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CHILDLESS BY CHOICE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON COUPLES'
EXPERIENCES OF MARRIAGE AND VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS

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Voluntary Childlessness

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ABSTRACT

Voluntary childlessness is defined as a process in which individuals do not have a child and they intentionally choose to become childless. The numbers of individuals and couples who decide to remain childless have increased over time. For the Turkish context, based on the statistics of TÜİK (Turkish Statistical Institute), in 2020, 13.5% of households consists of only a wife and a husband without the presence of children (while ignoring cohabiting couples). Despite the growing number of childless individuals and couples, there is limited research how couples experience voluntary childlessness and how they negotiate this decision in their relationships. In the present study, the main aim is to understand the experiences of childfree couples. More specifically, their motivations and rationales behind this decision, experiences of being childfree and the effect of voluntary childlessness over their marital lives are explored. Five married childfree couples were recruited for the present study. The mean age of the participants was 34 (from the age of 25 to 47) and the mean duration of marriages was 5 (from 2 years to 8 years). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each partner individually through online channels, and they took approximately 90 minutes to complete. Based on the thematic analysis of the interviews, four main themes were identified, namely a) meanings of having a child, b) decision making process, c) marital functioning and d) facing societal norms. The findings demonstrated that childfree couples perceived negative aspects (e.g. loss of autonomy) of having children as well as acknowledging its positive aspects (e.g. being as a unique experience). These perceptions were influential in their decision making process as a couple and as individuals. In addition, while making a tentative decision and reflecting on it as couples, there was consensus among partners and direct communication in which they shared their opinions about having children openly. The childfree participants were satisfied with their marital lives based on its unique aspects (e.g., sense of togetherness and strong communication). As being a minority group, they face with some societal norms, experienced a sense of being different from society and develop strategies to

cope with those norms. The results of the study are expected to inform the perspectives and practices of clinicians who work with childfree individuals and couples. Discussions of the findings in relation to the existing literature, limitations and suggestions for further studies are presented.

Keywords: Voluntary Childlessness, Motivations, Decision-Making Process, Marital Adjustment, Societal Norms

ÖZET

Gönüllü çocuksuzluk, bireylerin çocuk sahibi olmadığı ve bilinçli olarak çocuksuz kalmayı seçtikleri bir süreç olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Gönüllü çocuksuzluğa karar veren kişilerin ve çiftlerin sayısı zamanla artmıştır. Türkiye bağlamında, TÜİK'in (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu) 2020 istatistiklerine göre, hanelerin %13,5'i çocuksuz olup evli olan bir kadın ve bir erkekten oluşmaktadır (birlikte yaşayan çiftler göz ardı edilerek). Çocuksuz bireylerin ve çiftlerin sayısının artmasına rağmen, çiftlerin gönüllü çocuksuzluğu nasıl deneyimledikleri ve ilişkilerinde bu kararı nasıl aldıkları konusunda sınırlı sayıda araştırma bulunmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, çocuksuz çiftlerin gönüllü çocuksuzluğa ilişkin deneyimlerini anlamaktır. Daha spesifik olarak, bu kararın arkasındaki motivasyonları, çocuksuz olma deneyimlerini ve gönüllü çocuksuzluğun evlilik yaşamlarına etkisi araştırılmaktadır. Bu çalışma için beş evli ve çocuksuz çiftle görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Katılımcıların ortalama yaşı 34 (25-47 yaş arası) ve ortalama evlilik süresi 5 yıldır (2-8 yaş arası). Yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler, çevrimiçi kanallar aracılığıyla çiftlerden her biriyle ayrı ayrı görüşülerek gerçekleştirilmiştir ve görüşmeler yaklaşık 90 dakika sürmüştür. Tematik analize dayalı olarak, a) çocuk sahibi olmanın anlamı, b) karar verme süreçleri, c) evlilik işleyişi ve d) toplumsal normlarla yüzleşme isimli dört ana tema belirlenmiştir. Bulgular, gönüllü çocuksuz çiftlerin, çocuk sahibi olmanın hem olumsuz yönleri (örneğin, özerklik kaybı), hem de olumlu yönleri (örneğin, benzersiz bir deneyim olması) üzerine düşündüğünü göstermiştir. Bu düşünceler hem çift olarak hem de bireysel olarak karar verme sürecinde etkili olmuştur. Buna ek olarak, gönüllü çocuksuzluk kararı alınırken ve bu karar üzerine düşünülürken, eşlerin kendi aralarında çocuk sahibi olma konusundaki görüşlerini açık bir şekilde paylaştıkları ve bu konuda fikir birliği sağladıkları görülmüştür. Gönüllü çocuksuz katılımcılar, evliliklerinin önemli gördükleri yönlerine (örneğin, birliktelik duygusu ve güçlü iletişim) dayalı olarak evlilik hayatlarından memnun olduklarını belirtmiştir. Katılımcılar, azınlık bir grup olarak bazı toplumsal normlarla karşılaşmakta, toplumdan farklı olma hissini

deneyimlemekte ve bu normlarla başa çıkmak için stratejiler geliştirmektedirler. Bu çalışmanın sonuçlarının gönüllü çocuksuz bireyler ve çiftlerle çalışan klinisyenlere yaklaşım ve uygulamalarını geliştirecek doğrultuda bilgi vermesi beklenmektedir. Bulgular mevcut literatür bağlamında tartışılmış, çalışmanın sınırlılıkları ve sonraki araştırmalar için öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gönüllü Çocuksuzluk, Motivasyonlar, Karar Verme Süreçleri, Evlilik Uyumu, Toplumsal Normlar

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Voluntary childlessness or being childfree seems to be a growing trend as stated in the review paper by Basten (2009). Being childfree is a term used for individuals who do not have children at the present moment and do not want and plan to have children in the future (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). Recent reports indicate that around 20 % of women to remain childless in the USA (Carol, 2018), around 20 % in European countries (especially Germany, Switzerland and Austria) (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017), % 8 in India and % 48 of couples to remain childless in Canada (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020). It is difficult to reach statistics about the percentage of childfree couples since most of the statistics focus on women rather than men and couples and also, statistics do not distinguish voluntary childlessness from involuntary childlessness (Basten, 2008). Most of the available studies on voluntary childlessness look at individuals' attitudes and experiences about it. Not surprisingly, voluntary childless women have been studied much more than men in the literature (Waren & Pals, 2013). Most of studies in the area have examined childless men by comparing them with women and/or fathers (e.g., Magarick & Brown, 1981; Park, 2005; Rijken & Merz, 2014). Few studies looked at the experiences of couples.

Veevers (1973) points out that all couples are expected to have children, if they are not infertile, and examining this topic is considered to be interesting since those couples with children conform to the society's traditional values. In a consistent vein, negative attitudes towards those who choose to remain childless have been documented in the literature. Even 30 years after Veevers' argument, a research done with undergraduate students showed that childless women are favored less (Mueller & Yoder, 1997). Involuntary childlessness which is about medical causes like infertility is much more tolerated in society, whereas especially childfree women are accused of being selfish, irresponsible, and not feminine (Gillispie, 2000; Meyers, 2001; Rich et

al., 2011). On the other hand, some research demonstrates that people's perspectives about voluntary childlessness have started to change towards the positive (Koropecj-Cox et al., 2007).

Marital adjustment is defined as "the experience of a married couple acclimating to a marital relationship", which includes factors of "marital satisfaction, cohesion, agreement, affection, and conflict" (Kendrick & Drentea, 2016, p.1). Existing studies with voluntarily childless couples have examined marital relationship and adjustment to some extent (Pelton & Hertlein, 2011). Besides marital adjustment, there are studies that concentrated on decision making processes (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Forsyth, 1999; Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014), life cycle (Pelton & Hertlein, 2011), and characteristics and backgrounds of childfree couples (Forsyth, 1999; Ramu, 1985; Somers, 1993). For example, in Houseknecht's quantitative study (1979), the mothers and childfree women were compared based on marital adjustment, including factors of "consensus, cohesion, satisfaction, and affection expression". The researcher finds out that childless women significantly had higher scores than mothers on marital adjustment. Similarly, Calan (1984) found out that voluntarily childless couples have higher cohesion and consensus scores than parents and postponers, while Somers (1993) showed that childfree couples have higher levels on dyadic satisfaction and cohesion. Although this research suggests that childfree couples report higher levels of marital adjustment, the issue needs further and more detailed examination.

As in the line with Western countries, in Turkey, fertility rates have been decreasing (Kagıtcıbası & Ataca, 2005). Even though voluntary childlessness has been studied since 1960s in Western societies, the topic seems to be newly emerging in Turkey. Perceptions toward childless couples (Copur & Koropecj-Cox, 2010), experiences of voluntarily childless women about motherhood and womanhood in relation to other people (Yıkımış, 2018) and experiences of childless women (Parlak & Tekin, 2020) have been studied in the context of Turkey.

In light of the existing evidence, it can be expected to observe more voluntarily childless couples in the future. Therefore, the topic of voluntary childlessness will get

more attention both in social life as well as in clinical settings. As explained above, the literature about voluntary childlessness in the international arena and in Turkey is mostly concerned with women and there are only a few studies examining the experiences of couples. In this study, the aim is to understand how married couples experience and decide to be childless, and how they define their marital adjustment in their relationship. The present study aims to present a better and deeper understanding of experiences of voluntarily childless couples and develop implications on effective ways to engage with such couples and comprehend their experiences in applied settings.

1.2. CHLDLESSNESS

Childlessness can be defined as a state for individuals who do not have a child in their lives (Houseknecht, 1987). Being childless is not a new phenomenon, yet the studies that focus on this issue increase in years (Lynch et al., 2018). Even though infertility rates have been decreasing, “the percentage of childless couples has more than doubled since 1960” (Somers, 1993, p.643). Basten (2008) argues that some of these childless couples remain childless voluntarily, showing a growing trend in voluntarily childless individuals. It was also notable that most studies examining the rates of childlessness (both voluntary and involuntary) mostly concentrate on women to create statistics. The reasons for increase in childlessness rates are associated with women’s active participation in working life and improvement in contraceptive methods (Livingston & Cohn, 2010). Those researchers also point out that being childless become more acceptable and that people consider having a child as a choice of individuals.

There seems to be two types of childlessness as voluntary and involuntary in the literature. The distinction between voluntary and involuntary childlessness is based on the choice of individuals. Those individuals who have some kind of medical situation that prevent them from having a child are defined as involuntarily childless (Houseknecht, 1987; Kelly, 2009; Somers, 1993). Therefore, if individuals want to

have children, but are not able to have based on some medical reason, those individuals are defined as involuntarily childless. On the other hand, voluntary childlessness is defined as those individuals who do not have a child at present and think not to have one in the future (Houseknecht, 1987). It is based on their decision or choice, rather than some kind of medical condition like infertility. However, it becomes difficult to draw strict boundaries among types of childlessness. It becomes challenging to define permanent childlessness, since most of the studies is done with individuals who are still in the age of childbearing (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017). In addition, most people do not know whether they have the necessary biological or physiological characteristics and conditions that would allow them to have a child.

1.2.1. Voluntary Childlessness

Basten (2008) suggests that with the increase in rate of childlessness, it is not wrong to assume that the rate of voluntary childlessness also increases, especially in Western societies. As mentioned before, voluntary childlessness can be used for individuals who do not want children deliberately and engage in some activities to prevent becoming parents such as birth control and abortion (Bloom & Pebley, 1982). Therefore, it is based on the choice of individuals whether they are married or not. Three criteria can be used to define voluntary childlessness based on the article of Houseknecht (1987). As a first criteria, voluntarily childless individuals do not have children at the present moment. Secondly, these individuals do not consider having one in the future and lastly, this decision of remaining childless is based on their own decisions and intentions. However, it has been suggested that defining voluntary childlessness and drawing boundaries of this definition is not a straightforward issue. For example, Rowland (1998) mentions that some individuals can decide to remain childless but with time, some individuals might miss the childbearing ages and want to have a child. In this sense, those individuals' voluntary childlessness turns into involuntary.

Lastly, there has been a debate about defining this issue as voluntary childlessness, intentional childlessness or being childfree. The term “voluntary childlessness” has been used by the end of the 1970s (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). Before that, researchers mostly have used “childlessness” which make it difficult to distinguish voluntary from involuntary childlessness. With the increase in voluntarily childless population, some scholars have started to use and prefer the terms “childless by choice” and “childfree”, since these definitions seem to highlight choice of individuals rather than an absence of children as in involuntary childlessness (Blackstone and Stewart, 2012; Pelton & Hertlein, 2011). In this study, voluntary childlessness and being childfree will be used interchangeably.

1.2.1.1 Research on Women and Voluntary Childlessness

Not surprisingly, voluntary childless women have been studied much more than men in the literature (Waren & Pals, 2013). It is not unexpected, since the importance of becoming parents is ascribed more to women and their lives than men. Motherhood is considered to be one of the most important duties for women and by putting motherhood outside of their identities and rejecting parental roles, women experience more disadvantages and difficulties than men (Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Letherby, 2002). Blackstone and Stewart (2012) point out in their review paper that the subject of voluntary childlessness entered the literature with 1970s and in those times most of the articles examined the subject as a deviance from society. This interest about childfree women in 1970s was related to rise of second wave feminism in which feminist women have started to defend their individual rights of reproduction and sexuality while rejecting domestic roles and patriarchy (Sappleton, 2018). Blackstone and Stewart stated that researchers have tried to understand demographics, predictors and background of voluntary childless individuals, especially heterosexual women. For instance, Houseknecht (1978) compares undergraduate female students based on their willingness to have a child. The purpose of this study is to see if there is a difference in factors of “family background”, “reference group” and “self-other attitudes”

between women thinking to have children and women thinking to remain childless in the future. Based on his findings, women having no desire to have children have psychologically distant families which lead them to give importance to autonomy and achievement.

The attempt to understand voluntary childlessness based on demographics and characteristics of individuals, specifically women, did not end in 1970s. There are studies that focus on the issue from a similar perspective continuing to be published in 1980s and 1990s (Basten, 2008). One study reports that women who intentionally decide to remain childless are highly educated, mostly have jobs and married with someone who mostly have jobs related to managerial positions (Baum & Cope, 1980). Similarly, Bram (1984) points out that childless women are more likely to have higher educational status, more professional jobs and jobs in male-dominated areas than mothers and delayers (have intention to have a child in the future). In addition, childless women seem to care more about their work than others and they have long-term plans about their occupation. In 2006, Abma and Martinez also concentrate on the same issue and present similar findings in that compared to delayers and mothers, voluntarily childless women have higher incomes and lower levels of religiosity. In this sense, it can be said that voluntarily childless women are mostly associated with lower levels of religiosity, higher education, and a willingness to participate in labor force.

Existing studies on women's voluntary childlessness indicate that there are various reasons for women to choose voluntary childlessness. For instance, Settle and Brumley (2014) studied women's motivations and grouped these motivations under three titles, including the advantages of being childfree, negative aspects coming with having children and constraints. Being childfree brings benefits and opportunities to women's lives by protecting their freedom and/or autonomy, being independent, traveling more, sparing time for self-development, and socializing with their partners and others. When considering costs of having children, women acknowledge the situations in which they lose their independence, carry lots of responsibilities, have financial burden, disrupt their careers and cause inequality in marriages. As to the

constraints, women's experiences consist of various aspects such as not finding suitable partners, not feeling maternal instincts, and having negative childhood experiences.

Sense of freedom and/or autonomy appears to be one of the major reasons and motivations for women about choosing to be childless discussed in previous research. Childfree women consider motherhood as full of sacrifice bringing burden to the lives of women (Settle & Brumley, 2014). The sense of freedom is a broader concept for voluntarily childless women which includes "greater opportunities for self-fulfillment; improved financial position; decreased domestic responsibilities; wider opportunities to be spontaneously mobile and trying new experiences; greater opportunities to socialize, entertain friends and build and sustain social networks" (Peterson, 2015, p.2). In their clinical study with 33 voluntarily childless women, Kaltreider and Margolis (1977) point out that based on demands and responsibilities about childcare, women thought that they would lose their sense of freedom by having children. In this sense, by remaining childfree, women find the chance to protect their freedom and save time for themselves (Gillespie, 2000).

Another motivation that seems to be influential on women's decision of being childfree is self-development which includes factors of sustaining education, engaging in the work life, developing their own fields of interests, and constructing their own career. The condition of being childfree gives women the chance to independently focus on their self-development without fulfilling extensive responsibilities related to children and childcare (Shapiro, 2014). Mollen (2006) highlights in her research with nine childfree women that it is important for those women to sustain-self-development which includes sustaining their careers. In the same vein, based on their qualitative research with seven childfree women, according to Bimha and Chadwick (2016), having academic and career plans and ambitions play a significant role in the decision of being childfree.

In the decision-making processes to become childfree, there seems to be two pathways called as active and passive (Settle & Brumley, 2014). Women who actively decide about voluntary childlessness, even if they are not always certain about the

decisions, develop perceptions about motherhood and decide that they do not want to be a mother. Passive deciders, on the other hand, remain childless because of constraints such as financial problems and career plans. Compared to active deciders, those women deciding passively do not seem to be so distant to the idea of having children, so that they stand in a more ambiguous position. They appear as more open to reconsider and question their decision of being childfree than active deciders.

1.2.1.2 Research on Men and Voluntary Childlessness

Most of the available studies on men and voluntary childlessness have examined childless men by comparing them with women and/or fathers. A few studies have focused only on males' experiences, decision making processes and characteristics. The situation can be related to the definition of masculinity based mostly on occupations and success of men, rather than fatherhood so that the position and perceptions of men are still open for exploration (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). As seen in the study by Peterson (2012), even in the media and news, childfree men are mostly represented along with their partners, whereas women representations are much more diverse since society attributes more meanings to motherhood.

As in the case with research on women, some researchers have tried to explore the demographics and predictors of voluntary childlessness for men, mostly focusing on factors of religiosity, occupation, and level of education. For Waren and Pals (2013), being Catholic and holding beliefs about traditional gender roles decreases the possibility of being childfree. Contradicting with studies on women, there is no correlation variables about finances and the probability of being childfree for men. Similarly, Jacobson and Heaton (1991) point out that individuals attending religious activities are the least likely to become childless. In addition, men who desire to work more hours are predicted to be childless, but quality of education or occupation do not become predictors for men's voluntary childlessness.

When looking at the motivations of men to remain childless, similar to women, childfree men perceive negative aspects of childcare (Mynarska & Rytel, 2020). These

aspects include financial problems, sparing most of the time to children and energy devoted to children. Since this research considers negative aspects of childcare under the same title, it becomes difficult to see motivations which appear as more significant for men to decide voluntary childlessness. On the other hand, Park (2015) in her study with fourteen childfree women and nine childfree men proposes some of this difference. Men more than women mention the financial cost of raising children and define it as a sacrifice. Based on Park's research (2015), similar to women's expressions, men consider that their personalities are not suitable for raising children. Compared to childfree women who seems to hold more altruistic motivations (e.g., considering growth of the population), men make their decision based more on individualistic reasons such as financial freedom (Houseknecht 1987).

In their qualitative research, Smith and colleagues (2019) point out the lack of literature solely focusing on the experiences of childfree men. The authors made a research with eleven childfree men about their decision-making process and motivations. Their findings demonstrate that childfree men do not consider this decision as final and give importance to have options in the future. Similar to previous studies about motivations and reasons behind the decision of voluntary childlessness, those participants also mentioned financial concerns and losing freedom of their lifestyles as a reason for being childfree. Furthermore, they point out their concerns about the world such as overpopulation.

In sum, existing research on women and voluntary childlessness reveals that women choose to be childfree out of concerns over protecting their autonomy and developing themselves and their careers. Some also mention facing constraints and unsuitable circumstances for having children. Although the literature on men is more limited, available research point to similar motivations, with a particular emphasis on financial costs of having a child. For both men and women, education level, occupation and religious beliefs seem to play a role in their decisions. The studies reviewed above present how individuals think about voluntary childlessness and how they choose to

remain childfree. In the next section, studies on voluntarily childless couples will be reviewed.

