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no. 36 What’s ‘childless’ got to do with it?

Melissa Graham and Stephanie Rich
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Melissa Graham and Stephanie Rich
The Alfred Deakin Research Institute Working Papers

SERIES TWO

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Gender: Revisited, Revised, Reconfigured

Introduction: Adam Brown and Kim Toffoletti

The three papers comprising this series (Working Papers 35, 36 and 37) emerged from a one day symposium titled Gender: Revisited, Revised, Reconfigured, held at Deakin University in November 2011. An initiative of the Faculty of Arts and Education’s Processes of Signification Emerging Research Group (PSERG), the symposium aimed to showcase current research in the fields of gender, feminist, women’s and masculinity studies being undertaken across the University. The symposium provided a forum for emerging and established scholars to participate in theoretical, methodological and critical debates around gender, with a view to identifying intellectual synergies, points of connection and sites for potential research collaboration and exchange.

The focus of the inaugural PSERG symposium was on the re-interpretation and re-imagining of gender in different contexts, posing broad questions: In what (new) ways are gender stereotypes constructed in an increasingly media-saturated world? How are complex re-workings of gendered behaviour and expectations breaking down binaries and subverting dominant paradigms? What relevance does the concept of ‘gender’ have today? Given the wide scope of the topic, the papers presented engaged with issues relating to gender from a variety of contemporary perspectives, offering opportunities for rich inter-disciplinary dialogue between fields as varied as new media, psychology, literature, health, law and education. Participants ranged from postgraduates to new and senior academic staff.

The selection of Working Papers presented here is indicative of the range and scope of gender analysis and critique occurring across disciplinary boundaries. Taking the mediasphere as the site of critical focus, the contributions range from explorations of gendered discourses of childlessness in print media (Melissa Graham and Stephanie Rich, Working Paper No.36) to ‘moral panics’ about the sexualisation of girls in mainstream commercial culture (Claire Charles, Working Paper No.35), and the relationship between gendered embodiment and popular television programming (Jack Migdalek, Working Paper No.37). Each contribution demonstrates how gender, as a fluid – even unstable – concept and category continues to impact on Australian socio-cultural and political life in complex ways.
What’s ‘childless’ got to do with it?

ABSTRACT

Childlessness is increasing in Australia and has resulted in an upsurge of media commentary on the lives of childless women. This paper investigates the use of the label ‘childless’ in the Australian print media by drawing meaning and understanding from these representations within the context of pronatalist ideologies. Our analysis suggests that childless(ness) is used as an irrelevant descriptor and as a discreditable attribute, which further serves to perpetuate negative othering stereotypes of childless women. This is particularly exemplified through the representation of Australia’s Prime Minister Julia Gillard by the print media. This analysis highlights the continued positioning of women in regards to their reproductive status.

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Introduction

Childlessness is a growing trend internationally. In Australia the number of women remaining childless has increased over recent decades, with 32% of Australian women over the age of 15 years childless at the 2006 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007), an increase of 5% from 1986. For women of peak childbearing age (25 to 44 years) there has been a 50% increase in the number of childless women between 1986 and 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007). Similar patterns of increasing childlessness have been observed in New Zealand (Boddington and Didham 2007; 2009), the United Kingdom (Berrington 2004), the United States of America (Abma and Martinez 2006; Biddlecom and Martin 2006; Dye 2008) and parts of Europe (Frejka and Sobotka 2008). This increase in childlessness is thought to result from a combination of three different factors: increases in infertility, increases in the number of women choosing not to have children (the voluntarily childless), and increases in the number of women ‘circumstantially’ childless, that is, women who would like to have children, but who are not in circumstances to act on this desire during their reproductive lives. These recent trends have been linked to the rise of feminism, broader access to reproductive choice, and women’s increased participation in the workforce (Gillespie 2003; Seccombe 1991).

