

# Time, Anticipation, and the Life Course: Egg Freezing as Temporarily Disentangling Romance and Reproduction

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## Abstract

This study examines women's use of egg freezing as a tool to renegotiate the relationship between romantic and reproductive trajectories and temporalities. We interviewed 52 participants who were considering freezing their eggs, were in the process of freezing their eggs, had already frozen their eggs, or had considered freezing their eggs and chose not to do so. We find that most of our participants used egg freezing to disentangle the trajectory of finding a partner from the trajectory of having children, with the end goal of bundled marriage and childbearing. For some participants, this temporary disentangling is an intermediate step toward fully decoupling these trajectories through single parenthood. Using this critical case, we move beyond previous work on sequencing and timing in the life course by focusing on (1) individuals' subjective experiences of time and (2) the ways women manage and manipulate time in the life course. Finally, we show how these theoretical tools can be used to better understand other empirical cases in the life course.

## Keywords

egg freezing, life course, reproduction, temporality, union and family formation

Union and family formation are occurring at increasingly older ages for women in the United States. From the 1940s through the early 1970s, women's average age at marriage was 20; it has now crept up to 27 (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). Over the past few years, the average age of first birth has reached record heights (Mathews and Hamilton 2016). Birth rates have simultaneously declined for women in their teens and early 20s and increased for women in their 30s and 40s (Martin, Hamilton, and Osterman 2017). Trends toward later transitions are even more pronounced for women with higher levels of education, who are now more likely to begin childbearing in their 30s compared to their counterparts in earlier

decades (Livingston 2018). In the midst of these demographic changes, increasing numbers of women are using reproductive technologies—including in vitro fertilization (IVF) (CDC 2017) and egg freezing (Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology 2018)—to manage and manipulate time in the life course.

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Egg freezing is a new reproductive technology that involves extracting and preserving women's reproductive cells in anticipation of future infertility. The use of this technology to "stop time"<sup>1</sup> by pausing the progression of a critical life-course timeline raises important questions for sociologists of the life course. What draws women to egg freezing, and what can egg freezing tell us about the management and manipulation of time in the life course more broadly? In this article, we analyze how women use egg freezing to manage their anticipations of the future, and in particular, to modify the relationship between their reproductive and romantic trajectories while still preserving the ideal of eventually having children with a romantic partner. Our analysis, using conceptual tools from the sociology of time, allows us to rethink the role of time in life course research while providing useful conceptual tools and theoretical insights for future work in the sociology of the life course.

"Time, context, and process" (Elder 1994) are critical elements in the study of the life course, but researchers in this area have tended to analyze time as an impersonal, linear measure progressing chronologically, using "clock time" or "calendar time," to study phenomena such as aging, birth spacing, and union duration. These impersonal conceptualizations of time are useful for certain research purposes. However, as we will show, we cannot adequately understand the appeal and use of egg freezing without attending to individuals' subjective experiences of time and their anticipations of the future, and without conceptualizing time as both something that actors experience as outside of their control and something they actively work to reshape.

Specifically, we go beyond examining time in terms of objective, chronological measures to look at (1) individuals' experience of time and (2) individuals' management and manipulations of time. In examining individuals' subjective experiences of time, we attend to actors' sense of the flow of time, their anticipations of the future, and their sense of the relationship between different

trajectories in their lives—in our empirical case, whether having children in the future is seen as tightly connected with or contingent on finding a partner. In the case of individuals' management and manipulation of time, we attend to how individuals create and revise trajectories as they move through them, including attempts to manipulate the relationships among different trajectories in their lives, such as modifying the relationship between finding a partner and having children. We introduce the concept of *disentanglement* of trajectories, a theoretical approach that is critical for understanding the appeal of egg freezing and that allows for a richer understanding of individual actors' progression through the life course more generally.

We conducted interviews with 52 women in different stages of the egg freezing process. We found that our participants used egg freezing as a tool to manipulate subjective experiences of time and to remake anticipations of the future. Women were fearful that rushing to find a partner with whom to have children was rationalizing their search for a romantic partner, making the process calculative and contrived. This prompted them to situate new relationships on a long-term time horizon, as they sought to temporarily disentangle their partner search from long-term childbearing goals. By *temporarily disentangle*, we mean cognitively isolating the different strands of experience and action so they could move forward according to their own desired temporalities. By pushing their imagined childbearing timeline further into the future through egg freezing, women hoped to bracket their childbearing goals and pursue romantic partnership for its own sake, rather than pursuing partnership as a means to have children. They hoped that temporarily taking apart these strands of experience and action would allow them to protect their romantic life from the rationalizing force of a ticking reproductive clock; participants aimed to eventually rejoin these trajectories, that is, have children with the "right" partner. Leveraging these insights, we show that attending closely to actors' experiences of and attempts

to remake trajectories and temporalities in the life course opens up new lines of inquiry for life course scholars and provides new ways of thinking about older lines of inquiry.

## THE CASE OF EGG FREEZING

Egg freezing, medically referred to as oocyte cryopreservation, is a new<sup>2</sup> and rapidly growing<sup>3</sup> reproductive technology that potentially preserves women's ability to produce genetic offspring. We focus on women who are freezing their eggs because they anticipate having difficulty getting pregnant and giving birth as they age. Women may also elect to freeze their eggs for other reasons, such as cancer patients or female-to-male transgender individuals preserving their genetic material before treatment. The process of egg freezing includes one to two weeks of hormone stimulation. This is followed by an outpatient procedure to retrieve the eggs that bloomed during that cycle. If a woman chooses to use her frozen eggs, she must fertilize them and implant them in her uterus (i.e., the second half of the IVF process). This may or may not result in a viable pregnancy. The likelihood of one round of IVF using frozen eggs resulting in a live birth is between 3 and 30 percent (Cil, Bang, and Oktay 2013). Success depends on the age at which the patient froze her eggs, the method of freezing used, and the number of embryos transferred.<sup>4</sup> Egg freezing is rarely covered by insurance. Women generally pay upward of \$10,000 for each cycle, in addition to annual storage fees of around \$1,000 and, if used, the cost of IVF. Current research on women's use of their frozen eggs suggests few women return to use them (Alvarez et al. 2015; Dahhan et al. 2014; Myers, Daily, and Jain 2015). Ultimately, although egg freezing is marketed as an "insurance policy" for women's future fertility, it involves a great deal of uncertainty.

Complete demographic information on women who freeze their eggs in the United States is not available. However, existing research suggests that most women who freeze their eggs are White, highly-educated,

have high incomes, and are in their late 30s (Baldwin et al. 2015; Hodes-Wertz et al. 2013; Myers 2017). Existing literature on egg freezing has focused on a broad range of social implications of the technology. This includes the medicalization of anticipated infertility (Martin 2010), the ethical issues raised by the technology (Baldwin et al. 2014), the enactment of "responsible" reproduction (Carroll and Krøløkke 2017), and the potential for egg freezing to reshape kinship structures (Schuman et al. 2013).

Egg freezing researchers disagree over whether the procedure is empowering (Goold and Savulescu 2009; Homberg, van der Veen, and Silber 2009; Mertes and Pennings 2011; Robertson 2014) or exploitative (Harwood 2009; Smajdor 2009). Among studies geared toward analyzing the appeal of egg freezing, the technology is occasionally framed as a way to delay childbearing until conforming to intensive mothering ideologies is possible (Baldwin 2017; Myers 2017). In contrast, evidence from survey research suggests women do not use egg freezing to purposefully delay childbearing. Instead, most women who freeze eggs do so because they are single and looking for a long-term partner with whom to have children (Baldwin et al. 2015; Greenwood, Pasch, and Huddleston 2017; Hodes-Wertz et al. 2013; Seyhan et al. 2017; Stoop, Nekkebroeck, and Devroey 2011). In what follows, we aim to adjudicate these conflicting accounts concerning why women elect to freeze their eggs.

