The Childless Voices Choir: Mitigating isolation, silence, and shame through group singing

PRESENTATION: RESEARCH & KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE ON ARTS & HEALTH
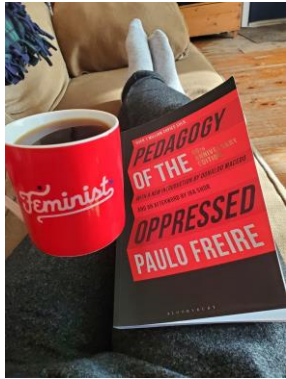
LAURA CURTIS

JANUARY 10, 2024

Introducing the Research

▶ Involuntary childlessness = childless-not-by-choice (CNBC)

▶ Childless Voices Choir online singing sessions

▶ Theories of community (Delanty, 2018) and empowerment (McLaughlin, 2016)

▶ Involuntary childlessness as stigma – Isolation; silence; shame (Gold, 2012; Petropanagos, 2017; Weissman, 2017)

▶ Emergent themes: Identity transformation (Trevarthen, 2002) and self-empowerment (Adams, 2008) through *communitas* (Turner, 1969) and affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012)

Positioning Myself as 'Insider'

The room called childlessness has many different doors. Not just the ones marked "Didn't Want " or "Couldn't Have"

— gateway —
women.com

- Loss of an only child
- Inability to conceive
- Inability to retain a pregnancy
- Social position that does not support having children or access to essential reproductive health services

"Pronatalist societies promote reproduction and parenthood through "direct policies, such as child subsidies, or indirect influence, such as cultural celebrations of motherhood and childbearing" (Lovett, 2018, p. 1028)

Disenfranchised Grief

"The intangible nature of involuntary childlessness can be an ambiguous loss, often not apparent to others." (Darroux, 2022, p. 27)
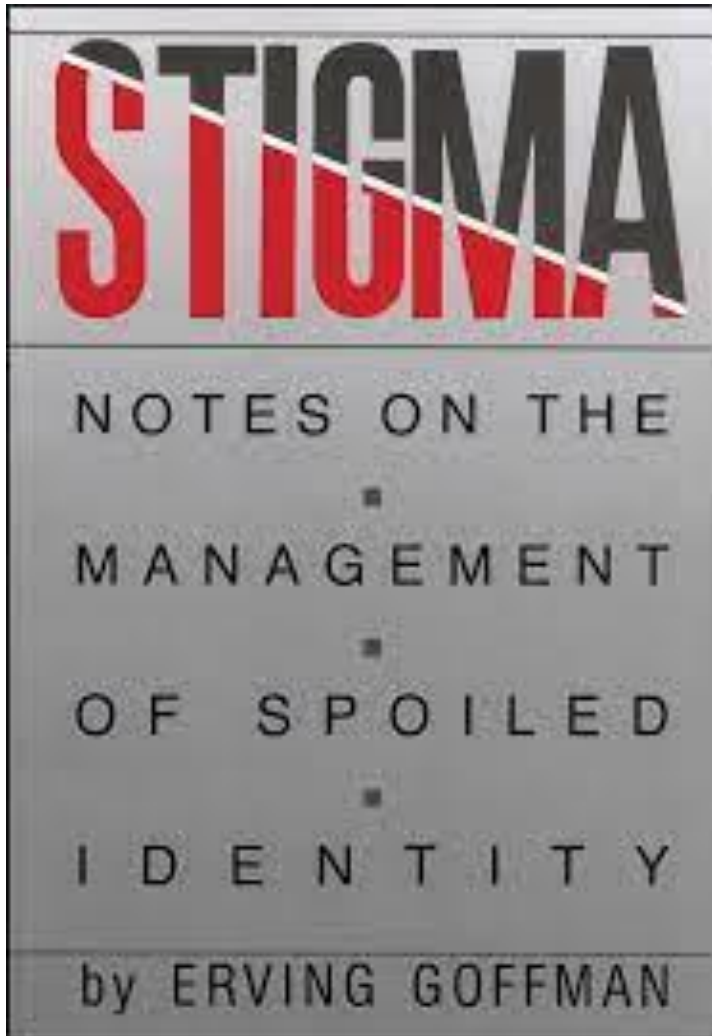
STIGMA

