

‘Unnatural’, ‘Unwomanly’, ‘Uncreditable’ and ‘Undervalued’: The Significance of Being a Childless Woman in Australian Society

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Abstract Childlessness is an increasing trend, internationally and in Australia. The few studies exploring the lived experiences of childless women have been conducted in America, Canada and the United Kingdom; predominantly during the 1980s and 1990s. The experiences of childless women in contemporary Australia remain under-researched. This hermeneutic phenomenological study sought to enhance understanding of the lived experience of being a childless woman in contemporary Australia. In-depth interviews with five childless women revealed five key themes as significant facets of the experiences of childless women: notions of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’; woman = mother; childlessness as a discrediting attribute; feeling undervalued; and the significance of being childless. By privileging the experiences of childless women in a pronatalist society, it is apparent that misconceptions and stereotypes about childlessness continue to pervade. This study contributes to understanding this growing population group; highlighting that while childlessness is increasingly acknowledged, it is still not completely understood.

Keywords Childlessness · Stigma · Stereotypes · Pronatalism · Femininity

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Introduction

The most recent estimates from the Australian Bureau of Statistics suggest that a growing proportion of Australian women are not having children [3, 4]. In 2006, 37% of Australian women in the peak child bearing age of 30–34 years had not had children. This is significantly higher than in 1996, when 29% of women aged 30–34 years were childless [4]. An increase in women remaining childless has also been observed in the UK [50] and the USA [15]. Despite this increasing trend, childlessness continues to be a minority position in Australian society.

Although childlessness is increasing both in Australia and other western countries, the research focus exploring childlessness has been undertaken predominantly through demographic, socio-psychological and feminist approaches [43]. Research studies undertaken through a demographic approach have often focused on identifying trends in childlessness [1, 59, 61] and characteristics of the childless population [23, 33, 52]. Whilst such research provides us with valuable information about demographic trends in childlessness and where the childless population are socially located, the focus is towards fertility decisions and outcomes rather than experiences of childlessness; consequentially, they do not serve to privilege the voices of childless women.

The body of research undertaken with a socio-psychological orientation has explored the pathways and decisions towards remaining childless [30, 54, 62, 69, 70, 72], and the intentions of the childless towards marriage, fertility decision-making, and family formation [6, 10, 37, 41, 43]. Additionally, it has also explored the attitudes of others towards the childless [12, 34, 35, 49, 60], and childless women's experiences of encountering stereotypes, stigmatisation and marginalisation as attributable to their childless status [5, 22, 25, 29, 38, 44, 45, 51, 55, 56, 68]. Women involuntarily childless through infertility have been stereotyped as sad, suffering, desperate and 'victims' of childlessness [5, 22, 38], and have experienced being reprimanded for their childlessness and failure to achieve motherhood status, whilst concurrently being scrutinised for their 'obsessive' desire to have children [64]. Voluntarily childless women have often been perceived as selfish, self-centred and materialistic [5, 25], and have experienced being met with shock, pity, criticism and hostility in light of their voluntary childlessness [46].

Research exploring childlessness through feminist orientations has often explored childlessness through the lens of social conflict and the unequal power and resource distributions between men and women [9, 40, 47]. Cannold's (2005) research with 35 Australian and American childless women explored the nature and experiences of circumstantial childlessness; whereby women with a desire to have children have experienced childlessness imposed upon them by external circumstances such as having no partner, having a partner who is voluntarily childless, or an inability to negotiate paid work with the demands of motherhood [9]. Whilst these demographic, psycho-socio and feminist research approaches have provided valuable and much needed insights into the phenomenon of childlessness, they do not directly address exploring the lived experience of being childless and what it is like to live as a childless woman in contemporary Australian society.

Discourses Shaping the Experience of Childlessness

The lives and reproductive decisions of childless women are both experienced within, and pervaded by, broader socio-cultural discourses [18, 25]. Discourses can be understood as cultural and social practices and communication, through which beliefs and understandings about the world are constructed and conveyed [57]. Dominant discourses represent those that are imposed on people [38]; whereas counter/resistant discourses can be understood as those that challenge the dominant discourses in society, through offering alternative ways of being [28].

The influence of dominant discourses of pronatalism and motherhood on the lives of childless women is evident in prior research [2, 25, 26, 31, 51, 64]. Pronatalism, conceptualised as an ideology that incorporates beliefs, attitudes and actions that, implicitly or explicitly, support parenthood and encourage fertility [66], has been recognised as a prominent characteristic of western society [64]. The social and political climate of Australia is largely pronatalist; exemplified through the implementation over recent years of population policies and maternity payments designed to encourage fertility [31, 60]. This is illustrated through Australian population policies such as the ‘Baby Bonus’ [31], the Victorian State government Infertility Treatment Act 1995 (Vic), and in the public call of senior national politician Peter Costello for Australians to have “one for mum, one for dad, and one for the country” [13].

Pronatalist ideologies also serve to establish and support cultural discourses of femininity, in which the act and desire to mother is deemed central to what women do, and what women are [24, 26]. Through such discourses, womanhood and motherhood come to be seen as synonymous identities and facets of experience [2]. Thus for women, parenting and the act of mothering are not only presented as desirable, but are in fact seen as the natural expression of their ‘femininity’ [7]. While motherhood has been recognised as mostly undervalued in society through holding little material or social status, non-motherhood is often granted even lower prestige [38]. As such, the lives of Australian childless women are further influenced by prevailing motherhood discourses, in which women without the desire (voluntary), ability (involuntary¹) or opportunity (circumstantial) to have children, may be seen as abnormal and unfeminine [7, 40].

