

The Unimaginable Huisje-Boompje-Beestje

*An ethnographic exploration of personhood and family through the lens of
Dutch women who do not want to be mothers*



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Prologue

I hastily open my laptop, quickly poured myself some tea, and grabbed my blanket from the couch to make it myself comfier on my chair. Since a few years I live with my boyfriend in a rather small house with horrible insulation. If it is winter, having the windows closed and the heater on means it turns into a Finnish sauna in no time. Yet, if you open one small window it means you have to grab another sweater and sit underneath a blanket, because that is how easily it transforms into a freezer again. I sometimes meet with my Guatemalan friend online, whom I met in Colombia, and we talk about all kinds of topics that interest us or keep us awake at night. Rather quickly after my friend, Paula, answers my call, I bluntly pose her the question: “if I may ask, would you like to have children later? I have been thinking about writing my thesis about women who do not want to have children...”.

A couple of weeks before, I had a conversation with my boyfriend about not wanting children. It has been, for a long time, clear to him that he does not want to have children, but what do I want? I had not given it any deep thought until that conversation, so it was the first time I would let my thoughts run freely and allow for whatever feeling I would get when thinking about having children surface.

In attempt to list all the reasons why I would or would not want to have children, one thing that popped up was, it is the right thing to do amidst the current climate crisis? Is having children not the biggest contributor to carbon emissions? And in what kind of world would my child grow up in anyway? Soon afterwards I found an article online that wrote about birth strikers, and it interested me so much. “Are those women really on a strike, of not having children, until those in power declare a climate emergency”, my Guatemalan friend asks, “and to raise awareness to the general public about the environmental crisis?”. It both amazes us how these women have put aside their desire for children in attempt to change the current state of the earth. Something we were not sure of if we would be able to do that. Then, Paula starts to talk about her own decision not to have children, something she had known for a long time already. She explains me her reasons. Her main reason being that she does not have motherly feelings. She furthermore appreciates her freedom and does not want to have more responsibility than she already has. While I sipped at my large mug of tea that was slowly getting cold, and I pulled up my blanket over my shoulders again, I continue to listen to her story. I feel grateful that she confides in me and our friendship and shares this personal story with me, despite our different cultures and the long distance. Paula lets me ask her all the questions I have and lets me share my fears and doubts.

“But aren’t you afraid you will end up alone when you’re older, and you don’t have children?” I ask, on which she replies: “no, I am not. I don’t think it is a guarantee when having children that you won’t end up alone when you’re older. A lot can happen in life... death, war, fights between family members, pandemics, illness, accidents, love, all kinds of things. Ending up alone can always happen, it doesn’t withhold me from not having children”. It is the first time someone challenges my thoughts, and my fear of being lonely when I am old. She is completely right, but I have not ever thought about it like that. After an hour I close my laptop. Even though I notice that the room is still cold, I do not need the blanket anymore as my body fills up with this warm and glowy feeling of relief, recognition, and connection. I can feel that it will be the right decision to write my thesis about women who do not want to have children, but simultaneously I also find it a personal and thrilling topic of which I do not know a lot about yet.

Throughout the thesis, I hope that you, my reader, will be inspired and feel invited to think about your own position within this subject. It does not matter if you do not know yet what you want or do not want. Perhaps you find yourself inspired by the stories of the women I have spoken to, and you might recognize yourself in it, or perhaps not, which is also fine. Nonetheless, I hope you read this thesis with an open and curious mind to find out more about other ways of being a worthy woman and more importantly, a worthy human being.

Introduction

Nine: “are you a complete woman if you don’t do that [not have children]? Then who are you if you do? Will you only become a mother then? Are you besides that anything else? And what is your life then? In both cases [with or without children]. How do you fill that in?”¹

At a certain moment in your life, the majority of your friends seem to shack up, get engaged, tie the knot, and start popping out some kids. Even though the majority of my friends are not yet thinking about having babies, when I started my fieldwork, I saw some older friends and acquaintances get pregnant and have babies. However, it has never been that naturally or obvious or to me to have children. I have been on birth control as long as I can remember and the sporadic scares of accidentally being pregnant when missing a pill has only made me think more about if I want to be a mother or not. Why do I want to have children? Do I want the life that comes with it and have such a responsibility? Do I want to give up such a big part of my freedom? Moreover, how can I assure a proper life for my child in a world that already has these disastrous problems and in which the habitability of the planet is not secured? Simultaneously, I wonder what this decision means for the trajectory of my life. How does life look like without adhering to the pronatal expectation that women have a desire for motherhood? Who am I as woman then, and as a person? Furthermore, what does family mean to me if I am not going to have a family on my own? Nine, a 24-year-old participant of mine, is also in doubt whether or not she wants to have children. When I spoke with her on the phone, she raised similar doubts and concerns as me. The phrase written above illuminates one of the concerns she has about her reproductive choices as a woman in Dutch society. Similar to me, she wonders if she can be a complete woman if she abstains from motherhood. Yet simultaneously, she is afraid it will define her whole identity and wonders how she should fill in her life. Precisely the various doubts and concerns written above I explore in this thesis and the lived experiences of women who decided to not be mothers in the Netherlands.

Over recent decades, an increasing number of women in the Global North are reconsidering their reproductive choices and opt for a life without children (Gillespie 2000; Donath, Berkovitch and Segal-Engelchin 2022). My participants, for example, value their freedom, do not want the responsibility for a child, or do not want their lives to revolve around

¹ Interview with Nine, April 13, 2022

someone else. The decision to not be a mother can therefore be considered an act towards the future (Appadurai 2013; Bryant and Knight 2019). This present-day decision allows for them to actively shape a future that will make them happy. One that does not include having children. In this thesis I explore the notion of the future as the discipline of anthropology remains to be shaped by the lens of the pastness (Appadurai 2013) and the influence of the past on the present and the future (Bryant and Knight 2019). To focus on how people organize the future helps understanding “the present, anticipating the unknown, and intervening in the world” (Salazar et al. 2017, 3).

Yet despite the increasing number of women who abstain from motherhood, it is still not considered the ‘standard’ life trajectory. In the Global North, parenthood is perceived as a desirable achievement and a natural step in one’s life as it carries the promise to happiness, and those that divert from it are placed outside the norm (Veevers 1973; Ahmed 2010). Furthermore, the desire to become a parent is regarded as an indicator that a person accepts their position in society as a man or woman. It is also an expression and representation of their femininity or masculinity by pursuing a socially respectable and desired life decision (Veevers 1973). The early research of Jean Veevers (1973) illuminates how structural and societal norms and practices pressures people into parenthood, but it does not include the lived experiences of those who abstain from parenthood nor specifically of those who identify as female.

Namely, women are also subjected to the workings of pronatalism. This is the perception that motherhood is “naturally synonymous with womanhood, and that female identity cannot be (and ought not to be) extricated from its motherhood role” (Gotlib 2016, 330). This perception is shaped by political, social, economic, and medical narratives that endorses the women-as-mother or woman-as-essentially-mother (Gotlib 2016). Despite the emergence of the logics of capitalism and neoliberal free-market logics of action that supposedly allow women to freely determine their lifestyle and to gain control over their lives and bodies, pronatal beliefs seek to limit the autonomy of women in the realms of reproduction and childbirth (Donath, Berkovitch and Segal-Engelchin 2022). For example, pronatal beliefs have permeated into the medical realm and obstruct women who do not want to be mothers to be sterilized or women who want to get an abortion and pursue their desired lifestyle (Moore 2020).

As Veevers (1973) already slightly indicates, parenthood is essential to be accepted as person in society and to be considered worthy and someone who counts. Parenthood, or motherhood in the case of women, is perceived to be central to someone’s personhood. The early studies of the person of Marcel Mauss (1985) laid the groundwork for later studies of personhood. He argued that Western understandings of what is to be a person is the sense of an

inner self, rather than the understanding of a person in relation to each other. Nowadays, the notion of personhood is used to describe who, within any given culture, counts as a person and is considered to be either an accepted or fully functioning member of society (Appell-Warren 2014; Degnen 2013). People from the Global North have often been characterized as oversimplified individual, autonomous, differentiated, bounded, and lacking any sense of connection to others, whereas others from the Global South are described as less autonomous, less individuated, and more relational and interdependent (Glaskin 2012; Lamb 2008). Even though this dichotomy is too limited, it remains useful as a broad description of a personhood in which “autonomous agency” is valued in many societies in the Global North (Conklin and Morgan 1996, as quoted in Glaskin 2012, 298). Besides autonomy and individuality as important values, motherhood is also an important culturally recognized marker through which women can achieve full personhood (Appell-Warren 2014). However, those who abstain from motherhood challenge this idea that motherhood is central to personhood. Therefore, in this thesis I use the notion of personhood to explore how Dutch women who do not want to be mothers reconfigure themselves as they abstain from motherhood and seek to push beyond perceptions that motherhood is central to personhood.

Moreover, besides pronatal discourses pressuring women to become mothers and have children, the latter also pressures women to have a family (Gillespie 2000). Definitions of family in the social sciences are “quite easy to come by, but they can be difficult to reconcile” (Powell et al. 2010, as quoted in Blackstone 2014, 53). In other words, one working definition is difficult to agree upon. Marshall Sahlins (2011, as quoted in Lamb 2018), for example, argues that family are persons who are members of one another, who belong to one another, who are present in each other’s live concurrently and whose lives are intertwined and interdependent. In the Global North, however, the nuclear family is oftentimes reinforced as social and cultural norm, which focuses on the heterosexual married couple with their children (Tarrant 2011). George Murdock (1949) even argued it is a universal human social grouping, yet in fact, there have always been diverse families such as single-parent families, transethnic families, transnational families or gay families (Tarrant 2011; Silver 2020). Queer theory has also focused much on families that are chosen (Weston 1991). These exist of people who are not related to each other by blood but still have the same enduring relatedness as with blood relatives and contains similar consequences such as pleasures, obligations, and accountabilities (Haraway 2016). However, research on the meaning of family of women who do not want to be mothers is rather limited. Hence, in this thesis I also focus on the notion of family to explore

the meaning of family of those who abstain from motherhood and who do not follow the normative model of the nuclear family.

Thus, women who do not want to be mothers encounter and experience normative constraints due to 1) hegemonic imaginations of parenthood as a promise to happiness 2) the centrality of motherhood to full personhood, and 3) the nuclear family as social and cultural norm. This raises questions about, for example, how Dutch women who do not want to be mothers shape their future and fill in their life when motherhood is considered a desirable achievement in one's life, how these women reconfigure themselves within society as women without children, and what is their understanding of family when abstaining from motherhood. The combination of these questions led me to the research question of this thesis:

“How do Dutch women in their adulthood who do not want to be mothers perceive and give meaning to notions of personhood and family within a pro-natalist society?”

In this thesis I will explore the lived experiences of Dutch women in their adulthood who do not want to be mothers, in order to illuminate the meaning of personhood and family in a pro-natalist society where the “female identity cannot be (and ought not to be) extricated from its motherhood role” (Gotlib 2016, 330). I aim to move beyond how gendered, socio-cultural, and pronatal norms and expectations shape and marginalize woman who do not want to be mothers and explore how these women enact and reconfigure their identities beyond motherhood. Furthermore, I explore how their reproductive choice shapes their ideas, actions, and social relationships in respect to family and kinship. The aim is to enhance empathetic forms of understanding the lived experiences of Dutch women who challenge pronatal norms and expectations. This is important because the understanding of their experiences as women has a relevance to recognize the workings of (oftentimes hidden) gendered norms and expectations that continue to taunt the everyday lives of these women.

The field

It is difficult to get a grip on the current size of the community of Dutch women who do not want to be mothers. However, as stated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2014, as mentioned in Ivanova and Dykstra 2015), there is a positive trend in childlessness rates after the 1950s in various countries in the Global North. Of the Dutch women who were born in 1945, 11 percent did not have children whereas, as CBS (2020) predicates,

18 percent of the women born in 1995 will not have children. This percentage mainly consist of women who chose not to have children, but it also includes involuntary childlessness.