In addition to being a phenomenon worthy of study for its own sake, egg freezing serves as a critical case for analyzing and reconceptualizing time in the life course. Women going through the egg freezing process reckon with perceived incongruences among imagined biological and social timelines (Waldby 2015). This creates a state of "hyper-projectivity" (Mische 2009) in which persons experience themselves careening toward the future. For many women, the decision to freeze eggs comes at an emotionally fraught moment in the life course, when previously taken-for-granted futures of marriage and childbearing

are called into question (Johnson-Hanks 2002). As we will show, these imagined futures come to be treated as projects requiring active work and attention, rather than impending futures they approach passively.

### *Temporality and the Life Course*

The life course, “a sequence of socially defined events and roles that individuals enact over time,” offers an inherently temporal view of social life (Giele and Elder 1998:22). The traditional life-course perspective includes three temporal dimensions: (1) the individual life span from birth to death (aging); (2) the social timetable of the life course (life stages); and (3) historical time (Elder 1977; Ryder 1965). Demographers have devoted considerable attention to the chronology of life-course events, especially timing and sequencing, emphasizing the social structures that explain patterns in these areas. Theoretical work on the life course has mostly been devoted to social-psychological (Elder 1994; Frye and Trinitapoli 2015; Karp and Yoels 1982; Neugarten 1979) and structural-cultural questions (Holstein and Gubrium 2007; Johnson-Hanks 2006; Johnson-Hanks et al. 2011). These perspectives have enriched our understanding of how individuals perceive life-course stages and how life-course trajectories change across history. However, previous work has left unexplored the ways individuals might experience and manipulate the temporality of life-course trajectories themselves.

For scholars of the life course interested in “time, context, and process” (Elder 1994), recent sociological work on time offers useful tools for understanding individuals’ experiences of time and their anticipation of the future. As opposed to the linear temporal measures, such as age or clock time, in which time continuously marches on in uniform increments, this line of work focuses on continuities and discontinuities in temporal experience (Zerubavel 1979, 2003), the shifting speeds of temporal experience (Elias 1992; Sorokin and Merton 1937), and the multiplicity of temporalities, including biological,

cultural, historical, and institutional forms of temporality (Lewis and Weigert 1981; Mills 2000; Nowotny 1992; Zerubavel 1979). Temporality is shaped by power structures, especially social class (Auyero 2012; Bourdieu 2000; O’Rand and Ellis 1974; Schwartz 1974).

Most work on the life course does not attend to individuals’ experiences of time (Hitlin and Elder 2007) or other constructions of time such as institutional time (Mills 2000), but some notable work has reexamined time in the life course. Many scholars have worked on the subjective experience of aging (especially in gerontology), age norms and expectations, and the individualization of the life course (Diehl et al. 2015; Settersten and Mayer 1997). Other work goes beyond looking at the life course in terms of a singular, linear route, emphasizing that the life course is marked by inflection points after which life-course pathways change course (Abbott 2001; Johnson-Hanks 2002). This work suggests that the life course should be studied through analyzing individuals’ aspirations of multiple possible futures, rather than focusing narrowly on events (Johnson-Hanks 2002).

Hitlin and Elder (2007) connect notions of time in the life course to the concept of agency. They argue that individuals exercise different forms of agency depending on their orientation toward the future. They describe one form of this agency as life-course agency, oriented toward the long-term future and toward past transitions, which they distinguish from other, more immediate agencies (i.e., pragmatic). When applying these ideas to empirical cases, life-course scholars have kept analyses of time in the life course at a long-term, outcome-focused level (Hitlin and Kirkpatrick Johnson 2015). In this way, they have failed to consider the interaction between shorter- and longer-term forms of anticipating the future.

Other theorists of time look at the connections and disconnections between different ways of anticipating the future. For instance, Tavory and Eliasoph (2013) distinguish between an individual’s moment-to-moment anticipations of the future, called *protentions*,

and long-term, naturalized, and taken-for-granted orientations toward the future, referred to as plans. Both of these stand in contrast to trajectories,<sup>5</sup> which are more explicit long-term narratives and reflexive modes of future orientation. Protenctions and trajectories may be connected or disconnected. For example, when a single woman goes on dates, she may or may not experience a connection between the moment-to-moment anticipations of her dating experience and her long-term marriage and childbearing plans.

Individuals' future projectivity in trajectories varies along multiple dimensions (Mische 2009, 2014). These include the range of possibilities in view, the degree to which the individual sees herself moving toward the future as opposed to a sense that the future is coming toward her, and the reach of the individual's time horizons, or how far into the future she anticipates and makes plans.

A critical dimension of projectivity useful for understanding the appeal of egg freezing is *connectivity*, or the imagined linkages between trajectories, including the degree to which some imagined future possibilities are experienced as contingent on others (Mische 2009). For example, as we will show, our participants experienced a tight connection between the search for a romantic partner and their ticking reproductive timelines. Accordingly, women felt their partner search was rushed. In addition to experiencing the flow of time and the connections between different trajectories, individuals actively work to manipulate their experiences of time (Flaherty 2003, 2012) and to renegotiate the relationship between different trajectories (Mische 2009).

We import these conceptualizations of time and anticipation from the sociology of time into the study of the life course, building on these concepts to develop the concept of *disentanglement* of trajectories. As we will show, the notion of disentanglement allows us to understand the appeal of both egg freezing and its relationship to our participants' movements through the life course.

Within union and family formation, demographers have focused on the timing of life

course stages and transitions, such as early or delayed childbearing and marriage (e.g., Goldstein and Kenney 2001; Heck et al 1997; Keyfitz 1975). By focusing on the timing of life-course stages and transitions in union and family formation, but not attending to individuals' subjective experiences of time, demographers and sociologists have been unable to delve into important elements of how individuals both experience and attempt to manipulate their life-course trajectories. In making sense of individuals' actions and interactions, it is critical to determine whether people's protentions in the present are linked to longer-term trajectories and plans in the life-course.

For example, when a couple has sexual intercourse they might be thinking only about the very next moment, rather than linking the present to a long-term family formation plan, a dimension linked to the propensity to have unprotected sex (Flood 2003; Higgins and Hirsch 2008; Raine et al. 2010). The connections and disconnections between protentions and long-term trajectories, and between the present and the future, are not only passively experienced. They are also actively managed and manipulated, especially with recourse to new reproductive technologies. For example, a married couple planning a potential divorce may work to bracket this imagined future dissolution in order to have another child in the near future.

Sociologists of union and family formation have also given significant attention to sequencing of events. They have especially focused on atypical sequencing, including childbearing before marriage (Cherlin, Ribar, and Yasutake 2016; Guzzo and Hayford 2010; Manlove et al. 2010; Wu, Bumpass, Musick 2000), cohabitation before marriage (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Smock 2000), and sexual intercourse before marriage (England, Wu, and Shafer 2013; Wu, Martin, and England 2017).

In focusing primarily on the sequencing of events, however, scholars tend to assume that two events that typically occur in a particular sequence are stops along a single trajectory. In contrast, these events may in fact be experienced as separate but related trajectories with

distinct temporalities. Examining sequencing is important, but it should be coupled with analyses of changing levels of *connectivity* between different trajectories. This connectivity happens at both the individual level and the level of changing structural and cultural conditions. In union and family formation, for example, becoming an adult is no longer considered contingent on getting married (Cherlin 2004). For some women, having children is no longer contingent on finding a suitable marriage partner, a shift that allows women to manage the uncertainty of their marriage trajectories (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Hertz 2006).