The Lived Experiences of Childless Women

Research that attends to the lived experiences of childless women constitutes a smaller portion of the body of literature [5, 9, 19, 32, 66, 67]. Taking a sociological perspective, Veevers (1980) explored the lived experiences of 156 Canadian voluntarily childless wives and husbands, providing insight into the social meanings surrounding parenthood and marriage. The difficulties around defining childlessness

¹ Based on Letherby [40] and Daniluk’s [14], *involuntarily* childless women are those who desire to have children, but due to infertility (the inability to achieve a viable pregnancy after 1 year of regular and unprotected sexual intercourse) are unable to have biologically related children.

present limitations in this research; a quarter of the ‘voluntarily’ childless female participants reported the final consensus to not have children was initiated by their husbands. In America, Ireland (1993) explored issues of womanhood, motherhood and female identities with 100 childless women, providing important insights into socio-cultural discourses surrounding fertility, femininity and childlessness. Additionally, Vissing (2002) explored the lived experiences of 125 American childless women. Her research offered valuable knowledge regarding the personal and social experiences of childless women, but the relatively highly structured interviews limit the extent of her exploration of the lived experience of being a childless woman. Ultimately, as these studies were predominantly conducted during the eighties and early nineties, they may be significantly outdated and no longer provide accurate reflections into the experience of childlessness. Cannold (2005) explored the experiences and causes of circumstantial childlessness through interviews with 35 Australian and American childless women. However, despite being an insightful and relatively contemporary qualitative study attending to the lives of childless women, its inclusion of Australian and American women together and predetermined focus on the experiences and causes of circumstantial childlessness, constrains the study’s ability to provide insight into the lived experience of what it is like to live as a childless woman in contemporary Australia. Given that an increasing number of women in Australia are remaining childless, this lack of research exploring childlessness means that what is known about the lives of Australian women, and what is actually occurring in the lives of many Australian women, may differ [11]. In light of this gap, this study aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding childless women; in order to enhance understanding of the lived experience of being a childless woman in contemporary Melbourne, Australia.

Methods and Data

Drawing on the work of Veevers [66] and Park [51], for the research described here the term ‘childless’ is used to refer to those women who have never had, and currently do not have, any biologically or socially related children (such as step-children or adopted children), and thus have never assumed the role or identity of a mother.

A qualitative approach in the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology [65] was used to guide this research. Phenomenological research can be understood as the exploration of lived experience. Essentially, the notion of ‘lived experience’ refers to our everyday world and experiences; our daily interactions and experiences that we encounter naturally and pre-reflectively [65]. Building on phenomenological research, the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology is also focused towards the study of lived experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with exploring lived experience, with the intention of creating meaning and achieving understanding [36]. As such, being both a descriptive (phenomenological) and interpretive (hermeneutic) approach, this methodology assisted in drawing forth meaning from the women’s views of their lived experiences; enabling a deeper understanding of the lived experience of being a childless woman.

Sampling

Ethical approval for this study was granted from the Deakin University, Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Sciences Human Ethics Advisory Group, in September 2008 (HEAG-H 96_08). Purposive sampling was used to recruit five women aged 18 years and over, who lived in or around Melbourne, Victoria, Australia and who identified themselves as being childless. During the recruitment process, no definition of what constituted ‘childless’ was specified. This was guided by the desire to avoid imposing any definitions or presuppositions of what being a childless woman constituted, upon women who identified themselves as childless. This was also informed by the inconsistencies observed throughout the literature, as noted by Ireland [32], in regards to the different definitions of childlessness that have been used in studies exploring childlessness. Research exploring childlessness has included women with no biological children but whom have adopted children [14, 44], women who have never assumed the role of a parent [66], and women who have out-lived their children and thus have not always been childless [16]. Therefore, a definition of what constituted childlessness was not offered during the recruitment process, as how the women defined and identified their own childless status was of interest in itself to the aim of the research.

Importantly, our definition of childlessness was inclusive of the various reasons and types of childlessness, such as involuntary, voluntary and circumstantial childlessness [8, 9]. Previous research has been problematic in the recruitment of the childless, as the researchers’ conceptualisation of the participants’ type of childlessness, has in fact been incongruent with the participants’ lived experiences [7, 32, 58, 66]. We also wished to avoid imposing preconceptions regarding any commonalities or differences in the experience of childlessness, as attributable to particular types of childlessness.

Women were recruited through an advertisement placed in a local newspaper, and also through word of mouth, where women had heard about the study through various networks and contacted the researchers expressing their desire to participate. The age of participants was open to childless women aged 18 years and over. Whilst this allowed for a potentially wide age range amongst participants, our study sought to avoid reproducing the attitudes of others as cited by childless women in past studies (see for example Veevers [66], Gillespie [25]), who infer that younger voluntarily childless women will undoubtedly change their minds. A total of five women who met the inclusion criteria, ranging in age from 34 to 48 years, participated in the study. Ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability and socio-economic status of the women were only documented, through observation. All the women appeared of Anglo-European background and of middle range income.

