



Article

“Why Would You Want a Baby When You Could Have a Dog?” Voluntarily Childless Women’s “Pternal” Feelings, Longing and Ambivalence

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Abstract: This article explores voluntarily childless women’s experiences and understandings of human-animal interactions and their attitudes towards companion animals. It draws on interviews with 15 Swedish women who expressed a lack of “maternal” feelings and therefore had remained voluntarily childless, or childfree (used here as two interchangeable concepts). Instead, the women described how they perceived the attachment bonds to companion animals that they had developed as similar to, or even superior to, the attachments bonds between parents and their children. The article thus introduces the expressions “pternal”, and “pternal feelings”, to denote these women’s attachment bonds to companion animals (primarily cats and dogs). The results, however, also illustrate that few of the women actually took on the role as “pet parent”. Although they longed to develop attachment bonds with companion animals, they were conflicted and experienced ambivalence, leading to decisions to develop avoidance strategies, resembling those involved in the childfree decision. Hence, many of them described themselves as both childfree and “petfree”.

Keywords: voluntary childlessness; women; pets; “pternal”

1. Introduction

People’s relationships with companion animals have usually been portrayed in a positive light, with research revealing therapeutic, psychological, physiological and psychosocial benefits (Barker et al. 2003; Blouin 2012; Sable 2013; Sussman 1985). Human and non-human bonds have, however, also sometimes been pathologized. Froma Walsh (2009a) explains:

Those whose closest relationships are with animals have often been viewed as strange or deficient, their affections pathologically misplaced. Strong attachments have been assumed to be symptomatic of an inability to forge healthy connection with humans or to handle separation and loss. (Walsh 2009a, p. 467)

One example of pathologizing is the “popular stereotype” (Bartlett 1995, p. 90), which depicts a childless woman’s bond with her companion animal as unhealthy compensation for the missing child (Campbell 1999; Blackstone 2014; Morell 1994; Veevers 1980). Voluntary childlessness, especially, has a stigma attached to it and continues to be surrounded by prejudices and stereotypes (cf. e.g., Letherby 2002; Peterson 2010a; Rich et al. 2011). While other stereotypes about voluntarily childless women have been thoroughly researched and disputed, their relationships with animals and pets have not received much attention until recently (Blackstone 2014; Laurent-Simpson 2017; Volsche and Gray 2016). The lack of research means that these myths continue to inform people’s affective reactions toward voluntarily childless women.

The aim of this article is to explore how 15 Swedish voluntarily childless women made sense of their decision to remain voluntarily childless, by drawing specifically on their experiences regarding interspecies relationships. The article adopts a qualitative methodological perspective focusing on understanding human behavior, and on how people interpret and make sense of their life. The broader conceptual framework was inspired by interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith et al. 1999) and the method for analysis guided by an inductive, hermeneutical approach.

2. Previous Research

Previous research has recognized the developmental and health benefits of pets in families (Friedmann and Thomas 1985; Rochberg-Halton 1985). Pets can have a sociability function in families, meaning that they can facilitate human-to-human social interaction, and improve the socialization of children and adolescents (Covert et al. 1985; Davis and Juhasz 1985; Robin and Bensel 1985; Serpell 1999). Studies show that pets can be a source of emotional and social support to their owners, and that a strong sense of community can form through animal companions (Headey 1999; Meehan et al. 2017; Bulsara et al. 2007). Pets can also have a surrogate function in social interaction and serve as substitutes for friends, spouses or children (Veevers 1985). This is especially true for people who are socially isolated and suffer from psychological illness, or who experience a social stigma (Chur-Hansen 2010; Antonacopoulos and Pychyl 2010). The majority of those who bond with companion animals, however, also interact successfully with people and do not develop non-human bonds as substitute for failed interactions with humans (Kurdek 2008).

Companion animals often become part of the construction of “family life” and are sometimes treated as beloved persons, and ascribed agency and autonomy (Blouin 2013). These anthropomorphising processes are manifested in phenomena such as “fur babies”, i.e., that pets are pampered, as family members, and “pet parents”, reflecting that there is a deep attachment and bond in the interspecies relationship that goes beyond the possessive relationship implied with the word “owner” (Greenebaum 2004; Owens 2015).

People’s attitudes towards pets and how and if they bond with companion animals differ greatly, for example due to childhood experiences (Blouin 2012). Studies also show that women generally have more empathetic or positive attitudes toward animals than men, and count pets as family to a higher degree than men (Herzog 2007; Owens and Grauerholz 2018). Research further suggests that women without children in the household are more likely to develop mothering bonds with their pets than women with children (Turner 2001). Childless people or “empty nesters” have even been suggested to use companion animals to compensate for the lack of children in their life (Rockett and Carr 2014). Margolies (1999) offers an explanation to why and how pets can function symbolically as children for the owner:

The primary symbiotic relationship between a mother and a child has many elements in common with that between a person and an animal. Pets are devoted, forgiving, affectionate, un-critical, and available. Their love is given unconditionally. The relationship, like that between a mother and an infant, is essentially non-verbal. Pets offer their owners an opportunity to receive unconditional maternal love again. (Margolies 1999, p. 298)

Although pets are similar to children in this way, animals’ needs are simpler than children’s, making it easier to be a “pet parent” than a parent (Blouin 2012). There are also species-related differences. While dogs are especially known to display child-like behaviors (Volsche 2018), cats are easier to take care of and cat ownership may therefore be a “response to loneliness” that appeals especially to “isolated individuals” (Beck and Madresh 2008, p. 52).

