

Pronatalism and Social Exclusion in Australian Society: Experiences of Women in their Reproductive Years with No Children

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Abstract Pronatalism in Australian society constructs women as mothers, and places women who do not conform to pronatalist norms of stereotypical femininity because they have no children, at risk of stigmatisation and social exclusion. This paper explores the nature of pronatalism-driven social connection and exclusion in Australian society of women aged 25–44 years with no children. A total of 636 female Australian residents aged 25–44 years with no children provided qualitative data during a mixed-methods study conducted in 2014. A self-administered online questionnaire employed the critical incident technique to collect qualitative data on participants' experiences in different domains of life. The data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Findings suggest pronatalism in Australian society influences the experiences of women with no children, manifesting in a continuum of connection within, exclusion within, and exclusion from, all domains of life, with nuanced experiences dependent upon the nature of women's 'deviance' from pronatalism. Emergent themes elucidating the experiences of women with no children include: woman = mother; idealised childed; stereotyped, judged and invalidated childless; private issue on public trial; childless incapacibilities; subordinated childless; hegemony of the childed; and exclusion from normative life. These findings emphasise the importance of challenging pronatalist norms of femininity and building a society in which women's motherhood status is irrelevant to judgements of their character, value, completeness and success.

Keywords Childlessness · Voluntary · Involuntary · Circumstantial · Pronatalism · Social exclusion

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Introduction

Breaking one of the last female taboos [30], the increasing percentage of Australian women in their reproductive years with no children [2, 3] is at risk of social exclusion due to pronatalism in Australian society [35]. Pronatalism manifests in ideologies, discourses and policies that construct motherhood as natural and central to being a woman, and impose a moral, patriotic and economic obligation on women to procreate [15, 30, 41]. While rhetorically valuing motherhood's benefits to families, societies and economies [21], pronatalism reinforces patriarchal power by perpetuating gendered constructions of women as mothers and men as breadwinners, and allocating authoritative and material resources to masculine roles [15, 27]. While pronatalism disempowers women as resource-less mothers, it further marginalises women who diverge from pronatalist norms of stereotypical femininity due to having no children [29]. Unequal power relationships perpetuated by ideologies such as pronatalism create social boundaries that include conformant 'insiders' and exclude deviant 'outsiders' [8]. These societal-level processes drive social exclusion, a multidimensional process interacting between the societal, community and individual levels, which manifests in a continuum of connection and exclusion characterised by constraints upon the extent and quality of individuals' and groups' resources and opportunities for participation in the social, civic, service and economic domains of life [34]. Experiences of connection or exclusion in one domain of life can influence other domains [23]. For example, a high level of connection in employment within the economic domain can reduce opportunities for social interactions within the social domain; while a low level of financial resources within the economic domain can exacerbate exclusion from participation in paid activities in other domains of life [23]. This paper explores experiences common to all domains of life, which provide a deeper understanding of the nature of pronatalism-driven connection and exclusion in Australian society of women in their reproductive years with no children.

Hegemonic pronatalist discourses in Australian and international media and political rhetoric idealise women with children and stigmatise women with no children [17, 18, 36]. According to Goffman [16], 'normal' individuals construct those who are not 'normal' as stigmatised and less than whole. In pronatalist societies, having no children is a discreditable attribute which is not immediately apparent, but may be revealed or concealed [35]. Evidence increasingly supports this construction of pronatalism-driven stigmatisation, and indicates pronatalism constitutes 'truth' at the community, relationship and individual levels [14]. Women can experience having no children as discrediting, feeling that others perceive women with children as natural and inevitable, and women with no children as unnatural, deficient and incomplete [21, 28, 35]. Furthermore, women can have nuanced experiences depending on which 'typology' of women with no children they fall within. Voluntarily childless women, who freely chose not to have children [41], have described being stereotyped as child-hating, selfish, materialistic, career-driven, non-nurturing and unwomanly [11, 15, 28]. Involuntarily childless women, who wished to have biological children but were unable to achieve a viable

pregnancy [9], experienced similar stereotypes when others assumed they were voluntarily childless [5], and felt further stereotyped as pitiable, shameful and desperate [21, 26]. Some involuntarily childless women also perceived themselves as incomplete and failed women [5, 38]. Other typologies, about whom there is little research on experiences of stigmatisation, include circumstantially childless women, who were unable to have children due to circumstances such as having no partner, financial insecurity, or health issues other than those preventing a viable pregnancy [7]; undecided women, who were unsure about having children; and future childless women, who intended to have biological or social children in future [1]. Terms used to describe women with no children, such as ‘childless’, often have negative connotations of being ‘less than’ women with children [20, 41]. In this paper, the preferred language is ‘women with no children’, which acknowledges women as ‘women’ first, and then describes them as having no children rather than being ‘less’ or ‘without’. However, for the purposes of clarity and brevity, the term ‘childless’ is used in relation to the typologies of women with no children.

While there is a growing body of research on stigmatisation of women with no children, research on experiences of connection and exclusion in the social, civic, service and economic domains of life is limited. As previously outlined, social exclusion is experienced on a dynamic continuum, upon which individuals may over time move towards exclusion in some domains and connection in others [34, 37, 39]. Women with no children can have nuanced experiences of connection and exclusion in different domains of life, depending upon the salience of pronatalism in the particular domain [40].

