When choosing not to have children results in moral disadvantage at work: exploring the workplace politics of (mis)recognition of voluntary childfreeness

Abstract

Although norms that underlie disadvantages of parenthood at work and childfreeness in society have been investigated, those that shape inequality mechanisms related to childfreeness in the workplace are largely overlooked. This negligence marginalizes childfree voices and hampers efforts to broaden our understanding of workplace (dis)advantage. This study aims to investigate how inequality mechanisms generated by moral norms operate in relation to voluntary childfreeness at work. Twenty interviews were analyzed using a Butlerian lens to reveal the workplace politics of (mis)recognition of voluntary childfreeness. The findings illustrate how various ethical frameworks generate marginalization and ethical violence. They allow certain parenting and childfree subjects to be recognised while leading to the misrecognition of others. This study contributes to the literature by illustrating how the moral norm of collective devotion to parenting gives parenting subjects some flexibility to deviate from workplace availability expectations while partially transferring their availability demands to childfree subjects. Furthermore, it highlights the absence of a moral framework that enables childfreeness to be celebrated and supported at work in the same way as parenthood and reveals how societal processes of stigmatisation of childfreeness are reproduced in the workplace. Finally, it adds the term 'reproductive' to the concept of the heterosexual matrix and coins non-reproductive queerness.

Introduction

The critical management and organization studies literature has examined the tensions between parenthood and neoliberal norms of workplace productivity, thereby revealing structures of parental disadvantage at work (Borgkvist et al. 2021; O'Hagan 2014). Simultaneously, the literature on childfreeness in society has illuminated the inequality mechanisms with which those who choose not to have children are confronted. It has shown how parental normativity engenders stigmatization and marginalization (Fikslin 2021; Koropeckyj-Cox et al. 2018; Rich et al. 2011) and how these disadvantages manifest differently depending on the intersection with gender, age, sexuality, and race (Verniers 2020). Disadvantages related to childfreeness at work, however, have (apart from a few exceptions (Cummins 2005; França 2022; Utoft 2020)) received little attention.

Although the literature has highlighted how (re)productivity norms underlie parental disadvantages at work and childfree disadvantages in society, we need to expand our knowledge on how such norms interact in relation to childfreeness at work. Although a few studies have hinted at workplace challenges for those who are childfree (Dixon and Dougherty 2014; Ramsay and Letherby 2006), the functioning of these structures of inequality needs to be further explored. This takes the aim of management and organization studies to study *all* forms of workplace inequality seriously (Alvesson et al. 2009) and further steers this literature away from underrepresenting childfree perspectives. This study aims to investigate how the inequality mechanisms generated by interacting moral norms operate in relation to childfreeness in the workplace. Using a Butlerian (2005) lens, I analyze 20 interviews on childfree workplace experiences.

This research contributes to the literature by illustrating how the moral norm of collective devotion to parenting allows those who parent to occasionally deviate from workplace availability expectations, while partially transferring their availability demands to

those who are childfree. Moreover, this study helps to explain processes of marginalization at work by highlighting the absence of a moral framework that enables childfreeness to be celebrated and supported in the same way as parenthood. It also illustrates how the stigmatisation of childfreeness in society is reproduced at work. Lastly, it introduces the concept of non-reproductive queerness and adds the term 'reproductive' to Butler's heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990).

In this article, I first discuss the literature on parental normativity in society and neoliberal workplace productivity in relation to parenthood and childfreeness. Then, I explain the theory and methodology, after which the findings illustrate the workplace politics of (mis)recognition of voluntary childfreeness. The discussion section elaborates on the implications of the findings for the discussed bodies of literature, highlighting the study's theoretical and practical contributions, and is followed by a conclusion.

Childfreeness and Parental Normativity in Society

Childfreeness is the state of not having any 'biologically or socially related children (adopted children or stepchildren)' (Verniers 2020, 108). The literature that examines childfreeness in society distinguishes between voluntary, involuntary, and temporary childfreeness (Verniers 2020). To better represent the experiences of my community in the literature, this study focuses on those who are voluntarily childfree (see the methodology section for a further reflection). Recognizing that the distinction between voluntary and involuntary childfreeness might not always be clear-cut, voluntary childfreeness refers here to identifying more with not wanting children rather than with wanting them, irrespective of potentially being physically (un)able to have them. The reasons for not wanting children might be related to aspects outside one's control. As desires may shift over time, voluntary childfreeness is defined here as the current

state of not wanting to have children and not planning to have them, even though this stance may unexpectedly change in the future or may have been different in the past.

The literature on childfreeness in society has illustrated how this phenomenon tends to be confronted with stigmatization and marginalization, as it deviates from parental normativity in the Global North and South (Fikslin 2021; Mandujano-Salazar 2019; Rich et al. 2011). Voluntary childfreeness is often viewed as an immoral decision (Verniers 2020), as it disrupts the ideal of familism (Chan et al. 2023) and pronatalist values that pervade Eastern and Western societies (Babu 2024; Verniers 2020). It tends to be perceived negatively, as a sign of coldness and self-centeredness (Blackstone and Stewart 2012; Koropeckyj-Cox et al. 2018).