Even though this research is not bound to a specific location or region in the Netherlands, the women I met primarily live in the Randstad or in other bigger cities such as Breda or Arnhem. Only a few other participants lived in smaller villages elsewhere in the Netherlands. However, as this research focuses on the manifestations of the lived experiences rather than the context in which it takes place, certain contextualizing factors were not used to limit participant pools. Different aspects of the lives of the women I have spoken to, such as their age and upbringing, impact and influence the experience as a woman who does not want to be a mother. Therefore, I decided not to focus on one specific region or location and focus on the lived experiences of women who live in the Netherlands. The women I have met are between the age of 24 and 41. Within these years, people graduate, find a job, meet their partner, settle down, and think about their reproductive choices. Moreover, these women are in their fertility peak and are often subjected to hegemonic discourses of motherhood and mothering ideologies. Therefore, I decided to focus on women solely to explore how gendered norms and pronatal narratives are experienced by women who do not wants to be mothers.

However, the community of women who do not want to be mothers are not only active in real life but interactions on platforms such as Instagram or Facebook also play an important role in the lives of these women. It is not easy to estimate how far the online community of Dutch women who do not want to be mothers reaches or how large it may be. Even though I have reached out to 481 accounts with my Instagram account in March, April and June 2022 (see Figure 1), it does not reveal where these people come from and which gender they are. As I have also used English hashtags underneath my posts, such as #childfree and #childfreewoman, people from all over the world could have read my stories and posts. As of June 2022, over 300,000 publications have been posted with the hashtag childfree, whereas there have been over 500 publications with the Dutch hashtag kindvrij.² Nonetheless, I can state that the 101 followers I have are predominantly female and the ones who have responded on my posts are Dutch as my posts and questions raised are written in Dutch. Even though my Instagram account hardly represent the entire community, it provides an idea of the context and demographics of my fieldwork.

² Retrieved through log-in Instagram on June 13, 2022.

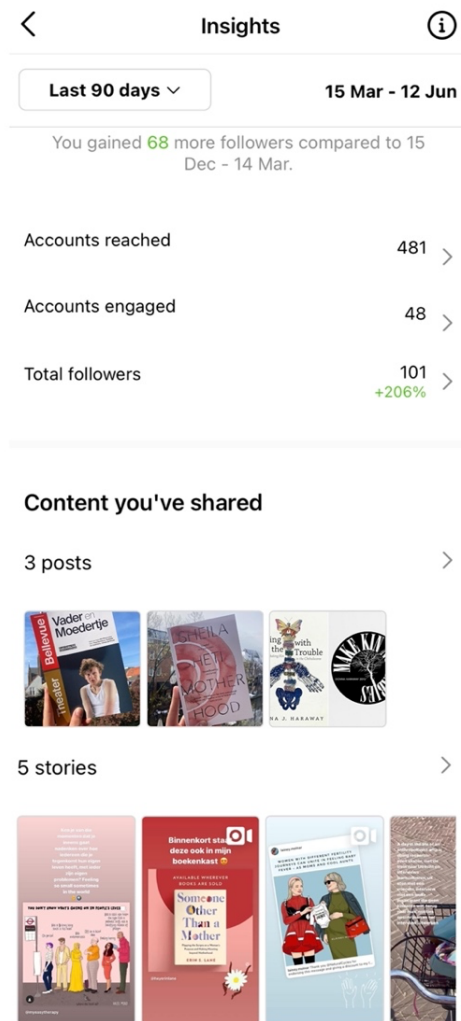


Figure 1. Channel analytics from the Instagram account *antropoloogzonderkinderen* in the time period March 15 till June 12, 2022. Retrieved through log-in Instagram on June 13, 2022.

In this thesis I decided to use the framework of “women who do not want to be mothers”. Even though childless and childfree are often-used terms to address people who are not parents, language is a tool that can lead to assumptions and indirectly to stigmatization (Moore 2014). More importantly, these terms do not grasp the variety of women I met. The term childless indirectly indicates that someone misses children in their lives and that it is not a deliberate choice. On the other hand, the term childfree implies it is a conscious choice to lead a life without children yet may also have the connotation that children do not play a role in their lives. Similar to what Orna Donath, Nitza Berkovitch and Dorit Segal-Engelchin (2022) argue, some women I met are emotionally uninterested in being mothers and would prefer to avoid any interaction or relationship with children, while there were also others who do not want to be mothers but are interested in the company of children. This ranges from having a foster child, or being a teacher, to spending time with nephews, nieces, or their friends’ children. Therefore,

these different “relationships with children, without giving birth nor raising them as their mothers, raise the question of whether ‘childfree’ is the accurate terminology, as they do have children involved in their lives” (Donath, Berkovitch and Segal-Engelchin 2022, 3). For this reason, throughout this thesis, I use “women who do not want to be mothers”, and hereby I want to emphasize that these women do not want to give birth to a child and be a mom, but it does not necessarily mean that children are not a part of their lives.

Methodology and operationalisation

One of the more distinctive research methods and characteristics of the discipline of anthropology and of being an ethnographic researcher is participant observation (Madden 2017). It is a method that entails the researcher to partake in daily activities, routines, interactions, events, and rituals that a group undertakes to learn more about “the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their cultures” (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 1). However, in the Netherlands there is not one specific geographical community of women who do not want to be mothers where I could conduct participant observation. Moreover, as Christine Hine (2015) claims, ethnographic research is rarely limited to one geographic, social, or cultural setting. Digital media and technologies are nowadays part of the everyday and of the more spectacular worlds that people inhabit (Pink et al. 2016). There are various Facebook groups, and Instagram accounts and hashtags that focus on not wanting children that my research participants follow and interact with throughout their everyday lives. These groups or accounts are oftentimes of great importance to them to meet other like-minded people, interact with each other and to receive support in their decision not to have children. Therefore, rather than merely being a ‘lurker’ on the internet, I actively participated within these groups through discussions, interacted with different accounts, and created my own Instagram account that enabled me to engage in activities across all roles within the community (Hine 2015). My Instagram account was named *antropoloogzonderkinderen*³, on which I posted content about not having children and about my research, so that I could interact with participants and other followers and accounts. This account, where I actively created and posted content, gave me legitimacy as both an insider in the community and as a researcher. Moreover, I joined one private Facebook group and collected data on the views, experiences, and beliefs of its members as shown through their activity in the group, their discussions, responses, and their interaction with each other and with me.

³ Anthropologist without children

Alongside online participant observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with my research participants. In ethnographic research, anthropologists mostly depend on unstructured and informal interviews that take shape in daily conversations and small chat, but also make use of semi-structured interviews to obtain answers to particular questions (May 2011). Through my Facebook and Instagram account, where I posted a message that I was looking for participants, I got into contact with various women who either know for sure that they do not want to be mothers or are still in doubt. When my Instagram account received more attention, as I used often-searched hashtags such as #childfree, different women started to reach out to me to participate rather than the other way around. Ultimately, I conducted 28 semi-structured interviews with different women between the age of 24 to 41. The majority of the women were Dutch, but I also spoke with 3 women from Belgium. The conversations were mainly held in real life, but I also met up online on some occasions. These conversations lasted between 45 minutes to 2 hours. I made a general topic list to guide the conversation, in order to better understand the social worlds of the women I met, their ideas of the future, and their perception of family and kinship. As the research progressed, I started to explore certain issues and topics more into depth (O'Reilly 2012) and adapted the topic list by removing and adding certain topics or questions.

Moreover, I also incorporated sensory ethnography into my research. To do this kind of ethnography is to research sensory perception and reception such as sight, hearing, and taste. There are multiple ways that are able to grasp “the most profound type of knowledge [which] is not spoken of at all and thus inaccessible to ethnographic observation or interview” (Block 1998, as quoted in Pink 2019, 5). I invited most of my research participants, at the end of the interviews, to produce drawings or paintings of their perception of family. I believe, in my research, that drawings of the perceptions of family and the emotions and affect experienced with it can be better explained in drawings rather than articulated in words. The drawings make visible a diverse range of sensory reactions and show how affect and emotion are felt (Tolia-Kelly 2007). With the drawings I offered my participants another form of expression to create “alternative grammars that are not always encountered or expressible in oral interviews (Tolia-Kelly 2007, 340). Together with my participants I analysed the drawings which also allowed them to raise other issues that had not been addressed during the interviews. Some drawings I added to the thesis to give a sense of sight into the perceptions of my participants and give a sense of the emotions and affect experienced with it.

Besides online participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and participant-led drawings, I conducted autoethnography and kept a personal diary for this. Autoethnographies

are “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experiences of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes 2000, 21). Being part of the community of women who do not want to be mothers, I kept track of my own experiences, feelings, sensibilities, and thoughts about my own decision to not be a mother. I have used this diary as part of this thesis in the prologue and two interludes which allows for the readers to “feel the dilemmas, think with a story rather than read about it, join actively with the author’s decision points, and become co-participants who engage with the story line morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually” (Wall 2008, 44). The prologue and interludes illuminate my own personal journey, from the moment I started to think more deeply about whether I want to have children or not, to being confronted with the consequences, the doubts, and the sadness that comes with the decision and lastly, the moment I tell my parents about my doubts. These experiences are additional to and act as further insights into certain topics that also came up during the conversations with my research participants, and provide for insights into “motivations, emotions, imagination, subjectivity, and action in ways less available from other sources” (Laslett 1999, as quoted in Wall 2008, 40).

Ethics and role of researcher

The most important and general rule of anthropological research I made sure to follow was to minimize possible harm to participants. Raymond Madden (2017) states that the ethnographic information the researcher collects about people can be educative and interesting, yet simultaneously it can also be highly sensitive and possibly dangerous. Therefore, as Madden (2017, 34) continues, each ethnographic researcher must continuously manage “the ethics of gathering and representing ethnographic information”. For example, during conversations, every so often negative emotions or past experiences were brought out within some of my research participants when talking about the decision of not wanting to be a mother or when talking about perceptions of family. Therefore, I made sure I gained informed consent beforehand and emphasized that at any time my participants could stop with the research without any negative consequences. Moreover, I did my utmost to make the conversations with my research participants as comfortable as possible. In case of negative emotions or experiences, I tried to leave space for my participants to decide how much they wanted to tell me and solely listen. Lastly, I would always emphasize again that I use pseudonyms.

Furthermore, to do participant observation on social media required a careful approach in respect to anonymity and informed consent. On one hand, to not reveal my identity as a researcher can be useful to circumvent adapted behaviour of participants in the presence of a

researcher (Ebo 1998), but on the other hand the online accounts of people are just as meaningful and authentic as their identities in real life and therefore not to be taken lightly (O'Reilly 2012). This especially applies to platforms such as Facebook and Instagram where identities are most of the time not hidden nor are digital aliases often used. Therefore, I always announced my intentions and my role as a researcher on the platforms I used, namely Facebook and Instagram. I even used a separate Instagram account made specifically for this research. On both platforms I stated that any interaction could possibly be used for my thesis. Throughout the thesis I anonymized all participants I have spoken to or that I interacted with online, to protect their identity and the information they shared with me.

Furthermore, according to Kathleen DeWalt and Billie DeWalt (2011) and David Mosse (2006), there is no neutral or objective knowledge in ethnographic research as all researchers are biased. Nonetheless, in the beginning of the fieldwork I perceived reflexivity and subjectivity as a problem to overcome. Yet, as my research continued, I rather came to see it as a productive force that I had to confront, and I continuously reflected on the influence of 'me' on the research. I have my own baggage of presumptions and prejudice, my own upbringing, education, and history that informs my perspective and therefore influences the research (Madden 2017). Being part of the community of women who do not want to be mothers whilst being a researcher is a compromising one. Precisely because of my insider role, I made sure to situate my feelings and thoughts, and ground my arguments in the stories of my research participants rather than to base them on my personal beliefs and thoughts. I did this to minimize the risk to over-identify or "speak for" my research participants (Chavez 2008).