Data Collection

Two semi-structured, in-depth interviews were sought with each woman. First interviews were conducted with all five women, with the duration of interviews ranging between 1 and 2 hours. Interviews usually began with asking the women the broad question, ‘So, what is it like for you, being childless?’ This allowed the

women to direct the interview towards what was important or significant to them about being childless. To generate further discussion, additional questions were used. These questions were broad and used sparingly. As a verification measure, all five women reviewed the transcripts of the first interviews for accuracy. Some of the women used this opportunity to amplify on certain points they had made, and to write some additional thoughts that had occurred to them post the interview, that they wished to communicate.

Second interviews were conducted with four of the five women; one woman declined a second interview as she expressed she did not have anything further to contribute. These interviews were more structured than the first interviews; concept maps of the preliminary data analysis were presented to the women which formed the focus of the discussion. All of the women confirmed the authenticity of the thematic analysis during these second interviews. The interviews were all digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. To protect the identity of the women, the pseudonyms of Kate, Tamara, Liz, Sandra and Diane were assigned during transcription.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed through the phases of data immersion, theoretical and open coding, creation of categories, and thematic analysis [21]. Following data immersion, a theoretical coding process was undertaken in which Van Manen's [65] four lifeworld existentials were used as a lens through which to organise and explore the data. These four lifeworld existentials composed of: *lived space* (how one subjectively experiences the spaces and places we are in), *lived time* (how we experience time and moments subjectively, rather than more objective 'factual' notions of time), *lived body* (our bodily presence in our lives and the way we experience, feel, share and conceal through our lived body), and *lived human relations* (the interactions and relationships we create and/or maintain with others). Van Manen [65] contends that many experiences relate to these four lifeworld existentials; as such, they offer us a helpful tool through which to explore and come to better understand a particular lived experience. In the current study, the interview data was coded and organised according to the four lifeworld existentials. Whilst each of the four lifeworld existentials presented their own distinctive focus, they were not discrete but rather were interwoven and inter-related aspects of the participants' lived experiences. Following this process, an open inductive coding process was undertaken, in which the data was labelled and organised by particular ideas that were emerging within the data.

Upon coding and organisation of the data, the creation of categories was undertaken through a process of exploring how the codes shared relationships, in order to develop categories. Finally, the process of thematic analysis was then undertaken, in which the researchers moved beyond descriptions of categories, towards offering explanations and interpretations of the concepts that presented within the data. In the process of thematic analysis, it became apparent that each major theme was pervaded by many of the lifeworld existentials, rather than just one. As such, the final analysis is presented under the five main themes that evolved;

honouring the nature of the lifeworlds existentials as realms that pervade multiple themes in the lived experience under investigation.

Discussion of Findings

Through the processes of analysis, five main themes emerged as significant facets of the women’s lived experiences. These five main themes are depicted in Fig. 1. The themes consisted of various categories that were considered to be essential elements of each theme. While the themes emerged as significant aspects of the experience of childlessness independently of one another, they are not considered mutually exclusive but in fact inter-related.

Woman = Mother

In light of pronatalist ideologies, ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ can often be presented as synonymous identities and experiences [2]. The lived experiences of the women in this study appeared to be shaped by this socio-cultural synonymy between woman and mother. During the second interviews, this theme resonated very strongly with the women; particularly with Kate, Diane and Liz. For some of the women, this theme was apparent through experiences of motherhood being an assumed position. Sandra, Diane, Liz and Tamara, all of whom are in their forties, all discussed experiences where people had assumed that they had in fact already become mothers.

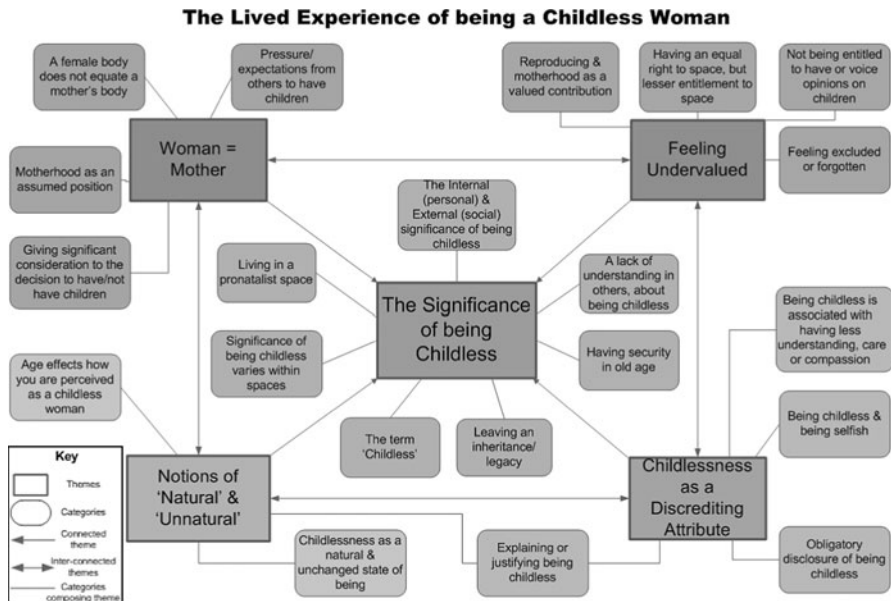


Fig. 1 Visual representation of themes and categories

Tamara spoke of people assuming she was a mother, even when neither the topic nor presence of children was apparent:

And people often just assume that I've already had kids, or that my kids are grown up now or whatever. (Tamara, 44)

In addition to facing assumptions that they were in fact mothers, the women also spoke of people assuming that they wanted to be mothers; consequentially, also assuming that they were unhappy or despondent with their childless status. Liz, aged 41 years, discussed feelings of having to explain her happiness to others, due to underlying assumptions that she wanted to be a mother and thus could not be satisfied in her life, being childless.