Although decoupling parenthood and partnership through single motherhood continues to be stigmatized, an overly tight connection between certain union and family formation projects is also taboo. The culturally dominant justification for marriage is romantic love, not childbearing or other outcomes (Coontz 2006; Simpson, Campbell, and Berscheid 1986; Whitehead and Popenoe 2001), a condition that may make disentangling marriage and childbearing trajectories more appealing. Work and family scholarship goes beyond observing levels of connectivity among different trajectories and devotes considerable attention to how individuals actively work to renegotiate the relationship between their family and career trajectories (Blair-Loy 2003; Damaske 2011; Gerson 1985, 2010). Ultimately, it is critical to explore the connections and disconnections between different trajectories rather than taking them for granted, and to examine the ways individuals attempt to manipulate the relationships among different trajectories and thus reshape their experiences of time. This is the starting point of our empirical analysis.

## **METHODS**

This article relies primarily on 67 in-person, in-depth interviews conducted using a life story technique (Atkinson 1998). Interviews are particularly useful for understanding the “emotional landscape of desire, morality, and expectations” people inhabit (Pugh 2013:50).

Interviews also allow for an in-depth, open-ended examination of meaning-making and planning for the future. During the interviews, we asked questions about participants’ childhoods, education history, work history, dating and relationship history, past and present social connections, decision-making and experience with egg freezing, cultural attitudes about marriage and childbearing, and hopes and plans for the future with regard to work, romantic relationships, and family. Interviews lasted between one and three hours. Participants were eligible for the study if they were seriously considering freezing their eggs, were in the process of freezing their eggs, had already frozen their eggs, or seriously considered freezing their eggs and then chose not to do so.

We conducted interviews with 52 participants,<sup>6</sup> as well as 15 follow-up interviews with 12 of those participants. We conducted follow-up interviews with participants who in their initial interview indicated they anticipated changes in their partnership, parenthood, or egg freezing statuses in the near future. Some follow-up interviews were conducted over the phone. All interviews were conducted between March 2016 and August 2017, a time span that limited our ability to study changes to our participants’ plans for the future over a long period of time. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality, and we omit potentially identifying information, such as employers’ names.

Interviews were conducted with one of two authors, and both authors conducted about the same number of interviews. Each author listened to the interviews they did not conduct and wrote memos on the interviews within a week of their occurrence. All follow-up interviews were conducted by the original interviewer. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, either by the authors or by professional transcriptionists, and then coded in Dedoose (2018). We initially coded emerging themes from the memo writing process, and we fine-tuned the codes over time in dialogue with our data and with relevant literature, making use of abductive analysis (Tavory and

Timmermans 2014). Examples of parent codes include “appeal of egg freezing,” in which we coded for discussions of what drew participants to freezing their eggs, and “egg freezing decision-making,” in which we coded for the factors that contributed to our participants making the final decision to freeze their eggs. We each coded all of the transcripts; we then conducted a reconciliation process for any differences in coding, finding and resolving 28 discrepancies beyond trivial differences such as the length of the unit of analysis, which ensured reliability in our interpretation of the data.

Because egg freezing is most prevalent among a small and specific segment of society, we used a targeted recruitment strategy. As part of recruitment, we visited all known fertility centers in New York City and asked if we could leave study flyers in the waiting rooms. Several fertility centers complied. We also put up flyers at local universities and cafés, posted in online forums for women interested in egg freezing, emailed groups of female professionals, and maintained Facebook and Twitter accounts throughout the study for recruitment purposes. We also recruited using snowball sampling, asking our participants if they knew anyone else who might be interested in joining the project at the conclusion of the interview. We found participants through all these methods, but we were most successful in recruiting participants via online strategies. We ultimately conducted in-person interviews with women who lived in the metropolitan areas of New York City, Boston, Washington, DC, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Our sample is limited to women who lived and worked in large metropolitan areas in the United States, and therefore we cannot speak to the experience of women freezing their eggs in other countries or outside of major U.S. urban areas.

In our sample of 52 women (see Table 1), 28 were White, five were Black, 12 were Asian, two were Hispanic, and five were Middle Eastern. The average age of our participants at the time of the first interview was 35; this includes participants who had

conducted the egg freezing process, those who were still considering whether to freeze, and those who had previously considered egg freezing but ultimately decided not to freeze. The average age of our participants at the time of egg freezing was 36. At the time of the first interview, five participants were students without income and five were unemployed. Not including these participants, the mean annual personal income at the time of the interview was about \$100,000. All participants had completed college. At the time of participants’ last interview, 30 women had completed a cycle of egg freezing (“freezers”), 19 were considering freezing their eggs (“thinkers”), and three had considered freezing their eggs but had decided against it (“decided not to freeze”) (see Table 1). Three participants identified as lesbian, bisexual, or queer and had or were looking for female romantic partners.

Among the participants who froze their eggs, at the time of egg freezing, 25 were single and never married, two were single and divorced, three were in romantic relationships, and none were married. Among the women seriously considering freezing their eggs, at the time of the first interview, 10 were single and never married, three were single and divorced, two were in romantic relationships, and four were married. Among the three women who seriously considered freezing their eggs but decided not to, at the time of the interview, two were married and one was in a serious relationship; all three of these participants were single when they began seriously considering egg freezing. Consistent with research that shows few women return to use their frozen eggs (Myers et al. 2015), only two of our participants had used their frozen eggs at the time of the last interview, and neither was successful.

## RESULTS

### *Disentangling Romantic and Reproductive Trajectories*

Most of our participants were single and looking for a long-term partner to have children

**Table 1.** Participant Characteristics

	Full Sample	Freezers	Thinkers	Decided Not To Freeze
Race				
Asian	23%	13%	42%	0
Black	10%	13%	5%	0
Hispanic	4%	0%	11%	0
Middle Eastern	10%	13%	5%	0
White	54%	60%	13%	100%
Country of origin				
United States	83%	87%	74%	100%
International	17%	13%	26%	0
Mean age at interview	35	37	33	35
Mean age at egg freezing	N/A	37	N/A	N/A
Employment status at interview				
Not working	10%	11%	11%	0
Full-time, unpaid student	10%	0	26%	0
Works part-time	4%	3%	0	33%
Works full-time	77%	87%	63%	67%
Career field <sup>a</sup>				
Arts and media	12%	10%	11%	33%
Business and law	40%	27%	37%	NA
Medicine and research	13%	17%	5%	33%
Social or public service	19%	20%	21%	NA
Student	15%	7%	26%	33%
Income at interview (mean) <sup>b</sup>				
\$127,000	\$127,000	\$136,000	\$107,000	\$79,000
\$0 to \$50,000	31%	17%	47%	67%
\$50,001 to \$100,000	29%	33%	26%	NA
\$100,001 to \$150,000	21%	27%	16%	NA
\$150,001+	17%	23%	5%	33%
Relationship status at interview				
Single and never married	58%	67%	53%	NA
Divorced, currently single <sup>c</sup>	10%	7%	16%	NA
In a relationship	15%	17%	11%	33%
Married	17%	10%	21%	67%
Relationship status at egg freezing				
Single and never married	N/A	25 – 83%	N/A	N/A
Divorced, currently single	N/A	2 – 7%	N/A	N/A
In a relationship	N/A	3 – 10%	N/A	N/A
Married	N/A	0	N/A	N/A
Fertility outcome at final interview <sup>d</sup>				
Nulliparous	87%	83%	100%	33%
Pregnant	8%	10%	0	33%
Child(ren)	6%	7%	0	33%
% of full sample	100%	58%	37%	6%
N	52	30	19	3

<sup>a</sup>Does not include unpaid full-time students.

<sup>b</sup>Income mean does not include unpaid full-time students, unemployed participants, and one refusal. Accordingly, this number is slightly inflated.

<sup>c</sup>All divorced participants were also single at the time of the interview; no one was divorced and in a relationship or remarried.