For women who do not have children, it is their lives and reproductive decisions that come to be experienced within, and permeated by, dominant cultural discourses surrounding femininity, motherhood and reproduction (Earle and Letherby 2007; Gillespie 2000). Additionally, women’s lives and reproductive decisions must be navigated and negotiated within a society that is characterised by pronatalism, a prominent discourse within western society (Ulrich and Weatherall 2000). Pronatalism can be understood as an ideology in which beliefs, attitudes and actions serve to implicitly or explicitly support parenthood and promote fertility (Veevers 1980). It is argued that pronatalism also embodies moral underpinnings in which all births are represented as contributors to individual, family and societal wellbeing (De Sandre 1978 as cited in Park 2002). Pronatalism is a dominant characteristic of Australia’s current social and political climate (Dever 2005; Heard 2006), as evidenced by Government initiatives and policy such as family-friendly tax incentives and the Baby Bonus (Anderson 2007; Heard 2006; Jackson and Casey 2009).

In light of Australia’s pronatalist ideologies and the increase in childlessness over recent decades, prominent discourses have emerged in the public and media realms concerning decreasing total fertility rates, increased life expectancy, and concerns over an ageing Australian population (Gray et al. 2008; Qu et al. 2000). As a result, childlessness has received substantial media attention; however, this has predominantly been through a problematic lens. This paper provides an analysis of pronatalist discourse in the Australian print media and a critique of the use of childless(ness) as a ‘descriptor’ by the Australian print media. In doing so, we reflect on two main ways in which childless(ness) was used as a descriptor. Firstly, we discuss the use of childlessness as an ‘irrelevant’ descriptor of women which is presented in newspaper items as relevant. Secondly, we examine the use of the label childless(ness) to serve as a discreditable descriptor. The purpose here is not to provide exhaustive examples of what we observed, but rather to reflect on our findings.

Pronatalism and the Australian print media

Prevailing pronatalist discourse in Australian society has led to fertility being shifted from a ‘personal’ issue to a ‘public’ concern (Heard 2006). This is highlighted through its representation in the Australian print media from the year 2000, in which increasing concern over Australia’s decreasing birth rate saw the topics of fertility and infertility gain substantial media coverage (Anderson 2010; Dever and Saugeres 2004). For more than a decade Australian readers have been exposed to pronatalist ideology in the Australian print media (Anderson 2010). This pervasive pronatalism within the print media has implications for the way in which Australian women who are not fulfilling pronatalist aspirations, such as childless women, are represented in this same media realm.
The power and role of the media in the construction and facilitation of stereotypical views of women, and women’s roles in society, has attracted considerable scholarly attention (Gilens 1996; Power et al. 1996). The portrayal of women in the print media appears to hold the stereotype that ‘marriage and mothering [are] the natural aspirations of all women’ (Koutroulis 1990: 73). Shugg and Liamputtong Rice’s analysis (1999; 2002) of Australian women’s health issues in the print media suggests that women are portrayed by the media as ‘mothers’ and focus on women’s ability to conceive and raise children. Media organisations set the news agenda by acting as gatekeepers; they decide which stories will be disseminated to the public and how this information will be framed and presented. When the news media make the decision to cover a particular story, they select certain aspects of the issue while excluding others. This framing is influenced by a variety of social, economic and cultural factors within the media organisation and its staff. Based on agenda-setting and framing theory, this gatekeeper role by media organisations plays an important role in shaping and/or reinforcing public perceptions and attitudes about childless women (Wright et al. 2008).

The explicit yet pervasive role the media can play in the formation of public attitudes is also apparent in the way common media representations can come to form ‘common sense’ assumptions, which can then be taken in and adopted by readers (Livingstone 1998). This is particularly relevant in the representation of women in the media. As Byerly and Ross (2006: 40) so aptly highlight, ‘the ways in which women are represented in news media send important messages to the viewing, listening, and reading publics about women’s places, women’s role, and women’s lives’. Consequentially, through prevailing pronatalist ideologies that are communicated in the Australian print media, constructions around womanhood equating to motherhood are reinforced to readers, rendering childlessness as a deviant and unacceptable alternative life course for Australia women.