Previous research has highlighted how childless people’s attachment to animals often is interpreted as unhealthy and a replacement for missing children (Campbell 1999; Owens 2015). Veevers (1979) addressed this stereotype in an early study of voluntary childlessness, in which she interviewed 156 voluntarily childless American couples and discovered that only a small minority saw their pets as

child surrogates. Instead, many of the couples disliked pet ownership, and for some, experiences of pets had reinforced their decision not to have children. Similarly, Morell (1994) discovered that although many of the childless women she interviewed enjoyed companion animals, there were just as many who steered clear of them due to other priorities—mainly their desires to “minimize domestic responsibilities and maximize flexibility” (Morell 1994, p. 94). Bartlett (1995), in her study about childless women, found that companion animals were mentioned only by a small number of interviewees. Many of the voluntarily childless women and men interviewed by Blackstone (2014), however, described having strong emotional bonds with their pets and described them as family members, some even referring to them as their children.

The above-mentioned studies did not focus exclusively on the relationship between companion animals and childless humans, but only touched upon it. Two studies of late, however, concentrated specifically on this topic. Volsche (2018) interviewed 30 voluntarily childless participants residing in the United States, with 28 of the 30 being pet owners. The interviews illustrate the variations in how the childfree constructed their identities in relation to companion animals, with some using the parenting terminology and describing a parent-child relationship, while others carefully avoided any such implications, expressing awareness of the stigma attached to the idea of “fur babies”. Andrea Laurent-Simpson (2017) analyzed how 14 childless pet owners constructed a parent identity in relation to their companion animals. She interprets these parent identities as internalized cultural expectations on becoming a parent, and identifies three parental domains that indicated such an internalized parent identity: “caregiving” (physical and emotional care and protection), “parental relationship” (treating and perceiving the pet as a child), and “life modification” (making life decisions regarding e.g., family and work with the animal in mind).

3. Theoretical Framework

Research investigating relationships between humans and their companion animals has typically done so from a psychological perspective, mainly drawing on human relationship theories such as attachment theory or social support theory (Kurdek 2008). Attachment theory investigates how infants and children develop attachment bonds with attachment figures such as parents and caregivers, focusing on the internal cognitive processes involved and emphasizing the evolutionary significance of meaningful affectional relationships (Peacock et al. 2012; Sable 2008; Zilcha-Mano et al. 2012). Researchers have extended the application of attachment theory models to also encompass not only adults’ varying need for close emotional relationships (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991), but also interspecies relationships (Beck and Madresh 2008; Sable 2013). This research has demonstrated that people with high levels of attachment to companion animals experience closeness to them similarly to human attachments (Zilcha-Mano et al. 2011). Companion animals can thus serve as attachment figures and humans can form an “enduring close affectional bond that is perceived as providing emotional support and companionship” with their pets (Meehan et al. 2017, p. 277). Researchers have, however, also pointed out that the term “attachment”, as defined in traditional attachment theories, may not accurately describe a human-companion animal relationship. Instead, Crawford et al. (2006, p. 100) suggest that although attachment theory is a good starting point to explore human-companion animal relationships, they are more complicated than generally believed, and measuring the degree of attachment does not “adequately depict that relationship”.

In order to make it possible to capture more aspects of this complicated relationship, this article adopts a sociological perspective and uses feminist theory as a starting point to investigate the social construction of gender, femininity, motherhood, parenthood and family in society. This allows us to recognize that it is primarily women’s attachment to pets that has been pathologized (Margolies 1999). Similar negative cultural views do not exist about men and their interspecies bond, for example with dogs as their trustworthy companions (“man’s best friend”) (Blazina and Kogan 2016), or about women who are also mothers (Beck and Madresh 2008). Morell (1994) interprets the stereotype about childless women’s relationship with companion animals as “a forceful example of how compensatory

ideology works" (Morell 1994, p. 90). This means that childless women's attachments to companion animals are not taken on their own terms and are not understood as an expression of a genuine bond between humans and non-humans. Instead, these interspecies bonds are interpreted as signifying a substitution for the missing child. The underlying belief is that: "[...] women have a strong desire to nurture and care for living beings", and when this urge or desire cannot be fulfilled by motherhood, women can instead develop: "[...] parent-child relationships with companion animals" (Turner 2001, p. 9). The negative interpretation of the interspecies bond relies on the cultural view that children are the appropriate recipients of women's nurturing behaviors, and that voluntarily childless women do not fulfil their "moral mandate" to have children (Owens 2015). A woman that declares that she has no inclination to become a mother can therefore be viewed as being egoistic, cold, lonely, bitter, emotionally unstable or unable to build close and affectionate bonds with others (Blackstone 2014; Letherby 1994; Rich et al. 2011).