Finally, this research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. O'Reilly (2012) states that ethnographic research is in itself inherently unpredictable, and its design must therefore be flexible in any circumstance when planning fieldwork. However, I must admit I found it challenging to plan my ethnographic research beforehand when the situation and regulations changed so often in the Netherlands. Fortunately, when I started my fieldwork, the regulations started to ease gradually, and I could conduct more easily in-person interviews with participants. Nonetheless, I asked every research participant to decide for themselves with what they felt most comfortable and safe with, meeting me online or in real life.

Outline

This thesis consists of two storylines. As mentioned before, I incorporated my autoethnographic data into a prologue and two interludes. This first story line follows my own personal search in if I want to be a mother or not. Even though every woman who does not want to be a mother

has their own unique story, it exemplifies the many thoughts, doubts, concerns, and emotions that may follow with the decision not to be a mother. The interludes help to feel with the story and to step into the shoes of another, rather than solely read about it. This story line can be read separately from the thesis or chronologically. The second story line, on the other hand, follows the lived experiences of the women I have spoken to. It is divided into three chapters that connect the ethnographic data I gathered during the fieldwork to anthropological theories.

In the first chapter I explore hegemonic imaginations of parenthood that circulate in the Netherlands, where motherhood is often perceived as a promise of happiness. However, the women I have spoken to actively shape a different future and challenge the idea that happiness solely derives from the hegemonic trajectory in life. However, simultaneously, they experience the threat of regret that is looming over their shoulder which acts as a first elaboration on the constraints that come with the choice of abstaining from motherhood.

In the second chapter I put forward an explanation on the pronatalist discourses at stake in the field. Women in the Netherlands continue to be linked to their reproductive abilities and are assumed to have a desire for motherhood. Yet, my participants deviate from this pronatal belief and illuminate, for example, that caring for others can exist side-by-side the decision to not be a mother. Furthermore, these women seek to push beyond pronatal narratives and want to be considered worthy of recognition and someone who counts.

The third chapter will expand on the meaning of family of women who abstain from motherhood. The nuclear family continues to be reinforced in the Netherlands and in turn taunts the women I have spoken to who consider family to be much more than the one in which they were raised. Furthermore, there is the assumption that these women will end up alone without children. The narrative of these women rather show that they actively strive to belong to others and to be taken care of, and hereby challenge binary conceptions of individualist and relational modes of personhood.

Interlude: doubts

It is always such a quest, in the city I live in, to find a restaurant to everyone's liking and where we can eat when it is the birthday of someone in the family. Not because there are not enough restaurants in the city centre, but mainly because my family and I are indecisive. We never have a strong opinion on what we want to eat and are creatures of habit. Usually after giving it some thought, we end up at one of our usual spots. Surprisingly, for the birthday of my dad, my family and I will meet a new restaurant. It is his 60th birthday after all, which is definitely a milestone to be celebrated. The restaurant has been in the city centre for a while now, but I had not had the time yet to give it a try. From friends I heard that the food and the cocktails are really nice, so I thought it would be perfect to give it a shot for my dad's birthday.

My boyfriend and I arrive in a hurry, and we already see my family sitting at the window. It is the only restaurant in the street where it is located. Even though it is already February, the street is decorated with little Christmas lights which are probably soon to be taken down. Nonetheless, it gives a cosy feeling to the rather empty and dark street. Only the two snack bars opposite the restaurant are fully lit up with fluorescent tubes. From the outside I can see shadows of people flying around, being busy and probably preparing for the long night ahead full of orders from students who would like to have a late-night snack after the last club closes its door at 5am. We enter the restaurant and are greeted by the few workers at the restaurant. Even though the music plays rather low in the background, the lights are slightly too bright, and the heater could have been turned up higher, the restaurant reminds me of being in France. Yet the multitude of tropical plants simultaneously brings me to the jungle in the Amazons.

We walk towards my mom, dad, brother, and his girlfriend and sit down at the table. After ordering our first drinks, I give my dad his present for his birthday. After some discussion and confusion on my part, we conclude that I had given the same present a few years ago. We have to laugh, forgetting things runs in the family apparently. At moments like these I really love that I can see the resemblance between me and my parents. It is funny to see which qualities and traits you have gotten from your father, mother, or even your grandparents. The things that interest me, that are important to me, how I handle certain things and how I act towards others. These I can oftentimes explain by looking at my own family. Family means a lot to me, even though we are not the kind of family that sees each other often or talks a lot on WhatsApp. Nonetheless, I know that I can count on my family and that we love each other unconditionally.

The first bites that we ordered are brought to the table and we start eating them. We find it difficult to place the different tastes. It sometimes reminds me of the holidays with my family in France, but simultaneously also to the different meals I have eaten in different countries in Asia and Latin America. It is fun to share so many small little bites with each other, and it forces us to eat slower and talk more with each other. All topics are discussed: how it is going at everyone's job, at university, how it was on our holiday and what holidays everyone has planned this summer, and so on. Then my dad starts talking quite seriously: "now that I am turning 60, it makes me realise that I am not getting any younger and it makes me think more about the time I have left with you all". He then starts to talk about how proud he is of my brother and me, and all that we have accomplished in life. It touches me and my eyes are filling up with tears. It makes me sad to think that my parents will not be there my whole life, and that I will miss them immensely when that time comes. At the same time, I have this feeling of pride and happiness that I was born into this family. It fills my body with this warm and glowing feeling. I can see the value and importance of family, which is also why I have doubts about not having children of my own. I love my family, I value family, but at the same time, I cannot speak for my unborn baby if it is going to be the same for him or her.

Chapter 1

(Un)imaginable Futures

Eveline: “of course, you have a lot more freedom without children. My boyfriend and I can just do whatever we want. Spontaneously to a movie, a café, a museum, a daytrip, or a weekend away without needing to arrange all kinds of things. You don’t necessarily have to sleep at home. We are also a bit quiet, so I think it’s nice to go on holiday in the low season, and with children you often go into busy environments, but well, that’s not the main reason. The loss of freedom, I think, is.”⁴

Julia: “it is kind of how the world is right now. I think it’s not really fair to have a child then. I just find it all a bit depressing. I have a feeling that the life of newborn babies is getting worse, and the quality of life is going down. I don’t necessarily see it as very dystopian [the future], it’s not that we can’t do anything anymore, that everyone dies, but I think there will be a lot of insecurity and that comes with a lot of external tensions.”⁵

Teske: “well, for me, I think that children are quite a limitation in what you can do with your life. [...] you don’t have much choice how your child will come out or whether it fits into your life. You have to change your life completely to the needs of your child.”⁶

Sam: “it’s not at all that we have an exciting life, or that we travel a lot or those kind of things, but those smallest bits of freedom that you have, like: ‘oh, I’m going to sit outside with a cup of coffee because the sun is shining’. That is not possible [with children]. You can’t, when you have a child... you have to move and act according to the structure and rhythm of your child.”⁷

Only a few weeks after starting my fieldwork, I had already spoken to more research participants than I can count on two hands. The majority I met online at first, but the moment

⁴ Interview with Eveline, March 21, 2022

⁵ Interview with Julia, February 24, 2022

⁶ Interview with Teske, March 8, 2022

⁷ Interview with Sam, March 2, 2022

the corona measures in the Netherlands started to ease, I met in different cities with different women. Usually while sipping ginger or mint tea in different cafés or restaurants, I directly asked them about their reasons not to want children. Even though the reasons differed per person, at one point I came to realise that my participants, such as Eveline, Julia, Teske, and Sam, had one thing in common. These women have certain imaginations of the future that influence their decision not to be mother. This includes for example the loss of freedom, a life that completely revolves around a child, or the decreasing habitability of the planet. In anticipation of such a future with children, my participants abstain from motherhood and dominant mothering ideologies, which can therefore be considered a present-day act that shapes a different future (Appadurai 2013).

This chapter will first illustrate the dominant imaginations of parenthood in the Netherlands. It is often promoted as a promise to happiness. However, the women I have spoken to disturb this fantasy that happiness can only be found in this particular way of living (Ahmed 2010). I show that these women actively shape their own future. One that differs from the hegemonic imagination of *'huisje-boompje-beestje'*⁸. This is a Dutch saying that symbolizes a nice, conventional, quiet, but often boring family life with children. Thereafter, I explore more deeply how abstaining from motherhood is an act towards the future. For this I use literature of Appadurai (2013) and Bryant and Knight (2019). Finally, I show that abstaining from parenthood is often promoted as something one will regret later in life (D'Avelar 2022). Hence, feelings of grief or sadness is not often spoken about but is something that is nonetheless experienced by some of the participants I have spoken to.

Unimaginable futures of happiness

In February, at the beginning of my fieldwork, I got notified by Facebook that I had been tagged by a friend in an article about pope Francis. The title stated: *"Pope finds couples without children selfish: 'they do have two dogs or two cats'"* (Bollen 2022). The pope reportedly perceived the increasing conscious choice to remain childless one that ultimately leads to a civilization in which people loses the riches of parenthood (Bollen 2022). It reminded me of what my 31-year-old participant Yolanda said when I met her online. While Yolanda was positioned on her couch with her phone in her hand, I sat outside with my laptop to catch some sunrays. From a young age, Yolanda has known that she does not want to be a mother. She told me she cannot imagine being happy giving up certain aspects of her life, those she finds

⁸ It translates to a house (huisje), a garden (boompje), a pet (beestje).

important and appreciates, for a child. However, for many parents this is not the case, as Yolanda argues: “then you get that cliché sentence as reply [from parents]: ‘you get a lot in return’.”⁹

Not only Yolanda is used to getting such comments about parenthood, the majority of women I have spoken to receive similar reactions of acquaintances or strangers who do not know them well. Parenthood is oftentimes promoted as “the most beautiful thing there is”, or “you will miss something essential if you don’t have children”, or as the pope would call it, otherwise one will miss “the riches of parenthood” (Bollen 2022). Another participant of mine, Lila, also mentioned something similar about the romanticized picture of having children that is still dominant in the Netherlands. “I think that this romantic picture [of having children] is constantly kept alive. You often have parents who tease you like ‘oh, it’s so hard’, and then you say: ‘I don’t want children’, then immediately the response is like: ‘oh, but it’s the most beautiful thing that could ever happen to you’. However, the first thing they do when you ask how they are doing is complain about their children. Then I think, are you trying to convince yourself or me, if it’s really that great?”¹⁰ Despite parents often sharing the downsides of parenthood, both Yolanda and Lila illustrate it is nonetheless continuously promoted as a promise to happiness.

