

Article

Social Exclusion of Australian Childless Women in Their Reproductive Years

Beth Turnbull *, Melissa L. Graham and Ann R. Taket

Centre for Health through Action on Social Exclusion (CHASE), School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University, Burwood, VIC 3125, Australia; E-Mails: b.turnbull@deakin.edu.au (B.T.), melissa.graham@deakin.edu.au (M.L.G.), ann.taket@deakin.edu.au (A.R.T.)

* Corresponding author

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Abstract

Research suggests Australian childless women are at risk of pronatalism-driven social exclusion. This exploratory, mixed methods, cross-sectional study described and explored the social exclusion of Australian childless women aged 25 to 44 years, and asked: what are the nature and extent of social exclusion of childless women; and do the nature and extent of exclusion vary for different types of childless women? A total of 776 childless female Australian residents aged 25 to 44 years completed a self-administered questionnaire. Quantitative data were collected on childlessness types, indicators of exclusion and perceived stigmatisation and exclusion due to being childless. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, One Way ANOVAs and Kruskal Wallis Analysis of Ranks. Qualitative data on childless women's experiences were inductively thematically analysed. Findings suggest societal-level pronatalism drives exclusion of Australian childless women. While exclusion occurs in all domains of life, childless women experience more exclusion, and perceive more exclusion due to being childless, in the social and civic domains than the service and economic domains. Circumstantially and involuntarily childless women, followed by voluntarily childless women, perceive more exclusion due to being childless than undecided and future childed women. Experiences are influenced by the nature of women's 'deviance' from pronatalism.

Keywords

childlessness; demography; fertility; pronatalism; social exclusion; stereotypes; stigma

Issue

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1. Introduction

Increasing numbers of Australian women aged between 25 and 44 years have no biological children, rising from 33 per cent in 2006 to 35.5 per cent in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007, 2012a). Research suggests pronatalism in Australian society places childless women at risk of social exclusion (see for example Graham & Rich, 2012a; Sawyer, 2013).

Social exclusion is a multidimensional process driven by unequal power relationships interacting between

the societal, community, relationship and individual levels, and manifesting in a continuum of inclusion and exclusion characterised by constraints upon the extent and quality of resources and opportunities for participation in the social, civic, service and economic domains of life (Levitas et al., 2007; Popay et al., 2008). Research suggests societal-level pronatalism drives stigmatisation and exclusion of childless women. Pronatalism constructs women as mothers, manifesting at a societal level in policies, discourses and ideologies designed to promote fertility by representing mother-

hood as a moral, patriotic and economic duty, and at community, relationship and individual levels in cultures, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that assume motherhood is natural, innate and inevitable (Gillespie, 2000; Graham & Rich, 2012a; Veevers, 1979). By constructing motherhood as central to being a woman, pronatalism perpetuates patriarchal power by disempowering women as resource-less mothers, and marginalising 'deviant' childless women (Gillespie, 2000; Park, 2002).

Political and media analyses have revealed hegemonic pronatalist discourses in Australian society constructing childless women as idealised 'insiders' and childless women as stigmatised 'outsiders' (Graham & Rich, 2012a, 2012b; Sawer, 2013). Canadian and United States studies found most adults believed motherhood was innate and natural (Miall, 1994), and more adults had negative or neutral than positive attitudes towards being childless (Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendell, 2007). Research from Australia, the United Kingdom and United States found women experienced being childless as discrediting, and believed others perceived childless women as unnatural, deficient, unfulfilled and incomplete (Letherby, 1999; Rich, Taket, Graham, & Shelley, 2011; Sternke & Abrahamson, 2015). Some involuntarily childless women internalised pronatalism, perceiving themselves as failures and incomplete (Bell, 2013; Sternke & Abrahamson, 2015). There is, however, limited research investigating the exclusion of childless women in their reproductive years from the social domain, which encompasses social networks, support and interaction, and social and leisure participation (see for example, Albertini & Mencarini, 2014; Bell, 2013; Debest & Mazuy, 2014; Doyle, Pooley, & Breen, 2013; McNamee & James, 2012; Sternke & Abrahamson, 2015), the service domain, which incorporates availability, accessibility, affordability, appropriateness and adequacy of services (see for example Baker, 2003; Hammarberg, Astbury, & Baker, 2001; Mollen, 2006; Onat & Beji, 2012; Parry, 2004) and the economic domain, including participation in employment, the nature and quality of working lives, and material and financial resources (see for example Doyle et al., 2013; Fieder, Huber, & Bookstein, 2011; Huber, Bookstein, & Fieder, 2010; Malik & Coulson, 2013; Rich et al., 2011). There is no existing research in the civic domain, which includes participation in community and political activities, groups and organisations.

While the extant evidence reveals the complexity and diversity of childless women's experiences, it emerges from disparate studies investigating distinct domains of life and undifferentiated or particular types of childless women. There is no Australian research investigating social exclusion of different types of childless women in their reproductive years from multiple domains of life. This exploratory study aimed to describe and explore the social exclusion of Australian

childless women aged 25 to 44 years, and asked: (1) what are the nature and extent of social exclusion of childless women; and (2) do the nature and extent of social exclusion vary for different types of childless women?

While acknowledging the negative connotations associated with terms used to describe women with no children, 'childless' and 'childless' are used to describe women without and with children respectively in this paper.

2. Methods

The study was conducted in Australia during 2014. Ethics approval was obtained from Deakin University's Human Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG-H 175_2013). The cross-sectional, mixed-methods study employed a fully mixed concurrent equal status design (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009).