1.2.1.3 Research on Couples and Voluntary Childlessness

As in the same line with women and men, there has been studies that focus on the differences between childfree couples and couples with children. Based on the research done by Somers (1993), compared to couples with children, childfree couples report higher incomes, less religious belief and more occupational positions as managers. According to Forsyth (1999), in the same line with the rationales and motivations of individual men and women, preserving freedom and lifestyle appears to be the most significant reason to remain childless for childfree couples' decision-making process. In addition, childfree couples give importance to financial cost of childcare and sustaining careers.

From the perceptions of childfree couples, having children and getting married are presented and taught to be a necessity, and based on this learning, they grow up with expecting to become parents one day (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020). The decision-making process of voluntarily childless couples have been studied since 1970s. In earlier research done by Marciano (1978) with forty married couples who decided to remain childless, it is claimed that the husband's role in the decision of being childfree is greater than women. In fact, if women want to be childless, it could end up with divorce. According to Marciano (1978), husbands decide to be childless, and their wives accept this decision. In this sense, the author argues that traditional marital life does not change in the voluntarily childless couples, since husbands still hold marital power and women seems to be passive in the decision-making process.

At the same time, Cooper and colleagues (1978) also examined decision-making process of childfree couples with a broader approach. The authors made interviews with 55 couples who decided to become voluntarily childless. Based on those interviews, there seems to be two kinds of decision-making processes among couples, namely "early articulators" and "negotiators". Early articulators decide on

being childfree individually before the marriage. Negotiators, on the other hand, start to think about the issue of having children with marriage. They discuss negative and positive aspects of having children and possible changes in both their personal and marital lives. Some of the couples (both early articulators and negotiators) make certain steps to avoid having a child, like getting vasectomy. The researchers emphasize that for negotiators, the decision of being childfree can be initiated by the husband, wife or both side of couples. Moreover, a third category can be added to this list as postponers where one of the partners can constantly postpone the idea of having children or becoming childfree and also, couples together can stand distant to discuss the decision of having children and to share opinions on this matter (Bhambhani & Anand Inbanathan, 2020). In this sense, postponers seem to consider the decision of having children or not having them as a process; until they discuss and negotiate, their positions appear to be ambiguous and temporary. It seems that without agreeing upon having children, they remain childless and define themselves as being childfree.

Similar to previous findings about the decision-making process of voluntarily childless couples, based on interviews done with 20 childfree couples, Lee and Zvonkovic (2014) identify three types of childfree couples, namely “mutual early articulator couples”, “mutual postponer couples” and “nonmutual couples” (p.7). There are three steps among couples to decide not having children. In the acceptance phase, each partner thinks about having children and develops their own reasoning about the issue with considering its advantages and disadvantages. In the agreement phase, it becomes a mutual decision to remain childless. In this phase, spouses discuss their own opinions with their partners and learn their partners’ position about the issue. In the last step, closing of the door, it becomes impossible for couples to have biological children because of medical causes, like going through menopause and/or sterilization like getting vasectomy.

According to Lee and Zvonkovic’s findings (2014), before the final phase, the couples can reconsider their decision from time to time and discuss the subject again, being influenced by external (e.g., witnessing someone’s childbearing), internal (e.g.,

fear of being regretful in the future) and/or relational (e.g., partner having serious illness) factors. Revisitations are not always shared and discussed with partners since most of the time, they thought that these feelings and thoughts are temporary. Furthermore, without triggers, the issue of having children can come into agenda by initiations of one spouse. In those conversations, each partner tries to comprehend that they still share similar opinions about not having children, so that they do not feel as putting pressure on their partners. Therefore, by discussing with their partners, they reaffirm their decision of being childfree. In the same vein, Carmichael and Whittaker (2007) point out that the decision of voluntary childlessness is not a final decision for couples. As conditions of life and wishes of individuals change in time, couples can rethink about the process, construct different opinions about the issue, change their minds, and even decide to have children.

In sum, available studies on voluntarily childless couples look at their consensus on the issue of remaining childfree. It seems that couples reach the idea of becoming childfree from different paths (e.g., postponing to have children and negotiating actively). Since getting married and becoming a parent are considered as essential markers of adult life in society, social attitudes towards voluntary childlessness are likely to shape women's, men's and couple's experiences. Next, available studies on attitudes towards voluntary childlessness will be summarized.

1.2.1.4 Research on Attitudes toward Voluntarily Childlessness

Social attitudes become significant to “understand current behaviors and the changing social landscapes that influence future intentions, plans, and behaviors” (Koropecky-Cox & Çopur, 2015, p.375). The attitudes toward voluntarily childless individuals have received great attention since 1960s. There seems to be an inconsistency among studies that survey attitudes toward childfree individuals. On the one hand, most of the studies demonstrate that society negatively labels individuals who choose to be childfree, since they deviate from social norms of having children (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). In this sense, childfree couples and individuals face some

kind of stigmatization from society. They face social pressures coming from society, especially family members, to become parents (Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014).

Especially earlier studies show that people attribute less favorable characteristics to childfree individuals. For instance, Callan's study (1985) done with 45 participants reveals that participants favored less and attributed negative characteristics more (e.g., being materialistic, selfish, and less loving) to voluntarily childless individuals compared to parents having two or more children. When considering that, participants also acknowledged that childfree individuals give more importance to their careers, conform less to societal norms and are financially more confident compared to parents. In the same vein, Jamison and colleagues (1989) asked 156 college students to rate characters in fictional scenarios and the results showed that childfree individuals are comprehended as more selfish, less loving, less sensitive, and less adjusted. Interestingly, students rated husbands as more selfish than wives. These perceptions of people toward voluntarily childless individuals are also supported by Polit's study (1978). In the study, the participants were expected to interpret and rate fictitious characters which differ in terms of the number of children that they have, including voluntarily childless characters, based on some characteristic (e.g. likeable and caring). The results reveal that childfree individuals are rated as having fewer nurturing capacities, needing more compassion, being less desirable in social settings and having more autonomy in their lives compared to parents.

Even after twenty-seven years after those studies, similar findings were presented by Lampman and Dowling-Guyer (1995). The study was done with 215 undergraduate students to examine their attributes toward voluntarily and involuntarily childless individuals. The results demonstrate that there is stigma toward voluntarily childless individuals by attributions of laziness, loneliness, insensitivity and unhappiness as well as having less caring qualities than parents and involuntarily childless individuals. In the same vein, Mueller and Yoder (1997) indicate that based on the findings of their study, compared to mothers, childfree women were attributed

more negatives aspects such as having less a satisfying life and participants expect them to be unhappy in the future.

Contrary to previous studies, Koropecyj-Cox and colleagues (2007) emphasize that social perception about childfree people changes and that individuals does not ascribe negative bias toward them and in fact, childfree couples seem to be attributed to have higher marital qualities since participants considered family size as a choice but at the same time, identified constraints to become parents (e.g., career concerns for professional couples and financial difficulties to working class couples). On the other hand, it is worth to mention that if individuals consider this decision as temporary and think that there is a chance for couples to have a child in the future, they have more positive perceptions and thoughts about voluntarily childless couples. In this sense, it can be said that from the approaches of individuals, temporary childlessness is more tolerable and normative than permanent childlessness. Even though it can be thought that individuals' perceptions and stigmatization toward childfree people have started to change with the recognition of childfree individuals more in 2000s, Ashburn-Nardo (2016) demonstrates that negative attitudes seem to remain similar to other periods. Different from previous research, the researcher points out that having children is considered as a moral imperative, so that the participants rate higher moral outrage for those being childfree than individuals with children.

Individuals who experience marginalization formed by society and its norms try to accept their marginalized identities and make others accept them as who they are with their decisions (Park, 2002). In this sense, childfree individuals as a marginalized group face with inquiries about timing and planning about having children, with the assumption that all couples will have a child sooner or later (Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014). Therefore, individuals perceive that they are not accepted as being childfree and expected to conform to societal norms by having children. In this sense, childfree individuals are questioned about the reasons behind their decision of voluntary childlessness yet presenting motivations and rationales do not seem adequate for others to believe in them and their decision.

In order to cope with these stigmatization experiences and negative bias by society, childfree individuals and couples develop some strategies. When asked about plans for having children, some childfree individuals try to hide their real opinions and provide vague answers (e.g., implying the possibility to have children in the future) (Park, 2002). Another technique presented by Park is identity substitution in which people present themselves as belonging to less marginalized and stigmatized group, such as being involuntarily childless. In this sense, based on social pressure, in order to prevent upcoming inquiries, childfree individuals disclose health problems that constrain them from having children. The third strategy used by childfree individuals is justification. In this perception, childfree individuals are not concerned with explaining themselves, rather they question the opposite side, becoming parents. They try to learn reasons behind having children while considering having a child as a selfish act. Furthermore, some individuals justify themselves by leaving no space for questioning and indicating that their life belongs to them, so that nobody has the right to question their decisions. The last strategy indicated by Park (2002) is generating excuses related to biological reasons. Especially women reply to questions coming from their surroundings about having children by indicating that they lack maternal instinct and/or an interest in babies and children.

In addition, some childfree individuals utilize the strategy of avoiding providing long answers and engaging in discussions with others who position having children as an essential thing in their lives (Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014). In this sense, one of the useful methods becomes changing the subject of the conversation. In addition, to avoid discussions, the childfree individuals find themselves in a position that they blame their partners for the position.

Overall, negative attitudes towards voluntary childless individuals and couples have been documented in the literature. Although many people making the choice to remain childfree and find coping strategies in the face of social pressure and marginalization experiences, these negative attitudes seem to preserve their position in

contemporary societies to some extent. In the next section, the topic of marital adjustment, the definition and factors related to the issue will be reviewed.

1.3. MARITAL ADJUSTMENT

Marital adjustment has been used in family studies in order to predict and understand the success of marriages. Locke and Williamson (1958) define marital adjustment as “the presence of such characteristics in a marriage as a tendency to avoid or resolve conflicts, a feeling of satisfaction with the marriage and with each other, the sharing of common interests and activities, and the fulfilling of the marital expectations of the husband and wife” (p. 562). On the other hand, it seems to be difficult to draw boundaries of marital adjustment and its operational definition since researchers have thought that the term of marital adjustment explains itself (Spanier & Cole, 1976). According to the authors, even though marital adjustment is evaluated usually by scales that determine and demonstrate marital adjustment of couples in a specific period of time, it is more beneficial to consider marital adjustment as developing within a process.

By reviewing previous studies, Spanier and Cole (1976) tried to define marital adjustment by presenting factors related to the term. According to the researchers, marital adjustment consisted of five factors and was determined by aspects such as “troublesome marital differences”, “interspousal tensions and personal anxiety” “marital satisfaction”, “dyadic cohesion” and “consensus on matters of importance to marital functioning” (p.128). The first factor is about the differences among partners, but it does not mean that all differences have strong influence on marital adjustment. The authors mention that some differences have even positive influence for enhancing marital adjustment. For the second component, the authors highlight the importance and effect of the level of anxiety over every personal relationship, so that if the level of anxiety is high in individuals and/or between partners, it has a negative influence on marital adjustment. Marital satisfaction or happiness seems to be related to the individual’s perception about marriage, marital success, and stability. The aspect of

dyadic cohesion is related to the feeling of togetherness, constructing emotional bonds and feeling connected to the partner. On the other hand, having consensus is mostly about couple's decision-making process in which the couple comes into agreement in important subjects.

Even though researchers sometimes use marital adjustment and marital satisfaction as similar concepts, marital adjustment seems to be an extensive term which includes the dimension of satisfaction (Kendrick & Drentea, 2016). As marital adjustment gets effected by marital satisfaction, there are some aspects which have an influence on marital satisfaction. Bradbury and colleagues (2000), in their review paper, point out some dimensions effecting being satisfied about marital life. The first one is about interpersonal dimensions of functioning among couples. Interpersonal relations among couples are determined by other factors such as each partner's affect and change in patterns of spouses. The context is also influential for marital satisfaction. In micro level, having children or not, backgrounds of each partner and being exposed to stressors (e.g., work life and traumatic events) affect marital satisfaction. In macro level, institutions and broader factors can also have an effect on marital life, specifically marital satisfaction, such as economically different environments (high or low) and rates of employment (high or low).

The predictors of well-adjustment of couples in the marriages are investigated in the literature. The age of partners, the degree of religiosity, the number or absence of children and emotional maturity of each partner seems to have influence on marital adjustment and marital success. Kendrick and Drentea (2016) indicate that being emotionally mature, having few age differences among couples, higher religious beliefs and having fewer or no children appears as good predictors of well-adjusted couples.

1.3.1. Marital Adjustment of Voluntarily Childless Couples

Since having children is defined to be an important step in marital life by societal norms, individuals are likely to perceive children as contributing to their

marital and personal life in a positive way (Callan, 1980). In this sense, voluntarily childless couples are viewed as having less marital satisfaction or happiness and they are aware of this negative stereotyping (Callan, 1983; Somers, 1993). In fact, most of the relevant studies indicate that compared to couples with children, childfree couples seem to have higher marital adjustment. When the factors underlying their marital adjustment are examined, there are mixed results in the literature to understand childfree couples' experiences of marital life. In addition, when examined the literature about marital adjustment of childfree couples, there are few studies and most of them are date back to 1970s to 1990s.

In 1979, Houseknecht examined wives and childfree women in terms of marital adjustment. The researcher points out that childfree women have higher scores in marital adjustment than wives, but this difference mainly originated from the factor of cohesion. While childfree women seem to be happier in their marital life, wives do not attribute this dissatisfaction about their marriages to the child. Callan (1984) also finds out in his study about the comparison of early deciders, postponers and wives that voluntarily childless couples have higher dyadic consensus than wives, but contradicting to previous research, the level of dyadic satisfaction is lower in childfree couples. In this sense, it seems that childfree couples meet in similar aims in life, decide together and engage in similar activities and interests.

Different from the previous research, Somers (1993) examined marital adjustment of childfree individuals and individuals with children. It is presented that compared to parents, childfree individuals have higher dyadic satisfaction and dyadic cohesion, whereas there seems to be no difference in the aspects of dyadic consensus and affectional expression. Somers (1993) emphasizes that the results can be related to children as being the center of couple's lives and that couples without children consider their partners as a center of attention.

There seems to be mixed results about marital adjustment of childfree couples. Some studies indicate that compared to couples with children, childfree couples appear as having higher cohesion, while in other studies they seem to have higher consensus,

but at the same time lower marital satisfaction. Contradicting previous research, some studies have found that childfree couples have higher dyadic satisfaction, but no difference in dyadic consensus. A review of the literature reveals no research that look at marital qualities of childfree married couples within a qualitative research design. In the next section, voluntary childlessness in the Turkish context will be explored.

1.4. VOLUNTARY CHILDLISSNESS IN THE TURKISH CONTEXT

As in Western societies, in Turkish society, voluntary childlessness seems to be a growing trend. Fertility rates have been decreasing since 1960s based on increased women' entrance into the labor force and becoming more educated (Isik & Pinarcioglu, 2007). In fact, compared to 1978, childless families doubled its percentage among types of families in 2016 (Cobanoglu, 2020). Even though it is difficult to distinguish voluntary and involuntary childless families, based on the statistics of TUIK (Turkish Statistical Institute), in 2020, the percentage of families without children which consists of only a wife and a husband appears to be 13.5 and the statistics do not include others (e.g., individuals living alone or cohabitating couples) who define themselves as being childfree.

Pronatalism can be defined as the state's, society's and culture's pressure and encouragement for individuals to have children (Brown & Ferree, 2005). Even if there seems to be a change in politics from time to time, especially with the beginning of 2000s, the state of Turkey strengthens the politics of pronatalism (Akşit, 2010). In this sense, especially for women, having children seems to be a necessity and an identifier of their identities and femininity (Kocyigit, 2012). In Turkey, as being a family-oriented country and society, "the social status of a woman, her dignity and self-esteem are closely related to her procreation potential" (Isik et al., 2006, p.321). In fact, becoming a wife and a mother, as well as taking caring of husbands, children and domestic work is attributed to women as being national duties (Kulakaç et al., 2006). While motherhood is strongly related to women's social status, fatherhood is also attributed to be a significant role for men to ensure the continuum of family name, be

a bread winner and provide financial care for the family (Hortaçsu, 2007; Zeybekoglu, 2013). In this sense, even though the meanings and attitudes of parenthood is different between men and women, they are both valued and considered to be a necessity by Turkish society.

Besides, the importance of parenthood, more specifically motherhood, giving birth to children and raising them up are attributed significant meaning in the Turkish society. Even though, there seems to be a decrease in economic value of children in the society, children are still considered to be important for getting support in older ages (Ataca & Sunar, 1999) and being a source of psychological well-being (Kagitcibasi & Ataca, 2005). The authors mentioned that psychological value of children includes aspects such as witnessing a child's growth, being a source of love and providing care for someone. Therefore, even though the aspects attributed to children have changed over time, the value of children seems to remain significant for Turkish society.

In spite of voluntary childlessness as being a growing trend, in the Turkish literature, the subject of being childfree seems to be newly emerging and to include mostly women participants and their experiences. In a recent qualitative study, Yikmis (2018) examined the experiences of fourteen childless women about living in a pronatalist society. She does not restrict her sampling with childfree women since according to the researcher, it becomes difficult to determine boundaries between involuntary and voluntary childlessness. As in Western studies, the participants mentioned reasons behind the decision of remaining childless as sparing time for themselves, their interests, and their husbands, feeling freedom and not carrying responsibilities about children and childcare. In addition, they felt pressure about becoming mothers from relatives, specifically their mothers. As a way to deal with these societal pressures, women utilized strategies such as using humor, providing ambiguous answers and implying the situation as temporary.

In a similar qualitative study focusing on voluntarily childless Turkish women, Simay and Tekin (2020) point out that motherhood means sacrifice and increasing responsibilities. In this sense, by being childfree, individuals can protect their freedom

(e.g., financial freedom and managing their time). On the other hand, related to social pressures, the researchers mention that childfree women feel also incomplete and constantly questioning. Even though they seem to be confident about their decision to remain childless, the participants have fear about feeling regret in future, questioning their decisions and changing opinions about having children since they perceive motherhood as an instinctual thing.

While childfree individuals', specifically women' experiences include social pressure about becoming parents, it becomes noteworthy to understand people's perceptions and attitudes toward voluntarily childless individuals in the Turkish context. Copur and Koropecykj-Cox (2010) indicate that compared to parents (both men and women), childfree individuals are seen less warm and more driven. In terms of marital relationship, participants attribute more positive aspects and affects to parents rather than childfree individuals. On the other hand, it is noteworthy to consider individuals who hold such negative stereotyping and stigmatization. Individuals who are fathers, seeing the child as essential and/or having high levels of hostile/benevolent sexism tend to perceive voluntarily childlessness as negative and do not support the idea of remaining childless (Bahtiyar-Saygan & Sakallı-Uğurlu, 2019). On the other hand, individuals being younger and having higher education are predicted to provide more support toward childfree individuals.

It can be seen that compared to Western studies, in the Turkish context, studies on voluntary childlessness have recently emerged. In this sense, the experiences of childfree individuals, especially men and couples are not covered in literature.

1.5. THE PRESENT STUDY

As presented above, beginning with the 1970s, research on voluntary childlessness became more extensive and comprehensive, including reasons of being childfree, demographics of childfree individuals and attitudes toward voluntary childlessness. The subject has been studied in different disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and economics. On the other hand, the studies have focused on mostly on

women rather than men and couples. Studies including childfree couples as participants have mostly examined marital adjustment in comparison with parents (Pelton & Hertlein, 2011). Even though the definition of marital adjustment can differ in studies, it is mostly determined through some factors such as marital satisfaction and affection (Kendrick & Drentea, 2016). The marital adjustment has usually been evaluated through scales rather than concentrating on individuals' and/or couples' experiences. In this sense, in the present study, one of the aims is to comprehend the experiences and perceptions of voluntarily childless couples about their marital life and relationship with spouses.

