

# When men choose to be childless: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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## Abstract

A growing number of individuals expressly choose to remain childless, yet research exploring these intentions in men remains scarce. This study examines the experiences, subjective reasoning, and decision-making processes of voluntarily childless Australian men near the median age for first-time fatherhood. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 Australian-resident men (28–34 years;  $M = 31$ ;  $SD = 1.48$ ). Participants were selected from the Men and Parenting Pathways longitudinal cohort study ( $N = 609$ ) based on having stated they did not want to have children “at all.” Data were collected and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Analysis identified a superordinate theme; *Fatherhood: The door is still ajar*, which was marked by the men’s reluctance to unequivocally commit to a childless future. Subordinate themes were *The Realization*, *The Talk (or lack of...)*, *The Rationale*, and *The Pressure*. At the normative age for transitioning to parenthood, role choices are salient. Overall, men’s decision-making process to not have children appears to be fluid and influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Despite changing social trends and acceptance of divergent life trajectories, these men are acutely aware that their intentions place them outside the norm. In policy and practice, it is important to recognize the changing norms around fatherhood timing and support voluntarily childless men and couples in constructing their identities, life course, incongruent decisions, and relationships.

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In most Western cultures, pronatalist norms are constructed to encourage procreation (Jackson & Casey, 2009), yet despite societal expectations, the trend toward childlessness in many developed countries is increasing, in part due to choice (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2016; The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] family database, 2015; United Nations, 2015). Voluntary childlessness (VC) is not a new phenomenon and there exists a sizable body of literature on women who choose to remain childless (e.g., Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Gotlib, 2016; Letherby, 2002). However, in some countries, rates of childlessness are higher among men (Gray, 2002). An estimated 5–9% of men do not intend to have children (Roberts, Metcalf, Jack, & Tough, 2011; Thompson & Lee, 2011; Warren, 2008), yet research exploring these intentions remains scarce (Shapiro, 2014).

When parenthood is framed as normative, the preference to not have a child is often treated as aberrant and associated stigma potentially results in psychological or social stress (Doyle, Pooley, & Breen, 2012). Ashburn-Nardo (2017) found that the moral responsibility of having children fell to both men and women, where choosing not to have children elicited moral outrage from others. This value-laden imperative is especially evident in strongly pronatalist nations where the ideologies, discourses, and policies construct women as mothers and men as fathers (Tanaka & Johnson, 2016). Governments have successfully employed social and economic policies to “nudge” procreative intentions and fertility rates (McDonald, 2006; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), while politically endorsing having offspring as virtuous and community-spirited (Drago, Sawyer, Shreffler, Warren, & Wooden, 2011; Jackson & Casey, 2009). An exemplar in the Australian context, where this study was based, was a financial “baby bonus” incentive accompanied by a call from the Federal Treasurer for families to “have one for the father, one for the mother and one for the country” (Farouque, 2004).

Research, conducted on samples of childless women, points to the potential for pronatalist ideologies to be detrimental to some women’s identity (Gotlib, 2016), and moral agency (Morison, Macleod, Lynch, Mijas, & Shivakumar, 2015), and linked to feelings of exclusion and stigmatization (Park, 2002; Turnbull, Graham, & Taket, 2016). Only a small number of studies have focused on men. In one such study, childless men were found to be unhappier and less satisfied with their lives than childless women in highly pronatalist countries with below-replacement fertility rates (Tanaka & Johnson, 2016). In another study spanning 25 European countries ( $N = 44,055$ ), women reported greater acceptance of their VC status than men, with higher levels of gender equality associated with larger effects (Rijken & Merz, 2014). It is suggested that, more so than men, women bear the costs (both personal and professional) of having and raising children and therefore perceive greater gains of childless status (Rijken & Merz, 2014).

Compared to fathers, childless men face a number of physical and mental health outcomes. These include risk for injury and addiction, all-cause mortality, and ischemic heart disease (Weitoft, Burström, & Rosén, 2004) and higher rates of both assisted and unassisted suicide (Steck, Egger, & Zwahlen, 2016); isolation through limited

involvement in communities, tendency to not seek family support, and poor quality family relationships (Dykstra & Keizer, 2009); lower levels of life satisfaction and feelings of exclusion from the provider role that is central to men's fathering identity (Keizer, Dykstra, & Poortman, 2010).

Despite risks associated with childlessness, outcomes vary. In women, a sense of personal choice and control and active resistance or rejection of stigma have been found to be protective against negative mental health outcomes (Jeffries & Konnert, 2002; Morison et al., 2015; Tanaka & Johnson, 2016). In men, a qualitative study of 12 participants who had a "preemptive" vasectomy noted the men tended to discuss their choice less within the context of stigma and more in terms of dispositional unconventionality and rebellion against societal norms (Terry & Braun, 2012). This may be indicative of multiple models of masculinity operating (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). While the role of procreator is central in dominant models of masculinity, it is not the only signifier. Risk-taking and rebellion are also traditionally expressions of masculinity. One possibility is that they might offset the absence of the fatherhood role as an identifier of manhood (Wetherell & Edley, 1999).

