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Stegen, Hannelore; Switsers, Lise; De Donder, Liesbeth

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# **Life stories of voluntarily childless older people: a retrospective view on their reasons and experiences**

**- ACCEPTED FOR PUBLICATION -**

Hannelore Stegen,<sup>1,\*</sup> Lise Switsers,<sup>1,2</sup> Liesbeth De Donder<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

<sup>2</sup>Research Foundation Flanders (FWO), Egmontstraat 5, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

\*Corresponding Author:

Hannelore Stegen, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Email: hannelore.stegen@vub.be

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**Life stories of voluntarily childless older people: a retrospective view on their reasons and experiences.**

**Abstract**

This article investigates the reasons for and experiences of voluntary childlessness throughout the life course. Thirteen voluntarily childless people aged 60 years and older (Belgium) were interviewed using the McAdams approach (2005). Four profiles were derived from the reasons given for voluntary childlessness: the “liberated careerist,” the “social critic,” the “acquiescent partner,” and “voluntarily childless because of life course circumstances.” Results further indicate that older people experience feelings of acceptance, loss (missing familiarity with current trends, being helped, and children’s company), and relief concerning their voluntary childlessness. Moreover, they rarely seem to regret their choice. The discussion indicates the existence of voluntary childlessness among older people, a phenomenon sometimes questioned in the existing scientific literature. As part of a diverse target group, these older adults each have their personal reasons and experiences regarding childlessness.

## **Life stories of voluntarily childless older people: reasons and experiences**

Permanent childlessness in Europe has risen in recent decades, especially since the 1970s (Fiori et al., 2017; Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017). In western European countries (such as Belgium, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, England and Wales), trends in childlessness follow an asymmetric U-shaped pattern: around 25% of the women remained childless in the first quarter of the twentieth century, followed by a decline to 10-14% of women born in the 1940s (because of the Baby Boom around the 1960s (Van Bavel, 2014)). From the 1960s birth cohorts onward, we see that number went up again and 16-19% of women in these countries never had children (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017). For later birth cohorts, the trend towards increasing childlessness in western Europe has generally been stabilizing until now (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017). There are no current exact statistics on childlessness for Belgium, but according to Statbel, the Belgian statistical office, the crude birth rate decreased in 2019 for the seventh year in a row and stood then at 10.5 per mille (Statbel, 2019). In the United States, the percentage of women without children by the end of their reproductive years doubled from about 10 to 20% between the mid-1970s and the mid-2000s (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017). Since then, there was a small decline to around 15% in 2010-2012. For other countries such as Canada and Australia, there are similar trends because they also had the same Baby Boom in the 1950s and 1960s (McDonald & Belanger, 2016). Historically, overall fertility was higher in Canada than in Australia, but since the 1960s, the fertility rates of the most recent birth cohorts are higher in Australia, possibly because of the stronger Australian economy and family policy (McDonald & Belanger, 2016).

Despite the ups and downs in childlessness levels, there is thus an increase of childlessness since the 1960s. Fiori et al. (2017) indicate that this increase in childlessness is

mainly the result of two trends. On the one hand, there is a decrease in fertility because women are increasingly postponing having children. On the other hand, there is a greater social acceptance of childlessness due to changing norms and values. Since the 1960s, the possibility to choose whether or not to have children has also led to an upward trend in the number of people who voluntarily opt for childlessness (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017). A result of this increase in childlessness is the increased number of older adults who are voluntarily childless.

Although childlessness is often used in a dichotomized way (having children or not), research points out that reasons for childlessness vary greatly. Deindl and Brandt (2017) state that “childlessness may, for example, result from a free decision or it might be the involuntary consequence of not having a partner or due to biological problems” (p. 1545), making a distinction between voluntary and involuntary childlessness. With regard to the reasons for voluntary childlessness in general, there are several reasons for childlessness among younger people that are expected to be reflected in this study as well: one may prefer a career to a family (Ireland, 1993; Rybińska & Morgan, 2019), the choice may have been made in agreement with the partner (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2016; Veevers, 1980), one may be skeptical about society, resulting in a preference not to have children (Ireland, 1993; Smith et al., 2020), or there may be external circumstances leading to the permanent postponement of children (Rowlands & Lee, 2006; Stahnke et al., 2020).

Many studies on older people refer to infertility as the main cause of childlessness (Dykstra & Wagner, 2007). More recent research, however, acknowledges that childless older people form a heterogeneous group with various reasons for being childless (Wenger et al., 2007), both voluntary and involuntary. Tanturri and Mencarini (2008) state that such “a careful evaluation of the reasons behind voluntary childlessness is clearly relevant in a context where the consensus in the literature is that almost all women want at least one child”

(p. 56). Women born since the 1950s and 1960s have perceived less pressure to have children as religiosity has declined in Western countries (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008). Moreover, other interests, such as careers or leisure activities, are considered more important than children (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008).

