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2.10 Discourse, power and exclusion: The experiences of childless women

Gemma E. Carey, Melissa Graham, Julia Shelley and Ann Taket

Throughout culture, motherhood is celebrated while childlessness is promoted as a sorry state. Women without children are ignored unless they are desperately seeking motherhood or are regretfully watching others become mothers and grandmothers. Who is talking about women having viable lives without children of their own? Not many.

(Morell 1994: 1)

While determining the rates of, and reasons for, childlessness is difficult, we know that a general upward trend exists in the number of women who do not mother children in Western countries (Campbell 1985; Seccombe 1991; Ireland 1993; Morell 1994; Bartlett 1996; McAllister and Clark 1998; Gillespie 2001, 2003). Currently, approximately 20 per cent of women fall into this category, whilst historically 10 per cent have represented the norm (Park 2002). This increase relates to an increase in infertility (as a result of delayed parenting, and other factors), but also to an increase in the number of women choosing not to have children, or the voluntarily childless (Seccombe 1991). Current research into the area of voluntary childlessness suggests that significant social exclusion and social connectedness issues may exist for such women.

To date, the conceptual tool of social exclusion has not been applied to the experiences of childless women. By analysing childlessness from a social exclusion perspective, in this chapter we begin to address an important knowledge gap by advancing two areas of thought. First, we provide a new perspective on an emerging social trend; and second, we advance social exclusion theorising by demonstrating that it can be divorced from the economic dimensions of disadvantage with which it is most commonly used. We begin by discussing current literature on childless women which depicts considerable stigma and discrimination issues. Using multiple theoretical perspectives we then attempt to better conceptualise the underlying processes which lead to these negative social experiences. To achieve this we draw on the concepts of discourse, power and social exclusion.
Voluntarily childless women: an emerging social trend

It has been anticipated that 23 per cent of women over the age of 45 in the UK will be childless by 2010 (Gillespie 2003). Although no comparable data exists, such estimates might also apply in countries like Australia. The increasing trend towards childlessness has been interpreted as an effect of rising feminism, increased access to reproductive technology, and women's increased participation in the workforce (Seccombe 1991; Gillespie 2003). Multiple studies (see Houseknecht 1979; Russo 1979; Callan 1986; Heaton et al. 1999; Gillespie 2001; Park 2002, 2005) have claimed to have established several common characteristics between the voluntarily childless which support these explanations. These studies have found that women without children are usually tertiary educated, more likely to be employed in professional and managerial positions, and have a high income. With regard to childless couples, both spouses are more likely to have high incomes and a greater flexibility between gender roles (Gillespie 2001; Keizer et al. 2007).

The social group(s) in which voluntary childlessness is growing are those which we would expect to see enjoying the benefits of wider social roles afforded by feminism, better reproductive technology, and a less gender-biased workplace. They are not the groups with which we associate disadvantage, as they are well positioned socially and politically, and enjoy full economic participation (both in terms of production and consumption). However, research which has investigated the experiential aspects of childlessness suggests that despite this, women who do not mother are socially disadvantaged. Studies into perceptions and experiences of childless women have found that women who do not have children are a heavily stigmatised and negatively stereotyped group (Letherby 1994, 2000; Letherby and Williams 1999; Gillespie 2000; Park 2002).

Stigma surrounding childlessness has been found to lead to feelings of incompleteness or beliefs that others perceived them as desperate, pitiful and selfish (Letherby 1999). With regard to negative stereotyping, the voluntarily childless tend to be considered socially undesirable, selfish, individualistic, irresponsible, materialistic, under-developed and less caring (Veevers 1974; Gillespie 2000; Park 2002). Park (2002) also found that people expressed a desire for more social distance from voluntary childless people. When compared with parents, Park (2002) argues the voluntary childless are considered less socially desirable, less well adjusted, less nurturant and more autonomous. She contends that voluntary childless women incur a greater degree of stigma than the involuntary, as involuntary childless women embrace the parenting role in theory, if not in practice (Park 2002). While involuntarily childless women are met with pity, voluntarily childless women are likely to be considered selfish (Letherby 1999). These findings are further substantiated by Callan (1986) who found that voluntarily childless individuals were considered more likely to be materialistic, selfish, individualistic and career orientated and that the lives of childfree women were considered less rewarding.
While no research has been conducted explicitly into the area of childlessness and social exclusion, both the findings discussed above and narratives of childless women portray significant connectedness issues. For example, a not uncommon experience for childless women is ‘Being with a group of women talking about the apparently inexhaustible topics of their labours, children’s eating habits, or teenage rebellion is similar to being in a group of men talking about football. I feel excluded’ (Letherby and Williams 1999: 725). This is particularly evident in lay literature (Hutchison (2007: 1): an Australian journalist writes ‘I’d like to tell [politicians] about the view of community I have. The one that excludes you if you can’t contribute to conversations about nappies and birth choices’.