These structures of disadvantage manifest differently depending on individuals' (intersecting) social identities. The female childfree experience tends to be characterised by more pressure to comply with parental normativity than the male one (Chan et al. 2023), as societal discourses portray motherhood as key to the female identity (Gillespie 2003). Those who do not comply with these norms tend to be portrayed as deviant (Rich et al. 2011). Expectations of motherhood may differ at the intersection with racialized identities. For example, studies in the United States suggest that, although Black Americans may face more rigidly enforced gender roles compared to White Americans (Vinson et al. 2010; Verniers 2020), stereotypes of Asians as motherly might confront them with even more pressure to comply with motherhood ideals compared to non-Asians (Verniers 2020). Considering the difficulties in constructing a female childfree identity that is socially accepted (Chan et al. 2023), some female coping mechanisms include passing as temporarily or involuntarily childfree (Park 2002; Turnbull et al. 2017), because these forms of childfreeness tend to be less contested (Koropeckyj-Cox et al. 2018). The male childfree experience may be approached as slightly less problematic, as hegemonic masculinity relies more on career achievements than

on parental status (Park 2002). This may engender coping mechanisms that emphasize workplace success to sustain a positive identity (Mandujano-Salazar 2019).

At the intersection of childfreeness and age, younger individuals who identify as childfree tend to be more socially accepted than older ones (Mandujano-Salazar 2019), as the former may be perceived as temporarily childfree (Verniers 2020). Simultaneously, those with minoritized sexual identities are not expected to align with parental normativity (Fikslin 2021). They are presumed not to have children (Clarke et al. 2018) and may even be seen as unsuitable for parenthood, as they do not comply with the heteronormative ideal of the nuclear family (Verniers 2020). Overall, the literature on childfreeness in society has illustrated that the tension between childfreeness and parental normativity may generate various types of inequality. Still, these tensions remain largely unexplored in the context of the workplace.

Parenthood, Childfreeness and Neoliberal Workplace Productivity

A large body of literature has examined the tensions between parenthood and norms of workplace productivity, showing how gendered parental struggles revolve around ideal worker notions that are based on the unencumbered worker without (child)care responsibilities (Acker 1990; Borgkvist et al. 2021; O'Hagan 2014). Motherhood is typically regarded as 'less ideal', as it is associated with decreased workplace availability due to maternity leave and childcare responsibilities, which can hamper career advancement (Maxwell et al. 2019; Zanhour and Sumpter 2024). In contrast, fatherly workplace struggles take a different form, as they center on expected compliance with ideal worker notions (Borgkvist et al. 2021). Although some studies show how paternal flexible working practices are becoming increasingly used and accepted (Balan et al. 2023; Byun and Won 2020), a large body of literature has illustrated how historically shaped norms around the male breadwinner tend to complicate the uptake of paternal support initiatives (Borgkvist et al. 2021; Clar-Novak 2024). The intersection of

parenthood with other characteristics, such as sexuality and relationship status, might further increase parental structures of inequality, as dual non-compliance with workplace productivity norms and ideals of (hetero)normative nuclear parenthood may be in tension with social pressures (Radcliffe et al. 2022; Sawyer et al. 2017). Overall, this literature has illustrated how parenthood predominantly constitutes a disadvantage in the workplace.

By contrast, the topic of childfreeness at work has received substantially less attention. The few studies on this topic have shown how childfreeness is often seen as a sign of unencumbered prioritisation of work over 'life' (França 2022; Utoft 2020), resulting in work/life balance issues. Examples are being assigned extra work (Cummins 2005; França 2022) and the lack of acknowledgment of private life needs (França 2022). Although organisational support policies center on parenthood, and childcare responsibilities are typically seen as valid 'excuses' for workplace flexibility (Ramsay and Letherby 2006), non-child-centered private life aspects, such as personal (mental) health issues, non-child family ties, and leisure interests, lack this legitimacy (Turnbull et al. 2017). This may discourage workers without children, who are typically not covered by workplace support policies, from voicing their work/life balance needs (França 2022). Other workplace struggles beyond the area of work/life balance include processes of stigmatisation and social exclusion. Examples include receiving judgmental questions about one's childfreeness (Ramsay and Letherby 2006) or being left out of child-centered conversations with colleagues (Dixon and Dougherty 2014).

Although these studies have shown what some of the challenges of the childfree workplace experience are, we need to expand our knowledge of how these inequalities function, especially at the intersection of the pressures of neoliberal workplace productivity and normative parenthood. This helps to shift the literature's gaze further away from parenthood as the center around which its 'universe' revolves.