In the social domain, which includes social networks, interaction and support, and participation in social and leisure activities [23], research has focused on involuntarily childless women. Studies have found involuntarily childless women received support from family and friends [5] and pursued leisure as an avenue for fulfilment [31, 32]. However, some involuntarily childless women experienced contraction of social networks through separation or divorce [5, 24], felt excluded from social networks and social and leisure activities structured around children [19, 33], and experienced intrusive, pressuring, insensitive and judgmental interactions with husbands, families and friends [5, 32, 38]. Some involuntarily childless women protected themselves through secrecy and self-regulated exclusion [19, 24]. The limited research with voluntarily childless women found they experienced pressure from family and friends to become childless [10, 11, 35].

The civic domain includes participation in community and political activities, groups and organisations [22]. There is no research in the civic domain about women in their reproductive years with no children. The service domain encompasses availability, accessibility, affordability, appropriateness and adequacy of services [22]. Research has found some voluntarily childless women were refused sterilisation procedures [15, 28]. Moreover, some involuntarily childless women experienced financial, time, emotional and physical barriers to fertility treatment [31, 33].

The economic domain includes material and financial resources, participation in employment, and the nature and quality of working lives [23, 34]. While there is little evidence of exclusion from financial resources or employment, research

suggests women with no children can have exclusionary experiences within employment. Some women with no children felt others doubted their professional credibility [24, 35], experienced inadequate recognition of family responsibilities, and were expected to work inconvenient shifts, additional hours, weekends and holidays [11, 28]. Furthermore, some involuntarily childless women felt excluded within working environments structured around people with children [25].

The extant evidence reveals the complex experiences of women with no children. However, there is no Australian research exploring the social exclusion of women in their reproductive years with no children. This paper explores the nature of pronatalism-driven connection and exclusion in Australian society, of women in their reproductive years with no children.

Methods

Deakin University's Human Ethics Advisory Group approved the mixed-methods study (HEAG-H 175_2013), which was conducted in Australia in 2014. This paper focuses on the study's qualitative component, which recruited 636 female Australian residents aged 25–44 years, who were not pregnant and identified as never having assumed the role or identity of a biological or social mother [35, 41]. Examples of the latter include mothers of adopted, step or fostered-children. Participants included women who were involuntarily childless, circumstantially childless, voluntarily childless, undecided and future childless.

The methods for the quantitative and qualitative components of the mixed-methods study have previously been reported in detail [40]. The methods relevant to the qualitative component are as follows. Participants were recruited by advertising through 38 women's health services, 13 Facebook pages and blogs, professional networks and snowball sampling. Participants provided qualitative data by completing open-ended questions (see "Appendix") in a self-administered online questionnaire. The open-ended questions employed the critical incident technique, in order to obtain detailed accounts of the past experiences of participants [6] in the social, civic, service and economic domains. Data were inductively thematically analysed. The researchers engaged in data immersion, coded and recoded data, then identified categories and underlying themes in relation to the different domains of life. Iterative discussions between the researchers facilitated refinement of themes and revealed key themes were repeated in each domain of life. Identification of common themes led to the generation of a framework of unifying themes experienced in all domains of life by all typologies of women with no children. The unifying themes moved beyond description into interpretation, and provided a deeper understanding of the nature of social connection and exclusion of women with no children. Data saturation was reached when no further codes or categories emerged from the data. Throughout data collection and analysis, the researchers reflected on their own experiences as women with no children, while remaining open to the diversity of women's experiences.

While the researchers' previous paper [40] described the nature and extent of social exclusion in different domains of life and differences between typologies of

women with no children, this paper focuses on common themes reported in all domains of life by all typologies of women with no children. In the findings and discussion, participant quotations illustrate experiences in all domains of life of all typologies of women with no children. De-identified quotations are attributed using identification numbers (denoted as ID), typology of woman with no children and age. No more than one quotation from any participant is used. Each theme was experienced in all domains of life, by all typologies of women with no children. Within a theme, specific domains or typologies are sometimes referred to, in order to illustrate nuanced experiences in different domains or by different typologies of women with no children.

Findings and Discussion

The findings reveal the complex nature of social exclusion of women with no children, illustrated by Fig. 1. The researchers have previously reported that women experienced a continuum of pronatalism-driven connection within, exclusion within, and exclusion from the social, civic, service and economic domains of life [40]. The mixed-methods study's quantitative findings suggested women with no children experienced more exclusion from resources and participation, and were more likely to feel excluded as a result of having no children, in the social and civic domains, than the service and economic domains. Overall, involuntarily and circumstantially childless women, followed by voluntarily childless women, were more likely to feel stereotyped, stigmatised and excluded due to having no children, than undecided or future childless women [40]. In order to more deeply understand the social connection and exclusion of women with no children, this paper explores the common themes revealing the nature of connection and exclusion, experienced in all domains of life by all typologies of women with no children: the overarching theme of 'woman = mother' and seven underlying themes of idealised childless; stereotyped and judged childless; childless incapacities; private issue on public trial; subordinated childless; hegemony of the childless; and exclusion from normative life.

Woman = Mother: Societal-Level Pronatalism

Societal-level pronatalism, represented by the star in Fig. 1, emerged as the overarching theme, which drives experiences of connection and exclusion in all domains of life. Reflecting previous research regarding women with no children [5, 35, 38] and analyses of political and media rhetoric [17, 18, 36], many women were cognisant of the conflation of women and mothers in Australian society. In addition, many women experienced pronatalist political and media discourses as idealising and valuing women with children, and stigmatising and devaluing women with no children.

