

VULNERABLE LIFE COURSE? HOW DO WOMEN WITHOUT CHILDREN FACE SOCIAL NORMS ON MOTHERHOOD ?

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Social norms on motherhood are given in historical time, are related to fertility, social representations of the family and couple, life course regulations and gender roles.

2. Hypothesis: the transition to motherhood is normatively expected.

3. Childless/childfree women need to face different sources of stress like lack of social network support, constraints to negotiate other life course choices and individual identity because of childlessness.

4. Hypothesis: childlessness / being childfree may enhance processes of vulnerabilisation.

Research questions

- How are childless / childfree women confronted with unmet expectations to be mother?
- What are the implications in the nonnormative trajectory of women for those who drifted into childlessness versus those who chose to be childfree?
- Are they specifically vulnerable in their personal and relational sphere (identity, support, partnership)?

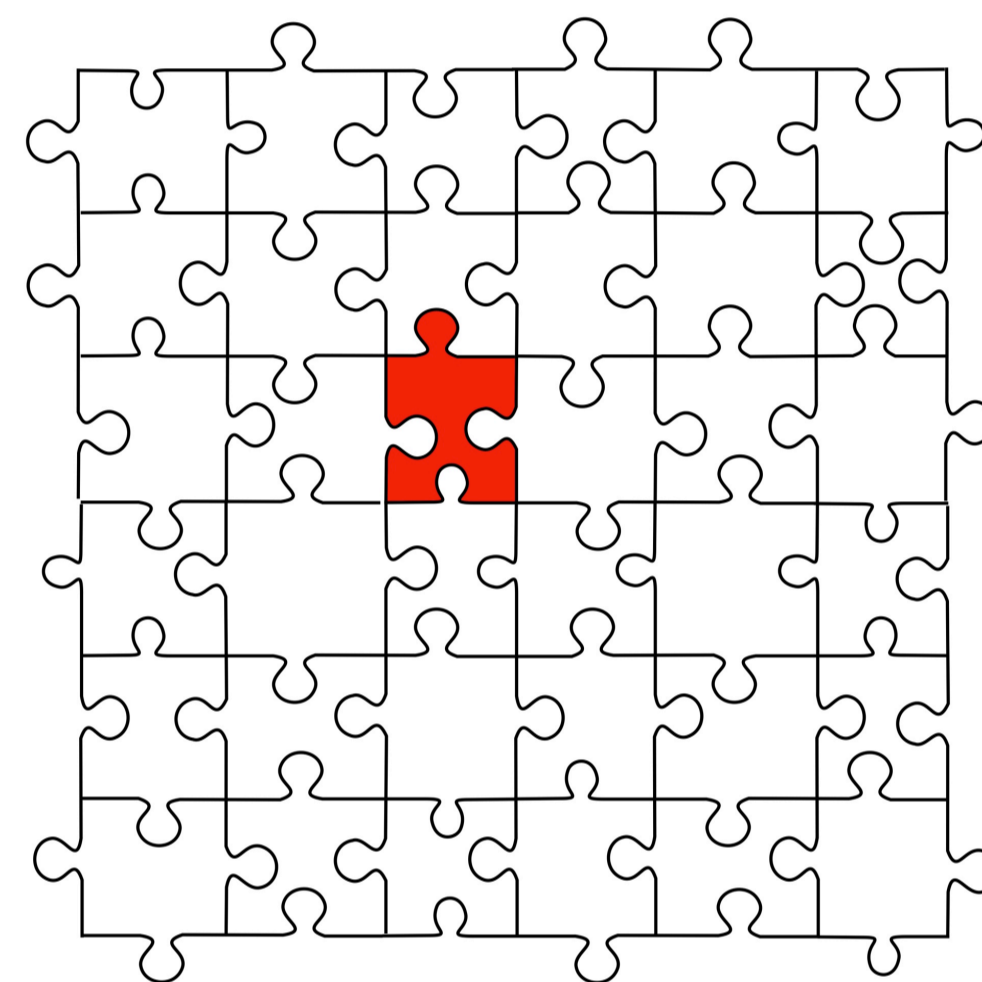
Data and Methods

- N=68 semi-structured interviews: N=32 women of which N=16 where in couple and N= 20 men
- Sample: women are resident in CH, heterosexual and childless. The sample is purposively stratified by cohort. Women who could still have children (34 - 45), those who, just passed the fecundity threshold (46 - 55) and who are not in reproductive ages (56 - 65+)
- Guideline includes: *construction by interviewee of meaning of childlessness – identity construction as no-mother related to gender – enforcing of norms inside the network – sentimental and professional trajectories*
- Thematic content analysis

FINDINGS

Minerva imagined to have a family since her childhood. During her PhD's it was not the right period and she considered her ex-partner unsuitable as father. Zeus married and had a daughter, even though he reports not having really wanted to. When he met Minerva, he did not wish to have another child. Minerva convinced him, and because they postponed childbearing, they had to begin medical treatments. These treatments failed. Minerva experienced it as a failure. Such failure intensified her feeling of exclusion from the family unit represented by Zeus and his daughter.