Analysing Acts of Giving an Account to Uncover the Politics of (Mis)recognition of Voluntary Childfreeness

The work of Judith Butler (2005) provides a useful tool to unravel the functioning of norms that engender processes of marginalization. According to Butler, moral norms exert power through social relations. Butler's work (2005) relies on a performative ontology of the subject, which is understood as inherently vulnerable and dependent upon relations with others (Kenny and Fanchini 2024). Rather than presuming that subjects exist a priori, independently, and autonomously, Butler (2005) conceptualizes the subject as emerging through social relations. Social norms, which govern the recognition of both the self and others (Butler 2005), shape the conditions of recognition that determine who counts as a morally viable, ethical subject, and hence as fully human, and who is misrecognized, implying subsequent sidelining and stigmatization (Harding et al. 2013). Butler's work (2005) has been used in previous studies to illustrate how norms exert power (Kenny and Fanchini 2024), for example, by showing how the academic subject emerges in compliance with gender norms and norms of neoliberalism (De Coster and Zanoni 2019), or how whistleblowers 'become "impossible" in the eyes of the organization' (Kenny and Fanchini 2024, 3), because they are excluded from acceptable worker norms (Kenny and Fanchini 2024).

Butler's work (2005) focuses on the tension that occurs when individuals, who have inherently limited knowledge of the self, because they can only know the parts of themselves that are recognizable through the ruling normative framework, are nevertheless morally held accountable in social relations for their full, opaque selves. Individuals are expected to produce coherent self-narratives (or accounts of the self) that comply with the social norms through which subjects become intelligible. This impossible ethical demand generates ethical violence, as it forces subjects to conform with these moral frameworks, while suppressing the 'immoral' parts of the self that are not aligned with them (Butler 2005).

Although these social, moral norms that govern the politics of recognition precede practices of (mis)recognition, they should not be understood as absolute totalities (Butler 2005), as there are possibilities for resistance (De Coster and Zanoni 2019). Norms are negotiated through social interactions in which accounts are given. By giving an account in the desire to be recognized as fully human, individuals explain and justify their actions (Messner 2009). In doing so, they either comply with the established normative matrix that pre-determines who will and will not become humanly recognizable or attempt to redefine these terms of recognizability at the risk of misrecognition (Butler 2005). Hence, recognition is inherently provisional, and the struggle for recognition is continuous.

Butler's work (2005) on giving an account provides a useful framework to realise the goal of this study. First, analyzing instances of giving an account allows me to reveal how moral frameworks that dominate workplace relations exert power. Second, the way in which processes of giving an account illustrate who is recognized as a worthy and viable human being and who is not (Butler 2005) enables me to capture how the mechanisms of inequality in relation to childfreeness at work function. Drawing on Butler's (2005) concepts of '(mis)recognition' and 'giving an account', the following research questions will be addressed in this study: 1) How is the childfree subject performed in the act of giving an account at work? 2) How does the parenting subject emerge in social interactions at work? 3) What are the consequences thereof for (mis)recognition of voluntary childfreeness in the workplace?

Methodology

Data Collection

As I recruited research participants who are voluntarily childfree like myself, my identity positioned me closer to an insider position than to an outsider position (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). I felt that my positionality facilitated access and the establishment of trust (Dwyer and

Buckle 2009) in the data collection phase, which took place between January 2023 (after approval from the university's ethics committee) and September 2024 (although two respondents sent me voice notes with additional experiences later). During the recruitment process, I disclosed that I am voluntarily childfree, and various respondents noted that supporting our community was a key reason for their participation. Most research participants felt comfortable sharing information they may not have shared with someone who is not voluntarily childfree, such as their lack of affection for their colleagues' children.

However, some respondents may not have fully explained all their experiences, due to (potentially false) assumptions of similarity between me and them (Brown 2012; Dwyer and Buckle 2009), for example, by not elaborating on how questions about why they do not want children made them feel. Simultaneously, the way in which I am an outsider to other groups to which my respondents belong (Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Gair 2012) implied that respondents may have elaborated more on aspects they thought I was not familiar with. For example, several respondents elaborated on the cultural context in which they grew up when discussing their decision to be childfree, potentially due to my or their own migration status.

Prioritizing the likelihood of capturing deeply personal experiences and smooth access to respondents over a recruitment and sampling strategy that translates into high levels of generalizability, my research participants were approached via my personal network (Browne 2003), followed by a snowballing method (Browne 2005). As I did not have a large network in the country to which I migrated during the data collection phase, I attended in-person meetups of childfree groups I found via an app for socializing and recruitment purposes. Although the risk of participants feeling pressured to participate in the study due to social ties can never be fully eliminated (Browne 2003), I minimized this by emphasizing that potential participants should not feel obliged to take part due to these ties.

Based on the insights of the literature on the relevance of intersecting social identities (Verniers 2020), I recruited participants with a variety of characteristics. My recruitment strategy generated a largely heterogeneous sample (see Table 1), although all respondents are professionals in white-collar jobs, and most have the same racialized identity. Reflecting my personal pattern of migration (I moved from Belgium to the United Kingdom during the data collection period), I recruited participants in these two countries. These societal contexts are characterized by reducing fertility rates, with an average rate of 1.46 children per woman in Belgium in 2025 (Chini 2025), and 1.44 children per woman in England and Wales in 2023 (Office for National Statistics 2024). In addition, the age at which women become mothers has been increasing, to an average of 30.9 in Wales and England in 2023 (Roxby and Walker 2024), and a mean of 29.5 in Belgium in that year (Eurostat 2025). There are signs that voluntary childfreeness is becoming increasingly popular in Belgium and the United Kingdom, but that the phenomenon is still stigmatized in both societies (Amies 2024; Roxby and Walker 2024), which makes these contexts interesting settings to explore this topic.