Prior research characterizes VC men into three types: "articulators," who knew early on and have never changed their mind; "postponers," who have put the decision off (Lunneborg, 2000); and "childless by circumstance," who previously had not ruled out the prospect of having children, but due to circumstances, did not (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007). How men arrive at childlessness is a potential factor in later psychological adjustment. Of these groups, the "postponers," whose outcomes eventuate without active decision-making, may be the most vulnerable given they do not assume control of their futures; however, this has not been explored in men. Also important to psychological well-being is the quality of a couple's communication when making decisions about procreation (Bodin, Stern, Folkmarson Käll, Tydén, & Larsson, 2015). Past research suggests that the dyadic decision-making process for couples is fluid, occurs over time, and is shaped by a myriad of motivating factors (Blackstone & Stewart, 2016; Shaw, 2011). Reported motives for men, women, and couples to not have children include an unwillingness to take on parental responsibility, selfishness, feeling unsuited to the role, and an aversion to the perceived lifestyle change or loss of freedom (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Terry & Braun, 2012). This is yet to be examined in depth from the perspective of men who do not intend to have children.

There is little research that addresses the experiences of gay men and their intentions or desires to have children. They are an underrepresented group in research on parenthood in general. Nevertheless, the few studies that exist indicate that most gay men want to become fathers, although the proportion remains less than in heterosexual men. In a recent study, 89.7% of 638 heterosexual men and 76.4% of 628 gay men expressed desire for parenthood (Kranz, Busch, & Niepel, 2018). A study of 225 New York gay youth (16–22 years of age) similarly reported 86% of young gay men expected to have children someday (D'Augelli, Redina, Sinclair, & Grossman, 2007). The less common desire to not want children is therefore a question of interest among all men regardless of sexual orientation.

Although previous research gives a broader conceptualization of men's decision to remain childless, they do not explore the subjective experience and ongoing

decision-making process of men who are at the peak age for entering fatherhood and who are biologically able to procreate but do not intend to have children. In this instance, the term peak age refers to 28–34 years of age, which encompasses the years immediately prior to and following the median age for the first-time fatherhood (33 years; ABS, 2017). At this life stage, when fatherhood becomes a normative milestone, pronatalist pressures would be most salient. Influences on procreative decisions may include, but would not be limited to, lifestyle opportunities, partner intentions, family-of-origin experiences, role identities, world views, physical or mental health concerns, and financial or work-place pressures. These and other underlying reasons might differentially affect future well-being and couple relationship quality and are therefore important to understand.

To address this gap, this study explores the experiences of VC Australian men near the median age for the first-time fatherhood, their decision-making process, and the motives for their decision. Further, the study investigates the men's decision-making in the context of perceptions of societal expectations, parental role models, and partner influences.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

This study reports on data from semi-structured interviews with 11 men (pseudonyms used) who were aged between 28 years and 34 years (Mean = 31;  $SD = 1.48$ ), where 33 is the median age for fatherhood. Nine men identified as Australian, one as Vietnamese-Australian, and one as Croatian-Australian. Household incomes ranged from average to high with the majority in the average range (ABS, 2016). Three participants identified as homosexual and eight identified as heterosexual. At the time interviews took place, the marital status was as follows: two participants were single, three were married, one was engaged, and five were in long-term, cohabiting relationships. The sample size is in line with the analytic approach utilized.

### *Procedure*

Following approval from Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee, participants were recruited through an Australia-wide study, Men and Parenting Pathways (MAPP). The MAPP study is a 5-year longitudinal research project. All participants were recruited into the study between 2015 and 2017 and undergo annual follow-up by online survey, for 5 years. Recruitment methods included social media, partnerships with organizations, and word of mouth.

Of the 609 eligible participants who completed a 30-min Wave 1 online survey, 18 indicated they (a) were biologically able to have children, (b) were not parents, (c) had agreed to be contacted for further research, and (d) had answered the survey question: "do you hope to have children in the future?" with "not at all." Four men were due for their annual survey and, to ensure that no cumulative respondent burden would risk loss to follow-up in the longitudinal study, they were not selected for interview. We contacted 14 men, 11 of whom confirmed eligibility and availability to be interviewed by the first

author (a woman of similar age, married, with two children). The men who participated were all from two major cities, Melbourne and Brisbane. Nine interviews were face-to-face interviews and two were via Skype. The interview schedule was designed in line with Smith, Larkin, and Flowers (2009), and mock interviews were conducted to refine the schedule. The interviews took place between April 2017 and November 2017 at locations of convenience to the researcher and the participant, such as a local library or café.