You feel yourself put in the position of having to justify your happiness, or how you can be fulfilled. You have to justify your existence to people with children because they just can't get their head around that you can live your life so differently, and still be satisfied. (Liz, 41)

A socio-cultural synonymy between woman and mother had also shaped the experiences of the women, through encountering notions that a female body is a mother's body. Tamara, aged 44 years, raised the way that women's bodies were often discussed primarily as mothers' bodies. Tamara was critical of this, highlighting the inaccuracy of presenting particular women's issues, as solely mother issues.

You know, this is a child thing or a mother thing. Stretch marks, sagging breasts, this sort of thing happens 'when you have kids'. It happens when you get older. If you don't exercise, if you don't eat right, these things happen. And it's not just about having kids. (Tamara, 44)

Through discourse that presents women's changing bodies and the process of ageing as issues only experienced by mothers, the notion of a woman's body as equivalent to a mother's body is reinforced.

Socio-cultural constructions have often presented motherhood as necessary for females to reach an 'adult femininity' [42]. This notion that motherhood is a necessary rite in order to authentically achieve the realisation of womanhood, appeared to be one that the women were both familiar with, and one which they questioned. Diane, a 48 year old woman, challenged the notion that her own adult femininity or womanly status was in any way compromised due to not having experienced pregnancy or childbirth.

So? It's just the way it is. Yeah, yeah I still certainly feel female, and still feel like a woman. (Diane, 48)

Similarly to these findings, Maher and Saugeres [42] in their Australian qualitative study with 100 childless women and mothers found that childless women were aware of socio-cultural constructions equating adult femininity with motherhood, and were critical of these. Previous research by Gillespie [24], also found that childless women challenged the notion that their femininity was compromised by their childlessness.

The theme of woman equals mother also emerged for the women in this study, through experiencing pressure and expectations from others to have children. Both Sandra, aged 44, and Diane, aged 48, spoke of experiencing expectations and pressure from others to have children; particularly when they were in their thirties.

And you know I remember um when David and I first met, you know, and people would straight away say “so when are you having children?” And I thought, they just wanted me to validate their decision. (Sandra, 44)

As both these women are now in their mid to late forties, it is important to note the possibility that the pressures they experienced to have children were a reflection of the culture of that time, and that this may, or may not, have lessened for younger women today. Despite this, these findings are consistent with recent Australian research where childless women had experienced pressure from friends, relatives and work colleagues, to have children [42].

In light of pronatalist ideologies, ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ can often be presented as synonymous identities and experiences [2]. In western culture, motherhood as fixed and central to feminine identity is deeply embedded, facilitated by varying social, cultural, religious, and political values [24]. The lived experiences of the women in this study appeared to be shaped by this socio-cultural understanding of a synonymy between woman and mother.

Notions of ‘Natural’ and ‘Unnatural’

The women in this study emphasised strongly an awareness of dominant discourses through which motherhood is presented as normal and natural, and consequently, childlessness was considered an unnatural and abnormal state. Tamara discussed the way in which remaining childless can be viewed as abnormal.

It’s the default position. And if you don’t have kids by a certain age, then there’s something wrong with you. (Tamara, 44)

The role of motherhood for women is often presented as pre-ordained, with women’s natural instincts and bodies being perceived as suited to reproduction and bearing children [24, 73]. Through this discourse, as the position of mother is presented as *natural*, childlessness through its failure to realise a woman’s natural instinct and imperative, is presented as *unnatural* [24].

During the interviews, through discussions with the women regarding the manner in which motherhood and childlessness is presented, a counter/resistant-discourse began to emerge. Despite the dominant discourses of motherhood as natural and childlessness as unnatural, the women in this study spoke of childlessness as in fact, a natural position and way of being in the world.

But at the same time it’s not like I came into the world with kids, so it’s like, it’s just my natural state of being I guess. Being childless is just who I am. (Kate, 34)

You would think, with that notion again, that everyone has been in that childless state. That everyone has been there, and that’s the state that’s a natural one, that changes. (Liz, 41)

Through emphasising that childlessness is a state in which all women enter the world and thus that all women have experienced, Kate and Liz are able to challenge the notion that childlessness is an unusual and unnatural state. By working within the dominant discourses of motherhood as natural and childlessness as unnatural, the childless women in this study were able to use the concept of ‘naturalness’ to confirm, rather than deny, the legitimacy of their own childlessness as a natural state of being.

The theme of ‘natural and unnatural’ also emerged, through the way in which the age of the women also affected how their childlessness was perceived by others. For Tamara, her childlessness shifted from something that was accepted and understood when she was younger, to something that was rejected and perceived negatively as she aged.

