Chapter 7

Negotiating Parenthood: Men, Intimate Relationships and Childbearing

As scholars of reproduction have previously articulated (Becker, 2000; Rothman, 2000) even in the case of male factor infertility, the processes involved in undergoing IVF, such as internal ultrasounds, blood work, the injection of stimulation drugs, egg retrieval, all the way through to the much wished for positive pregnancy test and birth, revolve round the female body as the site of intervention and management (Barnes, 2014). In this regard, egg freezing is no different; however, despite women's bodies being the focus of this effort, this research found that men and the relationships women have, or want to have, with men are central to their use and experience of this technology. This chapter will explore how women utilised egg freezing in an effort to make up for lost reproductive time and to better enable them to find the right partner for their child. It will show how their search for such a partner was inhibited at times by what they perceived as negative attitudes towards fatherhood held by metropolitan men. I will suggest that some men's ambivalent attitudes towards becoming a parent may be shaped by the increasingly individualised nature of the life-course and the pressures of performing 'intimate fatherhood' and will show how this reticence to commit to fatherhood acted as a drag on women's fertility, leading them to 'delay' motherhood, in some cases longer than they desired. This chapter will also examine how the unequal power relations at play in the process of relationship formation and progression worked to disadvantage women as they aged, and thus how some women found themselves engaged in a process of reproductive negotiation and bargaining with their partner in an attempt to secure motherhood. Finally, this chapter will close by examining how women mobilised egg freezing as a tool to communicate their enduring reproductive capacities in an effort to increase their value in the marketplace of marriage, but also how they managed the disclosure of egg freezing as a tool to identify suitable as well as unsuitable potential partners.

7.1. Lost Time and the 'Right' Type of Father

Unlike many users of IVF technologies, at the time of freezing their eggs, most of the women in this research had not spent time trying to conceive nor had they experienced miscarriages and failed IVF cycles. In fact, on the surface, they were reproductively healthy, had often long assumed that

motherhood would be part of their lives and had every potential chance of becoming a parent. However, these women's quest for motherhood had been thwarted by their experience of what has been described as 'social infertility' (Lombardi, 2015; Weston & Vollenhoven, 2002). Specifically, these women had lacked, and often still lacked, a partner who they believed would be the right father for their children and who also wanted to become a parent. Many of the participants described how they had spent sometimes significant periods of their 20s and 30s in relationships with men with whom they thought they would have children, only for the relationships to break down sometimes due to conflict between themselves and their partner about becoming parents. One participant, Amber, told me how she had 'wasted' what she believed was her 'best childbearing years' in her previous relationship which had broken down when she was 34, leaving her single and childless at a time in her life when she had expected to be enjoying motherhood. Charlotte similarly described how a sudden and painful break up of an 18-month-long relationship, which had included what she believed was serious discussions about trying to conceive, had left her feeling like she had also wasted precious time on a partnership which she had anticipated would lead to motherhood. She told me:

> He basically left for work in the morning; said 'I love you, I adore you', and he was talking about buying a house with me the day before, but then he came home and basically said 'I have to let you go, I can't move forward'. We weren't fighting there were no problems, no nothing, he walked out the door and never called me again after a year and a half of dating […] and when you are that age, you are like oh my god this person just wasted a year and a half of my life when they knew that I might possibly want this [motherhood] in my life.
>
> – Charlotte (42 years)

For women such as Amber and Charlotte, the time spent in these failed relationships as well as the time they were spending as single women looking for a partner was time that they felt had been, and was potentially still being, wasted. This sense of waste came from their understanding of their fertility (as well as their time) as a finite resource which had not yet been deployed or used effectively in the pursuit of a committed long-term relationship which would eventually lead to motherhood. For these women, and others, social egg freezing appeared to be a tool to help redeem the time they spent as single women and as a way to ensure they did not engage in 'panic-partnering'[1] and thus waste further 'fertile time' in the wrong relationship. Egg freezing also offered them a

[1]See Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion about panic partnering.

more hopeful orientation towards the future where their desires for motherhood could be fulfilled. As Charlotte went on to emotionally explain:

> I do feel empowered in a way. I think there was this sense, and this feeling I had before I did this [egg freezing], that 'oh my god I just gave up my last chance to have a baby' [but] I feel […] my last relationship definitely got the best of me, but he didn't get all of me; he didn't take away that last thing that I preserved.
>
> – Charlotte (42 years)

When discussing the options available to them at the time of considering freezing their eggs, many of the women remarked that they could simply stop taking the contraceptive pill without informing their sexual partner, and several women explained that they had known women who had done this in order to get pregnant. Claudia told me: 'I think if you go back to my mum's generation or my grandmothers, a lot of it was the guy wants to delay, so they stopped taking the pill and that was that.' However, Livvy suggested that whilst she believed that many men entered into fatherhood without a conscious choice or effort, she did not want to 'trick' her partner into fatherhood. This sentiment was echoed by many of the other participants. This rejection of pursuing pregnancy 'covertly' was because these women did not simply want to have a baby but wanted to create a family 'unit' or 'set-up' wherein the responsibility for raising a child through to adulthood, with the associated pains and pleasures, was shared by themselves and a partner who was as equally invested in parenting. As Olivia explained, for her it was 'not just wanting the kids, it's wanting the family unit'. Melanie similarly described how she could have conceived via casual sex but instead wanted to create a family. She told me:

> Really, if I want to have a baby I can go out and do that anytime [but] that's not for me, it was really more about having a family and having a partner there to share that with.
>
> – Melanie (36 years)

Emily also extolled how she believed parenting to be a 'two-person job' which necessitated the commitment of an engaged partner who had equally chosen parenthood. This led her to suggest that pursuing parenthood without a partner's 'buy-in' would, in her view, be unlikely to produce the family unit she had desired. She told me:

> I think it would be a strange thing to do, to get pregnant without really your partner's buy in; it would be foolish in my view to do that. There are women who stop taking the pill and don't tell their partner, or you know other devices to get pregnant without their partner quite realising that that's what was happening. I just think that's foolish. It's a real two-person job bringing up a child. Myself and my partner have been at home together for the first

> three months, he has been off work as well, and with two people together it's been fantastic, but I can't imagine having to do it on my own. I mean it's hard-enough work when there are two of you, it must be virtually impossible when there is just you.
>
> – Emily (44 years)

As discussed previously in Chapter 4, despite not yet becoming a mother, it was not uncommon for the participants to have clear ideas about how they would want to go about mothering. These intentions often indicated a desire to engage in practices of intensive motherhood. However, to have the time, energy and financial resources to approach motherhood in such a way the participants also needed the right type of father, one who was actively engaged in the raising and caring of children. I suggest that in addition to being committed to mothering 'intensively', the participants also sought to find a male partner who they believed did, or could, exhibit characteristics associated with what has been referred to as 'new' or 'intimate' fatherhood (Dermott, 2014).

Recent decades have seen a significant shift in what is expected of men in the parenting realm (Schmitz, 2016). This shift has seen men's roles as fathers move away from the model of the detached authoritarian towards a greater commitment to engaging in the emotional practices of fathering (Dermott, 2014; Featherstone, 2009; Henwood & Procter, 2003). This shift has also seen men's role concerned less with breadwinning and providing instrumentally for the family, to one more focused on the provision of care, emotional support and greater familial engagement (Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Stevens, 2015; Summers, Boller, Schiffman, & Raikes, 2006). As part of this, men are now more often expected to be actively engaged in the practices around preparing for parenthood, such as attending ultrasound scans and antenatal classes (Smith, 1999) as well as being a 'hands on father' more equally sharing in the parenting of children once they are born (Hinton & Miller, 2013). This shift in the social expectation of fathers has led authors such as Fairlough (2014) to suggest that the ideology of intensive mothering is now being extended to men and the 'ideal father' is increasingly seen to be one which reflects or embraces this model of 'intensive parenting'. This image of 'new' or 'intimate' fatherhood (Dermott, 2014) is now well established not only in parenting studies literature and in public but also in policy discourse (Dermott, 2001; Rush, 2013; Tanaka & Waldfogel, 2007). Such an image of fatherhood was also highly regarded by the participants and reflected their own desires when seeking a partner. However, in discussing their search for a suitable partner, participants told me time and time again about the difficulties they encountered in finding a man who embodied such ideals and instead reported that the men they met were often unwilling to settle down and were often even more reticent to commit to fatherhood. I suggest that this perceived lack of enthusiasm may have been shaped, at least in part, by the growing individualisation of the lifecourse as well as the pressures and associated expectations of intensive fathering.

7.2. Individualism and the Gendered Pressures of Parenthood

Research shows that partnering and parenthood continue to be a lifecourse expectation for most men and women (Hammarberg et al., 2017; Jamieson, Milburn, Simpson, & Wasoff, 2010). However, despite this, census data indicate that the rate of solo-living, particularly at the time most conventionally associated with living with a partner and child, has risen noticeably over the last four decades, especially with men (Jamieson, Wasoff, & Simpson, 2009). Concurrent to this trend, and perhaps more well known, is the rising age of parenthood, lower rates of fertility, higher rates of marital breakdown and longer periods of time spent by adults outside of committed relationships (Mills et al., 2011). These social changes have been attributed by many social theorists to the detraditionalisation of the modern lifecourse which has seen the lives of social actors become more disembedded and increasingly self-reflexive (Bauman, 2005; Beck-Gernsheim & Beck, 1995; Giddens, 1991). I suggest that the growing individualisation and self-reflexivity characteristic of the modern lifecourse, which remains inherently gendered, may help us understand some of the challenges women encountered when seeking a partner with whom to embark on parenthood.

The direction of a person's life was once shaped by the deep ties, loyalties and expectations that were shared with their family and wider community and which would restrict the choices they would make throughout their lives. However, detraditionalisation and the rise of individualism saw the loosening or severing of these ties and gave rise to a political subject who was less a social citizen with powers and obligations towards a collective body, and instead an individual whose citizenship was manifested through the construction and management of their own individual biographical project (Rose, 1999). In such a context, social actors are required to be 'free', lead their own lives and manage their biographical projects through the exercise of personal choice, among a variety of marketed options (Beck-Gernsheim & Beck, 1995; Rose, 1999). However, whilst restricting in its embrace, the traditional lifecourse offered not only a degree of familiarity but also security which was seen to be eroded in the transition to individualism. Thus, whilst the shift to the 'choice biography' of contemporary culture obliges individuals to be free and lead their own lives without constraints of the past, authors such as Beck-Gernsheim and Beck (1995) have noted how this has resulted in the increasing fragility of the family and personal life.