Minerva 42 cohabiting with Zeus 45

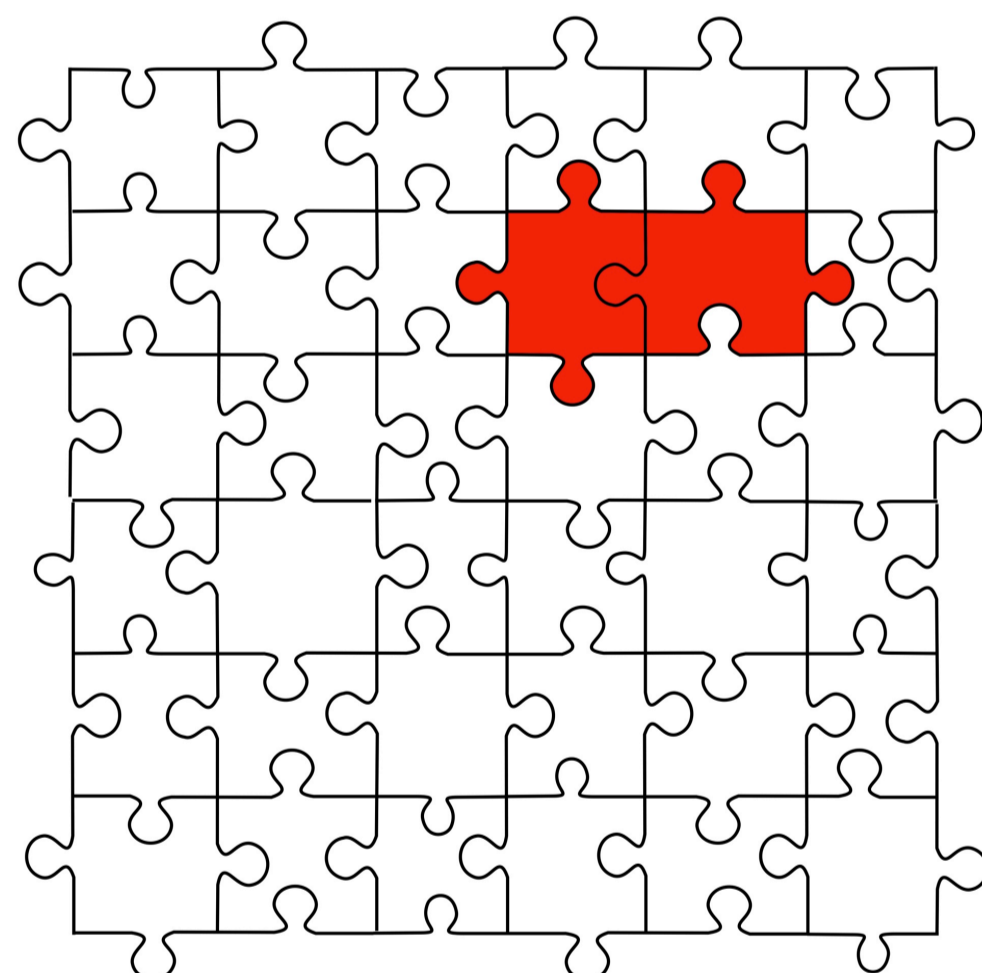


- Social norms on motherhood are interpreted in the context of family and couple relationships
- Childlessness represents for her a challenge in terms of her family role and identity
- Involuntary childlessness represents a "failure" only for her

Vulnerability source: childlessness challenges individual identity as a woman and as a partner

Yoga and Yogi met during a long trip in Asia. Yogi did it for a spiritual course, a few months before he became a father. When Yoga came back, she decided to move to another country for her studies. She met again Yogi and they decided to live together. Yoga wanted a child but Yogi not at all. This disagreement led to a dilemma: either negotiating or breaking up. In addition, Yoga's sick mother put stress on Yoga to have a baby to maintain the maternal kin line alive. At the same time, she accused her daughter of her cancer. Eventually, Yoga and Yogi decided not to have a child and agreed on that.