2.1. Sampling

The target population was childless female Australian residents aged 25 to 44 years who were not pregnant and identified as never having assumed the role or identity of a biological or social mother, for example, of adopted, step or fostered-children. The age range encompassed Australian women's mean age of first birth of 28 years, peak reproductive age of 30 to 34 years, and usual completion of fertility between 40 and 44 years (ABS, 2008, 2010a; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2010).

The formula for a binomial distributions k-sample for the chi-square test (Brown et al., 2010) yielded a minimum sample size of 427, including 171 voluntarily childless women, who freely chose not to have children (Veevers, 1979), 64 involuntarily childless women, who wished to have biological children but were unable to achieve a viable pregnancy (Daniluk, 2001), 64 circumstantially childless women, who were unable to have children due to other circumstances such as having no partner, partner infertility, or health issues other than those preventing a viable pregnancy (Cannold, 2005), 64 undecided women, who were unsure about whether to have children, and 64 future childless women, who intended to have biological or social children in future.

In the absence of a sampling frame, participants were recruited by promoting the study through 38 women's health services, 13 blogs and Facebook pages, professional networks and snowball sampling. Of the 1,411 respondents, 631 women who did not click the 'submit' button at the end of the questionnaire were excluded pursuant to the ethics approval as deemed withdrawals; and four whose dates of birth fell outside the target age range were excluded. The total sample size was 776 women, a completion rate of fifty-five per cent.

2.2. Data Collection and Measures

A self-administered online questionnaire collected quantitative data on socio-demographic variables, types of childlessness and social exclusion. Indicators of exclusion were measured using the social interaction subscale of the Duke Social Support Index (George, Blazer, Hughes, & Fowler, 1989) and the MOS social support index (Chronbach's $\alpha = 0.97$; one-year stability $\alpha = 0.78$) (Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991) in the social domain, participation in community groups, activities and events (ABS, 2010b) in the civic domain, degree of problems accessing and using services (Dermott et al., 2012) in the service domain, and employment status (Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, 2012) and personal income (ABS, 2011) in the economic domain. Data were also collected on stigma consciousness (Chronbach's $\alpha = 0.72 - 0.74$) (Pinel, 1999) and degree of perceived exclusion from domains of life due to being childless. Open-ended questions employing the critical incident technique, which seeks to obtain detailed accounts of participants' experiences of past incidents (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005), gathered qualitative data on each domain (see Appendix).

2.3. Data Analysis

Aggregate scores were computed for social interaction, social networks, social support, community participation, problems accessing and using services and stigma consciousness (Hughes, Blazer, & Hybels, 1990; Sherbourne & Stewart, 1991). Employment status was computed from items on paid work status, underemployment and unemployment. Personal income ranges were recoded into income levels (ABS, 2012c). Five-point scales measuring degree of perceived exclusion due to being childless were collapsed into binary ordinal variables consisting of no perceived exclusion or at least a slight degree of perceived exclusion.

Descriptive statistics examined socio-demographic characteristics, indicators of exclusion and stigmatisation and exclusion due to being childless. One Way ANOVAs and Scheffe's post-hoc tests analysed differences between types of childless women's stigma consciousness. Kruskal Wallis H and Dunn's post-hoc tests analysed differences in social interaction, social support, community participation, problems accessing or using services, employment status, personal income and perceived exclusion due to being childless.

Qualitative data were inductively thematically analysed through data immersion by reading and re-reading all qualitative data, coding and recoding, and identification of categories and underlying themes. A framework of experiences across all domains was gen-

erated, illustrated by participant quotations from all types of childless women in all domains of life. De-identified quotations were attributed using identification numbers (denoted as ID), childlessness type and age. No more than one quotation from any participant was used.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 shows participants' demographic characteristics and comparable Australian data. Compared with Australian females aged 25 to 44 years (89.4%) (ABS, 2012b), 39.5 per cent fewer participants were married, in a civil union or de facto relationship (49.9%; $n=386$; 95% CI for difference $-43.0 - -35.9$). A higher percentage (10.8%) of participants identified as lesbian or bisexual (13.0%; $n=97$) than Australian women aged 16 to 59 years (2.2%; 95% CI for difference $8.5 - 13.4$) (Smith, Rissel, Richters, Grulich, & Visser, 2003). Compared with Australian women aged 15 years or over (19.9%) (ABS, 2012b), 58.1 per cent more participants possessed a bachelor degree or higher (78.0%; $n=605$; 95% CI for difference $55.0 - 60.9$). Almost half the participants (48.5%; $n=361$) were in the high-income bracket, compared with 20 per cent of Australian adults (95% CI for difference $24.9 - 32.1$) (ABS, 2013). Close to three-quarters of participants (73.2%; $n=554$) identified as having no religion or being unsure, compared with 22.4 per cent of Australian females (ABS, 2012b). In contrast, only 21.0 per cent of participants identified as Christian, compared with 69.2 per cent of Australian females (ABS, 2012b).

Table 2 shows types of childless women and differences in demographic characteristics. There were differences between types of childless women's age ($F = 51.8$; $df = 4$; $p < 0.001$), relationship status ($\chi = 97.6$; $df = 4$; $p < 0.001$), sexual orientation ($\chi = 13.1$; $df = 4$; $p = 0.01$), religious status ($\chi = 16.1$; $df = 4$; $p = 0.003$), area of geographic residence ($\chi = 11.8$; $df = 4$; $p = 0.02$) and educational attainment ($H = 20.1$; $df = 4$; $p < 0.001$).

3.2. Indicators of Exclusion

Table 3 shows indicators of exclusion in the social, civic, service and economic domains. Circumstantially childless women had lower social support scores than the undecided (Dunn's Test = -97.0 ; $p = 0.001$), involuntarily childless (Dunn's Test = 114.1 ; $p = 0.004$), voluntarily childless (Dunn's Test = -115.6 ; $p < 0.001$) and future childless (Dunn's Test = -171.3 ; $p < 0.001$). While there was an overall difference in social interaction scores ($H = 11.3$; $df = 4$; $p = 0.02$), post hoc testing identified no differences between types of childless women.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants and comparable Australian data.