Contemporary adults have an abundance of opportunities for education, employment, travel and intimate relationships that were much less available to previous generations (Sassler, 2004), and as noted in Chapter 3 there is a shared sense among (some) young adults that it is important to spend time accumulating life experiences and goals prior to settling down and starting a family (Bergnéhr, 2009). Unlike previous generations who entered into lifelong intimate relationships and marriages at a comparatively earlier age,[2] the 'digital

[2]The average age of first marriage in 1975 was 22.8 years for women and 25 for men, whereas in 2015 it was 31.2 years for women and 33.2 for men (ONS, 2018).

revolution' of the modern day has enabled individuals to connect with multiple potential intimate partners via the Internet and mobile devices with increased frequency and ease (Hobbs, Owen, & Gerber, 2017). Furthermore, whilst dating websites and apps such as Tinder and Bumble are recognised as an appropriate and realistic way to meet a life partner and have a long-term relationship (Smith & Anderson, 2016; Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017), these tools have also facilitated the high turnover or short-term 'disposable' relationships, particularly in large metropolitan centres densely populated by unpartnered adults (Laumann, Ellingson, Mahay, Paik, & Youm, 2004). Thus, it appears that the emergence of what Bauman (2003) described as 'computer dating' has not only created an oversupply of options (Beck-Gernsheim & Beck, 1995), particularly for those with social, economic and sexual capital, but has also contributed to the increased fragmentation and impersonalisation of intimate relationships. This, Bauman has argued, has seen lifelong partnerships eroded by the veritable smorgasboard of romantic options available to individuals who can date 'secure in the knowledge that they can always return to the marketplace for another bout of shopping' (2003, p. 65). As Birger (2015) has noted, online dating can often work in particular to the benefit of men by creating a seemingly limitless marketplace of options which enable them to keep their options open by playing the field without the need to settle into a long-term partnership. Whilst there does not yet appear to have been a wholesale retreat from marriage which theorists of individualisation feared, the quick turnover of relationships in cities such as London, New York and Chicago, where many of the research participants were based, and the ubiquity of internet dating have nonetheless had a significant impact on the lives of the women in this research.

As Kinneret Lahad (2017) has previously argued, the time spent being single, meeting partners and dating is seen as a valuable and positive use of time by many young women. However, this period of normative singlehood can give way to a more pathologised state of 'late-singlehood' when a woman is in her 30s, at which point her single status is no longer read as a sign of choosing a partner wisely but is instead seen as an indicator of her 'choosy' or 'over-selectiveness'. Thus, the trend towards relationship churning, marital delay and high divorce rates, which has meant that the amount of time individuals spend in search of romantic unions has extended, has gendered implications for women. This is because whilst men and women are afforded greater autonomy to plan and execute their intimate and reproductive lives, social conditions continue to privilege heterosexual marriage and family life as a goal and mark of success in the lives of women more than men. Furthermore, unlike women men have a longer reproductive lifespan in which to pursue parenthood. Research examining the partnering intentions of young men and women has indicated that women are less committed to spending time outside of a committed partnership than men who are more likely to celebrate singledom and associate it with sexual freedom (Jamieson et al., 2002). By comparison, long-term singlehood is not a status which most women choose but is instead one characterised by much uncertainty (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). This state of unwanted singlehood was evident in the experience of many of the women taking part in this

research, several of whom were currently in or had recently come out of relationships where their partner had either been unwilling to commit to the relationship long term or where there had been disagreements about the couples' future regarding children. It was not unusual for the participants to have been part of these 'precarious intimacies' for several months or even years before turning to egg freezing, with some women commenting that they wished they had exited these relationships sooner, having realised they would be unlikely to provide them the family unit they desired. The problem these women encountered spending time in relationships with men unwilling to commit to the relationship or have children was typified by the story I heard from Melanie as well as Claudia, which is explored in more detail below.

Melanie had been dating Gavin for little over a year when, both aged 31 at this point, in a casual conversation he remarked that he didn't think he wanted to have children. Shocked at this admission Melanie reluctantly pressed him on the matter. She told me:

> I looked at him, and was like, 'What do you mean you don't want to have kids?!' […] So we kinda got in to this discussion, and he was like 'well you know, we have been dating for like a year do we need to discuss this now?' I said 'no', but on the inside, I was like 'yeah' [we do]! We had only been dating a year and everything was good, but you don't want to date someone for another year and they still say they don't want to have kids and that's basically what was happening throughout our relationship […] he was like 'no I don't want to have kids', 'yeah I want to', 'no I don't'.

A little under two years later but with the issue about becoming parents still unresolved, Gavin and Melanie moved in together, but she described how within three weeks of living together she knew the relationship was not going to work.