NOTES ON THE · MANAGEMENT · OF SPOILED · IDENTITY

by ERVING GOFFMAN

"IT'S SUCH A PROCESS…I'M LUCKY IN A WAY THAT I FEEL LIKE I'M SORT OF COMING OUT THE OTHER SIDE OF IT, BUT I'VE ACTUALLY WORKED VERY HARD TO GET TO THAT STAGE…I FEEL LIKE…I'VE ENDED UP ON A DIFFERENT PATH…BUT I THINK THAT'S VERY MUCH ENDED UP BEING THE RIGHT PLACE." - SUE
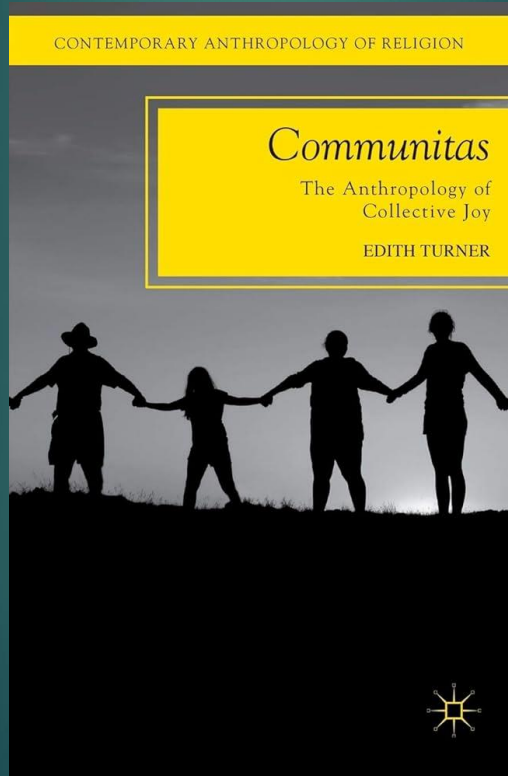
Theoretical Framework

Community

- "Support, strength, unity" – Lu

- "Friendship, love, support, and education…a constantly changing, organic process, action…protection" – Helen

- "Belonging" – Stephanie

- "Inclusive" – Anna

- "Belonging…warmth, understanding …empathy…companionship" – Sue

- "Pulling together" - Tracey

Communitas

- The liminal moment as transformational (Turner, 1969; Wirtz, 2014)

- "Betwixt and between" (Turner, 1969, p. 4)

- Potential identities - "Mother. Unmother" (Chester, 2003, p. 779)

- Collective musical engagement as a liminal and ritualistic experience

communitas ⟶ Identity transformation

Solidarity

"a capacity for action" (Delanty, 2018, p. 53)

"mutual concern" (Mason, 2000, p. 27)

"an empathetic understanding of the common needs and interests of others and a standing with them in view of these" (Wilde, 2013, p. 101)

solidarity ⟶ Self-empowerment

Affective Solidarity

Transformative action: "a productive basis from which to seek solidarity with others, not based in a shared identity or on a presumption about how the other feels, but on also feeling desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort, and against the odds." (Hemmings, 2012, p. 158)

Empowerment

"To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity" (Freire, 2018, p. 46)

shutterstock.com · 1922117087

Self-Empowerment

"Individuals, through their participation in group activities, gain skills and resources that lead to personal development. Their self-concept improves and they develop personal interaction skills. As individuals develop skills, the group functions more effectively. It gains strength as a group through broader membership, increasingly effective leaders, more resources, allies, opportunities, and strategies, and the development of skills for effectively using power." (Stein, 1997, p. 62)

Research Questions

1. Does the choral environment in the Childless Voices Choir foster community building and solidarity among involuntarily childless women?

a) If so, in what ways do involuntarily childless women experience community and solidarity within the Childless Voices choral environment?

2. Does the experience of singing in the Childless Voices Choir foster the development of self-empowerment among involuntarily childless women?

a) If so, in what ways do involuntarily childless women develop self-empowerment through singing in the Childless Voices Choir?

3. Does the public sharing of these women's experiences through the performance of collaboratively composed choral music foster community and the development of self-empowerment?

a) If so, in what ways do these women experience community and develop self-empowerment through the collaborative composition and performance of choral music?

Methodology

A Feminist Approach to Research

- Particularizing women's experiences
- Situated knowledge
- Reflexivity

"Even when researchers and respondents share structural and cultural similarities of, for example, gender, ethnicity, class, and age, this does not guarantee knowing or 'better' knowing. Being an 'insider'—whatever this actually means—is not a straightforward route to knowing." (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006, p. 40)

Ethnography

- ❖ Meaning
- ❖ Depth
- ❖ Emic (insider) perspective

a methodology that seeks "to produce detailed and situated accounts of specific cultures in a manner that reflects the perspective of those whose culture is under discussion" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 4)

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

PAR's purpose "is not merely to understand situations and phenomena but to change them. In particular it seeks to emancipate the disempowered, to redress inequality and to promote individual freedoms within a democratic society" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 51)

Study Methods

Phase 1

- Online singing session observations (Sept. 1st to Dec. 31st, 2021)

- Three, one-hour, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews per participant

- Two focus group interviews (Tuesday singers and Saturday singers)

Phase 2

- Singing session participation and observations (Nov. to Dec., 2022)