As the number of voluntarily childless older adults is expected to increase in the coming years (Fiori et al., 2017), this research is interested in the life stories of voluntarily childless older people, in particular, in the reasons voluntarily childless older people had for making this choice and their experience of childlessness during the life course.

### **Defining Voluntary Childlessness**

There is no clear consensus on the meaning of childlessness in the existing literature. Dykstra and Hagestad (2007), for example, define the childless as “those who have no living biological or adoptive children” (pp. 1295-1296). According to them, those who only have stepchildren or foster children are also considered childless, while Fiori et al. (2017) consider people who only have stepchildren as not childless. Moreover, people can also be defined as childless if their children predecease them (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007). However, Dykstra and Hagestad (2007) argue that this group is very similar to parents in terms of reasoning because they have experienced what it is like to be a parent. In trying to overcome these discussion points, researchers attempt to define voluntary and involuntary childlessness. Conner and Stith (2014) describe voluntarily childless people as “those who do not desire to have children” (p. 205), and Dykstra and Hagestad (2007) describe this group as people who did not want children, who were too busy with other things, or had interests other than having children. According to them, involuntary childlessness is mainly applicable in a medical-biological context, especially when fertility problems occur (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007). Some studies mention a third category, the so-called postponers (Dykstra & Liefbroer, 1998;

Peterson, 2015), who can be seen as inadvertently childless. This third group refers to women who postpone having children for career, education, and lifestyle reasons, which ultimately limits their chance of having children.

There have always been older childless adults. However, the question remains as to whether a distinction between voluntary and involuntary childlessness is interesting. Older adults grew up with different norms and values, so looking at their reasons for childlessness from a contemporary perspective must be done very carefully (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007). Young people today for example sometimes doubt their choice to remain childless (Ahmadi et al., 2019), or already experienced a stigma at an early age as a result of their voluntary childlessness (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). Also the fear of regret in the future sometimes plays a role in the decision-making process (Parlak & Tekin, 2020). Therefore, it is interesting to examine how older people look back on their voluntary childlessness, to determine whether the assumptions or fear of younger generations are correct.

Even in today's older age cohorts, there were already pioneers in making individual decisions, who therefore attached more importance to education and work than to parenthood (Hagestad & Call, 2007). Especially among women, there is generally a strong positive relationship between education and childlessness (Keizer et al., 2008).

### **Theories and Concepts Explaining Voluntary Childlessness**

A common theory in this context is the "choice biography" of the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, as opposed to the "normal biography" (Keizer et al., 2008). Since the 1970s, people have had more opportunities to make individual choices, and childlessness has increasingly been seen as a deliberate individual choice, in part due to the availability of contraceptives (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Peterson, 2015). This tendency is in line with Hakim's preference theory (1998), in which women increasingly follow their personal preferences without being stigmatized. Their decisions affect their desire to have children.

Hakim's theory arose from the idea that, from the mid-1960s onwards, contraceptives gave women more independent control over their own lives. Since then, women have been able to choose between career and motherhood or a combination of both (Hakim, 1998).

Peterson's freedom versus risk discourse (2015) is another way of looking at voluntary childlessness. People who choose not to have children can consider this as a freedom, wherein autonomy and independence predominate. Following the risk discourse, they see children as a barrier to their personal development (Peterson, 2015).

Finally, not only personal reasons but also context can play a role in choosing childlessness. Factors such as cultural differences (Gibney et al., 2017; Peterson, 2015) and the historical context (Hagestad & Call, 2007; Koropecykj-Cox & Call, 2007) can explain the choice of childlessness. Voluntary childlessness is more common in countries with a highly developed welfare state, such as Sweden (Peterson, 2015) or Norway (Gibney et al., 2017). Modernization and emancipation have led to strong gender equality in Sweden, making it easier to accept voluntary childlessness (Peterson, 2015). Also, in the Norwegian welfare state, children are no longer seen as so-called insurance for old age (Gibney et al., 2017). Historically, events such as the Second World War and the Great Depression could have had a negative impact on the number of children (Hagestad & Call, 2007). Koropecykj-Cox and Call (2007) add that the generation of older people who were children during the Second World War have more children than the generation before. However, Dykstra and Hagestad (2007) point out that, from the 1970s onwards, due to the importance of Beck's choice biography, more and more people were able to choose childlessness. The result was that having children was no longer a foregone conclusion.