<sup>d</sup>None of the pregnant or parenting women successfully conceived using eggs they had frozen. Four were impregnated through intrauterine insemination (IUI), one through IVF with donor eggs, and one through sexual intercourse.

with at the time of the interview, or they were looking for a long-term partner to have children with at the time they froze their eggs. Egg freezing is often portrayed as a way for high-powered working women to delay childbearing for the sake of professional advancement.<sup>7</sup> However, only seven of our participants brought up career factors as driving them to freeze their eggs.<sup>8</sup> These women described needing time to overcome occupational and financial instability. This is in contrast to popular narratives about using egg freezing to delay childbearing to make partner at a law firm or become CEO of a company. Most of our participants framed romantic concerns as the primary driver for freezing their eggs or looking into egg freezing. Even women who did profess concerns about occupational or financial stability as it related to childbearing often coupled such concerns with worries about their romantic lives.

Our participants anticipated age-related infertility (Martin 2010): they believed their ability to get pregnant and have children would decline over time or had perhaps already begun to decline. The childbearing trajectory is often rife with uncertainty: the speed of the decline and the precise end of the reproductive timeline are unknown. For women who want to have genetic children with a romantic partner, with or without assisted reproductive technology, beating their imagined ticking reproductive clock is connected to and contingent on finding a partner. Most of our single participants experienced pressure to find a partner quickly due to this contingency; they were plagued by a sense they were running out of time to have children with a partner. They portrayed egg freezing as enabling them to manage these anxieties by temporarily disentangling the project of finding a partner from the project of having children.

Our participants often reflected on a shift in their orientation toward romantic relationships and future childbearing: from taking future marriage and childbearing for granted when they were younger, especially in adolescence and their 20s, to needing to approach these futures as projects on which they must

actively work. Asked if she imagined herself having kids when she was a teenager, Ora, a 34-year-old White woman who worked in the fashion industry and who was considering freezing her eggs at the time of the first interview, said:

For sure. And it was—it felt very like, *Well, of course*. But it didn't feel as intentional, find a partner, find a person that you want to have children with, duh duh duh . . . it was more like, *Yeah, of course . . . in a thousand years*. But now that time has come, so . . . [laughs].

Like Ora, most of our participants recounted a shift from taking future partnership for granted to needing to actively work, in an “intentional” way, at finding a partner, transforming futures that seemed inevitable into purposive trajectories (Tavory and Elia-soph 2013). Our participants often attributed this shift to developing a sense of their own dwindling ability to get pregnant.

### *Working on Romance*

Some women began relating to romance as a project on which they actively needed to work. This could be due to a break-up or a long period of singleness, experiencing family and friends entering long-term relationships and getting married, receiving external pressure from contacts who told them it was important to find a partner to have children with soon, or when they reached “magic numbers” (Martin 2017), such as age 35, that serve as cultural road signs of their declining grasp on the chance to have children.

Hadiya, for example, a 37-year-old Black woman working as a nurse, was in the process of freezing her eggs during our first interview. Asked to explain why she started “panicking” about relationships at 35, she said:

Because everyone knows 35 is the magic number, all of a sudden you're high risk, all of a sudden I thought all my eggs are going to just like, I don't know, disintegrate, and I am now not going to have a kid. I don't

know, I was just freaking out. So I went—so at 35, that was when I first went and had a consultation with the fertility doctor.

Turning 35 signaled to Hadiya that she needed to begin actively working toward finding a partner and having children, for fear her eggs might “disintegrate.” Confronted with a ticking reproductive clock in the face of a future rapidly coming toward her (Mische 2009), Hadiya lamented the tight connection between her search for a partner and her pursuit of having children. Asked about the appeal of egg freezing, Hadiya talked about protecting her romantic life from the temporal constraints of her reproductive timeline:

Without the egg freezing, maybe I would date a guy or end up with a guy I shouldn't be, just because maybe he wanted a child and that's what we want, but in reality I really . . . I just don't want to have a child with anyone. I actually would like to be . . . I want to be with the person that I want to be with and out of that have a child, and I think egg freezing will allow me to do that instead of doing it the other way.

Hadiya made a distinction between finding a partner for its own sake, with whom she will eventually have children, and looking for a partner as a means to have children. She framed egg freezing as a way to achieve the former, by disentangling her search for a partner in the present from an imagined rapidly-moving reproductive timeline.

This was a prominent pattern among our participants: they hoped that egg freezing would loosen the tight connection between their reproductive timeline and their path to finding a long-term romantic partner. They expressed three major advantages to disentangling these projects: first, our participants imagined that egg freezing would make it possible to find the right partner and avoid “settling” due to decreased time pressure; second, they hoped egg freezing would allow the romantic trajectory to achieve a slow, organic temporality, protected from a rationalizing ticking clock; and third, they intended

to use egg freezing to signal to prospective partners that they were not rushed or looking for a partner as a means to have children.

Like Hadiya, Chloe, a 33-year-old White and Latina woman who worked in product management and was considering freezing her eggs, described the appeal of egg freezing in terms of disentangling her dating life from her long-term childbearing goals:

My number one priority is to find a play-partner to have a blast with who stretches me, grow, and we can learn, and I'm not willing to give that up to have a family at the right time. So [egg freezing] is my way of putting the family thing over here, so that I can focus on the super compatibility, and not feel like, *Oh, sometimes you have to give things up in life, and people aren't perfect.*

Chloe hoped that by pushing her reproductive timeline further into the future, she could disattend from concerns about future family (“putting the family thing over here”), thereby bracketing her imagined future childbearing trajectory (Husserl 1960). She hoped to pursue dating and relationships for their own sake, rather than as a means to have children within a certain timeframe (“I'm not willing to give that up to have a family at the right time”).

Similarly, Catherine, a White, 39-year-old acupuncturist who was briefly married in her mid-30s, was considering freezing her eggs at the time of her interview. When asked what originally appealed to her about egg freezing, Catherine explained she was drawn to egg freezing because she thought it would help her reshape her dating life by disconnecting her search for a partner from her concerns about her reproductive timeline:

Just the fact that, you know, you didn't have to date people thinking, *Oh God, I have like a year. Are you right for me? Are you right?* It makes you sort of anxious to try to find a partner because you feel like you have to do it fast, which can lead to you making wrong decisions because you have this goal of a

baby as opposed to this goal of a partnership, which I think could be dangerous.

Catherine expressed that her reproductive timeline should not dictate her partner search, and that the project of having children should be distinct from and secondary to the pursuit of finding the right person. Although this motivated her interest in egg freezing, Catherine was leaning toward not freezing her eggs at the time of the interview, due to concerns about its effectiveness: “From my research, it doesn’t seem to be a guarantee at all.”

### *Avoiding Settling*

To be clear, most participants still hoped their partnership and parenthood projects would come together in the form of bundled marriage and family, and they saw having children as contingent on finding a partner. By punting the imagined end of their reproductive timeline further into the future, they could date without simultaneously attending too closely to their desire for children. Modifying the relationship between these two trajectories enabled them to reshape their subjective experience of each trajectory’s temporality. The disentangling of these projects was temporary: they hoped to isolate their romantic lives from their plans to have children for the time being, to avoid subordinating their search for a partner to the temporal constraints of a dwindling reproductive timeline.

