**Victoria’s familiarisation notes on the childfree *Facebook* comments dataset**

In this handout, Victoria reflects on her familiarisation process, and what she brought to the analysis of the data in terms of her experience and positionings, and she shares her overall familiarisation notes on the dataset. These are Victoria’s actual familiarisation notes written for herself, rather than notes written *to be shared with readers*. They are less polished (more ‘stream of consciousness’) and more detailed than the familiarisation notes Ginny shared in the book (in Box 2.4), which she wrote *for the book*. We present Victoria’s notes like this, to give you a messier version of ‘real life’ familiarisation notes.

**What I bring to the process of familiarisation and how practically I approached this**

Throughout *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* we emphasised that the researcher is active in the analytic process and also that they ‘bring things’ to the analysis of data. What do I bring to the analysis of this dataset? Having given this some thought, I think I bring the following (this is not an exhaustive list; as we have emphasised reflexivity is an ongoing process):

* *Lots of experience of analysing qualitative data*. I have a fairly well-honed analytic sensibility, this doesn’t mean that analysis is always easy, sometimes I can read data and panic – ‘there’s nothing here!’ – but engaging with data *as* data is a familiar practice to me. It’s something I do quite a bit (although not nearly as much as I would like), both through conducting my own research and through supervising student research.
* *An analytic sensibility shaped by my doctoral training in critical psychology and discourse analysis*. Even though I rarely do discourse analytic work these days, I am nonetheless aware that the way I engage with data is informed by my discursively oriented training. For example, I have a more detailed focus on language use than I think is typical for more experientially oriented researchers. I notice when people draw on cultural commonplaces (common and culturally recognisable turns of phrase such as ‘each to their own’) and I ask myself questions like ‘what is this doing?’ and ‘what does using this enable the speaker to do?’ Such questions are underpinned by a more performative view of language. I also notice some of the ‘hows’ – how things are said rather than what is said, the structural or organisational dimension of language use (e.g. maximising and minimising language, listing etc.).
* *Experience of researching meaning making around family and relationships and particularly ‘nonnormative’ family and relationships*. My PhD research, for example, examined discourses within psychology and the wider culture around same-sex parenting. I was particularly interested in how the contested cultural space of same-sex parenting is navigated by lesbian and gay parents, and also right wing opponents of lesbian and gay parenting. This means, I have experience of analysing the discursive terrain of contested family and relational practices like choosing not to have children.
* More specifically, I bring *experience of researching, and also supervising research on, women and men who choose to be childfree*. This means I am both familiar with the wider interdisciplinary literature on voluntary childlessness and with analysing data about the meaning of being childfree. This inevitably means when reading the *Facebook* comments dataset, I will be making comparisons with the data I have previously analysed (noticing similarities and differences), and also reflecting on the existing literature. One quotation that nearly always comes to mind in relation to meaning making around child freedom is from the US sociologist Sharon Houseknecht (1987). She argued that people rationalise their decision to be childfree by drawing on “an acceptable vocabulary of motives previously established by the historical epoch and the social structure in which one lives” (p. 316).
* *A critical perspective on dominant Western ideologies and constructions of subjectivity* such as neoliberalism and the relentless emphasis on the socially dislocated individual.

Having recently been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, I have had to adapt to a new way of working with data. Usually I would engage in familiarisation by reading and making notes on hard copy data, and I would hold a lot of my thinking around the data in my head. Now there are two challenges I have to navigate – first, I’ve lost a lot of the function in my right hand and so can no longer handwrite, and second, I no longer have the capacity to hold lots of different thoughts about data in my head. This means I engaged in familiarisation by reading the data on screen and using voice recognition software to record my observations, insights and wonderings about the data. I also used the voice recorder on my phone to record any thoughts I was having when I wasn’t near my computer.