	Participants per cent (n)	Australian per cent	Percentage difference (95% CI)
Age (n=775)			
25-29	25.4 (197)	24.8	0.6 (-2.4 – 3.8)
30-34	30.3 (235)	24.0	6.3 (3.2 – 9.6)
35-39	22.7 (176)	25.3	-2.6 (-5.44 – 0.5)
40-44	21.5 (167)	25.8 ¹	-4.3 (-7.0 – -1.3)
Relationship status (n=773)			
Single	33.4 (258)	Not available	
Relationship (not living together)	9.3 (71)	Not available	
De facto relationship	26.4 (204)	35.7	-9.3 (-12.3 – -6.1)
Engaged	5.4 (42)	Not available	
Married/civil union	23.5 (182)	53.7 ²	-30.2 (-33.1 – -27.1)
Separated/divorced	1.3 (10)	10.1	-8.8 (-9.4 – -7.8)
Widowed	0.8 (6)	0.5 ¹	0.3 (-0.2 – 1.1)
Sexual orientation (n=745)			
Lesbian or bisexual	13.0 (97)	2.2 ³	10.8 (8.5 – 13.4)
Heterosexual	87.0 (648)	97.8	-10.8 (-13.4 – -8.5)
Educational attainment (n=776)			
Year 12 or below	5.0 (39)	58.6	-53.6 (-55.0 – -51.9)
Certificate/diploma	17.0 (132)	21.5	-4.5 (-7.0 – -1.8)
Bachelor degree	41.0 (318)	14.8	26.2 (22.8 – 29.7)
Graduate/postgraduate qualification	37.0 (287)	5.1 ⁴	31.9 (28.5 – 35.3)
Employment status (n=773)			
Employed/self-employed	93.0 (719)	71.6	21.4 (19.5 – 23.1)
Unemployed	6.3 (49)	3.9	2.4 (0.9 – 4.3)
Not in labour force	0.6 (5)	24.5 ⁴	-23.9 (-24.3 – -23.1)
Personal income level (n=744)			
Low (first three deciles)	9.3 (69)	30.0	-20.7 (-22.7 – -18.5)
Lower middle (fourth decile)	7.3 (54)	10.0	-2.7 (-4.5 – -0.7)
Middle (third quintile)	7.4 (55)	20.0	-12.6 (-14.3 – -10.6)
Upper middle (fourth quintile)	27.6 (205)	20.0	7.6 (4.4 – 10.9)
High (fifth quintile)	48.5 (361)	20.0 ⁵	28.5 (24.9 – 32.1)
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status (n=771)			
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	1.4 (11)	2.5	-1.1 (-1.7 – -0.03)
Non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	98.6 (760)	97.5 ¹	1.1 (0.03 – 1.8)
Country of birth (n=771)			
Born overseas	14.1 (109)	26.2	-12.1 (-14.4 – -9.5)
Born in Australia	85.9 (662)	73.8 ⁶	12.1 (9.5 – 14.4)
Language spoken at home (n=772)			
Language other than English	6.2 (48)	19.5	-13.3 (-14.8 – -11.4)
English only	93.8 (724)	80.5 ⁶	13.3 (11.4 – 14.8)
Religion (n=757)			
Christian	21.0 (159)	69.2	-48.2 (-51.0 – -45.2)
Judaism	0.4 (3)	0.5	-0.1 (-0.4 – 0.6)
Islam	0.1 (1)	2.3	-2.2 (-2.29 – -1.7)
Indian religions	1.8 (14)	4.2	-2.4 (-3.1 – -1.2)
Folk, new and other religions	3.4 (26)	1.5	1.9 (0.8 – 3.4)
No religion or unsure	73.2 (554)	22.4 ⁶	50.8 (47.5 – 53.9)
Geographic residence (n=776)			
Major city	77.4 (601)	68.4	9.0 (6.0 – 11.9)
Inner regional	15.2 (118)	19.7	-4.5 (-6.9 – -1.8)
Outer regional	6.4 (50)	9.5	-3.1 (-4.6 – -1.2)
Remote	0.3 (2)	1.5	-1.2 (-1.5 – -0.7)
Very remote	0.6 (5)	0.8 ⁷	-0.2 (-0.6 – 0.6)

Notes: 1 Australian females aged 25 to 44 years (ABS, 2012b); 2 Registered marriages only (ABS, 2012b); 3 Australian females aged 16 to 59 years (Smith et al., 2003); 4 Australian females aged 15 years and over (ABS, 2012b); 5 Income deciles of Australian adults (ABS, 2013); 6 Australian females (ABS, 2012b); 7 Australian residents (ABS, 2008).

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of types of childless women.