> You could tell by his actions that he wanted to be a bachelor. For instance, three weeks after moved in I was out shopping for an ironing board and he calls me and says, 'where are you?' And I was like 'getting an ironing board' as we had just moved in and we didn't have one […] he was like 'can you do me a favour and go home and get my cheque book? I just bought a condo at an auction' […] I was like, 'so you made this huge purchase without discussing it with me?' And it wasn't just a condo, it was a one-bedroom condo so it's like, when you have been dating someone for almost three years and they buy a one-bedroom condo […] So that was the first thing he did and I already had the feeling like this was not going to work just because I felt his actions were really selfish […] So, then I stayed a whole year trying to make it work […] I was like I need to try everything and

> then I thought, you know what, you just need to tell him that you want to have a family […] so I just sat him down and said like look this is what I want and I don't think you want that, and he started sobbing and so I knew that that I was right and so I packed up and left, and you know he never asked me to stay.

Melanie therefore left this relationship around the age of 34 and, fearful that she would not meet a partner and be able to pursue motherhood in the near future, froze her eggs when she was 36. I heard similar stories to Melanie's from many women who described how they had been in both short- and long-term relationships with men who were often ambivalent about committing to fatherhood or even outright rejected the suggestion. When Claudia was 32 she had been in a relationship for a year, but she told me: 'the very first time I mentioned kids he never called me back ever again!'. Several women attributed men's perceived lack of interest in pursuing fatherhood to the longer period of time in which men had to become parents compared to women, as well as men's interests in attaining satisfaction in life without becoming a father. For example, Mary described how her new partner did not yet want to become a father and instead sought to pursue an international sporting career despite the fact that they were both approaching the age of 50.

It is possible that in the past, men's transition to fatherhood was an expected part of the lifecourse which men entered into with little thought or opinion, especially given that gender role expectations would have seen women as primarily, if not solely, responsible for the delivery of care for the infant and in the maintenance of the home. As previously noted, contemporary parenting ideologies now require more from men following the transition to fatherhood and include an expectation for them to be actively involved not only in providing financially for the child, increasingly alongside a partner who also remains in employment, but to also contribute to the emotional care and well-being of their offspring and engage in practices associated with intensive parenting. It is possible, similar to how the demands of intensive motherhood left some women feel ambivalent about becoming mothers (see Chapter 4 where this is discussed in more detail), that the demands and expectations placed on men to perform 'new' or 'intimate' fatherhood may contribute towards or compound men's ambivalence towards fathering. Despite this, it was common for the research participants to explain how they wanted their partner to choose fatherhood ideally on his own terms; as Livvy explained, she 'didn't want to pressure anyone in to it'. However, whilst the notion of motherhood as an eventual lifecourse experience continues to reflect the way women are socialised to assume maternal futures, men are currently not subject to the same pressures and expectations (Hinton & Miller, 2013). Thus, it is further possible to understand men's ambivalence towards fatherhood as the outcome of an individualistic culture where choices (such as the decision to become a father) are made based upon a relative assessment of costs and benefits. The men the women met were, similar to themselves, most often in their

mid-30s to early 50s, highly educated, financially secure and in well-paid professional jobs and had often lived alone or independently for many years. As such, the opportunity costs associated with entering fatherhood could potentially be quite substantial for these men. However, unlike their female counterparts, these men were not only under less social pressure to adhere to normative expectations of parenthood but were more able to 'put off' such a transition to later in the lifecourse. As Leona commented:

> If men want to delay things and have a great time in their 20s and go out to clubs and not necessarily worry about finding someone to settle down with, and they can have loads of fun for a decade, why would they rush to settle down.
>
> – Leona (39 years)

However, this lack of urgency on behalf of men to commit to fatherhood ultimately appeared to result in them acting as a drag on the fertility of the women they met and formed relationships.

7.3. Men as a Drag on Fertility

Previous research by Jamieson et al. (2010) examining men's attitudes towards partnering and parenthood has suggested that the lower level of interest some men display towards pursuing parenthood, such as that exhibited by the partners and potential partners of some of the research participants, can be attributed, in part, to the fact that much higher proportions of men compared to women inhabit relatively child-free social worlds. Jamieson et al. (2010) suggest that this lack of interaction with children helps keep fatherhood out of mind and prevents men from thinking about the potential joys of intimate parenthood or any consideration of when they might like to try and become a father. They further note how as a result men can act as a drag on women's fertility by slowing the process not only of forming a co-resident committed relationship but also of pursuing parenthood. The idea of men as 'drags on fertility' characterised the experiences of a large number of the women in this research and is captured well in the following two accounts from Claudia and Livvy.

Claudia (41 years) was divorced and had been in multiple relationships in search of the right partner with whom she could have a child. When I interviewed her, she was in the early stages of pregnancy after conceiving unexpectedly with her partner (aged 31). She told me how before she got pregnant she wanted to try to conceive via fresh IVF with her partner (her frozen eggs were no longer available) but explained how her partner was not yet ready to have a child. She told me:

> My partner said, 'we can talk about it in six months but not before then; I am not ready'. And then when I got pregnant, I was like 'why are you so upset? You knew we had a small

> chance of conceiving and you had agreed to talk about doing a fresh cycle in six months', and he was like 'no, I agreed to discuss it again in six months and what I was planning to do when we got to six months was to tell you I needed another six months'.