But this disentangling is important. The pressure to find a partner quickly conflicts with romanticized notions about finding the right person, an imagined path with a desired temporality, undiluted by pragmatic concerns or strategic efforts. Our participants expressed fear that too tight of a connection between the pursuits of finding a partner and of having children could lead to “settling.” Egg freezing was repeatedly portrayed as a means of avoiding settling with someone who was not right for them by extending their reproductive timeline. For example, Ana, a Black, 40-year-old real estate broker who froze her eggs at

age 37, said that egg freezing gives women “an enormous amount of freedom.” Asked what she meant by that, she responded:

I have a lot of friends who maybe rushed into having children because of their timing, just their biological clock is ticking, and it’s not that they didn’t want to have children, but they’re choosing—and by their own admission—to have children with people who they probably wouldn’t have had children with if they had taken the time to form a real relationship with someone and do it traditionally. So I mean, it gives me the freedom to . . . pursue my career, my dreams, the freedom to choose the right mate for me, and you know, live my life.

Settling, in this context, refers to marrying an undesirable partner in order to have children. Several participants framed egg freezing as a way to avoid settling. They drew boundaries between their own imagined trajectories and the trajectories of their friends or family members who they understood to have settled. Chloe, for example, was critical of friends who have a “70 percent compatibility” level with their partners, and she distinguished this from her own desired partnership search: “I want 90, 95 percent compatibility.” She framed egg freezing as a way to avoid “force-fitting” substandard relationships to meet “some arbitrary deadline.” In addition to avoiding settling with imagined undesirable partners, participants also framed egg freezing as a way to avoid going back to tumultuous or unhappy past relationships.

Most of our participants were concerned about sacrificing their selectivity. However, a few talked about the underside of being too selective about their partners. Samantha, a White, 39-year-old executive at a media company, seriously considered freezing her eggs, but she decided not to do so when she met her current husband. Reflecting on their relationship, she said, “I stopped being so particular. . . . [There are] parts of him that are not perfect and I think that earlier I would be too much of a perfectionist about people.” Samantha framed settling as a product of

maturation. Finding a marriage partner, even one who might be less than “perfect,” made freezing her eggs less desirable.

### *Achieving Desired Romantic Temporality*

In addition to helping participants avoid “settling” with substandard partners, disentangling romantic and reproductive projects holds the promise of allowing women to achieve a desired temporality in their dating lives, without situating each new relationship on a long-term time horizon. For example, Olivia, a 41-year-old White woman who worked for a healthcare company, froze her eggs after separating from her husband. In our first interview with Olivia, she described the benefits of egg freezing for her own life:

I don't believe in investing time kind of crazily trying to meet somebody now to be my baby-daddy. What I think I accomplish with freezing my eggs is to give myself time to let things organically happen and not run around like a crazy person trying to make something happen. That doesn't make sense.

Olivia did not want to try to “make things happen” in her romantic life or force her romantic life to fit her reproductive timeline. Extending her reproductive timeline helped her truncate the time horizon of her dating life, allowing her to pursue romantic partnership “organically,” without the constraints of a rationalizing ticking clock.

Other participants explicitly described how the pressures of a long-term time horizon damaged their dating lives. We interviewed Jackie, a White, 34-year-old executive director at a nonprofit, before and after she froze her eggs. During the first interview, she expressed that freezing her eggs would allow her to be more relaxed about the timeline of her romantic relationships:

[W]hat I want it [egg freezing] to do is to liberate me from like, looking at every single new relationship like, alright, like,

today's July 28th, [2016]. We're going out on August 1st, so like, by August 1st, 2017, like, we can like . . . a year from now, I'll like, know if this is the person or not the person, and then I can get pregnant or I can get married if I wanna like do that, and go through that.

Just as Olivia framed egg freezing as allowing her dating life to be more “organic,” Jackie framed egg freezing as allowing her to access a desired temporality in her dating life, ideally truncating an overly rational and over-extended time horizon. Simply put, with egg freezing, she hoped she could date without fixating on her end goal of family. Jackie depicted an imagined, undesirable temporality of future romantic partnerships that she hoped egg freezing would help her escape:

I guess I don't wanna go from like, to rush through like, part of getting to know each other in like the early part of the relationship, and then to go right in—to like, rush through, hurry up, real quick, get married, and to like, rush to try and have a baby, and . . . I don't know, I guess I have these like, baked in ideas about what sorts of timelines work.

Narratives of fast, immediately intense romance, or love at first sight, permeate popular culture (Illouz 1998). Nevertheless, our participants idealized a slow build in their romantic lives that they hoped would lead to stable partnerships; a romantic temporality they hoped egg freezing could help them access.

Jackie expressed a desire to use egg freezing to help her disconnect the protentions, or moment-to-moment anticipations, of her romantic life from the long-term project of having children. She hoped to truncate her imagined future trajectory of finding a romantic partner by disconnecting it from the project of having a child, renegotiating the connectivity between the two trajectories (Mische 2009). Jackie feared that her sense of urgency to find a partner to have children with left her unable to access a more idealized

romantic temporality, oriented toward slowly and “organically” getting to know prospective partners. She hoped egg freezing would allow her to shift her dating interactions to this more romanticized temporality, with a short-term time horizon, temporarily disconnected from her long-term goals of getting married and having children.

Other participants identified the tensions inherent in a rushed romantic temporality and saw it as making dating lives too rational and calculative. They talked about the dangers of being “ambitious” in relationships; about wanting to let their romantic lives unfold in an “organic” way; about not wanting to have “end-game Mr. Right”; and about wanting their romantic lives to be “magic.” Disentangling romantic and reproductive temporalities through freezing reproductive cells holds the promise of isolating romantic pursuits from the rationalizing force of a ticking reproductive clock and restoring the “magic” to the search for a partner.

### *Temporal Signaling in Romantic Interactions*

Several participants expressed hope that by freezing their eggs and accessing an idealized romantic temporality, they would better align their own trajectories with prospective partners. This would help them avoid signaling that they were “in a rush” to have children. This phenomenon was often experienced as deeply gendered.

Beth, for example, a White, 34-year-old woman who worked in the pharmaceutical industry, lamented that “there’s no clock for men.” Our participants often tried to prove to prospective male partners that they were not on a fast-track to long-term partnership and childbearing, deploying their frozen eggs as evidence. Isa, a 42-year-old Black woman who worked in finance and who froze eggs and embryos created with donor sperm, used her frozen eggs to signal to prospective partners that her dating life was disconnected from her childbearing trajectory, allowing for the desired temporality:

I told one guy that I was dating, ‘cause he was like, *You’re 42, you’ll want a family right away*, and I was like, *No*, I said, *I’m not in a rush. I froze eggs, I froze embryos*. I said, *I have options*. So I want to enjoy the process of a relationship, I don’t want to rush it. Which you know, obviously now is fine. But if—a few years ago it might have been different.

In the process of coordinating futures with prospective partners, Isa used her frozen eggs to signal that her protentions were disconnected from the long-term project of having children: “I’m not in a rush. I froze eggs.” Isa, along with other women in our study, framed a truncated time horizon in her partnership trajectory as an important asset on the dating market. Similarly, Madeline, a 36-year-old White Orthodox Jewish woman who worked in real estate, told prospective partners that she froze her eggs:

I think I’ve told three guys, and . . . everyone’s like, *Okay, great*. I think for guys, even—especially in the religious community, I think it, they’re like, *Oh you’re 36? And you froze your eggs? That’s great*. Like, it makes them feel better. So, I don’t know if that’s, it’s not really true, right, because there’s only a 10 percent [chance] that the eggs will—like that’ll work out. But in their mind, it makes them feel better.

Madeline is conscious that her frozen eggs are unlikely to lead to a live birth. Nonetheless, she deploys them in dating interactions to signal to men that she is young enough to be considered a suitable partner and has ample time left to have children.