	Involuntary	Circumstantial	Voluntary	Undecided	Future childless	F ¹ /χ ² /H ³	df	p value
Type of childless women (n=768)	n=161	n=161	n=281	n=139	n=123			
Per cent	8.3%	21.0%	36.6%	18.1%	16.0%			
Age in years (n=767)	n=64	n=161	n=280	n=139	n=123			
Mean	36.9 (SD=4.9)	36.5 (SD=5.3)	36.0 (SD=5.6)	31.7 (SD=4.1)	30.1 (SD=3.4)	51.8 ¹	4	<0.001
Relationship status (n=765)	n=64	n=160	n=281	n=138	n=122			
Single	17.2%	64.4%	31.0%	13.1%	13.1%	97.6 ²	4	<0.001
Partnered	82.2%	35.6%	69.0%	86.9%	86.9%			
Sexual orientation (n=738)	n=62	n=156	n=272	n=132	n=116			
Heterosexual	90.3%	91.0%	81.3%	88.6%	91.4%	13.1 ²	4	0.01
Lesbian or bisexual	9.7%	9.0%	18.8%	11.4%	8.6%			
Religion (n=765)	n=63	n=152	n=277	n=136	n=122			
Religious	41.3%	32.9%	20.9%	22.1%	27.9%	16.2 ²	4	0.003
Not religious/unsure	58.7%	67.1%	79.1%	77.9%	72.1%			
Geographic residence (n=786)	n=64	n=161	n=281	n=139	n=123			
Major city	70.3%	84.5%	72.2%	79.9%	80.5%	11.8 ²	4	0.02
Regional/ remote	29.7%	15.5%	27.8%	20.1%	19.5%			
Educational attainment (n=768)	n=64	n=161	n=281	n=139	n=123			
Year 11 or below	0.0%	1.2%	2.1%	1.4%	0.0%			
Year 12 or equivalent	1.6%	2.5%	4.6%	3.6%	4.1%			
Certificate or diploma	20.3%	14.9%	23.8%	12.2%	8.9%			
Bachelor or above	78.1%	81.4%	69.4%	82.7%	87.0%			
Mean rank	388.4	398.3	352.0	402.2	418.8	20.1 ³	4	<0.001

Notes: 1 One Way ANOVA; 2 Chi Square Test for Independence; 3 Kruskal Wallis Analysis of Ranks.

Table 3. Indicators of exclusion in the social, civic, service and economic domains.

	All participants	Involuntary	Circumstantial	Voluntary	Undecided	Future childless	H ¹	df	P value
Social interaction score ²	n=765	n=63	n=159	n=276	n=138	n=121			
Median	7.0	7.0	7.0	7.0	8.0	8.0			
Mean rank		335.7	372.5	361.0	404.5	422.2	11.3	4	0.02
Social support score ³	n=739	n=60	n=150	n=273	n=130	n=119			
Mean	55.4 (SD = 17.5)	54.2 (SD = 22.2)	46.1 (SD = 18.2)	56.6 (SD = 17.3)	56.3 (SD = 16.1)	63.0 (SD = 12.3)			
Mean rank		383.1	269.0	384.5	366.0	440.3	49.0	4	<0.001
Community participation score ⁴	n=771	n=64	n=160	n=278	n=138	n=123			
Mean	3.2 (SD = 2.3)	3.3 (SD = 2.8)	3.3 (SD = 2.4)	3.2 (SD = 2.3)	3.3 (SD = 2.5)	3.1 (SD = 2.0)			
Mean rank		373.7	386.1	386.0	379.0	375.3	0.4	4	0.98
Problems accessing/using services score ⁵	n=776	n=64	n=161	n=261	n=139	n=123			
Mean	70.7 (SD = 6.1)	70.4 (SD = 6.6)	70.3 (SD = 6.5)	70.8 (SD = 6.3)	69.9 (SD = 5.6)	71.4 (SD = 5.1)			
Mean rank		363.2	372.6	394.4	382.2	391.2	1.8	4	0.77
Employment status	n=773	n=64	n=159	n=280	n=139	n=123			
Employed	83.3%	87.5%	82.4%	81.8%	82.0%	87.8%			
Underemployed	9.7%	6.3%	9.4%	10.4%	10.1%	8.9%			
Unemployed	6.3%	4.7%	8.2%	6.8%	7.2%	3.3%			
Not in labour force	0.6%	1.6%	0.0%	1.1%	0.7%	0.0%			
Mean rank		398.4	378.5	376.9	377.5	401.0	3.6	4	0.5
Personal income levels	n=744	n=60	n=158	n=267	n=134	n=117			
Low	9.3%	5.0%	9.5%	9.4%	11.9%	8.5%			
Lower middle	7.3%	5.0%	7.6%	8.2%	7.5%	4.3%			

	All participants	Involuntary	Circumstantial	Voluntary	Undecided	Future childed	H ¹	df	P value
Middle	7.4%	10.0%	6.3%	7.5%	8.2%	6.0%			
Upper middle	27.6%	26.7%	22.2%	28.5%	25.4%	35.9%			
High	48.5%	53.3%	54.4%	46.4%	47.0%	45.3%			
Mean rank		392.6	384.8	360.0	355.9%	367.9%	3.0	4	0.6

Notes: 1 Kruskal Wallis Analysis of Ranks; 2 Ordinal scale from 0 to 13. Higher scores indicate more social interaction; 3 Interval scale from 0 to 76. Higher scores indicate greater levels of instrumental and affective social support; 4 Interval scale from 0 to 14. Higher scores indicating participation in more community groups/events and activities; 5 Aggregate score from 5 to 75. Lower scores indicating a greater degree of problems accessing or using service.

Table 4. Perceived stereotyping, stigmatisation and exclusion due to being childless.