4. Method

This article draws on qualitative, in-depth interviews with 15 Swedish women, who defined themselves as voluntarily childless. The interviews were part of a larger data set, constituting a total of 36 interviews (with 30 women and 6 men), collected within the two authors' research studies, which aimed to explore the lived experiences of being voluntarily childless in Sweden.

Already Houseknecht (1987) recognized the problems with recruiting people for studies on voluntary childlessness. One of the challenges has to do with that the topic can be considered as sensitive and stigmatized. For our studies we therefore adopted an open, flexible and inclusive sample method. We came in contact with about half of the women through an online network for voluntarily childless women. The other half were contacted using a combination of sampling methods; some had appeared in media where they shared their experiences of being voluntarily childless, others contacted us themselves after learning of our research through media or online. Finally, a couple of our informants were recruited using snowball techniques (Browne 2005).

Only women who fulfilled the following criteria were interviewed: they had no biological children; they were not expecting any children in the future; it was an intention and/or choice not to have children. We however did not include it as a necessary condition that the women were married at the time of the interview or that their reproductive period was over (cf. Houseknecht 1987). As a result, the women interviewed were between 29 and 61 years old. Eight were single, four cohabiting with a man while two of them lived in long-term relationships with a man without sharing a household with them (so called LAT-relationships, which stands for Living Apart Together). All women presented themselves as heterosexual. They were promised anonymity and pseudonyms are used to refer to them. More detailed information about them will not be revealed here.

Only four of the 15 women talked about that they shared household with companion animals at the time of the interview. Seven more of the women told about having previous experiences of living together with companion animals. In four interviews, the women mentioned companion animals, but it was not disclosed if they had any pets or if they had previously owned pets (see Table 1 below).

The interviews were conducted in an environment preferred by the informant, which meant primarily in the participant's home, but sometimes in coffee shops or interview rooms in public libraries. All interviews were conducted face-to-face. The interviews were semi-structured and based on open questions about their decision not to have children and about living as a voluntarily childless woman in contemporary Swedish society. The interview guide encouraged the women to tell their stories, and reconstruct their experiences about reactions from family and friends on their decision; attitudes in society towards voluntary childlessness; their intimate relationships; their career and working life; what was important in their lives and what they enjoyed and appreciated with living a voluntary childless life. The interviews focused on capturing the women's perspectives in a narrative manner. Narratives are self-defining stories in which the "story teller" make sense of their experiences, their social world, their life and make claims of who they are (Bruner 1991, 2004). There were no explicit

questions about pets or animals in the interviews. Instead, the analysis of the replies to primarily two questions showed that the women repeatedly referred to companion animals: the questions about why they had chosen to live a voluntary childless life and what they mostly enjoyed with a voluntary childless lifestyle. That many of the answers to these questions contained references to companion animals emerged inductively from the data during the analytical phase of the research.

Table 1. Summary table of the respondents.

| Name (Pseudonym) | Age | Partnership Status | Pet Status | Interviewer |
|------------------|-----|--------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Alice | 33 | LAT | | Author 1 |
| Beatrice | 44 | Single | (Cat prev.) | Author 1 |
| Caroline | 50 | Single | | Author 1 |
| Doris | 35 | Single | One cat | Author 1 |
| Eva | 29 | Cohabiting | (Cat prev.) | Author 1 |
| Fanny | 40 | Cohabiting | | Author 1 |
| Greta | 43 | Single | Two cats (Dog prev.) | Author 1 |
| Hanna | 43 | LAT | (Dog prev.) | Author 1 |
| Iris | 42 | Single | (Dog prev.) | Author 1 |
| Julia | 33 | Cohabiting | (Cat prev.) | Author 1 |
| Kim | 42 | Single | (Cat prev.) | Author 2 |
| Lena | 40 | Single | One dog | Author 2 |
| Maria | 61 | Married | One cat | Author 2 |
| Nora | 61 | Single | (Cat prev.) | Author 2 |
| Paula | 50 | Cohabiting | | Author 2 |

