terms, as it comprises of nude images of both childless and childfree women from all walks of life. Felkin debates the social stigmatisation of women who, by choice, circumstance or for whatever reasons, have decided to go against the instinct for childbirth and what she calls “maternal productivity.”

My ears pricked up when I heard of the *Mum's Not the Word* photo project, reminding me of a chapter in *Other than Mother* entitled “Occupying Your Body in Taking Your Place on Earth” in which I explore the potency of the childfree body. I was reminded of my own process in rereading this section:

I had to occupy my body before feeling free to not procreate. I had to listen and get to know my body more intimately, and more quietly, from the inside. This contrasted with a childhood and youth of listening to others tell me their views about my body, good or bad, punishing or loving. (Kalamamani, 2016, p. 171)

Becoming childfree—and it was a process of becoming for me, rather than an easy, overnight decision—meant I had to occupy (or reoccupy?) my body. I had to listen carefully with all my senses in deciding to be childfree. I had to become better attuned to the rhythms of my embodiment. I came into relationship with my own ambivalence, in fact with my nested ambivalences: some days towards being incarnate at all (for example, while I felt immobilised, as explored above), and certainly towards being a woman with all the assumptions, associations and ascribed identities that that can entail. In making the decision to remain childfree—a strongly countercultural decision—I had to trust my body more, to be more intimate with my embodying and disembodying processes. As a long-term meditator this was familiar territory, yet it was still both liberating and painful.

In occupying my body, I was able, in the words of Peterson and Engwall (2013), to hear for the first time the silence of my childfree body. I resonated strongly when I read their affirming words:

women can resist gendered discourses through constructing an embodied childfree identity. The naturally childfree position and the “silent body” have transformative power to contest the meanings attached to womanhood and could increase freedom for women to experience womanhood in a variety of ways. (Peterson and Engwall, 2013, p. 387)

I became, and continue to be, fascinated by the embodied aspect of being childfree and contesting “the meanings attached to womanhood.” If, in the words of the title of the book by Ireland (1993), we are “reconceiving womanhood” then what does being without child mean for our experience of being a body? I am interested not only because I work as an embodied-relational therapist—a form of relational body psychotherapy—but also because, in paying attention to our childfreedom on a bodily level, there is scope to move beyond the conventional framing of the childfree (and, in this instance, the childless) woman as lacking something, historically being met with pity, or worse still, scorn, rather than being recognised for their actual and potential abundance and, as Peterson and Engwall point out, the myriad possible ways of being a woman.

The potency of being childfree for me has been the capacity to say yes to new horizons and what I refer to in *Other than Mother* as “baby-sized projects,” given the liberation of saying no to childbearing. Personally, my embodied experience of choosing childfreedom resonates closely with that of US childfree pioneer Stephanie Mills:

As a feminist, I assumed that I should determine the purposes my body would serve, and I must have intuited that for me the writer's life would be incompatible with parenthood. My renunciation was, in fact, epicurean, and it has abetted my simplicity. (Mills, 2002, p. 7)

Occupying my childfreedom has often felt freeing, not only as I have felt freer to write and pursue other long-term dreams, but also compared to living with the conflict of indecision, which, energetically, I found quite divisive. I am reminded of Bartlett's words:

The constant postponement of deciding can also be seen as emotional paralysis; the woman constantly living in a state of division with a resulting lack of direction and an enormous drain on her energy: sitting on the fence is hard work. (Bartlett, 1994, p. 101)

This longing to occupy my body was a political moment, as well as being an embodying, relaxing, releasing moment. On a bodily level it was rather like the “Occupy” movement with activists setting up camp in public places a few years ago: outside St Paul's Cathedral in London, Wall Street in New York, and closer to home, College Green in central Bristol. The Occupy movement was an attempt to reclaim power and decision making, in the face of yawning late-stage capitalist inequality and austerity. I could see a direct parallel with my own childfree situation on a very small scale. I have a sense of occupying, or reoccupying my body, which has given me confidence and a greater capacity to speak out—with kindness, I hope, and maybe fiercer kindness in the face of pronatalism. Soulé's (2005) words spring to mind:

Fierceness is not the same as cruelty. Our fierceness is what gives us the energy to want to change things in a positive direction. It's also what mothers feel when somebody attacks their children. And that's a healthy thing. We need to re-embrace that kind of fierceness and indignation, not from an egoistic point of view but from a compassionate perspective. We can't let the world be destroyed, and we need to be fierce—not violent or cruel, but fierce about it.

As important as occupying my body, knowing my agency and potency, is how I find myself occupying the planet; how I treat other life on earth; human and other-than-human. I have explored elsewhere in detail why I think embodiment matters (Kalamani, 2012, pp. 51–62), and the parallel between the disembodiment of humans and the mistreatment of the world and her other-than-human and more-than-human species. I will not repeat that here, apart from to say that I am heartened by the blossoming of the fast-emerging field of ecopsychology; exploring and acting upon our connection with the so-called “natural world”—how we are a part of, not apart from what we term “nature.”

Thinking more globally, whilst acting locally, the childfree body might also be a potent body given that some of us, at least, with the available time and resources, are likely to be able to give more time in acting for the world given that we are not occupied in procreating and child-bearing. There is much work to do for us all—parents or not, childfree or not. A few friends who are parents sometimes encourage me in my work, wishing they had time to be more social engaged. Likewise, I hope I encourage them in theirs; the vital work of creative parenting. As Overall points out:

on a global scale, the dangers of procreation go far beyond the individual: they include growing overpopulation and the strain on planet Earth's carrying capacity. The “why have children?” decision is, therefore, a big issue, having to do with fundamental institutions such as education and health care, the way we do business, our stewardship of the environment, our consumption of resources and our care for each other. (Overall, 2012, p. 17)

The question of childfreedom linked to climate emergency, over-consumption, and environmental concerns is gaining far more attention than ever before in the popular media. Just this week (February 2019) US democratic congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez argued that it is a “legitimate question” to ask whether it is moral for people to continue to have children with the worsening threat of climate chaos (Harvard, 2019). I think of organisations like US-based Conceivable Future, a women-led network of Americans bringing awareness to the threat climate change poses to reproductive justice, and demanding an end to US fossil fuel subsidies (see <http://conceivablefuture.org/>). I think of being interviewed in the new year for BBC's “Cut through the noise” programme entitled *Climate change: Are children really the future?* (see <https://www.facebook.com/bbcnews/videos/712962439099892/UzpfSTE2OTk1MTkzMTY5MzA5NTA6MjI0NTY3OTUwNTY0ODI1OQ/>). I think of how having one less child, or no children, can be one of the most significant actions we can take to individually help combat climate change on a personal level, also reported more frequently now in the popular media (Carrington, 2017). Just this morning (March 2018) two women from Extinction Rebellion (see <https://rebellion.earth/>) have initiated the #birthstrike campaign, declaring they will not have children because they are too concerned about climate change to bring children into the world, appearing on BBC2's Victoria Derbyshire programme.

These fears are founded. A statistical survey from Oregon State University, published in *Global Environmental Change* in 2009, highlights the environmental impact of childbearing. In addition to the resources a child will use in his or her lifetime, there is the exponential power of population growth:

Under current conditions in the United States, for example, each child ultimately adds about 9,441 metric tons of carbon dioxide to the carbon legacy of an average female—which is 5.7 times her lifetime emissions. (Gies, 2012)

The carbon legacy of child-bearing is significant. The blossoming of ecopsychology; taking steps to remember why we want to stand with and take action for life on earth—even though individual actions can sometimes seem futile—is significant. When I think of those who have chosen to remain childfree with ecological/consumption factors in mind, the accusations of the childfree being “selfish” are shown to be largely unfounded. In Lisle’s words “the egocentricity of nonmotherhood is turned on its head in an endangered environment” (Lisle, 1996, p. 244). Addressing our individual carbon footprints is, of course, but one aspect of addressing the climate emergency. These individual actions open up dialogues and new conversations about our reproductive choices—for those of us who have a choice—supporting the reconceiving of women hand in hand with more regenerative ways of living. Individual and community actions are an important way of keeping a connection with our potency rather than (understandable) despair and despondency.