Interviews were conducted in person, where possible, but sometimes they were conducted online for practical reasons. Before the start of each interview, I shared the information and consent document with respondents, which included information on their rights as research participants, safeguarding their anonymity, and protecting and using their data. They all signed this document and gave their consent for the interview to be recorded. I used a semi-structured interview guide, which included themes such as norms around workload division, 'coming out' as childfree in the workplace, experiences of being treated differently, and workplace norms around parenthood. Examples of questions include the following: 'How does your childfreeness play a role in your current job?', 'How would you describe your work/life balance?', and 'To what extent are your colleagues aware of your childfreeness?'. Depending on respondents' preferred language, interviews were conducted in Dutch or

English. I transcribed and coded the interviews in their original language and translated quotes only when including them in this paper. To make sure that the original meaning was conveyed correctly, I checked my translation with the interviewee and with a native English speaker (Yunus et al. 2022).

Table 1: Respondents' characteristics

Nr	Country of residence	Field of work	Gender identity	Sexuality	Relationship status	Age	Racialisation	Nationality
1	Belgium	Sustainability	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	Single	30-40	White	Finnish
2	Belgium	Intergovernmental sector	Cisgender woman	Bisexual	Single	30-40	White	Slovenian
3	Belgium	Cultural sector	Did not want to be categorised					
4	Belgium	Graphic design	Cisgender woman	Queer	Single	20-30	White	Belgian
5	Belgium	Design	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	Single	30-40	White	Irish
6	Belgium	International affairs	Cisgender man	Gay	Single	30-40	White	Belgian
7	United Kingdom	Education	Cisgender woman	Bisexual	In a relationship	30-40	White	British
8	United Kingdom	Government	Cisgender man	Heterosexual	In a relationship	40-50	Latino	Colombian and British
9	Belgium	Non-profit	Transgender man (in transition)	Asexual	In various polyamorous relationships	20-30	White, Jewish	Dutch
10	Belgium	Academia	Cisgender man	Heteroflexible	In various polyamorous relationships	30-40	White	Belgian
11	United Kingdom	Publishing	Cisgender woman	Demi-sexual	Single	40-50	White	British
12	United Kingdom	Consulting	Cisgender woman	Bisexual	In a relationship	40-50	White	European
13	United Kingdom	Gaming	Cisgender man	Heterosexual	In a relationship	50-60	White	Italian-American/Ashkenazi Jewish American

14	United Kingdom	Construction	Mostly identifies as female, sometimes as gender fluid, uses she and they pronouns	Bisexual	In a relationship	30-40	White	British
15	United Kingdom	Academia	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	In a relationship	40-50	Mixed - half white, half Arab	British
16	United Kingdom	Engineering	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	Single	30-40	White	Non-British
17	United Kingdom	Academia	Non-binary	Asexual	In a relationship	30-40	White	American
18	United Kingdom	Engineering	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	Single	30-40	White	Polish
19	United Kingdom	Non-profit	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	Single	40-50	White	British
20	United Kingdom	Accounting	Cisgender man	Gay	In a relationship	40-50	White	British

Data Analysis

A risk of the 'closer-to-insider' position is the potential for biased interpretations of the data due to "loyalty tugs" (Brannick and Coghlan 2007, 70). These are pulls stemming from belonging to two different communities, in my case, the research community and the childfree community. I experienced loyalty tugs when reflecting upon which excerpts to quote in the findings section, because I felt conflicted about including potentially controversial aspects that could put my community in a negative light. Upon reflection, I decided to concentrate on how well excerpts matched my research questions and theoretical framework, rather than on the level of controversiality of the content as I perceived it.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Inspired by the work of Charmaz (2008), which is embedded in a social constructionist epistemology, I followed an iterative process, going back and forth between the empirical data and Butler's (2005) concepts. I drew on a performative, relational ontology of the subject (Butler 2005; Kenny and Fanchini 2024). In the first step of the data analysis, I read through the transcripts and identified recurrent themes, such as being asked to take on extra work and the decision to be voluntarily childfree being seen by others as not genuine. Then, I went through the interview transcripts again, looking for specific excerpts in which respondents narrated processes of giving an account (Butler 2005). I assigned first-order codes to the behaviours described, such as "hugging babies at work against my will" and "pretending to consider adoption".