At the time of freezing her eggs, Claudia had long wanted to have children. She had been in multiple relationships during her 20s and 30s with men whom she described as unwilling to commit to fatherhood and had found it difficult to meet a partner who shared her parenting ambitions. She explained how, for her and many of the women she knew, delayed motherhood was at least in part shaped by men's attitudes to fatherhood. She explained:

> I have been so considerate to men, taking contraception, allowing them years of my life saying they are not ready […] the women that I know that don't have kids, it is because they have not got the right partner […] I think we have raised a nation of perpetual adolescent men.
>
> – Claudia (41 years)

Livvy also experienced discord in her relationship following an unexpected pregnancy. Shortly after unsuccessfully attempting to freeze her eggs when she was 35 due to her partner's reticence to commit to fatherhood, Livvy fell pregnant with twins. Shocked that she has fallen pregnant after being told she had a low ovarian reserve, she described how her partner did not want her to continue with the pregnancy. She told me:

> We were so unprepared I mean we hadn't even lived together before. So, in one year we had to, well first establish that we did still want to be together, and secondly move in together […] and then you know having twins and doing all that, it's been so many changes in one year!
>
> – Livvy (38 years)

Happily, however, Livvy went on to tell me how her partner was really enjoying being a father and had even suggested having more children. As a result, she commented that accidentally falling pregnant was probably the 'best thing that could have happened', because otherwise she may not have ever had children.

As both accounts from Claudia and Livvy demonstrate, it was not that these women had delayed becoming a mother due to their desire to travel, pursue advanced degrees or even to enjoy life as a child-free adult. Instead, the delay was due to the attitudes towards fatherhood and parenting held by their current or previous partners who had thus acted as a drag on their fertility by pushing them to attempt conception at a later stage in the lifecourse, despite the associated risks. Whilst both Claudia and Livvy had explained to their

current partners the risks of age-related fertility decline in women, their partners either did not take the information seriously[3] or were still unwilling to try to conceive and instead favouring the use of donor eggs. Such a finding reflects previous research which has shown that men are less informed about age-related fertility decline than women (Vassard et al., 2016) and that both men and women consistently overestimate women's ability to conceive at an older age and the efficacy of assisted reproductive technologies in overcoming fertility problems caused by age-related fertility decline (Daniluk et al., 2012; Eriksson, Larsson, Skoog Svanberg, & Tydén, 2013; Tough et al., 2007; Wyndham et al., 2012).

7.4. Negotiating Partnering and Parenthood in the Face of Age-related Fertility Decline

In addition to perceiving previous and current male partners as unwilling to settle down and commit to having a family, a small number of participants also articulated how they believed that women held less power in romantic relationships than men, particularly in relation to progressing the relationship beyond a merely casual setting. As Leona commented:

> I think a lot of the time my perception is that if two people are in a relationship, it's normally the guy that is slower to commit and it's kind of all done at his pace. When he is ready to settle down then he will propose, and then when he is ready to have children. So, I think that that is I part of it and that because they kind of call the shots.
>
> – Leona (39 years)

Leona's comment reflects other research which has indicated that both women and men believe there can be an unequal distribution of power in intimate relationships and which sees men having more control than women (Abowitz, Knox, Zusman, & McNeely, 2009; Felmlee, 1994; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). For example, whilst strict gender norms related to family life have been subverted in recent decades, such as the increase in the number of stay-at-home fathers (Locke, 2016) and maternal breadwinners (Cory & Stirling, 2015), the long-held tradition that only men should propose marriage (in heterosexual relationships) has remained stubbornly persistent and women who propose are sometimes perceived as desperate or emasculating (Strauss, 2016). Such

[3]Livvy had told her partner about age-related fertility decline, but told me:

> "Whenever I kind of broached the subject of all 'ohh you know but I am kind of getting on a bit', he'd just think that that I was being silly because there was plenty of women in their 40s having children and he just didn't see what all the fuss was about."

power imbalances in progressing intimate relationships, however, have potentially detrimental implications for women as they age. As such, Charlotte, who had also experienced numerous romantic disappointments, explained how she believed older women should not spend time in relationships which do not appear to have a future. She told me:

> For a woman their first mistake is like, once you are over the age of 35 – come on – if the guy is not proposing to you or moving things forward after a certain amount of time, as a woman you have got to have your boundaries.
>
> – Charlotte (42 years)