A semi-structured approach was used for the interviews, which lasted between 30 min and 60 min. Participants were informed that the interviews were for research purposes and all information would be de-identified.

## Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used for data collection and analysis. IPA is a qualitative approach that aims to explore how people make sense of their life experiences (Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2009). This study examined the interplay between meaning attached to experiences and the resulting choice for a future without children. Coauthors conferred between interviews to evaluate and refine the process. The data were analyzed in an iterative and inductive cycle, starting with transcribing, followed by a close reading and analysis of each transcript. Emergent themes were identified within each case and across cases, culminating in a superordinate theme and several subordinate themes (see Table 1). Finally, a framework for understanding the themes was created by all of the researchers (see Figure 1).

## Results

Analysis identified a superordinate theme Fatherhood: The door is still ajar and subordinate themes The Realization, The Talk, The Rationale, and The Pressure.

### *Superordinate theme: Fatherhood—The door is still ajar*

All participants, even one who had a vasectomy, expressed that they had “not shut the door” on their decision to not have children, despite having answered “not at all” to the item “Do you hope to have a child in the future?.” A sense of agency was central to both their choice to not have children and their willingness to preserve their options. This was evident in comments such as “...as far as I know we could, if we wanted to, have children,” (Jon), and “well who knows. I haven’t had a vasectomy...” (Mark). Further to framing this nonnormative pathway as a choice, the men saw the parenting role as one they could fulfil successfully, identifying themselves, or noting family members who had identified them as potentially a “good father.” They also reported largely positive attitudes to children, particularly nieces, nephews, and god-children, with some men noting that these children “were enough for me” and “I don’t feel like I’m missing out.”

For some, not closing the door on their decision reflected a clear differentiation between their current and future self, recognizing that “...just because old me doesn’t want a child but maybe the new me does” (Sam). Mark was cognizant of factors

**Table 1.** Prevalence of superordinate and subordinate themes.

Superordinate/ subordinate themes	Jack	Eric	Sam	Tom	Jon	Mike	Josh	Oliver	Mark	Hugh	Darren
Door still open	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The Realization											
"I've always known"						✓	✓		✓		✓
"I've never thought about it"				✓				✓			
"I assumed I would . . . but . . ."	✓	✓	✓		✓					✓	
The Rationale											
"I'm different"		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Family of origin	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fears	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Financial concerns	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
Responsibility versus freedom	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				
Influence of others	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓			✓
The Talk											
"Never had a serious conversation"	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		
"Maybe we are not on the same page"					✓					✓	
"Early on"						✓					✓
The Pressure											
"Deal Breaker"	✓			✓	✓				✓	✓	
"A bit"					✓						✓
"I don't care"		✓	✓								

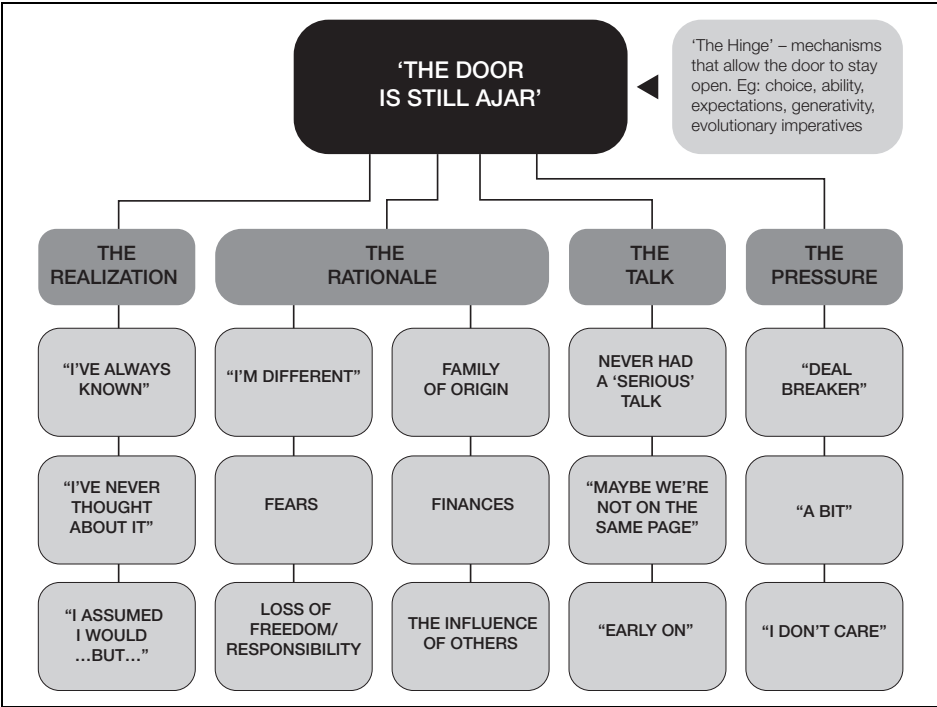
potentially beyond his control, whereby "there might be some biological clock that starts ticking and a switch goes off and I go 'I want that'."