The research on voluntarily childlessness is dominated by Western societies and studies are mostly quantitative and empirical (Lynch et al., 2018). In the present study, besides marital adjustment and/or quality, how individuals decide to remain childless, how they experience being childfree and in which ways they negotiate and discuss this issue with their spouses will be examined. As studies about voluntary childlessness is very few in the Turkish context, the understanding of childfree couples' experiences through the present study will contribute to the literature and clinical applications with couples. The present study, based on a qualitative and exploratory research design, intends to answer the following research questions:

- a) How do couples decide to be voluntarily childless?
- b) How do they experience voluntary childlessness?
- c) How does voluntary childlessness influence their subjective experience about marital relationship and adjustment?

CHAPTER II: METHOD

2.1. DATA COLLECTION

After getting approval from the Istanbul Bilgi University Ethics Committee, the researcher used convenience sampling strategies to reach the participants. The study was announced with social media posts and shared in psychology-related professional e-mail lists. Five married couples (5 female and 5 male) who a) did not have a child at the time of data collection and b) had no intent to have a child in the future were the participants in the present study. There was no age restriction. Initially, living abroad was set as an exclusion criteria with the goal of understanding the impact of the socio-cultural context of Turkey on voluntary childlessness and couple's experiences of it. However, due to difficulties with reaching the intended number of participants, this exclusion criteria was changed in the recruitment and data collection process. Thus, two couples who were living abroad and volunteered to participate in the study were also recruited. The distinction between voluntary and involuntary childlessness is based on the choice of individuals. That is, those individuals who have some kind of medical condition to prevent having a child are defined as involuntarily childless (Houseknecht, 1987; Kelly, 2009; Somers, 1993). Therefore, the couples who were childless based on medical causes like infertility or in the process of receiving fertility treatments were excluded.

Couples who fulfilled the inclusion criteria and accepted voluntary participation were recruited as participants. Each participant was interviewed separately online due to the pandemic. An interview guide was prepared and followed in the interviews (Appendix A). Since the interviews were carried out through online channels, informed consents were taken via e-mail. Before the interviews, the participants were expected to clearly state their consent for taking part in the study in an e-mail, fill out the consent form (Appendix B) and send them to the researcher. Following their approval of the informed consent form, semi-structured interviews were scheduled and conducted. Since the informed consents were filled before the interviews, the researcher turned on

the audio-recorder at the beginning of the interviews. The researcher explained the aim and process of the study and asked whether participants had any questions. They were reminded of their right to leave or stop the interview any time they wanted. Afterwards, the researcher asked questions in the demographic form (Appendix C) and filled out the form. In the demographic form, the participants were expected to answer questions about their age, the city they lived in, their educational status, job, income, the form of meeting with the partner, the duration of their marriage and relationship, the residents of their household and their experience of cohabitation. The interviews were conducted individually with each partner, because the researcher wanted to understand each participant's unique experience and to see the differences within couples about the decision of being childless. The interviews lasted between 54 to 110 minutes.

The researcher audio-recorded all 10 interviews with two separate voice-recorders. Then, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher will keep all voice-recordings and transcriptions in a password-protected computer for five years following data collection.

2.1.1. Data Collection Tool

For the semi-structured interviews, an interview guide which includes questions about participants' motivations, decision-making processes about being childfree, and their marital and relational functioning was prepared (Appendix A). The questions related to marital and relational functioning were formed through the definition of marital adjustment and the factors under this term. Based on the literature about marital adjustment (Kendrick & Drentea, 2016; Spanier & Cole, 1976), the questions on subjective experiences of childfree individuals about their marital lives were specified under some factors such as dyadic consensus and dyadic cohesion. The questions were reviewed with the advisor and revisions were made through the recommendations of the advisor.

For developing a better guide and testing the questions, the researcher made one pilot interview with a married woman whose husband did not want to attend the

interview and made revisions in the guide. Based on this interview, the researcher also gained experience in carrying out an interview. The final guide consisted of 42 open-ended questions which acquired information about the narrative of the participants' relationship, their decision-making process, marriage quality, and their experiences in social networks and society.

2.2. PARTICIPANTS

Five married couples (5 female, 5 male) were participants of the present study. Their ages ranged from 25 to 47 ($M = 34$). The participants mainly defined their income as average, except one couple who defined as having upper income. The length of their marriage ranged from 2 to 8 years, with an average of 5. Two of the couples indicated cohabiting before getting married for 1 to 1.5 years. Two couples were living abroad, while others lived in two big cities in Turkey. Three couples met through friends, while one couple met in social media and the other couple met through work. Detailed demographics about participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 2.1. Demographic Information of the Participants

ID	Age	Education	City of Residence	Occupation	Relationship Duration (years)	Marriage Duration (years)	Cohabitation
1F	37	Master	İstanbul	Software logistic strategist	14	8	Yes (1.5 years)
1M	47	Master	İstanbul	Electronic Engineer	14	8	Yes (1.5 years)
2F	30	PhD	Muğla	Academician	6	2	No
2M	31	Bachelor	Muğla	Computer Engineer	6	2	No
3F	30	Bachelor	Dubai	Marketing Researcher	9	6	No
3M	31	Master	Dubai	Business intelligence manager	9	6	No
4F	34	Bachelor	Stockholm	NGO worker	9	6	Yes (1 year)
4M	38	Bachelor	Stockholm	Computer Engineer	9	6	Yes (1 year)
5F	25	Bachelor	İstanbul	Marketing Training Specialist	7	2	No
5M	32	Bachelor	İstanbul	Electronic Technician	7	2	No

*M=Male F=Female

2.3. DATA ANALYSIS

In order to understand couples' shared and unique experiences about voluntary childlessness, Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used. Thematic analysis can be defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p.76). In the present study, thematic analysis was applied to manifest content of the interviews from a social constructionist perspective. In this perspective, the attention was given to how experiences of individuals are formed socially and how these experiences and meanings change by social factors (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher was attentive to cues about the effect of social context on participants' experiences. There were also specific questions in the guideline that directly asked participants about their perceptions and experience of being childless in the society. Six steps were followed for the analysis based on Braun and Clarke's recommendations (2006). First, the researcher transcribed the data and read and re-read transcriptions in order to familiarize with the data. In the second step, initial codes were developed using the MAXQDA Software program. At this step, the researcher tried to capture participants' experiences and perspectives, and codes were produced based on these experiences. Next, the researcher searched for candidate themes and collected codes under potential themes and subthemes. Then, the candidate themes were reviewed to check whether they were relevant to the codes and a thematic map was generated. In the fifth step, a clear definition for each theme was developed and the themes were named. Before the final step, which was about reporting the analysis, the researcher reached the participants again for member-checking in order to validate and explore whether themes were credible and reflective of their experiences. Three participants replied to the e-mail, gave positive feedback and stated that themes were representative of their experiences. Therefore, no revisions were made about themes and sub-themes.

To increase trustworthiness, each step of coding and analysis was discussed with the advisor. After the first interview was done, it was transcribed and sent to the advisor. The advisor gave feedback for conducting better interviews and presented

some suggestions. When coding the first interview was finished, the advisor interpreted the codes. Based on these interpretations, a more clear definition of the codes was developed, and some codes were changed. The following coding process was done based on these reflections of the advisor. After the coding of all interviews by primary researcher, there was also a meeting with the advisor to discuss codes, determining possible themes, collecting codes under those candidate themes and naming the themes in order to construct a more coherent narrative.

2.4. THE RESEARCHER'S PERSPECTIVE

As a psychology and sociology graduate, my interest in understanding people in social context grew over the years. In various settings including work and college, I made a lot of observations about how people behave and develop patterns in their systems or organizations. I realized that even though people have different backgrounds, in specific social settings, they can share similar experiences. In addition, with the change of social context and time, some of the experiences are also altered. I find it valuable to understand individuals and their experience with the consideration of social context. However, for me, it is also important to consider individuals' uniqueness which led me to study clinical psychology.

Based on my education in a clinical psychology program, I worked with only adult clients rather than couples within psychodynamic perspective. In therapy sessions, my focus is on the clients' inner world. By this way, I can notice their relationship patterns, including intimate ones, and work with clients. On the other hand, I have only listened to one side of the story about intimate relationships and had no chance to listen to two sides of the story and observe dynamics within the relationship. In addition, considering intimate relationships cannot be thought outside of social context. In this sense, I wanted to study couples in the present study which became a new field for me. I think studying couples became an overlap between my perspectives about sociology and clinical psychology education.

I grew up in a small city in which people were very much interested in each other's lives. One of my parents' married friends had no child. Even though it was not spoken or asked, I heard conversations about them being involuntarily childless. When I looked at them, I observed that they shared their spare times together, engaging in different activities like trekking and traveling abroad and having a lot of fun. I remember that I asked myself what if being a childless is their choice. I realized that none of their friends or families considered this as an option. After coming to Istanbul for university, I encountered many couples that either delayed the idea of having a child or decided to stay childless. It strengthened my curiosity about the topic, especially about their decision-making process, the effect over marriage and interaction with society.

Even though I felt confident at the beginning of the study about finding participants, it became difficult to reach couples where both partners were willing to participate in the interviews. More than four women wrote to me to participate in the study individually, but they mentioned that their husbands did not want to attend. Therefore, in order to reach an adequate number, I accepted couples who lived abroad. It became informative for me to listen to the participants when they compared their experiences between Turkey and abroad. At the end of each interview, almost all participants told me that they had never explained this decision in such a detailed and organized way which led them to higher awareness about the topic and themselves.

From my perspective, the position of me as being unmarried and childless could have some effect over the process. In one interview, the participant explained the reasons behind the decision about being childfree. Suddenly, she stopped and asked me whether I had a child or not. She seemed relieved to hear that I did not. According to my observations, me being childless made participants more comfortable to share their experiences. Over the process of most interviews, at some point, participants asked me whether I was married or not. I think that especially when they shared their experiences about their marriage, they considered the situation and shared more details. One participant gave me advice about marriage and the importance of finding the right

person. I thought that way of sharing things and content of the interviews may be different than the present study, if I were married or had a child.

Since I had no experience in qualitative research, it took time for me to adapt to the interviewer role. In one-to-one sessions, I was used to sit in the chair with my psychotherapist identity. While conducting the interviews, at the beginning it was challenging to differentiate my researcher perspective from my psychotherapist approach. From time to time, I found myself concentrating on some sentences which were not related to the research topic. On the other hand, having experience as a psychotherapist became beneficial in some ways such as understanding participants' unique experiences by posing questions. Overall, preparing a guideline and questions and keeping the interview setting in the standardized way helped me to balance the situation and made me more confident as a researcher.

CHAPTER III: RESULTS

With using thematic analysis, four main themes were generated based on ten interviews with five married couples. The main themes were named as “meanings of having a child”, “decision making process”, “marital functioning” and “facing societal norms”. These four themes included three to four subthemes within (see Table 3.1.).

Table 3.1. Themes and Subthemes of the Research

Themes	Meanings of Having a Child	Decision Making Process	Marital Functioning	Facing Societal Norms
Sub-Themes	Loss of Autonomy	Thinking Rationally about Having Children	Valuing Togetherness	Having a Child as an Essential Step
	Burden of Responsibility	Reaching a Consensus	Appreciating Strong Communication	Being Different from Society
	Concerns About Finances and Career	Ongoing Reflection	Sharing Responsibility of Household Chores	Coping with Societal Norms
	A Unique Experience			

3.1. MEANINGS OF HAVING A CHILD

In the interviews, meanings of having a child were mostly discussed and expressed by participants. This theme covered participants’ perceptions of having a child. They mostly observed their families, friends, and society in general to detect

what changes with a child in their personal and marital life. Based on their accounts, four sub-themes emerged as “loss of autonomy”, “burden of responsibility”, “concerns about finances and career” and “a unique experience”. While they regarded having a child as a threat to their autonomy, career and finance and burden of responsibilities, at the same time, they acknowledged it as being a different and unique experience.

3.1.1. Loss of Autonomy

All of the participants mentioned that having a child came up with loss of autonomy. Having a child required dedication that individuals prioritize their children over their lives. From participants’ perspective, even though, this dedication declined as children grew up, parents still took their children into consideration for every step they take, such as planning holidays and moving to another city or country. Some participants perceived having a child as requiring good planning in everyday life and somehow removing spontaneity of their lives. They thought that they had to engage in activities which they did not like for a child such as cooking or shopping. All participants emphasized that having a child meant prioritizing him/her over their individual autonomy and freedom.

I do not want to spend the best years of my life raising a thing. I prioritize myself on this issue. After having a child, I have to look after him/her for 15 years.... After that I have to think about someone while going on a vacation and I have to go with him/her. If I leave him/her somewhere, I always think of him/her and his/her wellbeing. In short, it means mortgaging at least my 15 years. I am 30 now, so I will be exhausted in my 45. I do not want this. (2F)

I attained my freedom late in my life. I had to struggle to get it because of my family. I had been restricted so that I reached the period in which I could do anything I want in such a late age... I do not want to change it. If I have a child, I will not be free anymore. As my mom determined most of the things in my life before, now the child will determine. I cannot ever get my freedom back.... I never think that you can be free with a child. It is no longer your life, it the child’s life. I do not want such a thing. I do

not want to give priority to someone else in my life. I always want myself to be a priority. Therefore, the child makes me feel like somehow my life will be subjugated. (3F)

Even though we break up with my wife, the child will not go anywhere. The child will always be present for me... I will see this responsibility as a priority at least 15 years, 10 to 15 years of my life. This changes priorities in my life. When changing my job, going for a vacation with my friends or deciding on an investment, almost everything changes. (1M)

With giving priority of their lives to a child, participants mentioned that they had to give up some of their interests, hobbies, or activities. Instead of engaging in those activities with a child, their focus would be on the activities related to the child, his/her needs, and responsibilities.

I would have no hobbies. I would feel regretful (ukde olurdu). There are things like “When I retire, I will learn to play the piano or when I retire, I will read about philosophy more”. I would not go for shopping for myself, but I have to do it for him/her. Compulsorily... You read lots of books and search things from various sources about caring for cats. I have to learn about it (childcare). If I read a book, it must be about the child. My whole life would change. (1F)

We do sports together. As she wishes, my wife can go to dance or meet with friends from college. You have to restrict all of these activities, when you have child. When I want, for instance, there will be Beşiktaş’s game next Tuesday... Even with the difficulties related to pandemic in Turkey, that day I can go to the game. But with the child, you think “Is there anything related to the child that day”. Does my wife have anything to do? Or I cannot go because he/she has homework. Maybe something will happen, and he/she will be sick. I have to deprive myself. (5M)

In a similar way, based on participants’ perceptions, having a child also meant not to spend spare times based on their own wishes. They stated that if they had a child,

that would mean giving most of your time to the child. Therefore, they would have less time to spend for themselves, which they considered as a need. Some of the participants (3 female, 3 male) emphasized the significance of having a personal and private space for themselves and explained how having a child would interfere with it.

So, people have limited time. Based on my character, I want to keep some of this time to myself. I am the kind of person who recharges when I am alone... I keep some of this time to my wife. I share it with her. Besides that, I have to work but when the child comes, whether is willingly or unwillingly, I would need to reserve most of this time for the child. (4M)

I think that I could not spare time for myself and have difficulties about catching up with life. So, I would be overwhelmed by work and home. (3M)

From participants' accounts, having a child brought a much more planned life. These plans were formed based on the child's needs and wishes. Four of the participants emphasized the burden of planning and organizing everything around child, such as socializing with friend, selecting schools, or moving to a different city.

When you have a child, God forbid (Allah korusun) that it can be born premature or with a problem. I was like that. I had asthma, so I was regularly at the hospital. We need to plan everything around the child. For instance, which place does the child stay comfortably, whose home would make the child more comfortable? You even choose your friends based on the child. (5M)

I wonder whether we can move to Bodrum or not if we had a child. We probably could not. For instance, there is no heating system here. If I had a child, I must think lots of things about warming him/her. When the school age comes, it means to pick up a good school, X school and move to another neighbourhood... Pursuing this kind of life would make me feel overwhelmed, trapped. Taking everything into account, adapting to his/her wishes and needs would be difficult for me. (2F)

In the same vein with planning and organizing, with the child, it became difficult to preserve spontaneity in their personal lives. All of the female participants and two of the male participants pointed out that with the child, they would lose their spontaneity. Without a child, they could preserve it and make daily decisions more simply according to their own wishes.

If you want to sleep, you sleep. If you want to go somewhere, go there. Are you hungry, eat. Do you want to watch tv series, watch them. Just simple as that. Because in my opinion, people with children do not have these things. They can have them when children allow it or after schedules of their children. As I said, freedom is as simple as that. (3F)

Everything would change (with a child). Our lifestyle would be very different. We would begin to live differently. Because now we do not care about anything, so we live as we want. We do things that we want that day. If we do not wish to clean the house that day, we do not clean it, but with the child, the responsibilities would become different. (5F)

3.1.2. Burden of Responsibility

All of the participants pointed out that having a child brought many responsibilities. They tended to describe all of the duties related to a child as a responsibility. From their perspective, the responsibilities would begin the day when they decide to have a child. They emphasized that in every decision, you had to consider the wellbeing of the child and behave responsibly. When the participants had responsibilities of their own, they believed that with the child, the amount of them would increase. This understanding was closely related to the sense of loss they reported in the previous subtheme with regards to individual autonomy, personal space and time, and freedom.

In the beginning, there are sleepless nights. You have to provide constant care and fulfil the responsibilities. When he/she is a baby, you need to wake up at night and

changed their diapers. Then, you need to play games with him/her constantly. With the school ages, you have to pick a good school and help him/her to do his/her homework. (4M)

I know from my experience. I am the only child in my family; I have no siblings. My mom and dad broke up when I was ten. I know very well about how parents had great effect on their child and his/her wellbeing. There are lots of responsibilities in these. The child needs people who provide him/her all kinds of care and all kinds of support. (2M)

For some of the participants, there was a concern about providing care constantly. In their personal lives, some of the chores made them feel overwhelmed. Without a child, they thought that they could delay things or share them with their partner easily. When the child arrives, they expressed that it would be inevitable to do the housework or other chores, since they would be the main source to provide care for the child.

You constantly have to look after the needs of him/her and make dinners considering him/her. But I do not like to cook at home. I do not like it; I could not make time for it. You have to be in the position that you cook all the time. There is also laundry...My husband might tell this himself, but he told me the other day “When you have a child, you constantly have to do shopping”. We both do not like shopping but for the child, you must constantly buy things...But for me, the most difficult part is to cook for the child. (4F)

Similarly, the husband highlighted how his wife had concerns about the dependency of the child.

My wife has such a hesitation. It makes her frightened to have something that is purely dependent on her. Maybe for that child, she will be the only source for providing his/her needs because he/she cannot take it from anyone else. So, it means to take a great responsibility for someone who is needy. (4M)

As one participant emphasized, having a child also increased their workload. It meant to carry two people's responsibilities in one individual.

You take a shower, he/she takes a shower. Sorry to say that but you go to the toilet, he/she goes to the toilet. You live like a double person. You eat your meal, he/she eats the meal. I mean, you do everything to sustain the life for both yourself and him/her. Plus, intellectually, you read a book for yourself and you read a children's book to him/her. I mean, what you make, you make it double. For me, it is a huge workload. (1F)

Six of the participants (3 male, 3 female) mentioned that childcare brings physical fatigue. In general, they mostly stressed periods after the child is born in which the parents have to care for and feed the child and put him/her to sleep at nights.

I mean, you become the slave of that child right after he/she is born. Parents become dehumanized (insanlıktan çıkıyorlar). There is neither sleep nor proper meal. They can eat whenever possible. There is an expression among mothers; "never having a hot coffee"... There is always hustle and bustle. She cannot sleep at nights. For me, sleeping at night is important. I am not a person who can stay up late at night. (3F)

"Last night, I could not sleep" becomes a very normal sentence for them. It is a regular process for them which I only experience two or three times a year. They cannot sleep; they are exhausted. They spend their whole time with him/her every evening. They are always tired. (3M)

One participant thought that the fatigue is not restricted to first years of the child. Taking care of the child and fulfilling the responsibilities would have physical consequences.