Negotiations involving the progression of intimate relationships towards commitment, cohabitation, marriage or motherhood often see women (who wish to have a genetically related child) have more at stake than their male partners. This may be for two reasons: firstly, because the sexist double standard of ageing sees men's sexual value increase as they age whereas the inverse is often the case for women; and secondly because the window of time in which women can pursue parenthood is significantly shorter than men. As such, men can often hold greater reproductive capital than women which can not only be deployed in their current relationship but also be transferred with relative ease in the future into new partnerships. By contrast, women in their late 30s or early 40s who are coming towards the final years of their fertile lives may have less of a chance of conceiving with a new partner. Such an inequitable situation can therefore be quite disempowering for women who are part of these 'precarious intimacies' and who are sometimes forced to engage in a process of reproductive negotiation and bargaining with their partner in an attempt to secure motherhood, such as that experienced by Claudia. Several other women in this research also described how they were faced with the decision to either remain in their current relationship and wait for their partner to either change their mind about, or become ready to pursue, fatherhood or leave their partner and try to find a new relationship in which to pursue motherhood. However, as Livvy described, leaving her 'perfectly good' relationship on the 'off chance' that she found someone 'better' and who did want children was potentially a high-risk strategy. This was in part because the participants believed that men may wish to avoid dating a woman in her late 30s imagining she would be desperate for a child. Therefore, to put off making decisions about fathering, women suggested that men would instead prefer to enter into relationships with younger women. As Oliva explained:

> Women complain at the moment that they have this fertility barrier that men don't, and so in the context of internet dating you have a load of women in their late 30s and the guys their age want to meet women who are five or 10 years younger and the women feel very resentful […] If someone is scrolling through a load of profiles they will look at 38-year-old woman that doesn't have children and think 'she will want kids, NEXT!' […] So you

> feel like you're fairly disadvantaged with an advert over your head saying: 'in final years of reproduction'.
>
> – Olivia (37 years)

Lacey and Johanna also remarked that cities such as London, where they believed there was a high number of single and unmarried adults, created less of a sense of urgency among men in particular to settle down in a long-term relationship. They explained:

> I do find in terms of like dating that a lot of men I meet around the same age as me are eternal bachelors basically, and even those that say that they want children I think they like the idea of having them but they don't actually want to change their lifestyle, whereas I think there are a lot of 40-year-old women that would happily give everything else up just to be able to have a child.
>
> – Lacey (40 years)

> I think certainly there have been a few guys who fall into this bracket of being commitment-phobic, and they are still in their late thirties early forties and they are still going out with their male friends and have no intention of ever wanting that to change […] and if a guy has got a big social group of male friends to support them in their single life they are not going to marry until they start to see their friends drop away, until their friends get off the bus. And the problem in London is a lot of them don't get off the bus!
>
> – Johanna (42 years)

In addition to these difficulties with dating at an older reproductive age, Aleen also described how the high population density of single adults in large cities meant that online dating in a person's 30s could be a particularly 'brutal' experience. She told me:

> It [dating] is pretty brutal […] you will be talking to someone online and then they will just disappear into thin air. I don't think people think about the fact that they are talking to people because they are hidden behind a computer screen […] So this would be typical that you get a message saying do you want to go out on Saturday night and I would get back to them and say yeah fine where shall we go and you hear nothing further from them. I am like so where did that person go? I think it's really rude and it annoys the fuck out of me […] probably he asked that question to 10 people and I was number four on the list and maybe number two or number three came in first and therefore he went with them. It's that callousness that's really there. You have to be emotionally strong for that shit.
>
> – Aleen (35 years)

The dual difficulties of finding a partner at an older reproductive age, and dating in a city seemingly densely populated by single adults, were exacerbated by the participants' perception that by their late 30s most of the men who were still in the dating pool were less interested in settling down and having children compared to their peers who had 'coupled up' by their late 20s. This led one participant to suggest that women who were looking for a commitment should consider dating men who were recently divorced. She told me:

> I think it's, I think a lot of the good ones get snapped up when they are younger, so it's like if you have been in a relationship most of your life, then being single, then you have been left with the dregs […] Divorcees, I think that's the way forward […] divorcees are perfect as they have kind of done the same route as me […] they will have made all of their mistakes before being married and they probably want to have a relationship; they know about give and take and know how to create room for someone in their life whereas guys who are a bit older are like eternal bachelors.
>
> – Lacey (40 years)

As such, it appeared that the problem that many of the women in this research were facing was not that there had been a complete 'flight from commitment' in men driven by the increasingly individualisation of the lifecourse but that many of the men who were still single in their late 30s and 40s held different attitudes towards commitment and fathering compared to their peers who had entered long-term relationships and marriages in their 20s and early 30s. Furthermore, whilst these currently single men may well go on to marry and have children, the participants believed that these men did not see women their age as viable partners. In such a context it is easy to see why egg freezing appealed to the participants because they not only saw the technology as offering them the possibility to 'freeze' time and therefore stop 'wasting' or 'losing' time, but it also helped prevent some women engaging in 'panic-partnering' and making the 'wrong' choice about their future partner. However, this research also found that egg freezing also had the potential to enable women to increase their value in the marketplace of marriage and improve their chances of attracting the right partner.