### *The Realization*

- *"I've always known"*

Some knew from an early age. "I've known all of my life but it was more cemented when a lot of people that I knew, that are around my age, started having children (Darren)." Growing up, Mike "wasn't thinking about children at all" and was influenced by a VC woman, reflecting that "meeting her, and talking with her is how I realised that, I think that's the kind of life I want as well."

Josh had recently experienced a change in his intentions and could now see a future with children, despite being previously "sure" he did not want children. His change of heart highlights the fluidity in the decision-making process. For some, it is possible that the "not at all" response to the survey question "do you hope to have children in the future" is an act of postponement and shows that men may be unaware of potential future



**Figure 1.** Superordinate and subordinate themes.

developmental shifts. Josh insisted he “knew” he did not want to be a father “... since before I was a teenager.” Life events, including the termination of an unplanned pregnancy, reshaped his thoughts and feelings about fatherhood, and he and his partner agreed they would try for children in the future.

- *“I have never really thought about it”*

A lack of conscious decision-making characterizes some men’s stance on fatherhood. They have avoided thinking about this normative adult milestone, sometimes due to circumstances. Not “giving any thought” to children was in part due to being single as Tom reflects:

“To be honest I didn’t have a partner until I was quite a bit older, probably early 20’s, so it’s not something I thought about at all.” At 30, following an unplanned pregnancy and miscarriage, Tom had a vasectomy; he reasoned that this was a convenient method of contraception, with the “full support” of his wife. Oliver spoke of distance between himself and the decision to parent. It was

not a thing that I thought about. I’ve always been on the fence or ... if it was something that would happen it would be a long way from where I was at that moment, no matter when that moment was.

- *"I always assumed I would . . . but . . ."*

Four of the men assumed that at some point in the future they would have children. However, that changed for each of them. For Jon, it just "never happened." While his early 20s saw him considering the possibility, he thought "there's plenty of time left," but by his late 20s, he "wasn't really wanting to have kids" and his long-term partner also did not want children. On the other hand, Sam's homosexuality prompted him to question his motivation to have children:

When you are younger you just kind of go, what is everyone else doing? Do I think that is a possibility for me? At that stage I knew I was gay so that wasn't going to be a natural step in the process. But the whole maybe I want kids, maybe I don't want kids, you don't actually know and then life comes along and you think 'what is it that I want to achieve out of life?' I'm just not motivated by children. (Sam)

While Sam and Jon came to their own conclusion that they did not want children anymore, other men changed their mind as a result of their partner's desires.

### *The Talk*

All but two participants were in committed relationships. Eight felt sure they were "on the same page" as their partner regarding the intention to not have children or that their partner was "even more sure" of this. All men indicated that they valued the idea of an honest conversation regarding intentions, regardless that the conversation did not always occur.

- *"Never had a serious conversation"*

Seven of the nine men in relationships reported that they had either never had or had delayed having a "serious" conversation about parenthood, rather, it "comes up regularly" as a "passing comment" or "banter." Tom stated that he and his wife "haven't had a real sit-down serious conversation about it," despite the fact that Tom has had a vasectomy. Jack says that it "comes up periodically" but noted they "probably should" have a serious conversation soon since they are "getting married at the end of the year."

- *"Maybe we are not on the same page"*

The hesitation and reluctance to have a frank conversation with their partner was a recurring theme in this study. Jon has had the serious conversation with his long-term girlfriend of 15 years, but he noted it took them 12 years to "feel comfortable" discussing the idea of not having children. He recognizes the gravity of this conversation and discusses how "nervous" it made them.

It'd be a pretty big problem if we weren't on the same page with that. And that's only something we've really only felt comfortable discussing lately. Um, I think she was afraid



that I would have really strong feelings about wanting to have children. You know we had a few drinks . . . we talked . . . it's sort of pretty funny to think about it that we were both so like nervous, you know . . . I guess it was like that might be the start of . . . (long pause) [Interviewer: A rift?] yeah, like if we were on different pages. (Jon)

This excerpt highlights that the wishes and expectations of a romantic partner appeared to play a crucial role in the decision-making process for these men. The discomfort and anxiety that accompany this conversation appeared to be a motivating factor in avoiding it.

Hugh says that he and his partner talked but it was “just casually, never a serious conversation” and that “it was always a joke,” even involving family members. When they finally did talk more seriously, Hugh “didn’t take it well” and he says he felt “disappointed.”