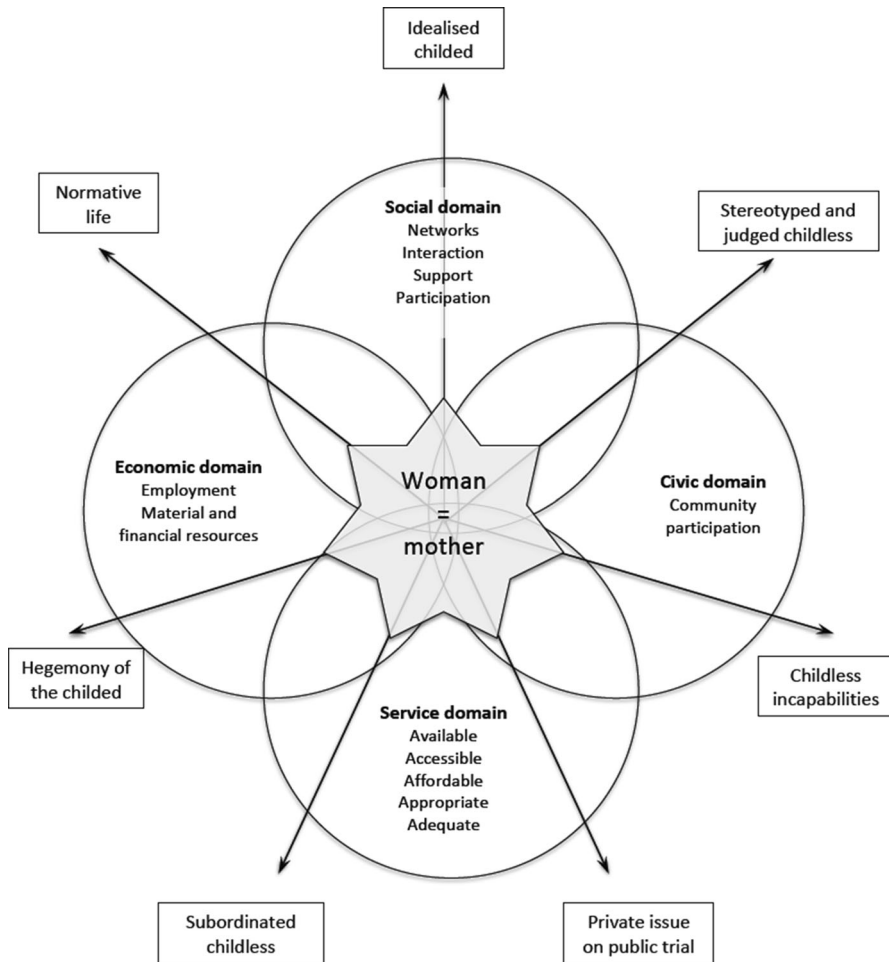


Fig. 1 Pronatalism-driven connection/exclusion of women with no children. *Star* societal-level driver of social connection/exclusion. *Circles* domains of life experienced through the extent and quality of resources and opportunities for participation at the community, relationship and individual levels. *Arrows* continuum of connection—exclusionary experiences—exclusion. *Boxes* manifestations of pronatalism-driven connection/exclusion

The non-stop glorifying of women as mothers in media. All I hear is how wonderful mothers are and how essential their role is as women ... [W]omen represented as women without the identity of being mothers is not represented. Motherhood is valued above all else in terms of being a woman. It sends a message if you are not a mother you are not of value to society. (ID 218; involuntarily childless; age 32 years)

As the arrows in Fig. 1 illustrate, societal-level pronatalism manifested at the community, relationship and individual levels in a continuum of connection within, exclusion within, and exclusion from, the domains of life. As the authors have

previously reported [40], some women reported experiences of connection, consisting of access to resources and freedom to participate. Many women reported exclusion within the domains of life, consisting of stigmatising interpersonal interactions. Finally, some women reported exclusion from the domains of life by way of exclusion from resources and participation. Substantially more women reported exclusionary experiences within domains, than exclusion from, or connection within, domains of life. Nuanced experiences of connection and exclusion were influenced by whether women’s non-conformance with pronatalism was non-volitional (innocent) or volitional (guilty), temporary or permanent, and internalised, disempowered or empowered. These relationships are shown in Fig. 2.

The seven underlying themes, represented by the boxes in Fig. 1, reveal the nature of pronatalism-driven connection and exclusion in the domains of life. Women’s experiences within these themes illustrate the continuum of connection within, exclusion within, and exclusion from the domains. Furthermore, these themes reveal women’s nuanced experiences of connection and exclusion.

