

## Reflexivity in research on voluntary childlessness

*Reflections from Nikki Hayfield and Gareth Terry*

As an illustration for their emphasis on reflexive practice in *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* Ginny and Victoria asked us to reflect on our interview research about women's lived experiences of voluntary childlessness (conducted with Victoria and Sonja Ellis – see Clarke et al., 2018; Hayfield et al., 2019). We both approached the interviews from a position of having chosen not to have children. We engaged in a *Skype* and email discussion to reflect on the importance of this in relation to data collection and analysis.

**Nikki:** It's great to be having this conversation. I enjoy and value reflective practice, and I've previously written about the importance of reflecting on insider and outsider identities in the context of my PhD research (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015).

**Gareth:** Yeah, I agree. An important part of my early research training was the encouragement to reflect on how my identities shape, and are shaped by, research – especially as I tick all the privilege boxes! (i.e., cisgender male, heterosexual, Pākehā [New Zealand European], ostensibly middle class, and able bodied). Doing research with people that were Other to me in some way was (historically) something I avoided for the most part because there are already lots of potential power issues between the researcher and the researched, without adding in more layers. As a consequence, I have generally only done research with Pākehā men (Terry & Braun, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2013).

**Nikki:** Whereas in contrast, my own personal experiences of being a woman who doesn't want children led to my interest in exploring this topic. I wondered whether other childfree women had similar experiences to mine and wanted others to have a chance to talk about what it's like to be a childfree woman in a society where it's often assumed that all women will want children. When I've been open about not wanting children others (particularly mothers) have reacted in interesting ways.

**Gareth:** Mm, I've had some strong reactions to being childfree. People have even gotten visibly angry at me. Mostly though, it's been the suggestion that I couldn't possibly maintain my childless status forever, as children are considered the 'natural' consequence of a heterosexual relationship. And other people also assumed that despite my own position, my female partner would *definitely* want kids at some stage. What sorts of things have people said to you?

**Nikki:** I've had very similar responses. Other women have made references to my 'biological clock' and told me that I will want children one day or warned me that I am missing out by not having kids. They seemed to try to 'persuade' me to have children! Initially I was a bit taken aback by those responses, but as time went on I started to be more intrigued. I wondered why others reacted so strongly to the idea of me not having kids and why it mattered to them enough to comment on my life.

**Gareth:** The other thing I've noticed is others thinking that I hadn't thought it through. That I was just going through a 'phase'. They were often surprised to hear that my partner and I had been discussing it for over ten years, so in all likelihood had worked it through far more than other people might when they decided to have children. It was dealing with these expectations that made me really keen to hear what others had to say. My research on men who had pre-emptive vasectomies (Terry & Braun, 2012) began this, and when this childfree women project came along, I jumped at it.

But for me, this was the first study I've been involved in where I was interviewing women, and I wasn't quite sure what to expect. How would the interview dynamics work? How would women respond to my questions, coming as they were from a man?

**Nikki:** It's interesting that lots of research published in feminist journals recently is often discursive and critical, which is great, but I still really value that idea of 'giving voice' that traditionally underpinned feminist approaches (Edwards & Holland, 2013). I think this links to broadly being 'an insider' in lots of the research that I do – like when I interviewed bisexual women about their experiences of marginalisation (Hayfield et al., 2013; Hayfield et al., 2014).

**Gareth:** Well, although I've identified as childfree for a little while now, I was worried my insider status would be limited to that aspect of identity – it turns out though, there were *plenty* of other connections that helped the interview (shared middle class values was a key one!).

**Nikki:** Yes, and of course, there were differences for me too, ways in which I was an outsider to the participants, perhaps in terms of their sexuality, age, class, ability, and race and ethnicity. But it certainly felt to me as though participants were able to open up and talk about their personal experiences. What do you think?

**Gareth:** Yeah, because I was orientated toward difference, I was continually surprised by the overlaps of participants' experience and ideas with my own. I found that the women I interviewed were quite tentative about their status, not sure of its permanence, something that rang true for my own experience. This was quite different from the unmitigated 'sureness' of the men I'd interviewed about their pre-emptive vasectomies. I had struggled to identify with these men's accounts when doing my PhD, so found connection with these women's stories a positive experience. There were definitely times I could have probed the women's responses more, but my guardedness about overstepping privilege boundaries shaped the way I interviewed – I was a little too careful, and didn't push women's explanations at all for fear of being the pushy (male) interviewer. I think this wasn't really a problem though, perhaps it worked out due to the willingness of our participants to talk about their experiences - they were really invested in this topic!

**Nikki:** I agree. But what I really noticed was how some of these women's childfree actual experiences were quite different from mine.

**Gareth:** What sorts of things are you thinking of?

**Nikki:** Well, one participant in particular really strongly disliked children. That made me realise how much I enjoy spending time with friends' children - which I hadn't really thought about before. I've often been an insider in research and I learnt about interviews through the feminist literature, so I think I'm quite empathetic. But on that particular occasion the difference between the participant's experiences and my own really struck me and changed the dynamic during that part of the interview.

**Gareth:** Oh yeah, I definitely had the same sort of reaction to those sorts of accounts. So how did you feel that those differences impacted on data collection and analysis?

**Nikki:** Well the interview felt less relaxed, and I didn't probe her to elaborate because the extent of her dislike made me feel uncomfortable. So, when it came to analysis, the data from her interview were thin and there was less depth to analyse because I didn't encourage her to give a rich account of disliking children. And actually, it would have been really interesting to explore accounts of

childfree women disliking children in all the interviews. Especially as it's something they might be more likely to deny so that they are not seen as less loving than mothers - which is one of the stigmatisations that childfree women face. I'd probably try to be more inquisitive if I were doing interviews again and lean into it rather than away from it. How about you, did you notice any discomfort?

**Gareth:** My concerns about misrepresenting women definitely shaped my orientation to the data. My normal tendency in research is to take a critical approach as you were discussing earlier, treating participants' accounts as constructing a certain perspective on the world. In this case, my worries meant I took many of the accounts at face value - as a post-positivist researcher might. Initially, I was less able to look at the cultural resources our participants were drawing on, or the ways in which they deployed these ideas in the interviews.

**Nikki:** How do you think that impacted on data analysis then?

**Gareth:** It meant more work to get into the data, doing more rounds of familiarisation and coding than I have in the past. Being part of a team made up mostly of women, where others felt much more comfortable being critical with women's experiences and accounts, can't be underestimated. I began to see that my cautiousness was a bit excessive, but simultaneously team meetings helped me identify where I was missing certain things in the data due to the differing ways that men and women can experience being childfree, given the greater pressures on women to have children. Was there anything else that stood out for you?

**Nikki:** Well I think my background in LGBTQ+ and sexuality studies informed the data analysis too. When participants told other people about not wanting children, their accounts reminded me of 'coming out' stories. I think that particularly clued me into how these women managed their stigmatised childfree identities in particular ways - so that felt like a really useful lens to have on this data.

**Gareth:** At the risk of being too 'meta' - this sort of activity, doing this sort of writing or talking - really helps my thinking! I have found conversations like this extremely formative to my development, and this was no exception. It was a good learning experience overall.

**Nikki:** Definitely. It certainly felt to me that doing this research reiterates how important reflexivity is in the research process.

## References

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