However, he accepted his partner’s view on not having a family because he “couldn’t imagine living life without him.”

- *“Early on”*

Darren and Mike, both single and not constrained by the potential loss of a partner, emphasized that the ideal time to have this discussion would be early in the relationship, particularly given that they do not want children and that “most people do.” Darren felt that this intention could make or break a potential relationship:

I’m pretty up-front about it early on in the piece and it’s kind of a deal breaker for me if somebody does want to have kids. I just lose interest straight away, especially if it’s a deal breaker for them that eventually they do want to have children. (Darren)

## *The Rationale*

Participants were asked about influential circumstances and their reasons for not wanting to have children. The participants cited financial concerns, fears about the state of the world, their own family history, and the vicarious experience of others. The two dominant reasons were seeing themselves as outside of the norm and having an aversion to losing their perceived freedom or lifestyle.

- *“I’m different”*

Seven men framed their own intention to not have children by situating themselves outside the norm, referring to themselves as “unconventional,” “not traditional,” or “different.” This identification as nonnormative comprised two distinct components: The first, a self-evaluation that incorporated a perception of the self from the eyes of others; and the second, a critical appraisal of others who chose to have children. Tom and Eric identified themselves and their respective relationships as “not traditional,” particularly in terms of gender roles. Eric did not want children “because that’s what’s expected from society.” Mike considered himself different from his friends, explicitly stating this did not make him “less.”

Not everyone wants them, not everyone has to have them, not having them doesn't mean you are a lesser person or less responsible. (Mike)

Jon expressed frustration that his being different cast him on the outer and that childless adults "just don't exist on the political spectrum at all." Identifying himself as different from his brothers, Jon also emphasized that he didn't "rush" into this important decision. There is a sense that he is, in fact, making the responsible choice.

In my family though, I've always been a bit sort of different. My 2 brothers were married when they were 25 or something and to me it seemed like they were in a real rush to just um . . . to have kids and to be married and I could never understand it. It's like they couldn't wait to be old men . . . I think I'll always be the weird Uncle Jon that's got long hair and you know, is weird but I'm happy with that. (Jon)

Part of being unconventional involved challenging social norms and in some instances criticizing the decisions of others to have children without "good" reasons. Eric was critical of someone who referred to their child as a "gift" to their family, because "you shouldn't have a baby for someone else. That's a terrible reason to have a baby." Mike rejected the traditional idea of having a child to "look after you when you are old and sick" as "ridiculous in this day and age." Oliver and Mark questioned why having a baby was the "default" and "path of normalcy," both claiming that people "make a lot of assumptions" and "don't think hard enough about it." Mark went further, asserting that having a child is "an unhealthy sort of ego thing" where men think of children "as a reflection of them, as some measure of their wealth and their property in the world."

- *Family of origin*

Five spoke of an "absent" father, either literally or emotionally. They had only a "vague recollection" of their childhood and, specifically, "not much memory" of their interactions with their father. The remaining six men praised both parents but there was a distinct lack of interpersonal stories about the role of their father in their childhood.

Some men actively rejected their parents' modeling of caregiving. Mark believed his ideas about parenting were "in direct opposition and reaction to my parents." Tom and Jon both reflected on the role their father played in their childhood and recognized that their father was "not hands on" or was "a distant figure," which was in contrast to their vision of being a father "being a role model, offering guidance" and "the guy who can change a nappy and hold the baby and be there."

- *Responsibility/loss of freedom*

Mike and Eric saw themselves as responsible people who did not want "that responsibility." Ideas of additional responsibility, making sacrifices, and losing a sense of freedom were often interwoven:

Being sort of like tied down because you've got kids. You can't do a lot of things . . . responsibility and lack of personal freedom, for me they go hand in hand. (Mike)

"The freedom. Freedom to do what I want, when I want and not have to worry about who will look after them or do I have to stay home? I'm just not prepared to sacrifice that."  
(Tom)

Finances were of concern for six of the men, one of whom was "not a high-income earner by any means" and felt his earnings were not enough (Tom). Oliver identified the need for financial security to raise a child, wanting "to be a lot more secure if I had someone else relying on me that can't take care of themselves" and Mike had other priorities for his money as he liked "to have my things; nice things, and buy whatever I want." The word "selfish" was a self-descriptor used by five of the men who attributed this to the freedom they desired, to do "what I want," to "live for myself" because "I like the lifestyle I have" and don't want to be "tied down" or have "my life on hold for 20 years" (Tom, Jack, Hugh, Mike, Jon).

Although they articulated that they were avoiding responsibility, four of the men countered this description with examples of being "responsible" by "making a difference in the community." Three, who were in artistic professions, framed their contribution to society in terms of leaving a "creative legacy" and some discussed "passing on values" to others, including their nieces and nephews.