Idealised Childed

The experiences of women with no children were influenced by others’ idealisation of women with children. Many women experienced connection arising from, or despite, their non-conformance with expectations of becoming idealised women with children. Some voluntarily childless, undecided and future childed women

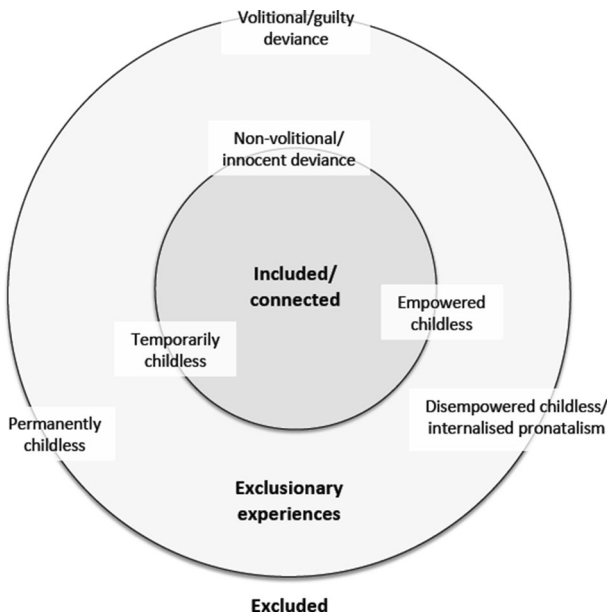


Fig. 2 Influences on nuanced experiences of connection/exclusion. *Concentric circles* continuum of connection—exclusionary experiences—exclusion. *Rectangles* influences on experiences of connection/exclusion of women with no children

experienced others' acceptance and understanding of their choices and priorities; while some involuntarily childless, circumstantially childless and future childless women received empathy and support from others who understood their wish to have children, expanding upon existing research with involuntarily childless women [5].

I had a miscarriage last year and my partner at the time was very supportive, my dad came to the hospital ... [T]hree friends stopped by the house with cards, plants and candles. Lots of hugs. My boss and close colleagues were supportive, understanding and thoughtful ... It was a very upsetting experience to go through but my support networks – rarely tested – were stronger and more effusive [than] I'd ever hoped. (ID 043; circumstantially childless; age 39 years)

Furthermore, some involuntarily childless, circumstantially childless and future childless women who wanted to have children, as well as voluntarily childless and undecided women who wanted relationships with children, valued being included in children's lives. Conversely, some women experienced affirmation of their non-conformance with expectations to have children through interactions with and observations of people with children.

[W]e started to tell people 'We've decided not to have children' and the reactions were really surprising! ... [M]y favourite response, and the one we get far more often than you might think, is 'Yep, fair enough! It's not all it's cracked up to be!' ... People who have had a bad experience raising their children are happy to open up to people who choose not to have kids, as if trying to assure you that you're making the right decision. (ID 617; voluntarily childless; age 34 years)

Similarly, many women felt their non-conformance with expectations to become idealised women with children provided the freedom, flexibility, time, energy and financial capacity to participate and contribute in all domains of life, in contrast to constraints on the resources and participation of women with children. Women with no children described having the freedom to provide support to friends and family; participate in social, leisure and community activities; contribute to community, social and political groups and causes; access services; and participate in education and employment.

I have recently joined a Christian non-violent direct action group, to protest and register lack of support for how the Australian Government is currently treating asylum seekers and refugees ... I could not have become involved as I have, with young children to care for and they would take priority, and in this process have found a cause for which I feel passionately. The experience has been nourishing, to work with other adults (young and old) to support take action we feel similarly about, as a group of Christians. (ID 263; circumstantially childless; age 44 years)

Many women experienced their freedom to participate as liberating and fulfilling. However, some involuntarily and circumstantially childless women acknowledged

their freedom was a distraction from not having children. This finding expands upon previous studies with involuntarily childless women [5, 32].

[T]he only things I can think of are all the ‘special’ things we do that we know a lot of our friends with kids can’t... This being said, I would give all of it up to have a baby. In fact, a lot of the time we are going out and doing ‘nice things’ to ensure we don’t fall in a depressed heap... (ID 087; involuntarily childless; age 33 years)

Given the understanding of pronatalism as a patriarchal ideology that disempowers women as resource-less mothers [15, 27], non-conformance with pronatalism is expected to increase the level of connections of some women with no children. However, the findings also suggest pronatalism can marginalise ‘deviant’ women with no children and reduce the quality of women’s resources and opportunities for participation, resulting in exclusionary experiences within, and exclusion from, one or more domains of life. As outlined above, the majority of experiences within all themes manifested as exclusionary experiences within the domains of life. Congruent with previous research [5, 35, 38], many women described others’ assumptions and expectations they had children or would have children in the future, and disappointment when such expectations were not met. Some women felt others’ disappointment invalidated their achievements and worth.

My grandmother made a comment that I was ‘letting us down’... It was hurtful and reduced my societal contribution to nothing more than my uterus. I told her ‘I have four degrees, what more do I have to do to show I’m a worthy person?’ ... I get these comments all the time ... Why aren’t I enough? Why is nothing worth anything if I don’t procreate? (ID 449; voluntarily childless; age 29 years)

Augmenting previous research that found voluntarily childless women experienced pressure from family and friends to become childed [35], all typologies of women with no children experienced pressure to become idealised women with children in all domains of life. For example, in the service domain, circumstantially childless, voluntarily childless and future childed women received advice on the health risks of having no children and the curative nature of having children. The availability of fertility treatments ensured involuntarily childless women were not immune to such pressure.