Sarah Ahmed (2010) complicates the notion of happiness in her book. It is an oft considered universal goal for which all humans should supposedly strive for, and it is perceived a promise that directs people towards certain life choices and therefore away from others. If a way of living promotes happiness, then to “promote happiness would be to promote those ways of living” (Ahmed 2010, 11). Certain life choices, such as having children, are deemed good as social groups expect pleasure from it. It is exactly in this expectation that Ahmed (2010, 29) points to the “promising nature of happiness”. As Lila implies, there is a dominant perception that parenthood promises happiness, despite the actual struggles that parents experience when having children. It is an image that is continuously reinforced to ensure its survival (Ahmed 2010) – just like the parents who tell Lila that it is the most beautiful thing that can happen to her or as my other participant Rosie states: “it is imprinted at an early age: ‘motherhood, or parenthood, is something nice, it is sunshine and roses’. But the rest is passed over in silence.”¹¹

Ahmed (2010) also talks about feminists as example of being killjoys who “kill joy simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising” (Ahmed

⁹ Interview with Yolanda, March 6, 2022

¹⁰ Interview with Lila, March 1, 2022

¹¹ Interview with Rosie, April 21, 2022

2010, 65). Most of the women who do not want to be mothers do not find imaginations of the future with children as promising as thought of by others who think about it as “not only being good but as the cause of happiness” (Ahmed 2010, 65). “I try to imagine it [a life with children] and then I find it tiring”, explained Eveline, another research participant of mine. Even though she is able to imagine the fun aspects of having children, it is overshadowed by the thought of “your everyday life [with children] being just the daily grind. When I imagine myself with children, then of course you immediately think of the positive things first. ‘Oh, that would be nice’, but then I think: ‘oh, yeah, but usually it isn’t like that’. Most of the time it’s just normal. It’s not like every day is a highlight of course.”⁴ Whereas for the majority of parents this might provide joy or is worth the effort and trouble, women who do not want to be mothers are not happily affected by this life choice which in turn disturbs the very fantasy that happiness can be found solely in this particular place (Ahmed 2010).

Other futures: “what I want, when I want, and how I want it”

Every time I spoke to another research participant about her life without having children, about her passions in life, what is most important to her, or whenever I read the umpteenth post on Instagram or Facebook about aspects such as freedom, I came to realize these women have other imaginations of the future than what is offered by societal expectations and norms. For example, I met with a friend named Loïs in a café nearby the city centre where I live on a sunny Sunday in February. I had not seen her in many years, so I felt excited to meet her. We were seated outside, wearing our winter coats, and ordered two sweet ice coffees and two cupcakes. She started to talk about her doubts of having children and she is primarily concerned about the world in which children grow up in nowadays. However, she also talked about how she would like her life to look like when she does not opt for motherhood. Rather than to follow the hegemonic imagination of ‘huisje-boompje-beestje’, Loïs wants to see the world and travel a lot. She furthermore appreciates her time on her own to do her own thing and imagines herself being the cool aunt to her friends’ children. It is in anticipation of a future in which she can travel a lot, spend time on her own and be a cool aunt to her friends’ children, that she may decide not to be a mother.

Several anthropologists, such as Arjun Appadurai (2013) and Rebecca Bryant and Daniel Knight (2019), have denoted that the discipline of anthropology has not focused much on the study of the future yet. Rather, anthropological theory and research continues to be informed by the lens of the pastness (Appadurai 2013) and its relationship with the present and the projections of the past onto the future (Bryant and Knight 2019). Therefore, the authors

bring attention to the anthropology of the future and stress the importance of the role of the future on the present. Appadurai (2021) argues that people perform agency and shape the future rather than to perceive the future as an objective reality that emerges and to which people must act to. In other words, people actively craft their future and perform agency in the process of future-making. He argues that imagination, aspiration, and anticipation are the three human preoccupations that shape the future. These are not solely in the mind but translated into daily activities and practices and are acted upon (Appadurai 2021). Thus, futures are produced rather than merely discovered.

In anticipation of a loss of freedom when having children, present-day actions such as the decision not to be a mother allow for women to produce a different future. To not be a mother makes it possible for my research participant Babette, for example, to “quietly read my book all day and finish my book in one go, where people with children can do that much less, because the child needs attention.”¹² Even though Babette likes to work with children for her job, she imagines having her own children would drastically change her life, her relationship with her partner, friends, and family. She stated: “I simply don’t want to get into that”. In a similar vein, Bryant and Knight (2019) argue that temporal orientations such as expectation, speculation, anticipation, and hope bring the future into the present. Similar to the human preoccupations of Appadurai (2013), these orientations are generative of action. In other words, everyday actions have a purpose that is oriented to a certain end for which people do or do not strive for. For example, when I spoke with Mira about her decision to not be a mother, she told me how she imagined the rest of her life without children. She wants to travel a lot by car whenever she can with her partner. However, she also wants a house with lots of animals such as sheep, horses, or chickens that need care. Then she said: “yeah, you just can’t do that with a kid. No, I wouldn’t want to do that with a child either. Because I don’t want to do that, I automatically don’t want a child.”¹³ It is possible to travel, whenever wanted, as the care of animals can be outsourced to other people and as they do not need a constant care. “You just drop by, in the morning or in the evening, because feeding animals doesn’t take all day long [as compared to children].”¹³ Despite the growing reproductive labour market of maids, nannies, and home-care nurses who offer services in contemporary high-income households or neighbourhoods that “in the past would have been taken care of by the mother or wife figure in a household” (Sassen 2002; Mills 2003), Mira would not outsource the care of children to others

¹² Interview with Babette, March 10, 2022

¹³ Interview with Mira, March 2, 2022

as she believes that parents should be there for their children “100% of the time” and be emotionally available to ensure a proper life for a child. Yet, she does not want to dedicate full time parental attention as she values her career, and “yes, you can always say half-half or something [work part time], but, do you want to go to all that trouble to take care of a child?”¹³ Thus, it is the present-day decision not to be a mother that orients to a future to which Mira does and simultaneously does not strive for.

Thus, the different women I have spoken to shape their own future. One that makes them happy rather than to follow the hegemonic imagination of settling down, buy a house, get married, and have children. Sam told me: “it does not mean that I have to travel through Taiwan with my backpack, but that I can for example eat and drink what I want, when I want and how I want it. [...] That you think at 4 o’clock in the afternoon: ‘oh, I’ll grab a glass of wine’ for example.”⁷ Or what my other participant, Yolanda, told me: “I like my job very much, my friends and family are important to me. I also really enjoy doing new things, taking courses and stuff like that. Like everyone else, I really enjoy eating out and be on vacation. [...] But to not dedicate my life to someone else, because I think if you have children, then you must really do that.”⁹

Face the threat of regret

When I read the popular book that was published in 2019 *Echte vrouwen krijgen kinderen: De stille revolutie van de niet-moeder*¹⁴ of Liesbeth Smit, I first became aware about feelings of sadness or even grief. The author writes about both voluntary and involuntary non-mothers and explores what it is like to not be a mother as a woman in contemporary Dutch society. The book contains several stories of primarily involuntary non-mothers who mourn for what will never come, what has happened but is no more (e.g., miscarriage), or what has been attempted to but could not be realised (e.g., infertility). However, a few days afterwards I had a conversation with Eveline who shared similar feelings despite her conscious choice not to be a mother. She sent me a message on Instagram that she was interested in my research, even though I had not been that active on my Instagram account for a while and wanted to talk with me. Soon afterwards we had a call on Zoom. Eveline is still in doubt whether to have children or not, even though at the moment she leans more towards not having children. She values her freedom and does not want to commit to the responsibility that comes with having children. However, at one point, she started to talk about the mother-child relationship that she will most likely

¹⁴ Real women have children: the silent revolution of the non-mother

never have: “that is what I struggle with now and what I’m trying to accept. That you don’t have that. That is quite difficult. [...] Then I walk into the HEMA, and then I see those cute little baby clothes. Don’t you have that too, that you want to buy that?”⁴ Even though certainly not all women who do not want to be mothers experience this, it is a feeling of sadness that Eveline talked about. It is one that is not often talked about. After I tell her that I believe it should be more accepted to have feelings of grief or sadness, she states: “but what you just said, it’s actually too little about that [loss and sadness]. It’s often about how everyone is, how happy people are with their choice, and I think that’s important too. We also have to express that, but also that it is indeed difficult and a loss and that it is sometimes confrontational because it is not the norm.”⁴

As mentioned before, there is a societal expectation that people want to choose parenthood as it carries the promise to happiness. Simultaneously, it carries the belief that one will surely regret abstaining from this expectation later in life. Maria d’Avelar (2022) writes in her article about how regret is more than an individual cognitive and emotional phenomenon, it should also be considered social and cultural. She states that certain regrets are acceptable and even expected for certain groups, whereas others are definitely not. For example, to regret motherhood is still considered a taboo (D’Avelar 2022). Even though it is already known that motherhood is not always a bed of roses, there is no room for reevaluation and regret (Donath 2015). On the other hand, when abstaining from motherhood, regret is “to be expected” (D’Avelar 2022, 4). It is a feeling that is strategized, measured, and more generally experienced to stoke fear and anxiety at large (White 2017). It functions in society as “a regulator, making sure that we follow social and cultural norms as much as possible, with the threat of regret looming over our shoulders every time we stir away from them” (D’Avelar 2022, 5). These societal expectations can be considered “a pat on the back and a warning to nonconforming women; fall into line or face the threat of regret” (Lane 2022, 159).

Although Eveline does not regret her decision to not be a mother, her feelings of sadness and loss may also be seen as “to be expected” as she steers away from societal norms and expectations (D’Avelar 2022, 4). These feelings may therefore not be talked about often. They do not, however, change her decision to not be a mother. Neither does it for the other participants I have talked to about this. For example, I met Lola in a café in March. While sipping coffee and ginger beer, she tells me that she will miss, or even mourn, that she will not experience some of the things one would experience when having children. She talks about the mother-child relationship she finds special and being pregnant. However, rather quickly afterwards, she emphasizes that she would not want to be a mother because she will miss these

aspects. She explains that people cannot choose both options. One cannot simultaneously have and not have children. This is what my participant Sam also mentioned to me:

“And it seems to me, that pregnant belly, those hormones that come with it and that a baby is born, that you can experience that. That you make your parents grandparents, that you make your husband a father. All that seems really wonderful to me. That is really a point at which I say: ‘yes, that is a loss. I think I’m going to miss that’. But you just have choices in life, you can’t have everything and if you make a certain choice, yes, that has consequences for something else. And whatever choice you make, if you do choose children, your freedom is generally a lot less. If you do not choose children, then you will not experience such things.”⁷



Dutch women who do not want to be mothers all have their own personal reasons not to become mothers. Yet, what they have in common is that they actively shape their own life and create a future that makes them happy. A future that does not revolve around the life of a child and centers freedom and independence. Hence, these women abstain from following the dominant imagination in the Netherlands of ‘huisje-boompje-beestje’ that promises happiness. Yet, as the notion of choice overemphasizes the freedom people have to shape their world and future as they want to (Gammeltoft 2014), this chapter has also put forward a first elaboration of “the sense of ambivalence and constraint” that prevail in the life paths of women who do not want to be mothers (Lamb 2018, 59). Namely, certain threats of regret continue to loom over the shoulders of these women. In the next chapter I explore how pronatal discourses places these women outside the norm and influences how they perceive themselves and others.