Reflections on the ‘Representations of childless women in the Australia print media’

During 2011, we conducted a qualitative research project which explored how childless women were represented in the Australian print media. Factiva was used to retrieve the data for the study and covered a four year period from July 2007 to July 2011. Data was sourced from one national daily newspaper and 13 state and territory-wide daily newspapers. The search terms used to retrieve relevant newspaper items were: ‘childless* or childfree or child-free’; and ‘wom?n or female*’. The search strategy resulted in 1,006 newspaper items being retrieved. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied by the researchers to the data to determine the relevance of the newspaper items in light of the aims of the research. After the inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, 679 newspaper items were excluded from the analysis. However, it was in applying the exclusion criteria that we observed that many of these excluded newspaper items would be of interest in themselves.

Of the 679 newspaper items excluded, 322 used childless(ness) as a descriptor at some point in the newspaper item, yet childless(ness) was not the focus of the newspaper item itself. We use the term ‘descriptor’ to mean the use of a word, term or label to describe or identify the characteristics or attributes of a woman. Essentially, we argue that this type of labelling is othering (Carey et al. 2009; Taket et al. 2009) and only serves to highlight negative other representations (Boréus 2006). In regards to these newspaper items we then began to contemplate and question: what’s ‘childless(ness)’ got to do with it?

Childless(ness) – an irrelevant descriptor made relevant

Reading through the excluded newspaper items, we observed that the term ‘childless’ was being used as a descriptor of women, despite the fact that it was irrelevant to the focus of the newspaper item. Here we observed that the attribute of being ‘childless’ was deemed by the authors of the newspaper items as relevant to include, even though the focus of the newspaper items had nothing to do with childlessness, reproduction, fertility, motherhood
or families. For example, interviews with actresses about their upcoming films or plays mentioned that the actress was childless, despite the film/play not exploring childlessness. Interestingly, these newspaper items also questioned the actress’s ability to play certain ‘mother-like’ characters given their real life childlessness status. This was suggestive of the assumption that a woman’s ability to have a successful career, and be capable and competent within the chosen career, is connected with her reproductive status. This only serves to perpetuate the myth that mothers are more ‘able’ than non-mothers.

Another observation of the irrelevant use of the label childlessness was apparent in a short interview with an Australian female artist about her new prize-winning artwork, stating: ‘The childless Canberra artist and her lawyer husband broke up last year...’ (Daily Telegraph, 6th October 2008). In this case, the artist’s work was not focused on childlessness or motherhood; however, her ‘childless’ status was deemed relevant to mention in the newspaper item. Further to this, the newspaper item was not about the artist’s life, yet her childless status was somehow deemed worthy of mentioning when discussing her prominent career and prize-winning work. We observed here that within the very public sphere of print media there was a foregrounding of a woman’s very personal reproductive life. The unnecessary and irrelevant inclusion of women’s childless status serves to promote a conceptualisation and understanding of women through a reproductive and pronatalist discourse. It is noted that in western cultures characterised by pronatalist ideologies, womanhood and motherhood can often be presented as synonymous identities and facets of experience (Arendall 2000). Pronatalist ideology as evident in Australia’s socio-cultural and political environment thus serves to establish and support cultural discourses of femininity, in which the act and aspiration to mother is considered fundamental to what women do, and what women are (Gillespie 1999; 2003). The newspaper items appeared reflective of the prevailing pronatalist discourse in Australian print media (Anderson 2010). Through the practice of making the attribute of ‘childlessness’ relevant in what can be considered irrelevant contexts, the stereotype of women as mothers and conceptualisation of womanhood as motherhood, is reinforced. Through this, women are ultimately defined by their reproductive status, with the reproductive position of women being made relevant to how women are perceived and valued. For women who do not have children, they in fact become defined by what they have not done, rather than what they have.