There is the doctor at my medical practice who every time I ask for a refill of the pill tells me the statistics of women without children getting cancer. (ID 175; circumstantially childless; age 34 years)

Our [general practitioner] who was ... trying to be supportive, kept telling us to have faith, keep trying, and that he knew I would get pregnant. Despite quite a lot of medical evidence to the contrary and my husband’s dramatically unravelling mental health. The message that for me to have a child was the most important thing in the world no matter what the cost was pretty strong. (ID 440; involuntarily childless; age 40 years)

In all domains, many circumstantially childless, undecided and future childed women felt pressured to ‘hurry up’ and have children. Moreover, some circumstantially childless women experienced pressure to settle for ‘any man’ for the sake of having children.

During my recent breakup with my partner ... my mum kept emphasising my age and the fact I may not meet someone else in time to have children ... When I decided to go back to uni[versity] to undertake post-graduate studies, my mum suggested I need to reflect upon whether this was a good idea given my age and childless status. During the breakdown of my relationship, a friend told me I should do everything I can to stay in the relationship because at my age I may not find someone new in time to have children. (ID 650; circumstantially childless; age 31 years)

In contrast, many voluntarily childless and undecided women described others’ arguments they were ‘missing out’ by not having children. Many were also told their feelings would change once they met the ‘right man’, grew older or had children. Furthermore, some voluntarily childless and undecided women felt their reasons for not becoming idealised women with children were invalidated and pathologised.

I have been told plenty of times that I will ‘get clucky’ ... and that I can’t make the decision as I haven’t experienced having children of my own. (ID 203; voluntarily childless; age 35 years)

During ... treatment ... at a major hospital. It was assumed my choice not to have children was a pathology rather than a conscious choice. (ID 360; voluntarily childless; age 41 years)

Conversely, some women who were not stereotypically ‘ideal mothers’ experienced an absence of pressure to have children, or pressure not to have children. Women who reported such experiences included women in same-sex relationships, women with no partners, older and younger women, and women with a disability. This finding supports suggestions that pronatalism-driven connection and exclusion can vary according to race, marital status, sexual orientation and other characteristics, given pronatalism’s construction of ‘ideal’ mothers as white, heterosexual and married [12, 13, 35].

I have a disability, so I think it’s often seen as a good thing that I don’t have kids. More than the traditional worries of childless women, I worry that I would be perceived as a risky parent if my husband and I had children. (ID 374; undecided; age 34 years)

Because I am in a same sex relationship my parents don’t think I should have children. This is my perception as it has taken them a long time to accept my relationship. (ID 596; voluntarily childless; age 40 years)

At the other end of the continuum, some women experienced exclusion from domains of life in connection with others’ idealisation of having children and expectations women would or should have children. In the social domain, some

circumstantially and voluntarily childless women who were permanently childless, and undecided women who were considering becoming so, experienced separation or divorce from partners who wanted to become childed. This finding complements earlier research in which involuntarily childless women, who were similarly permanently childless, reported separation from partners [5].

Congruent with existing research in the service domain [15, 28], medical practitioners sometimes invalidated women's choices not to have, or to have, children. Some circumstantially and voluntarily childless women reported that medical practitioners refused to provide contraception or sterilisation procedures because they believed women should have children or would change their minds in future. Conversely, some involuntarily childless, circumstantially childless and undecided women, who were not perceived as stereotypically 'ideal mothers', were denied access to fertility services, excluding them from an avenue for overcoming non-volitional deviance from pronatalism.

I have seen eight doctors in the past four years about getting my tubes tied and no doctor will refer me on because I'm considered too young to make that decision at 27 years old, despite never once in my life having wanted or considered having children. (ID 013; voluntarily childless; age 27 years)

I have no children, am single, and found out I had low ovarian reserve. Specialist didn't really care or show any interest in helping me as I didn't have a partner, and I therefore wasn't 'serious' about wanting to have kids. (ID 640; undecided; age 34 years)

In the economic domain, some women reported that employers who assumed they would have children excluded them from employment and promotion opportunities. In addition, some involuntarily and circumstantially childless women described being left financially and materially disadvantaged after divorces from husbands who wanted to have children. Other involuntarily and circumstantially childless women experienced financial hardship arising from attempts to have children through fertility treatments.

Stereotyped, Judged and Invalidated Childless

Consistent with earlier research [35, 38], many women described exclusionary experiences of having no children as a stigmatising, discrediting and othering attribute. The current study provides a deeper understanding of the nuanced stigmatisation experienced by different typologies of women with no children. Many women experienced stigmatisation through others' negative stereotyping of their reasons for having no children. Previous studies have found voluntarily childless women believed they were stereotyped as not having children because they were child-hating, selfish, materialistic and career-focused [11, 15, 28, 30]. The present study revealed such stereotypes were also experienced by circumstantially childless, undecided and future childed women, all of whom others perceived as culpable for exercising volition that contributed to having no children. Reflecting

previous research [5], involuntarily childless women also experienced such stereotypes when people assumed they were voluntarily childless.

Because I have a good job and a successful career people assume I made a choice not to have children because I was too career focused and driven... (ID 416; involuntarily childless; age 43 years)

In addition to others' stereotyping of women's reasons for having no children, many women experienced negative judgements and 'othering' as a result of having no children. While all typologies of women with no children felt judged as incomplete and unfulfilled, involuntarily, circumstantially and voluntarily childless women who would not or could not ever have children and were thus permanently childless, felt judged as 'failed women' and having 'something wrong'. Further illustrating the disempowerment described by involuntarily childless women in previous research [5, 38], some involuntarily and circumstantially childless women in this study internalised pronatalist judgements.