Other participants hoped that having frozen eggs would keep them from sending unintentional signals or “vibes” to prospective partners in dating interactions. Olivia consistently referred to egg freezing as a “desperation avoidance strategy”; she wanted to avoid signaling to men that she was hurriedly searching for a partner to have children with. Similarly, Tracey, a 35-year-old White and Lebanese woman who worked in clinical research, was in the process of freezing her

eggs at the time of the interview. She talked about not wanting to have an “air of desperation” on dates, and she framed this as part of the appeal of freezing her eggs:

You’d like, get down on yourself for being single and not meeting anyone, and then always in the back of your head, just like, *You’re getting older and if you want to have kids . . . blah blah blah*. It’s like, it’s so hard at least for me, and probably for a lot of girls, it’s hard to just not always have that in the back of your head . . . and probably part of the reason I thought maybe if I froze my eggs I would—I would just take away that . . . I don’t know if I was just putting out a vibe, like *I need to find someone quick and like make it work so we can do the normal, okay, date for a year and then maybe get engaged, okay, and then like a year from then get married and then maybe a year from then have kids*.

Having frozen eggs was framed as an interactional tool in participants’ romantic lives, either directly deployed to signal they were not “in a rush” to find a partner to have children with, or as a means to avoid sending unintentional signals of rushed temporality.

Part of the appeal of egg freezing is its ability to disentangle the pursuit of finding a partner from the pursuit of having children. Many participants feared that too much pressure to find someone quickly could lead them to “settle” with the wrong person, and they wanted to avoid an over-rationalized or overly pragmatic manner of dating. They drew on cultural narratives of the appropriate temporality of dating, which was in tension with their sense of a ticking biological clock. They used egg freezing to change the nature of their own experience of finding a partner and to signal to prospective romantic partners that they were not in a “rush” to get married or have children.

Among the small number of participants who were married or in serious relationships, egg freezing was also framed as a way to reshape the relationship between their romantic and reproductive trajectories. Paige, a

White, 35-year-old doctoral student who was in a serious relationship when she froze her eggs, described a desire to not think about relationships as “household-building scenarios.” She described egg freezing as a “backup” and a way to take pressure off her relationship: “I think [egg freezing] will make it better because I won’t feel so much pressure and we can just let things happen how they happen.” Participants who were in relationships or married still framed egg freezing as allowing them to disentangle their romantic trajectories from their paths toward childbearing.

Vanessa, a 36-year-old Asian woman who worked as an actor, was considering egg freezing in part because she saw it as a kind of insurance on her marriage:

I’m like, people’s feelings change, and let’s be realistic, I love my husband, we’re great right now, but you never know what’s going to happen. What if I blow my chance at having my own biological child and we’re not even together anymore? So those are some of the thoughts that ran through my head in terms of considering freezing my eggs.

For Vanessa, having frozen eggs held the promise of preserving her ability to have children in the event her marriage ends. Most participants wanted to protect their romantic trajectory from an encroaching reproductive timeline, but for Vanessa, the appeal of egg freezing was in protecting her reproductive timeline from the potential precarity of her marriage.

### *Splitting Trajectories, Pursuing Single Parenthood*

For several participants, freezing eggs did not help disentangle the project of having a child from the project of finding a partner. Some of these participants began to consider or pursue single parenthood, fully splitting the two projects.<sup>9</sup>

Egg freezing often serves as an intermediate step toward single parenthood; a way to temporarily disconnect the project of finding

a partner and the project of having a child before, or instead of, decoupling these projects completely. In some cases, participants framed egg freezing as giving them more time to find a partner before turning to single parenthood. For other participants, going through the egg freezing process gave way to considering single parenthood as an option, particularly when egg freezing did not have the desired effect on their romantic lives.

Olivia, for example, was entirely closed to the idea of single parenthood the first time we interviewed her. She thought that completing three rounds of egg freezing would allow her to date without thinking about having children, and that she would be content to not have a child if she did not meet an appropriate partner. When we next interviewed her nearly a year later, however, she had become more attached to the idea of having children and had begun to seriously consider the option of single parenthood. When we asked her how she became more accepting of the prospect of single parenthood, she explained:

It has become clear to me that finding that great male partner that I was hoping was out there, might not be out there. And so coming to terms with that reality has invited me to look at other possibilities in a way that I wasn't willing to when I was still dead set on that.

This growing disappointment that her partner might not be “out there,” coupled with her greater commitment to having a child, led her to consider pursuing single parenthood.

Some participants became single parents after finding they were unable to successfully disentangle partnership and parenthood through freezing their eggs. Kayla, a White 37-year-old social worker who was single for most of her adulthood, had expected egg freezing would take the pressure off finding someone, allowing her to relax on dates and improve the likelihood of finding a partner. After freezing her eggs, she told us she continued to have a sense of urgency to have children, such that “there wasn't any space for like, naturally getting to know someone,”

and she wanted to stop “passively waiting” to meet someone.<sup>10</sup>

I think that the pressure I feel to have a child is so, feels, and the desire, and the pressure is so strong, I don't even know if I like, I can't even tell if I like someone, you know? [laughter] And also, I kind of feel like my life would be easier if, I mean harder in some ways, but easier if I had a child, or if I made this decision to have a child, and then I was dating, because then I would just feel like, I've made this decision for myself, you can come, you can join or not.

Even though she had frozen her eggs, Kayla could not fully disentangle the project of partnership from parenthood. She imagined that splitting these projects entirely might actually improve her romantic life. When we followed up six months later, she was pregnant from an intrauterine insemination (IUI) with sperm from an anonymous donor.<sup>11</sup> She explained how she made the decision to pursue single parenthood:

I think I just wanted to not delay this part of my life, like having a child. So even though the egg freezing like presumably put a hold on my biological clock, it didn't actually—for me, it didn't do what I imagined it does for some people, which is to say like, *Okay now I'm going to take the next couple of years and really try to meet someone.* It didn't like achieve that initially. It just made me realize that I really wanted to be at a different stage and that I didn't—though I could now wait for it, I didn't want to wait for it.

After putting considerable effort into temporarily disentangling her parenthood and partnership projects by freezing her eggs, Kayla decided to move forward with parenthood, regardless of her partnership status. When she got pregnant, she felt she had “permission” to stop dating. In contrast to participants like Catherine or Chloe, who expressed that their childbearing plans should not dictate their partnership search, Kayla expressed an inverted version of this: that her partnership search should not dictate when she has

children. Now that her path to childbearing was no longer contingent on finding a partner, Kayla was hopeful about her romantic prospects. She said she intends to resume dating after having her baby and that “it won’t feel as burdensome because I won’t have the pressure.”

One participant, Leah, a queer 38-year-old rabbi who felt her dating life was stymied by the rigors of rabbinical school, was choosing between egg freezing and single parenthood. Leah decided to pursue egg freezing so she could “throw” herself into dating one more time before pursuing single parenthood. When a relationship that seemed promising did not work out, she decided to fully disconnect the project of becoming a parent from the project of finding a partner:

I wanted to throw myself more into dating, and there was a relationship that I was hoping would work out, that ended up not working out. And I think as soon as, like that was part of it for me, like fuck, sorry I’m cursing, like fuck dating . . . like I can’t wait. I just felt like I needed to separate—there came a point after this relationship that I was hoping would work out and didn’t, and I was just like, you know what, I need to separate these projects.

Leah initially chose to freeze her eggs instead of moving straight to single parenthood. But she decided to become a single parent after becoming frustrated with “waiting” for a partner, thereby moving from disentangling these projects to fully splitting them. She got pregnant through an IUI with sperm from a known donor, and, at the time of the second interview, she was dating while in the early stages of her pregnancy. The problem of how to manage the relationship between finding a co-parent and finding a partner emerged in a new form. She said she would like to find a partner who could join the family she created, and she struggled with how to manage this on dates.