	All participants (n=764) ³	Involuntary (n=64) ⁴	Circumstantial (n=160) ⁵	Voluntary (n=279) ⁶	Undecided (n=138) ⁷	Future childed (n=123) ⁸	F ¹ /H ²	df	P value
Stigma consciousness score ⁹									
Mean	36.6 (SD = 9.4)	33.3 (SD = 8.6)	34.1 (SD = 8.1)	36.2 (SD = 9.0)	37.9 (SD = 9.9)	41.2 (SD = 9.5)	13.3 ¹	4	<0.001
Exclusion from social interaction ¹⁰									
Median	5.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	5.0			
Mean rank		330.2	303.1	383.0	422.7	460.7	53.5 ²	4	<0.001
Exclusion from social support ¹⁰									
Median	5.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	5.0			
Mean rank		355.5	305.1	382.7	424.0	450.2	46.7 ²	4	<0.001
Exclusion from community life ¹⁰									
Median	5.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	5.0			
Mean rank		303.9	310.6	407.9	402.7	433.0	49.3 ²	4	<0.001
Exclusion from services ¹⁰									
Median	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0			
Mean rank		349.2	358.5	382.1	414.3	402.4	14.5 ²	4	<0.001
Exclusion from material and financial resources ¹⁰									
Median	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0			
Mean rank		367.8	365.4	372.9	401.3	413.3	11.7 ²	4	0.02
Exclusion from employment ¹⁰									
Median	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0			
Mean rank		392.9	370.7	377.0	392.7	387.3	3.4 ²	4	0.5

Notes: 1 One Way ANOVA; 2 Kruskal Wallis Analysis of Ranks; 3 n=730 for stigma consciousness and 763 for community life; 4 n=150 for stigma consciousness; 5 n=150 for stigma consciousness, 159 for community life and 161 for education; 6 n=263 for stigma consciousness, 278 for social interaction and employment, 281 for services and education, and 280 for material and financial resources; 7 n=132 for stigma consciousness, 137 for social interaction and 139 for education; 8 n=117 for stigma consciousness and 122 for employment and material and financial resources; 9 Aggregate index from 10 to 70, with lower scores indicating greater stigma consciousness ; 10 Ordinal scale from 1 to 5, with scores of 4 or below indicating at least a slight degree of exclusion due to being childless.

3.3. Stigmatisation and Exclusion Due to Being Childless

Table 4 shows stigmatisation and exclusion due to being childless. Future childed women’s mean stigma consciousness score was higher than voluntarily, circumstantially and involuntarily childless women’s scores (p < 0.001). Undecided women’s mean stigma consciousness score was higher than circumstantially (p = 0.02) and involuntarily (p = 0.03) childless women’s scores. The results suggested future childed women per-

ceived less stigmatisation due to being childless than voluntarily childless women, and future childed and undecided women perceived less stigmatisation than circumstantially and involuntarily childless women.

Participants perceived at least a slight degree of exclusion due to being childless from social interaction (47.3%), social support (42.5%), community life (36.8%), services (20.5%), material and financial resources (17.7%) and employment (12.2%). In relation to social interaction, circumstantially childless women

perceived more exclusion than voluntarily childless (Dunn's test = -79.9; $p = 0.001$), undecided (Dunn's test = -119.6; $p < 0.001$) and future childless women (Dunn's test = -157.6; $p < 0.001$), involuntarily childless women perceived more exclusion than undecided (Dunn's test = -92.6; $p = 0.02$) and future childless women (Dunn's test = -130.6; $p < 0.001$), and voluntarily childless women perceived more exclusion than future childless women (Dunn's test = -77.7; $p = 0.004$). In relation to social support, circumstantially childless women perceived more exclusion than voluntarily childless (Dunn's test = -77.6; $p = 0.001$), undecided (Dunn's test = -118.9; $p < 0.001$) and future childless women (Dunn's test = -145.1; $p < 0.001$), while involuntarily childless (Dunn's test = -94.8; $p = 0.02$) and voluntarily childless women (Dunn's test = -67.5; $p = 0.02$) perceived more exclusion than future childless women. Involuntarily and circumstantially childless women perceived more exclusion from community life than undecided (Dunn's test = -98.7; $p = 0.006$ and Dunn's test = -92.1; $p < 0.001$), voluntarily childless (Dunn's test = -104.0; $p = 0.001$ and Dunn's test = -97.3; $p < 0.001$) and future childless women (Dunn's test = -129.1 and -122.4; $p < 0.001$). Circumstantially childless women perceived more exclusion from services than undecided women (Dunn's test = -55.8; $p = 0.02$).

3.4. Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion

Childless women described pronatalism-driven experiences on a continuum of connection and inclusion within, exclusion within, and exclusion from, all domains of life. Each theme or element of a theme was experienced by all types of childless women in all domains of life, unless types of childless women and domains of life are specified. Some women described only connection and inclusion or exclusion, some reported connection and inclusion in some domains and exclusion in others, and some reported inclusion and exclusion in the same domain. Substantially more women reported exclusionary experiences within, than connection and inclusion within or exclusion from, the domains.

3.4.1. Experiences of Inclusion and Connection

Many women described experiences of inclusion and connection arising from their 'deviance' from pronatalism. Experiences of inclusion and connection are subtly different. 'Inclusion' refers to experiences in which childless women feel included by childless people and within childless domains of life. 'Connection' refers to experiences in which childless women have the resources and opportunities to connect and participate, despite the potential for exclusion by childless people or from childless domains of life.

Some women described experiences of inclusion.

For example, some involuntarily childless, circumstantially childless and future childless women received emotional and instrumental support, while some women valued being included in children's lives.

I am fortunate to have some friends around me who invite me to share in their families. I am a godmother and have regularly held nannying roles – it's a privilege to be entrusted with the responsibility of caring for people's kids and for them to tell me they know I'd treat them as if they were my own. (ID 224; undecided; age 32 years)

Furthermore, some voluntarily childless, undecided and future childless women reported others' understanding of their priorities and decisions.

My mother had a talk with me when I was in my early twenties. She said that she completely understood and agreed with my stance about being child-free and gave her full support. She told me that knowing me as well as she did, having children would be a mistake for me and I would probably always regret having them. (ID 125; voluntarily childless; age 40 years)

Other women described experiences of connection. For example, some women experienced affirmation of being childless through observations of or interactions with childless people.