Chapter 2

(M)otherhood

On the way to the café where I would meet one of my participants, and despite my long, green winter jacket, which is often referred to as a sleeping bag by my boyfriend, I had gathered some chills. It was mid-March and the wind felt as little icy snowflakes scratching my bare skin. I took a seat outside in the sun when I arrived. The terrace reminded me of the *patio*¹⁵ at the place I used to live in Colombia several years ago; hidden away in the middle of the city, shielded from the cold wind, surrounded by tropical plants, wooden furniture, colourful blankets and pillows, and people preying on a spot in the sun. Fortunately, the sun quickly melted the snowflakes that were still clenching on my skin, and it made way for the bright sunrays to warm up my body. Even though I had already spoken to several participants, I felt a bit nervous. I wondered how this conversation would be like. If it would feel like a good conversation between friends, like how all the other conversations had felt like till then. And how much would she want to share about this personal and sensitive topic? Would my questions be appropriate? Before I could let my thoughts give rise to the natural reaction of my body to being nervous, namely clammy hands, wobbly legs, and a dry mouth, my participant Minke appeared with a smile on her face: “*hoooooi, alles goed?*”¹⁶ From that first moment, the conversation went smoothly, but at one point we got distracted by the family that was sitting at the table next to us. It was a German family with a new-born baby, who were also enjoying the very few sunny spots on the terrace. At a certain moment the baby had his eyes on Minke and stared at her intensely for at least 5 whole minutes. We laughed, “I think he knows what we are talking about” we both said at the same time, even though simultaneously it also made us a bit uncomfortable. What if he could actually understand us and hear about how happy we are with not having a baby like he is? It brought me back to the conversation I had with Kamiela, another participant of mine, in a different café in another city. We were talking quite loudly about not wanting to be a mother, about her imaginations of the future with and without children and about family. Suddenly I noticed that the mother and daughter that came to sit next to us moved to the table next to them. It confused me a bit. Had they picked up our conversation and had it made them feel uncomfortable, I wondered? Of course, I did not ask them about their reason to move to the table next to them, but it made me aware that Kamiela and I were talking in public

¹⁵ Roofless inner courtyard

¹⁶ “Hey, how are you?”

about a topic that might be sensitive or not considered normal by others. Yet, before I had the chance to ask Kamiela if she had noticed this, she continued to talk about her sterilisation: “luckily, I cannot have children anymore. Not even by accident as my ovaries are completely dead because my fallopian tubes are cut and burned off for several years now.”¹⁷

Even though at both incidents I assumed that it was connected to the topic Minke, Kamiela and I were talking about, it nonetheless made Minke and I both feel uncomfortable and with Kamiela I became aware that we were talking about something that may not be seen as normal by everyone. Some of my participants also mentioned that they feel different than the rest, with strangers or even with friends. For example, Eveline said to me: “With friends I sometimes have the idea that I am different. They talk to each other about first steps, lengths. [...] Then I can’t really participate in that conversation.”¹⁴ My other participant Emily even tried to find out if the desire to be a mother was not somewhere inside of her, because everyone around her wanted to have children. She wondered why she did not have those maternal feelings and thought about herself: “what am I missing?”¹⁸

In this chapter I illuminate how women who do not want to be mothers are positioned outside the norm as hegemonic pronatal discourses continue to persist in the Netherlands. There is the expectation that women want to be mothers (Gotlib 2016). Moreover, taking care of children is an often-perceived attribute of mothers, even though my participants show that this can simultaneously exist with the decision not to be a mother. Thereafter, I explore how the women I have spoken to seek to reconfigure themselves within society as they abstain from motherhood and redefine what is normal and good (Lamb 2018). Hence, I illuminate how these women seek new imaginaries of valued personhood beyond motherhood. Of being more than “either a mother or not”, and still be considered someone who counts and is worthy of recognition.

It is a matter of time when your ovaries start to shake

Although the baby at the café made Minke and I feel uncomfortable, we both also mentioned that he was rather cute. Yet, it did not give us the so called ‘*rammelende eierstokken*’ that women are expected to get when one sees an adorable baby or child. It is a Dutch saying that is used when a woman has a strong wish for children and roughly translates to shaking ovaries. It is, however, also used when a woman sees an adorable baby or child and it awakens her desires,

¹⁷ Interview with Kamiela, March 15, 2022

¹⁸ Interview with Emily, March 22, 2022

her 'biological drive' or need for bearing children. A mysterious hormonal process one cannot account for (Lewin 2016). Something you supposedly get when you are in your late twenties or early thirties. "At a certain point you get a feeling that you want children"¹ is what people oftentimes tell my participant Nine for example. Another participant of mine, Emma, has always said her whole life that she does not want to be a mother. She is the same age as me and we both talked about how much can still happen in life that might change her decision. It could be that she wants to have children, she argues, if her ovaries start to shake when everyone else around her will have children. This statement is telling as it indicates the assumption that every woman's biological urge for children will be awakened at a certain moment in life, which is strengthened when her surrounding starts to have children as well. It is a pronatal narrative that entangles the female identity with motherhood. It perceives every woman as essentially a mother (Gotlib 2016).

Pronatalism considers motherhood a "natural step that does not require thought or discretion because women are naturally endowed with a 'maternal instinct', and with 'feminine traits' that are associated with caring for others" (Donath, Berkovitch and Segal-Engelchin 2022, 8). Sherry Ortner (1974) explains that women have been connected throughout history to maternity as they are the ones who give birth and create new life, dedicate a greater portion of their body and time on procreation, are charged with a domestic familial role, and have been appointed to raise children into proper cultured beings. In other words, to be a mother and to mother has been and continues to be considered natural and wanted by most women. These pronatal discourses naturalize the 'standard' life trajectory of women, which in turn places women who do not to be mothers outside the norm and it makes them encounter severe cultural derision or social stigmatization (Donath, Berkovitch and Segal-Engelchin 2022; Venkatesan and Murali 2019). Most of my research participants have experienced at least once that there is a perceived inextricable linkage between maternity and femininity. For example, my participant Sam told me about the most frequent reaction of people when she tells them she does not want to be a mother. She had just finished working when I met her online around 1 o'clock. As she has her own company, she can decide when to work and for how long. She appreciates her freedom, and this is one of the things that allows her to decide for herself how to spend her time. She explained: "but it's so assumed that if you're a woman, you're going to have kids. It's never, why do you have kids? Why do you want children? You never hear that. It's always, why don't you want them? Why not, why not?"⁷ Most of my participants told me that they have received this question. Yolanda also mentioned something similar: "but I do notice that if you don't want kids, you're the exception, not the rule. That people often ask: 'oh, why not?', while

nobody says if you want children: ‘why?’. Yes, people would find that a very strange question.”⁹ The question ‘why not?’ seems rather innocent at first yet entails the pronatal belief that every woman naturally wants (and ought) to be a mother (Gotlib 2016). It is not common to ask why a woman does want to be a mother, as it is considered a natural step that does not require consideration (Donath, Berkovitch and Segal-Engelchin 2022). Yet, to ask why a woman does not want children is normal as it is a decision that deviates from pronatal norms and expectations.

Yolanda also told me a story that also illuminates that there is the expectation that Dutch women want to be mothers. She told me that she has never felt maternal feelings, yet as her partner was not completely sure if he wanted to be a father or not, she had tried “to find out if there wasn’t some way... if there wasn’t a tiny fraction of a motherhood wish inside of me and I could milk it out or something.”⁹ At some point she told me about a conversation that she had with her boss who does not want to be a father. He told her that: “it’s also that people look at him a little bit as if he took something away from her. There is an assumption that it’s not exactly what the women wanted. That, in general, there is the idea that women prefer to have children in opposite to men.”⁹ In other words, there is the pronatal belief that all women want to be mothers and that in the case of Yolanda’s boss, other people believe he has taken away the opportunity of his partner to become a mother even though it is her decision not to be one. This in turn illuminates that pronatal narratives continue to tarnish the personalities and the lives of women who do not want to be mothers as social responses still dispute their decision (Donath, Berkovitch and Segal-Engelchin 2022).

To even further strengthen my argument that pronatal narratives provoke the idea that all women prefer to be mothers and in turn places women who do not want to be mothers outside the norm, I turn to the debate around the sterilization of women. Few of my participants report difficulty obtaining this procedure. For example, Babette talked about how men can more easily get sterilized than women. Compared to men, women generally get the reaction of physicians: “you’re too young, you still want children later in life, or you already have two, but you might want a third.”¹² These physicians reinforce pronatal beliefs that women will regret sterilization when, for example, they get older, they change their mind, or meet the ‘right’ partner (Moore 2020). However, research has shown that sterilization is rarely regretted by women who do not want to be mothers (Young et al. 2018). As reported by women who either want to be or are already sterilized, pronatal beliefs are permeated into the medical realm and obstruct women to pursue their desired lifestyle.

In the next part, however, I explore how the women I have spoken to work to push beyond perceptions that women want to be mothers and hereby challenge certain pronatal beliefs about mother love and mothering as biologically determined.

(M)othering

Through a friend of mine, I met with Susanne at her home in the evening. It was the first time I met with a participant at home, so I felt excited but also a bit nervous. All other participants I met either online or in cafés or restaurants. With Google Maps still running on my phone, which has been the most frequently used app during my fieldwork, I rang the doorbell. I had never been in this small village in the Netherlands, but I could imagine it being a quiet neighbourhood at night when all the kids have been put to bed. Whereas in broad daylight I imagined it being crowded with children playing around and parents being hectic to be on time for their children's hockey or soccer training. I wondered how someone who does not want to be a mother feels like in such an environment with a multitude of children running around. Susanne opened the door and welcomed me in her house. When I sat down, she poured me some tea and put some chocolate cookies from Switzerland on the table. She told me that she had never felt the urge to have children. For a long time, her partner and she kept saying: “in 5 years, we'll look at it in 5 years.”¹⁹ She is 41 now and does not plan on having children. Yet, she also told me that since a few months she has a foster child for one weekend per month. She likes children, but simply does not find the life with children appealing as it would limit her in her freedom. Even though she takes care of a foster child, she still has a lot of freedom to do her own thing. Susanne wants to contribute to the future of someone else and to pass on something positive to a child who carries ‘*een rugzakje*’.²⁰ This is someone who has experienced a lot of difficult things in his or her life. Furthermore, she believes that she can learn from the perspective of the child as well, rather than solely provide stability in the life of her foster child and show that things can be done differently and that everyone can have a nice life. Her foster child with his backpack included. It intrigued me that she opts for having a foster child, even though she does not want to be a mother, as it confronts my own beliefs and upbringing that women who do not want to be mothers nonetheless choose to have a foster child or become a stepmom.

In a similar vein, another participant, Babette, told me: “in the long term I maybe want to take in children that have a hard time at home, who can still go to their home, but that I can

¹⁹ Interview with Susanne, March 16, 2022

²⁰ Backpack

babysit once in the weekend. I might want to do that. I have to think about more into depth of course, because you naturally also get attached to those children if things don't go well at home. That's difficult, I think. But what I have seen at the boarding school [her previous work], then I think: 'if I can actually give such a child a safe place for a weekend, I will do that'. When I'm ready for that."¹² These women consider a caring role to be different than simply being a mother to one's own child. It does not make them a mother at once, as it is a different role that carries differential consequences such as obligations, accountabilities, and pleasures (Haraway 2016).

In her controversial book about Brazilian mothers in the favelas in the Zona da Mata region, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1993) writes about mothers who seem to be indifferent to the death of their babies. According to the author it is not considered a suppression of grief but rather a strategy for survival. These women struggle to survive and experience everyday violence such as scarcity, sickness, and death. It is within this environment that children are born and too often fall sick and die. This led to a certain sense of powerlessness and a kind of triage that stronger babies are favoured, and weaker babies are allowed to slip away with little grief. The author states that mother love and mother-infant bonding as biological determined within the first few moments of a child's life are 'modern' ideas. Even though they may have a biological base, its manifestations are shaped by economic and social conditions while cultural beliefs reinforce them. Whereas the Brazilian mothers in the book of Scheper-Hughes (1993) only bond to and love those babies who are able to survive early infancy, in the Netherlands some of my participants are taunted with responses to their decision to not be a mother such as "you don't know what real love is until you have a child of your own". Her work helps to recognize pronatal discourses about (unconditional) mother love and mother-infant bonding in the Netherlands that dispute non-mothers who take care of other children without identifying as mothers. Caring for and loving someone else's children does not naturally mean women are or will be mothers (Millar 2014; Donath, Berkovitch and Segal-Engelchin 2022). In the next paragraph I show another example of a participant who challenges these discourses and illustrates that the decision to not be a mother can exist side-by-side the desire to invest in relations of care (Millar 2014).