In conclusion, a review of the relevant literature indicates that voluntary childlessness among older people has not been widely investigated. Most studies deal either with childlessness in general among older people or with voluntary childlessness in general, but



not both in combination. There is still a great deal of uncertainty about the existence of voluntary childlessness among older people. The circumstances in which older people grew up differ from those of younger age cohorts, and the question remains as to whether a voluntary choice of childlessness was possible at that time (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007). The perception of one's own childlessness also determines a great deal, since the specific reasons for childlessness also determine the description that people give to their own childlessness (Connidis & McMullin, 1996). This research, therefore, focuses on the specific target group of voluntarily childless older people. Three major components are researched:

1. How do voluntarily childless older people perceive their life course (including their future life course)?
2. What reasons did voluntarily childless older people have for not opting for children when they were younger?
3. How do voluntarily childless older people experience their childlessness throughout their lives?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants in this qualitative research were 13 voluntarily childless people, born between 1935 and 1958, living in Flanders or Brussels (Belgium). All participants, six men and seven women, have Belgian nationality. Participants were married (1), living together (4), widowed (5), divorced (1), or single (2). Eleven participants were retired while two were still at work. Eleven participants lived at home, and two lived in a residential care center. All participants spoke Dutch, which is the first author's native language (and it was the first author who conducted the interviews).

In terms of inclusion criteria, the older participants had to be voluntarily childless. We followed the delineation of Conner and Stith (2014), who describe voluntarily childless

people as “those who do not desire to have children” (p. 205) and thus chose not to have children for various reasons, exclusive of involuntarily childless. Although voluntary childlessness in the narrow sense implies a well-considered choice of childlessness, the so-called postponers (Dykstra & Liefbroer, 1998; Peterson, 2015) were also included in the data collection. Operationally this meant that the inclusion criteria were: (1) the childlessness of the participants could not be attributed to medical-biological causes (e.g., fertility problems) and (2) they perceived themselves as “voluntarily childless.”

In this study, 8 participants considered their childlessness as a result of their own choice, and 5 of them postponed having children for career, education, and lifestyle reasons, which ultimately limited their chance of having children. Despite this differentiation, participants from both categories considered themselves as ‘voluntarily childless’.

### **Interview Protocol**

McAdams’ life story approach (2005) was used to interview each participant. Life stories have previously been used as a research method in discussions of personal matters, for example, among financially excluded older adults (e.g., Van Regenmortel et al., 2019). The life story method was considered appropriate for interviewing voluntarily childless older people because the participants were encouraged to talk about personal matters (Van Regenmortel et al., 2019). In these life stories, the focus was, on the one hand, on the meanings that people assign to their lives, and, on the other hand, on the life course as a psychosocial construct reflecting personal convictions, values, and traditions in society (McAdams, 2005). During the life story interviews, each participant was given the time to tell their life story. The beginning of each interview focused on the participants’ actual life story, asking them to consider their own life as a book and divide this book into chapters (between two and seven for practical reasons). After reviewing the chapters of their life, we discussed the reasons for their childlessness and the corresponding experiences throughout their lives.

There was also a hypothetical section in each interview: if the participant had not been childless, what aspects of their lives would be different? Finally, the participants were asked to look ahead by adding a future chapter to their life story. The main questions asked during the interviews are as follows:

1. Suppose you had to divide your life into chapters, just like a book. Into which chapters would you divide your life? What would the titles of these chapters be? Describe the chapters of your life story.
2. Why do you not have children?
3. Tell me something about how you experienced your life without children. Was the experience different across the different chapters of your life?
4. If you had children, would your life have been different?
5. You have already described your chapters and the important scenes of your life story. Please describe how you see the next chapter in your life. What does your future chapter consist of?

## **Procedures**

The interviews were conducted between November 2018 and April 2019 and lasted on average 1hr 57min; the shortest interview lasted 1hr 26 min and the longest 2hr 35min. To reach participants, the personal network of the first author was consulted. Several organizations working with older people also sourced interviewees (e.g., via newsletter or Facebook). Fifty recruitment posters were distributed throughout Flanders and Brussels (e.g., in residential care centers, cultural centers, community centers, and local service centers), and the snowball method was used. When a potentially interested participant contacted the first author (via email or telephone), the aim of the research and the eligibility of the participant (e.g., voluntary childlessness) were discussed. Then, the information letter was sent by email so that each participant had the opportunity to ask questions in advance or to choose not to

participate in the study. When the participant did not have an email address, the first author visited the participant to personally deliver the information letter with some explanations. Each participant was free to choose where and when the interview would be conducted. Twelve interviews took place in the home environment (at home or in the participant's residential care center), and one interview was conducted at the university, at the request of the participant involved. At the start of the interview, each participant signed an informed consent form, and the structure and purpose of the interview were briefly discussed before the actual interview.