As an Australian woman who is nearly 40 with no children, I constantly live my life avoiding society. Australian society is so family/children orientated that I just don't feel that I fit in anywhere ... I strongly feel that childless women aged 35 [plus] are judged very harshly, even by those closest to them, for having no children despite the circumstances. I feel like I have failed as a woman for not having children. (ID 653; circumstantially childless; age 38 years)

Judgements shifted between negative if women were perceived as volitionally childless (culpable), and 'sympathetic' if women were perceived as non-volitionally childless (innocent) or possessing the stereotypical traits of women with children. Some involuntarily and circumstantially childless women, for whom having no children was non-volitional, felt pitied as unhappy, with involuntarily childless women feeling further judged as desperate and hysterical. Conversely, as also revealed by previous research [32, 35], some voluntarily childless, undecided and future childless women felt judged as aberrant and unnatural for not wanting to have children, or not yet having children.

People – often people I've just met – feel the need to ask increasingly personal questions upon finding out I'm single and have no kids. This is often followed by certain looks – usually of the pitying kind and reassurance that there is still plenty of time. These reassurances lessened when I hit my late thirties and the pitying is now accompanied by suspicion that there is something wrong with me. But if I mention my nieces (who I adore) suddenly the attitude swings back again – as if they had me pegged as a child-hater but now they know I love my nieces, I'm back to being the poor childless spinster to be pitied. (ID 679; circumstantially childless; age 43 years)

An elderly woman asked me if I had children and I said no. I told her that I did not want to have children. She was very shocked and kept telling me that I had to and that children are everything. That it is not natural not to want children. (ID 233; voluntarily childless; age 34 years)

Some women experienced exclusion from domains of life as a result of stereotyping, judgements and ‘othering’ of women with no children. For example, some women experienced exclusion from receiving social support from friends and family, and others experienced exclusion from health services. The common link driving those experiences was others’ inability to understand the needs of the childless ‘other’.

[C]ontacting grief counsellors when we were told our journey to have children was over - I was told I was not eligible for grief counselling as no one had died. (ID 364; involuntarily childless; age 31 years)

However, congruent with previous research with involuntarily and voluntarily childless women [30, 35, 38], this research revealed women with no children were not merely passive receivers of pronatalism-driven stigmatisation and exclusion. Some women inadvertently exacerbated exclusion by engaging in self-regulated exclusion from interactions, activities and support, in order to avoid stigmatising experiences or conceal a stigmatising attribute. Building on research with involuntarily childless women [19, 25], self-regulated exclusion and concealment were barriers to social interaction and support for some involuntarily and voluntarily childless women.

My two close girlfriends cannot have children and think people who do not want children are selfish ... I cannot tell them my decision to not have children. (ID 124; voluntarily childless; age 34 years)

A close friend announced she was pregnant ... it was hard to be excited for her, I almost cried! I can’t tell her (or anyone else really, except my partner) about the conception difficulties. I don’t know why – she would be sympathetic and understanding – I just can’t. (ID 755; involuntarily childless; age 31 years)

Other women rejected pronatalism by creating counter-discourses critiquing others’ negative perceptions of their genuine reasons for not having children. For example, an involuntarily childless woman rejected being characterised as ‘barren’ in contrast to childed women’s fertility. Furthermore, a voluntarily childless woman rejected negative perceptions of women who wanted careers in comparison to positive perceptions of women who wanted children.

Career ambition (which I have) as opposed to marriage-and-children ambition (which I happily don’t have) is viewed poorly. I feel that this really needs to change. (ID 719; voluntarily childless; age 32 years)

These findings are similar to those of other studies, in which women rejected pronatalism by creating counter-discourses of having no children as natural, fulfilling and socially valuable [5, 30, 35]. The women in this study were also constructing important counter-discourses, which embraced stereotypes of women with no children and framed them as neutral or positive attributes. Such counter-discourses are essential in moving towards a society in which women are neither judged nor excluded for having no children.

Private Issue on Public Trial

A further manifestation of pronatalism was the public interrogation about women's private reasons for having no children. Some women felt required to conceal or defend having no children in response to interrogations. Such experiences support earlier research suggesting having no children was a discrediting attribute that women were required to justify or conceal in order to maintain credibility [5, 35, 38], in contrast to having children, which required no justification [30].

The choice of not having children of my own seems to be fodder for public discussion – too often people are very comfortable to ask me why I don't have children when I really feel it's none of their business. I don't ask them why they DID have children. (ID 680; circumstantially childless; age 41 years)

Women's responses to interrogations encompassed stigma management techniques outlined by Park [30], including passing, identity substitution, and redefining the situation. For example, some voluntarily childless women concealed their choices by 'passing' as future mothers. Moreover, identity substitution was employed by some involuntarily childless and undecided women who claimed to have children, and voluntarily childless women who claimed to be involuntarily childless.

When people ask me if I have children I lie and say I have because I feel like they will think I am lesser if I admit I don't. (ID 589; involuntarily childless; age 42 years)

Some circumstantially and voluntarily childless women defended themselves by claiming love for and involvement with children. In doing this, the women redefined women with no children from 'child-hating' to 'child-loving'. However, in the social, civic and economic domains, some women felt driven to engage in self-regulated exclusion from childed people, groups, activities and events in order to avoid interrogations.