I spent several days reading and reflecting on the data. I hasten to add that I didn’t spend the *whole* working day engaged in familiarisation, as it’s quite an intense and draining activity. I also wanted to allow time for my thoughts to percolate – working on familiarisation over several days facilitated that. The final thing I did each day was to record my overall thoughts on the data – I did this without worrying about correcting the inevitable errors that happen when you use voice recognition software, and grammar and punctuation errors, because these notes were just for me. In the later stages of working through the dataset, I could start to see some patterning in the data (and by this I don’t mean themes, I was not thinking at all about themes at this stage) – the same tropes and arguments re-occurring. This meant I started to see some things differently, in a new light, and perhaps started to develop a deeper understanding of the data and ideas about what these recurrent tropes might be doing, noting things to explore further. Because of everything I bring to the data, I think my noticings and familiarisation notes are often more conceptual and latent than descriptive and semantic (but this is obviously also shaped by the dataset and research question) – it’s really important to see this is a reflection of me as an analyst and what I bring to the process, not a sign that I’m doing analysis ‘right’ or ‘better’.

**Overall familiarisation notes**

This is a really interesting dataset (this is always a good feeling to have about your data!), it feels like there’s lots going on and I have lots of different thoughts sparking and tumbling. It feels important to get everything down, so this will be a bit of a ramble, a bit stream of consciousness, but I don’t want to lose anything.

*Choice: Each to their own/the principle of respecting personal choice*

Choice comes up a lot in the dataset in a number of different ways. One of the first things that struck me is the repeated reiteration of sentiments like ‘each to their own’, the importance of respecting personal choice and not judging others alongside a huge amount of judgement! I started to wonder, when working through the dataset, if saying things like ‘each to their own’ or emphasising the importance of (respecting} personal choice functions something like what discourse analysts call a ‘disclaimer’ (the classic disclaimer is ‘I’m not racist but…’). Something people feel obliged to say, a socially normative or desirable sentiment that positions them in particular ways (and attempts to avoid them being labelled in particular ways – e.g. as racist), before they then go on to say things that conflicts with that sentiment or even undermine it. A number of the commentators seemed to vacillate between emphasising the principle of respecting personal choice and implicitly or explicitly arguing that one choice (having children or not) is better (most often it seemed to be the choice to have children). There also appeared to be a vacillation across the data between viewing choices to parent or not parent as of equal worth and between viewing one choice as better or the ‘right choice’ (the ‘right’ choice being one that any ‘right’ thinking person would make). It’s interesting that people who can’t have children (people who are sub-fertile) are often presented as tragic figures and their tragedy is that they don’t have a choice – which seems to serve to valorise the primacy of choice. Interestingly, one or two commentators present people struggling with infertility as having the choice to adopt, so they’re not entirely without choices.

*Choice: Socially dislocated personal (and private) choices*

The other thing that really struck me about the repeated emphasis on personal choice is that these choices (to have children or not) are seen as socially dislocated rather than socially embedded (this reminded me of the literature, and my teaching sessions on, body hair removal and the reluctance of participants/students to see their choice to remove body hair as anything other than a socially dislocated personal preference). If our choices are socially embedded then they are subject to all kinds of social pressures, expectations and norms (in the qualitative literature exploring the experiences of childfree women, (heterosexual) participants often speak about the pressures and expectations placed on them by others to have children). So framing the decision as a personal choice turns our attention away from the fact that we live in a strongly pro-natalist culture, and that certain choices are harder to make and others easier to make (in a pro-natalist culture, it’s easier to choose to have children). In conforming to social norms, there is always the risk of becoming sheep-like (this trope was indeed evoked by some commentators); in making certain normative choices we risk losing our individuality (and being an individual seems to be really important, something I would associate with neoliberal ideologies). It seems easier for the childfree to present themselves as ‘going their own way’ (to paraphrase one of the participants in my student’s study of childfree men) than it is for parents to present themselves in this way. Indeed, some commentators derided parents for their lack of individuality. In framing choosing to parent or not as merely a matter of personal preference, reproductive decision-making is dislocated from the wider social context. This framing allows parents to position their choice as free, as thoughtful and considered, rather than as merely conformist. Some commentators did bring in the social context and discussed the social consequences of reproductive decision-making – a commonly evoked consequence was around the climate change and overpopulation. Another was around care of the elderly. It’s interesting to me that the continuation of the human race was only mentioned on one or two occasions, although a few people made reference to the fact that a particular commentator or everyone was once a child, and this seemed to evoke a similar logic (if no one chooses to have children, then the human race dies out). In this dataset, both parents and the childfree have to justify their choices and ward off potential negative attributions (for parents, this is unthinking conformity and sometimes selfishness, for the childfree, it’s selfishness, missing out, valuing the wrong thing, being shallow, deficient humanity and adulthood). The framing of the choice to have children or not as personal was often accompanied by an explicit or implicit framing of this choice as also private – this choice shouldn’t be open to moral scrutiny by others. That people are doing something bad if they make judgements about others’ choices, especially if those choices are different from their own.