When you’re younger, it’s more accepted, you know you’re kinda groovy if you take that position a lot of the time. But as you get older, they start to see you as being more deficient. You’re missing out, you don’t understand, you don’t live in the real world, you never grow up, that sort of thing. (Tamara, 44)

Interestingly, it appears that despite the fact that Tamara has become chronologically older over time, due to her status as an older childless woman, Tamara is perceived as having *aged*, but not necessarily having *matured*. This finding is consistent with research by Maher and Saugeres’ [42], where some childless women felt they were perceived as immature for not wanting children. Diane had also expressed that how her childlessness was perceived by others, changed overtime as she grew older. For Diane, whilst her childlessness was unaccepted and questioned when she was in her thirties, pressure and expectations from others to have children had now ceased in accordance with her age.

I used to even say how I can’t have children, and then they would say about IVF and that. Now, it’s really good. Now, at my age, they don’t go down that track, so that’s nice. (Diane, 48)

Comments from the women in this study highlight that the way a woman’s childlessness is perceived in terms of being natural or unnatural, is largely influenced by social norms regarding age and the acceptability of being childless, and being a mother. While the socio-cultural and political landscape of Australia is pervaded by pronatalist ideology [31], not all women in Australia are encouraged to become mothers [60]. Lesbian women, teenage mothers, and single women, are often deemed as inappropriate to mother [17]. Kate, a 34 year old single woman, discussed the way in which women are not asked why they want children, unless they fail to meet the criteria in which society has deemed motherhood as natural and acceptable.

Nobody gets asked. Unless, and ok here are the exceptions. Unless they are fifteen, or unless they have fifteen kids, and it’s like how dare you have fifteen kids! Or unless they are sixty five ... If you’re any one of those extremes, then it’s evil and wrong. But if you’re thirty five and you want three kids, or you have three kids and you’ve got the mortgage on the house, then that’s perfectly natural. There’s natural and unnatural, going on here. (Kate, 34)

As illustrated through Kate's comment, whilst in light of pronatalist ideologies childlessness can be perceived as unnatural for many women, in contrast, for those women who are deemed socially unsuitable to mother, childlessness may in fact be considered a natural and even desirable position.

Childlessness as a Discrediting Attribute

According to Goffman [27], stigma can be understood as an attribute that is deemed profoundly discrediting, and that impairs the social acceptability of the possessor. Goffman [27] highlights the distinction between the discredited (where their stigmatising attribute is immediately evident and visible), and the discreditable (the individual's discrediting attribute is not immediately visible or apparent, and is revealed through the process of communication and interaction). In this respect, childlessness can be understood as discreditable; the discrediting attribute of childlessness not immediately apparent but rather revealed through both sharing and controlling information. Most of the women in this study expressed the belief that childlessness was not as stigmatised, nor as negatively perceived, as it once was in the past. Despite this, during interviews the women revealed that childlessness served as an attribute that was discrediting in their lived experiences through being: a status they felt required to justify or explain; a characteristic they believed detracted from their credibility; and an attribute they felt was associated with being selfish, and having lesser care or compassion.

During her second interview, Tamara confirmed the way childlessness felt discrediting, through highlighting that the status of being childless is not something one can easily reveal; childlessness is not a neutral status and is something one is evaluated negatively on.

Yes, it is discrediting, because you feel it's not something you can just come out and say, and not be judged one way or the other for. (Tamara, 44)

Kate also discussed during her second interview the way that she felt childlessness served as a discrediting attribute.

That is the discrediting thing, that's the thing that actually takes away from you. It's a nil thing, it's a minus, it's not an attribute that's worth anything. (Kate, 34)

Kate highlighted the way in which childlessness is not considered a positive or valuable attribute; on the contrary, it is deemed an attribute that can diminish your creditability and repute. Additionally, Kate further expanded upon her belief that childlessness served as a discrediting attribute, through raising the way that the status of mother is often used by women to begin statements, as it is predominantly a socially regarded and creditable status. For instance, a statement such as, 'As a mother, I felt it was appalling', can often be heard in public or media discourse. Kate observed that childlessness is not able to be used in this same way as motherhood, to give integrity to what one says.

They don't do it the other way either. 'As a childless woman, I think it's really important to ...' No! Nobody gives a crap about it, that's not a qualification that's worthy (Kate, 34).

Childlessness also served as a discrediting attribute for the women through it being associated with selfishness. In light of the way that mothers are often presented as giving, patient and selfless, childless women are juxtaposed against this image and may consequentially be perceived as selfish [10]. Whilst only Tamara had reported an incident of directly being accused of being selfish, many of the women expressed that they felt they were viewed this way, in broader society. Both Sandra and Diane raised feeling that their childlessness was associated with being selfish.

I don't know that people verbalise it, but I think there is a general you know view, that people who don't have children are selfish, are self-absorbed. (Sandra, 44)

Diane: If I choose to not have children, if someone else looks at me as selfish, let them.

Interviewer: Do you think that people do?

Diane: Probably. Probably, yeah probably.

Interviewer: Like have you had things directly said to you?

Diane: No not directly said no, but you do just *feel* it. (Diane, 48)

This finding is consistent with American qualitative research by Park [51] and Australian research by Maher and Saugeres [42]. In response to feeling their childlessness was perceived as selfish, Tamara and Diane emphasised that they had given thoughtful consideration to the decision not to have children, and argued that many parents do not give enough consideration to this decision.