- Three online song learning/ practice sessions (Jan. 2023)

- In-person recording session (Jan. 28, 2023)

- One, one-hour, one-on-one, semi-structured interview per participant (Jan. to April, 2023)

Phase 1 Findings

ISOLATION   SILENCE   SHAME

"It's more that you don't have to talk about it [childlessness] almost in a way in that...it's a given...and you're just there as you are rather than you're worrying that you're about to get swatted by a question about it...in a normal community." - Stephanie

Unlocking the Voice

"Choir is an interesting one, isn't it because I'm not, as you've probably worked out by now [LAUGHS] I'm not a natural singer, which I know a lot of people are in the group…but I did sort of like the idea of what Helen was talking about, about sort of opening up the voice, not necessarily just the singing voice really" - Sue

WE 'SING' WHAT WE CANNOT SAY

- Helen

A Sense of Belonging

"I guess it's the belonging thing. And I know that…I only manage to come about half the time or less but, kind of knowing that you're all singing even when I'm busy doing something else…it's really good to know that this community is here, and that's, yeah, that's something I draw strength from." - Nicola

"yeah…we can kind of still attend off camera as well, so if we're not feeling that great, Helen sort of always encourages us to come anyway, doesn't she? And not feel that we have to show our faces; just be there." - Emma

Phase 2 Findings – The PAR Project

Developing Self-Empowerment

"in addition to providing nurturance and contexts for activism, women's networks can be crucial to the process of consciousness-change…it is in and through networks…that most women engage in collaborative activity and, through that activity, can begin to experience themselves as confident, competent beings" (Ackelsberg, 1988, pp.304-306)

Affective Solidarity

"I think that one stood out for me because it didn't feel…something that I'd kind of experienced, whereas sort of most of the other lines do, sort of thing. Like, the kind of being together and kind of us being a family sort of thing. That kind of sensation was something that resonated with me. It was just that one that I thought, "Oh! [LAUGHS] have I got being on a mountain to come?!" [LAUGHS]. **But it's a thing that's different for all of us, however similar it is for all of us as well**" - Stephanie

Moving Forward: Re-imagining the Self

"I think a big thing that becomes very obvious is that it's very difficult to see outside of your own arena when you're so deep in grief…it almost feels like a recovery, even though it isn't recovery…And I think…you're put back together differently, aren't you?...it's like that Japanese thing. What's the Japanese thing with the gold where they put the old pottery back together?...It's like that…'cause you do get smashed apart, you know, I very much feel that, and you get put back together, but it's not…quite the same." - Sue

"You see all these amazing women that do all these amazing things, you know, they've got these…great lives where they're busy doing this or they're busy doing that…yeah, it's very inspiring I think, you know? It's very inspiring to feel that." – Sam

"I feel quite empowered. And today my mum actually said to me, 'cause I said, "Oh, I'm having my interview today," and she said, 'Oh, Tracey, you've come such a long way'…That was brilliant…I think now I've come to accept it. I've come to accept childlessness" - Tracey

Moving Forward: Activism

Self-empowerment "is based on the assumption that people themselves can make a decisive contribution to the self-set goal of realizing their own potential and making the most of relationships with other people" (Adams, 2008, p. 90)

"I think, my God, how lucky am I?! It's like, my pain has provided a purpose and then, what I did before, singing, has also supported that. It's like my worlds have come together, you know? It's given me a kind of an identity, I suppose…So, I kind of feel like everything is kind of coming in and meeting at one point, and let's just see where that goes. Let's just see where that goes, you know? I can't do it by myself, you know? We're all doing it together. It's not just me doing this" - Helen

Conclusions

Affective solidarity developed through affective dissonance in relation to varied experiences of involuntary childlessness

Affective solidarity played a significant role in the development of self-empowerment

The development of self-empowerment was made manifest through consciousness-raising

Resistance of pronatalist discourses motivated a desire for, and move towards, social justice action

Communitas as critical to communal bonds

Transformation of musical, social, and/or personal identities through community building and the development of self-empowerment

Calm After the Storm

https://youtu.be/8z6_lTVnygk?si=gH9MX8SoPf2xj3fe

Thank you!

Refenences

Ackelsberg, M. A. (1988). Communities, resistance, and women's activism: Some implications for a democratic polity. In A. Bookman & S. Morgen (Eds.), *Women and the politics of empowerment* (pp. 297-313). Temple University Press.