Yoga 39 married to Yogi 45

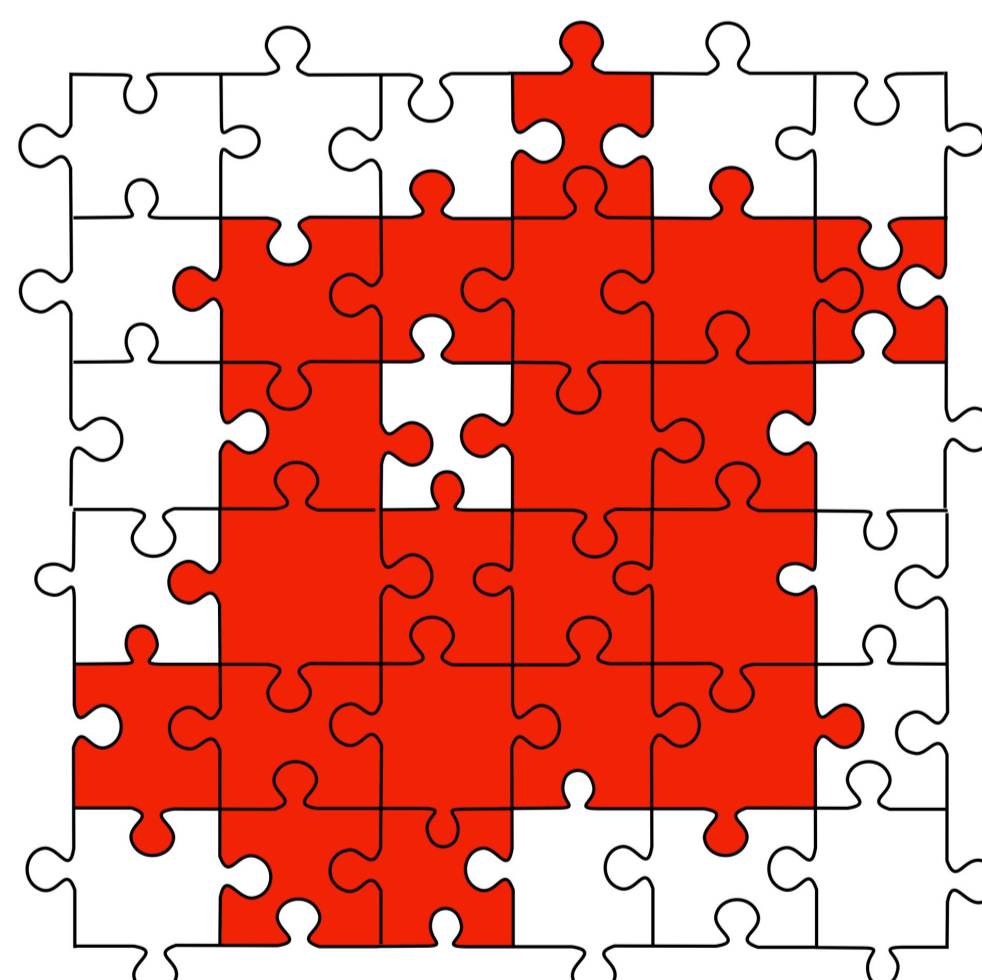


- The decision about having or not having children was taken gradually
- Pressure Adaptation process
- Childlessness becomes childfree. Partners adapt their behaviour and discourses to the situation

Vulnerability source: union trajectory and initial disagreement on parenthood

Since her adolescence Celeste decided to be childfree and privileged her career. She claimed her choice at the beginning of all her relationships. Her family is still yet very shocked about her life style. Her father considers that a childless / childfree woman is as a "fruitless tree, we need to root it". Even if her life course could be interpreted as away from the norm, she married and her husband shared her childfree choice.

Celeste 40 married to Babar 39



- Social norms on motherhood are enforced by the larger family members
- Partners agree on being childfree from the onset of their union
- They rely on their union and agreement on being childfree to be resilient against the pressure to conform

Vulnerability source : social network pressure to conform to norms

DISCUSSION

➢ Childless / childfree women are faced with the social norms on motherhood during other critical transitions in their life course, like during work transitions, when entering a couple relationship, or when parenthood spreads in their social networks.

➢ Social norms on motherhood do not imply only becoming mother, but require taking into account a number of other norms. This leads to the perception of childlessness as a probable process of vulnerability. The missing transition to motherhood in most cases implies a reorganization of the life course. Individuals mobilise resources agentially: identity, couple and network resources.

➢ Childlessness should not be interpreted as a state but as a process. Vulnerabilisation emerge only by looking at the dynamics (personal, couple, and family dynamics) through which individuals come to be childless or childfree. Social representations of gender roles lead to associating motherhood with a high value status.

➢ **Childless and childfree women are not necessarily vulnerable given that other dimensions in their lives are not nonnormative. Scholars have to focus on how individuals face the stress due to gender norms on parenthood and how they build responses to stress. Research on childlessness / being childfree is a privileged point of view study the interplay between social norms and individual trajectories.**