I have in the past gone to my friends' kids parties but felt really uncomfortable. I would be asked often why don't you have kids? Do you want kids? ... I now just don't go to these types of activities anymore. (ID 089; circumstantially childless; age 41 years)

Childless Incapabilities

Previous research has revealed women with no children felt others perceived them as deficient, inadequate and incomplete [21, 35, 38]. This study provides a more nuanced understanding of the perceived 'incapabilities' of women with no children. Many women described others' assumptions they were deficient in knowledge, skills, abilities, emotions and attributes that people believed women acquired only when they had children. These included not being capable with or understanding children, not understanding parenting, and not being capable of true happiness, love,

empathy, sympathy, self-sacrifice, maturity, nurturing others or caring about broader social issues.

[M]y interactions with others are made up of hundreds of these tiny ways in which people say ‘when are you going to grow up, get serious, and have kids’, or ‘what does your life even mean if you’re not planning on having kids’. And don’t even get me started on the ‘you just don’t know yourself until you have a child’, ‘you just don’t know how to love until you have a child’, ‘you just don’t know what really matters until you have a child’, ‘you just don’t know how to time manage or get things done until you have a child’ crowd. (ID 114; voluntarily childless; age 30 years)

As a result of such assumptions, many women experienced invalidation and discrediting of their views, advice, contributions and expertise in all domains of life. This finding expands upon studies in the economic domain, which found women with no children felt that others doubted their professional credibility [24, 35].

I was elected into a public role in my community in my late thirties and received many negative comments about not understanding ‘proper’ families because I didn’t have children. (ID 706; circumstantially childless; age 42 years)

Some women felt their views and expertise were invalidated, discredited and silenced to such a degree that they were excluded from resources, opportunities and participation in the social, community and economic domains. For example, some women felt excluded from employment opportunities. Other women were excluded from providing support to childed friends and family.

I have missed out on work because I do not have children. There seems to be an attitude that in order to work effectively with children, one needs to have their own. (ID 045; voluntarily childless; age 35 years)

[A] friend once told me I could never give her help, support or advice about children because I wasn’t a mother. (ID 521; voluntarily childless; age 44 years)

Subordinated Childless

Many women described others’ beliefs that women with no children experienced less tiredness, time pressure and stress than women with children, had more money than people with children, were not financially stressed, and had an undeserved easy life. Similarly, many women felt others perceived their needs, experiences and feelings, including health issues, personal interests and families, as less important than those of people with children.

Generally woman with children are given more access to flexible working arrangements, purchased leave and other benefits which I find very unfair. I have other commitments, including family commitments, that are not given as serious consideration as child raising commitments. (ID 185; future childed; age 30 years)

In turn, many women felt their needs were subordinated to those of people with children. Women described unreciprocated expectations to provide support to, receiving less support than, expectations to do more than, and preferential treatment of, people with children. Furthermore, some women felt excluded from resources and opportunities for participation as a result of prioritisation of the needs of people with children.

My mum visits my sister every month because she has a child. My mum has visited me once this year. (ID 302; involuntarily childless; age 32 years)

I remember being asked to go to the back of the queue – despite my appointment – because a patient with a baby was in the waiting room. I had a class to attend and I could not wait or else I would have to forfeit my appointment entirely. That day I was diagnosed with an STD. The [general practitioner] was rather judgemental about it as I was already some evil witch who ate babies alive just because I did not let the other patient with the baby jump the queue. (ID 097; voluntarily childless; age 43 years)

Becoming redundant in my job. I felt one of the factors of selecting me for redundancy was that I had no dependents. (ID 747; future childless; age 28 years)

This theme augments existing research in the economic domain. Such research has found women with no children experienced inadequate recognition of family responsibilities and expectations of working inconvenient shifts, additional hours, weekends and holidays to cover women with children [11, 28]. The present research reveals experiences of exclusion deriving from the subordination of the needs of women with no children, occur within and from all domains of life.

Hegemony of the Childless

Many of the experiences women with no children related to their minority status within domains of life dominated by people with children. Many women felt excluded, othered, marginalised, invisible and irrelevant within, while some women experienced complete exclusion from, social networks, social interactions, social and leisure activities, community groups, events and spaces, service areas and workplaces dominated by or catering exclusively to people with children. In addition, some women felt silenced and excluded from having a voice in social networks, communities, politics and media dominated by or catering to people with children.

I feel like my community places a lot of importance on mothers and those who want to be mothers. There are no support groups for those who cannot be, or choose not to be, mothers. For example, on the way to work, I see a clinic with a sign that says ‘pregnancy matters’ with little blue and pink baby feet. I have never seen a clinic promoting ‘all life matters’ ... It’s disgusting and unfair that life only matters if you plan on giving life. When do the childfree get support? (ID 121; voluntarily childless; age 30 years)

I feel that governments focus wholly on families and family issues and completely ignore anyone without children. Our opinions are in no way wanted by any side of politics. (ID 573; voluntarily childless; age 32 years)

So often when I look through the media, I see absolutely no mention of women 30 plus without children. It makes me feel like a failure of a woman, ‘not normal’ and like I do not belong anywhere... I am continually told I must understand how hard it is for poor tired mums who have no time or energy to think about anything but their kids - all while they enjoy the social inclusion and status they gain from motherhood. I am continually told I should enjoy my ‘freedom’ - when my freedom is frightening, lonely and isolating. I am continually told how lucky I am to not be tied down to a man and kids – but that man is paying your joint asset called the family home, while I stay trapped with no assets in a rented sharehouse. I am tired of ‘identifying with the oppressor’ and always be[ing] told [to] think about their experience while my own is completely ignored, silenced and shamed. (ID 751; circumstantially childless; age 35 years)

All typologies of women with no children experienced exclusion within and from childed domains of life. This finding expands upon previous studies, which found some involuntarily childless women felt marginalised within and excluded from social networks and interactions, leisure activities, and workplaces dominated by people with children [19, 25, 33, 38]. Furthermore, some women engaged in self-regulated exclusion from networks, activities, spaces, events and services dominated by people with children.