Some participants anticipated keeping their romantic and reproductive trajectories fully separate. Jessica, a White 41-year-old

producer who froze her eggs and then later chose to become a single parent through donor insemination, now has a 2-year-old child. She explained that having frozen eggs in storage changed the nature of her dating life: “I don’t feel like I need someone else to have kids, like it’s not like I’m interviewing people for their role of dad or donor.” At the time of the interview, Jessica was considering having a second child. She did not mention this on dates, because she was not “interviewing [them] for the role.” Jessica continued to pursue dating and relationships as a single mother, but she did not anticipate rejoining these trajectories.

The decision to move from disentangling these projects to splitting them entirely is not always singular and final. One participant, Francine, a 39-year-old White woman who worked at a large technology company and had not dated in recent years, froze her eggs and then decided to pursue single parenthood. After one failed pregnancy attempt, she moved from New York City to a more family-friendly city and changed jobs for better maternity leave. After moving, she contemplated doing another round of egg freezing and then decided to try dating in her new city. She had taken steps toward single parenthood, but she still believed she could meet a partner any day and they might have a family together. She actively struggled between temporarily disentangling and fully splitting these projects:

You know, there is one, like, work stream, for a lack of a better word, like there is one path where I am moving forward with my plans to have a family. There’s another path where I am moving forward with dating, which could affect the plans to have a family, but I’m not relying on one to make the other one happen.

Over the course of four interviews, Francine oscillated between each “work stream,” switching from holding out hope that egg freezing would allow her to meet a partner, to excitedly talking about the possibility of becoming a parent, to a renewed hope that she

still might meet a romantic partner before becoming a parent. Ultimately, the journey between disentangling and splitting the parenthood and partnership projects was circuitous and emotionally fraught for many participants.

Freezing eggs and becoming a single parent are often two parts of a developmental process and work in tandem with one another. Some participants already had single parenthood in mind when they first considered egg freezing; for others, egg freezing led to a consideration of single parenthood. Whether or not egg freezing helps participants “relax” on dates, bracketing their interest in both parenthood and finding the “right” partner plays an important role in their movement through these different paths. For some participants, single parenthood was the flipside to settling: they would rather have a child alone than with an unsatisfactory partner. The disentangling of partnership and parenthood can crack open the window to fully splitting these projects.

## DISCUSSION

### *Theorizing the Relationship between Partnership and Childbearing Trajectories*

Our participants, mostly single, childless women over age 30, sensed that a rapidly moving reproductive timeline was encroaching on their dating lives, creating a tight connection between their pursuits of finding a partner and having children. They experienced a rushed temporality of dating and romance and felt pressure to “settle” with an undesirable partner, violating cultural ideals around the appropriate temporality of dating and romance. They worried they were looking for partnership as a means to having children, rather than seeking romantic partnership for its own sake.

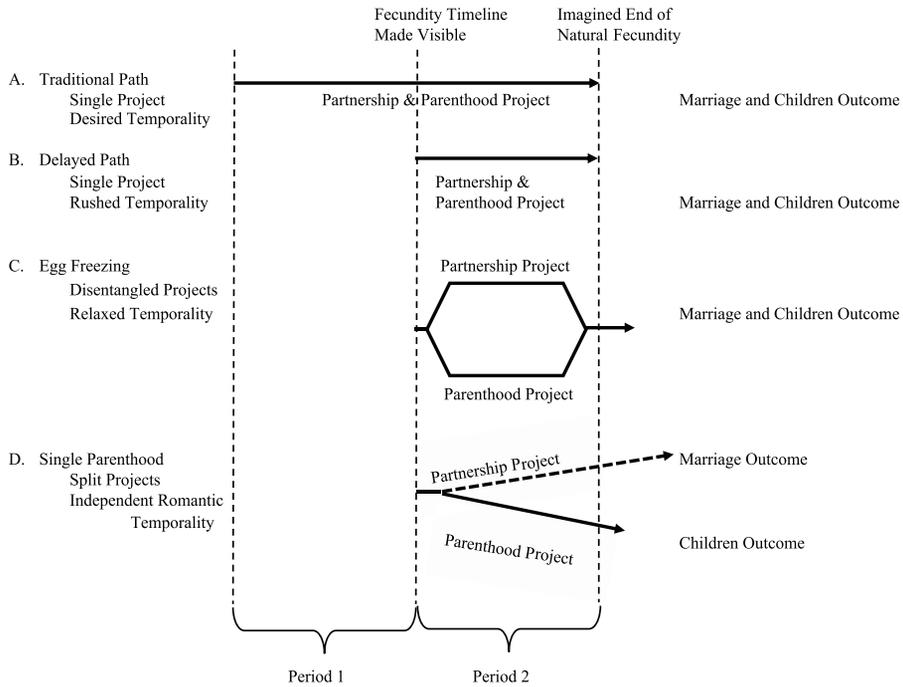
Women sought to *temporarily disentangle* these projects via egg freezing. They hoped to bracket long-term childbearing goals, change the experience of their partnership trajectory, and signal to prospective partners that they were not “in a rush” to find a long-term partner and have children. In some cases, this

disentangling of partnership and parenthood was a precursor to fully decoupling these trajectories through single parenthood. This *splitting* of the partnership and parenthood trajectories held the promise of changing the experience of their search for a romantic partner.

Our participants constructed four ways of navigating the relationship between pursuing partnership and pursuing childbearing (Figure 1). These paths do not capture every participant’s experience, nor do they capture the experiences of all women, some of whom, for example, may actively choose to not have children (McQuillan et al. 2012) or may engage in other forms of resistance to prescribed family trajectories (Lahad forthcoming). However, they are useful ideal types emergent in participants’ accounts.

In the more traditional path (A), individuals pursue marriage and childbearing as parts of a single trajectory, “organically” meeting a partner when relatively young and then unhurriedly having a child a few years later. In the delayed path (B), individuals move from taking their own marriage and childbearing futures for granted to becoming hyper-focused on these trajectories. This shift (in Figure 1, Period 1 to Period 2) is often due to hitting a meaningful age threshold (e.g., age 30 or 35), seeing friends progress toward marriage and childbearing, or being warned by older women in their lives about a ticking reproductive clock. Individuals on trajectory B often struggle with the prospect of looking for a romantic partner and co-parent simultaneously, and they think that doing so harms the prospects for both.

Alternatively, women may try to use egg freezing to extend their reproductive timeline and to disentangle these two trajectories (C): on one trajectory they pursue a prospective partner, guided by romanticized notions of finding “the right person,” and in a separate, later trajectory they pursue childbearing with this partner. The endpoint is the same as the traditional path: bundled marriage and childbearing. Finally, women may split these trajectories fully (D) by becoming single parents



**Figure 1.** Partnership and Parenthood Projects

by choice, liberating the romantic project to extend past women's imagined end of natural fecundity.

### Limitations

While interviews generate rich first person accounts, they cannot directly access individuals' experiences of time, particularly compared to observational methods like ethnography. Moreover, relative to surveys, in-depth interviews require a smaller sample of participants and limit the residential areas of participants to a few locations. Additionally, because all interviews were conducted over the course of about 16 months, this study is limited in its ability to speak to how participants' plans for the future might change over a longer time period.

In addition, because of the study's focus on one expensive technology (i.e., egg freezing), most of the sample was highly educated, White, and middle- or upper-class, and all participants were women. Our participants' race and class likely shaped their decisions to freeze eggs, but the absence of structurally

disadvantaged participants and the small number of participants of color limits our ability to analyze precisely how structural position shaped participants' interest in egg freezing and their experiences of time.

Future work should investigate how temporality in the life course operates for individuals with different demographic characteristics. For example, studies of advanced maternal age tend to focus on White women, but age of first birth is increasing for people of all ethnic groups (Livingston 2018). Future work can also fruitfully apply and extend our framework to study how women of other races and classes manage their experiences of time and the connections among different life-course trajectories.