Next, I analyzed each excerpt to assess what the moral pressure was that steered the account given. These pressures are displayed in Table 2. The first is the reproductive heterosexual matrix (cf. Butler 1990). Butler's (1990) concept of the heterosexual matrix refers to a system in which one's perceived biological sex is aligned with one's presumed (cis-)gender and presupposed (hetero)sexuality in social interactions. I have added the term 'reproductive' to Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix to include individuals' assumed desire to

be(come) parents. The reproductive heterosexual matrix manifests differently depending on one's perceived age, with individuals who are assumed to be ethically too young for childrearing being approached as future parents, in contrast to those who are seen as having passed the socially accepted age for reproduction. The second moral framework is non-reproductive queerness, which denotes the assumption of non-reproductivity of sexually queer subjects. The third moral framework is collective devotion to parenting, which implies communal dedication, sacrifice, celebration, enthusiasm, and affect toward parenthood, and the fourth is neoliberal workplace productivity, which entails individuals' subjugation to the productivity and availability demands of the workplace. I analyzed whether, in each instance of giving an account, the respondent complied with or resisted the moral framework.

In the fourth phase of the data analysis, focusing on the first and second research questions, I looked for the subject positions that emerged in the accounts given. They are outlined in Table 2. In the last step, concentrating on the third research question, I looked at the implications for the politics of misrecognition of voluntary childfreeness at work. I found that the positions that are outlined in the last column of Table 2 had the tendency to be unintelligible along the identified moral frameworks.

Table 2: Outcome of the data analysis

Moral frameworks	Recognisable subjects	Unintelligible positions
The reproductive heterosexual matrix	The (future) parenting subject	Voluntary childfreeness
Non-reproductive queerness	The queer childfree subject	N/A
Collective devotion to parenting	The childfree subject who celebrates parenthood The celebrated parenting subject	Childfreeness that does not celebrate parenthood Celebrated childfreeness

Collective devotion to parenting & neoliberal workplace productivity	The available childfree subject who supports parenthood	Childfreeness that does not support parenthood
	The supported, less available parenting subject	Supported, less available childfreeness

The Politics of (Mis)recognition Along the Reproductive Heterosexual Matrix

The majority of respondents performed selves along the reproductive heterosexual matrix. This moral framework exerted power through social relations, in which there was a tendency to assume that those who were perceived as heterosexual and of (or below) what was deemed the morally appropriate age to rear children had the desire to be(come) a parent (in the future). This happened often during social interactions in workplaces that respondents described as more traditional due to a high representation of colleagues with conservative values, and/or in settings with many colleagues with (young) children. Especially respondents who were thought to have the right age (Verniers 2020) and who were perceived as female (Chan et al. 2023) in such interactions talked about being held accountable along the reproductive heterosexual matrix. The following excerpt is an example thereof:

'Nobody believes that I'm childfree by choice. They either have a preconception that I haven't found somebody, or that at some point I'll have children. I feel completely erased as that being a valid choice in life. And nobody seems to…it's always: "Oh, don't worry, you'll have children. Oh, someday you'll change your mind." (…) So I've said it out loud, but I don't think it resonated with people as a legitimate life choice' (Respondent 2, cisgender woman, bisexual, 30-40).

The speaker's presumed desire to have children was conveyed in her colleagues' words, 'you'll have children', which discursively performed the future parenting subject (cf. Park 2002) as a condition to comply with the reproductive heterosexual matrix. Non-compliance with this

moral framework, in the case of Respondent 2, subsequently resulted in misrecognition (here in the form of "erasure"), as in the described relation of accountability, an ethical self that is aligned with this moral norm was not performed.

Although various respondents, like Respondent 2, were open about being voluntarily childfree at work, thereby risking misrecognition, others suppressed the "immoral" parts of the self (Butler 2005) that did not align with the reproductive heterosexual matrix in the desire to be recognized as fully human, which confronted them with ethical violence. For example, Respondent 18 said she was "not talking about my reproductive plans" (Respondent 18, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 30-40), and Respondent 7 replied "Oh well, you know, it's never too late. Maybe we'll adopt one day" in response to "awkward questions from other colleagues" (Respondent 7, cisgender woman, bisexual, 30-40). As temporary childfreeness at the socially accepted age aligned with reigning moral norms (cf. Koropeckyj-Cox et al. 2018), feigning plans to become a parent enabled Respondent 7 to escape misrecognition.

Some narratives revealed possibilities for resistance (De Coster and Zanoni 2019). This typically occurred in contexts that were described by respondents as liberal due to a high representation of colleagues with progressive views, and/or in settings with many young colleagues without children. For example, Respondent 1, who worked in the latter type of workplace, shared the following social interaction.

'One of our team members is going on maternity leave, and so we gave her a present from the team, and uhm, and our director was also there, and then he was making a comment, like: "Ah, the baby will be super nice and put pressure on everyone else to have children". Then there was a moment of awkward silence and personally I was momentarily quite taken aback by this comment. Then the girl who was going on maternity leave, she was like: "Yeah, no, it's everyone else's choice what they want to

do". And then I also commented something like: "No, that's not necessarily going to happen'" (Respondent 1, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 30-40).

Although the director referred to the reproductive heterosexual matrix by talking about 'pressure to also have children', the responses that followed his remark constitute forms of resistance that aim to redefine the terms of recognizability (Butler 2005) to allow for the recognition of the voluntarily childfree subject.