- *Influence of others' experiences*

Tom described his vicarious experiences observing his friends with children who are too busy with "family commitments," and Darren recalled friends who have "no sex life" now that they have children. Jon called his nephews "little terrors," and Oliver reflected on the "negative stories" he hears from his brother. Jack has experienced working in a café with "spoilt brats," and Josh's coworkers were "really negative about family and children". There were no recalled positive narratives around friends or family with their children.

- *Fears*

Some participants mentioned their fears in terms of the state of the world. Concerns such as "over population," "an energy crisis," "climate change and stuff," and the general "state of the world." For most, these concerns were an addendum to the interview, or attributed to someone else, but nevertheless volunteered as part of a supporting rationale for a childless future. However, two men highlighted a personal experience that manifested as a motivating factor; seeing the "world we live in" as a "cruel" place, citing this as a central reason to not [inflict it on a child]. Two also cited health reasons, fearing that conditions they suffered from may be inheritable. Jack said he was from "bad stock" with a "laundry list of ailments" that he and his partner did not want to "pass on." Both the global concerns and health concerns were framed in terms of protecting a hypothetical child from a painful or difficult future, which is ironically nurturing and paternal.

## The Pressure

When asked about pressure from family, friends, or society to have children, only two agreed that there was. The rest downplayed these expectations; over half of participants stated there were “no expectations for children” and “no pressure” anymore or that they did not care about the pressure to have children. Despite such claims, four men related how the “pressure is off” them to fulfil their parents’ expectations, since their sibling had produced a grandchild, implying a filial obligation to procreate.

- *“A deal breaker”*

For three of the participants, the decision-making process was influenced by the desire of their partner. After a few years of marriage, Eric had decided he didn’t want a child, but realized that it was important to his wife, “she was adamant she wanted children.” He said that for her it was “kind of a deal breaker” if he did not want children anymore. After allowing some time to process, Eric agreed and at the time of interview was expecting a child with his wife. Josh also did not want a child, however, he admitted there were “ups and downs in regards to whether or not I’d be prepared to have a child with my partner. But the actual desire was not there.” He said they broke up “because I didn’t want a child and she did. And you know it was obvious that there wasn’t a long-term future to our relationship.” After some time apart, they reunited after he identified something within himself that wanted to “have a baby with her.”

This influence from a romantic partner also worked in the opposite direction. Hugh had “always wanted kids” but was aware that his partner was “dead against kids.” They had been together 12 years and Hugh said it was “an easy decision” because “I would have to choose that relationship over raising a child by myself.”

- *“A bit of pressure”*

Friends and family asking about children featured in 5 of the 11 participants’ responses. Hugh reflected that there “was a bit of pressure from my parents to have children because my sister found out that she was never going to have children.” Jon found it “quite rude when people make comments” and Jack feels “kind of annoyed” at friends who insist he would be “a good father” because they “still push that I should” even though he has made his intentions clear. Darren admits that it is only due to him being “quite vocal about not wanting children” that people “have stopped asking about it.” Jon reflected on the reason his mother had “learnt not to ask about it” because he had “an argument with her once about it that it is rude and it’s my life.”

- *“I don’t care”*

An acknowledgement and subsequent rejection of societal norms was offered by Eric who commented that “you grow up, you get married, you have kids . . . there is that expectation, but I don’t necessarily feel that expectation . . . or I don’t care. I don’t care

what society wants from me.” Sam too is “very much willing to tell anyone, ‘I am not in the market for having children’.”

## Discussion

This study revealed that voluntarily childless (VC) men, at the normative peak age for entering fatherhood, are still in the process of consolidating that decision. Similar to VC women, they characterize the childless identity as a “fluid journey” (Shaw, 2011, p. 151); however, in contrast to the women in prior research, childlessness among men in this study was not as central to their identities nor an inevitable decision (Peterson, 2015).

Prior research of voluntarily childless, and only heterosexual couples, reported three phases of dyadic decision-making: agreement, acceptance, and closing of the door (usually the sterilization of either partner) (Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014). The men in this study, some in relationships and others single, were primarily still in the agreement phase, some had moved to acceptance, but none has closed the door. One participant divulged having had a vasectomy yet noted there was a small chance he and his partner could conceive, and should that occur, they would “keep the baby.” Keeping the door open cognitively prepares the men for any eventuality, providing self-assurance that they will adjust in the future, regardless of what happens. For some, renouncing parenthood may also be deemed necessary to maintain a partnership with someone who is opposed to having children (Buhr & Huinink, 2017). Psychological goal adjustment theory suggests that, as a potential protective mechanism, some men adjust their desires when they perceive that they are not likely to be fulfilled (Gray, Evans, & Reimondos, 2013). Perhaps, keeping the door open is a function of the normative age and might change as the men age, and the transition to fatherhood is not as socially salient. Due to perceived social pressure at this age, men might be not formalizing this decision as a way of reducing the cognitive distance between themselves and men in their social circles who are having children. It is also possible that, since most participants had not finalized their choice through sterilization (Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014), they may be adopting strategies of perpetually postponing childbearing until they lose interest or they, as a couple, are no longer biologically able to have a child (Berrington, 2004).