The analysis was inspired by a phenomenological and hermeneutical framework (cf. [Seidman 1998](#); [Smith et al. 1999](#)) and guided by an interpretivist-theoretical tradition focusing on the notions of self, self-concepts, identities and meaning-making processes ([Manning and Kunkel 2014](#)). This is a framework which allows for an emphasis on how the women constructed and negotiated their identities, while taking the cultural, relational, environmental and societal context into account. The analysis thus focused on discerning what the women themselves wanted to tell and what they themselves ascribed value, meaning and importance in their lives (cf. [Smith et al. 1999](#)). The analysis also focused on identifying diverse stories and nuances and variations in their self-narratives, i.e., in their stories about self and life (cf. [Seidman 1998](#)).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. During the analytical phase, the interview transcripts were analyzed in a two-step process with an initial coding where the references to companion animals first emerged as a prominent theme. After the theme had been identified in this initial coding, a more focused and interpretative coding commenced where the interview transcripts were once more thoroughly searched for mentioning of companion animals and these so called “meaning units” (cf. [Shaw 2011](#)) were analyzed specifically for this article. Different considerations regarding animals were in this manner discovered in 15 of the interviews. This article is based on an analysis of these 15 interviews. The analysis did not attempt to determine the interviewed women’s attachment levels, but instead aimed to explore how they made sense of, and gave meaning to, their own non-human attachments, or lack of such attachments. Both authors engaged in the analysis, using a reflexive and interpretative stance to make sense, in a hermeneutic manner, of the meaning the women ascribed to companion animals. The results presented in this article developed during this reflexive, analytical phase.

The research was conducted in full compliance with ethical codes of conduct for social science research, including informed consent. Ethical research conduct also involves error analysis and not overestimating the significance of the results. The results presented here have been carefully, realistically and critically evaluated regarding reliability, soundness and clarity (cf. [Swedish Research Council 2017](#)).

5. Results

The analysis of the interspecies relationships of the Swedish voluntarily childless women resulted in two overarching categories. The first category consisted of the stories told by women who expressed “peternal” feelings, i.e., a strong delight in pets or an intense longing for pets, and had experiences from owning companion animals. The second category comprised the opposite type of stories—told by women who described themselves not only as “childfree”, but also as “petfree” and expressed strong feelings about the importance of not being a “pet parent”. Each of these two categories, however, included a variety of different approaches and it is important to also emphasize the nuances in how the women made sense of companion animals. The analysis therefore highlights how the women’s self-narratives were characterized by ambivalence and reflections regarding responsibilities. Despite “peternal” longings, the responsibilities towards the animals made them refrain from having their own pet. Such a responsibility had too large an impact on their desire for freedom. This also resulted in only one of the voluntarily childless women interviewed discussing her relationship with her companion animals in terms of “parenting”.

5.1. “Peternal” Feelings, Attachments and Longing for a Companion Animal

When asked about why they had opted out of motherhood, many of the women used childhood narratives to construct a voluntarily childless identity. In several cases, these childhood narratives described relationships with companion animals. Iris recollected about her upbringing: “We had animals in our home. We had a dog when I was born and later on I got a rabbit that I had for a long time. So I’ve always had animals instead” (Iris). The use of “instead” can be interpreted as reflecting Iris’s awareness of expectations on her to develop an attachment orientation towards babies already during her upbringing. Her narrative suggests that the proximity to companion animals in her family could explain why “young Iris” did not develop this attachment orientation towards babies in the same way as other children did (cf. Kurdek 2008; Zilcha-Mano et al. 2011), and why “adult Iris” did not feel a desire to have children.

How an attachment orientation towards babies could/should, manifest itself during childhood emerged in other interviews. When Hanna was asked why she had remained childless she explained: “Babies have never interested me”, and she recollected from her early childhood:

I remember in kindergarten, seeing the other girls screaming “oh, a baby!” as soon as they saw a baby carriage, running to almost crawl into it to have a look. It never interested me. [. . .] It could have something to do with that. (Hanna)

Hanna continued to recount, describing her orientation towards animals: “But on the other hand . . . I was extremely interested in animals and my greatest wish was to get a dog or a cat so I ran to greet dogs instead” (Hanna). Hanna’s “but on the other hand”, similarly to Iris’s “instead”, suggests that her orientation towards pets had replaced the development of an attachment orientation to babies.

Julia, who explained that she had “no interest in children”, also ruminated about her upbringing, during which she described interaction with babies as lacking. She used the same expression as Hanna: “on the other hand”, when she explained her interest in pets:

Animals on the other hand . . . I can think “oh, how cute! That’s adorable!” I can’t tear my eyes off kitties and puppies. I always make a fuss over them and have to nuzzle them. But not with kids. (Julia)

In contrast to how other people express excitement about babies, most of the women interviewed explained that they had never experienced babies as wonderful and cute. Some of them, however, drew parallels to their own overwhelming feelings towards animals. Beatrice was asked to explain her decision to remain voluntarily childless and she expounded:

I have never liked children. [—] You are supposed to love children just because they are children. But I can't say that I genuinely like something in a general manner like that. [. . .] The only thing that I can say, almost say, that about is cats. Just as other people get silly with babies, I get like that with cats. (Beatrice)

Kim also explained how cats, no matter how they looked or behaved, were always cute and compared it to the feelings others expressed about babies: “Yes. I can understand that feeling. The little piffle feeling: ‘Oh, how cute!’” (Kim). She could also relate to the feeling of getting totally absorbed by something: “If I’m to be honest... It’s clear that you’re getting caught up in what’s one’s interest in the moment. So if I get a cat I will surely only speak cat, cat, cat, cat, cat” (Kim). Iris was less understanding of how parents become totally absorbed by their children. She also rejected the idea that her behavior as a pet parent would simulate that sort of excitement:

Most people seem to go crazy just because they have been able to reproduce. They don't talk about anything else than diapers, vomit and other things that I don't care about. I mean, I had a dog before, but I didn't call my friends to tell them about his poo! (Iris)

Nora reflected, in a similar critical stance, over how she refused to adapt to the social norms and join in on the excitement about babies: “And those of my co-workers who came to work with their babies and everyone said: ‘Oh, yes... how sweet!’ [But] I just walked away.” (Nora). Not meeting social expectations on a certain behavior usually elicits social disapproval, which the women also were aware of. Julia reflected over her orientation towards companion animals: “It’s somehow inhuman in a way, that animals are more important or that I’m a person who prefers animals to humans” (Julia). Turning to self-reflection, Julia continued: “It seems so cold when recounting it” (Julia). Referring to her own behavior as reflecting the character trait “cold” could be interpreted as if Julia had internalized the stereotypes about voluntarily childless women as uncaring, hard-hearted, distant and detached (Blackstone 2014; Letherby 1994; Rich et al. 2011).

The overwhelming delight in babies, as displayed by other girls in the narratives of Hanna and Doris, could be interpreted as an early manifestation of the biological urge to become a mother, commonly believed to be experienced by most adult women and sometimes referred to as “maternal feelings” (cf. Peterson and Engwall 2013). These women thus dissociated themselves from having developed this type of maternal longing for a baby. Two of the women, however, described what could be understood as a “peternal” longing for a companion animal. They discussed their urge for a companion animal as an innate biological urge, similar to how other women described their maternal desire for a baby. Eva reflected on how both the absence of maternal instinct and the strong preference to have a dog, were natural and biological processes:

My boyfriend came up with a theory that I might get the bodily reaction that in other women leads to the feeling “I want children”, but in me, these signals are transformed in the brain and what comes out is: “I want a dog!” [laughter] I really want a dog. [—] I have thought about this and maybe I lack some neurological connections. (Eva)

Kim, similarly, emphasized her absent baby fever and instead highlighted her strong longing to have a cat. “I want to... God... mhh mhh [sighing] I want a cat! I have never felt that oh mhh [sighing again] I want a child” (Kim). Kim acknowledged that there was a distinction between the urge for a baby and for a cat, but in order to make the interviewer understand her reasoning she persisted: “that sounds ridiculous [comparing children with cats], but I have to make that parallel” (Kim).

Kim also recounted how she used the analogy between pets and children when she was confronted with the statement “you would be a wonderful mother” (Kim). In order to deal with this implicit suggestion that all women want to become mothers, Kim responded with the counterstatement “you would be a great cat owner” (Kim), aware of that this would also end any discussion about her childfree status. Appraising a childless woman’s caring disposition (displayed e.g., towards companion animals) in this manner is a manifestation of so called “pronatalistic pressure” (Peterson 2010b), i.e., the powerful

normative force coercing women into motherhood, constructing voluntary childlessness as unnatural and as an unconceivable option. Childless women commonly experience manifestations of pronatalistic pressure as more or less explicit attempts to persuade them about the advantages of becoming a mother (Peterson and Engwall 2013). All of the women interviewed had encountered this. Eva reported how she dealt with that:

If someone asks why I don't want children it usually ends with me saying: "As long as I prefer to have a dog to a baby, I shouldn't have children. Period." You can't argue with that. So that's usually the most efficient strategy [to silence them]. (Eva)

Caroline reflected over the power of the pronatalistic pressure as she noted that not all women who become mothers "really crave a baby". Instead, according to Caroline, they get persuaded by society or by a partner, which made her ponder: "Why don't they just get a puppy instead?" (Caroline). Overturning the stereotype about childless women's pets being child substitutes, Caroline thus implied that some children instead are substitutes for pets and that pronatalistic pressure prevents some women from making the most sensible decision, i.e., getting a pet. Eva likewise questioned the choice to have children: "When my friends have told me they're pregnant my first thought has been 'But why would you want a baby when you could have a dog?'" (Eva). Iris, not only implied that children could be substitutes for pets, but explicitly developed her ideas about this:

I don't know if the dog becomes some kind of substitute [for childless people]. I have almost seen having children as a substitute for getting a dog. [laughter] I have heard people being given the advice to have children in order not to have to be alone. Seriously! I've heard it several times! And I feel "but why don't you get a dog? It will be cute and sweet and it won't give you any problems with quarrelling or whining". (Iris)

Only one of the women interviewed expressed what could be interpreted as what in previous research has been defined as a "petparent" identity (Owens 2015; Owens and Grauerholz 2018). Greta expressed that she enjoyed a "special bond" with her two cats and considered them to be the most important in her life. For her, the childfree lifestyle meant that she could protect her two cats from the risks of being subjected to the cruelty of children. Greta explained that she had always, since she was a child, considered children to be "big animal abuser". She continued to account for what that meant for her and her decision to remain childfree: "Right now I have two cats, and I would never dream of exposing them to a life together with children" (Greta). Greta gave an example of her protective attitude:

A colleague of mine asked if she could borrow one of my cats because her daughter wanted a companion animal. "Are you completely crazy?", I replied, and she said: "What do you mean? It's only an animal!" If you have that attitude you shouldn't even have a stick insect as a pet. My God! They are my babies. [—] It would be just as absurd as if I asked to borrow her child to see if I could cope with being a mother. (Greta)

Referring to her cats as her "babies" is a way of drawing on cultural parenting narratives and constructing a childless interspecies family narrative (Owens 2015; Owens and Grauerholz 2018). Comparing her cats to children, and strongly refuting the idea about "only an animal", Greta seemed to oppose the everyday distinction between humans and non-humans in which the parental relationships to animals is minimized and devalued (cf. Owens and Grauerholz 2018). At the same time, she portrayed herself as a more responsible and legitimate parent than her friend. The role as a protector of the companion animal/child is part of the caregiving parental role that Laurent-Simpson (2017) identified in her research on childless/childfree pet owners. Similar to Greta, several of the informants in the study of Laurent-Simpson (2017) were concerned with protecting their companion animal from traumatic memories of teasing and bullying, although no one in her study identified children as the culprits.

5.2. Remaining “Childfree” and “Petfree”—Ambivalence and Avoidance Strategies

Why then, if Eva, Caroline, Kim, Julia and Hanna, had these “peternal” longings, did they not have companion animals? Actually, they, together with Beatrice and Nora, strongly rejected the idea about having pets. As we shall see in this section, references to companion animals were also intertwined in the women’s narratives about how children would disrupt their lifestyle. In these narratives the women used similar arguments to explain why they did not have pets that they used to describe the disadvantages of having children.

Just like being a parent, being responsible for pets was perceived, by these women, as restricting the owner’s freedom and independence. These women emphasized that they were “childfree” and not “childless”, emphasizing “the positive experience of the choice” (cf. e.g., [Park 2005](#), p. 399 for a discussion on the choice of term). Both children and pets would prevent them from feeling “spontaneous” (Beatrice) and made them “feel trapped” (Beatrice). Beatrice: “could imagine that it would be really nice to have a cat” but explained her priorities in life: “It’s important for me not to have responsibility for someone else. I don’t have any pets either because I don’t want to be responsible for it” (Beatrice).

Fanny described how she enjoyed not only the benefits of a “childfree lifestyle”, but also a “petfree lifestyle”, involving minimal household and caretaking duties. She shared her observation about “mothers who need a pet to take care of and groom” when they become “empty nesters”. Contrary to this she explained: “But I feel that those care-taking duties are just a burden to me” (Fanny). Previous research has shown how voluntarily childless women sometimes explain their decision with reference to a lack of a biological urge to have a baby ([Peterson and Engwall 2013](#)). Fanny described her decision to forgo motherhood in this manner, as something very “natural” due to absent “maternal instinct”. Fanny explained how her childfree decision was linked to her identity and her lifestyle, describing that she had never had: “that motherly, nurturing and caretaking part” (Fanny). She continued to explain what that meant: “I don’t have the need to take care of a child or a pet. I don’t feel that need very strongly” (Fanny). Instead, her needs gave priority to personal freedom. Nora described a similar experience:

I think children, you know, it had... it had also cropped my freedom. I’ve had some cats... And I was thinking about getting a cat again, but... if I want to travel or do this and that... who would take care of the cat? (Nora)

As seen above, the women described a need for freedom that not only prevented them from parenting a child but also from parenting a companion animal (cf. [Peterson 2015](#)). Similar arguments, regarding these women’s need for freedom, were thus used to support their decision not to have children and to support their decision not to have an animal companion. In short, their lifestyle preferences could be summarized in the expression: “I don’t even have any pets!” (Beatrice).

Likewise, Julia ruminated over her limited possibilities to care for a companion animal, or a child, due to her lifestyle:

I had a cat a long time ago. Unfortunately, he died. But I love cats. I would really love to have a cat. But with the life I lead right now, travelling a lot, having engagements in the evenings. It would be a miserable life for the cats. When you get home, the poor cat would be starving for affection and attention and then I wouldn’t get the space I need. When I tell people that they always support that decision: “That’s very sensible of you, don’t get a cat”. But it’s the exact same thing with a child. (Julia)

Julia thus described that it was easier for other people to accept that she, because of life circumstances, opted out of a cat than a child. In contrast to Fanny, Julia and Beatrice expressed feelings of ambivalence regarding pets. Ambivalence, i.e., “mixed feelings”, defined as a “mix of positive and negative emotions toward the same relational object” ([Lendon et al. 2014](#), p. 272) is a concept previously often referred to in research on voluntary childlessness (cf. e.g., [Letherby 2002](#); [Letherby](#)

and Williams 1999; Reuter 2018; Veevers 1979). Although Julia longed for a cat, she had decided to give up the idea of having a pet. Her ambivalence and struggle involved taking into account her own need of “space”, but she also displayed a high level of empathy with the cat and acknowledged the cat’s needs of affection and attention and that she would not be able to fulfil those needs. She compared this line of reasoning, an example of responsible ambivalence, with her decision to forgo children (cf. Reuter 2018).