Governments are showing few signs of taking seriously the challenges of the climate emergency. Witness the first debate on climate change to have taken place in the UK parliament in the past two years (on 28 February 2019, see <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/feb/28/mps-debate-climate-after-school-strike-but-only-a-handful-turn-up>) with only 10–20 MPs participating at the height of the discussion. It becomes clear that individual actions and the building of social movements are increasingly significant. I pointed out earlier that the childfree movement in this country is, as yet, virtually non-existent. In the arena of climate emergency and with the potency of the childfree body in mind:

movements . . . involve people thinking hard and creatively about how to win against opponents who are often more powerful, wealthier, and with greater cultural authority than them. This is one of things that make them such a delight to participate in . . . they are among the spaces where people push themselves most fully, in more dimensions of their being than in more narrowly defined contexts. (Cox, 2018, pp. xii–xiii)

6 | MAKING VISIBLE THE EMPTY WOMB IN THE THERAPY ROOM

With potency in mind, how do we harness this energy and have more conversations about childfreedom in therapy circles: in person, in the written word, possibly in our therapy rooms, given that they have not happened to date? In the past few years, leading *Other than Mother*-themed workshops I have heard unsavoury tales of childless and childfree folk feeling misunderstood, frustrated and sometimes traumatised by their experiences in therapy. Anecdotally, it is not unusual for childfree clients to be told that they will change their minds, or might regret it (echoing Kelly’s points from earlier) and the grief of childless women can be minimised or misunderstood by therapists, or therapists have adopted an overly solution-focused or overly-simplified response, with premature suggestions about IVF or “why don’t you adopt?”

In thinking how we might address the “empty womb in the room” of childfreedom, I revisit the *Therapy Today* article I wrote, addressing the same question:

The obvious starting point is to know our own conditioning, biases and preferences and to be aware of how these can affect our work. This theme understandably engenders strong feelings and it can take courage to face those feelings in ourselves. These matters extend from the personal through to the archetypal dimensions of what it means to be alive and our potential to procreate. They have certainly challenged me to look deeply at my own conditioning, assumptions, beliefs and purpose and those of others around me. (Kalamani, 2009, p. 33)

Thinking of my own starting point, I know that my bias is as a non-mother, a non-parent. Many, not all, of my current clients and supervisees are without child, a trend which is fairly steady in my private therapy practice. A significant

number in the past have been parents. Many of those parents are glad to be so. Ambivalence is also a recurring theme; ambivalence in parents and non-parents alike. I have been struck repeatedly, in *Other than Mother*-themed workshops, to hear how people never realised they had a choice as to whether or not to procreate, so even the chance to think about it can be liberating and releasing.

A few clients who are parents have come to see me for therapy precisely because I have *not* chosen to be a mother, wanting a change from being around parents and to contemplate how their lives might have been without child. A few times clients have flagged their reservations about coming to see me because they have children and I do not. One saw me as determinedly childfree, hence her reservations. I was curious about that, given that I still feel tentative and reluctant around this theme, and honestly would rather not be living in times in which I feel compelled to write about this subject. I realise that writing a book on childfreedom is still—unfortunately—a counter-cultural act, even if it is reflective and nuanced, and even given our uncertain times. Of course, at times, potential clients are not aware that I write at all, let alone write about apparently controversial subjects.