One striking finding of the current study is avoidance of an emotionally open and frank conversation about having children. Kurdi (2014) similarly found that many childless women had either only had one conversation, early in the relationship, or had not talked about having children at all. Communication is vital in relationships, and the avoidance behavior discussed in this study may be related to fear of losing their partner or they might be characteristically unlikely to engage in potentially emotionally charged topics. This is evident in the nervousness expressed by some of the participants in relationships when broaching the topic. However, it is possible, as Blackstone and Stewart (2016) found in men and women, that the decision to remain childless has occurred, for some, as a process over time internally and the discussion is merely a verbal expression of the agreement.

Building on prior research, these men considered a variety of reasons in choosing not to have children including extrinsic factors such as population concerns and financial expenses (Park, 2005). Moreover, the current study highlights the significance of

intrinsic factors such as a counter-normative identity and a fear of losing the freedom and lifestyle they value. Consistent with past research of men and women who did not yet have children (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Doyle et al., 2012; Peterson, 2015), the men in this study expressed a desire for freedom and saw the responsibility of fatherhood as posing a threat to the life they envisioned for themselves. They tended to see themselves as less traditional and unconventional in their gender roles (Terry & Braun, 2012) and unrepresented in politics (Turnbull et al., 2016). There was a conscious rejection of stigma and expectations, placing a positive spin on their nonnormative position. This is consistent with Park's (2002) findings on stigma management that VC women and men redefined childlessness in a positive way. Despite claiming they did not feel pressure from parents, friends, or society, some men expressed guilt for not fulfilling their parent's wishes, although that "pressure" was somewhat alleviated by siblings who had children already.

Further, the men in this study proactively redefined voluntary childlessness as a valid social role. They articulated their contribution to society through other means such as being an active member of the local community, coaching and teaching, philanthropy, looking after family members, and participating in the lives of others' children as an opportunity to pass on knowledge and values. In the light of the negative stigmatization and exclusions experienced by some voluntarily childless men, highlighting that they are a responsible member of the community might be a protective factor for these men. Redefining their role is crucial given that being voluntarily childless has been identified as a risk to well-being. Moreover, some research has demonstrated that generativity development is more important to psychological well-being than parenthood status (Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008).

Parenting intentions and future parent-child relationships are built on foundations of attachment representations (Scharf & Mayseless, 2011). The participants of this study discussed the role their own father played in their perceptions of fatherhood, with some rejecting that model. This supports Lunneborg's (2000) finding that men who perceived their own father to be absent or distant were less likely to be interested in being a father themselves. Participants discussed their perceptions of fatherhood, expressing the need to not only support their family financially, but to be emotionally present for the child, which supports previous findings on men's expectations of fatherhood (Kings, Knight, Ryan, & Macdonald, 2017). The men in this study also emphasized that the decision to become a father should not be taken lightly, and in line with findings in VC women (Doyle et al., 2012), not one they would make half-heartedly.

Significantly, men framed their intention as voluntary and therefore rejected the stigma of childlessness as a failure or short-coming which supports previous research (Jeffries & Konnert, 2002; Keeton, Perry-Jenkins, & Sayer, 2008; Terry & Braun, 2012). Some men positioned themselves in opposition to the dominant discourse, rejecting the mainstream by condemning the condemners. Participants in this study referred to others having children as "unthinking" behavior, which supports similar findings with women by Park (2005) and labeled reasons for being a parent (such as having a child care for you in old age) as not good enough or inappropriate (Doyle et al., 2012). Rather than reflecting on the majority position of childlessness as being transgressive, these participants turn the tables questioning the ethical choices of parents. Potentially, in this time

of sociohistorical change around parenthood, these men may be seeking to carve out a masculine role where procreation is not central to their identity. Or it is possible that they are adopting a masculine response to rejecting core roles within dominant frameworks of masculinity (father and provider).

The participants' articulation of this counter normative view might stem from their frustration from living in a pronatalist society where they feel "less" (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005) and where moral criticism has been directed at the voluntarily childless (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). It is likely that simply having the conversation, particularly in the context of a research study, evoked a sense of being judged in these men. Under-pressure, individuals' comfort levels with choices are tested. The critical comments of the men in this study might be interpreted as an inclination to deflect moral judgments back onto the majority; an arguably defensive response to normative expectations, despite few participants endorsing overt feelings of pressure to procreate.