Seeing overburdened mothers on public transport makes me grateful I don't have children. (ID 477; circumstantially childless; age 37 years)

Furthermore, many women valued their freedom to participate and contribute in all domains of life, and others actively built lives in which being childless was valued and affirmed.

I work full-time, but my husband works part-time in an unskilled job while he is studying for a more skilled job. I don't think we could have this arrangement if we had children. (ID 299; voluntarily childless; age 44 years)

I have a great group of friends and family who are like-minded....Even if I had children I would not go to mother's groups ... because that wouldn't be my 'cuppa tea'. I like people who live outside of the box. (ID 117; circumstantially childless; age 42 years)

3.4.2. Exclusionary Experiences within the Domains of Life

Many women experienced being childless as a stigma-

tising attribute, which resulted in exclusionary interpersonal interactions within domains of life, with friends, family, community members, service providers, clients and colleagues. For example, many women described others' assumptions and expectations they had children or would have children. When such expectations were not met, they experienced others' disappointment, invalidation of their worth and pressure to become childed. For example, some involuntarily childless women received unhelpful encouragement to become childed. Some circumstantially childless women felt pressured to settle for 'any man', and many circumstantially childless, undecided and future childed women were pressured to 'hurry up'. In addition, many voluntarily childless and undecided women described others' arguments they would feel different once they met the 'right man' or had children, were 'missing out', or were unqualified to decide not to have children. Voluntarily childless and undecided women also felt others pathologised their choices.

Many women also described being stereotyped and judged by others. Women who were perceived as making choices that contributed to being childless felt stereotyped as child-hating, career-focused, materialistic and selfish.

There is a perception you are selfish (so what if you are?!), a baby-hater, have something wrong with you or are ruthless. Your personality is judged by a decision you make about one aspect of your life. (ID 139; undecided; age 33 years)

All types of childless women felt judged as incomplete and unfulfilled. Involuntarily, circumstantially and voluntarily childless women who would not or could not ever become childed, felt further judged as defective and failed women. Some involuntarily and circumstantially childless women internalised such judgements.

The pressure to find a man and have a baby [as soon as possible] is huge. I feel it every single day of my life. There is no relief from feeling abnormal, shamed and like a failure. (ID 751; circumstantially childless; age 35 years)

Some involuntarily and circumstantially childless women who wanted children felt judged as unhappy and desperate. In contrast, some voluntarily childless, undecided and future childed women felt judged as abnormal and unnatural for not wanting, or not yet having, children. All except involuntarily childless women felt judged as culpable for not having or delaying children.

[W]hen I was 27 I was diagnosed with [polycystic ovarian syndrome] and was then informed by an older female [general practitioner] that I should have considered such diseases before I decided to

be single and without a child. (ID 115; future childed; age 31 years)

Many women described others' beliefs they lacked knowledge, emotions, abilities and attributes that women acquired only upon becoming childed, including not understanding children and parenting, and being incapable of maturity, happiness, love, empathy and selflessness. Many women experienced invalidation of their views, contributions and expertise as a result of such beliefs.

We live in [an area] for private schools so there's always chatter about whose child goes where. I feel excluded from these discussions because I have no children but I also feel private schools suck money from public schools. Expressing that opinion is unpopular and is normally met with 'well you would think differently if you had kids'. No, I wouldn't. I find that assumption offensive. (ID 556; circumstantially childless; age 38 years)

Furthermore, many women felt others perceived their feelings, experiences and needs as less important than those of childed people, and accordingly prioritised the needs of childed people.

Not being granted leave during holiday periods to allow parents to take leave. Not having access to any flexible working arrangements (part time, work from home etc.), which are only granted to parents. Having to work back late to cover people leaving early to pick up kids from school. (ID 011; circumstantially childless; age 33 years)

In addition, many women experienced public questioning about their personal reasons for having no children, in response to which they felt required to justify, defend or conceal being childless. Finally, many women felt marginalised, invisible and irrelevant in interactions, activities and spaces dominated by childed people and children.

When I get together with my friends, they always talk about their children, and I sit there and have very minimal to say/input. I then tune out and feel lonely and very depressed. (ID 333; involuntarily childless; age 36 years)

3.4.3. Exclusion from Childed Domains of Life

Some women experienced exclusion from domains of life idealising, prioritising, dominated by or catering exclusively to childed people, or stigmatising childless women. In the social domain, some women experienced exclusion from financial and emotional support from family who prioritised childed relations, and many wom-

en experienced exclusion from childed social networks.

Losing several very good friends to the world of 'mummyhood', even when you make all sorts of efforts to keep the relationship close it dies ... I feel these relationships would probably have survived and grown if I too had chosen to have children. (ID 119; voluntarily childless; age 36 years)

In the service domain, some circumstantially and voluntarily childless women were denied access to contraception and sterilisation procedures because medical practitioners believed they should become childed or would change their minds. Other women experienced exclusion from services that catered exclusively to childed people, or did not understand childless women's needs.

Gynaecological services for women not wishing to get pregnant are hard to access and [obstetric gynaecologists] seem uninterested in childfree woman and have a lack of knowledge about gynaecological problems outside of those relating to childbirth. (ID 017; voluntarily childless; age 35 years)

In the economic domain, some women experienced exclusion from employment and promotion opportunities by employers who assumed they would become childed, invalidated their expertise in working with children, or prioritised childed people's employment needs. Further, some involuntarily and circumstantially childless women described financial hardship arising from attempts to become childed, or following divorces from husbands who wanted to become childed.

Due to marital separation with husband after the stress of not having children my material and financial resources have suffered enormously. No longer have a home, struggle to make ends meet. (ID 218; involuntarily childless; age 32 years)

Finally, some women engaged in self-regulated exclusion from childed people, activities, groups, events and spaces, in order to avoid stigmatising experiences.