Adams, R. (2008). *Empowerment, participation, and social work* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Anandhi, S. & Velayudhan, M. (2010). Rethinking feminist methodologies. *Economic and Political Weekly, 45*(44/45), 39-41.Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/20787527

Bays, A. (2017). Perceptions, emotions, and behaviours toward women based on parental status. *Sex Roles, 76,* 138-155. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0655-5

Bell, K. (2013). Constructions of "infertility" and some lived experiences of involuntary childlessness. *Journal of Women and Social Work, 28*(3). 284-295. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109913495726

Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B., Pearce, C., Taylor, T. L. L., & Taylor, T. L. (2012). Three Brief Histories. In *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method* (pp. 13-28). Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400845286-004

Ceballo, R., Graham, E. T., & Hart, J. (2015). Silent and infertile: An intersectional analysis of the experiences of socioeconomically diverse African American women with infertility. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 39*(4), 497-511. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684315581169

Chaskin, R. (2013). Theories of community. In M. Weil, M. Reisch, & M. Ohmer, *The handbook of community practice* (pp. 105-122). Sage Publications., Ltd. http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412976640.n5

Chester, D. H. (2003). Mother, Unmother: A storied look at infertility, identity, and transformation. *Qualitative Inquiry, 9*(5), 774-784. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403254887

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education*. Routledge.

Darroux, N. (2022). *An analysis of the disenfranchised grief of involuntary childless women* (Publication No. 3587). [Doctoral dissertation, Liberty University]. Scholars Crossing.

Day, J. (2013). *Living the life unexpected: 12 weeks to your plan B for a meaningful and fulfilling future without children*. Bluebird Books.

Delanty, G. (2018). *Community* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Doka, K. J. (1989). *Disenfranchised grief: Recognizing hidden sorrow*. Lexington Books.

Doka, K. J. (2002). *Disenfranchised grief: New directions, challenges, and strategies for practice*. Research Press.

Doucet, A. & Mauthner, N. S. (2006). Feminist Methodologies and epistemology. In C. D. Bryant & D. L. Peck (Eds.), *Handbook of 21st Century Sociology* (pp. 36-42). Sage Publications.

Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (50th anniversary edition). Bloomsbury Academic.

Gateway Women. (2023). *Gateway women: United by and beyond childlessness*. https://gateway-women.com

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Gold, J. M. (2012). The experiences of childfree and childless couples in a pronatalistic society: Implications for family counsellors. *The Family Journal: Counseling and therapy for couples and families, 21*(2), 223-229. https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480712468264

Gotlib, A. (2016). "But you would be the best mother": Unwomen, counterstories, and the motherhood mandate. *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry 13*(2), 327-347. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11673-016-9699-z

Greil, A., McQuillan, J., & Slauson-Bevins, K. (2011). The social construction of infertility. *Sociology Compass, 5*(8), 736-746. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2011.00397.x

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies, 3*(14), 575-599. http://www.jstor.com/stable/3178066

Hemmings, C. (2012). Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation. *Feminist Theory, 13*(2), 147-161. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700112442643

Letherby, G. (2002). Challenging dominant discourses: Identity and change and the experience of 'infertility' and 'involuntary childlessness'. *Journal of Gender Studies, 11*(3), 277-288. https://doi.org/10.1080/0958923022000021241

Lovett, L. (2018). Pronatalism. In A. O'Reilly (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Motherhood* (pp. 1028-1029). http://dx.doi.org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.4135/9781412979276.n560

Mason, A. (2000). *Community, solidarity and belonging : Levels of community and their normative significance*. ProQuest Ebook Central. https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca

McLaughlin, K. (2016). *Empowerment: A critique*. Routledge.

Our Healing Voice. (2023a). *Our Healing Voice*. https://ourhealingvoice.com

Our Healing Voice. (2023b, May 6). Childless Voices – Calm After the Storm *Raising Awareness* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8z6_ITVnygk

Parry, D. C. (2005). Work, leisure, and support groups: An examination of the ways women with infertility respond to pronatalist ideology. *Sex Roles, 53*(5-6), 337-346. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-005-6757-0

Petropanagos, A. (2017). Pronatalism, Geneticism, and ART. *IJFAB: International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics, 10*(1), 119-147. https://doi.org/10.3138/ijfab.10.1.119

Sartwell, C. (2002). Community at the margin. In P. Alperson (Ed.), *Diversity and community: An interdisciplinary reader* (pp. 47-57). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Stein, J. (1997). *Empowerment & women's health: Theory, methods and practice*. Zed Books, Ltd.

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Cornell University Press.

Weissberg, R. (1999). *The politics of empowerment*. Praeger.

Weissman, A. L. (2017). Repronormativity and the reproduction of the nation-state: The state and sexuality collide. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies, 13*(3), 277-305. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2016.1210065

Williams, M. E. (1997). Toward greater understanding of the psychological effects of infertility on women. *Psychotherapy in Private Practice, 16*(3), 7-26. https://doi.org/10.1300/J294v16n03_02

Wirtz, U. (2014). *Trauma and beyond: The mystery of transformation*. Spring Journal, Inc.