People don't necessarily think, before they have a child. They don't weigh up the pros and cons and see not having a child as an option. (Tamara, 44)

I guess I'm just more responsible, really. About, it is a huge responsibility to have a child and bring it up in the world, and you know, are you up for it? (Diane, 48)

Through emphasising the thought and reflection they have given to choosing to remain childless, and the absence of such reflection amongst some parents, Tamara and Diane reframe their childlessness through the lens of responsibility, rather than selfishness. Drawing on the work of Park [51], this technique to manage their discrediting attribute is reflective of Sykes and Matza's [63] theory of the 'Condemnation of the Condemners' [51].

Childlessness also served as a discrediting attribute through the way in which the women felt they had to explain, or justify their childlessness, to others. Tamara, Diane, Sandra and Liz all discussed that they felt at times, they were required to justify or explain why they were childless.

Diane: And I used to go into quite lengthy, explanations as to why I wasn't going to have children and, to sort of justify it.

Interviewer: Did you feel that you had to?

Diane: *Yes*. Really did feel like I had to. (Diane, 48)

Diane also shared that in light of feeling required to justify or explain her childlessness, Diane would often comment to people that she could not have children, as an attempt to ward off further questioning about her childlessness.

I got so sick of it when I was in my thirties that I used to say, 'I can't'. And then they would say, 'oh yes but there's IVF, and there's surrogacy and there's this and this and this'. And I'd go, 'Oh, (sigh)'. You know, I can't just say something to shut you up. (Diane, 48)

During her first (and only) interview, Sandra also discussed experiences of feeling required to justify or explain her childless status to others. The comment from Sandra was indicative of the frustration that many of the participants expressed, at feeling compelled to justify their childlessness to others.

And um, you feel like you have to make an excuse for it or something, it just really annoys the shit out of me. (Sandra, 44)

Feeling obliged to justify one's childlessness was similarly reported by American childless women in Morrell's [47] qualitative study. Woollett [74] contends that in light of living in a pronatalist environment, childless women will often be called upon to explain their childlessness to others, as it fails to adhere to social norms. Whilst it is important to note that the women in this current study did not report being directly asked by others to explain their childlessness, nearly every participant reported feeling that they were required to do so. Liz, aged 41, explained that this feeling of being required to justify one's childlessness was due to the way that it is perceived as a discrediting attribute.

It's like you have to put a little annotation at the bottom of it; an excuse or reason. You've got to excuse your childlessness because it's this discrediting thing. (Liz, 41)

Therefore, the feeling of having to justify or explain one's childlessness to others, as reported by most of the women in this study, may be attributable to the way that childlessness serves as a discrediting attribute. As such, childless women may possibly try to justify or explain their childlessness, as an attempt to regain credibility.

For the women, childlessness was also associated with having lesser care or compassion; particularly in regards to issues of an altruistic or humanitarian nature. For Sandra, she felt that her childlessness was perceived by others as an attribute that detracted from the authenticity of her care and interest in the world and her community.

I feel very much a part of my society, and my world and my community. And sometimes I feel like, you know, I really care about what happens to the world. And I'm interested in politics; I'm interested in a whole lot of other things. And then sometimes when it's, when it's underscored by whether you're a

parent or not, or there's some sort of reference to that within that context, it just, it annoys me. (Sandra, 44)

Sandra appeared frustrated that her childlessness is brought into view and deemed as relevant when she expresses interest in issues of an altruistic nature; ultimately, her childlessness discredits the legitimacy that is attributed to her interests and concerns. Morell [47] contends that, as motherhood is associated with selflessness and concern for others, a perception emerges that “if women don't care for children, they only care for themselves” (p. 77). Consequently, the original attribute of childlessness then becomes associated with being self-orientated, and having a diminished ability to have care and compassion for others.

Liz and Sandra also expressed frustration at their childlessness being associated with having lesser care or concern over the environment. Liz and Sandra were frustrated and offended by the notion that because they do not have children of their own, that they will not have concern about the future of the world for children.

I'm concerned for all my friends that have younger children. God, what's life going to be like by the time these kids get there? You know, what's the planet going to be like ... But yeah, it's the same whether you've got kids or not. (Liz, 41)

In fact there was a notice on our floor in our building, there's our kitchen and then there's a kitchen down the end. Someone had put a sign up, “You may not have kids and not care about the future of our planet, but I do, so recycle”, or something like that. It was so offensive. (Sandra, 44)

Despite such social attitudes as illustrated in Sandra's example, past research has found that a concern over the environment and overpopulation has been cited by numerous voluntarily childless women, as influencing their decision to remain childless [41, 46, 47]. Additionally, Sandra discussed feeling prevented from entering the territory of having care and compassion about issues of an altruistic nature; suggesting that such areas are defined by some parents as being reserved for parents.

There are some people who are really righteous. And that whole thing about people always talking about, I want a better life and world for my kids and my planet. And that the planet should be in a better state for my kids and my grandkids. And like, that sort of language *excludes* me. It's morally exclusive territory. I want a better planet for all children as well. (Sandra, 44)

This finding is consistent with Morell's [47] research, where childless women who expressed concern about preserving the environment for future generations, also expressed resentment at feeling excluded from having opinions on such moral areas, as such areas appeared reserved for women who mothered.