Went to appointment at [a hospital miscarriage clinic]. Same rooms and waiting rooms as pregnant women going for their check-ups. Indicated to sit at chairs facing wall and not towards the pregnant women ... I would have gone back to that clinic but it was too difficult due to so many other pregnant women around. (ID 087; involuntarily childless; age 33 years)

4. Discussion

This exploratory, mixed-methods study was the first to

investigate the social exclusion of different types of childless women in their reproductive years, across multiple domains of life in Australian society. This discussion explores the nature and extent of social exclusion of childless women, differences in the social exclusion of types of childless women, and the study's strengths and limitations.

4.1. *The Nature and Extent of Social Exclusion of Childless Women*

The findings revealed a complex picture of the social exclusion of childless women. The qualitative and quantitative findings suggested childless women experienced pronatalism-driven stigmatisation, congruent with studies finding other people stereotyped and stigmatised childless women (Çopur & Koropecykj-Cox, 2010; Koropecykj-Cox & Pendell, 2007; LaMastro, 2001). The qualitative findings further suggested pronatalism manifested in a continuum of connection and inclusion within, exclusionary experiences within, and exclusion from, all domains of life. Some women felt being childless resulted in experiences of connection and the freedom to contribute and participate. However, many women experienced exclusion within the domains of life. For example, reflecting previous research that voluntarily childless women experienced pressure from family and friends to become childed (Rich et al., 2011), all types of childless women experienced such pressure in all domains of life. Many women were expected to justify being childless, supporting earlier findings that being childless was a discrediting attribute that women were required to justify or conceal in order to maintain credibility (Bell, 2013; Rich et al., 2011). In addition, confirming and expanding upon research finding childless women felt workplaces prioritised childed people's needs for annual and carers leave, flexible work and work-life balance, and that others doubted their professional credibility (Doyle et al., 2013; Rich et al., 2011), many women experienced subordination of their needs to those of childed people, assumptions they lacked qualities only childed women could possess, and discrediting of their views and expertise, in all domains of life. At the other end of the continuum, some childless women experienced exclusion from resources and participation in domains of life dominated by, prioritising or catering exclusively to childed people. This finding augments existing research revealing involuntarily childless women's exclusion from a childed social world (Loke, Yu, & Hayter, 2012; Malik & Coulson, 2013).

Supporting the qualitative findings, the quantitative findings revealed exclusion varied within and between the domains of life. In the social domain, childless women had moderate levels of social interaction and high levels of social support. While Italian research found that childless women were less likely to receive

social support than childless women (Albertini & Mencarini, 2014), it compared childless with childless women. In the civic domain, a new area of research for childless women in their reproductive years, childless women had low levels of participation in community groups, events and activities. In the service domain, childless women had a low degree of problems accessing or using services. However, in the context of qualitative findings that some women felt excluded from mental and reproductive health services, and a United States study finding 22 per cent of childless women had difficulty obtaining healthcare (Bernstein, 2001), the aggregate score may have disguised problems with particular services. In the economic domain, most women were employed and in the upper middle or high personal income brackets, in accordance with the weight of Australian and international research (Debest & Mazuy, 2014; Miranti, McNamara, Tanton, & Yap, 2009; Waren & Pals, 2013).

In relation to perceived exclusion due to being childless, childless women perceived more exclusion in the social and civic domains than the service and economic domains. This may be explained by the implications of pronatalism in different domains. For example, stigmatising experiences may be more salient in the social and civic domains, while freedom to participate may be more pertinent to the service and economic domains. In addition, when considering the continuum of connection and inclusion within, exclusionary experiences within, and exclusion from, domains of life, the qualitative findings revealed substantially more women described exclusionary experiences within domains of life, than experiences of connection and inclusion within, or exclusion from, domains of life. This facilitates an understanding of why the quantitative findings did not consistently reveal exclusion from, or connection and inclusion within, domains of life, by suggesting exclusionary experiences within domains of life are more relevant to childless women.

4.2. Differences in Social Exclusion of Types of Childless Women

The findings revealed an equally complex picture of exclusion of types of childless women. In relation to the indicators of exclusion, circumstantially childless women reported lower levels of social support than other types of childless women. There were no statistically significant differences in other indicators of exclusion, suggesting different types of childless women had similar levels of resources and participation. Australia's divergent cultural, social, political and economic context from other countries may explain inconsistencies with United States and French studies, which found voluntarily childless women had higher workforce participation rates and incomes than other childless women (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Waren & Pals, 2013). In rela-

tion to perceived exclusion due to being childless, circumstantially and involuntarily childless women, followed by voluntarily childless women, perceived more exclusion than undecided and future childless women. These differences corresponded with findings that involuntarily, circumstantially and voluntarily childless women perceived more stigmatisation due to being childless than future childless women, and involuntarily and circumstantially childless women perceived more stigmatisation than undecided women.

The qualitative findings provided additional evidence of nuanced differences in childless women's experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Such differences were influenced by whether women's 'deviance' from pronatalism was non-volitional (innocent), volitional (guilty), and temporary or permanent. For example, some involuntarily and circumstantially childless women, for whom being childless was non-volitional, received sympathy and support. However, others felt stereotyped as unhappy and desperate, consistent with previous research with involuntarily childless women (McCarthy, 2008). In contrast, women whom others perceived as culpable for choices that 'contributed' to being childless, felt stereotyped as selfish, materialistic and child-hating. Furthermore, women who were permanently childless felt judged as failures. In addition, some circumstantially childless and voluntarily childless women who were permanently childless, and undecided women who were considering becoming permanently childless, experienced divorce or separation from partners who wanted to become childless, building upon earlier research with involuntarily childless women (Bell, 2013).