The Politics of (Mis)recognition Along Non-reproductive Queerness

A large minority of respondents performed selves accountable along the moral framework of non-reproductive queerness. Based on this moral norm, which denotes the ethics of non-reproductivity of sexually queer subjects (cf. Clarke et al. 2018; Fikslin 2021), the queer, childfree subject became recognized. Individuals who became intelligible as queer subjects were not held accountable along the reproductive heterosexual matrix but along non-reproductive queerness. The following excerpt exemplifies that dynamic:

> 'I tell them [colleagues] I'm gay, and usually they conclude that I don't have children, because it's difficult for gay couples to have children, let alone for gay people who are single, although there are people in my circle of friends who have considered using artificial insemination' (Respondent 6, cisgender man, gay, 30-40).

This narrated workplace interaction shows how the queer, childfree subject was performed, thereby allowing the speaker to become recognized as fully human along non-reproductive queerness and safeguarding him from misrecognition along the reproductive heterosexual matrix.

In the social interactions respondents talked about, individuals who were seen as male subjects became legible as queer subjects more often than those who were perceived as female. For example, the respondent who made the comment below became legible as a heterosexual subject. She performed a moral queer self to justify non-compliance with the reproductive heterosexual matrix to be recognized as fully human.

'I was having a discussion with a co-worker [about pregnancy]. (…) I was like: "Well, I wouldn't become pregnant, because I don't have sex with men on a regular basis" (…) I kind of used my queerness as an excuse, I was like: "Well, I don't have sex with men, so I wouldn't. (…) That kind of cut it" (Respondent 4, cisgender woman, queer, 20-30).

The speaker's references to "I don't have sex with men" and "I wouldn't become pregnant" allowed the queer, childfree subject to emerge, thereby producing a self that is accountable along the moral framework of non-reproductive queerness. These examples illustrate how those who became legible as, or performed, queer subjects became recognized as moral, childfree, queer subjects in social interactions at work.

The Politics of (Mis)recognition Along Collective Devotion to Parenting

A third moral framework along which accountable selves were performed is the ethical norm of collective devotion to parenting, which implies communal dedication, sacrifice, celebration, enthusiasm and affect toward parenthood. It was identified often in narratives of workplaces with many colleagues with (young) children. The excerpt below is an example of how various respondents performed selves compliant with this moral framework:

'Last Friday two (…) colleagues brought their kids to work. They were in the canteen with their strollers. (…) Even though I didn't have any interest in those children, and I didn't know these kids, nor their mothers, (…) there is a big pressure to go to these mums, congratulate them, and look at the children, (…) squish their cheek. (…) The unwritten, cultural, social pressure, is so big, that in that instant, you do something you don't want to do' (Respondent 6, cisgender man, gay, 30-40).

In the desire to become recognized as fully human, Respondent 6 expressed congratulatory remarks about his colleagues' children, and faked affection for them. Thereby, the celebrated parenting subject emerged, and the childfree subject who celebrates parenthood was performed. This confronted Respondent 6 with ethical violence, as he suppressed the "immoral" parts of himself (Butler 2005) that are not aligned with collective devotion to parenting.

In various narratives in which respondents performed selves accountable along collective devotion to parenting, the unintelligibility of celebrated childfreeness became apparent. For example, Respondent 15 said that although "you're indoctrinated, socialised rather, into, you know, asking about people's children (…) no one ever comments, never gets to talk about your sort of experience of the absence of children" (Respondent 15, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 40-50), and Respondent 16 described how "there was recently an e-mail sent around to that larger department about somebody having a baby", but "my big milestone was buying a flat (…) and you know, nobody's sending emails around" (Respondent 16, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 30-40). This illustrates how the politics of misrecognition along the moral framework of collective devotion to parenting functions.

The Politics of (Mis)recognition at the Intersection of Neoliberal Workplace Productivity and Collective Devotion to Parenting

A fourth moral framework along which respondents frequently performed accountable selves, is neoliberal workplace productivity, which denotes individuals' subjugation to the productivity and availability demands of the workplace (cf. Utoft 2020). Although this ethical pressure repeatedly emerged solo in respondents' narratives of struggles to obtain work flexibility and support for matters in their private life (cf. França 2022), it was often referenced together with the moral framework of collective devotion to parenting. One way in which this happened, was in the narratives of a handful of respondents in which they performed accountable selves along neoliberal workplace productivity instead of collective devotion to parenting. This comment exemplifies this dynamic:

> 'During COVID (…) [online] meetings would get interrupted by children, and that's fine to a degree, but then instead of continuing the meeting like we should, it would be: "Oh, how old is he, what is he doing, how is he eating?" All of those questions about the child, and I'm like: "Can we please work? We're not paid to talk about your children"' (Respondent 4, cisgender woman, queer, 20-30).

By speaking about not being paid to talk about children, Respondent 4 performed a self that complied with neoliberal workplace productivity in the desire to become recognized as fully human. Simultaneously, in the narrated social interaction she resisted compliance with the moral framework of collective devotion to parenting.

