

What's childless got to do with it?

Redefining womanhood away from motherhood

An investigation into Australia's pronatalist society and the subsequent stigmas and expectations surrounding childless women

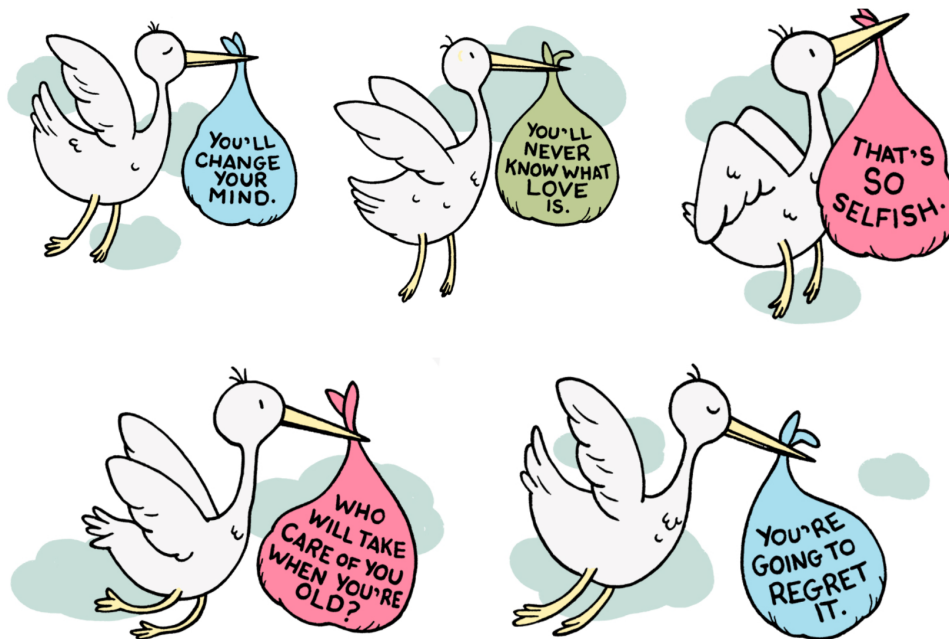


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Introduction

Living as a female in a pronatalist society, I continue to understand the ever-present pressures placed on women to have children, as we normalise and naturalise women's roles as mothers, and discredit and marginalise women without children. I can not help but notice the toxic implications of unquestioned pronatalism within our society and chose to investigate the nature of Australia's pronatalist society, the implications of these pronatalist norms, as well as how we can work to combat this social exclusion while celebrating all women. In completing the Personal Interest Project (PIP), my aim was to develop a greater understanding of what shapes mine and other women's feminine identities on the micro, meso, and macro levels.

I aimed to explore the potential implications of a pronatalist society and the stigmas and expectations placed on women without children. I questioned and observed the different treatment between men and women when it comes to having children, as men seem to have an opt-out clause for discussions around children and family, where women do not. I was able to recognise the immense pressure placed on women to have children and follow an irrational 'timeline', a pressure which I had not seen placed on men.

The primary research methods I used in this investigation granted me with both a statistical and analytical perspective as well as personal opinions and anecdotal experiences. I used four research methods in order to collate both qualitative and quantitative results; case study, questionnaire, personal reflection and content analysis. The case study and questionnaire offered a greater range of personal perspectives from open-ended questions delivered to a broad number of respondents to grant me varying opinions and anecdotes from different genders, as well as a case study centred around the gendered media treatment of Julia Gillard, enabling me to further understand Australia's pronatalist society on a macro level. Through my exploration of both the family structure at a micro level and Australia's macro political atmosphere I observed and asked questions about all levels of society. Secondary research including photo essays, peer reviewed journal articles, books, media articles, and other sources provided support for results collated through primary research, as well as introducing new perspectives.

The cross-cultural perspective evident throughout my PIP is between men and women. I examined and compared the differing pressures placed on men and women to have children, and whether they experience social exclusion due to childlessness to the same extent. My initial secondary research suggested that childfree women experience more negative reactions, as a man's status and reputation within our society is not tied to whether or not they have had children. To integrate this cross-cultural perspective throughout my PIP, I conducted a questionnaire which asks participants about the different pressures placed on them to have children, and whether or not they felt discriminated against due to not having children.

Social continuity and change is addressed throughout my PIP by looking at the changing nature of Australia's pronatalist society between the 1950s - 2010s, identifying previous and existing attitudes towards childless women. I also engage with the role of women in bringing about future change in my final chapter.

Coming to understand the nature of Australia's pronatalist society aided my development of social and cultural literacy as I learned that one's culture underpins their behaviour, beliefs, and values, as well as becoming aware of issues of discrimination and prejudice.

Conclusion

There is no one way to be a woman. However, through this social investigation I have come to understand that Australia's pronatalist society creates unrealistic norms surrounding what it means to be a woman, subsequently exposing childless women to social exclusion at the micro, meso and macro levels. The historical and cultural construction of motherhood as the defining feature of womanhood has significantly contributed to the development of these pronatalist ideals which permeate the contemporary context. I have come to learn that the implications of these pronatalist norms enlarge the already prevalent gender stratification in Australia. However, I have come to understand the integral role played by strong females going against the status quo in taking strides towards future change.

My research proved my initial hypothesis that Australian society permeates pronatalist values, thus stigmatising those who fail to conform to the patriarchal norms of parenthood. Through in-depth primary and secondary research, the stark contrast in the treatment between men and women became prevalent. Where women face an uphill battle against stigmatisation based on their maternal status, a man's status is not tied to whether or not he has children.

The collaboration of my primary and secondary research methods proved to be effective in the construction of my PIP. The use of personal reflection and interacting with a variety of secondary sources has been beneficial as I was able to contrast the perspectives of theorists, journalists and academics with my own subjective experiences. My questionnaire was effective in granting me with qualitative insight into a personal issue. Incorporating personal anecdotes and experiences from my questionnaire gave me access to a broader knowledge base, assisting with my final conclusion that childless women experience a significant amount of discrimination based on their maternal status in comparison with childless men. However, with the advantage of hindsight, I am able to acknowledge the inadequacies of some of the questions in my questionnaire. In retrospect, it would have been more beneficial to ask questions that related more closely with what I discussed in my PIP. Due to the intimate nature of topics such as fertility and motherhood, I ensured participant anonymity and highlighted to the respondent the nature of the task and how I might use their responses to ensure that my research was ethical. My case study surrounding the media treatment of Julia Gillard and Australia's political sphere was an extremely valuable resource. It granted me insight into Australia's political atmosphere and the treatment of childless women at a

macro level. Similarly, my content analysis allowed me to go in-depth into a specific moment in time, thus allowing me to evaluate whether or not the treatment of childless women is improving.

Through the construction of my PIP I believe that I have become more socially and culturally literate, becoming more aware of the discrimination and prejudice which Australian women face due to the socially constructed definitions of womanhood. My PIP has helped me to make sense of the society which I live in, as I make connections between the pronatalist norms evident in Australia's macro political sphere and my micro interactions.

At the beginning of my PIP I set out to discover the impact of a pronatalist society on the treatment of childless women. Through primary and secondary research and the construction of my project, I have come to understand that this issue is wide-reaching across a multitude of different societies and cultures, and has deeper causes and implications. In this sense, rather than forming an official conclusion, my PIP has opened up many more questions surrounding gender and pronatalist ideology within Australian society.