Socialisation processes have led to womanhood being synonymous with motherhood, as evident in the media’s construction and dissemination of implicit, dominant pronatalist ideologies. As we were attuned to exploring the representation of childlessness and childless women in the print media, the inclusion of ‘childless’ in these articles was jarring and stood out as anomalous. However, for the broader public newspaper readership, the irrelevant descriptor of ‘childless’ being made relevant through inclusion in such newspaper items, becomes a familiar, unquestioned and unperturbed part of the reading experience. This is problematic for various reasons, particularly for the way in which such practices serve to implicitly facilitate gendered stereotypes of women and discourses of idealised femininity.

**Childless(ness) – a discreditable descriptor**

Through the process of reflecting on the excluded newspaper items, it became apparent that childless(ness) was also applied in the newspaper items as a descriptor in a way that was discreditable, and that further perpetuated gendered stereotypes and expectations for women. Goffman (1963) highlights the difference between those that are discredited (where a stigmatising attribute is visually recognisable) and those that are discreditable (where the discrediting attribute is not immediately visually recognisable, but is revealed through interaction and information sharing). He also conceptualised stigma as an attribute that is deemed profoundly discrediting, and that impairs the social acceptability of the possessor. In light of socio-cultural discourses of pronatalism and motherhood, childlessness can be perceived as a form of non-normative social behaviour and thus may also become a discreditable attribute (Lampman and Dowling-Guyer 1995; Miall 1985). Furthermore, through socio-cultural discourses of femininity equating womanhood with motherhood (Arendall 2000), women without the desire or ability to have children are often seen as
abnormal and unfeminine (Campbell 1985; Letherby and Williams 1999). Consequently, childless women may be stigmatised when they cannot, or choose not to, become mothers (Riessman 2000).

The notions of stigma and discreditable attributes expressed in the newspaper items were of particular prominence in articles relating to Australian politics and politicians. Despite the increasing number of female politicians in state and federal Australian politics, the media reporting of women politicians still appears to draw on and perpetuate outdated constructs of femininity (Muir 2005a) and negative gendered stereotypes regarding women and women's roles (Zamfirache 2010). This was observed in the ‘childless’ descriptor that accompanied many of the newspaper items covering Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, and politicians Maxine McKew and Julia Bishop. For example, the newspaper items that focused on McKew's political campaign in Bennelong, New South Wales, during the 2007 federal election consistently raised McKew's childless status, despite motherhood or childlessness not being the focus of the story. The context in which McKew's childless status was mentioned only served to highlight her as somehow deficient in her ability to hold public office due to her inability to fulfill the presumed natural life course for women of becoming a mother.

Of the excluded newspaper items, 86 mentioned Julia Gillard and her childless status. Terms such as ‘childless Gillard’ and ‘the childless Prime Minister’ were observed in newspaper items in which the focus of the article was not childlessness, reproduction, motherhood or family issues. In research that we conducted in 2009-2010 (Rich et al. 2011), childless women revealed that their childlessness served as a discrediting attribute in their lives as women through being: a status one cannot easily reveal without negative appraisal; a status one must justify or explain; and a status that is associated with having lesser care or compassion. In light of Australia’s pronatalist environment, socio-cultural constructs equating womanhood and motherhood, and the negative connotations that are often attached to childlessness, references to Gillard and McKew’s ‘childlessness’ can be understood as having a discrediting impact on the representation of these women in the print media.

Analogous to our reflections, research conducted by Muir (2005a) exploring the media’s reporting of family care in relation to Australian politicians, suggests that the credibility of Australian female politicians can be diminished through media reporting that draws on traditional myths of femininity and makes reference to women’s maternal status. Research conducted in New Zealand has also reported a preoccupation with the maternal and familial status of female politicians in the news media coverage; criteria not equivocally applied to appraise male politicians (Fountaine and McGregor).