*Choice: Making the right choice*

There is also something interesting around making the right choice (for you) – regret and by implication having made the wrong choice was implicitly framed as a bad outcome, something to avoid (I can’t quite yet get a handle on why, but there’s definitely something there). Commentators often stated that they had ‘no regrets’ about the choice they had made. This again almost had a ritualistic quality, rather like reiterating the importance of respecting personal choice.

*Oppositions and contrasts*

Another thing that struck me is that the data are riven with oppositions – between good and bad parents, between good and bad motives for having children, between productive and responsible citizens and those who are selfish and leach off the state and the taxpayer, between children (framed as highly meaningful) and money and material possessions/consumer goods (framed as shallow and decadent). The other opposition I’ve already noted is between reiterating the principal of respecting personal choice versus arguing for the superiority of one choice. All these oppositions and contrasts remind me of discursive analyses of ‘identity work’ and the way contrasts and oppositions are used to position speakers as reasonable. So, if the childfree are positioned as choosing money and material possessions over children this allows the commentator (with children) to frame valuing money as shallow and decadent and the childfree as living lives of luxury and excess. In other words, the childfree are selfish – in this dataset, being selfish is clearly one of the worst things you can be (selfishness is a recurrent trope in the childfree literature, and in my previous research on this topic, and also in the literature on nonnormative family practices more broadly). There doesn’t seem to be a huge amount of disruption of, or challenge to, the idea that the childfree prioritise money over children – this is an interesting contrast with the childfree women dataset in which the women addressed the assumptions that they are career-driven and prioritising money over meaning a lot.

*Being a responsible decision maker (and a good citizen)*

There is also something important around being a responsible decision-maker (and responsible and irresponsible decisions) – the commentators often positioned themselves as someone who had made well a considered choice (to have children or not), and there is often a contrast between thoughtless parents and the thoughtful childfree (or between the thoughtless childfree and thoughtful parents). The importance of being a responsible decision-maker is something that came up a lot in my student’s research with men who chosen to be childfree. This notion, like personal choice, also seems to be tied to neoliberal ideologies and values. It seems to be part of a broader emphasis on being a responsible citizen rather than someone who leaches off the state and the taxpayer (this opposition relies of course on the social demonisation of benefit claimants). Are there social imperatives around making well thought through decisions? There was also quite a bit of material related to ‘being a good citizen,’ someone who contributes to, rather than leaches off, society. For example, it is bad to have children if you have to rely on the state for financial support. Parents (and good parents particularly) contribute to the social good by having children, whereas the social good of the childfree seems more suspect and open to debate. It’s interesting that several childfree commentators often mentioned their engagement in social reproduction (caring for, or contributing to the upbringing of, other’s children). There’s also the climate change/overpopulation argument – the childfree contribute to the social good by choosing not to have children. There is definitely a scrabble around which group (parents or the childfree) makes the most responsible and socially beneficial choices (e.g. are the childfree ‘saving the planet’ or relying on other people’s children to look after them in their old age?).