### **Analyses**

During the analysis procedure, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. The MAXQDA analysis program was used to analyze the data. A thematic analysis was executed to explore themes such as the reasons and the experiences related to voluntary childlessness. Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The reasons for voluntary childlessness were analyzed inductively. In the inductive analysis of the reasons, three steps (Kaiser & Presmeg, 2019) were followed: (1) open coding (i.e., all possible answers to the question about the reasons for childlessness were indicated with the corresponding label); (2) axial coding, to relate codes to each other (e.g., “reducing the ecological footprint” and “the fear of overpopulation” fitted within the label “environment”); (3) selective coding (i.e., to derive a number of typologies of voluntarily childless older people from their reasons to remain childless, different labels from the previous steps were linked with each other in order to arrive at four profiles). For the experiences, the analysis started with a deductive approach. Some labels were determined in advance, based on the literature, for example, “regret” (Wenger et al., 2007), “acceptance” (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007), and “loss” (Rowland, 2007).

The results section includes quotations to support the findings. These quotations have been translated from Dutch to English, and their expression was clarified. The first author, who also followed a course on Academic English, was responsible for these translations, and the translations have been reviewed by English language editing services.

## Results

### How Voluntarily Childless Older People Experience their Life Course

The interviews for this study were conducted using the McAdams' life story approach (McAdams, 2005). An overview of the results is presented in table 1 below, which will be discussed in more detail further on.

Table 1. Overview of the 13 participants of this study

Participant	Demographics			Life story		Profile each participant belongs the most to*
	Age	Gender (M/F/X)	Partnership	Number of chapters	Categories? (chronological / themes)	
1	68	F	Divorced	6	Chronological	1
2	67	M	Divorced	7	Chronological	2
3	70	M	Divorced	4	Chronological	3
4	83	F	Widowed	3	Themes	1
5	61	M	Single	6	Chronological	3
6	72	M	Cohabiting	4	Chronological	4
7	62	F	Cohabiting	6	Chronological	1
8	84	F	Single	5	Chronological	4
9	71	M	Widowed	5	Chronological	3
10	62	M	Single	7	Chronological	2
11	67	F	Married	7	Chronological	4
12	82	F	Widowed	5	Chronological	4
13	77	F	Widowed	6	Chronological	1

\* 1 = liberated careerist, 2 = social critic, 3 = acquiescent partner, 4 = voluntarily childless because of life course circumstances

First, each participant was asked to divide their life into a number of chapters with a description of each chapter and the reason(s) for choosing this specific subdivision. The various chapters reflected their life story up to the time of the interview.

Almost all participants chose to divide their lives chronologically. Moreover, the division among these participants was quite similar: most of the participants started with their youth in the first chapter, followed by a chapter about secondary school, and sometimes university studies. For many participants, these first chapters were followed by the so-called adult life. This period often consisted of two, three, or more chapters. Some participants categorized their lives based on their careers (different jobs, for example), different residences, or the number of relationships they had. For many participants, the final chapter was the retirement chapter, where participants indicated that they were living their lives at their own pace after the end of their careers. One participant divided her life into three main themes, namely “work,” “holidays,” and “sports.” By dividing life into themes, events from the entire life course eventually emerged.

### **Reasons for Being Voluntarily Childless: Four Profiles Derived**

The analysis resulted in four profiles of voluntarily childless older people: “the liberated careerist,” “the social critic,” “the acquiescent partner,” and “voluntarily childless because of life course circumstances.”

The first profile is the so-called liberated careerist. Although men can also prioritize their careers over a family life, in our participant group, only women gave explicitly their careers as a reason. These participants never wanted to stay at home and take care of the children while their husbands provided the family income. In other words, maintaining independence from their partners was an important motivation. These participants expressed the importance of the period in which they were born. They mentioned that they grew up in a period characterized by the availability of contraception and the emergence of feminism,

giving them an increasingly critical view of society. One participant, for example, was voluntarily sterilized at a young age and said the following:

I absolutely wanted to continue working; there was no way that I would stay at home as a mother.... Just, yes, a free woman, and yes, feminism, I am from that period.  
(woman, 68 years old)

The liberated careerists were often characterized by the absence of the sense of being a parent (cf. the sense of motherhood). They said they did not experience the feeling of longing to have biological children and to take care of them. One participant even indicated that the relationship with her husband might not have lasted if he had wanted children.