Three of the women who previously had shared their household with a companion animal described the problems they had experienced. Contrary to what previous research (Owens and Grauerholz 2018; Owens 2015; Walsh 2009b) has shown about pet parenting as a preparation to become a “real” parent, Beatrice, reflected over the experience in the following way:

Having a cat was really a kind of vaccination for me. It made me realize what I already knew. If I can’t even take care of two cats without feeling trapped, what would it be like with a child? A cat you can ... If you get upset with your cat you can put it in the bathroom for an hour, of course you wouldn’t like to, but still ... (Beatrice)

Even for Eva, who preferred animals to children, a pet could become a burden. She was asked what she enjoyed with her voluntarily childless life and she instantly replied: “To be able to be free” (Eva). She expanded on what this meant by recounting how she and her partner once had a companion animal:

We had a cat once. It was fun and it actually made us feel a little like a family. It was nice and fun. But at the same time ... there were some problems with the cat and as you can tell he is no longer with us. It became a burden and it was a little like ... it ended up being an encumbrance. (Eva)

Although Eva was deterred by the episode involving the companion animal, it is worth noting the reference to the positive experience of feeling “a little like a family”. Two adults living together is not perceived as a family in the social construction of “doing family” (cf. Blackstone 2014; Owens and Grauerholz 2018). A child, or a cat, increases the possibilities of being perceived as a “real” family.

Kim, who expressed how she loved cats, and previously had owned one, came to the decision to not have a cat due to her lifestyle:

I had a cat when I moved home to Sweden. But she died unfortunately and I didn’t get a new one. Because I realized how hard it was ... to be away from home all the time, I traveled a lot with the job then and worked long days and was gone. And the little kitty ... when I got home she was so happy to see me after being completely deprived of company, and so rather, I have chosen to opt out a cat. Because I don’t think I have time to take care of it. (Kim)

Kim, similarly to Julia, expressed her ambivalence towards being a cat-owner. While Julia described empathy, as a prerequisite for feeling guilt, Kim was more explicit about wanting to avoid feeling the guilt of leaving the cat alone. Still, such guilt also reflected the concern for the cats (cf. Rotkirch and Janhunen 2009).

The relationship with companion animals was also constituted as problematic by three of the four women who were pet owners. Doris had a cat, and when she was asked to explain why she had chosen to live a life without children she replied: “I would have a hard time coping with having someone that is so dependent on you ... it’s quite enough with having a cat [laughter]” (Doris). Doris thus emphasized the distinction between the level of caregiving associated with pets and children. Maria was another cat owner interviewed and she opined that a child would possibly constrain her everyday life even more than her cat already did:

Yes, it is possible. I’ve always had a cat and ... We get very bound by it. It’s coming along everywhere. It’s true that you’ll be bound. Maybe not always physically but very bound mentally. (Maria)

Similarly to Eva, Julia's previous experiences of "pet parenting" only reinforced her choice to remain voluntarily childless. She reflected in a self-aware manner over how she thought she would be able to cope with the motherhood role, and compared it to how she coped with the role as "pet parent":

I'm a very impatient person and with the cat ... when the cat was meowing I felt like hitting it! [laughter] So I can only imagine, what would it be like with a kid? It would be so incredibly much worse! (Julia)

In these cases the women's experiences of pets confirmed their decision to forgo children, whether it was based on refuting what was understood as necessary life modifications or anticipating an unacceptable high level of caregiving. Even Greta, who cared for her two cats to a point where they had become her "fur babies" (cf. [Greenebaum 2004](#)), making sure never to let them go outside or be alone at home for too long, described that she had her limits when it came to caring for companion animals. She had previously had a dog and could compare the two different types of companion animals: "I've had a dog also and that was a completely different kind of care-taking and you needed to spend much more time at home with the dog" (Greta). Preferring a cat instead of a dog could be explained with reference to "species-typical differences in social behavior, with cats being more emotionally distant from their owners than dogs" ([Zilcha-Mano et al. 2011](#), p. 348). The cat, with self-reliance and lack of interdependence ([Beck and Madresh 2008](#)), was a better fit with Greta's own preferences regarding autonomy.

6. Discussion

This study has examined how 15 Swedish voluntarily childless women gave meaning to and constructed their voluntary childless decision by drawing on experiences regarding interspecies relationships. Only four of the 15 women interviewed disclosed that they actually owned pets and only one expressed what could be interpreted as an evident "petparent" identity (cf. [Laurent-Simpson 2017](#); [Owens 2015](#); [Owens and Grauerholz 2018](#)). Instead, about a third of the women wanted to be "petfree" for the same reasons as "childfree", and strongly dissociated themselves from the responsibilities associated with pet parenting.