*Missing out*

A very common trope in the wider childfree literature is that the childfree are ‘missing out’ in some way – this is reflected in the idea of child substitutes (relationships with nieces and nephews and other people’s children, pets or ‘fur babies,’ as they are often referred to in this dataset and elsewhere), with these often (pets especially) being framed as poor substitutes for the ‘real’ thing. Sometimes the idea that the childfree invest their love (that should ‘naturally’ and ideally be invested in children) in pets is treated as laughable, derisory (revealing the childfree’s inadequacy as adults and human beings). Quite a few of the commentators who are parents drew on a notion of parental experiential authority – the idea that children give you access to unique life experiences and knowledge that the childfree can’t access. This seemed to be linked to the idea that the childfree can’t make informed decisions, can’t know their own minds because they don’t truly know what they’re missing out on. The love of a child or the love between a parent and a child was sometimes presented as almost transcendent, a higher or the highest kind of love. This was particularly evocative when people tell stories of not wanting kids and then ‘accidentally’ having them and their perspectives on their lives were transformed. This implies that the childfree don't know their own minds and aren't really ever in a position to make an informed decision about not having children because until you *know* you don't *know*.

There’s also the idea that the childfree are missing out on the opportunity to be fully human and fully adult – these are also common tropes in the wider childfree literature, that somehow the childfree are immature and lacking. On a few occasions this was stated quite explicitly – the childfree are almost pathologically deficient because they lack the capacity to want a child, have a child and care for a child (this idea sits in tension with the idea that some people shouldn’t be parents, that there are good and bad parents). Sometimes the childfree reverse this ‘missing out’ idea by highlighting all the things they have that parents can’t have – financial security, disposable income, freedom (although ‘freedom’ didn’t come up anywhere near as much is it did in the childfree women and men datasets). Interestingly, sometimes parents orient to what they’re missing out on but seem to use this to underscore that what they do have is better than what they don’t (e.g. sentiments like the love of a child is ‘worth every penny’ or is ‘priceless’).

*Things that seem to be taboo*

There seem to be some things that are taboo or unsayable by certain groups – so it appears to be pretty taboo for the childfree to say they don’t like children. I noticed that the childfree commentators often mention that they like or love children or they mention all the children in their lives (a few times in a listing format to emphasise the number of children in their lives; this reminded me so much of lesbian parents talking about all the male role models in their children’s lives). This made me think of how some of the women in our childfree women study after describing that they’d always known they didn’t want children immediately, often within seconds mostly, made it clear that they liked children. So, not liking children appears to be almost taboo, marking you out as a defective human being.

It also seems to be quite taboo for the childfree to invoke the ‘children are hard work’ discourse that many parent commentators both jokingly and seriously deployed. It only seems to be acceptable in the context of discussing caring for other people’s children (so it’s sort of okay to talk about caring for your nieces and nephews and how great it is to hand them back to their parents at the end of the day, which is similar to how grandparents might talk about grandchildren), but one commentator who talked about disliking children immediately got jumped on by another commentator.

It strikes me that these things potentially point to the difficulty of being childfree and reminds me of Houseknecht’s quotation about the ‘acceptable vocabulary motives’, there are certain ways of making sense of being childfree that are more or less socially legitimate and there are other ways of making sense that are taboo.

*Good and bad parents make good and bad children*

There’s often assumed to be a relationship between parenting and the character of the child and subsequent adult; that parents are entirely responsible for how their children turn out. Sometimes commentators position themselves as having made the right decision to not have children because they knew they wouldn’t be a good parent. There is also the frequent framing of people who make thoughtless decisions, or don’t make decisions (because they have children ‘by accident‘), to have children as bad parents, who will produce bad children, who become bad adults. Whether you are a good or bad parent, or would make a good or a bad parent, seem to be related to your moral character (and perhaps character and personality more broadly). Again, as in elsewhere in the data, there is much rampant individualism and social dislocation here.

Okay, I think that captures most of my initial thoughts – clearly with lots to discuss with Ginny and lots of avenues to explore when we start coding the data.

**Reference**

Houseknecht, S.K. (1987). Voluntary childlessness. In M.B. Sussman & S.K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 369–395). New York: Plenum Press.