Vulnerable life courses? Social norms on motherhood and childless and childfree women in Switzerland
Vanessa Brandalesi and Laura Bernardi (University of Lausanne, LIVES)

Background and research questions
This paper researches the implications of social norms, including age norms, about motherhood on the life courses of childless and childfree women in Switzerland, a context where gender roles are strongly modelled around the man-breadwinner / woman carer nuclear family setting (Giraud & Lucas, 2009). Contemporary childlessness (or being childfree) is most often the result of a choice, or rather the sequence of a series of contingent choices, by an individual or a couple. Inevitably, it contrasts with social norms about motherhood, expectations about couples’ fertility, and “traditional” gender roles (Kelly, 2009). Social norms of motherhood are inserted in a specific gender regime (Connell, 1987). Family sociologists as Roussel (1989) and family demographers as Van Kaa (March 1987) argue that individualization guides social actors more than compliance with norms related to social institutions such as the family. Individualisation processes can be read as an evolution of the nuclear family, as if the barycentre moved from the children (the golden age of the child), to the couple (the golden age of the couple, rise of childlessness, and postponement), to the single individual (rise in divorce and in childlessness). One key element to understand this evolution is to focus on social norms about motherhood, which allow exploring the construction of dominant values about family, partnership, and the dominant gender regime. Motherhood has been seen as a social institution as the family (Rich, 1976), a social institution which has been naturalized and used to define women’s role in the gender system and shape her identity. Feminist scholars across disciplines argued that the female body has been closely tied to motherhood and such processes reiterate the bi-categorization "men" / "women", "father" / "mother and legitimize a series of practical differentiations and complementarity of social sex roles (Gardey & Löwy, 2002). This complementarity is also visible in the construction of the life course of individuals, which seems to show that women’s life courses are defined by and acted according to compliance with their reproductive function (Keizer, Dykstra, & Jansen, 2008). The woman’s career (Becker, 1985) would focus on looking for a “good” partner and becoming a “good” mother (Garcia, 2011). If this is the normative frame, our research questions are: How childless/childfree women are confronted with the unmet expectation to be mother? What are the implications of their a-normative trajectory for women who drifted into childlessness versus those who chose
childlessness? Are they specifically vulnerable in their identity definition and their relational sphere?

Through the content analysis of a set of 68 interviews with women and couples, we suggest that motherhood in contemporary Switzerland remains central to the identity and the definition of the life course of women and of heterosexual couples. We not only identify the permissive, prescriptive and proscriptive norms in terms of age and the sequence of life course transitions which women are embedded, but also uncover the way in which they differ in the way they negotiate their choices and situation of not being mothers.

Data and research method

We draw on a set of face–to–face semi-structured interviews carried out in 2013 (N=68). Respondents were recruited in a variety of ways: a) one part (N=17) came from the survey respondents of the study Contemporary couples (see Widmer, Kellerhals, Levy, Ernst Stähli, & Hammer, 2003) who accepted to be re-interviewed; b) one part (N=34) were contacted through a multiple entry snow-balling technique (starting from the previous group of respondents, by personal contacts, call from our internet website and call from national radio).

We stratified the sample according to residence and age criteria. Women and men were residents in all three main linguistic regions of Switzerland at the moment of the interview. This allows us to maximize the exposure to potentially different set of norms (the German-speaking part of Switzerland being on average more traditional in terms of gender and family norms than the rest of the country) (OFS, 2013). Women were aged from 34 to 65 years old. This latter choice was driven by theoretical considerations about the experience of childlessness in different phases of the life course. We wanted to have situations in which childlessness was almost irreversible situation (women over 45) and situations in which fertility was still possible in principle at least. Clearly our older women have experienced the crucial years in which childlessness was turning into a definitive state in a different historical time and therefore have been subjected to different gender and age norms about motherhood. The retrospective nature of the interview partially accounted for these differences. Table 1 gives a description of the sample characteristics by age and type of interview (individual or couple).

1 N=68 in term of units of interviews. In some cases, we did one couple’s interview, after individual’s interview. This explain N=68 which not correspond in term of respondents but in terms of number of interviews.

2 http://www.lives-nccr.ch/fr/actualite/projet-de-etre-femme-sans-enfant-cest-pas-si-facile-n707

3 Vanessa Brandalesi conducted the interviews in French and Italian. For 10 interviews in Swiss-German, she formed an assistant-student, Charlotte Gisler, who did the interviews in this language and translate after in French.
Couple interviews were proposed to all women in a couple, and possible in most cases. They are particularly insightful to explore negotiations about having children to understand the processes driving the absence of children. In some case, the man in the couple had had children from a previous relationship. These cases allowed us to enlarge the variety of situations in which women face their own biological childlessness including when they may experience social motherhood. In fact childless women are rarely isolated from a network of children in their family (for example as aunties, as stepmothers). Given the weight of the naturalisation of motherhood, social motherhood experiences give important insights concerning social norms and the ways in which people face them.