Social discourses and choosing not to mother

To appreciate how childless women may be socially excluded we must first confront certain characteristics of our current social and political climate (and the discourses which flow from such a climate) in the context of childbearing. Currently, Australian society is characterised by a strong pronatalist ideology which apotheosises motherhood. This glorification of motherhood has consequences for the social dimensions of childbearing, and in turn for choosing not to bear children. Indeed, Park (2002) and Letherby (1999) argue that the stigma and negative evaluations of childless individuals (particularly the voluntarily childless) pertain to, and are derived from, a social environment that continues to be strongly pronatalist. Motherhood and non-motherhood are both private and public performances; dominant discourses, such as pronatalism, therefore profoundly affect how women experience having children, or being voluntarily childless, in both a public and private sense. They affect social interaction and social experience, but also individual attitudes, experiences and emotional responses.

Pronatalist ideology suggests that the ‘encouragement of all births [is] conducive to individual, family, and social well-being’ (De Sandre 1978: 145 in Park 2005: 357). Pronatalism therefore operates on several levels:

- Culturally, when childbearing and motherhood are perceived as ‘natural’ and central to a woman’s identity; ideologically when the motherhood mandate becomes a patriotic, ethnic or eugenic obligation; psychologically when childbearing is identified with the micro level of personal aspirations, emotions and rational decision making … and on the level of population policy, when the state intervenes, directly or indirectly, in an attempt to regulate the dynamics of fertility.

(Heitlinger 1991: 344–45 in Park 2002: 22)

The political and social climate of pronatalism prevents voluntary childlessness from emerging as an alternative cultural discourse and practice. Furthermore, Park (2002) argues that the political and social emphasis on ‘family’ values removes
the voluntarily childless option from cultural discourse. This is particularly so at present in Australia due to the political emphasis which is currently being placed on population decline, economic viability and national responsibility. Pronatalism also refracts through other female centred discourses. Our perceptions of motherhood, femininity and feminine identity are all shaped by dominant pronatalist discourses. Gillespie (2000) argues that part of the hegemonic pronatalist doctrine is a dominant ‘motherhood discourse’. She contends that in Western culture, motherhood has come to be understood (and presented) as a fixed, natural, fulfilling practice which is central to feminine identity and that ‘Constructions of femininity and women’s social role have historically and traditionally been contextualised around the practices and symbolism surrounding motherhood’ (Gillespie 2000: 223). Powerful discourses, produced through social, political, medical and religious institutions, proliferate the belief that only through motherhood can women be truly fulfilled; mothering and nurturing is what women do, and mothers are what women are (Gillespie 2001). Indeed Russo (1979) suggests that motherhood exists on a different plane from other sex or gender roles for women; it is a mandate that pervades social institutions and individual psyches, and as Gillespie (2001) has noted, the social and cultural discourses of femininity and motherhood are particularly slow to change.

Similarly, Hird and Abshoff (2003: 347) state that the ‘symbolic configuration of women as mothers extends beyond the familial boundary to support an ideology of gender that specifies women’s “nature” as sexually reproductive’. Nevertheless, Letherby (1994) draws attention to what is possibly a contradiction, or perhaps irony, of the dominant motherhood discourse. Despite the sanctity of motherhood and the judgements made about those who choose not to mother, many would argue that motherhood itself has had little status in Western society. Due to these prevailing social discourses women who choose not to have children challenge dominant perceptions of female identity and femininity. Concurrent with this, they have become constructed as a morally deviant ‘other’ in contemporary Australian society. Park (2002: 22) suggests that this moral objectification is twofold: ‘the deviance of the voluntarily childless lies not only in the fact that they do not have children, but primarily, and especially for women, in the fact that they do not want them’. Similarly, Letherby (1999: 230) found that people perceived a lack of desire to mother as deviant and abnormal because it ‘transgressed cultural images of femininity, of nurturing and self-sacrifice, associated with motherhood’.

These pronatalist discourses represent a dominant feature of Australian society. They are normative in that they dictate standards of behaviour and shape social norms. But how have pronatalist discourses gained such social legitimacy?

**Discourse and power**

We cannot speak of discourse, and certainly not of dominant or normative discourses, without raising the subject of power. Power is what makes discourses
hold true and renders them dominant and normative. Foucault’s (1980) concept of power is particularly useful for understanding the relationships between discourse, power and exclusion. In understanding how discourses and power operate, we may begin to appreciate the relations which are the underlying root of disadvantage.