After I have a child, I have to provide care at least until the age of 15. It brings about physical fatigue. (2F)

Another point the participants made was that if they had a child, they would constantly be concerned about the child's well-being. They pointed out that even after

they fulfilled all their physical caretaking responsibilities, their mind would still be occupied with the child. From their perspectives, in every aspect of children's lives, parents feel responsible which lead them to worry all the time. Nearly all participants (4 female, 4 male) indicated this aspect as significant, and emphasized the psychological and emotional dimensions of carrying this responsibility, besides physical burden. Especially, female participants mentioned the worry about the wellbeing of babies and stressed that they would be primary caretaker to concern about babies' health.

I hesitate about having constant concern, what if something happens to him/her. You are the primary responsible person for his/her wellbeing. (4F)

Worrying about him/her; checking in your mind that he/she is OK. This is something that I do not want in my life...Because it is not like a job. I mean I did my work, changed the diaper, breastfed him/her, and put him/her to sleep. It is not like "OK, from now on, God may protect him/her". Constantly asking "Does he/she breath or turn down?". Parents think all the time...For example, a mother speaks with you, but behind her eyes, you can see that she is not paying attention; there is always this occupation with the child. And there is no such thing that it will not happen to me. It will happen. (1F)

I think I am prone to become a mother who counts the child's breath. I would wonder if something happened. How many times he/she went to the toilet? He/she went for four times, not five, what happened? I am prone to become such a mother. For me, I would be quite crazy. (3F)

On the other hand, even though male participants concerned also with health issues, their focus was more on the social interactions of the child and taking good education. They gave importance for the child to construct good friendships and be socially active. Also, they cared about the child to be financially independent in adulthood. Therefore, it could be said that based on male participants' perceptions, their

concern was on the development of self-confidence of the child both in childhood and adulthood. One participant highlighted that he would have concern about whether his child is bullied or not in the school.

When the child starts to the school, you would worry about whether he/she is bullied by his/her friends at school or not. You need to take these issues into consideration. (4M)

3.1.3. Concerns about Finances and Career

The participants mentioned the financial burden coming with the child as well as concerns about their future careers. They thought that when you have a child, you have to reserve most of your financial resources to the child and his/her future. This consideration was shared more frequently by male participants than female participants. Only three of the female participants pointed out the financial difficulties related to the child, while all of the five male participants highlighted the issue.

My priorities will completely change (with a child). I mean, I have to erase the things that I want to do now and in the future. Because I have to give my whole financial resources to him/her. I anticipate huge expenses. I observe it from my friends with children. (2M)

In this society, families carry the financial load. The society does not raise your child. When you say, "I have no money", social government does not compensate the expenses of you or your child... It is necessary to reach a certain economic level. (1M)

More specifically, providing good education seemed to be a big concern in participants' accounts. They remarked the expenses about especially private schools since they believed that children could get decent education from those institutions. Some of the participants observed that families started to worry about this immediately after the child was born and try to save money.

New families or families whose children start school, I mean people around us, have no other option than private schools. Five years ago, they started to search for a

private school. Sometimes, they got into lines... For me, the most important thing would be the education of my child. It would become a problem not to send him/her to a good school, and they are expensive. I do not know what they cut back, how they do it. But in that sense, even an economic problem might be experienced. (4F)

They (our friends with children) are trying to choose a school. People in a certain socio-economic environment never consider public schools as an option. Private schools are a solution. Private schools have really high prices... The economic cost of that is nothing small. (4M)

Along the same lines, without a child, most of the participants believed that they could live financially more stable and confident. They were able to keep money for themselves and their interests.

You know there are actually positive aspects of being an adult who does not have children. I mean, for example, with a certain level of income, people support a family with children. I care only for myself with the same income... Because the assumption of the society is to have children and since the standards are set according to it, childlessness has provided some financial convenience for me. (4M)

You need to be financially confident (for having a child). For example, we were planning to go abroad before the pandemic. I guess, it is a bit of a financial thing to have no children. So, it is a comfort (not to have a child). Now we both work in a good institution. We have something good; we have private health insurance. (5M)

Last but not least, having a child were presented to be an obstacle for future careers of mostly women. Four women and one male participant reflected on this issue, emphasizing that especially after giving birth, women seemed to be primary caregiver. From participants' approach, in infancy times, women are expected to carry on responsibilities such as breastfeeding and changing diapers. Participants pointed out that also in the last months of pregnancy, the women are expected to leave their jobs. Even if they go back to their jobs, there would be sense of falling behind from their

colleagues. At this sense, the participants emphasized that after having a child, they would start to construct their career all over again.

For one thing, I would probably take a break from my academic studies (if I had a child); it means staying away. I am a computer engineer; God knows what will happen when I take a break. Even a war of robots can break out; technology is advancing so fast. So, this is one of the things that scares me a lot. I would probably miss a lot of things. (2F)

I am working now, and I have goals for my career that I want. I do not want to lose my career (by a child) (5F)

One participant mentioned that growing up in an environment where women only took care of the children and did not work demonstrated her the importance of having a career. This influenced her views on becoming a mother in her current life. She said that women in her family did not work; only took care of their children. They devoted to their lives to their children and children's wellbeing. At this sense, the participant started to think that by having a child, it became difficult for women to be successful in their careers.

My mother never had the idea of working... My aunts did not work either, no women close to me worked. They do the housework and are devoted to their children. Especially for my mother...her whole life is just us, my siblings and me.... I guess my mother's motherhood has made me think. I formed the idea that I was not going to be a woman who could not stand on her own feet by giving birth to a child. (4F)

One male participant observed the inequalities between men and women after having a child. He pointed out that there is a little change in men's lives after the birth of a child, whereas women are expected to make sacrifices about their career by the society.

(Based on pressures of society) At most points, men can continue their social life, and preserve their working life while women stay home and take care of children. (4M)

3.1.4. A Unique Experience

Besides negative perceptions about having a child, most of the participants tended to define it as a unique experience. They expressed that they love children and some of things can be only experienced by having a child. In this sense, some of participants mentioned their concern about feeling regretful in the future as indicated by others with children. Eight of the participants (4 female, 4 male) at some point mentioned their love about children.

By the way, if I had a child, I would probably like it very much, like other mothers. I love children, I have no such thing as I do not like children. (2F)

I have always told my negative ideas about children. I also have good ideas. Believe it. Actually, I find kids very cute and sweet too. (4M)

In fact, two of female participants told that in the past, they wanted to become mothers at a younger age.

For a long time, during my university years, I was thinking that if I get married, I would have a child immediately. I had such a perception that I would immediately have a child because I love children, I love them very much. I really love spending time with babies and children. But I suppose when you get older you realize the seriousness of the situation. (5F)

Most of the participants indicated that you could experience great things with children. Some of these cannot be experienced by other aspects of their lives such becoming pregnant and observing of their child's growth.

Having a child at home is also fun, he/she talks all the time and learns new things. For example, the most impressive thing for me about a child is creating that child out of nowhere, observing the development of his/her personality happening

under your direct intervention. I mean he/she learn new things and is constantly hungry for knowledge, and you can teach him/her something new all the time. I think these would be very enjoyable experiences. (4F)

I did not experience it, but everybody says that you feed a living thing, make it a part of your life, spend time with it, and this creature has a different feature from a pet, it talks to you. (2F)

One participant said that a child could immediately break the routine of their lives. For her, it was the only positive aspect of having a child.

It would cause us to experience these negativities and negatively affect our marriage, but whatever the child is, it adds colour to your life. It is such a huge change. There can be only one positive side to this: getting out of that routine, bringing a colour to your life, sharing something together, nurturing it. (3F)

One male participant considered the child as a way to transfer his knowledge, perspective and value judgments.

Me and my wife, like everyone else, we have something of our own. I have something for myself, the culture or value judgments that I got from my family or my own school. It becomes appealing to me, like being able to convey these things to a child. (4M)

Six of the participants indicated the risk of being regretful in the future. This was especially related to biological reasons that women could give birth until a certain age. Some of the couples talked about this probability and considered adoption as a solution.

There is a pleasant side to having children. It has a lot of emotional aspects. I see this not only in my own child, not in the idea of my own child, but also in someone else's child. This is not different from what I feel for the cats I live with right now. Sometimes I found myself to think of what if we have a child. (2M)

I do not want (to have a child), my decision is final. But they say, look, you will regret it. Of course, there is such an aspect to this issue. You may really regret it years later, but since the age and the possibility of giving birth ends at some point, there is no turning back. They are right about it. (3F)

Related to that, one couple expressed that with a child they would not be alone in old age. In addition, they thought that there would be someone to take care of them. The idea of being alone and dependent on someone else made this couple concerned about their future without a child.

I also feel like we will miss an opportunity. It was not like that at all before. I thought that it was okay that we will die alone. But on the other hand, as I got older, that idea started to be a bit more difficult because it is really hard to be alone in old age, especially since Turkey is not a very social state. I mean, I will never have such an enjoyable experience. On the one hand, it is like an opportunity I will miss it if I cannot take the risk of facing a little difficulty now. (4F)

When I get old, who will take care of me, my friends' children or the children of my wife's siblings? At the end of the day, you know how much interest my wife's brother's child can show me? Probably, I will pay the price of it by being a lonely elderly person. Does that price scare me? Yes, it does. (4M)

3.2. DECISION MAKING PROCESS

All participants explained how they decided to remain childless. First of all, they told their own decision-making process and how they reached the idea of being voluntarily childless. In the second step, the participants narrated the process in which partners had a consensus about the subject. Even though there was a consensus among couples about being childfree, they mentioned that it was not an unquestionable decision, and that ideas and perceptions could change over time. Based on the reflections of participants, there subthemes were identified about the decision-making

process of being voluntary childlessness as “thinking rationally about having children”, “reaching a consensus” and “ongoing reflection”.

3.2.1. Thinking Rationally about Having Children

The participants mentioned that observing their own families and families with children made them think about the logic of having a child. They tried to understand the reasons behind others’ decision. They thought that it was based on instincts rather than logic. From the participants’ perspective, before having a child, most couples did not think about consequences of having a child. These consequences could have an effect on their personal life, marriage and even nature. In the same vein, they explained that individuals needed to consider the child and what he/she will face in life, drawing upon educational, economic, and social opportunities. In this sense, some of the participants found the decision of having a child selfish. The participants explained that realizing and analyzing these consequences were important in their decision-making process. Five of the participants (4 female, 1 male) remarked that most people made a decision about having a child based on their instincts and hormones.

As far as I understand, people have a child instinctively rather than thinking much about it. When I tell my thoughts about having a child to those who have children, they find it reasonable. When I talk to those people who do not have children, they usually either agree with me or say that “I want a child”. But there is no logic in it. (2F)

I think some people really have children based on their instincts without thinking it through. (3F)

Seven of the participants (3 female, 4 male) pointed out that it is not reasonable to have a child. Some of them mentioned that it was an emotional decision on the part of those who have a child. The participants believed that couples did not think much about it. They believed that if people thought about the reasons, they would not have a child.

I think it is not a well-thought-out decision. To me, doing it seems unreasonable.
(5M)

I make this decision rationally. I am sitting, thinking, and deciding, but I think having a child is a kind of madness anyway. It is not a logical decision. (3F)

One participant appreciated the emotional side of this decision, but when reflecting on it by herself, she said that she immediately considered the reasons for not having a child.

The child is also a very romantic and emotional thing. But you know, I cannot forget my thoughts about real life. That is why my thoughts do not change. It can be beautiful when you dream about it, but I cannot separate the facts in real life from the dream. That is why I do not have very long dreams. (5F)

In this sense, most of the participants told that rather than explaining the decision of being childfree, it was much more important to explain the reasoning behind the decision to have a child. They argued that it would have an effect on most of the aspects of their lives, but when they remained childless, they somehow preserved the same position in their life and marriage.

It is more important to think about in which state of mind, for what purpose, with which opinions, meanings, and value judgments, you decide to have a child. (1M)

“Why you do not have children?”, I think this is not a question that should be asked. Of course, I know that most of the society thinks the opposite. Why should I have a child? I feel like there must be some specific reason. (3M)

One participant highlighted that individuals assume that their partners want to have a child. Those individuals did not ask reasons behind this wish to have a child. They only engaged with a discussion about the timing of having child.

People usually talk about “When should we have children?”. This is what is spoken about. You have a preconception about the other's opinion on a topic that you

have never discussed. "He/she definitely wants to have children. I already want it. He/she wants it too, of course he/she does. So, when should it be?" (2F)

Even though, the participants found having a child as a unique experience, they pointed out that it was an irreversible decision. Some of the participants questioned the risk of being regretful after the child was born. In this sense, they thought that they had to live with consequences for a long period of time. Instead of handling these consequences and negative effects over their personal lives, they decided to be childfree.

The effect is certain, it causes something irreversible. Let's say, I experienced pregnancy, had the child, gave birth, what am I going to do? Let's assume that it was a very nice and wonderful experience. I could not say thank you to the participants (the child) and send them back.... Maybe, I would try (to have a child) if I could send it back. But since I cannot, do I want to bear the consequences? No, I do not. (2F)

It comes with a certain responsibility, so the thing is not in terms of marriage, but in terms of the person who will be born and come to the world. Such things do not have to a way back, or the child is not something that you could say I gave up. (1M)

Additionally, some of the participants acknowledged the effect of the child on the nature and the world. In the same way, they considered the world and society in which the child will live. By observing the circumstances in Turkey and the world, they defined it as selfishness toward the child to bring him/her into such a chaotic world. Four participants (3 female, 1 male) mentioned having a child harmed nature. It could cause increased consumption of resources, thirst, and famine. By being childless, they thought that they could protect some of the damage caused by a child over nature.

As we watch something like this documentary or deal with issues like global warming, many people are already moving away from the idea of having a child. Use as little water as you want, recycle as much garbage as you want, do not eat meat and so on. In fact, the greatest favor you can do to the world is not to have children. (3F)

The planet does not need it. We have 50 billion already. Moreover, it will bring someone extra into the world that brings consumption. So, there is nothing he/she can produce, it will take something out of this world, and there is no need for it. (2F)

One participant pointed out that the decision to remain childless was about her raising awareness about the planet. She could detect her negative impact on nature and tried to change her habits to minimize harm, such as not consuming meat.

I became a vegetarian between the ages of 24-26. While I was consuming something, I had a piece of meat on my plate, I knew that something died for it. I have already stolen a lot of things from nature.... I produce waste. As a very simple example, I use cling films. We use it every day, we use it without thinking. I consume a huge amount of plastic. I buy a product just because I wash my face with it, and this product is tried on a living thing, then it is killed, and all of these are so parallel. I can say that they all this realization started in my process at the same time. (2F)

Parallel to that, one participant highlighted that it is not sustainable to carry out with such a system in the face of increasing population., and that it led to running out of resources.

There is so much consumption and so many people, that is to eat food, to shelter, to drink clean water. It is not a very sustainable situation when you look at it from every angle. There are charts like how you may cause the greatest damage to the world in terms of carbon emissions. For example, having a child is number one. The second one is flying across the ocean. Owning a car is much lower. Are we going to compare having children with having a car or getting on a plane? But at the end of the day, it has an incredible effect on the big picture. (4M)

Besides the effect of child on the planet and the environment, the participants remarked the difficulties which children would have to face with. Since the child cannot be part of the decision to be born, they thought that it could become selfish to make the

child struggle with all these difficulties. When thinking about it, they also considered the standards of Turkey and how it became more and more challenging to live in.

You cannot really ask the child if he/she wants to be born. This world is not a very good place. It is not a very good place, especially in Turkey. Will I present him/her with the opportunity for a good future? Mystery. I think it is truly selfish to give birth to a child. (2F)

Bringing him/her into the world, unfortunately, I cannot offer him/her a very wonderful life The condition of the world is obvious, the condition of the country is obvious. Then, why should I give birth? I think it will not be very good for him/her if I have a child. I really think that he/she will live in a terrible world of famine, thirst, war. Why should I let a person experience these? (3F)

One participant questioned that it was difficult for some groups like LGBTI+ individuals or women to live in Turkey. From his perspective, they had to face and handle more difficulties than privileged groups like white and Sunni males.

One of the questions I asked myself was 'What would you do if your child's sexual orientation was not heterosexual? It is possible. Are you ready for it?'. That was one of the things I asked myself. Also, I am white, male, Sunni. My life was relatively easy. If I were a woman, it would be really hard in Turkey. (2M)

From the reflections of three participants (one female, one male), being childfree also meant sharing their resources with people and children in need rather than just their biological child. They mentioned that with a child, parents construct a sense of belonging and they prioritize transferring their financial and social resources with their own children. These participants mentioned that being able to share their resources with people and children who do not come from privileged backgrounds was valuable, and this chance made them feel less selfish. In their accounts, they touched upon social inequalities and how resources are distributed unequally in society.

Now, what will I do if I have a child? I will try to buy the best computer for my child. I will invest a lot of money to send him/her to good schools and so on. Another child will not be able to access them (the resources). I think, it sounds a little unfair..... If I have such a resource, I would like to share it with anyone who does not have access.
(2F)

I think, having children strengthens the structures that I do not like in societies. In the end, you have to say that he/she is a child of your own.... It means that you will actually take something away from other children. At some point, they (families with children) will give him a greater share in the education system, in the health system. Let me buy a summer house, pay for 7 private schools for my child, hire 40 nannies. On this basis, I do not want to be reinforcing this, maintaining, and strengthening such inequality between people. So, it is not a primary reason, but it feels good not to be part of it.... Why are you working so hard, why do I have a lot of money, so that it can be left to my child. Maybe, you are hiding your own selfishness. (1M)

Lastly, eight of the participants (3 female, 5 male) made a comparison with the standards of Turkey and other countries, especially Western ones. Based on their reflections, it seemed that raising a child was much easier abroad where individuals are able to get support from state. In addition, they thought that children would have better opportunities, such as having a good education, learning foreign languages, and socializing more with other children. A few participants mentioned that if they were living abroad, they might consider having a child.

A couple I know had their children here, but they decided to move to another country very quickly. ...I am talking about the Netherlands by the way. There are wide areas where he can run and play. Even the first trainings and education that the child can receive from a young age are very different. The child there can become a world citizen and establish his own identity much more quickly. Maybe, we are still kids here.
(2M)

My husband's sister lives in the Netherlands, she is a single mother. Holland is a country designed to raise children.... Of course, it is very difficult to raise children, but at least she does not think about the school because there was a school right next to her.... The state's support is more, and the support of the society is there. There is no such thing as if you love him/her, you have to endure everything, as it is in Turkey. (1F)

3.2.2. Reaching a Consensus

The participants pointed out that it is significant to have a similar attitude about having a child in order to sustain a healthy relationship and marriage. In the case of disagreement in such an important subject, it could cause some problems among couples. Some of the participants said that before sharing ideas with the partner, they thought about the subject and became certain about it. In this sense, most participants found it important to talk about having a child before marriage and mentioned whether they wanted a child. By talking about the topic with their partners, sharing ideas and asking questions, their ideas and decisions about being childfree were strengthened with time. Five participants (3 female, 2 male) said that they gave this issue a lot of thought and felt certain that they did not want to have a child, before sharing it with their partners.

If you ask me when I said it openly, when I said I do not want to have children, it was in our relationship.... But before I got married, I had such an idea, and after I fully matured this idea by myself and explained it to myself, I shared it with my partner. (2F)

My observation is that he (the husband) never thought about it. He did not think about having a child at all. But I thought and decided that I did not want it too. (3F)

Four couples indicated that they talked about and discussed the subject of having a child with each other before marriage. Some of them stated that it could

become more difficult to figure out and resolve if the subject is delayed and questioned after getting married.