Our interview guideline covered several aspects, among which the most relevant for the current paper are the following: a biographic account including dimensions of education, employment, partnerships, and family dimensions; perception / reception of social norms on motherhood through personal networks; and negotiation about fertility between partners. We employed semi-structured interviews to allow for some comparison across age and geographical region, while keeping a fundamentally explorative approach in the interpretation of the answers. The biographic part of the interview in addition allowed us to collect in parallel factual information on the life course and subjective meaning associated to childlessness and to the process of transitions and turning points leading to it. Our analysis is based on the thematic content analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) carried out through systematic coding and comparison of interview extracts. Top down and bottom up coding schemes are used in parallel (Saldaña, 2013). Major top down codes were “normative sequencing of life course events and transitions”, “age norms about childbearing”, “right parenting”, “right partner”. These codes permit us in the first place, to classify reference to norms as well as to see how they play a role in the unfolding of the narrative about the woman life course. This latter connection allows exploring the way in which norms are perceived, negotiated and enforced in social interaction.
Preliminary findings

Preliminary findings are based on a limited number of coded interviews and are tentative. Yet we would like to present these four examples of life courses of our childless/childfree women, to illustrate the richness of the material and the pertinence of the analysis of the ways in which social norms about motherhood affected women without children during crucial moments of their partnership and employment trajectory as well as the construction of their identity as women and couple. The cases offer a wide range of situations to explore the way in which norms participate in the construction of childless and childfree life courses. Women differ from each other in the age and partnership status of the woman at the moment of the interview, as well as the path leading away from motherhood. In two out of the four cases the woman’s partner was also interviewed, both separately and together with the woman (three interviews per couple). In one case the partner has a child from his first marriage. In one case the couple was married and had explicitly decided not to have children.

Majda (34 years old, French speaking Switzerland, in couple)

Majda is 34 years old at the time of the interview, and works as a psychologist in a cantonal institution. She had several long-term relations. For several years she has been in a relationship with a man who already had two children from a previous marriage. Her partner at the time and she did not live under the same roof. For him, there was no question of having children since he already had two. For Majda not living under the same roof already meant that certain conditions essential for her to have a child as a couple were not met. Her current boyfriend, who is 43 years old, and her discussed the issue of having children or not at their first meeting. At the time of the interview they were planning to live together, which is prerequisite for Majda to start a family. What stands out blatantly and repeatedly in her interview is her perceived physiological stress of being a woman; what she calls "the biological data" She realizes that any time that she discusses with her partner about children she is the one who brings the topic up and "pushes" the discussion on it. She justifies this by the pressure of Nature, which is forced women to procreate in a specific period of time.

"And by biological data I mean that we see clearly that women who give birth between 20 and 30, they recover more easily than those who are 40 years. I think that we should not play with Nature. You talked before about a limit of 40 years, which is generally accepted. I think that it is not us who fix it. I believe it exists, and so does the gender issue. I think as a woman, we are lying in one-way or another and then you say: “I have a period where I can consider it and I have a period where I cannot consider it. I can have a love life at 60, 70 years old but I cannot have children. "And a man can say: "I can do it until much later." And men therefore do not necessarily think in terms of dates or periods of life when it would be more or less favourable. Finally I feel it pretty strong also talking with friend, the fact that we have a limit fixed biologically for women. " 
Like most women in the study, across all cohorts, Maja focuses on the age limits to "natural" procreation as a pressing factor in her childbearing decision-making. This extract is representative of a part of medical discourses about the right age of childbearing. The expected transition to motherhood is also a transition at the right age. Such age norms legitimize Maja to bring the discussion in her marriage to "have" children as soon as possible; even she is 34 and potentially fertile for a few more years. Norms about the right setting in terms of partnership is also central here; the child is not imagined outside of a married and cohabiting couple.

Minerva and Zeus (42 and 45 years old, French-speaking Switzerland, in couple, partner has a child)
As a teenager Minerva had always imagined having children. She began extensive studies in the hard sciences, which she considers as incompatible with having children, although around her, she had examples of women who reconciled studies and children. In addition, she had no plans to have children with her partner at the time of the interview. For his part, Zeus had been married and had a daughter. Although he admits that his ex-wife at the time had forced his hand to be father while he had never felt the need. Five years after the birth of his daughter, he separated from his wife by mutual consent. Zeus and Minerva were part of the same group of acquaintances and initiated their relationship after a few months after their respective separations. Minerva was 32 years old at that time, and had postponed the idea of having children until then. Very quickly, she expressed her desire to Zeus, knowing that he had reservations on the topic. After much hesitation, they decided to stop contraception and tried to have a child. The child never arrived and they decided to go visit a doctor and had three attempts at hormonal treatment that failed. They decided to stop any type of treatment and Minerva begins to accept to be childless. Zeus during the interview maintained the idea that he did not feel it as much as Minerva the need to have children. For Minerva, having a child would have represented the union of a family.