In reflecting on the excluded newspaper items, references to Julia Gillard’s reproductive status were also observed during her election campaign for Prime Minister in 2010 against the opposition leader, Tony Abbott, with her childlessness being cited in newspaper items when referring to issues concerning babies, children and family policy:

*While Ms Gillard doesn’t have kids, she demonstrated that it hadn’t stopped her from mastering the must-have political skill of baby handling. Not a tear was shed as baby after baby came her way.* (The Australian, 19th July 2010)

*The childless Prime Minister cooed appropriately as baby after baby was thrust into her arms and not one bottom lip so much as quivered in her presence.* (Daily Telegraph, 24th July 2010)

*It seems a little inappropriate that an unmarried, childless woman should spend her time walking around shopping centres kissing babies.* (The Australian, 20th July 2010)

Here, we observed that childlessness served as a discreditable attribute through demeaning the female politician's ability to engage with, understand, or show affection towards, babies. It is recognised in the literature that in light of their childlessness, women without children have often been stigmatized as having no time for, spending no time with, and having no liking towards, babies and children. The newspaper items drew upon such negative
stereotypes, the references degrading the Prime Minister’s ability to be comfortable with babies, and not make them cry. This is by no means the first time that media commentary has been made about childless Australian female politicians and their ability to engage with babies and children. Substantial media attention was given to Natasha Stott Despoja in 2001 when she was photographed holding Andrew Bartlett’s new-born baby. Muir (2005b) observed that Despoja’s expression in the photograph was interpreted, amongst other things, as displaying horror, disgust and unease with children. Muir (2005b) posited that this incident was used to suggest she has limited understanding of the lives of everyday Australians, again serving as a discreditable attribute.

Our reflections on the excluded newspaper items also found that the Prime Minister’s childlessness was included in reference to family policy:

Perhaps Julia Gillard’s opposed to extended parental leave with pay because she’s childless, much the same way she continues the ban on same-sex marriage because she’s not gay. (Daily Telegraph, 30th July 2010)

Here, childlessness is used in a way that attempts to discredit the policy decisions of the Prime Minister, insinuating that as she does not have children, her decisions are grounded in and reflective of a lack of empathy, compassion and understanding around the needs of Australian parents and families. The message thus appears to be that if she is not a parent, then it does not affect her; as such, she does not care. Childlessness being an attribute that is discreditable through being associated with having lesser care or compassion was also found in our previous research to be a significant facet of the lives of Australian childless women (Rich et al. 2011). Interestingly, an American study by Stalsberg (2010) exploring the political consequences of being a parent, suggests childless female candidates lost their ‘typical gender advantage’ on issues requiring compassion, with the female childless candidates being perceived as lacking compassion, and having lesser perceived competency than mother candidates. It is Morell’s (1994: 77) contention that as motherhood is (stereo)typically associated with selflessness and concern for others, childlessness is juxtaposed against this image, with a perception emerging that ‘if women don’t care for children, they only care for themselves’. A woman’s childless status therefore discredits the legitimacy of not only their capability, but also of their compassion, empathy and understanding of families.

Conclusions

Pronatalist ideologies are pervasive in the Australian print media. Arguably, it is the very implicit nature of pronatalist discourse itself that has the strongest negative implications for Australian childless women. It is apparent that despite years of feminism and the women’s movement, women are still being defined in relation to their reproductive status by the Australian print media. References to women’s, and in particular, women politicians’ reproductive status demonstrated a continued association between womanhood and motherhood, and a persistent message that women’s reproductive status is of relevance to her capabilities, and appropriate for public commentary. When we think about powerful politicians one conjures images of the archetypal politician (read man rather than woman). Politics is gendered, yet beyond this our analysis suggests that within the gendered world of politics, even less credibility and status is ascribed to childless women who are viewed as particularly unfit for political office. Such views then serve to perpetuate problematic socio-cultural discourses of femininity and identity, which are then played out in, and reinforced by, the media. The propensity for the Australian print media to include references to women’s private lives and reproductive status serves to perpetuate gendered norms and stereotypes around women’s ‘appropriate’ roles and value in Australian society. The print media’s inclusion of childlessness as a discreditable attribute that should be disclosed regardless of the context further serves to stigmatise all childlessness as negative. Ultimately, this serves to deny the diversity amongst Australian women, and offer a positive and alternative life course for women – one in which their reproductive status, outcomes and decisions have nothing to do with ‘it’.
REFERENCES