7.5. Signalling Fertility: Disclosing Frozen Eggs

As was explored in Chapter 4, despite often spending several thousand pounds on egg freezing, not all the participants described being wholly sure that they wanted to become a mother. Instead, some women described engaging with the technology to keep the option of parenthood 'open' in future, particularly should they meet a partner who wanted to have children. However, as Lacey explained:

> You are in a tricky situation as a 40-year-old. They [men] think she either really doesn't want kids and has made that decision, or

> she is desperate, and she is literally trying to trap a man and have sex with them in the next 10 minutes to see if she can have a baby.
>
> – Lacey (40 years)

Being perceived by men as either uninterested in motherhood or as desperate for a child posed significant barriers to developing a meaningful partnership that could lead to parenthood in the future. As such, some of the participants articulated how disclosing that they had frozen their eggs to a potential partner at the right moment could be a useful way to signal that whilst they may be older reproductively, they were potentially still 'fertile' and thus retained a degree of reproductive capital which could be deployed in the pursuit of parenthood. Charlotte told me:

> As an older single woman you don't want to talk about your age with men, because even if you look fabulously young, and are fabulously beautiful, and fabulously attractive, the minute you tell a man your age, you feel you are being sized up and judged […] But I am very open [about disclosing her frozen eggs] […] it would be a discussion I would have with a man in the first three to six dates to be honest with you in terms of letting him know what I have.
>
> – Charlotte (42 years)

Katie also suggested that whilst she may not disclose her frozen eggs to a partner or potential partner early on in a relationship, she would be more likely to bring up her eggs as the relationship began to get more serious, particularly if her partner wanted to have children. She explained that by doing so she would be able to allay any concerns about her reproductive abilities as well as reduce the need to try and attempt conception immediately due to her age. She said:

> It's certainly not something I would bring up on like a first date by any means […] I think once I knew I was actually interested in somebody and we were starting to date more seriously, I think I would bring it up really quickly. Because obviously I think if the person I was with, having a child or family was important to them and something they wanted, I think that it would probably take a lot of pressure off them too, or ease any fears they had about our ability to do that. And so, I think that, yes, I think I would bring it up pretty quickly and just let him know that that was an option so that it would take some of the pressure off our relationship probably, from feeling like we had to race into things and quickly move things forward so I could get pregnant before I'm 40.
>
> – Katie (38 years)

The average age of the participants at the time of freezing their eggs in this research was 37 years. However, Charlotte froze her eggs when she was 42 and as such was warned by her doctor to only expect to have around five eggs for

freezing after the retrieval process. However, after having many more eggs retrieved than was first anticipated, she was eventually able to freeze 15 eggs. She told me how this not only made her feel younger and as if she 'still had it' but that it also boosted her confidence in finding a partner. She also told me the following story about what had happened to her the previous weekend before our interview:

> This will make you laugh Kylie, and maybe this is one too many martinis, but I met a man this weekend who asked for my number and out of nowhere my girlfriend blurted out my age and I don't know why I said this because it's kind of funny but I said 'yeah, but don't worry about it I had my eggs frozen last week!' In the morning I was like 'oh my god, I am never drinking again!'.
>
> – Charlotte (42 years)

The way Charlotte talked about her eggs as something which she 'had' and Katie described as an 'option' which she wanted to inform potential partners about indicated how their eggs carried a sort of redemptive power which they felt could improve the way men perceived them as potential (reproductive) partners. Furthermore, instead of potentially writing her off as a woman who had chosen not to have children or one who would be unable to provide them a child in the future, Charlotte referred to her eggs as the 'bonus' a man would get if he decided to pursue a relationship with her and how her eggs were thus a 'gift with purchase' which a partner could redeem should he wish to try and create a family with her. Whilst she certainly meant this in a light-hearted and jovial manner, such an articulation reflects how Charlotte sought to mobilise her eggs as a tool to increase her desirability in the eyes of men in the marketplace of marriage and how, for her, the best way to do this was to demonstrate that she still carried reproductive capital which she could call upon if needed to create a family.

Such a conceptualisation of frozen eggs as an asset which could improve the market position of the owners was also evident in the way some of the participants described how they hoped or believed men may react to the information that they had banked eggs for potential future use. As Katie described:

> I think any man that I'm actually seriously interested in would see it as a very positive thing, just because I think that hopefully I would choose a man who […] You know, if I were seriously interested in somebody that they would be a person who was kind and with integrity and would view this [egg freezing] as a really awesome positive thing.
>
> – Katie (38 years)

While Katie and Sofia both suggested that a future partner might see their actions as sensible, Sofia also more explicitly recognised how her frozen eggs were not only an investment in her reproductive future but how they were valuable to herself and her partner:

> I was doing that [egg freezing] not only for me but for my future partner […] I also did it thinking when I find the right one then he will probably appreciate the fact that I have saved my fertility for the future.
>
> – Sofia (39 years)

However, some of the participants were unsure and felt conflicted about telling the potential partner that they had frozen their eggs as they were concerned about how they may respond to such a disclosure. As Aleen described:

> So I said to my friends but surely they [potential partners] will think that […] the pressure is off, the age I am at and I if meet someone, it should be well that's a relief she won't [want to have a baby soon] […] I thought they would think it would be a good thing, but my friends don't seem to think so […] They are like 'they [potential partners] will think you are a lunatic' […] but I am like 'well I am, but it's for a good cause in the long run'. 'But they will think you are a psycho, don't tell them' this is what my friends say to me.
>
> – Aleen (35 years)

The participants were often more anxious and circumspect about telling men about their frozen eggs than Charlotte was and were instead concerned that it might send out the message that they were desperate for a child, which was ironically the perception they were actively trying to counteract by freezing their eggs. As Hayley told me:

> I am much more reticent of telling guys who I might be dating […] they might completely freak out and think oh my god she needs to get pregnant ASAP, shit. So, it's not something I would tell openly to a new man on the scene.
>
> – Hayley (38 years)

At the time of freezing their eggs, 26 of the 31 women were single and a little over half of these women ($n = 15$) had since had experience of telling a partner, or potential partner, about their reserve of frozen eggs. Despite hoping that the disclosure of frozen eggs, or the intention to freeze eggs, would take the pressure off a current or future partnership, the participants reported that they believed this disclosure in fact prompted the end of the relationship in several instances.