In late March, I met Maud nearby the train station, and we walked together to a café. We sat down, were greeted by the waitress and ordered some coffee and tea. She started to explain how it happened that she decided not to be a mother. She was never completely sure if she wanted to have children, but each relationship came to an end when her partner wanted to settle down, live together and think about having children. Maud explained me that she did not want to live together and did not want to have children. In her late twenties she started to think

thoroughly about her reproductive choices, and she came to realize that she never wants to be a mother. There is “no fibre in my body that has that itch to have children”²¹, and she does not like the imagination of a life with children. She perceives it to limit her in her freedom, it furthermore is a lot of responsibility, and she does not want her life to revolve around someone else. However, she also mentions that she works a lot with children and has worked in foster care for a long time. Consequently, when she tells people that she does not want to be a mother, she gets the occasional reaction: ‘yes, but you work with children right?’ . “People automatically assume that you want to be a mother when you work with children”²¹, Maud told me. She likes children, but simply does not want them on her own. In a similar vein to Susanne and Babette, Maud’s narrative highlights how women who do not want to be mothers seek to take care of others, whether it be a for a foster child or children at their work, while not having children on their own nor being a mother. It challenges pronatal discourses that dispute or even negate all other possible roles that women who do not want to be mothers can fulfil in the lives of children.

In the next part, however, I explore how the women I have spoken to seek to be considered someone who counts and is worthy of recognition. Despite the pronatal narratives that places them outside the norm and continue to tarnish their personalities and lives.

“You are more than whether you have or not have children”

Eveline and I wanted to call via Microsoft Teams, but we struggled to make it work. After almost two years of working at home during the pandemic, we both thought that we had acquired enough skills and knowledge to set up a meeting smoothly. However, for some reason the microphone of Eveline did not work. After some minutes of pressing all buttons, of closing and reopening the platform numerous times, and of sporadically asking “can you hear me?” without no reply, we decided to start the meeting via Zooms. After some delay, we could finally start our conversation. Immediately I noticed that our conversation allowed for my questions to be discussed thoroughly and to be critically looked at from various perspectives. At a certain moment we started to talk about the different terms that women who do not want to be mothers can identify themselves with. She touched upon her struggle to use the word childfree. She believes that she should not use it as she is not defined by whether she has or not has children. She debates if the notion of childfree should therefore be central to her personhood, in contrast to the way that motherhood can oftentimes be for many other women (Hayfield et al. 2019).

²¹ Interview with Maud, March 30, 2022

“And do you know, seriously, that I don’t really dare to use that term [childfree]? Because it’s really positive and you don’t want to hit a nerve with people with children. Like: ‘look at me being happy’. But why wouldn’t you do that? I mean, on a lot of Instagram accounts, in their biographies, the first thing it says is: ‘mother of...’, there are many women who identify themselves as mother. First as mother before anything else. I understand that, but then, why wouldn’t you identify yourself as childfree? Because they’re also very proud that they do have children, so why wouldn’t you be as proud to have no children? But still, it feels like you are purposely going against the flow, you feel a bit burdened. Because the other is the norm. Sometimes I think: ‘should I present myself as childfree because other women present themselves as mother?’. This is also an important part of who I am. That I am childfree. Just as they think it is important that they are mother. Still, I think: ‘*dat moet je juist niet doen, want je bent méér dan wel of geen kinderen*²²’, you understand? I always get that a bit with people that have that in their profile, like ‘mother of two’ and then the date. [...] why would you identify yourself with that at first? Why aren’t you... are you then first and foremost mother if you’re that... that before anything else? You are more than just a mother. A teacher for example... well... that’s up to them of course.”⁴

Eveline stated that, in her experience, when she looks at different Instagram profiles or when she meets new people, Dutch women oftentimes identify themselves primarily as mother before anything else. She then wondered if she should also identify herself as childfree, but simultaneously that decision comes with certain concerns and anxieties. Firstly, she is concerned that it may offend mothers as it sounds like she is happy not to have any children, and that the lifestyle of being a mother does not appeal to her even though it does to most women. Even though this is all true to Eveline, she is able to be happy for other people who opt for parenthood and accepts them when identifying themselves as mother. She perceives it to be less accepted the other way around. Secondly, Eveline is concerned that when she identifies herself as childfree, it limits herself to merely a woman who does not have children. Similar to how others limit themselves as a person when identifying as a mother before anything else. It is exactly this concern that illuminates how women such as Eveline seek to actualize new imaginaries of valued personhood beyond motherhood, beyond having children. She believes that women are more than whether they are or are not mothers.

²² “You shouldn’t do that because you are more than whether you have or not have children”

My other participant Nine shares a similar concern as Eveline. I met Nine through a friend of mine and I called her on WhatsApp as she lives in London for a while now. She shared her doubts about becoming a mother. The day I spoke to her, she had no idea what she wanted but she felt a lot of pressure that she should know already. One of her doubts entails how her identity would change when she either decides to become a mother or not. She told me that she has the “idea that women with children do indeed become mothers immediately and that is their whole identity.”¹ However, promptly afterwards she stated that this is of course not the case, but it is society that suddenly sees women with children merely as mothers and women without children as “hard women or something.”¹ Similar to what Eveline told me, it is important to Nine that her decision does not define her personhood.

Laura Appell-Warren (2014) argues that full personhood is attained when one adheres to societal expectations and norms. It is then that people are accepted as fully functioning members of society and considered worthy and valued. However, personhood cannot be understood in isolation from conceptions about gendered identities (Lamb 2008). In other words, to attain full personhood as a male is different than a woman. As mentioned before, pronatalist discourses naturalize the “standard” life course which includes having children as a woman. Motherhood is perceived a natural step, and the “most meaningful rite of passage for societal recognition, and an almost exclusive metric for the quality of a woman and her life” (Tietjens-Meyer 2001, as quoted in Donath, Berkovitch and Segal-Engelchin 2022, 4).

Yet, as both Eveline and Nine have illustrated, women who do not want to be mothers seek to redefine what is considered “good and normal” (Lamb 2018, 53) and challenge the understanding that motherhood is key to full personhood. In other words, in the perception of women who do not want to be mothers, to be a fully functioning member of society and to be considered worthy and valued is not attained through motherhood. These women consider themselves unique and separable from others, and do not want to be defined by their reproductive choice. Hence, there is an aspiration for singular personhood rather than general personhood. In contrast, Lauren Berlant (2008) argues that popular twentieth-century literature directed toward women’s culture makes women aspire towards general personhood rather than singular personhood. Through commodities, women’s culture makes women feel a sense of commonality, feel in similar ways and perform conventionally. Women are made to feel like women in particular yet general ways. “Look at all those pregnancy shoots and everything”, Sam gave as example, “you immediately want to get pregnant yourself, because you also want such a beautiful picture. Or a baby with perfect blue eyes and curls, I can imagine it makes others think: ‘oh, I want a child with curls and blue eyes too’.”⁷ Rather than to feel and act the

same way, my participants emphasized the importance to follow their own path, be true to themselves, and reach their full potential. “It is something I personally would never be able to do if I were a mother”²³, my participant Berit said.

In similar vein, another woman I spoke shared her thoughts about what abstaining from motherhood meant for her identity. She also emphasized the importance of being unique and separable from others (Lamb 2018). During the fieldwork I read several books about women who do not want to be mothers and posted about them on Instagram. One day, I read a post on Instagram from another childfree account, and she shared a quote from Sheila Heti’s book *Motherhood* (see Appendix 1). The quote made such an impact that I bought the book one day afterwards. Quickly afterwards I shared a post on my Instagram with the question how my followers would explain the experience of not being a mother, as it does not have a word yet. When I woke up the next day and picked up my phone, I noticed that I had received multiple reactions of different women. One woman explained that it allowed her to reclaim her identity as her own when she decided not to be a mother. For her, to become a mother, means to have an ‘*afgeleide identiteit*’²⁴. It means that you are not something yourself, but someone of someone else. For a long time, she doubted whether she would want to have such an identity, but it made her unhappy. The decision to abstain from motherhood and to reclaim her own identity provides her with happiness.



The women I have spoken to are not only taunted by the dominant imagination of ‘huisje-boompje-beestje’ that supposedly promises happiness, pronatal discourses also dispute their decision to not be a mother. Women in the Netherlands continue to be seen as mothers-to-be, because pronatalism argues that women are born with a maternal instinct and feminine qualities that are linked to caring for others (Donath, Berkovitch and Segal-Engelchin). However, my participants illustrate how caring for others, whether it be for a foster child or children at work,

²³ Informal conversation with Berit, March 15, 2022

²⁴ Roughly translated to “derived identity”

can exist side-by-side the decision not to be a mother. Furthermore, my participants challenge the belief that being worthy of recognition and someone who counts as woman is attained by motherhood. Rather, regardless of their reproductive choice, these women value being unique, separable of others, and being able to reach their full potential. Yet, these individualist desires do not outweigh other needs such as “the quest for companionship or urge to belong and to be taken care of (Lamb 2018, 53). Hence, in the next chapter I explore that women who do not want to be mothers still want to belong to kin or family, in whichever shapes it presents itself, and to be taken care of. Namely, they are emotionally and substantially part of “the other people, places, and things that make up their lived-in worlds” (Lamb 2008, 282).

Interlude: certainty

Oftentimes during the interviews, I ask my research participants if they have ever asked their own parents about their reasons to have children. The majority of women I speak to reply that they have never done that, but also tell me that they are curious to find out. It is such a normal question to ask why someone does not want to have children - something that most of the women who do not want to be mothers have to deal with occasionally. However, to ask the question the other way around is not that common yet. Since I started my fieldwork, I have also wondered about the reasons for my parents to have my brother and me. It has always been my plan to ask them sometime during the fieldwork. Moreover, I also want to share with them my own doubts of having children and becoming a mother. I am curious to see their reaction and to hear their thoughts.

It is a sunny day in March, and my family and I went to a theatre show together. We do not go to theatre shows often, but we went to the Tina Turner musical in Utrecht as we won free tickets from the state lottery. The show was fully booked, and we wondered how many people attended the show because of pure interest or because others had also won free tickets. It was an entertaining musical, yet the whole time I could not shake this nagging feeling in my stomach. A feeling similar to when it is your first day in class at high school and it is almost your turn to introduce yourself: a nervous feeling about what is to come. When am I going to ask my parents about their decision? When is the right moment? How will they react if I tell them I am not sure if I want to be a mother? The moment we stepped out of the theatre and walked to the car, I set my mind to it to ask my parents about their decision and to talk about my doubts during the car ride home. My brother decides to drive home, and my dad takes the seat next to him, whereas my mom and I take the seat in the back. The sun shines through the car windows. It warms my skins and makes me excited for this year's long summer nights.

When I hear Alicia Keys sing the words: "in New York, concrete jungle where dreams are made of...", I turn my head towards my mom and ask her: "why did you actually wanted to have children?". While my brother and dad continue talking about something I cannot follow, my mam starts to tell that she never wanted to have children until there came a moment it started to itch. Afterwards my parents made the conscious decision to have children, with my brother and me as evidence. It makes me wonder about this itch she is talking about; will I also get 'rammelende eierstokken' when I get older? And what does it feel like? At that same moment, my dad and my brother start to pick up the conversation and I ask my brother if he wants to have children if he gets older. While my brother shares his thoughts and wishes, I start to get a

little bit nervous again. I am back at my first day at high school and it is almost my turn to speak. Before I could lose myself in this feeling, my dad asks me: “do you want to have children?”.

“I am not sure”, I reply, “at this moment I don’t think so, and my boyfriend doesn’t want to have them either”. There, I said it. Immediately I feel a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I start to explain my reasons and my doubts, and I see my mom nodding her head. My parents understand and accept it. Even though I would not let their opinion influence my decision, I am happy about their reaction. I furthermore tell them how this research has been like a kind of therapy to me, and how it has given me a sense of relief. I found a lot of recognition in the stories of the women I have spoken to, and I felt a lot of space to just simply be there and to talk freely about these things. About all the possibilities, the advantages, but also the difficulties of not wanting to be a mother. It does not matter what I end up doing in life, every decision is going to be alright.