As a pronatalist society, there is a cultural view of parents as "selfless" (Park, 2002). The self-appraisals of the men in this study were not of selflessness nor were the men prepared to make the perceived sacrifices of parenthood. Consistent with Terry and Braun's findings (2012), the dominant social perceptions were (mostly) unconsciously recognized and raised preemptively, through the act of labeling themselves as "selfish." Forming an identity in resistance to the dominant discourse leads to a deficit identity, where they recognize what they *are not* rather than what they *are* (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005). However, on closer examination, many men in this study expressed that if they were to have a child, there would be a need to be more prepared than they were, as they would want to create a stable environment in which to raise children. This measured decision seems contradictory to the stereotype of childless adults as being irresponsible and selfish (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Koropecykj-Cox & Pendell, 2007; Letherby, 2002).

The present study highlights the propensity for morality to be an inherent component of procreative decision-making regardless of the position taken. From an evolutionary perspective, cooperative communities thrive with adequate population replacement or with population control in environments of limited resources. Procreative morality is a potential mechanism supporting this optimal balance.

### ***Strengths and limitations***

The current study has utilized IPA to provide valuable in-depth insight into the ongoing decision-making process for men currently at the peak age for entering fatherhood. Database searches yielded no other study of Australian men in this age-group who expressed that their intention was not to have children and no other study that included heterosexual and homosexual men, single and in relationships. As such, this study presents a novel sample and findings that were considerably more complex than the original survey response of "not at all" indicated. Inherent in the lived complexity is the potential for a change of mind. While it is important to recognize that survey questions on intent to have children may be limited in revealing the level of commitment to a position, it is also important to respect the declared intention of an individual at any point in time. For this analysis, the decision was made to include Eric, who was expecting a

child, because the alternative would have been to conceal the degree to which men may be fluid in their procreative choices.

The relative homogeneity of the sample and possible impact on the findings must be noted. Although participants were purposively selected to represent a particular age-group and intention, they are also homogenous in terms of the demographics. The participants were comprised of largely middle-class Caucasian men living in metropolitan areas. Further research could extend this to explore men's experiences as influenced by extremely disadvantaged backgrounds, more diverse cultural backgrounds, or men from rural areas. Although the sample included both heterosexual and gay men, further research is also required to establish whether the decision-making process and the lived experience associated with this nonnormative decision is the same for gay men.

It is also important to note that a female researcher conducted the interviews for this study. While every effort was made to limit bias, this may have introduced, it is pertinent to acknowledge that the values, attitudes, and perspectives of the authors as well as assumptions the participants may have made about the interviewer's attitudes will have shaped both the interview process and the analysis of the data.

### *Future directions and implications*

This study has laid the foundations for a unique prospective investigation of the process of intention forming a choice or action (Mynarska & Rytel, 2017) by following these men, using the longitudinal data gathered by the MAPP study. All men in this study have given permission to be contacted again. With the subsequent waves of the MAPP study, it will be possible to explore the stability of childbearing intentions in the next 3 years.

Childlessness is becoming more common across developing countries (Beaujouan, Brzozowska, & Zeman, 2016; Miettinen, Rotkirch, Szalma, Donno, & Tanturri, 2015; United Nations, 2015); these results therefore have application beyond this Australian cohort. Further studies should explore any risk to psychological well-being as a consequence of a nonnormative lifecourse. These findings have implications for practitioners working with VC men and couples as they construct their identities and relationships while navigating societal pressure and expectations. Specifically, practitioners have a role in exploring incongruent family plans within couples, supporting individual agency, reflecting on family of origin contributions, and situating choices within an understanding of pressures that arise from cultural norms.

### **Conclusions**

The current research highlights that the decision-making process for having or not having children is a fluid, dynamic process, influenced by a range of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Men at the peak age for entering fatherhood are still making or re-evaluating decisions that will shape their lifecourse. Despite changing social trends and acceptance of people's divergent life trajectories, men are still acutely aware that their intention to not have children sits outside the norm. These findings have inherent public policy implications such as the need to recognize changing norms around timing of




fatherhood, and men's agency in the choice associated with their potential to experience positive outcomes even when they go against the norm, this might be particularly likely when fertility intentions are aligned within relationships. When there are conflicting fertility intentions, encouragement of early communication within relationships will support women's choices as they approach ages associated with increased reproductive risk or loss of fertility.

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### Open research statement

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the authors have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. The data used in the research are not available. These data were qualitative and consent was not provided for open access to interview transcripts.

### Public significance statement

At the typical age for transitioning to fatherhood, men who choose the nonnormative path to remain childless are acutely aware of the unconventionality of their choice. Unorthodox positions can be psychologically taxing, which might partly account for two of the key findings of this study; that the men maintained a small likelihood that their decision might change; and that they avoided frank and open discussions with their partners about reproductive intentions.

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