“A friend, during her doctoral thesis had two children during that part of her studies, and she handled it very, very well. During the years of study, it was not something I was planning to do. After completing my studies neither. There was something that I could not discuss with the partner with whom I was”.

This excerpt illustrates the importance of norms about good parenting and good work-family balance. Both can question the possibility to have children. The interviewee feels that it is impossible to pursue her career and have additional family responsibilities. The question of
the “right” partner is also central for Minerva and Zeus. For her, a stable cohabiting relationship may not be the “right” one, if she cannot see in her partner the potential to be father. Beyond being a couple, the projections that individuals make of a “good father” or a “good mother” were recurrent in the interviews. At the same time particularity of this case is that Zeus has a child from a previous relationship. To be childless for Minerva means also here to have no “blood”, as a child could represented, and so a “strong” link with Zeus. It is important in the case of childless women to underline the dimension of lack of legitimation in the couple. But we could develop this aspect through more thorough analysis.

Alice & Le Chat (53 & 48 years old, French-speaking Switzerland, in couple)

Alice and Le Chat meet each other, respectively at 36 years old and 31 years old. Quickly after they meeting, they lived together. The issue of children is not very relevant. In fact, they explain, that there do not feel a strong desire to have children. However they agree, that it is only within this relationship, that they could imagine becoming parents.

Alice: “It is true that it is life (...). When I was young, I thought, when I was 15 or 16 years, I thought: "One day, I will have kids. When I grow up (…)" But the life made the circumstances (…) I had a relationship with an older man, when I was 15 (…) I took the pill very quickly, luckily! I had a fairly open mom, because it was still 1970s. Luckily! Because it could happen: an accident. It's clear, if I did not take the pill and everything. And well, it did not happen with him. (…) After the following partner with whom I could possibly have children it would have been my ex-husband because I got married at 28. And here, as I have already said, it was a mixed marriage with a Tunisian, but it was not an arranged marriage. It was a mistake anyway (…) it was again finished fast enough, two years after. We spent a year and a half together and then we got married and six months after we separated. So, I would say that fortunately there was no pregnancy either, because we never wanted it. We did not say: "Let's have a baby! " Because we have not yet had time to think about it, there was a lot to deal with, because he was an asylum seeker, a lot of worries. (...) Then I had a phase of life where for many years I lived alone, but not alone, alone, (…) At 36 years old when I met Le Chat (…) Effectively with Le Chat that was a nice love story from the beginning and finally with the only man, with whom it would have been nice to have a child, because I think it would have been a great father. He's a responsible, landing, quiet, (…) Now I am 53 years old and I have no regrets”.

This excerpt illustrates how the issue to be childless/childfree results from a process. In fact, during the interview with Alice, we asked her to trace her relationship. At many time points in her life she said it could have ben possible to have a child. But all these “opportunities”, e.g. be married, were not linked with other perceived “right” conditions to become a parent. So, in following the life course narrative, this allows us to identify windows of opportunities when the transition to motherhood was possible but did not occur. The qualities that define a normative fatherhood are linked to gender stereotypes and expectations. Alice uses adjectives to describe a “good father” like “responsible” and “quiet”, which could be linked to the stereotypes and the bi-categorization in term of motherhood versus fatherhood.
Marlene & Le Breton (58 & 61 years old, French-speaking Switzerland, married)

Marlene & Le Breton both work in the hotel industry. They met and married in the early 1970s. They talked about having children rather fast and in connection to work. They saw two options for their couple: either have children, or focus on work. They privileged their work in the hotel industry. Indeed, the couple sees having children and educating them as a full-time job that, if done, must be done well, and not in the spare time. They say that: "We have not had children because we love them too much”.

Marlene: “I would say 30 years ago we were selfish and nowadays, under current conditions and the problems that young people face, there are people who tell us, ‘This is exactly what one should do.’ The discourse from the outside (author’s note: outside the couple) has changed a lot in 30 years”

This passage underlines that couples are sensitive to external comments and judgements about their childless choice. The non-transition to motherhood is perceived to be acceptable nowadays but was not when the couple faced the decision. Possibly, comments received in 1970s are also different given that their conversation partners are aware that their childlessness is definitive. Nevertheless, given the pluralisation and multiplication of partnership and family forms, it is well possible that a childfree couple feels more legitimate and less vulnerable in its identity.

These illustrations indicate that social norms about age (medical discourse), about sequence and priorities of life domains (work over childrearing), may be proscriptive (no children without cohabitation), prescriptive (conceptions of good parenthood), and permissive (childfree is as a legitimate alternative under certain conditions). Childless women justify their condition by turning to normative arguments (age norms about motherhood, missing the right partner or the necessary agreement with the partner). By doing so, on the one hand they recognize the presence and the pressure of towards a normative life course for women, which is oriented to motherhood, but on the other hand they can negotiate deviance from it.
References