A second profile distinguished is the social critic. Those in this category of voluntarily childless older people had typically developed specific socio-critical ideas from an early age, which later contributed to their childlessness. The most common concerns were about ecology, climate, overpopulation, global warming, politics, and events such as wars and famines, as well as their consequences. The following statement explains this:

Now, the toughest ecological footprint you can make on this world is, in my opinion, having a child. I know that what I'm saying may be very controversial, but every descendant is someone who is going to pollute again. Due to the fact that I don't have any descendants, I didn't participate in that part of the pollution of the planet. (man, 67 years old)

These participants saw themselves as rebels, in the sense that they sometimes had ideas that could seem controversial. These social critics also took issue with people who have children without considering the consequences of having a child. Their critical view of society even made them anxious about the fact that something bad might happen to their own child.

The acquiescent partner is a third type of voluntarily childless older people. They ascribed their childlessness largely to their partner's initial choice, with which they agreed. The partner's reasons for remaining childless varied. In the interviews, the partners

themselves were voluntarily childless from an early age, though in some cases a pregnancy would have entailed too many health risks.

A final, broader category of voluntarily childless older people covers the whole of life course circumstances. These older people experienced situations throughout their lives that led to the choice of childlessness. Advice from others, events in their youth, or particular life choices they made reinforced the idea of remaining childless. They differ from the acquiescent partner in that, to a certain extent, the life course circumstances choice was that of the older person themselves, while acquiescent partners made the choice with their partners. Some examples of this fourth profile are explained in the following quotations:

So in primary school, I had, um, good friends and their parents were divorced.... But a divorce at the time affected the children. The children were judged for that, very much so.... And, I was like, "I don't want to see my children making choices." (man, 61 years old)

It's always the right time, in the right place, it's just what it is in general, and so, I don't think I've met the right man in the right place. (woman, 67 years old)

Other events, such as having a grandfather who advised against having children or making the choice of monastic life, were also circumstances that negated the wish to have children.

### **Experiences of Being Voluntarily Childless**

The participants were asked about their experience of voluntary childlessness. The main responses were acceptance, loss, regret, and relief. In table 2 below, the most mentioned experiences are shown for every participant, as well as the demographics and the profile they belong to the most. It is interesting to note that these experiences do not seem to depend on the profile to which the older person belongs (no trend is visible). This means that the feelings older people experience, might depend on the individual personality of each older person, and not on the profile they belong to.



Table 2. Overview of the 13 participants and their mentioned experiences

Participant	Demographics			Profile each participant belongs the most to*	Mentioned experience			
	Age	Gender (M/F/X)	Partnership		Acceptance	Loss	Relief	Regret
1	68	F	Divorced	1		X	X	
2	67	M	Divorced	2		X	X	
3	70	M	Divorced	3	X	X	X	
4	83	F	Widowed	1		X	X	X
5	61	M	Single	3		X	X	
6	72	M	Cohabiting	4		X	X	
7	62	F	Cohabiting	1			X	
8	84	F	Single	4	X			
9	71	M	Widowed	3	X	X	X	
10	62	M	Single	2	X	X	X	
11	67	F	Married	4	X		X	
12	82	F	Widowed	4	X	X	X	
13	77	F	Widowed	1	X	X		

\* 1 = liberated careerist, 2 = social critic, 3 = acquiescent partner, 4 = voluntarily childless because of life course circumstances

The first feeling that some participants expressed was a feeling of acceptance, namely the feeling that, after an initial period of doubt and coping with the stigma of voluntary childlessness, they were convinced that childlessness was the right choice for them. These participants embraced their childlessness more and more throughout their lives, and happily accept their current situation.

Among some participants, a sense of acceptance was accompanied by a sense of loss associated with voluntary childlessness (namely missing some familiarity with current trends, missing being helped, and missing the company of children). Although the choice of childlessness was voluntary, some participants still experienced gaps in their lives. The loss

referred, for example, to lack of familiarity with the world of today's younger generations, such as recent evolutions in technology or the educational sector. A participant explained this as follows:

Everything about education, I'm not sure about that, also about study choices and so on, that's one point. Then everything that, um... has to do with IT, I'm very sure that children would have kept me more up to date. (man, 61 years old)

Not receiving help (e.g., to go shopping) was also sometimes cited as something lacking, although several participants added that this should not be a reason to have children. Missing the company of children was also a factor. This includes not having someone with mental or physical similarities, not being able to transfer their knowledge, insights, and skills (i.e., a lack of generativity), and the occasional lack of company and the network of friends that children tend to have. One participant explained this as follows:

On the other hand, you don't have that coziness either. When my sister's children come over, you feel more like having a family, a feeling you don't have at other moments. (man, 62 years old)

Nevertheless, many participants reported filling the possible gap due to their childlessness with other activities or persons. Some participants, for example, filled their time without children by engaging in other activities, such as working, playing sports, or traveling. Sometimes, other young people in the participant's immediate vicinity, such as foster children, stepchildren, nephews, nieces, godchildren, or the children of friends, performed the children's role. However, this substitution was often only partial, mainly because the participants were not the parents of these children. This means that the parental role did not belong to them.