I started to think that I did not want to have a child, I thought about it very early. I think these are not things to think about after marriage. These decisions should be made while getting married, at least each partner can be prepared for the other partner's approach to having a child. I think you should be prepared for different opinions and talk it through. (2M)

In fact, our relationship was getting serious, and he was five years older than me. Back then, it seemed like an important difference to me. I would feel responsible, if he wants different things in his life or feels like he is missing something. So, I said that I never think of getting married or having children. "You know this, we will continue if you are okay with it". So, I said it very clearly. (4F)

It seemed significant for couples to create a common ground about having a child or being childless. From participants' perceptions, if couples had opposite thoughts about the subject, it became problematic to agree upon one idea.

First of all, I think it is very important to agree on this issue. If we did not agree, we would argue about it all the time. One side would always try to persuade the other. Since we agree, we understand each other right now. I think it is a very comforting thing to understand each other about that. (3F)

Since we made this decision before marriage, our marriage and relationship became healthier. We could not have such a healthy relationship if we did not make that decision clearly and still had no children. The fact that we made that decision, I think, made us move towards a more positive position. (2M)

On the other hand, the participants did not describe a one-time conversation. They described it more like a process in which they shared ideas, emotions, and thoughts about the subject from time to time. Based on the reflections of their partners, new questions emerged at times and discussed.

I remember we asked each other questions about this (having a child) such as how it would be like, if we had (a child)... I remember that we progressed by asking questions, and with time, both of our opinions took shape, "Yes, we don't want to have children". I mean, it took quite a long time. So, that day, the topic came up. Then, it was a process like talking about it again other days. (2F)

The last point made by the participants was that their perceptions and ideas were strengthened and became much more certain by comprehending their partners' approach. They pointed out that it was beneficial for them to see other aspects of the topic and this made them comfortable about remaining childless.

When I look back, we were always both clear about not wanting children, and that clarity has grown stronger over the years. Because over the years, having a child has become much more normal. For example, we were surprised when a friend of mine had a child 4 years ago. Now, it is extremely normal for my peers to have children. In fact, people who do not have a child are being asked why. But on that road, in terms of age, as it became normal for people to have children, we became more distant (to the idea of having a child) together. (3M)

I think that would be a big problem too, if one day one of us wants a child, and one of us does not. I know couples like that, one side wants a child, the other does not. Neither of us want this, this has led to the strengthening of this thought between us, because we supported each other on that subject. (3F)

One participant mentioned that he started to develop his own perception about voluntary childlessness by means of questions and discussions led by his wife.

As I came together with my wife and talked about these and she is actually a much more interested person in these issues, she gave me ideas or opened discussions where I could discover my own ideas. She taught me some things. So now I have a more conscious idea, I feel like I have some decisions that I can stand behind. (4M)

3.2.3. Ongoing Reflection

Participants tended not to define being voluntarily childless as an absolute decision. In fact, the decision of having a child was certain since there was no way of returning to the state of voluntary childlessness. Most participants mentioned that their perceptions have changed over time. Some of them even said that sometimes they found themselves in an emotional position to want a child. From time to time, participants reflected on their decision. The subject of having a child mostly became an issue while watching something (tv series, movies etc.) or observing difficulties experienced by couples with children. Sometimes, they observed appealing and interesting sides of having a child. From their perspective, it was also not possible to predict what will happen in the future since they could change their minds. They mentioned that even one week after the interviews were made, they might decide to have a child. Nine of the participants (4 male, 5 female) emphasized that it was not suitable to define it as a final decision, since they could not predict what will happen in the future and how their wishes and conditions will change.

A specific moment that you did not want it; there was not a moment like that. In time, one day we realized that it does not happen. This does not mean that it will never change. Life changes and she (the wife) might want to have a child a week later. Maybe I do not know, I could be in the same position. For me, the decision is not in the center of life. (1M)

Maybe it is like saying no to the idea of having a child over and over again, rather than making the decision not to have children... So, you can sit down one day and decide to have a child in two years. The opposite of this sentence does not make sense: "I will never have a child in my life". Do I have to swear? It could be like "I do not want to have a child at this moment", and that decision needs to be repeated. (4M)

It was important to take conditions into consideration while explaining voluntary childlessness. Based on the reflections of participants, the decision of being

childfree was valid in the present time. Therefore, participants acknowledged that they could want to have a child in the future if their ideas change.

At this point, I leave myself with some leeway, I will never say that I will never have children, never give birth. It is better to describe it as I do not intend to have children right now, because it is really a process, and this is where I am now. I can actually evolve to another point with another process. That is why I do not find it right to say things such as “I do not think about it already, and I will never do it”. I am not saying that at all. (2F)

From one participant’s account, it could be similar to other decisions made in people’s lives. Even though, individuals decided on something (staying in Turkey, working in one company etc.), it would change over time. It could not be foreseen from the present moment, since there were lots of things involved in these decisions, even the perceptions of people on the specific subject changing every day.

Do you want to work abroad or in Turkey? For example, you are now in Turkey. If I ask you why you stayed in this country, you might think that maybe an offer will come, and I will go abroad. Even if you have made a 100% decision to stay in Turkey, the conditions could change... There are people who came to Turkey from Syria. If you ask them three years ago, they would say no to moving out of their village. They could not know.... My wife can be affected by something and she can want a child. Or if I am affected by something, I can also want to have a child. (1M)

Based on the perspectives of one couple, since there was the option of contraception, they preserved the position of being childless. In this sense, as long as they did not think of having a child, the subject would not be discussed, and they would preserve their position of being childfree.

It is not like we are not going to have children; we already use contraception. If you use it, you do not have a child. There is a very clear physical rule. The question would be, “Shall we stop using birth control”. Such a question never came up. (1F)

We use birth control while having sex.... If you do not use birth control, you will have a child. Let's say, we are both in a biological condition that can have children. Since we constantly use contraception, we do not change our current state (of being childless). We need to talk about it if we want a child... (1M)

The subject of having a child mostly came into agenda by watching movies or documentaries and observing couples with children. Particularly, the participants observed the difficulties such as responsibilities and changes in social life faced by couples. It somehow became beneficial for the participants to make sure of their decision to remain childless. On the other hand, sometimes their focus could be on the positive aspects of having a child such as unconditional love toward the child and beauty of witnessing the child's growth. In these times, they considered the idea of having a child while acknowledging the difficulties. Four female and two male participants mentioned that the topic could be discussed and talked about again by witnessing others' lives with a child through scenes in movies or couples around them.

When we see those TV series, scenes in movies and so on, we both say, "God, this is terrible and luckily we do not have (a child)". Usually, it happens like this. (3F)

Our friends always trigger it (talking about having a child). Someone's child is born, and you go there to congrats them or someone with a child comes to your home. Then, you say that luckily, we did not have (a child). We appreciate it and congratulate each other. (1F)

Realizing positive aspects of individuals with a child could also lead to reconsider the idea of having a child. However, the consideration was temporary.

Three or four years ago, after my husband's sister gave birth, I asked "Should we also have a child?". My husband said, "Let's talk again a few years later". We never spoke about it again. It is like saying I wish I played a musical instrument after leaving a good concert. You observe love (towards the child), question whether you want to have that or not. (1F)

Four female and two male participants mentioned that their ideas about having a child changed from time to time. They said that in some moments, they felt that they wanted to have a child, but it was temporary. Some of them also told that they considered the child as a given thing coming with marriage. Therefore, before the marriage, they taught that they would have a child.

I started to think that I did not want this (having a child). But on the other hand, people emotionally wanted a child. You could say “What a lovely thing (to have a child)”. It changed, especially after I felt that I improved my financial situation. But my idea (about remaining childless) did not change. (2M)

Lastly, after moving to Sweden one and a half years ago, one couple emphasized that they started to talk about the subject of having a child more frequently. Higher standards of living and the state’s support for childcare led them to reconsider their decision. They found it logical to have a child abroad and taught that they could construct a better future for the child. On the other hand, despite the appealing conditions, they could not make the final decision because even if the conditions were better, there were still many things to consider such as prioritizing the child and spending most of their time for the child.

I think we talked about it a little more after coming here. But in the end, we thought about who will feed that child, who will cook.... So, who will take care of him/her every day for 15 years? It becomes very difficult for us. For example, I like to go out and drink and get drunk, maybe I cannot get drunk because there are children at home. To whom are you going to leave the child? I mean, it is extremely difficult on a daily basis, but I like the idea of having a child. But it is not easy. (4F)

When we come here, based on the state’s attitudes toward families with children we discussed more that if we want to do it, we could have a child here.... Some of the reasons about remaining childless did not become a problem here. But some of them are still valid. For example, when I come home from work, still I have to spare most of my time to my child. I am not convinced of this. (4M)

3.3. MARITAL FUNCTIONING

When talking about the decision of being childfree, the participants talked about the dimensions of their relationship and marital life. In this sense, they emphasized that with a child, it would be difficult for them to protect these dimensions which they cared for in the relationship. Firstly, they mentioned the importance of sharing in their marital relationship which included sharing emotions, interests, and experiences. From participants' approach, strong communication was also significant for them to sustain a healthy relationship. The strong communication also led to resolving conflicts more easily. The last point made by the participants was that they paid attention to share household chores equally. Based on their reflections, three subthemes were named as “valuing togetherness”, “appreciating strong communication” and “sharing responsibility of household chores”.

3.3.1. Valuing Togetherness

All participants emphasized the sense of togetherness and sharing things with their partner as significant aspects of their marital relationship. They found it important to share similar interests with their partner and to enjoy those interests together. In this sense, it was important for them to spare time for each other and engage in different activities such as doing sports and traveling abroad. They pointed out that with a child, the main focus would be on the child and responsibilities related to the child. Therefore, it would cause them to spend less private time for themselves as a couple. They remarked that with being childfree, they could preserve their one-to-one relationship without interference of somebody else such as a child. All participants emphasized that sharing interests and engaging in different activities with the partner was a crucial dimension of their marital life and relationship.

We went on trips together. We love to visit cities.... So, it is important for us to explore people and culture together. While we do yoga, it is not just about doing sports but also, we feel good. We experience sociability of yoga together. It could be going to

a yoga event together, it could be a camp or a workshop, or it could be going to a class together; we also share those places together. (1M)

I generally enjoy doing everything together. He is also my best friend, so I have a great time with him. I love doing everything, I love to sit and read a book and travel together. I love to spend time with him without doing anything. (5F)

All participants pointed out that it was important for them to share their life together. They defined their partners as best friends whom they could share all experiences and emotions. They said that their personal life would be unbearable without their partners. With the sense of togetherness, they did not feel lonely since they found the chance to share their emotions and get support from their partners.

I always described myself as a lonely person and I never thought that I could live with a person for such a long time without getting bored or angry. It was completely different with my wife. There was nothing better than living with her or having her with me all the time. (2M)

It is very nice that two people who love each other live together. Life is not pleasant if you are alone. It is good to feel this sense of togetherness and have good companionship. We found these things by being together. (1F)

All participants thought that with a child, they would spare less time for their partners. Based on their observations, they stated that couples with children mostly connect with each other through duties, needs and responsibilities of children. The participants pointed out that those couples' interests are mostly restricted to child-related activities, since the child and responsibilities toward the child take most of parents' times such as helping him/her with homework and playing games with him/her. When fulfilling these responsibilities, they could spend time together, yet there is no one-to-one relationship. By having a child, the participants believed that they would have less time to engage in activities and share experiences together as a

couple. Thus, the child was considered as a factor that would disrupt their dyadic relationship and create distance between them.

It is likely that after caring for a newborn, we would be strangers to each other. Because there would be two people who are experiencing different things in the same house during that time... You probably would not know what he experienced that day, or I would probably be asleep when I find the time. So, there would be a troubled relationship. (2F)

Especially in the first 3 years, there would not be an intimate relationship. You become two people who take care of a child. There would be not much sharing... It would be a relationship based on the completion of those daily life practices (related to the child). Conversation, sharing, doing something together, I observe that these do not exist (in couples with children). (3F)

While we like to do some activities together, for those people with children, taking care of the baby becomes like an activity that brings them together, if we accept it (childcare) as an activity. (3M)

In the same vein, according to most participants (5 female, 4 male), being childfree became beneficial for them to share more things and spend more time with their partners. They could prioritize their partners and their couple relationship instead of a child, and they attached importance to preserving this sense of connection, closeness, and intimacy.

We can spend more time with each other (without a child). The relationship is much more direct. What I define as a family is my wife and probably, she considers me as her family. (1M)

Sustaining a childless marriage brings us much closer to each other. We spend time together. We are still each other's priorities in our lives. (2M)

Lastly, two participants (one female, one male) pointed out that not only the child could have a negative effect on their sense of togetherness, but also since couples

need help about childcare, there would be others like family members to interfere with the relationship. It meant not preserving their one-to-one relationship.

We could be just two of us. In other words, when we have a child, I guess there will be a lot of things that we need more support and assistance from our families. Currently, we do not have such a situation, it is just the two of us and we are enough for both of us. (5F)

We would both devote most of our lives to the child. Especially in their first years, children need a lot of care and constant attention. Other people would enter our lives, his father would come to help us. My mother would come, she would not go, so she would stay for a while. We would not have our own private life. We would not be able to do something together. (2M)

3.3.2. Appreciating Strong Communication

The participants valued having strong communication in their marital life. They emphasized that they could communicate directly with their partners about any topic. The participants remarked that communication of couples who have children included mostly child-related problems and responsibilities. Even though, most couples mentioned that they usually did not engage in conflicts and arguments, in the case of conflict, they could easily talk about it and tried to solve it by listening to each other's opinions and feelings. In addition, based on their observations, they said that couples with children experienced lots of conflicts, especially about their children. In this sense, the participants believed that with being childfree, they could avoid conflicts caused by children. Nine participants (four female, five male) mentioned communication as one of the strong dimensions of their relationship.

We are very good in terms of communication. I mean, I can talk (to my husband) about things very easily. It is a rare blessing. I can easily share any troubles I am experiencing, whether it is related to him or something else... I can say that we have a very strong relationship in terms of communication. (2F)

Sometimes, we find ourselves chatting for hours. Even if the issues related to our relationship and other issues, these kinds of conversations arise, and we talk about them. I think, we have an open communication... We speak clearly and comfortably about what we think and want. (4M)

Moreover, six participants (3 female, 3 male) pointed out that with having a child, the other subject of conversations rather than the child would become insignificant. From their observations, couples with children engage in conversations mostly about child-related subjects. The participants highlighted that those couples communicated to share responsibilities toward to child such as preparing a meal and dropping of the child to the school. In this sense, those couples could not find much time to talk about their relationships or conflicts, since priorities are different.

What I observe from my friends frequently is that they (couples with children) can always talk about the child, because of daily responsibilities. They communicate only about fulfilling these responsibilities. Nothing else. I do not know if there were any other subjects they talked about before. They do not talk about topics like what we watch, what we eat, where we go. (1F)

In this sense, the participants thought that if they have a child, their communication would be impacted negatively. They considered that they would communicate with their partners about child-related subjects. They believed that there would be less conversation about their intimate relationship, emotions, and experiences.

It (having a child) would directly affect our communication. We would talk about whether the laundry is washed, the dishes are washed, the house is cleaned, the garbage is thrown out. "The diaper of the child is finished, get the diaper of the child and bring it". Now, we do not talk about those things... Communication would really be really problematic. (2F)

Probably, our focus would be the child. We would both have a lot of ideas about the child. Our conversations at home would start to be about him/her. How will we give him/her that education, how will we teach him/her not to do things? ... I am sure that if we had children, we would talk a lot, discuss, and evaluate the things about the child. (4M)

In addition, one participant mentioned that communicating with the partner was easier without a child. He thought that his relationship with the child could have an effect on his relationship with his wife. In this sense, their communication was more direct without interference of somebody else, especially children.

If we have a child, my wife will see me as Ayşe's or Ali's father. The good or bad aspects of my relationship with Ali and Ayşe would also have an impact on my relationship with my wife... There is no such thing in our relationship right now, so that the relationship continues very simply... Without children, the communication remains very simple and easy. (1M)

Three male and three female participants mentioned that in their relationships, usually they did not engage in conflicts. They said that most of the time, they shared similar perceptions and attitudes about the life. When they had a conflict, since they communicated with their partners well, they could resolve it very quickly. In addition, they defined discussions as sharing information in which they tried to comprehend their partners' feelings and ideas about the subject.

We do not argue much. I mean we are not perfect; we discuss things from time to time. There are some behaviours that I do not even like about myself. My wife has also thoughts about those (behaviours), or I have some thoughts about my wife's habits. But we talk about it directly with each other. (5M)

We did not have any trouble about our arguments. We have never fought so loudly anyway. We sit down and talk about our different opinions. The conversations

are made as “I think in this way, you think differently. How can we make a joint decision?”. (2F)

In the same vein, most participants (4 female, 3 male) saw the child as causing more conflict and arguments in the intimate relationships. They thought that if they had children, they would argue more, especially about the subjects related to children. They pointed out the burden of responsibilities as one reason to cause more arguments. From their perspectives, most of the time, couples with children feel exhausted about organizing and planning their lives around children. Therefore, it could lead them to have less tolerance toward each other. Furthermore, participants pointed out that those couples have less time to discuss and solve their conflicts. Therefore, being childfree led them to not engage in many conflicts or arguments. When the conflicts happened, they could solve them more quickly and find the chance and time to talk about them.

I think our conflicts would increase directly. Because having a child is a weary process. Even minor things would be become a subject for argument. (2F)

It would be troublesome to give my husband such a responsibility that would take much of his time. I think we would argue a lot. I would be overwhelmed... We would both feel bored and overwhelmed. So, there would be arguments starting from there (feeling overwhelmed). (4F)

According to one male participant, parents could have different opinions about raising children. Therefore, it would cause couples to experience more conflict and have more arguments.

There are a lot of books and large literature about raising a child. Therefore, parents might have conflicts in many different ways. I would say that the child should learn to eat by himself/herself, the mother says that I will always feed the child with my own hands so on. It also increases the possibility of arguing and conflict. (3M)

One female participant emphasized that without a child, it was possible to talk about conflicts more openly. From her perspective, parents need to hide problems from

their children. Therefore, for their relationship, being childfree became beneficial to solve conflicts and share opinions more openly and comfortably.

We argue, we solve it, we can interpret it for days. If there is a child in the house, we would not want the child to witness our arguments. We would have to pretend. We are freer at home because it is just the two of us. That is why I think it allows us to express ourselves comfortably. (3F)

3.3.3. Sharing Responsibility of Household Chores

In their marital life, the participants pointed out that they shared the responsibilities of household chores such as washing the dishes and cleaning the house. It was significant for them to share those chores equally. In the case of having children, they thought that they could not preserve equal sharing, since some of the responsibilities would fall upon women like breastfeeding. Some male participants thought that they would have to take responsibilities of chores more than women, whereas some male participants emphasized that women would take much of the responsibility since they would stay at home for a while to take care of the child. Female participants were also concerned about not protecting equality in the case of having children. They remarked that they would have to handle most of the responsibilities related to children. All participants mentioned that somehow, they tried to share responsibilities in the house equally.

My wife was very clear from the moment we met, as a feminist woman, that the division of labor would not be traditional. It was very clear that it has to be divided equally. We have established and maintained such a system without experiencing difficulties... We equally share them, so I consider our relationship to be superior to others. (4M)

What I call an equal relationship is actually issues related to the division of labor. Right now, I do not feel like I am in a patriarchal family. I live in a relationship

where responsibilities are shared, and social roles of men and women are not complied with. (3F)

Four female and four male participants emphasized that childcare is associated with women. Male participants mentioned that even if they would want to share responsibilities about the child, some of the duties could not be done by them such as breastfeeding. In this sense, sharing of household chores would be different. There was a difference in participants' approach about this issue. Two participants (1 female, 1 male) mentioned that since women would fulfill most of the responsibilities about the child, men would take most of the responsibilities about household chores. Other participants considered that there would be inequality among partners about sharing responsibilities and women's responsibilities would increase with children.