Chapter 3

(Non)normative families

Babette: “the friend of my mother became my second mother. She also has a daughter of 14 years old, and I have known her since she was born. So, to me, she is really my little sister even if we don’t share the same blood. It is real family to me. I also celebrate Christmas with them. My friend always says: ‘but those are friends you always invite’, but no, look... for me that’s really my second mom. I go to her when I am in need for a chat and a hug. That little one is also really my sister. To me that is more like family than the people with whom you share blood or DNA with.”

Tara: “so, in your opinion, can you choose your family then?”

Babette: “yes, I think so. I also think that ‘you have to do everything because it’s your family’... I think it’s just nonsense. When my boyfriend and I would break up and I need to leave my house tomorrow, hardly any of my cousins will support me whereas my chosen family will. Then I think, ‘yeah, if you weren’t there for me, why should I be there for you... because we’re family?’ The last time we got together as a family was over 3 years ago at my grandmother’s funeral.”¹²

When I started to ask my first few participants about their idea of family, I noticed that oftentimes my participants would explain the composition of their family of origin. However, after asking, for example, more thoroughly about the relationships they value most or about the common understanding in the Netherlands that one will be lonely without children at an old age, my participants could more easily express what family means to them. It oftentimes included friends, pets, the children of their friends, their partner or even solely themselves. The friend of Babette’s mother and her daughter, for example, feel like a second mother and little sister to her. Although every participant shared a different story about their family of origin, whom they considered family and how it makes them feel, I came to understand that most of these women build a nonnormative family and go beyond the heteronormative nuclear family that is biologically confined (Silver 2020).

In this chapter I first explore how in the Netherlands family and kinship remains to be defined in terms of biological relatedness or the one in which one is raised. Furthermore, it is

the nuclear family that is oftentimes reinforced as social and cultural norm. However, most of the women I have spoken to argue that anyone can be considered family. Thereafter, I explore one common question that most of my participants are taunted with. This is the question whether these women are afraid to be lonely when they are older. This question illuminates the belief that there are only individual families that are based on affect. Without a family on one's own, these women are perceived to end up alone without someone to take care of them and love them. Yet, my participants illuminate that the presence of children does not guarantee this either. At last, I show that belonging to kin and family is as important in the lives of the women I have spoken to as independence, freedom, being unique and separable. Hereby I take the relationship with their pets as example and argue that women who do not want to be mothers challenge binary conceptions of individualist and relational modes of personhood.

Anyone can be considered family

At the end of February, I met my first participant in a café in the middle of the city center. Fortunately, Tess was a colleague of mine so even though I was still quite nervous, I was confident that it would be a comfortable and good first conversation. Tess told me that she had always wanted to be a mother when she was younger. She had never thought about it thoroughly and assumed that having children was a normal step in someone's life. Yet, when she started to study and familiarized herself with contemporary issues such as climate change and other problems in the world, she questioned herself if it is reasonable to have children in a world that has these disastrous problems. However, she finds it difficult to imagine how her life would look like without children and sometimes even fears that she will end up alone later in life. Yet promptly afterwards she argued that children are not a guarantee that she will not be lonely when she is old. In her experience, family does not mean unconditional love. Her sister has a mild form of autism, and a small argument could irreparably break the relationship. However, she believes that Dutch society puts her in a corner with her family and makes her believe that she cannot choose family like she did with her friends. Yet, sharing blood with someone else does not mean much to her. Even though a few of my participants drew on conventional ideas about kinship and made references to biogenetic connections (Levine 2008), most of my participants shared similar thoughts with Tess about family. Most argued that family can be anyone. It is not tied to biological relatedness, but it can also be chosen. Moreover, family does not necessarily mean that there is by definition unconditional love.

Lauren Silver (2020, 220) argues that by questioning “who we consider to be family and how we make family, we can problematize the normative constraints so many different kinds of families encounter”. For example, she argues that queer people have no choice in whether they are accepted or rejected from their families of origin, and that in turn queer families are built only because of choice and intentionality. Fortunately, many of my participants have not been rejected by their families due to their decision not to be mothers. Yet, as Tess mentioned, the perception of family in the Netherlands remains to be defined in terms of biological relatedness or in which one is raised. For example, whereas Babette considers the friend of her mother as her second mom, her partner perceives them as friends as they are not related to each other. In turn, women who do not want to be mothers encounter normative constraints in who can be considered family and how they experience family.

Silver (2020) argues that the heteronormative nuclear family in the Global North has never been and continues to be largely a myth, as there have always been various nonnormative families such as single-parent-headed households, multiparent households or gay families. Furthermore, Donath, Berkovitch and Segal-Engelchin (2022) mention that the process of individualization within the Global North prioritizes the interest and needs of the individual in the name of “freedom of choice”. This includes the “ability to choose a type of family that can guarantee self-actualization, intimacy, and freedom” (Donath, Berkovitch and Segal-Engelchin 2022, 3). Yet, the nuclear family model continues to be reinforced as social and cultural norm - as a conventional good-life fantasy (Berlant 2011). It centers around the “heterosexual married couple of male breadwinner/female homemaker” (Tarrant 2011, ix) and anyone who is related by descent or adoption (Pathak 2017). For example, during Easter I saw a commercial of one of the largest supermarket chains named JUMBO²⁵ that represented a family that included such a heterosexual married couple with their own children. This supermarket chain oftentimes broadcasts commercials with this specific family, at least during each holiday such as Christmas or Easter. It reminded me of what my participant Susanne stated: “those [holidays] that you supposedly always have to celebrate with your family.”¹⁹

Yet, as mentioned before, most of my participants argue that family can be considered anyone. Emily stated for example: “there are many different ways to build your family, not only the one in which you were born. It can be with yourself, with your friends, any person you want.”¹⁸ My other participant Sam even sent me an image of a group of elephants that represented her idea of family (see image 1 or Appendix II). She stated that elephants always

²⁵ See commercial “Jumbo Dagje Uit 2022”: <https://youtu.be/yZ7HfZt-XEo>

take in baby orphans and consider them one of their own. Something similar she experiences with her friends and their children as she considers them family as well.

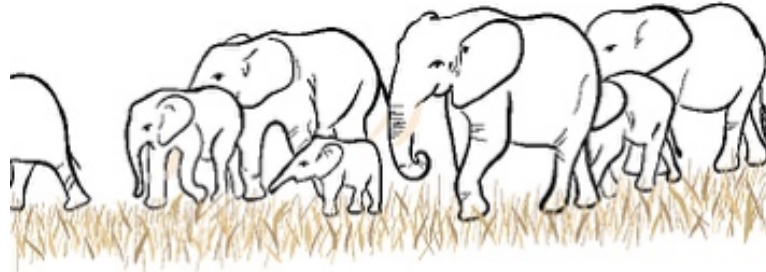


Image 1. Sam's idea of family (received March 6, 2022)

In other words, these women establish families on their own, besides maintaining ties with blood or adoptive relationships (Weston 1991). This is what Kath Weston (1991) famously named “families we choose”. She wrote about lesbian and gay families in San Francisco in the 1980s. Within these years gay men and lesbians were portrayed as people who either had no families or were threats to family. Rather, she argues, they formed families on their own. Kinship is not situated in the nuclear family, but also in relationships with former lovers, friendships, couple relations, and others. Hence, she challenges the idea that procreation is always the “base, ground, or centerpiece” of kinship (Weston 1991, 135). However, Ellen Lewin (2016, 599) illustrated in a more recent article that lesbians turned, the moment they became mothers, into strong adherents of “biological kinship as the foundation for the formation of solidary, reliable support networks”. Although Lewin (2016) does not claim that the families of the lesbian mothers are conventional, they resemble the family model that nongay people with children have always embraced. The rather recent research of Lewin illuminates that motherhood changed the meaning of kinship, and as I experienced during my fieldwork, abstaining from motherhood in turn also changed the meaning of kinship for women who do not want to be mothers. Babette, for example, foresees that within a couple of years many of friendships will change due to them becoming parents. She actively invests in relationships with friends who do not opt for parenthood and with whom she shares a childfree identity (Lewin 2016). She stated: “yes, when everyone has children, then we will still have each other.”¹²

“But are you not afraid you will get lonely when you are older?”

Halfway through my fieldwork I stumbled upon the videos of Sofie Rozendaal on YouTube. She had uploaded a mini documentary that was separated into 14 different vlogs about her doubts whether she wants to be a mother or not. One day I watched several vlogs in a row in which she conducted a little experiment. She became pregnant for one day and even had a baby for three days. Namely, she wore a pregnancy simulator to experience what it feels like to be nine months pregnant and took care of an infant simulator and fed it, responded to its cries, changed diapers, and dressed it. While she wore the pregnancy simulator, she mentioned that it made her happy and it made her go through a hormonal process she could not account for. Yet after she had to take care of the baby, her maternal feelings quickly eased off. She experienced first-hand all the reasons why she does not want to be a mother. Then I read the comment section and I quickly found a reaction of someone who believes that not having children means one will end up alone in a retirement home. There were a multitude of people who responded to refute the argument. In a similar vein, the women I have spoken to also receive the question if they are not afraid to be lonely when they are older. For example, Babette told me that she receives this question often, but she does not believe that children are a guarantee that they will take care of her when she is older. She furthermore perceives it not to be the duty of children. “They often ask me: ‘and later when you’re older and you end up alone?’ There are a lot of elderly people nowadays whose children don’t come to visit, so that is no guarantee that your children will take care of you. I don’t think it’s the duty of children to take care of you either. If you want to do it, yes, but my mom shouldn’t expect it when she’s 80 years old that she can live in my house and all that. If I want it myself, yes, but she shouldn’t expect it, do you understand where I put the nuance?”¹²

The common thought of being lonely without having children is rooted in the belief that Dutch society is composed of individual (nuclear) families that are based on affect – frequently expressed in words such as unconditional love (Tarrant 2011). As mentioned before, Tessa feels as if Dutch society puts her in a corner with the family that she was raised in. It limits her to this specific circle of people who supposedly are connected by unconditional love. Without having children and a family on her own, Tessa presumably will be lonely, without anyone to take care of her or to love her. Namely, other kin – in whatever shape it presents itself - are excluded from this vision (Cons 2018). Yet, most of the women I have spoken to explained that having children does not automatically signify the presence of a support system that would take care of them or love them (Ivanova and Dykstra 2015). Katya Ivanova and Pearl Dykstra (2015,

101) argue that “the quality of the emotional bond between family members is a substantially more important predicator of the provision of care than the sheer presence of children”. Sam for example explained to me that she considers her friends as family, and she has a stronger emotional bond with them than with her brother. “It’s not that I’m arguing with my brother, but I don’t have a warm relationship with my brother or anything like that. Yet I am always welcome at my best friend’s house, I can always go there. Her children are also very fond of me. They always get very excited when they see me, that’s really nice. Family, in my experience, is not blood related.”⁷ In this case, the relationship between Sam and her friends has the same enduring relatedness as those that are based on biology (Haraway 2016). These carry similar consequences such as obligations, accountabilities and pleasures. For example, Yolanda argues that celebrating holidays is not limited to the family in which one is raised. “I have enough people who are with our family... good friends of my parents for example, who either have no children or are divorced and the children are elsewhere for the holidays, or they don’t have contact with their children anymore, who then join us [during holidays]. That’s fine. You don’t necessarily need blood family to have family.”⁹

Following this train of thought, members of the chosen family can also take care of my participants at an older age and love them as blood relatives would do if the emotional bond were strong enough. However, most of my participants state that to not be lonely is “in your own hands”²⁶ and not the responsibility of another. “It’s really, I guess, what you do about it yourself⁷, my participants Teske stated. Maud, for example, is sad that she will not be a grandmother one day. Yet promptly afterwards, she argued that if she really wants that role, she will make sure that something like that will happen. Her nephews and the children of her best friend already consider her as Aunt Maud, so she also believes that she can fulfill the role of grandmother with them. She believes it is merely a title which a mother automatically gets when she has grandchildren, but in reality, being a grandmother is a wise woman who helps where necessary. Hence, Maud is not afraid to be lonely when she is older. She builds a family on her own and can be a grandmother without being a mother and having children on her own.