Nevertheless, several of the women without pets were intensely emotionally attached to a particular pet, or particular types of companion animals in a more general sense. Some of them even compared their longing for a pet with other women's maternal longing for a child, and thus expressed "peternal" feelings. Notwithstanding, not even these women, who compared their deep affection for companion animals with the attachment between parents and child, had adopted the full "caregiving" behavior, or attempted extensive "life-modification", with regards to a companion animal (cf. [Laurent-Simpson 2017](#)). They rejected the idea about taking on the responsibilities for duties such as feeding, cleaning and providing comfort to children as well as to pets. Previous experiences of companion animals made them refrain from once again sharing their household with a pet as the responsibilities would have too large an impact on their desired lifestyle. Although affections for companion animals were a significant aspect of these Swedish women's voluntary childless identities and sense-making, most of them were not willing to adjust their childfree lifestyle to include a pet. Those who experienced the strongest "peternal" feelings in this study, however, also expressed ambivalence. They struggled to acknowledge that their intense attachment to companion animals was not compatible with their needs for space and freedom. But ultimately, their responsible ambivalence (cf. [Reuter 2018](#)) involved both empathy and guilt towards the pet.

Little attention has so far been devoted to understanding voluntary childlessness as a phenomenon contextually dependent on social, cultural, historical, economic and political pre-conditions. We, however, here emphasize the need to interpret these results within the context of the current Swedish society. This is a welfare society characterized by a political commitment to create a 'child-friendly' society where structural measures support the reconciliation of parenthood and professional life. A powerful motivator for women to choose to remain childless has otherwise been professional career

preferences (Abma and Martinez 2006; Tanturri and Mencarini 2008). This choice—between children or career—is less relevant in the Swedish context. Consequently, this is a societal context in which women’s career orientation might not provide a legitimate explanation for the voluntary childless decision. Instead, previous research shows that Swedish women favor references to biological and bodily processes to make sense of their voluntary childless decision. This sense-making strategy is illustrated by expressions such as “silent body”, “lack of biological clock”, “no urge” (Peterson and Engwall 2013). These expressions mirror societal norms that motherhood should be preceded by a strong and irresistible longing for children.

When Swedish voluntarily childless women describe a lack of maternal feelings in this manner, they make sense of their decision to forgo children in dialogue with the societal discourse about motherhood: just as reproduction is assumed to be biologically programmed, so is voluntary childlessness. References to lack of a maternal instinct are therefore also a way of depicting voluntary childlessness as a “natural” decision in the sense of “not acting against nature”.

The results in this article illustrate that similar sense-making occurred with regards to companion animals. Describing strong “peternal” feelings makes sense in a societal context where maternal instincts have been biologized (Peterson and Engwall 2013). To display “peternal” feelings could also be a way of refuting stereotypes about voluntarily childless women being cold and unable to form attachment bonds with others (cf. Blackstone 2014; Letherby 1994; Rich et al. 2011). Expressing such “peternal” longings can therefore also permit voluntarily childless women to embrace their womanhood, regardless of stereotypes about “unwomanly conduct” (cf. Morell 1994; Rich et al. 2011).

Previous research has also highlighted how Swedish voluntarily childless women emphasize their need and desire for “freedom” when they explain and justify their decision to forgo having children (Peterson 2015). The women’s justification for living a “childfree” life, and a “petfree” life, even despite having “peternal” longings, seemed to coincide in arguments that these life-decisions were made to prevent disastrous consequences for themselves as well as for the child/pet. The sense-making strategy regarding not having pets thus gave further support and weight to their voluntary childless decision. It is a meaning-making strategy that presented their decisions in a consistent and responsible way, as they avoided being questioned about why they had companion animals but no children. By dissociating themselves from the caring-activities associated both with children and companion animals, their behavior made more sense, to themselves and to the surrounding society. Hence, making sense of a “petfree” lifestyle, in relation to their need of “own space”, also supported their childfree decision.

The qualitative, interpretive perspective adopted in the article facilitates a complex and nuanced analysis that highlights voluntarily childless women’s meaning-making as a reflexive, complex and continuous process (Manning and Kunkel 2014). The analysis therefore contributes to the growing body of research attempting to understand variations in human-non-human relations (cf. Blouin 2013). However, more research is needed in this area, especially because the voluntary childless population is prognosed to continue to increase. The results highlight the need for more cross-cultural comparisons between different cultural contexts. The article raises questions about whether or not “a desire to nurture” (Laurent-Simpson 2017) or being a “dog mom” (Volsche and Gray 2016) are more accurate arguments, justifications and sense-making strategies in some cultural settings than others, depending on, for example, the strength and influence of traditional gender roles in these cultures. Our research suggests that voluntary childlessness and “petparenting” can have very different meanings in different societal contexts.

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