It would be different in one way or another. So, she would have a bigger responsibility. Because someone has to work, and that would be me as the worker... Our relationship would go to a completely different direction. (2M)

I can see that many men, especially Turkish men, but I think this is a global problem, consider changing the child's diaper as helping the mother. Because they consider many things to be the mother's duty. Women cannot handle it all. They are crushed under this responsibility, because they take a responsibility that they should not have taken alone... I would care the child already. Would I be ok saying to my husband to handle household chores? Why should I do something like this? But I am sure, it would be needed. (3F)

As mentioned before, two participants looked at the topic in a different way. They thought that men would engage in more chores in the house because especially in the periods of infancy, women would take more responsibilities about childcare such as breastfeeding. They pointed out that women would feel more exhausted since they constantly wake up at nights to feed the baby. According to participants, considering physical fatigue, men would take care of the responsibilities at home.

I know that the roles in the house would change (with a child). I would take care of most of the responsibilities about the house since my wife would spend more time for him/her. It would be different than now, currently we share those responsibilities equally. (IM)

3.4. FACING SOCIETAL NORMS

According to the participants, society considered having a child as an essential step both for life and marriage. In this sense, the participants pointed out that they had to face societal norms about having children and felt pressure from society to have children. Based on reactions from their parents, relatives, friends, and other acquaintances, by deciding to be voluntarily childless, they became different from societal expectations. To minimize negative reactions and pressure, the participants emphasized that they developed some strategies to cope with societal norms. Based on experiences of the participants, three subthemes were formed as “having a child as an essential step”, “being different from society” and “coping with societal norms”.

3.4.1. Having a Child as an Essential Step

The participants pointed out that having a child is seen as an essential step of the life cycle by society. The participants pointed out that based on societal norms, individuals are born, go to the school, get married, have children, get retired and die. Similarly, according to the participants, society considers having children as a given thing that is included in the definition of traditional marriage. In this sense, the participants emphasized that they felt social pressure to have a child. They found themselves in the position that they had to present reasoning and give explanations about why they want to remain childless. Most people told them how wonderful it was to have a child. Those people constantly reminded the participants that they would miss lots of things if they remained childless such as getting support in old age from children and feeling unconditional love toward children. Six participants (4 female, 2 male)

highlighted that having a child is considered as a phase in the “normal” life cycle of individuals.

We already have a life cycle, what is put in front of us is that you go to school, you graduate, you get married, then you have children, you work, then you retire and so on. Life unfolds in this way. (2F)

The child graduates from the school, high school or college, goes to the military, completes his military service. In the third step, there is marriage. The fourth step is having a child. And life goes on like that. (5M)

In the same vein, the participants observed that the definition of traditional marriage includes having a child. From the reflections of the participants, society considers family as consisting of a mother, a father, and children. In this sense, marriages without a child are considered inadequate. Six participants (3 female, 3 male) emphasized that after getting married, society expects couples to have a child in order to become a “real” family.

Having a child sounds like something under the classic definition of marriage. When you look it up in a dictionary, the child is under the definition of marriage. (1F)

People are expected to marry one day by society... After getting married, people need to make concessions to comply with social roles... It starts with the wedding, buying houses and in the end, you comply by having children. (3F)

Moreover, when the society considers having children as an essential step, the participants mentioned that they felt social pressure to have a child. In their marital life, they listened from their relatives how the child was significant for marriage. They were constantly asked about when they will have a child. When the participants told others that they did not want a child, they were expected to present some reasoning. However, those explanations did not seem enough to convince others about their decision. Society, especially their relatives expressed that the child completes them as a married couple. Even though, some participants said that they did not feel under pressure, all

participants emphasized that at some point, their relatives or others around them brought up the topic of children and gave their advice about having children.

People treated it (having children) as something that should have happened, because it is considered as the last step in our marriage. I have to explain this to people and prove my argument. It is not like the conversation we are having with you. If I have this conversation with someone else, people want me to logically explain to them why I did not have children. Or they are trying to prove to me the opposite. However, I neither have to prove it, nor what they think interests me. I do not want it, it is over. But they say, look, you will regret it. (3F)

The very classic reaction from the family, relatives or even many friends is that “You will necessarily have a child at one point. We understand if you don't want it right now, but you have to be at one point”. Or just like my wife’s mother and some religious relatives said that “You cannot be childless; you have to give birth to a child” ... People react with social pressure. They interfere as “You have to (have a child)”. (3M)

Two couples mentioned that they did not feel social pressure about having children. They taught that since the duration of their marriage was not so long (2 years), people reacted as they would consider having a child at some point in the future. The participants pointed out that when they shared this decision with others, people seemed to be gentle, but they gave advice about the importance of having children in young ages. The participants believed that families, relatives or even colleagues did not consider it as a final decision, rather they comprehended it as temporary. According to participants, people taught that the participants had different interests like traveling abroad. Therefore, they expected that these interests would change, and they would want to have children. The participants believed that in the future, they will feel social pressure more and more, since they observed reactions towards other childless couples.

So far, we have not experienced any pressure about this (being childless). We have recently got married, there was not enough time to be pressured. I might be

talking about something else 2 years from now. In other words, I have not experienced any trouble until now... Everyone thinks we are newly married. (2F)

There is certainly a lot of social pressure for people who do not have children. I could observe it. But I do not feel that pressure right now. I had the chance to observe others because my aunt had a child in old age. And I witnessed all of these. People have expectations about having a child. Maybe my aunt did not want it, they did not even ask to my aunt if she wanted it. This was not spoken about... They talked about whether there was a problem with my aunt or her husband. Everybody outside of the marriage expressed an opinion about their life. (5F)

3.4.2. Being Different from Society

The participants emphasized that felt different from society, since having a child seemed to be a social norm for married couples. In addition, society constantly reminded them of this difference. Therefore, some of the participants mentioned that from time to time, they found themselves in a position that they questioned the decision of being childfree. In those times, they questioned whether this decision would be wrong and whether they would miss an opportunity. In addition, they asked themselves why and how they became so different from the society about this particular subject. When they experienced difficulties to accept this difference, the society also did not acknowledge it. According to participants, people did not believe that they did not want children. The society expected from participants to have children one day and to conform to societal norms. In this sense, based on the observations of the participants, the society supposed that the difference would disappear. Eight participants (4 female, 4 male) pointed out that they experienced a feeling of being different from the social norm.

I lived a very normal life; I did not live an extraordinary thing. I went to public schools. I know about religious matters; I know the rules. I am not an odd and red-haired woman. But I am not doing what society says about this (having a child). (1F)

It (being childfree) does not mean anything to me. I do not consider it as cool that I will not have a child. But it becomes like you take a very revolutionary step, you are very different, you are very marginal. Because people respond to you in this way. (3F)

Six participants (2 female, 4 male) emphasized that people did not believe in their decision to remain childless. According to the participants, people including families and friends, considered this decision as a temporary thing. In this sense, the participants were expected to have a child one day. Therefore, even though they presented reasoning of their decision, people tried to convince them about the importance of having a child without listening carefully. Some participants mentioned that this situation made them to feel not respected.

Generally, my older colleagues said that “You cannot be childless. You want it at some point. It is early now, enjoy your life, but you will have a child in the future”. Or there are those who say that “You should not speak very strictly; your opinion might change”. If it changes, it is not their business to question this decision. (3M)

We say that we do not want to have children. People immediately think that “They do not want for now; they will have in the future. Let them take their enthusiasm to travel around Europe, they will be bored at some point”. They never believe in our decision to remain childless. (1F)

In addition, when the society questioned this decision, some participants (3 female, 2 male) told that from time to time, they also questioned their decision about not having children. In those times, they taught whether the society was right about having children and they were wrong about remaining childless. They pointed out that they sometimes feel confused about their decision.

What if they are right? I mean, there is no fear, but what if I would surprise myself if I had a child one day? Because they look so confident. (1F)

People expect changes in this matter (having a child) over time. Because it was taught that way. For example, whether it is on the internet or on the street, when we see cute children, we show them to each other as “Look how cute he/she is”. After that, we sometimes wonder whether this is the indicator of the changes we expect to happen over time. (4F)

Four female participants pointed out the importance of women to become mothers in society. Without having children, they emphasized that society considered them as inadequate. According to the participants, based on the societal norms, the motherhood is seen as the most essential duty of women. In this sense, they mentioned that society always considered women as ready and eager to give birth. When they explained their decision about being childfree, people assumed and asked that their husband did not want to have a child.

There were direct questions. “Doesn't your husband want to have children?” I am a woman, so I want it, I am dying for having children. But because my husband does not want it, it would not happen. (1F)

“Of course, you will have a child, you cannot be without a child” ... The conversation with my mother is generally about regret. For her, this (having children) is my duty and that nothing else is possible. (3F)

One participant emphasized that he became closer to people like him, being different from society. He stated that being different somehow united those people who diverged from societal norms and formed their own minority group.

By saying that we are like that (being childfree), it turned into something like nationalism. So, it brings us closer to each other. Being different from the society keeps us together, strengthens the team. (1M)

Lastly, even though the participants considered themselves as minority on this subject, one participant mentioned that with more people deciding to be childfree, it

would become normalized. Therefore, society would no longer ask for reasoning or try to persuade married couples to have children.

You are doing something very strange for Turkish society, so they treat you as a marginal person... It seems normal because the people who make such decisions are very few yet. They learned like this; they continue like this. I think couples like us are gradually increasing. I think this situation will change as they increase in number. (3F)

3.4.3. Coping with Societal Norms

According to the participants, facing societal norms did not start with the decision of being childfree. They emphasized that they made the decision of getting married based on societal norms. The participants pointed out that if they had the chance to live together without marriage, they would not get married. From their reflections, getting married seemed to be a necessity mostly for women. With getting married, they mentioned that they became freer and got acceptance from society. In one way, they conformed to societal norms and got married but, in another way, they said that they tried to be outside of traditional marriage. In this sense, they mentioned that it was important to protect both personal boundaries and boundaries as a couple. After getting married, the participants mentioned that they faced another societal norm which was having children. Since they decided to remain childless, they developed some strategies to cope with societal norms. They emphasized that they shared their decision if others asked about it or brought up the subject. They did not decide to share directly, since most people taught that having children is necessary for marriages. Besides that, if someone had an opposite and conservative idea about this issue, they avoided giving specific and certain answers. Six participants (3 female, 3 male) mentioned that the decision of marriage was a necessity especially for women.

My wife's family is quite conservative, so it is a problem for us to live together. Even saying that she has a boyfriend was a problem. If she says something like that, his mother comes up with a question like when you will get married... You just meet, then you need a contract. (3M)

Marriage was a necessity for me than it was for him (the husband). Because everybody knew our relationship around us, my family, his family, except my father. And I turned thirty and it was still very painful to think about where I am when my father called. Since it would be more difficult to change my father, we got married (1F)

The participants pointed out that if they got accepted by society, more specifically by their families, they would not get married. They considered that if they chose to live together without marriage, they would struggle a lot. Therefore, they decided to conform to societal norms in this particular subject. Almost all participants (5 female, 4 male) emphasized that they would not be married, if they did not have to struggle for acceptance.

Personally, I am not someone who sees marriage as a romantic, sympathetic thing. And if it was not for my family, I might never have thought about getting married. I would like to live together. (3F)

If society did not force us so much, we would not get married. Because we do not need such a thing. This is our opinion. Cohabitation is a big problem while living in Turkish society. (2M)

On the other hand, with getting married, almost all participants (5 female, 4 male) emphasized that they became accepted by the society. According to the participants, getting married became a beneficial and easier way for them to live together. In this sense, they became freer to do things as a couple such as going for vacations and meeting with families.

The advantage of this is that my wife stays with me comfortably, she will not lie to her mother. When we go on a vacation, we do not have to tell anyone anything other than what we do. (1M)

I really wanted to live together in the same house, but of course, I was not able to say this to my family... So, the way of living together is linked to marriage. We can live together; we want to live together. The way to do this is through marriage. (2F)

When conforming to societal norms by getting married, the participants tried to stay outside of traditional marriage. For them, it was significant to protect boundaries. They emphasized that everyone had to have personal boundaries in the marriage. They could decide things individually which interested just one partner. In the same vein, protecting boundaries with families seemed important. The participants did not want any interference from their families about their marital life. In addition to that, it was important for the participants to spend time with their own friends and engage in activities separately. In this sense, they mentioned that they did not feel captive in the relationship as in the traditional marriage. Six participants (3 female, 3 male) stated that they tried to construct a different marital life rather than traditional marriage.

We have to stay out of traditional marriage... I also have a very distant relationship with my family, I protect my boundaries very well, and so is him. We said nothing would happen to us, but we were not sure. You hear such bad experiences about marriage. (1F)

We guessed that marriage was nothing like what people say. People can be individuals freely when they are married. There is no such thing that you need to do everything together. These are the scary side of marriage. I do not like being restricted... But we do not have such a relationship anyway. So, we got married to live together. (5F)

When the topic came to the decision of being childfree, the participants had to face societal norms again. They stated that they shared this decision when asked or the topic was approached by others, especially families. In this sense, they as couples mostly did not choose to share it publicly, since they were aware of having children as a societal norm. Eight participants (4 female, 4 male) pointed out that they expressed their ideas when the topic became an issue by others.

Actually, we did not make a decision about sharing our opinions, unless we were asked about it. We did not talk about whether we should explain this to our family or not. (2F)

Sharing this (being childfree) was not a decision for me. So, it was not a big step. The subject of having children was brought up, especially when you got married. The first-year passes, the questions start as “Do you think of having children?”. Everyone talks about it. At that time, you say, “No, I do not”. “Why don’t you” was asked absolutely. (3F)

Lastly, the participants indicated that they avoided getting into arguments with people who had conservative and strict thoughts about having children such as elderly relatives. At those times, they did not state their decision and provide reasoning. Rather, they seemed to agree with others’ opinion about the importance of having children in marital life. The participants highlighted that it was meaningless to get into conversations in which nobody accepted the other one’s approach. Seven participants (5 female, 2 male) pointed out that they did not engage in debates with people who had perceptions of having a child as an essential step in life and marriage.

When they ask, I do not say to anyone that we do not want to have children. Because people usually react immediately in the opposite way... That is why I always explained myself as “We have no intention for now”. This is my classic sentence on this subject. When you say something like that, I guess there is not much to talk about. (4M)

If I think that a person has very traditional ideas about childbearing, I do not get into the conversation. So, neither of us need to get tired. Because they might try to convince me, and they might find it too weird. I usually close the subject so that we do not talk about it. (3F)

CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate experiences of couples who choose voluntary childlessness in Turkey. By interviewing each partner, the goal was to examine motivations and reasons behind this decision, the process of decision-making both individually and as a couple, qualities of their marital lives and also the effect of the social context. Based on the reflections of the participants, four themes were identified, namely meanings of having a child, decision making process, marital functioning and facing societal norms. Under these four themes, there were also three to four subthemes. Under the meanings having a child, there were four subthemes which indicated that participants both observed the difficulties/constraints of being a parent and positive aspects of having a child. These subthemes are named as loss of autonomy, burden of responsibility, concerns about finances and career, and a unique experience. The second theme which highlighted partners' individual decision-making process as well as their negotiations about this issue as a couple includes three subthemes, named as thinking rationally about having children, reaching a consensus and ongoing reflection. As for the third theme related to marital functioning, the significant aspects and qualities of childfree couples' marital experience were captured. The three subthemes are defined as valuing togetherness, appreciating strong communication and sharing responsibility of household chores. The last theme was about societal norms which childfree couples face. Since having a child is seen as an essential step in Turkish society, childfree couples felt marginalized at times and they needed to develop some strategies to cope with these societal norms. Three subthemes that cover the experiences of childfree couples when facing societal norms about having children include having a child as an essential step, being different from society and coping with societal norms.

In the next section, four themes examined in relation to the existing literature about voluntary childlessness. Then, based on previous studies and results of the present study, some clinical implications will be presented. Thirdly, some limitations

and strengths of the present study will be discussed. Lastly, suggestions for further studies will be made.

4.1. DISCUSSION OF THEMES

Before going into details about themes, it is worth to mention the demographics and backgrounds of participants, and similarities and differences in the literature about voluntary childlessness. All participants in the present study had at least bachelor's degrees and their incomes were at the average to high level. All of the women had professional occupations. Even though it is not the main aim of the study to investigate the demographics of childfree individuals, the demographics of the participants were in the same line with what has been described in the existing literature. Even though there was no comparison group in the present study, the demographics of childfree women in the present study is supported by previous studies which show that childfree women have higher education, professional jobs and high incomes (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Baum & Cope, 1980; Chancey & Dumais, 2009). On the other hand, even though in the present study, men also have high education, professional jobs and high incomes, for men, education and occupation do not appear as being correlated with voluntary childlessness (Jacobson & Heaton, 1991; Waren & Pals, 2013). Even though religiosity also have been discussed in the literature and lower levels of religiosity seems to be one of the important aspects of being childfree (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Jacobson & Heaton, 1991; Waren & Pals, 2013), the aspect of religiosity for childfree individuals and couples did not come up in the interviews in the present study.

The meanings of having a child reported by participants were mostly based on their observations from couples and/or individuals with children. Even though negative aspects about having children seem to be more dominant in their perceptions, they also acknowledged positive sides of having children. The most frequently mentioned aspect of having children appeared as loss of autonomy. From participants' views, by having children, individuals have to put children in the center of their lives which means giving priority to the children in their personal lives. By prioritizing the child, in every

condition and decision about life (e.g., planning vacations, moving to another city/country), parents need to consider the child and his/her well-being first. In this sense, it meant to live less spontaneously and to spare less time to individual interests and hobbies. By becoming childfree, they could protect the sense of autonomy and spontaneity in their lives. Consistent with this, concerns over protecting a sense of freedom and autonomy were presented in the literature as one of the main reasons for remaining childfree (Avison & Furnham, 2015; Shapiro, 2014). Similarly, Houseknecht (1987) indicates, in her review article, that sense of freedom is the most frequently discussed motivation for childfree individuals, and it seems significant for protecting spontaneity and having opportunities and time for self-development.

In the present study, childfree participants also mentioned that with remaining childless, they can spare time for their interests and spontaneity in their lives. In the same vein, by means of being childfree, women in particular emphasized finding a chance to live spontaneous lives (e.g., traveling) and invest in their self-improvement (e.g., sparing time to hobbies), since motherhood means prioritizing the child's life over their lives, and only by remaining childless, they could have such opportunities (Mollen, 2006; Settle & Brumley, 2014). In a similar line, Mynarska and Rytel (2020) point out that childfree individuals perceive much of the costs of parenthood as being related to the necessity to spare most of the time to children and having less time for interests/hobbies. Therefore, consistent with the literature, the participants in the present study valued their personal and individual lives and remaining childless created the appropriate conditions for practicing them.

Based on the reflections of participants, the second subtheme appeared as burden of responsibilities. All issues related to the child and childcare were defined as a responsibility. Even if the participants had responsibilities of their own, with children the number of responsibilities would increase significantly and it would become difficult to delay things, especially related to household chores. According to participants, the child needs constant care and parents become a main source of this care. Therefore, based on the dependency of children to parents, by having children,

the participants emphasized that they would feel much more overwhelmed under these responsibilities (e.g., helping the child with homework). The participants emphasized that having children meant engaging in activities which they did not want to such as constantly cooking for children. Especially for the years of infancy, physical fatigue was related to having a child (e.g., waking up consistently at night).