In addition to acceptance and loss, participants also talked about the feeling of not having any regrets. Many participants agreed on this aspect: they did not regret choosing a life without children. One of the participants indicated that at the beginning she regretted a little that she had made this choice, but this feeling quickly passed away. The following

participant never experienced a sense of motherhood, and therefore she did not regret her choice to remain childless:

I've never regretted that we don't have children, because I've always said, and I still often say this now, the older I got or am getting, the more important it is, I think, that we don't have children. (woman, 62 years old)

Besides lack of regret, some participants also explicitly mentioned a sense of relief.

This relief was often a result of not experiencing the possible misery that children could have brought (due to illness, poor school results, puberty issues, or difficulties in later life).

The hypothetical question of how their life would have been with children proved difficult to answer for most participants, despite some having been in close contact with children (e.g., foster children, stepchildren, godchildren). Some female participants said they would have been a proud mother, but their careers would still play an important role, whether adapted to a life with children or not. Also, several participants suspected that their social network might have been more extensive, through contact with the parents of their children's friends.

Some participants mentioned that they would have passed on to their children some of their personal values, norms, and lifestyle. They would have encouraged them to take an interest in sports, to choose a career in youth work, not to smoke, or they would have taught them to drive. Of course, these values and norms were strongly related to the interests of each participant. In any case, all participants agreed that having children would undeniably have had a significant impact on their lives.

During the interviews, the question of whether the participants had ever considered having children was discussed. The answers varied: some participants firmly answered no, while others admitted that they had considered having children of their own.

### **Vision of Future Life Course.**

Each participant was asked to add one more chapter to their life story to highlight their vision of the future. Themes covered by the participants were: health and care, financial prospects, and anticipation of the deaths of people around them.

Health was the first theme for many participants in their chapter on the future. Participants wished to enjoy their lives with the best possible health and, where possible, with their partners. Usually, they no longer had any big plans or dreams, although, in some cases, travel was still a realistic option. Some participants were a little concerned about the future. Often these fears were related to their view of aging and the additional need for care because they had no children on which to rely. A female participant, for example, linked her concerns to whether or not she regretted her choice of childlessness. At the time of the interview, she had no regrets about her decision. However, she indicated that the absence of urgent health problems played an important role in her attitude. If the need for care were to become pressing, she believed that a sense of regret could still arise:

As long as you're in good health, you're active, and you don't have any problems, then you don't think about anything, right? And as long as you have your partner. But it's after that; maybe I won't feel this way in ten years' time? (woman, 67 years old)

However, several participants indicated that they were quite independent and that they wanted to burden as few people as possible when the time came that they needed care. That is why a number of participants had already made the necessary arrangements for a Physician-assisted Death<sup>1</sup> to be a real possibility when the need for care became too urgent. Formal care was also an option for some participants, but only to a limited extent (unless the participant was already living in a residential care center).

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<sup>1</sup> In Belgium, a Physician-assisted Death is legally allowed for patients in a state that, medically, has no prospect of improvement (Cohen-Almagor & Ely, 2018).

Having sufficient financial resources was sometimes a second concern. For example, one participant was worried about what would happen to his property after his death because he did not have children who would inherit it. Although this participant did have stepchildren, he was not married to his current partner, and Belgian law does not consider the stepchildren to be *his* children. As he explains here:

My biggest concern, that was, I have... I'm not really impecunious. I have a nice house. I have some money. I have a pension and all of it, but what will happen when I die? (man, 67 years old)

Lastly, the fear of losing people also played a role for some participants, as the following quotation makes clear:

That's the worst thing about getting old, isn't it, seeing all those people you love disappear and have to miss them, yeah.... But yes, that's life, isn't it? (woman, 82 years old)

## **Discussion**

This study used the life story approach of McAdams (2005) to examine the life stories of voluntarily childless older people. The focus was on the reasons for their voluntary childlessness and their experiences of childlessness throughout their life course.