Another way in which neoliberal workplace productivity and collective devotion to parenting emerged together in accounts given, is in narratives in which respondents performed selves as accountable along both moral pressures. The majority of respondents did this. The interaction of these two frameworks created a social space of dual accountability in which the

less available, supported parenting subject emerged, and the available childfree subject who supports parenthood was performed. The following response exemplifies that mechanism:

> 'I've definitely ended up doing more travelling than, I would say, than colleagues that have children. You get a feeling almost when people are sort of, you know, just in a meeting kind of space, like online, where you know, somebody says: "Oh well, we need to do X, Y and Z" or "Somebody used to go to this workshop", you know, everyone kind of goes silent. No more volunteers. I almost feel as though the expectation is that I would do it, because it's going to be much more difficult for them because they have kids. (…) I think you kind of internalise this idea that life is so very difficult for people with kids that it's part of your role in society, even if you don't have kids, to try and make that better for people' (Respondent 15, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 40-50).

The act of volunteering for the team's work tasks (cf. Dixon and Dougherty 2014) was explained by talking about expectations of compliance with workplace demands (a reference to the moral framework of neoliberal workplace productivity) and by discussing the idea that parenting activities should be alleviated by those who do not have children (a reference to the collective devotion to parenting). The interaction of these moral norms constrained the possibilities for recognition of less available childfreeness that does not support parenthood, while simultaneously leveraging a moral parenting subject that has reduced expectations of compliance with the moral framework of neoliberal workplace productivity.

In a few instances, these two interacting norms were resisted (De Coster and Zanoni 2019), such as in the case of Respondent 7:

'So I'll be on a call working on a proposal with a group of three, and two of them have children. So they're saying: "We're gonna have to head off, because we've got to do dinner". (…) And I say: "Well, normally (…) I wouldn't be working late, because I have to go to the gym, and I want to go out and see some friends this evening. I've got other responsibilities of caring for a friend, (…) but tonight, I will make the choice, and I'll stay in and do the work, so that you can pick it up in the morning. I hate morning working, like I hate working from 6am, but if you're happy to do that because you're a parent and it works with your schedule, then I'll do the night shift and hand over to you" (Respondent 7, cisgender woman, bisexual, 30-40).

By referring to her regular after-work activities, Respondent 7 did not perform a self that was fully aligned with neoliberal workplace productivity. Moreover, by talking about parents picking up work early in the morning, Respondent 7 did not allow the less available parenting subject to emerge. These acts of resistance put her at risk of misrecognition.

Discussion

By illustrating how the politics of (mis)recognition of voluntary childfreeness at work functions, this article contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it has shown that looking at the productivity demands of the workplace alone is not sufficient to fully understand the disadvantages and privileges that are linked to parenthood and childfreeness at work. Concepts such as the ideal worker (Acker 1990) help to explain how some structures of parental and childfree (dis)advantage in the workplace unfold in relation to availability expectations (e.g. O'Hagan 2014; Utoft 2020). However, the concept of collective devotion to parenting that has been introduced here is needed to provide a more complete picture of how childfreeness or parenthood favors or harms workers.

The ethics of collective devotion to parenthood exerts power in two ways. On the one hand, it provides parenting subjects moral recognition to occasionally deviate from availability demands, although the literature has illustrated how such lowered availability expectations may simultaneously have negative consequences such as hampered career progression (Maxwell et al. 2019). Although extant studies have highlighted that the reproductive labor of parental childcaring may not be financially valued (Burns, Gannon, Pierce and Hugman 2022), the findings of this research illustrate that this labor is morally valued, not only in society (cf. Fikslin 2021; Mandujano-Salazar 2019; Rich et al. 2011) but also in the workplace. Childfree subjects tend to lack this privilege of moral recognition for their non-(remunerated)-work activities (França 2022), and this study extends the emerging literature on childfreeness at work by showing how the interaction of the moral norms of neoliberal workplace availability and collective devotion to parenting underlie that form of disadvantage.

On the other hand, the ethics of collective devotion to parenting partially transfers the moral demands of workplace availability from parenting to childfree subjects. It pressures childfree subjects to support parenting subjects by alleviating their workload. Although the emerging literature on childfreeness at work has identified challenges such as expectations to "pick up the slack for those who have children" (Cummins 2005, 226), this study goes beyond these insights by showing how this dynamic is due to the interaction between neoliberal workplace availability and collective devotion to parenting. These moral norms tend to divide workplace availability demands unequally across the workforce, depending on workers' parental status. Resistance practices that were identified in this study, such as portraying non-childcare-related leisure time activities (cf. Turnbull et al. 2017) as legitimate reasons for being unavailable outside working hours, may help to challenge these inequalities.

The second contribution of this article is that, although extant debates in the emerging literature on childfreeness at work mainly revolve around work/life balance challenges (França

2022; Utoft 2020), this study further directs its gaze in other directions. The first way in which it does this, is by extending our knowledge of how the marginalization of childfreeness in the workplace functions, namely through the absence of a moral framework that enables the childfree subject to emerge on its own terms. Phenomena such as the lack of attention paid to the childfree experience in conversations with colleagues (cf. Dixon and Dougherty 2014), and the absence of workplace traditions to celebrate childfreeness, can be understood in light of this absent ethics. Instead, childfree individuals largely gain ethical relevance in relation to parenthood, namely, as subjects who celebrate and support parenthood. This captures how parenting is deemed a highly moral activity, in relation to which those who do not emerge as parenting subjects tend to gain moral value only through their devotion to it (unless they perform themselves as available workers). Thereby, this study shows how workers' moral value at work is not only derived from their productive ability (cf. O'Hagan 2014) but is also based on their assessed societal value by evaluating their contribution to parenthood (cf. Rich et al. 2011).