The theme of childlessness as a discrediting attribute appeared to resonate strongly with the women, with a couple of the women in fact making comments about feeling powerless to challenge such pervasive negative social perceptions of childless women that still exist in Australian society. Tamara spoke explicitly of this.

There's nothing really that you can do either because there is no lobby group, or sort of educational organisation or promotional thing that says, 'you must respect people regardless if they have kids', or anything like that. So you're out there on your own, and you've just got to find a way to cope with it. (Tamara, 44)

Feeling Undervalued

While motherhood has been recognised as typically undervalued in society through holding little material status, non-motherhood is often granted an even lower value and prestige [38]. For the women in this study, a sense of feeling undervalued due to being a childless woman emerged as a significant aspect of their experiences. Pronatalist ideology not only promotes motherhood as the basis of feminine identity, but further serves to perpetuate the belief that a woman's social role and worth is tied to motherhood [53]. For Liz, the social value granted to women through bearing children meant that she felt her own contributions to society were comparatively viewed as lesser, and undervalued by others.

With some people you get that sense that because of this incredibly important job, the most important job they've ever had in their life that my life is going to somehow be of less value than theirs, because I've not produced a child. (Liz, 41)

For Sandra, this manifested through a concern for the future and becoming an older childless woman.

Sandra: I'm not ever going to be a matriarch, I'm not going to have the status. Am I just going to be one of those women who just disappear, and become invisible?
Interviewer: Because?

Sandra: Yeah because you're not a mother or a grandmother. You know. Is that the only thing that we value older women for? And it seems to be that mainstream society still works like this in many ways. (Sandra, 44)

The notion of feeling undervalued through being invisible was also expressed by Kate. For Sandra, a sense of feeling undervalued was informed by the view that older women's worth was understood in terms of motherhood, however Kate discussed the way in which, similarly to other social attributes, childlessness can make one invisible in society.

Society makes people invisible enough as it is, like make certain groups invisible. If you're not pretty and young and thin, you're already partly invisible. Why have to add childlessness to that? Why just make it that much harder? (Kate, 34)

The women also expressed a sense of feeling undervalued through feeling they were not entitled to voice opinions about children, and that their contributions to the world for children were minimised. Childless women have often been stereotyped as having either no time for, or spending no time with, children; consequently, they are perceived as having no *understanding* of children [39]. For Liz, a current godmother

and former midwife, not feeling entitled to have opinions on children or having knowledge about children, is an immense source of frustration.

You can't have an opinion on families, or on children, or on schools or anything. And I suppose, in the last few years I just sort of tend not to say anything. (Liz, 41)

Despite having worked for years as a midwife, Liz is made to feel she is not entitled to express opinions on babies or children's issues, due to being childless. Similarly, research by Vissing [67] with childless women found that women who were family physicians, psychologists who worked with children, and women whom had degrees in child development, also reported being angered that parents assumed they had no understanding of children.

For Sandra, there was a strong sense of having her understanding of children, and contributions to the world for children, undervalued due to being childless.

People like me, childless people, still care about the world and have things to contribute in terms of what life should be like for families. I mean we all come from a family you know, we've all *been* children, I think we all have some value to add to that. (Sandra, 44)

Interestingly, for Diane a sense of feeling undervalued came through her observation that her choice to not want children was in itself, undervalued.

The choice to have children is valued more, than my choice. (Diane, 48)

It appears for Diane, that in light of living in a pronatalist environment and the social value attached to parenthood, her choice to remain childless is not granted the same value and legitimacy that is granted to the choice people make to become parents.

The Significance of Being Childless

The significance of being childless, to childless women themselves, emerged as a theme that was at the essence of this lived experience. This theme was placed at the centre of the lived experience of childlessness (Fig. 1), as it was both influential to and influenced by, the other four themes previously discussed. Being childless was to a certain extent significant, for some of the women, through facing personal issues such as leaving an inheritance and having security in old age. However, while the women acknowledged that being childless was significant in that it had shaped their lives in regards to what they have experienced, the significance being childless held for the women stemmed predominantly from the social (external) emphasis placed by others in society on their childless status, rather than from any largely personal (internal) importance within itself. Tamara expressed that being childless was not personally significant to her at all.

It's not really significant to me at all, in my life. (Tamara, 44)

Interestingly, Tamara's comments were in contradiction with her actions; despite labelling herself as a recluse, Tamara answered the advertisement in her local

newspaper and chose to give her time voluntarily to talk about being childless. However, through discussions with Tamara it became apparent that being childless was not particularly personally significant in and of itself, but rather, it became personally significant through the experience of being in a misunderstood, minority and sometimes marginalised, position. Many of the women expressed that they felt their childlessness was more significant to others, particularly parents, than it was to them. For Liz and Diane, it was through interactions with parents and the way their childlessness was perceived, that a greater personal significance evolved.

I actually think it's more significant to others who have children, that I don't have children, than it is significant to me. (Liz, 41)

I think it matters a whole lot more to people who have children. And they look at me and go, 'You haven't got children?' Like, I've stepped off another planet or something. (Diane, 48)

Similarly, findings revealed by Park [51] found that participants reported being voluntarily childless as being a background identity, with it becoming more central through negative reactions from others. The way in which the personal significance that childlessness held for the women in this study was shaped by the social significance of being childless, was also illustrated through Sandra's experience. Sandra expressed the belief that the personal significance childlessness held for her was largely the result of living in a pronatalist society.