Those with little paws: a quest for companionship

After I had spoken to all the women who had reached out to me, I noticed something interesting. Almost all participants either have pets or want to have pets. When I would meet someone online, oftentimes their cat would walk in front of the screen or start miaowing and scratching

²⁶ Interview with Julie, March 23, 2022

the door to enter. When I would meet my participants in real life, most of them would proudly show pictures of their pets. Some even drew their pets on the drawing I asked them to make about their idea of family (see image 2 or Appendix III). Therefore, I started to ask more about the relationship these women have with the animals that take up a large part of their lives and play a significant role in the families of women who do not want to be mothers (Blackstone 2014). Namely, most of my participants view their pets as important family members, similar to how parents view their children. Donna Haraway (2016) states that kinship is not limited to solely humans but also includes more-than-humans such as pets. For example, Babette stated: “my dog is really my baby. People sometimes say: ‘the love you feel for your child is unique’. Then, parents are a bit angry when I then say: ‘oh well, the love I feel for my dog is also the same, in my opinion, because I would really walk into my house if it was on fire so I can save it or take a bullet for him’. Yes, okay... I didn’t give birth to him but besides that, I think I like him just as much as parents like their own child.”¹² Another participant of mine, Kamiela, told me she has had pets her whole life. This includes rabbits, horses and hamsters. When other women tell her that children give unconditional love, Kamiela rather argues that the love of an animal is purer and undoubtedly unconditional. “It doesn’t matter who you are, but your pet loves you. No matter what happens.”¹⁷ In her opinion, when you have children on your own, a lot can happen that could break the relationship. Another participant, Sophie, also told me that she perceives the love of her pets are purer. These women even told me they love animals more than they love humans.

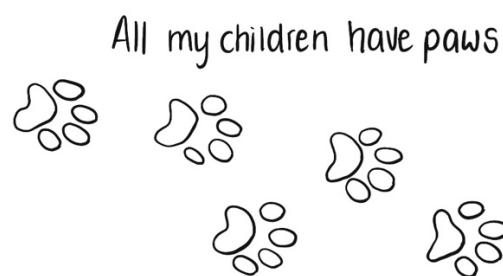


Image 2. Part of drawing of Ella’s idea of family (Received April 21, 2022)

In the last two chapters I have emphasized the freedom and independence that the woman I have talked to value, as well as being unique and separable from other. However, my participants are not limited to these conditions that they relate with. Namely, the individualist aims that women who do not want to be mothers pursue underscore the centrality of struggles to belong with and to others (Lamb 2018). As mentioned before, people from the Global North are oftentimes characterized as individual and independent subjects whereas people from the

Global South are seen as more related to one another (Glaskin 2012; Lamb 2008). This creates a false binary between individualist and relational modes of personhood. Even as the women I have spoken to strive to craft meaningful lives outside of motherhood, very few articulate their aspirations in terms of a drive for complete individual independence. This I have already shown with the last two parts written about the importance of family in the lives of these women, but the relationship with their pets also helps to understand that these women seek to belong with and to (non-human) others in a society that ‘normally’ centres motherhood and the nuclear family as a way to belong.

Sarah Lamb (2018) writes about the position of single women within India and the lived experiences of being positioned outside the norm. In a society in which “marriage is essential to their sense self-worth” (Thapan 2003, as quoted in Lamb 2018, 50), these women who abstain from marriage seek to redefine “what is good and normal” (Lamb 2018, 53). Simultaneously these women challenge binary conceptions of relational and individualist modes of personhood, as they are nonetheless on a quest for human belonging and want to “find a way to count in the social body” (Dickey 2013, as quoted in Lamb 2018, 51). In specific, family and kinship remain important to the women who abstain from marriage, even though in India the “normal” way to belong to a family has been through marriage. These women work hard to make “their own participation in kin relations possible – such as through legitimizing the kinds of lifelong ties to natal kin their brothers have always enjoyed, or adopting or bearing children as unmarried mothers, or cultivating kin-like living arrangements with nonblood companions” (Lamb 2018, 64). In a similar vein, when abstaining from motherhood, family and kinship remain important for the women I have come to know. Even if the family exist primarily of pets. Rosie told me her mother is the only member of her family left that is related by blood. The rest has either passed away or she does not have any contact with them. Yet, she stated: “I am never lonely, even though I am often alone.”¹¹ Namely, she has 7 cats. One sadly passed away recently. She buried the cat nearby her house in a little park and kept her little skull. “She will always remain part of the family of course.”



When abstaining from motherhood, the women I have come to know build their own family and do not limit themselves to the perception that family is defined in terms of biological relatedness, nor do they adhere to the hegemonic nuclear family model. Anyone can be considered family. This also makes it that these women are not afraid to be lonely when they are older. Alternative kinship structures can have the same enduringness and similar consequences such as pleasures and obligations as those that are based on biology (Haraway 2016). Moreover, these women argue that it is their own responsibility to not end up alone, and certainly not the responsibility of a child. At last, women who do not want to be mothers value being unique and separable from others, but also want to count in the social body and belong with and to others. Most of my participants emphasized the importance of family, in whatever shape it presents itself, and oftentimes consider their pets as important family members and little companions.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to answer the question how Dutch women in their adulthood who do not want to be mothers perceive and give meaning to notions of personhood and family within a pro-natalist society. After 5 months of immersing myself into the community of Dutch women who do not want to be mothers, I came to understand that these women are on a continuous quest to find an answer to what makes them *them*. They work to push beyond perceptions that women are intrinsically linked to motherhood and want to be considered worthy of recognition and someone who counts, regardless of their reproductive choice. They want to love and be loved and belong to a family that is not limited to relatives who are biologically related. Throughout the fieldwork, I continuously discovered the importance of the presence of Dutch women who do not want to be mothers and of those who share their stories online. Although this has been an anthropological research, I can argue that the many stories may have, to some extent, therapeutic powers for those who are in doubt or seek for recognition and belonging. The many reactions on my Instagram posts of women who want to share their own personal stories about their decision to not be a mother display the need for empathetic forms of understanding the lived experiences of Dutch women who abstain from motherhood.

The stories I have heard from Sam, Babette, Eveline, and the other women who do not want to be mothers invited me to reflect on notions of personhood and family in contemporary Dutch society. As these women are positioned outside the norm, they offer insightful perspectives on the norms, values and institutions of Dutch society (Lamb 2018). Similar to what anthropologists normally strive for – “to see the familiar more perceptively as we [anthropologists] step outside to make it strange” (Lamb 2018, 64) - women who divert from the ‘normal’ path of motherhood are placed outside of a familiar social identity, and from that position these women are able to speak about social, cultural and gendered norms in the Netherlands.

First, the lived experiences of the women I have come to know have shown that there is a hegemonic imagination of parenthood as a promise to happiness (Ahmed 2010). It is this trajectory in life that is normalized and reinforced as fantasy that happiness can solely be found in this particular place. My participants illustrated that abstaining from motherhood, as a present-day act that shapes a different future (Appadurai 2013; Bryant and Knight 2019), provides them with happiness. Simultaneously, these women are continuously reminded of the possible regrets that may follow the decision to not be a mother (D’Avelar 2022). This chapter illuminated that the increasing number of women who abstain from motherhood can be better

understood when we look at how these women organize their future (Salazar et al. 2017, 3). Hence, this research adds to and informs existing and future anthropological theory of the future.

Second, women who do not want to be mothers encounter normative pronatal constraints that centre motherhood to full personhood. It is then that women are perceived as worthy members of society (Appell-Waren 2014). Pronatalism continues to ascribe women as mother-to-be, due to their perceived maternal instincts and feminine traits that “are associated with caring for others” (Donath, Berkovitch and Segal-Engelchin 2022, 8). The women I have spoken to are regularly taunted by questions or comments that reflect these pronatal beliefs such as: “why do you not want to have children?” or “wait till your ovaries start to shake”. Whilst this research broadens the understanding that full personhood is attained through culturally recognized markers or by adhering to societal norms and expectations (Appell-Waren 2014), I also argue that to attain full personhood is not necessarily limited to these markers, norms and expectations. My participants have shown that they are unique and worthy of recognition (Lamb 2018), as some participants, for example, care for children of others without automatically identifying themselves as mothers. Yet, further studies on women who decided to have a foster child whilst defining themselves as decided with regard to abstaining from motherhood may enrich our understanding of what motherhood (or in this case otherhood) entails.

Third, the nuclear family as social and cultural norm disputes women who do not build a family with children on their own. Rather, they build their own family of chosen members (Weston 1991) and hereby challenge the nuclear family as ideal family model. This type of family centres around the heterosexual married couple and their children (Tarrant 2011). The chosen families of my participants also explain why there is most of the times no fear of being lonely at an older age. Alternative kinship structures carry a similar enduring relatedness as those that are based on blood (Haraway 2016). For example, one of my participants stated that her parent’s friends celebrate holidays such as Christmas with her family and are also considered family. Furthermore, this thesis contributes to challenging false binary conceptions of individual and relational modes of personhood (Lamb 2018). I explored how the women I have spoken to not only seek independence, freedom and individuality, but also want to belong with and to others (Lamb 2018). My participants emphasized the importance of belonging to their family, whether it exists of relatives that are related by blood, chosen members or non-humans such as their pets.

One last remark

This thesis focused solely on women who do not want to be mothers as I wanted to give voice to those who challenge pronatal beliefs that the word woman is synonymous with the word mother, and therefore I deliberately did not include women who do want to be mothers. As I abstain from motherhood myself and am therefore able to see something from the outside, I could more easily understand the lived experiences of Dutch women who do not want to be mothers and the social categories of kinship and motherhood. I furthermore did my utmost to ground my arguments in the stories of the women I have spoken to rather than to base them on my personal beliefs and thoughts, and I did my utmost to represent my research participants properly and truthfully in this thesis. However, the women I occasionally have spoken to alongside the fieldwork who either are mothers or want to be mothers also emphasized every so often the importance of making meaning beyond motherhood. Hence, further research on making meaning beyond motherhood, whether it comes to it as a mother, someone in between or as a non-mother, may contribute to a world in which the edges are not so sharp in the conversations we have with each other (Lane 2022).

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Appendices

Appendix I: Instagram post on Sheila Heti



“Recently I saw an Instagram post of someone who is reading Sheila Heti’s book. This is a novel about a 37-year-old woman who explores whether or not she wants children, being guided by other women’s experiences and fate. Her inner conflict in her head is clearly palpable, and her questions make you think about it too. The post on Instagram shared a quote from the book that also affects me a lot. I bought the book right after that. This was the quote:

“Maybe if I could somehow figure out what not having a child is an experience of – make it into an active action, rather than the lack of an action – I might know what I was experiencing, and not feel so much like I was waiting to act. I might be able to choose my life, and hold in my hands what I have chosen and show it to other people, and call it mine²⁷”

Motherhood and having a child in your life is something tangible. You can choose it and then you can hold it in your hands. But not having children? How do you describe the absence of

²⁷ Heti, Sheila. 2018. *Motherhood*. London: Vintage. p. 160

something? What is that experience, what is it called, without relating it to motherhood? What kind of ‘hood’ is that?

Waaaah, my brain is cracking. I can’t figure it out. How would you describe the experience of not having children? Is that a different experience than the life that parents had before having children?”

Appendix II: Sam’s idea of family



“A group of elephants always consist only of grandmothers, aunts, nieces and grandchildren. Only women. Males leave the group and join a smaller male group and, when the time is right, look for females. However, elephants always take care of an orphan. Although the group on the picture mainly contains blood relatives, this does not always have to be the case and ‘outsiders’ are also accepted. That’s family to me.”⁷

Appendix III: Drawing of Ella on her idea of family