Besides physical burden, participants gave importance to mental burden which was mostly related to constant worrying about the child's well-being, since they considered parents as primary caretakers. There seemed to be different areas of concern between men and women. While women's concern seemed to be about health issues, male participants had concerns about social and educational aspects of the child as well as health issues. Even though in the literature, the difference in the domains of concern has not been studied yet, Settle and Brumley (2014) points out that women try to avoid the constant concern about well-being of children by means of their decision of voluntary childlessness. The burden of responsibilities is also supported by previous studies ranging from earlier to recent ones. For instance, Kaltreider and Margolis (1977) in their clinical study with voluntarily childless women, indicate that the feeling of overwhelm based on responsibilities of childcare becomes a significant motivation for women to remain childless. Similarly, Mollen (2006) also examined childfree women and reasons behind the decision of voluntary childlessness. Based on the study, childfree women have been in the positions to provide care in younger ages (e.g., to the sisters or brothers), so that they found providing constant care as overwhelming and they did not want to be in a position as being constant primary caregivers. In this sense, women's decision might be influenced by traditional gender role expectations placed on women and may manifest a desire to practice different gender roles. Similar to women, also for men, it seems significant not to take extensive responsibilities about childcare for the decision to remain childfree (Park, 2005; Smith et al., 2019).

In addition to these two subthemes, the participants also considered their finances and their career. There seems to be an important difference between men and women on this particular issue. Even though some female participants mentioned the

financial burden of having children, male participants emphasized this issue more frequently. From the participants' accounts, especially education-related costs seemed to be a significant burden coming with the child. The difference between childfree men and women about consideration of finances have also been supported by previous studies. Houseknecht (1987) points out that men choose to remain childless more to avoid costs related to children, especially financial costs, more than women. Park (2005) also states that childfree men perceive having children as a sacrifice of finances and by remaining childless, they could avoid possible financial problems related to childcare. Men's greater emphasis on the financial costs of having a child in the present study may reflect the continuing relevance of masculine norms which expect men to perform the role of the breadwinner and the provider of a family.

Based on the present study, issues related to occupations and career seemed to be concerns of women only and even when male participants mentioned this issue, they perceived having children as constraining women's career rather than men's career. By having children, female participants mentioned that for a specific time period, they would be expected to leave their jobs which in turn leads women to experience difficulties about rebuilding their careers all over again. As in the present study, having a job is not just about finances, but also means economic freedom, and it becomes a significant identifier of their identities (Mollen, 2006; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008). Similarly, an increasing number of women consider having occupations and feeling financially secure as significant aspects of their personal lives (Lee & Gramotnev, 2006). In an earlier study, Kaltreider and Margolis (1977) also point out that childfree women put their careers and occupations in a significant position and they perceived their careers as an important aspect of self-development. Given the fact that women are expected to be primarily responsible for childcare and to take a leave from their jobs when they become mothers, couples' concerns over women's professional development seem to reflect a realistic assessment of gender-based inequalities both in the domains of family and work.

Besides negative outcomes coming with children, the participants also mentioned having a child as a unique experience. Most participants found children loveable and enjoyed spending time with them. This finding of having interest to children contradicts with previous studies. For instance, Park (2005) mentions that feeling discomfort around children and not feeling interested in children become one of the main reasons in the decision of voluntary childlessness. Moreover, Weston and Qu (2001) also found out in their quantitative study with childfree men and women that childfree individuals actively voiced their dislike toward children. Avison and Furnham (2015), in their study with 795 participants from different backgrounds (including parents, childfree individuals etc.) similarly found out that disinterest in children and childcare and discomfort around children seem to be important rationales of the decision to remain childless. One reason for this inconsistency could be related to the context in which the study is conducted. Because Turkey is a pronatalist society, children and motherhood are valued (Kocyigit, 2012). Even though there seemed to be decrease in attributions to economic values of having children, children still seemed to be significant source for getting psychological support and assistance in old age (Ataca & Sunar, 1999). In this sense, it can be speculated that in the Turkish context, it could become difficult to mention disinterest and dislike toward children in Turkey since it might get negative reaction from society.

According to participants in the present study, some incidents could only be experienced by having children such as observing the child's growth under the direct influence of parents and conveying their life experiences to the child. In this sense, some participants had concerns over feeling regretful in the future, a risk that was constantly reminded to them by their families and/or friends. In Gillespie's study (2000), even though participants did not express any concerns about being regretful in the future, they were always told by others that they would be regretful in the future, especially in older ages when they would not get support and care from their children. Similarly, Simay and Tekin (2020) in their study with childfree women living in Turkey found out that some childfree women expressed the fear of being regretful in the future,

since they perceived motherhood as an instinctual thing rather than a rational decision. In fact, Delyser (2011) conducted a study with childfree women after going through menopause and pointed out that even though those participants expected to be regretful before menopause, after it became impossible to give birth, they did not express any regrets. McQueen (2019) even emphasizes that the request of sterilization is usually refused by doctors by indicating the possibility of being regretful in future, even though studies do not support empirically that childfree individuals feel regret in their old ages. Despite this lack of evidence, the risk of feeling regret seemed to influence the participants in the current study. One couple gave importance to receive care from children in old age and thought that they might feel regretful in old age when they might feel lonely. However, for other participants, this risk was not about receiving care in old age, but rather missing the experience of bringing up a child and transmitting one's values to her/him.

The second theme captured childfree couples' decision-making processes. The first subtheme was thinking rationally about having children which was about individuals' process of decision-making before reaching consensus with their partners. The important step was to observe others with children and the reasons behind this decision. From participants' approach, individuals deciding to become parents do not think about the consequences of having children and they took this decision with instincts. The consequences are not just about personal or marital lives, but also there would be some consequences related to the world and nature overall (e.g., over population). Existing research provides consistent results with this finding. For example, Gillespie (2003) indicates that childfree women consider the child and his/her wellbeing and anticipate that children would face difficulties (e.g., scarcity) and problems in the world. Confirming this, Park (2005) points out that childfree individuals take problems in the world and environment into consideration when making their decision which becomes a rational decision. In addition, Mollen (2006) found out similar findings that increasing population is a concern for childfree women and facing such difficulties in the world can traumatize children. Similarly, Weston and

Qu (2001) indicate individuals' concern about the conditions of world which they see as an unsuitable place for children to live in.

In this sense, for the participants, it is much more significant to investigate and understand reasons behind the decision of having children rather than rationales behind voluntary childlessness, since childfree individuals do not have to face consequences while preserving the same position in their marital and personal lives. In the same vein, Blackstone and Stewart (2016) in their qualitative research with childfree men and women, report that childfree individuals taught they made a conscious decision which made them feel more confident. On the other hand, those participants also mentioned that individuals did not think much about becoming parents and motivations behind this decision. These comments indicated that the decision to be voluntarily childless is related to couples' reactions to the current state of the world with respect to population and environmental issues and is based on a critical and rational understanding of their social and physical contexts.

In the second subtheme named as reaching consensus, the participants pointed out the importance of mutual agreement on such an important subject, since it could affect the relationship with the partner. Five participants seemed to be early articulators as mentioned by Cooper and colleagues (1978). Those early articulator participants made their decision to remain childfree before getting married. The others seemed to be negotiators. They started to think about the issue after the beginning of their relationship and marriage, and their discussions were mostly initiated by their partners and observations of married couples with children. One couple, however, appeared as a postponer, as defined by Bhambhani and Inbanathan (2020). These couples do not engage in serious conversations about having children and share their opinions on the subject. The situation of being a postponer could be related to the duration of the couple's marriage since they have been married for only two years and did not find the chance to engage in a discussion about the issue. On the other hand, even though it was not explicitly talked, they knew each other as being distant to the idea of becoming parents. Even though there seemed to be different paths for the participants to reach the

idea of voluntary childlessness, all of them emphasized the importance of having consensus among partners about the subject.

Three steps of decision-making process proposed by Lee and Zvonkovic (2014) about voluntary childlessness can be applicable to the present study. Most participants engage in acceptance phase in which they developed their point of views based on negative and positive aspects about having children. In the second step, most couples stepped into agreement phase in which they learn about their partners' perspectives, engaged in discussions and share their own ideas. In this step, participants of the present study mentioned that their opinion about remaining childless was strengthened by the opinions and perspectives of their partner. The last step, however, was not applied by the participants which is closing the door. In order to close the door to be parents, the individuals either engage in sterilization and/or go through menopause. In the sample of present study, even if most participants mentioned the importance of birth control methods, none of them closed the door to having children.

Lastly, for the decision-making process, since they did not close to doors to become parents, the participants defined it as an ongoing reflection rather than a final decision. Smith and colleagues (2019) point out that childfree men hesitate to call it as a final decision, since they value to have options in the future. Supporting the findings of the present study, Carmichael and Whittaker (2007) also indicate that childfree couples do not consider it as an absolute decision and they leave some leeway to change. In this sense, it is possible for the childfree couples to rethink their decision and change their minds. The participants implied that their perceptions have changed over time and even some of them mentioned that they considered having children from time to time. Thus, it was difficult for them to predict what will happen in the future, since conditions in life and wishes and interests could change over time.

This process of ongoing reflection included continuing conversations about children with their partners. By observing some appealing sides of having children, they discussed the subject again with their partners. The subject of children mostly came into agenda with watching movies and/or observing others having children. Their

experiences and ongoing reflections are similar to previous reports about voluntarily childless couples in the literature. As Lee and Zvonkovic (2014) found out, before the final phase, there could be revisitations on the decision of being childfree. Based on their study, the participants only identified external reasons (e.g., moving to another country) and internal reasons (fear of being regretful in the future) rather than relational ones (e.g., partner having serious illness) to reconsider their ideas about having children and wanted to be sure that they were still on the same page with their partners about remaining childless. Supported from previous research (Blackstone & Stewart, 2016), it was not like a one-time conversation and the reflections about the issue appeared from time to time. On the other hand, they still hold the negative aspects of having children in mind, so that they did not decide to have a child.

There were three subthemes under the theme of marital functioning. The first one was valuing togetherness. The participants mentioned the importance of spending time and engaging in various activities together (e.g., traveling abroad). They also valued sharing similar interests and hobbies with their spouses. In a consistent vein, Somers (1993) indicates that childfree individuals have higher dyadic cohesion compared to parents which means that each partner values the companionship with their partners. From the participants' perspectives in the present study, by having a child, they would not spend as much time together, since childcare and responsibilities toward the child would take much of their time. In this sense, by becoming childfree, they could protect their one-to-one relationship without interference of someone. Therefore, they could preserve this sense of connection, closeness, and intimacy in which they found significant in their marital lives.

Consistent results have been reported in the literature. For example, Gillespie (2003) demonstrate that, being childfree contributes to women's lives and facilitates preserving intimacy in relationships. Yikmis (2018) also points out that in the Turkish context, by remaining childless, women taught that they could find more opportunity to spare time for their partners and they appreciated that aspect of their relationship. In addition, they became each other's supporters emotionally like good friends. In this

sense, childfree couples seemed to be more satisfied with their relationships. In the similar line with the participants of the present study, the researcher related this issue to absence of children, since without children, spouses could make their partners a center of attention. Similarly, Houseknecht (1979) points out that childfree women were well-adjusted because they got higher scores on dyadic cohesion including factors of intimacy, feeling of togetherness and closeness.

The second quality of the marriage that was mentioned and appreciated by the participants was strong communication. They gave importance to communicate with their partners about any subject, including the decision not to have children. They pointed out that in couples with children, children-related issues become the main subjects of conversations (e.g., dropping of the child to the school). Therefore, the participants thought that if they have children, they would not have much time to talk to each other about their relationships, emotions, experiences and/or conflicts. They also mentioned that they did not experience much conflict, since they share similar perceptions and attitudes about their life with their partners. Callan (1984) also demonstrates that childfree women have more dyadic consensus than mothers which means that they share similar interests and perceptions with their partners and meet in similar goals in life, leading to less conflict and arguments.

However, when conflicts happened, based on their communication skills, the participants in the present study talked about the issue and figured out the solutions. In the same vein, DeFrain and Olson (1999) point out that childfree couples are able to give more time to their marriages and relationships. They perceived discussing conflicts as a way to understand their partners' perspectives and emotions. In addition, the participants in the present study expressed that by remaining childless, they would avoid some conflicts and arguments related to children (e.g., sharing the responsibilities of childcare). In the same vein, compared to couples with children, they found more chance and time to discuss the issues. Overall, voluntarily childless couples wanted to have a dyadic relationship characterized by shared time and activities, a sense of connection, reciprocal communication, and conflict resolution. Therefore, their

approach to marriage was defined by forming a partnership, a perspective that differs from traditional conceptions where gender-based roles and duties are fulfilled.

The last subtheme of marital functioning was sharing responsibility of household chores. The participants found sharing responsibilities equally among partners in their household valuable. Starting with 1970s, in fact, having egalitarian views seems to be one of the significant aspects of childfree individuals (Veevers, 1979; Feldman, 1981). Baber and Dreyer (1986) indicate that childfree couples seem to have egalitarian perspectives about sharing responsibilities at home and in fact their perceptions are supported by their actions in their marital lives. Since participants thought that women take more responsibilities about childcare (e.g., breastfeeding), the distribution of responsibilities would change with having children. Moreover, Yikmis (2018) reports that childfree women anticipate taking much of the responsibilities about childcare if they have children and that they do not want to engage in such responsibilities.

It seems that childfree couples have more egalitarian perspectives about their marital lives and this situation can be connected to social change in the Turkish context. It seems that compared to 1970s, women have become more educated, more people prefer to live in urban lifestyles than rural lifestyle, and the traditional and patriarchal values in the traditional families start to lose their importance (Kagıtcıbaşı & Ataca, 2005). Boratav and colleagues (2014) also demonstrate with their qualitative study that because of urbanization, becoming more educated and the women's active participation in the working life, married men try to be more egalitarian in their family lives. Based on these changes in the Turkish context along with the demographics of participants in the present study (e.g., having high education and participation in labor force for female participants), it could be expected from childfree couples to be more egalitarian in their marital relationships as found in the present study.

In the present study, there were different approaches about change in sharing responsibilities of household chores. Some participants mentioned that men would take more responsibility about housework, since women would become much more engaged

with childcare. On the other hand, some of the participants pointed out that women's responsibilities would become more in this issue. Whether one side would take more responsibilities or not, the participants expressed that having children would destroy their equal distribution of responsibilities at home. In a consistent vein, Majumbar (2004) indicates that women are impacted more negatively than men for getting extensive responsibilities about childcare. Therefore, the author mentions that it becomes important for childfree couples to pursue this egalitarian division of labor at home and to avoid gendered division of labor.

The last theme named as facing societal norms consisted of three subthemes that were having a child as an essential step, being different from society and coping with societal norms. According to the participants, society considers having children as a significant step for one's life cycle, like going to school, having an occupation and getting married. As Doyle and colleagues (2012) mention, when others get to marry and have children, families expect from their children to follow the same path. In addition, having children seems to be a given in the definition of traditional marriage. In this sense, the participants expressed that they felt pressure and expectations to have children from relatives and friends. Lee and Zvonkovic (2014) point out that childfree participants constantly face with norms and pressures to become parents, especially from family members. They were expected to provide reasoning about the decision of voluntary childlessness and when they did so, they listened speeches about how wonderful and necessary to have child is.

In the present study, even though some participants (especially recently married ones) did not define this situation as social pressure, all participants expressed that the topic and timing of having children were brought up by others who provided advice to have children and how children completed the marriages. Recently married couples reflected about not feeling under pressure and emphasized that their families and/or friends perceived their childlessness as temporary and expected them to have children in future.

Since having children seemed to be a societal norm, the participants realized that they were different from society and were a minority group. Agrillo and Nelini (2008) indicate that not having children seemed to be a deviance from society which lead to childfree individuals being labeled negatively. Especially earlier studies tend to examine this issue as a way of deviance. It is supported by previous studies that individuals tended to attribute negative aspects to childfree individuals (e.g. being selfish, unhappy, lazy and materialistic) compared to parents and involuntarily childless individuals (Callan, 1985; Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995; Mueller & Yoder, 1997). In addition, as in the accounts of participants in the present study, the participants acknowledged that childfree individuals do not conform social norms (Callan, 1985).

According to the participants, society also perceived and reminded this difference to them constantly. By marginalizing, from time to time, the participants expressed that they also questioned their decision of being childfree. While reminding this difference, at the same time, society expects from the participants to become “normal” one day, conform to societal norms and have children. In this sense, participants felt that they were not taken seriously, since their decision was not accepted and believed by the society. According to Mollen (2006), there are three reactions about marginalization of childfree individuals by society which are also applicable to the present study. These are being labeled as abnormal (coming up with disbelief), expression of pity and discrimination. Similarly, Lee and Zvonkovic (2014) emphasize that childfree individuals constantly handle inquires coming from society with the expectation that every couple should have a child in their marital lives. In addition, Gillespie (2000) indicate that childfree individuals get reactions from society that they will change their minds in the future, so that being childfree is not a rational decision. The similar case can be seen in the Turkish context where childfree women were represented as inadequate and constantly questioned about their decision (Simay & Tekin, 2020). In this sense, they are expected to become parents one day and they do not feel accepted by the society with their decision of remaining childless.

There was an important gender difference between men and women on this issue. While male participants explained themselves through parenthood, female participants specifically expressed societal expectations about motherhood. According to female participants, society thinks that all women are eager to give birth and have children at some point in their lives. Similar to the present study, Yikmis (2018) mentions that for childfree women, the main social pressure comes from their families, specifically from their mothers. In this sense, becoming a mother and giving birth seemed to be duties of women. It can be related to the Turkish context which is a pronatalist country (Akşit, 2010) and a patriarchal society. In this sense, women and their status are dependent on their motherhood and giving birth seems to be one of the significant duties of women along with providing care to children and husbands (Isik et al., 2006; Kulakaç et al., 2006)

The participants emphasized that they used some strategies to cope with societal norms. The decision of getting married was one of those strategies. From the participants' point of view, if there was not such a social norm about getting married for two people to live together, they would not get married. By getting married, they taught that their relationship became legitimized in the eyes of society and it brought along some advantages (e.g. becoming freer, going for vacations together). On the other hand, even though they conform to the norm about marriage, as in the decision to remain childless, they did not sustain the aspects of traditional marriage constructed by society and norms (e.g., protecting boundaries, constructing personal spaces, holding different areas of interest from their partners). In this sense, the participants indicated that they became two people loving to share their lives together, but in traditional marriages, individuals would feel captive.

Moreover, they used some strategies to cope with societal norms about the subject of having children. They did not actively share their decision with others. However, when the topic was brought up by others, they provided an ambiguous answer and tried to change the subject of conversation. Park (2002) also states that providing vague answers is a strategy for childfree individuals to cope with

stigmatization. The study in the Turkish context indicates similar strategies for coping with societal norms, such as giving the impression that their childlessness is a temporary situation and providing ambiguous answers (Yikmis, 2018). In addition to that, the participants in the present study actively avoid discussing this subject with others such as elderly relatives whom they knew as holding conservative and traditional perspectives and attitudes about having children. In the same vein, Lee and Zvonkovic (2014) show that childfree individuals do not initiate discussions about this issue and when the subject is brought up by others, they try to avoid engaging in long conversations by means of changing subjects or blaming their partners about the decision.

4.2. CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

One aim of the present study is to present clinical implications of voluntary childlessness as well as theoretical contributions in the Turkish context. Identification of motivations and reasons behind the decision of being childfree, the decision-making processes and handling societal norms about having children can become beneficial for clinicians working with childfree individuals and/or couples.

First of all, it becomes useful for clinicians to be sensitive about the cultural context of voluntary childlessness (Hillier, 2017). In their article, Arthur and Collin (2010) discuss that every clinician and patient hold different kinds of perspectives, social values and judgments, and those issues change over time. In this sense, it is significant for clinicians to constantly reflect on these issues and detect their own perspectives. In the case of the present study, clinicians can also give importance to their perceptions about voluntary childlessness and what associations come to their minds when thinking about this subject. It becomes helpful for clinicians to detect and identify their bias and assumptions about childfree individuals, so that they can sustain a more objective perspective and concentrate on the experiences of childfree individuals and/or couples in the therapeutic process.