Working with parents is as important to me as working with the childfree, particularly but not only because parents are under incredible pressures, too—just different ones—and particularly given the surge in literature around parents “coming out” with their regrets around becoming parents, blowing the sometimes over-romanticised and misleading myths surrounding parenthood (see Donath, 2017; Fischer, 2016).

I think of the variety of clients who have been in my therapy room, or with whom I have walked in the park or sat in green spaces during therapy sessions over the years, with a few thoughts coming to mind regarding working with childfreedom. The first thing that comes to mind is working in an embodied way, encouraging clients to listen to their bodies. As Davies (2014) writes:

Women experience varying degrees of bodily “speaking” or “silence” with reference to mothering desires and therapists should attend to the embodied experiences of clients. (p. 109)

Respectfully attending to the embodied experiences of our clients is very often vital anyway, but particularly so in this area. The second is how different it is working with clients at different stages in their lifecycle. Again, this may relate to varying embodied experiences at different ages. The couple of elder clients who will always mourn the loss of never being in the circumstances to have had children calls for something very different to the late teens client who hopes to have children “one day” alongside a wavering longing to maybe be a nun or a recluse. Some elder clients sense a tangible, embodied sense of the loss of what never happened. “I’ve never carried a baby,” they tell me, touching their belly, exploring the ongoing dance of creativity and destruction.

There are, in sharp contrast, the definitely childfree clients. I do not see all that many clients who are definite in their childfreedom; most inhabit the “grey area” between being childless and childfree. I have worked with clients who are visibly physically repelled by the thought of child-bearing. This, for them, was a non-decision, and my work was to be able to be with their repulsion, to witness, to respond with curiosity as we went further into what was most repellent. A not unusual phenomenon in both occasional clients and workshop participants are those who are fairly sure they do not want children, but feel like they *should* want them, for the sake of friends and family. In words almost exactly echoing those of the afore-mentioned Jeanne Safer “I don’t really want to have a baby, I want to want to have a baby” (Safer, 2015, p. 190). Clients and workshop participant in this situation are given the space to gradually become aware of this “wanting to want” dynamic and before moving into exploring other longings and how those might take shape and find their feet. In this case I have witnessed instance in the words of Mollen, when we might “reframe the pathology of the voluntarily childfree woman as pioneering and trailblazing” (Mollen, 2006, p. 281).

I have seen activist clients who were too occupied with engaging in changing the world to have babies. A few acknowledge their non-parenthood, some with more pathos than others. “We’ve done our bit for the planet, haven’t we?!” one said once said at the end of a session, grinning broadly, in a particularly heartfelt and contactful moment. In terms of the work they have done; “world work” or work in the “world channel” to coin a term from Arnold

Mindell (Mindell, 1996) these clients challenge beautifully the “stereotype about selfishness [which] is based on an understanding of independence, autonomy and freedom as utterly unfeminine characteristics, needs and behaviors” (Peterson, 2014, p. 8).

In my twenties my decision not to want to have children was often questioned. As Dubofsky (2014) says:

While it is somehow become socially acceptable to ask everyone you come across if they have children, and if not, why, that does not make it easier to disclose a complicated answer, which everyone has to a certain degree.

Therapy offers the space for these complicated answers. Clients need us to believe them, believe our current reality, whilst respectfully asking us about the inconsistencies, mysteries and the play at the boundary edge. I count myself as fortunate that the two psychotherapists I worked with in my late twenties and mid-thirties accepted and respected my decision. They believed me, they trusted me and my childfree decision, rather than give any hint of the “you’ll grow out of it” look—a look which became familiar to me in my late twenties, but which occurs far less since I have entered my peri-menopausal years.