The findings also supported earlier studies revealing childless women's agency (Doyle et al., 2013; Park, 2002), by suggesting childless women are not simply passive receivers of social exclusion. Rather, their internalised, disempowered or empowered responses influenced experiences of social exclusion. Expanding upon research with involuntarily childless women (Bell, 2013), some involuntarily and circumstantially childless women who perceived themselves as failures, incomplete and unfulfilled, were deeply cognisant of being excluded. Furthermore, while some women inadvertently exacerbated exclusion by avoiding stigmatising experiences, others made empowered choices to build lives in which being childless was valued and affirmed.

The influence of the nature of women's 'deviance' from pronatalism facilitates an understanding of differences in types of childless women's degree of perceived exclusion. Some involuntarily and circumstantially childless women's greater degree of exclusion may have been influenced by permanent, internalised and disempowered non-conformance, despite involuntarily childless women's 'innocent' deviance. In contrast, some voluntarily childless women may have been protected from their volitional ('culpable') and perma-

ment deviance by empowered choices. Finally, some undecided and future childed women may have been protected by temporary non-conformance with pronatalism, whereby they were included on the basis of assumptions they would become childed in future.

4.3. Strengths and Limitations

The study had a number of limitations. In relation to the qualitative component, neither iterative data collection and analysis nor participant validation was possible in the context of an anonymous questionnaire. In relation to the quantitative component, its cross-sectional design precluded an examination of causality. Selection bias may have been introduced by the fifty-five per cent completion rate, and non-probability sampling limited external validity. Although self-selection was unavoidable due to the absence of a sampling frame, it may have produced a sample that was more likely to experience pronatalism-driven stigmatisation and exclusion. While the sample was not comparable with Australian women, participants' high educational attainment, employment rates, personal incomes and proportion of voluntary childlessness were consistent with research on the characteristics of childless women (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Miranti et al., 2009; Waren & Pals, 2013). Finally, due to its exploratory nature, the study did not control for confounding factors.

Despite its limitations, this study was the first to investigate social exclusion in multiple domains of life of different types of childless women in their reproductive years. Furthermore, the mixed methods approach facilitated a deeper understanding of social exclusion, the large sample provided sufficient power and rich qualitative data, the use of existing and validated scales reduced the potential for measurement bias, and self-administration minimised socially desirable responses. In addition, data immersion, participant quotations, locating the findings within existing research, and researcher reflexivity enhanced the qualitative component's rigour.

5. Conclusions

This research suggests societal-level pronatalism manifests in a continuum of childless women's connection and inclusion within, exclusion within, and exclusion from domains of life in Australian society, with more exclusion in the social and civic domains than the service and economic domains. Future research using a more comprehensive suite of indicators will further elucidate the nature of social exclusion. The study further suggests circumstantially and involuntarily childless women, followed by voluntarily childless women, perceive more stigmatisation and exclusion due to being childless than undecided and future childed wom-

en. Such differences may be influenced by the nature of women's 'deviance' from pronatalism.

Given social exclusion is a firmly established social determinant of health, it is essential to work towards an Australian society in which women's motherhood status is irrelevant to judgements of their worth, such that none would feel excluded in connection with being childless. Inclusive research can contribute to this change by measuring and exploring motherhood status and types of childlessness in health and social research. In addition, practitioners and policy-makers can develop inclusive interventions and policies by ensuring childless women's needs are considered in interventions and policies for all women, directly targeting different types of childless women with support groups, activities and events, and constructing counter-discourses of being childless as a positive and valued attribute.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors



Beth Turnbull

Beth Turnbull is a PhD candidate in the School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University. Her research seeks to understand the social connection and exclusion in different areas of life of women with no children, and how those experiences influence health and wellbeing.



Dr. Melissa Graham

Melissa Graham is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University. She is the Deputy Director of the Centre for Health through Action on Social Exclusion (CHASE). Dr Graham's research explores the lives of women without children with a particular focus on social exclusion, and health and wellbeing.



Ann Taket

Ann Taket holds the chair in Health and Social Exclusion within the School of Health and Social Development, and is Director of the Centre for Health through Action on Social Exclusion (CHASE) at Deakin University. Professor Taket has over thirty years' experience in public health related research, with particular interests in research directed at understanding the complex interactions between social exclusion and health, prevention and intervention in violence and abuse and the value of human rights based approaches in policy and practice.

Appendix: Open-ended questions used in the data collection instrument.

Topic/domain	Question
Stigmatisation	Can you think of a time when you felt you were stereotyped or stigmatized because you have no children? If so, please describe the incident in the space provided.
Social domain	Thinking about your family and friends, can you think of a time when you had a positive or negative experience related to not having children? If so, please describe the incident in detail in the space provided. Thinking about your participation in social and leisure activities, can you think of a time when you had a positive or negative experience related to not having children? If so, please describe the incident in detail in the space provided.
Civic domain	Thinking about your participation in community life, can you think of a time when you had a positive or negative experience related to not having children? If so, please describe the incident in detail in the space provided.
Service domain	Thinking about your access to and use of services, can you think of a time when you had a positive or negative experience related to not having children? If so, please describe the incident in detail in the space provided.
Economic domain	Thinking about your working life (including paid work and unemployment), can you think of a time when you had a positive or negative experience related to not having children? If so, please describe the incident in detail in the space provided. Thinking about your material and financial resources, can you think of a time when you had a positive or negative experience related to not having children? If so, please describe the incident in detail in the space provided.
General	Is there anything else you would like to tell us about being a woman in Australian society who does not have children?