First, concerning the life story, the interviewer requested the participants to divide their lives into chapters. Almost all participants divided their lives chronologically into chapters, but a division into themes was also possible. The fact that most participants divided their life story in different chapters following a similar pattern, i.e. in (often chronological) chapters with a clear starting and ending point (new job, new place of residence, new partner), can be explained by the fact that human lives consist of a series of events and circumstances which, although specific, are all part of archetypal experiences common to every human being. Atkinson (2001) calls this an 'innate blueprint', and refers to the idea that telling a life story in this way is characteristic of human nature, as part of a timeless and universal context. Nevertheless, there are studies, such as the one of Van Regenmortel

(2017), that show that older people might also compose their life stories following different (and thus not similar) patterns. Much depends on the interview guidelines given by the interviewer, the context and the older person who was interviewed.

Second, regarding reasons for childlessness, four profiles of voluntarily childless older people can be distinguished from the data. Nevertheless, these profiles and their meaning are not completely new: preferring a career to a family life (Ireland, 1993; Rybińska & Morgan, 2019), not following the norm by rejecting fixed gender roles (Ireland, 1993) and having a critical view on society (Smith et al., 2020), having a partner who would rather not have children (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2016; Veevers, 1980) and, due to circumstances, finding it too late to have children (Rowlands & Lee, 2006; Stahnke et al., 2020) were already discussed in older and new existing research on voluntary childlessness (in general, not only among older adults).

The first profile discussed in this study is the liberated careerist. This profile describes women who did not wish to stay at home and take care of children while their husbands provided the family income. In earlier studies, Ireland (1993) and recently Rybińska and Morgan (2019) described a similar profile with resembling characteristics. A period effect partly explains this profile (Kowske et al., 2010, p. 268); the rise of feminism and the increasing availability of contraception made it possible for women to prioritize their careers. On the one hand, these findings accord with Hakim's (1998) preference theory, which indicates that women are increasingly able to follow their personal preferences (including having children or not); on the other hand, they accord with Beck's choice biography (Keizer et al., 2008), in which people have more opportunities to make individual choices.

The second profile is the social critic. This type of voluntarily childless older person looks critically at society from an early age, including in the field of ecology. According to them, the world in which we live is not ideal for raising children because of problems

concerning ecology, climate, overpopulation, global warming, politics, and events such as wars and famines. These older people want to avoid the responsibility that comes with caring for a child. All these insights fit within the so-called risk discourse, in which humanitarian and ecological risks can also play a role (Moore, 2017; Peterson, 2015). It also matches with a similar profile description discussed by Smith et al. (2020), albeit among younger men.

The third profile is the acquiescent partner. Characteristics of this profile were already mentioned in 1980 by Veevers (1980), but also in more recent research by Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2016). These older people attribute their choice of childlessness to their partner, who, in their opinion, took the initial decision. However, they agreed with this choice, and their acquiescence increased throughout their lives. Lee and Zvonkovic (2014) talk about an evolution from agreement to acceptance when choosing voluntary childlessness, with the emphasis on the couple that makes the decision, and not on one of the two partners. Although acquiescent partners can sometimes make it seem that the decision was entirely their partner's, it is often the case that the voluntary choice to remain childless comes from both partners (Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014).

Finally, the fourth profile covers the broader scope of the life course circumstances that have led to voluntary childlessness (i.e. voluntarily childless because of life course circumstances). Also Rowlands and Lee (2006) and Stahnke et al. (2020) indicated that circumstances in youth, advice from a close relative, or particular life choices can strongly influence the choice to remain childless. Connidis and McMullin (1996) prefer to distinguish between childlessness as a choice and childlessness due to circumstances, as opposed to the dichotomy of voluntary versus involuntary childlessness. This shows that it is not always easy to state clearly whether childlessness is voluntary or involuntary, especially when triggered by a life event (Dykstra, 2009; Dykstra & Liefbroer, 1998).

Third, regarding experiences, voluntarily childless older people experience feelings ranging from acceptance to a feeling of (no) regret, relief, and loss (namely missing some familiarity with current trends, missing being helped, and missing children's company). Missing the company of children was recognized as early as 1980: in Baum and Cope's study, voluntarily childless people expressed that not having children means missing their company. Nevertheless, voluntarily childless older people do not often regret their choice to remain childless, and some even explicitly experience a feeling of relief. Young people today indicate that they sometimes doubt whether they would remain childless or not (Ahmadi et al., 2019), but the experiences of the older generations make clear that the fear of regret experienced by young people today when choosing for childlessness (Parlak & Tekin, 2020) is thus not always appropriate. Jeffries and Konnert furthermore indicated in 2002 that "those who do not perceive their childlessness as a choice are more likely to express regret, and these regrets are typically more serious and sustained" (p. 103). The interviews also showed that older people's lives could have been different if they had children, for example, in terms of the size of their social networks (parents of their children's friends). The gap that may arise as a result of childlessness is sometimes partly filled, either by other (sometimes young) people in their immediate surroundings (Albertini & Kohli, 2009) or by spending more time working, playing sports, or traveling. Despite everything, the stigma of voluntary childlessness is still palpable for the voluntarily childless older people until today, something that also the younger generations experience (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017).