Thinking of the original questions I raised at the start of the chapter about our preferences and strong feelings, in my work with the childfree I have felt challenged by clients who are repelled by children. This is a working edge for me and means I can find myself at odds with the more vociferously childfree. I am more repelled by the vociferous in childfree groups declaring “I hate children” than I am by most children. My heart sinks—you hate which children? Why? When? To me, hating children seems akin to racism or sexism or any other -ism. The difference between child hating and other “isms” is that we have, of course, all been children once upon a time, which makes the hatred more disturbing and thought-provoking.

Finally, the most important thing I have learned in both therapy work and through facilitating groups on being without child is the significant grey area between childfreedom and being childless through circumstance, happenstance and loss. This grey area is largely obscured in how childlessness is reported in the popular media or thought about in consensus reality, and it needs challenging. Thinking back to my changes over the years, for example, in Ireland’s categorisation from earlier, I can trace my process from a “traditional” to a “transformative” woman in the course of my late twenties and early thirties. I sense, sometimes poignantly, what I have lost and what I have gained from being without child. I am happily childfree, yet in another different lifetime, I can imagine myself with children, particularly as that vision was a given throughout my childhood. The parenthood—or non-parenthood—decision (when it is a decision) is a dynamic process. I rarely come across clients who have made an overnight decision to be childfree, or who always knew they would not have children. Perhaps our most important job is to simply bear in mind that being childfree is as valid a choice as being a parent.

7 | CONCLUSION

Recommendations ... for the professions of psychotherapy and counselling ... include the ability to openly explore oscillating desires and ambivalence without believing in a “right” choice, normalizing childfreedom, and helping clients to navigate the social world and plan ahead. (Davies, 2014, p. 2)

We have an immense opportunity as therapists to offer space and our skilled presence to those clients wanting to reflect on parenthood and/or childfreedom. Given the strength of pronatalism, albeit a covert strength, it is important to realise that it is still counter-cultural to choose to remain childfree, and it may or may not feel counter-cultural to us as therapists to work with the childfree.

Listening anecdotally to millennial voices it sounds as though twenty-somethings are much more aware of the parenthood decision as a choice compared to my generation; the thirty or forty somethings, brought up imbibing

pronatal beliefs. This is heartening. What is not heartening is that, because of austerity, financial circumstances are now much more significant factors in whether or not people feel they can have children.

There are still significant gaps in our knowledge about the childfree—and the childless, too. We would do well to research and hear more from childfree men—and childless men, too, whose voices often remain unheard. We also have a lot to learn from those who identify in a non-binary way, living with further prejudice.

Clients arriving in our therapy rooms may be ambivalent, undecided or fully in touch with the potency of their childfree bodies. We do them a great service if we can support them in this significant life decision-making, even if they are fairly definite in their childfreedom. We do them even more of a service if we also take an awareness of these dialogues beyond the therapy room, too:

Nonmotherhood is forever. Making a conscious choice about something so fundamental, and so entwined with one's own past, with society's expectations, and with notions of femininity and the purpose of life, takes every ounce of will you have; going against the grain always does. (Lisle, 1996, p. 189)

Societally we are in times when significant moves towards resilient, adaptable communities can be made if we can find ways to walk a line between respecting privacy, whilst acknowledging the wider consequences of our private decision-making. This applies to our choices about food, travel, energy usage, and broader consumption habits, as well as child-bearing. With the skills and experience we therapists have, we are potentially well placed to support these conversations and the building of such communities. In these late-stage capitalist times, three decades since the reification of the individual over and above community during Thatcher's era (epitomised by her statement "there is no such thing as society" (Thatcher, 1987)) exploring our personal decisions and their more public consequences is an important aspect in rebuilding community conversations, perhaps even starting in our direct therapy circles. Childfreedom is interesting in this respect, as it is a particularly intimate decision, and is still primarily seen as a personal decision in the privatised setting of the often idealised, increasingly rare nuclear family.

In questioning the narrative that success makes us happy, with being married and having children equating with "success," Dolan (2019) points out how the childfree "act as a nice counterbalance to the prevailing narratives." In the anthropocene period we have now entered, with its interrelated crises—with now weekly reporting about the impacts of climate change/breakdown, the extinction of different species, and the threat to insect life, for example—perhaps as therapists we might rethink what makes us happy.