Community life revolves around parenting and children. I tend to stay clear of any areas that include parents or children. (ID 716; circumstantially childless; age 43 years)

In contrast, some women described making empowered choices to build lives in which having no children was valued and affirmed, again revealing women with no children as agents who sometimes actively negated experiences of pronatalism-driven exclusion. Such experiences included forming friendships with people with no children, and forging connections with social networks, communities of interest and workplaces not dominated by people with children. Consistent with research suggesting being voluntarily childless was a positive life choice [10], most women who responded in this way were voluntarily childless.

My sporting and dog training groups are very neutral in regards to my lack of children and my kink/bdsm [bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism] community is the most encouraging community in regards to choosing not to have kids. (ID 510; undecided; age 26 years)

Exclusion from Normative Life

Some women's accounts revealed exclusion from the normative life course of having families or children. For example, some women described a strong sense of family in same-sex or opposite-sex partners, close friendships and pets. However, they experienced exclusion from legitimacy as a normative family.

We were told we should go to a different service at a church because the one we were going to was a 'family' service and we weren't a proper 'family'. (ID 490; undecided; age 30 years)

In addition, all except voluntarily childless women felt excluded from the normative life course of having children. Some involuntarily and circumstantially childless women experienced exclusion through ubiquitous reminders of having no children. Such reminders occurred in their families, friendships, communities, services and workplaces.

Sitting in our fertility doctors waiting for our appointment and looking at all the photos of happy babies and knowing that those babies were not mine. (ID 472; involuntarily childless; age 29 years)

In the economic domain, some circumstantially childless, undecided and future childless women experienced exclusion from the normative life course due to the necessity of choosing between children and careers. Others had inadequate financial resources to have or support children. For some circumstantially childless women, inadequate financial resources contributed to their inability to afford fertility services.

We peddle, but the floodwaters keep rising! We could raise further cash by consolidating the family households into one and joining forces with my grandparents. It is a major influence on whether I have a child at this time. (ID 535; future childless; age 33 years)

In the service domain, exclusion from fertility services of involuntarily childless, circumstantially childless and undecided women who were not perceived as stereotypically 'ideal mothers', in turn excluded them from the normative life course of having children. Importantly, having children continues to be the normative life course in Australian society. As such, all women with no children are excluded from normative life and in turn the opportunities for social connection concomitant with being 'insiders' with children [4].

Conclusions

The study had a number of strengths and limitations. Although the online questionnaire was more appropriate to the quantitative component of the mixed-methods study, it enabled recruitment of a large sample beyond the scope of most qualitative research, which yielded extremely rich data and facilitated data saturation. In addition, rigour was enhanced by data immersion, using participant

quotations, locating the findings within extant evidence, and researcher reflexivity. However, the anonymous online questionnaire prevented iterative data collection and analysis, and participant validation.

In spite of its limitations, this research is first to explore the nature of pronatalism-driven connection and exclusion in multiple domains of life in Australian society, of women in their reproductive years with no children. The findings from the current study strongly suggest societal-level pronatalism drives stigmatisation and exclusion of women with no children, which manifests in a continuum of connection within, exclusionary experiences within, and exclusion from each of the domains of life in Australian society. Experiences of connection and exclusion are influenced by the themes of woman = mother; idealised childless; stereotyped and judged childless; childless incapacities; private issue on public trial; subordinated childless; hegemony of the childless; and exclusion from normative life. Nuanced experiences of different typologies of women with no children reveal that experiences of connection and exclusion are influenced by whether 'deviance' from pronatalism is volitional or non-volitional; temporary or permanent; and internalised, disempowered or empowered. Given that some women experience connection and some women experience exclusion, further research should explore the risk and protective factors for social connection and exclusion of women with no children.

This study suggests women who deviate from pronatalist stereotypes of femininity because they have no children, can experience stigmatisation and exclusion in all domains of life in Australian society. Such experiences emphasise the importance of striving for an Australian society in which whether to have children is a genuine life-choice rather than the normative life course, such that women's motherhood status is irrelevant to judgements of their character, value, completeness and success, and none would feel excluded from or within any domains of life in connection with having no children. While such a vision requires generational change, inclusive research can contribute to this change by exploring motherhood status and the circumstances in which women have no children, in order to give voice to, normalise and acknowledge the heterogeneity of women's experiences.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interests The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Appendix

See Table 1.

Table 1 Open questions and their position in the questionnaire

Section	Open question (at end of each sub-section)
Stigmatisation	Can you think of a time when you felt you were stereotyped or stigmatised because you have no children? If so, please describe the incident in the space provided
Social domain networks/ interaction	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
Social/leisure participation	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 Employment	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
Material/financial resources	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?

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