The second way in which this study moves the debate in the literature on childfreeness at work in directions other than work/life balance-centered avenues, is by illustrating how the processes of stigmatization with which the childfree experience can be accompanied in society (Mandujano-Salazar 2019; Park 2002) might be reproduced in the workplace. The findings of this study have shown that those who become legible within the reproductive heterosexual matrix are at risk of moral condemnation at work, thereby confirming the insights of the few studies that have shown how childfreeness can be met with judgmental questions from colleagues (Ramsay and Letherby 2006). Although the number of characteristics covered by diversity management practices has increased over the years (Lee et al. 2023), childfreeness has so far largely remained under the radar. This study highlights the need to take childfreeness seriously as a legitimate ground for workplace protection.

The third contribution of this article is that, by introducing the concept of non-reproductive queerness and extending Butler's (1990) concept into the reproductive heterosexual matrix, it offers conceptual tools to refer to and better understand phenomena that have previously been described separately in the literature. These two concepts tie together insights on the role that gender (Chan et al. 2023), age (Mandujano-Salazar 2019; Verniers 2020) and sexuality (Clarke et al. 2018; Fikslin 2021) play in the processes of stigmatization with which childfreeness may be confronted. They also allow us to capture how assumptions about individuals' desire to be(come) a parent depending on their perceived characteristics are linked to structures of (dis)advantage at work. This article hierarchically classifies these assigned characteristics by showing how assumed sexuality might play a more determining role in such mechanisms of inequality than presupposed age and gender. It has shown how those who emerge as sexually queer subjects, who are typically confronted with marginalisation at work (Dos Santos et al. 2025; Yılmaz and Göçmen 2016), could be recognized as fully human, queer, childfree subjects. In contrast, those who performed selves accountable along the reproductive heterosexual matrix were at risk of ethical violence and misrecognition. Although the way in which individuals emerged as gendered and aged subjects was relevant in social relations of accountability along the reproductive heterosexual matrix, these elements did not play a role for individuals accountable along non-reproductive queerness. This difference in salience of emerging identity characteristics is key to understanding how structures of (dis)advantage manifest differently within the childfree community.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have various implications for practice. First, childfreeness may be included as a moral ground for workplace protection, especially in more conservative

workplaces and in settings with many parents with young children. Measures might particularly target those who are perceived as heterosexual, female, and of the 'appropriate' age for reproduction, as they are more at risk. A second proposed initiative is creating a more inclusive workplace culture of celebration, for example by celebrating the non-work-related milestones of those who are childfree. A third area of action centres on work/life balance. Distributing availability expectations more equally among the workforce, such as by treating non-child-centred private life activities with the same gravitas as childcaring tasks, conveys the principle that all workers are equally entitled to a healthy work/life balance.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

As this study only represents experiences of voluntary childfreeness, future studies could explore the extent to which the identified politics of (mis)recognition is similar for involuntary and temporary childfreeness. Moreover, as the sample of this study only included workers in white-collar jobs and had low levels of heterogeneity in terms of racialization, future work might investigate childfreeness in blue-collar contexts and with participants of a broad variety of racialized identities. Furthermore, although this work is based on data collected in Belgium and the United Kingdom, future studies may explore experiences of childfreeness at work in other societal contexts. Lastly, as no sector-specific insights could be derived from the data, future work may focus on sectors that are characterized by salient aspects identified in this study, such as high levels of representation of parents with young children.

Conclusion

Building on the emerging literature on childfreeness in the workplace, this research has revealed the power structures that underlie the mechanisms of (dis)advantage with which voluntary childfreeness is confronted at work, while highlighting the possibilities for resistance

and recognition. It does not deny the findings of earlier studies that have revealed childfree privileges, nor does it aim to undermine the importance of parental support practices in the workplace. It does, however, raise awareness of structures of parental privilege and childfree disadvantage that have so far largely remained under the radar. First, the concept of collective devotion to parenting introduced here shows how moral recognition of parenting tasks not only provides parents some flexibility to deviate from workplace availability expectations but also partially transfers availability demands from parents to childfree workers. Second, the absence of a moral framework that enables childfree workers to be celebrated and supported in the same way as parents are, and the reproduction of societal processes of stigmatisation of childfreeness in the workplace, show how other forms of disadvantage function. Moreover, the concepts of non-reproductive queerness and the reproductive matrix illustrate how structures of (dis)advantage manifest differently within the childfree community, depending on the hierarchy of specific social identity characteristics at the intersection with childfreeness. Future studies can explore how the increasing popularity of childfreeness affects these power dynamics.

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