ORCID

Emma Palmer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1899-5600>

REFERENCES

- Ashurst, P., & Hall, Z. (1989). *Understanding women in distress*. London: Routledge.
- Bartlett, J. (1994). *Will you be mother? Women who choose to say no*. London: Virago Press Ltd.
- Blackstone, A. (2019). *Childfree by choice: The movement redefining family and creating a new age of independence*. London: Penguin Random House.
- Carrington, D. (2017). Want to fight climate change? Have fewer children. *The Guardian online*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/12/want-to-fight-climate-change-have-fewer-children>
- Carroll, L. (2000). *Families of two: Interviews with happily married couples without children by choice*. Bloomington, IN: Xlibris.
- Carroll, L. (2012). *The baby matrix: Why freeing our minds from outmoded thinking about parenthood & reproduction will create a better world*. USA: LiveTrue Books.
- Casey, T. (1998). *Pride and joy: The lives and passions of women without children*. Hillsboro, OR: Beyond Words Publishing.
- Copur, Z., & Koropecykj-Cox, T. (2010). University students' perceptions of childless couples and parents in Ankara, Turkey. *Journal of Family Issues*, 31, 1481–1506. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X10361577>
- Cox, L. (2018). *Why social movements matter: An introduction*. London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd.

- Daum, M. (Ed.) (2015). *Selfish, shallow and self-absorbed: Sixteen writers on the decision not to have kids*. New York, NY: Picador.
- Davies, J. (2014). A phenomenological exploration into the lived experience of childfree women aged 45–50 (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/18503/>.
- Day, J. (2016). *Living the life unexpected: 12 weeks to your plan B for a meaningful and fulfilling future without children*. London, UK: Bluebird Books.
- Dolan, P. (2019, January). The money, job, marriage myth: are you happy yet? *The Guardian Online*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/06/happiness-index-wellbeing-survey-uk-population-paul-dolan-happy-ever-after>
- Donath, O. (2017). *Regretting motherhood: A study*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Drut-Davis, M. (2013). *Confessions of a childfree woman: A life spent swimming against the mainstream*. USA: Amazon Digital Services LLC.
- Dubofsky, C. (2014). "Childless" or "childfree": The difference matters. *Rewire.News*. Retrieved from <http://rhrealitycheck.org/article/2014/05/08/childless-childfree-difference-matters/>
- Felkin, D. (2019). *Mum's not the word: Childless, childfree*. Dorchester, UK: Earthworld.
- Fischer, S. (2016). *Die Mutterglücklüge: Regretting motherhood – Warum ich lieber Vater geworden wäre*. Munich, Germany: Ludwig Buchverlag.
- Furstenberg, F. F. (2014). Fifty years of family change: From consensus to complexity. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 654(1), 12–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716214524521>
- Gies, E. (2012). Even conscientious people have an eco-footprint. *Earth Island Journal: News of the World Environment*, Spring 2012. Retrieved from http://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/eij/article/even_conscientious_people_have_an_eco-footprint/
- 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.
- Gillespie, R. (2001). Contextualising voluntary childlessness within a post-modern model of reproduction: implications for health and social needs. *Critical Social Policy*, 21(2), 139–159. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026101830102100201>
- Goldberg, N. (2009). *Wild mind: Living the writer's life*. London: Rider Books.
- Harvard, S. (2019, February) Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez says it is "legitimate" for people to not want children because of climate change. *The Independent online*. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-children-climate-change-aoc-instagram-young-people-a8797806.html>
- Holmes, M. (2014). *The female assumption: A mother's story, freeing women from the view that motherhood is a mandate*. USA: Amazon Digital Services, LLC.
- Ibsen, H. (2003). *A Doll's house and other plays (P.Watts, Trans)*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Ireland, M. (1993). *Reconceiving women: Separating motherhood from female identity*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Kamalmani (2009). Choosing to be childfree. *Therapy Today*, 20(6), 31–33.
- Kamalmani (2012). *Meditating with character*. Alresford, UK: Mantra Books.
- Kamalmani (2016). *Other than mother: Choosing childlessness with life in mind*. Alresford, UK: Earth Books.
- Kelly, M. (2009). Women's voluntary childlessness: A radical rejection of motherhood? *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 37(3 & 4) Fall/Winter), 157–172.
- Lisle, L. (1996). *Without child: Challenging the stigma of childlessness*. London: Routledge.
- Malson, H., & Swann, C. (2003). Re-producing "woman's" body: Reflections on the (dis)place(ments) of 'reproduction' for (post)modern women. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 12(3), 191–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0958923032000141535>
- Mills, S. (2002). *Epicurean simplicity*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Mindell, A. (1996). Discovering the world in the individual; The world channel in psychotherapy. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 36(3), 67–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678960363005>
- 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>
- Overall, C. (2012). *Why have children? The ethical debate*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/8674.001.0001>
- Peterson, H. (2014). 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. (2013). Silent bodies: childfree women's gendered and embodied experiences. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 20(4), 376–389. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506812471338>
- Ratner, R. (Ed.) (2000). *Bearing life: Women's writing on childlessness* (pp. 19–28). New York, NY: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York.