I actually don't think it's that big a deal for me, but I think I feel it in the external world more, because I feel a bit like a fish out of water. Because I mean one of, I don't know. I don't even know what country I'm thinking about, but maybe there are some countries where, it's not such a focus on women being mothers. (Sandra, 44)

For Sandra, it appears the pronatalist emphasis in Australia's socio-cultural and political climate around women being mothers has given her childless status a greater personal significance, through failing to meet this socially prescribed status. Additionally, Kate and Diane discussed that it was through the emphasis in society placed on being childless, and the negative frame through which childlessness is often presented in the media and public discourse, that their own childlessness held a greater personal significance.

The fact that I don't have children yeah it doesn't matter to me, until you read things in the media, and hear things, and all the politicians talk about working families. (Diane, 48)

For Diane, it appears that it is the way that childlessness can be negatively presented, or not presented at all, that her childlessness becomes to matter quite significantly.

The theme of the significance of being childless was also characterised, through the way in which the women rejected the label of being 'childless'. Kate, Sandra, and Diane all stated that they did not like the word 'childless'. The term 'childless' has been argued as associated with deficiency, and having connotations of a 'lack'

[5, 47]. For Kate, Diane and Sandra, they too felt that the term ‘childless’ conjured negative connotations, particularly presenting childless women as being lesser for not having had children.

It’s not a qualifier I use about myself. And I guess if somebody asked I’d go, ‘Well no I don’t have kids’, but that’s not the same as saying I’m childless; I’m lesser for having no children. (Kate, 34)

I’m not sure why I don’t like the term ‘childless’ but I think it seems to conjure up connotations of something ‘less’, like I’m less of a person. I prefer to say ‘I don’t have kids. (Diane, 48)

In addition to feeling the term childless held negative connotations, Diane and Sandra expressed they also felt it was a misleading term. Diane stated that she disliked the term childless, as she believed it inferred that she wanted to have children but she couldn’t, or that she was devastated because she has not had children. For Sandra, the emphasis on ‘less’ in the term childless, presents an inaccurate portrayal of her position; as she does not wish to have children, she is not ‘less’, or having to go ‘without’ them.

You’re only child-*less*, if you wanted to be child-*full*, or whatever the opposite is of that. (Sandra, 44)

Despite the women rejecting the term ‘childless’, it is the word most commonly used in the body of research exploring women who do not have children. Therefore, the term ‘childless’ has been used in this research, however, we acknowledge the potential negative connotations of doing so, and that not all women who do not have children will identify with this label.

Conclusions

Childlessness is a growing phenomenon in Australia. Despite this, being a childless woman continues to be a minority and marginalised social position. Importantly, this research has raised questions regarding the extent to which childlessness is significant to childless women in and of itself, or whether the personal significance of childlessness is somewhat attributable to living as a childless woman in a society characterised by pronatalist ideology. Living in a pronatalist society renders childless women as deviant and unnatural; however, this notion has been challenged by the counter-discourse presented by women in this study, affirming the naturalness of their childlessness. Reframing childlessness as a natural and familiar way of being may offer a new and alternative discourse for Australian childless women in living in a pronatalist environment.

The strengths and limitations of this study are also important to consider. A major strength of this research is that it was largely guided by the participants; privileging the voices and experiences of the women. Second interviews with participants also provide a strength of the research, through allowing validation and exploration of the findings, with the women themselves. Additionally, participants in this research

were not asked to explain why they were childless. This presents another strength, as it offered the women a space and platform to express their voices and experiences, without having to explain or justify their childless status. Despite these strengths, a limitation of the research is the small sample size; consisting of five women. However, this was not considered to be problematic; small sample sizes being common in phenomenological inquiry [48], with past phenomenological studies having samples as small as three [71] or four [20] participants. Furthermore, as the women were all currently content with their childlessness, the findings from this study may not apply to childless women who are currently discontent with their childlessness. The findings of the research can only be applied to the study participants, as opposed to the broader population of childless women living in Melbourne. As the women appeared of Anglo-European background and of middle range income, this may also have significantly influenced the findings of the research and limited its applicability to childless women not of Anglo-European background, and of differing social locations. Future research is called for that explores the experiences of Australian childless women that are discontent with their childless status, and that explores the experiences of childless women of varying ethnicity, religion, age, sexuality, disability, socio-economic status, and those of Indigenous status.

This study contributes to our understanding of the lived experience of being a childless woman in contemporary Australia. Despite years of feminism and the women's movement, the persistence of dominant pronatalist discourses mean that the reproductive status of women is still made to be relevant to how women are perceived, defined and valued, in contemporary Australian society. Importantly, lived experiences of childless women revealed in this research of feeling discredited and undervalued, and being perceived as unnatural and unwomanly, demonstrate that misconceptions and negative stereotypes about childlessness continue to pervade. The number of women remaining childless in Australia is increasing. While this trend has been increasingly *recognized*, childlessness and living as a childless woman, is still not completely *understood*. This study contributes to the small body of knowledge around childless women, providing insights from contemporary Australia. As childlessness is a growing position amongst Australian women, it necessitates greater knowledge and understanding about childlessness among the public and academic domains.

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