Lastly, some participants were a little concerned about the future, but they also cherished some dreams. In accordance with McAdams' life story approach (2005), each participant was asked to add one more chapter to their life story to highlight their vision of the future. Themes covered by the participants were health and care, financial prospects, and anticipation of the deaths of people around them. Concerning financial prospects, older



people in general (not just the voluntarily childless) have concerns about being able to make ends meet at the end of the month (Litwin & Meir, 2013). Concerns regarding coping strategies for health and death are also common among older adults in general, and not just the voluntarily childless. For example, some older people go through a transition period to reorganize their thinking and behavior to cope with their increased fears of death. The outcome of this transition period is better adaptation to the end-of-life phase with increased acceptance of death (Cicirelli, 2003). It can also be assumed that voluntarily childless older people go through this transition period: for example, some participants stated that they had made the necessary arrangements for euthanasia to be a real possibility when the need for care became too urgent.

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

This study has several limitations. First, potential participants had to respond to an advertisement (via a Facebook call, poster, or online newsletter) if they were interested in participating. Therefore, the older people who participated were already engaged to a certain extent. In other words, selection bias is possible (Hernán et al., 2004). This bias goes even further because the interviews and the literature show that there is still a stigma about voluntary childlessness (Moore, 2017). Because of this, some older people may have preferred not to participate and, therefore, did not register for participation (Stevenson et al., 2018, p. 2). Moreover, Stevenson et al. (2018, p. 2) indicate that the diversity of the researched population may not be reflected in the people who wanted to participate. Therefore, the four profiles mentioned in this article are not exhaustive, because they only provide one possible classification of the heterogeneity of reasons for older people being voluntarily childless.

A second possible limitation is that there is no such thing as a single story: a life story is a “cultural construct” (Jupp, 2006, p. 160). The participants experience their lives in a

highly individual and subjective way (Van Regenmortel et al., 2019). They may not mention some details that seem unimportant to them but might be relevant for this study. Also, there may be an element of social desirability, with participants telling a story differently because they think that a certain version is more desirable than another (Jupp, 2006, p. 161).

There are many opportunities for more in-depth research into voluntarily childless older people. Longitudinal research, for example, can provide more in-depth insight into the theme through repeated surveys of the same population (Christensen et al., 2011) or through qualitative biographical studies (Hermanowicz, 2016; Van Regenmortel et al., 2019). There may be changes and developments over the years in the reasons given and in the experiences indicated for voluntary childlessness.

In this study, the number of participants was 13 because the chosen interview technique, life story interviews, is very time-consuming (Jupp, 2006, p. 159). However, the 13 participants showed similar personal characteristics in some areas: most participants were between 60 and 79 (only three were older than 80), while all of them had Belgian roots and were heterosexual. Future research with more diverse participants, including more people aged over 80, older people with a migration background, and a mix of sexual orientations, could generate new insights on this topic.

Another suggestion for further research comes from the idea that voluntary childlessness is difficult to define. The question arises whether a strict dichotomy of involuntary versus voluntary childlessness is relevant because childlessness sometimes results from living conditions and not necessarily from a conscious choice (Dykstra, 2009; Dykstra & Liefbroer, 1998). Also, unwanted circumstances may cause voluntary childlessness (Connidis & McMullin, 1996; Rowland, 2007). Therefore, a third recommendation is to develop methods to define people's childlessness in order to create more clarity about the different gradations that (voluntary) childlessness can have.

## **Conclusion**

This research aimed to explore the life stories of voluntarily childless older people and to map out the reasons for and experiences of voluntary childlessness. In the life stories of voluntarily childless older people, it became clear that they still have plans, but that they also have concerns about the future (health and care, financial prospects, and death). From the reasons for childlessness, four profiles can be deduced (the liberated careerist, the social critic, the acquiescent partner, and voluntarily childless because of life course circumstances). Despite the fact that the content of these profiles is not completely new, they combine ideas from different earlier studies. Describing their experiences of voluntary childlessness, the participants reported feelings of acceptance, loss, relief, and not regretting their choice (which is interesting for younger generations, because they often fear to regret their voluntary childlessness in the future). All participants agreed that having children would undeniably have had a major impact on their lives. Further research is needed to recognize the diversity of this target group, so that future generations also know what to expect if they voluntarily opt for childlessness. This study aims to open the way for more in-depth research, because having children is not inevitable, even for current older generations.

## **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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