Under a Foucauldian conceptualisation of power, power is ubiquitous. It flows throughout daily life, rather than being held in a central locale (as the Marxist tradition would suggest) that ‘Power must be analyzed as something which circulates … And not only do individuals circulate between its threads: they are always in a position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power’ (Foucault 1980: 98). Foucault’s conception of power is also productive in nature; it formulates discourse and knowledge which is given legitimacy through institutions (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982). Thus, just as state power is ubiquitous, so too are the discourses which flow from it.

Population policies, which promote procreation-based answers to economic and social problems, imbue pronatalist discourses with the authority of the state and other social institutions. Such discourses therefore gain substantial legitimacy and are able to regulate childbearing behaviour and attitudes at both a population and individual level by establishing social norms. Such discourses also have strong moral undertones which serve to further regulate the behaviour of individuals and populations. It is worth noting that discursive power is therefore both an individual and a totalising power – it dictates appropriate behaviour on a population level, but also singles out individuals that transgress social norms (Foucault 1980).

State power, in conjunction with medical and religious institutions, legitimises pronatalist discourse. Through this process such discourses become normative in so much as they establish social norms and expected behaviours. However, in dictating certain practices as normal, others by virtue become considered ‘abnormal’, or deviant. It is in this sense that we can begin to appreciate the underlying processes that lead to the social exclusion of childless women.

Social exclusion

Social exclusion has emerged as a term to conceptualise disadvantage and the processes which cause disadvantage. It derives from a lack of choice and sociability and is often linked with notions of stigma, vulnerability and marginalisation, as these phenomena are often associated with the breakdown of social cohesion. In conjoining discussions of power and discourse with social exclusion we are able to better appreciate the processes which underpin stigma, discrimination and social connectedness issues of childless women.

De Haan (1998) argues that social exclusion has two defining characteristics; first, it focuses attention on the fact that deprivation is multidimensional (and can include aspects of material poverty and/or social deprivation); and second, that it enables a focus on the relations and processes which cause
deprivation. Subsequently, it is useful in analysing ‘societal links, social participation, and interrelated issues such as the disadvantages of impoverished social networks, which can disrupt social bonds and lead to social isolation or lack of social integration’ (Arthurson and Jacobs 2004: 30). Whilst social exclusion is often used as an alternative term for poverty, material poverty is not a requirement for social exclusion.

The theory of social exclusion therefore allows insight into the social relations, processes and institutions which both enable society to function, but are the underlying root of deprivation (de Haan 1998). It is in this way that social exclusion is often used to conceptualise and/or analyse the social structures (such as race, gender and class) or policy environments which affect disadvantaged populations (see for example, Colley and Hodkinson 2001; Martin 2004; Horsell 2006). This focus upon social relations and institutions, however, is also useful for understanding how individuals may be disadvantaged due to their incongruence with social norms. In the previous section we outlined how pronatalist discourses are made legitimate by state power, and come to pervade daily life, normalising certain practices and making others ‘deviant’. In becoming society’s ‘deviant’ others, childless women become stigmatised, discriminated against and ultimately socially excluded. Indeed, Weedon (1987 in Letherby 1999) contends that maintaining a dominant ideology, such as pronatalism, requires the marginalising of experiences which seek to redefine it. Weedon’s comment contextualises the experiences of stigma described by childless women, and further illustrates how childless women are socially excluded due to normative pronatalist discourses.

Reidpath et al. (2005) link stigma with social value and the existence of social exclusion. They suggest that social exclusion relates to the ability of individuals’ to be involved in reciprocal exchange. If an individual is considered deficient in a particular area, or is stigmatised, they are perceived to have no means by which they may ‘give back’. Subsequently, individuals become excluded from social relations because social tensions are eased when such individuals are not included. In the case of childless women, these women may be considered to have little social value due to dominant pronatalist ideologies.

Current research suggests that exclusion of childless women is more complex than simply being denied social participation. Our pronatalist environment leads some women to subvert their ‘deviant’ identities, or alternatively to exclude themselves as ‘the context of continuing pronatalism ... requires many childless individuals to engage in information control and stigma management techniques, tailored to particular audiences, to manage their deviant identities’ (Park 2005: 372). Many women also feel the need to divert attention away from their voluntarily childfree identities (Letherby and Williams 1999; Letherby 2002; Park 2002). For example, Letherby (1999; 2002) found that childfree women felt it was easier to say that they hadn’t made a decision, and keep their ‘status’ and experiences hidden, while Morell (1994: 305)
notes that women must ‘constantly engage in acts of subversion if they pursue goals that are not stereotypically “feminine”’.

Based on the limited research available, the above analysis suggests that there is likely to be a considerable (and complex) social exclusion issue for women without children. This chapter represents a first attempt to explore this issue in a scholarly forum, but much more extensive work on this issue is still needed. The growing magnitude, yet minority and marginalised status of this group of women suggest that this is a deficit that needs to be addressed.