> I have told people about what I've done, you know, prospective boyfriends and that sort of thing, and they're usually quite positive about it but they also realise how serious I am about having children and that sends some of them running for the hills.
>
> – Rachel (34 years)

> I said, 'look I am 34 now and at some point, in the future I would like to have kids; I am thinking of freezing my eggs as that would give me more time and take the pressure off'. And that was it, he never called me again.
>
> – Claudia (41 years)

However, it was common for the participants to suggest that if a potential partner did react negatively to the disclosure by either ending the relationship or explaining that they did not want to have children, then this would be indicative that they were not the 'right' partner with whom they would want to try to conceive anyway. This suggestion led three of the participants to explain that they had, or might in the future, disclosed information about their frozen eggs as a 'litmus test' to ascertain whether their partner was right for them and to determine quickly if they shared the same desire for parenthood.

> I was dating this guy Ivan, I think we'd been on two dates when I started the egg freezing process, so it was so new and I just up and told him outright. I said 'this is where I am in life and I really want to have kids, so I've decided to freeze my eggs'. And like I said, he was like 'that's awesome, great, good for you, that's fantastic'. I guess I was a little nervous, would that freak him out or would he think it was weird or desperate or whatever, and it went so well it was just like ok, that's great. And then what I really realised in that moment, and what I told my girlfriends too, who were also going through it, was if he didn't have that reaction then he is so obviously not the right person for me. So, I almost looked at it like this kind of litmus test.
>
> – Jen (39 years)

> I thought, I am going to tell him partly it's a bit of a test because I had a feeling that he didn't want to have children, and I thought well I need to know. So, I told him as a little test and bless him he was really sweet about it. He was like 'wow that's a really brave thing to do' […] we broke up shortly after that. He had said he had been really worried for quite some time to tell me that he didn't really want to have children.
>
> – Lacey (40 years)

As the accounts above indicate, the disclosure of frozen eggs was mobilised by the participants as a useful tool to not only communicate enduring reproductive capacities to potential partners in an effort to take the pressure off new relationships but also weed out unsuitable partners. However, two of the participants, Claudia and Mary, warned that women should not be too eager to tell prospective or current partners about their frozen reserve of eggs and suggested that women would be better served keeping the information to themselves for as long as possible. This was because disclosing the existence of the eggs could, as

Claudia had experienced, lead their partners to continue to try and delay parenthood, further acting as a drag on their now 'frozen fertility'.

> If I did it again I would never tell a man I had frozen eggs not unless he wanted children right away because I think what it does it says to a guy 'hey we don't have to do anything yet, she has got frozen eggs' and it can make them delay.
>
> – Claudia (41 years)

> I didn't want to tell him because I thought it would be an excuse for him to put it off and put it off, so I thought if he doesn't know I have my eggs I can be like 'well I am getting older and you know there aren't that many chances left for me now'.
>
> – Mary (49 years)

This chapter has sought to demonstrate how women's reproductive intentions and actions are intimately entangled with the procreative consciousness (Marsiglio, 1991) and impulses of potential and actual male partners who have a significant role in shaping the timing of parenthood and women's use of social egg freezing. It has shown how women drew on egg freezing technology as a tool of fertility extension and genetic conservation to keep open the possibility of motherhood with a partner as equally committed to parenthood as themselves and described how they sought to parent with a partner who would engage in practices of intimate fathering. However, this chapter has explored how women encountered negative and ambivalent attitudes from men about committing to a relationship long term and pursuing parenthood and suggested that these attitudes may have stemmed from the pressures and perceived opportunity costs of performing intimate fatherhood which can be seen as being at odds with cultural values of individualism. Whilst this research did not observe a wholesale 'retreat from marriage' like theorists of individualisation feared, the dual difficulty of finding a partner at an older reproductive age and dating in a city seemly densely populated by single adults was exacerbated by the participants' perception that men in their late 30s sought relationships with younger women where they were able to put off decisions about fatherhood. Unlike women who were under pressure to have children by both 'biological' and social 'clocks', the men they met were able to delay the transition to fatherhood until later in the lifecourse which had the effect of acting as a drag on women's fertility. This chapter concluded by demonstrating how women mobilised their frozen eggs not only to extend the time that they had to find a partner and to prevent themselves from engaging in 'panic-partnering' but as a useful tool to communicate enduring reproductive capacities to potential partners and thereby improve their position in the marketplace of marriage.