Finally, while we capture our participants' perspectives about how men's experiences of time differ from their own, we did not capture men's experiences of partnership and parenthood trajectories, and it is possible that men experience more pressing time horizons than women perceive. We hope future research will pick up these questions.

### *Contributions to Sociology of the Life Course*

In this study, we move beyond looking at the timing and order of events (Elder 1998) to examining the subjective experience of time and its consequences for moving through the life course and for innovating when culturally-mandated progressions seem unlikely or impossible. Attending to (1) individuals' subjective experiences of time, and in particular their anticipations of the future, and (2) individuals' management and manipulation of time, including their reconceptualization of the relationship between different trajectories, offers useful analytic tools for sociologists and demographers beyond the case of egg freezing and union and family formation.

Analyzing these temporal aspects of the life course can enhance research on a variety of trajectories, such as career trajectories, educational trajectories, financial timelines, and movement toward life stages such as adulthood and retirement. Future research on the life course should investigate the use of other such tools and technologies to reshape progression through the life course and should take seriously actors' subjective experiences of time.

Existing work on the life course emphasizes the importance of considering how culture shapes life-course transitions and trajectories (e.g., Johnson-Hanks et al. 2011). Our work illustrates the importance of considering culturally-idealized temporalities in analyses of how culture shapes movement through the life course. Future analyses of actors remaking life-course trajectories should take into account what kinds of connections and disconnections between particular trajectories are culturally thinkable and desirable, and how cultural shifts and emerging technologies necessitate or make available new modes of reshaping one's movement through the life course.

In our case, amid increasingly delayed marriage and childbearing, the cultural desirability of bundled marriage and childbearing begins to conflict with idealized representations of pursuing a romantic partner as women approach the perceived end of their reproductive timelines. The emergence of a technology

promising to pause one's ticking biological clock thus interacts with cultural anxieties among childless, structurally advantaged women, prompting imaginative reconstructions of the relationship between partnership and parenthood.

Analyzing individuals' subjective experiences and manipulations of life-course trajectories allows us to go beyond surface-level differences in sequencing and timing between different groups. Instead, we can compare different groups' management of time in the life course and find patterns in their innovations. For example, Edin and Kefalas (2005) describe how and why structurally disadvantaged women become single parents: these women value marriage highly, but they are unwilling to settle for substandard marriage partners, and they see childbearing as a necessity and as a trajectory they can control. They think that having children should not depend on their ability to find a suitable marriage partner, so they modify the relationship between having a partner and having children by becoming single parents.

Like our participants, the poor women in Edin and Kefalas's study idealize an extended courtship before marriage and describe the perils of "rushing" into relationships. Of course, there are important differences between these two groups of women, but different outcomes can obscure what turns out to be a similar process: both groups manage the uncertainty of finding a marriage partner by isolating the romantic trajectory from the reproductive trajectory, protecting one trajectory from the limits and distortions of the other. Incorporating temporality into our understanding of the life course allows us to compare structurally advantaged and disadvantaged women's union and family formation patterns in a way that goes beyond the obvious or stereotyped preconceptions.

Finally, in this study we connect interest in a new reproductive technology and medical advancements more broadly to questions about the progression of the life course. Just as scholars of reproduction and demographers have documented the import of effective contraception in changing the reproductive life

course and broader life-course transitions (Bailey 2006; Goldin and Katz 2002), we illustrate how the advent of reproductive technologies like egg freezing might alter life-course formulations.

Access to effective contraception and safe abortions have helped women push marriage and childbearing into the future (England et al. 2013; Myers 2017), allowing trajectories like courtship and careers to progress with slower, steadier tempos and enabling women to disentangle romance and sexual intercourse from marriage and childbearing. In the same way, our participants use egg freezing to push partnership and childbearing into the future and disentangle their partnership and parenthood trajectories. We hope the present work encourages scholars of the life course to take seriously the injunctions that reproductive and other medical technologies can make in individuals' anticipations and experiences of the progression of the life course.

### *Contributions to Sociology of Time*

In this article, we used an analytically rich case to extend existing theoretical work on time and anticipation. Sociologists of time and anticipation have called for linking the concept of agency with individual agents' subjective experiences of time (Hitlin and Elder 2007; Mische 2014). Egg freezing appealed to our participants, in part, because it enabled them to exert control over their experiences of time and reclaim a sense of agency over their partnership and parenthood trajectories. They primarily chose to freeze their eggs because they were seeking culturally idealized temporalities of romance and reproduction, suggesting that attempts to link temporality and agency should take account of cultural constructions of desirable temporal experiences and desirable relationships among different life-course trajectories. Moreover, future research on individuals' management and manipulations of time should consider individuals' use of technologies and tools to shape their experiences of time. In this case, a new technology is

deployed in service of "time-work" (Flaherty 2003), at the level of short-term anticipations and long-term trajectories.

Our analyses of women using frozen eggs as a signaling mechanism in their interactions with men contribute to a growing body of work analyzing the connections between one's position in the social structure and one's subjective experience of time (e.g., Auyero 2012; Bourdieu 2000; Lahad 2012; O'Rand and Ellis 1974; Schwartz 1974). Illustrating gender inequities in temporality, our heterosexual participants used egg freezing to signal to prospective partners that they were not "in a rush" to have children and to manipulate their experiences of time to avoid giving unintentional signals of rushing toward marriage and motherhood. They thus took on the work of managing and disavowing gendered representations of themselves as desperate, hurried, and focused exclusively on motherhood, even as they left these representations of other women in their 30s and 40s intact.

Moreover, many participants not only used egg freezing to cope with gender inequities in short-term dating interactions, but to manage a more general sense of being on unequal footing with men with regard to life-course time. Participants lamented that, as they understood it, men are not subject to the same kind of "biological clock." By using egg freezing to make themselves more desirable to men, they used an individual fix for structural inequities, simultaneously submitting themselves to gendered stereotypes of aging women. Power structures and inequalities thus shape not only individuals' subjective experience of time, but also their attempts to manipulate that experience and to outwardly portray a particular experience of time. Future research should continue examining attempts to manage and manipulate structurally-imposed temporalities.

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## Notes

1. See, for example, <https://extendfertility.com/your-fertility>.
2. In 2012, the status of egg freezing as an experimental procedure was removed by the Society for Reproductive Medicine (2013). Although it is still only endorsed as a means of fertility preservation for women with medical needs, it has increasingly been promoted to and adopted by a more general population of women.
3. Between 2009 and 2016, the number of women choosing to freeze their eggs at fertility clinics in the United States increased from 495 to 8,825, and it has likely expanded significantly in the past three years (Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology 2018).
4. Most doctors tell women that 8 to 12 eggs are sufficient for producing one viable pregnancy, but these numbers vary considerably depending on the age at which a woman freezes her eggs (EggBanxx.com 2016).
5. Note that most life-course literature uses the term “trajectories” to describe pathways connecting consecutive life-course events, whereas the sociology of time literature uses “trajectories” to describe future-oriented projects. We use the term in the same manner as the sociology of time literature.
6. In total, we interviewed 53 individuals, however, one asked to not be included in the study after the interview.
7. See, for example, the *Bloomberg BusinessWeek* cover article titled “Later, Baby: Will Freezing Your Eggs Free Your Career? Egg Freezing Technology Is Helping Women Kiss the Mommy Track Goodbye” (Rosenblum 2014).
8. Of course, participants’ careers might have indirectly hampered their romantic relationships.
9. We focus on participants considering single parenthood, but some participants said they were not open to single parenthood as an option, regardless of their partnership trajectory.
10. For a discussion of women “waiting” to meet a partner and the sociotemporal aspects of singlehood, see Lahad (2012).
11. Note that IUI does not use frozen eggs. It simply places sperm directly in a woman’s uterus to facilitate fertilization.

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