Besides being culturally sensitive, clinicians need to be aware of gender-specific issues when working with childfree clients (Gold, 2013). The author mentions that motherhood is defined as a significant aspect women's identities and femininity, whereas for men, having financial power, achievement and success in their jobs seem to have more influence over the definition of their identities and masculinity. Therefore, men can be expected to face less social pressure about becoming parents compared to childfree women. The present study also demonstrates that female participants explained themselves through constraints of motherhood and duties of motherhood. On the other hand, male participants did not specifically talk about the responsibility of fatherhood; rather they tended to emphasize their perceptions through parenthood and/or indicate the difficulties women face with becoming mothers.

Clinicians working in Turkey should also consider the Turkish context, social norms about having children and stigmatization of voluntary childlessness. Aksit (2010) points out that Turkey is a pronatalist country. Pronatalism is about encouragement coming from the society, the state and culture to become parents and have children (Brown & Ferree, 2005). In this sense, individuals in Turkey are expected to have children and feel pressure to become parents. As in the case of other countries, society seems to be more prone to put social pressure on women more than men, since women are constantly defined through the probability of becoming mothers and their identities and femininity are shaped through those perceptions in Turkey (Isik et al., 2006; Kocyigit, 2012; Simay & Tekin, 2020). In addition, the consequences of having a child seem to be more for women, as in the present study. Both male and female participants at most points address similar issues (e.g., loss of autonomy, burden of responsibilities). On the other hand, it is noteworthy to realize that there is gender-specific outcomes and motivations of being childfree between men and women. For instance, childfree women in the present study expressed their concerns about careers with becoming mothers, but men did not hold such concerns. In this sense, clinicians working in Turkey should take both cultural and gender-specific issues into consideration when working with childfree individuals and/or couples.

The present study can also be useful to understand decision-making processes among couples as well as individual decision-making processes. It is significant for childfree individuals to shape their perceptions about having children, to share these perceptions and opinions with their partners and also know about their partners' perceptions and thoughts about the issue. It is also worthy to keep in mind that not every couple goes through the same processes (like early articulators and mutual postponers). In this sense, concentrating on unique experiences of each couple become valuable while knowing that there are some shared and general pathways. As Lee and Zvonkovic (2014) point out, there are some revisitations of the decision of being childfree among couples. The author mentions that most of the time, partners do not share these thoughts with each other, since they perceive the situation as temporary. In the present study, the participants also mentioned that from time to time, they thought about the subject and found themselves in a position that they became more positive about becoming parents. The situation is usually triggered by external sources like observing a friend who has a child. For clinicians, it seems important to assist childfree couples to engage in such conversations and to help them to express themselves more openly, and to adopt an accepting attitude towards the changes and fluctuations in their views and feelings about having or not having a child.

Detecting the ways in which childfree individuals manage stigma is also important for consideration. In the present study, the participants explained that they avoid engaging in long conversations about the topic. They shared their opinions about having children when the subject was brought up by somebody, rather than actively sharing their decision of being childfree. In addition, they had hesitations to talk with people who hold a traditional and conservative approach about having children. Therefore, they did not imply their real thoughts about having children and tried to change the subject of conversations. Rather than seeing those coping mechanisms as a way of defense, clinicians should support their clients about stigma management, acceptance of their identities and future goals in both personal and marital lives (Matthews & Desjardins, 2016). Keeping the usual coping strategies, clinicians also

encourage and assist their clients to think about other strategies to handle societal norms about having children. It is also important to discuss meanings of being childless and emotions related to societal expectations.

It becomes valuable for clinicians to consider childfree individuals as a minority in their societies (Gold, 2013). Even though the participants in the present study expressed some kind of social pressure about having children, especially newly married couples did not feel under extensive pressure. From their accounts, they expected to feel more pressure over time, when their ages become older and duration of marriages become longer. In this sense, Pelton and Hertlein (2011) recommend to clinical practitioners to lead support groups with childfree couples. Interacting with other childfree couples might become helpful in handling the feeling of belonging to a minority group.

The last clinical implication is about considerations of family dynamics of childfree couples. In the present study, sense of togetherness, constructing strong communication and distributing responsibilities of household chores equally seemed to be important aspects which made participants satisfied with their marriages and relationships with their partners. In this sense, while clinicians support individuals and/or couples to solve conflicts, it is also significant for them to identify strengths of the relationship. Understanding and identifying those dynamics can become also beneficial for solving conflicts.

To sum up, while working with childfree individuals and/or couples, it is important to be sensitive about culture and gender specific issues. In addition, identifying and increasing awareness of one's own inherent bias about voluntary childlessness is critical for clinicians in order to provide better assistance to childfree individuals and/or couples. The clinicians working in Turkey need to comprehend Turkey as being a pronatalist and patriarchal country, so that women face more social pressure than men. Having awareness of decision-making processes, realizing revisitations of the decision and encouraging couples to discuss about issues related to the decision of being childfree could become beneficial for therapeutic process. Lastly,

it seems significant for clinicians to identify and comprehend the strengths of couples' relationship which influence the individuals' satisfaction about their marital lives in order to provide better support and assistance.

4.3. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The present study contributes to the literature and clinical considerations about voluntary childlessness by examining married childfree couples based on the decision-making processes, experiences of being childfree and marital functioning. Even though the studies about voluntary childlessness dates back to 1970s in Western societies, the trend on studying childfree individuals have newly emerged in the case of Turkey. In addition to that, studies mostly focused on women, their experiences and their rejection of motherhood in a pronatalist country. In this sense, examining dynamics of childfree couples in the Turkish context can become influential both in the area of psychotherapy and research. Moreover, most studies have been conducted from empirical view by means of quantitative methods. In this study, utilizing a qualitative design gave more chance and opportunity to understand unique experiences of childfree couples in a deeper way.

Besides these strengths, there are also some limitations of the present study. First of all, it was difficult to reach childfree couples as participants. In the beginning of the study, the aim was to conduct the research with participants living in the boundaries of Turkey. However, after collecting applications, it was seen that there were a few numbers of applications in which both partners were willing to participate. Generally, childfree women seemed to be more enthusiastic about participating in the study than men. In order to reach an adequate number of participants, two couples who lived in abroad were accepted to the study. Even though those couples have lived in Turkey for a while and experienced being childfree in the Turkish context, the results could be different, if the study only covers the experiences of childfree couples living in Turkey. It is also possible to observe differences among childfree couples living in Turkey, depending on factors such as their urban-rural location, cohabitation and social

class. Therefore, for further studies, it becomes beneficial to recruit participants from more homogeneous settings and contexts from Turkey and examine the impact of this context on their experiences. In this sense, the better understanding of childfree couples' experiences can be constructed, especially about aspects of stigmatization and labeling in the Turkish context. In addition, since reaching to childfree couples was difficult, only five married childfree couples were interviewed. For further studies, it becomes helpful to include more than five couples as participants. By this way, it would be possible to capture diversity in experiences of childfree couples.

Another limitation of the present study is about childfree couples having different durations of marriages from two to eight years ($M = 5$ years). The variations in that issue could have an effect over participants' experiences of voluntary childlessness. For instance, two newly married couples mentioned that they did not feel social pressure, since their relatives considered childlessness as a temporary state. In this sense, not setting the limit about duration of marriages could be a limitation of the present study. Therefore, it can be suggested to set a limit to duration of marriages in future research such as being married at least five years. In addition, childfree individuals who close the door to having a child by going through menopause and/or sterilization can be interviewed to understand their experiences and whether there is a change about experiences and approaches over time and conditions about voluntary childlessness.

Besides duration of marriages, the demographics of childfree participants seemed to be homogenous. They had at least Bachelor's degrees, average to high incomes and professional occupations. This homogeneity as well as qualitative design and the researchers' subjectivity do not make the findings of this study to be applicable and generalizable to other contexts and/or childfree couples from different backgrounds. Related to limitations, further studies can include more heterogenous participants from different backgrounds (e.g. working class individuals and nonworking men or women). This kind of approach can lead to see the difference among childfree individuals and their experiences about voluntary childlessness. In

addition to that, there have been a few studies to examine voluntarily childless men. Especially in the Turkish context, being in the similar line with Western ones, the main focus is on women and their experiences. In this sense, it becomes interesting and beneficial to conduct a study which include male participants and focus on the experiences of childfree men.

The structure of interviews was formed as individual meetings rather than meeting as couples. On the one hand, it becomes a strength of the study since participants could share their experiences, emotions and opinions more freely and openly without interference of their partners. On the other hand, interviewing each partner separately did not allow the researcher to observe the dynamics of relationship between partners. As mentioned, two ways of interviewing have both advantages and disadvantages. Therefore, for further studies, it becomes important to understand the aim of the study and based on the aim, one of the methods can be applicable.

The last limitation is about coding process in which just one researcher was responsible for coding. Even though codes and themes were discussed with the advisor of the study, there was no investigator triangulation. The study would be more reliable with two researchers engaging in the coding process and applying the investigator triangulation. In this sense, for further research, it can be suggested to include two researchers for coding process to increase reliability and to construct better understanding of participants' experiences.

4.4. CONCLUSION

The aim of the present study is to explore married couples' experiences about voluntary childlessness. More specifically, it is tried to understand why and how couples and/or individuals choose to be childless and how this situation of being childfree affects their marital lives. The present study includes five married couples who define themselves as being childfree. Even though two couples currently live in abroad, all participants had experience of being childfree in the Turkish context. The interviews were done individually with each partner through online channels. The

literature about voluntary childlessness in Western societies is extensive, but the main focus seems to be on women rather than couples and men. On the other hand, the subject of voluntary childlessness seems to be newly emerging in the Turkish context. In this sense, the present study can contribute both to research about childfree couples and research about experiences of childfree individuals/couples in the Turkish context.

The findings demonstrate that childfree individuals have different opinions about having children. They appreciate having a child as a unique experience. On the other hand, they perceive negative aspects of having children such as loss of autonomy, burden of responsibilities and concern about finances and career more than positive aspects of having children. These perceptions lead individuals and couples to decide to remain childless. On the other hand, while making this decision rationally and thinking it through, childfree couples do not perceive it as a final decision, since it is like an ongoing process rather than a one-time decision. Therefore, the perceptions and opinions can change over time, they can reconsider the decision, even change their minds and decide to have a child. It becomes influential to see expressions of childfree couples' marital lives. Childfree individuals seem to give importance to their sense of togetherness, strong communication and equal distribution of responsibilities about household chores in their marriages which make them satisfied with their marital lives.

Lastly, as Turkey being a pronatalist country (Akşit, 2010), through the journey of voluntary childlessness, childfree individuals and couples face some societal norms about having children and feel some social pressure to become parents. There can be some gender-specific issues in which women more than men feel social pressure about motherhood. They are aware of being different from society and being a minority. In this sense, childfree couples intentionally or unintentionally develop some strategies to cope with societal norms.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

1) Tanışma

- Meslekleriniz nedir?
- İş dışında nelerle ilgilenmekten hoşlanırsınız? İlgilendiğiniz bir hobiniz var mı?
- Ne kadar süredir evlisiniz?
- Birlikte neler yapmaktan hoşlanırsınız?

2) İlişki Durumu ve Hikayesi

- Nasıl tanıştınız?
- Evliliğe ne zaman karar verdiniz? Bu süreç nasıl gelişti?
- İlişkinizi nasıl anlatırsınız?

3) Evliliğin ve Çocuk sahibi Olmak/Olmamanın anlamı

- Evliliği nasıl tanımlıyorsunuz?
- Evlilikte çocuk sahibi olmak denilince aklınıza neler geliyor?
- Evlilikte çocuk sahibi olmanın, sizin için nasıl bir anlamı var?
- Evlilikte çocuk sahibi olmamanın sizin için nasıl bir anlamı var?

4) Çocuk Sahibi Olmama Kararı

- Şimdiki ilişkinizden önce çocuk sahibi olmak konusunda neler düşünüydünüz?
 - Çocuk sahibi olmama fikri nasıl oluşmaya başladı?
- Evliliğe giden süreçte çocuk konusu konuşuldu mu? O dönemde neler düşünüydünüz?

- Evliliğinizde çocuk konusu ilk ne zaman açıldı? Nasıl açıldı?
Hatırlıyorsanız, anlatabilir misiniz?
- Çocuk sahibi olmamaya nasıl karar verdiniz?
- Çocuk konusunda eşinizle fikir ayrılığı yaşadığınız oldu mu? Nasıl?
- Bu kararı almanızda neler etkili oldu?

5) Evlilik Kalitesi

- Çocuk sahibi olmama kararını almak, evlilik ilişkinizi nasıl etkiledi?
 - Aranızdaki iletişim üzerindeki etkisi desem, aklınıza neler gelir?
 - Aranızdaki yakınlık ve paylaşım üzerindeki etkisi desem, aklınıza neler gelir?
 - Cinsel yaşamınız üzerindeki etkisi desem, aklınıza neler gelir?
 - Çatışmalarınız/tartışmalarınız üzerindeki etkisi desem, aklınıza neler gelir?
 - Ev içindeki iş bölümünüz üzerindeki etkisi desem, aklınıza neler gelir?
- Çocuk sahibi olsaydınız size göre evliliğinizde neler farklı olurdu?
- Çocuk sahibi olsaydınız bireysel olarak sizin yaşamınızda neler farklı olurdu?

6) Yakın Çevreyle İlişki

- Kararınızı ailelerinizle paylaştınız mı? Nasıl?
- Kararınızı ailelerinizle paylaşmaya/paylaşmamaya nasıl karar verdiniz?
- (Paylaşılsa) Nasıl tepkiler aldınız? Bu tepkiler karşısında neler düşündünüz/hissettiniz?
- Kararınızı arkadaşlarınızla paylaştınız mı? Nasıl?

- Kararınızı arkadaşlarınızla paylaşmaya/paylaşmamaya nasıl karar verdiniz?

- (Paylaşılsa) Nasıl tepkiler aldınız? Bu tepkiler karşısında neler düşündünüz/hissettiniz?

7) Genel değerlendirme

- Şu anda yaşadığımız toplumda çocuk sahibi olmamak bir çift olarak sizin için nasıl bir deneyim?

- Şu anda yaşadığımız toplumda çocuk sahibi olmamak sizin için nasıl bir deneyim?

- Çocuk sahibi olmama konusunda şu anda nasıl hissediyorsunuz?

- Bu duygularda ve düşüncelerde zaman içinde bir değişim oldu mu?

- Evliliğinizle ilgili ileriye dönük planlarınız ve hayalleriniz neler?

- Birlikte gerçekleştirmeyi istediğiniz bir hayaliniz var mı?

- Kendi yaşamınızla ilgili ileriye dönük planlarınız ve hayalleriniz neler?

8) Sonlandırma

- Sizin eklemek istediğiniz herhangi bir şey var mı?

- Benim sormadığım, ama önemli olduğunu düşündüğünüz bir şey var mı?

- Bugün burada konuşmak, bu görüşmeye katılmak size nasıl geldi?

APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Form

Araştırmanın Yürütüldüğü Kurum:	İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi
Araştırmanın Adı:	Çocuk Sahibi Olmamayı Seçen Çiftlerin Evlilik Deneyimleri ve Uyumları
Araştırmacının Adı:	Merve Erkaya
Araştırmacının E-mail Adresi ve Telefonu:	
Araştırmanın Danışmanı:	Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Anıl Özge Üstünel
Danışmanın E-mail Adresi ve Telefonu:	

Bu araştırma, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Klinik Psikoloji Yüksek Lisans Programı öğrencisi Merve Erkaya tarafından Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Anıl Özge Üstünel danışmanlığında yürütülmektedir. Bu araştırmanın amacı, çiftlerin çocuk sahibi olmamaya karar verme süreçlerini ve buna ilişkin deneyimlerini anlamaktır. Araştırmanın çocuk sahibi olmamayı seçen çiftlerle ilgili araştırmalara katkı sağlaması beklenmektedir.

Bu araştırmaya katılmayı kabul ettiğiniz takdirde, yaklaşık 60 dakika sürecek bir görüşmeye online olarak katılmanız beklenecektir. Bu görüşmede, bir çift olarak çocuk sahibi olmak-olmamak konusundaki düşüncelerinizi ve gözlemlerinizi öğrenmek için sizden bazı sorulara yanıt vermeniz istenecektir. Görüşmeler çift olarak değil, bireysel olarak gerçekleştirilecektir. Yanıtlarınız, sonraki analizlerde kullanılmak üzere ses kaydına alınacaktır.

Bu araştırma bilimsel bir amaçla yapılmakta ve katılımcı bilgilerinin gizliliği esas alınmaktadır. Verdiğiniz tüm bilgiler gizli tutulacaktır. Ses kayıtları araştırma süresince yalnızca araştırmacının ve danışmanının erişimi olan bir harici bellekte muhafaza edilecek, araştırma ve bilimsel yayın süreci sona erdiğinde silinecektir. Araştırma bulgularının sunumu ve raporlamasında kişi isimleri ve kimliğin anlaşılabilirliği demografik detaylar kullanılmayacak ve elde edilen bilgiler bilimsel yayınlarda kullanılacaktır.

Bu arařtırmaya katılmak tamamen isteęe baęlıdır. Görüşmeye katılmanın üzerinizde herhangi bir olumsuz etki yaratması beklenmemektedir. Ancak görüşme sırasında yanıt vermek istemediğiniz, size kendinizi rahatsız hissettiren sorular olursa bu soruları yanıtlamadan geçebilirsiniz. Görüşme sırasında dilediğiniz zaman kaydın durdurulmasını isteyebilirsiniz. Görüşme başlamadan önce, görüşme sırasında veya sonrasında dilediğiniz zaman soru sorabilirsiniz. Katılmayı kabul ettiğiniz takdirde çalışmanın herhangi bir aşamasında herhangi bir sebep göstermeden arařtırmadan çekilme hakkına sahipsiniz. Arařtırmadan çekildiğiniz durumda verdiğiniz bilgiler değerlendirmeye alınmayacaktır.

Görüşmenizin sonuçları, arařtırma sonlandırılmadan önce gözden geçirmeniz için sizinle e-mail yoluyla paylaşılacak ve geri bildiriminiz doğrultusunda gerekli deęişiklikler yapılacaktır. Burada amaç, sizin görüşlerinizin ve deneyimlerinizin en doğru şekilde anlaşılmasını sağlamaktır.

Arařtırmayla ilgili bilgi almak, soru sormak veya yorumlarınızı paylaşmak isterseniz, arařtırmacı Merve Erkaya ile iletişime geçebilirsiniz.

Arařtırmaya katılmayı kabul ediyorsanız, ařaęıdaki metni e-mail yoluyla arařtırmacıya iletebilirsiniz.

Bu çalışmaya tamamen gönüllü olarak katılıyorum. Bilgilendirilmiş Onam Formu'ndaki açıklamaları anladım. Çalışmaya katılmayı, görüşmenin ses kaydının alınmasını ve verdiğim bilgilerin bilimsel amaçlı yayınlarda kullanılmasını kabul ediyorum.

Katılımcı Adı-Soyadı:	
Tarih:	

APPENDIX C: Demographic Information Form

Yaş:

Cinsiyet: Kadın Erkek Diğer

Eğitim Durumu: İlkokul Ortaokul Lise Lisans

Yüksek Lisans Doktora

Çalışıyor musunuz? Evet Hayır

Meslek:

Gelir Düzeyi: Düşük Orta Yüksek

Hangi şehirde yaşıyorsunuz:

Evde sizinle beraber yaşayan başka biri var mı? Evet Hayır

Evet ise kim:.....

Tanışma şekli: Aile/Akraba Çevresi Okul İş Arkadaş Çevresi
İnternet Diğer (Lütfen belirtiniz).....

Evlenmeden önce ilişkiniz ne kadar süredir devam ediyordu?

Ne zaman evlendiniz?

İlk evliliğiniz mi? Evet Hayır

Evlenmeden önce birlikte yaşadınız mı? Evet Hayır

Evetse ne kadar süre:

APPENDIX D: Ethical Approval by the Ethics Committee

Ethics Board Approval is available in the printed version of this dissertation.