- Safer, J. (1996). *Beyond motherhood: Choosing a life without children*. New York, NY: Gallery Books.
- Safer, J. (2015). *Beyond Beyond Motherhood*. In M. Daum (Ed.), *Selfish, shallow and self-absorbed: Sixteen writers on the decision not to have kids*. New York, NY: Picador.
- Shriver, L. (2005, September). No kids please, We're selfish. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/sep/17/society>
- Somers, M. (1993). A comparison of voluntarily childfree adults and parents. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 55(3), 643–650. <https://doi.org/10.2307/353345>
- Soulé, M. (2005). The whole package. *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, Summer 2005. Retrieved from <https://tricycle.org/magazine/whole-package/>
- Stobert, S. & Kemeny, A. (2003). Childfree by choice. *Canadian Social Trends*, Statistics Canada—Catalogue No. 11-008, Summer 2003.
- Thatcher, M.(1987). Interview for *Woman's Own* (“no such thing as society”). Thatcher Archive. Retrieved from <https://www.margarethatthatcher.org/document/106689>
- Turner, D., Callaghan, J., & Gordon-Finlayson, A. (2016). Being the other: A creative exploration of the identity of the other. *British Journal of Play Therapy*, 12, 22–34. Retrieved from [https://www.dwightturnercounselling.co.uk/phdi/p1.nsf/imgpages/1976_BJPTWinter16BEINGTHEOTHER.pdf/\\$file/BJPTWinter16BEINGTHEOTHER.pdf](https://www.dwightturnercounselling.co.uk/phdi/p1.nsf/imgpages/1976_BJPTWinter16BEINGTHEOTHER.pdf/$file/BJPTWinter16BEINGTHEOTHER.pdf)
- Veevers, J. E. (1975). The moral careers of voluntarily childless wives: Notes on the defense of a variant world view. *The Family Coordinator*, 24(4), 473–487. <https://doi.org/10.2307/583032>
- Walker, E. (2010). *Complete without kids: An insider's guide to childfree living by choice or by chance*. Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group LLC.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Emma Palmer is a relational body psychotherapist, ecopsychologist, facilitator, supervisor and author based in Bristol, UK. Until 2017 she was known as Kamalamani, the name under which her writings are listed in the References above.

How to cite this article: Palmer E. The “empty womb” in the therapy room? The taboo and potency of the other than mother/childfree body. *Psychother Politics Int*. 2019;17:e1508. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1508>