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## **‘It’s just what you do’: Australian middle class heterosexual couples negotiating compulsory parenthood**

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### **Abstract**

A distinction is often made between the ‘choice’ of not having children, and the claim that having children is ‘natural’. What disappears in this distinction is the fact that having children is most often a choice. This choice, however, is rendered invisible through the naturalisation of parenthood as a normatively expected aspect of adulthood. Whilst this argument is not new, the topic of how heterosexual couples come to decide to have children has received relatively little attention within the academic literature. This paper reports on findings from the first stage of a longitudinal interview study focused on Australian middle class heterosexual couples planning for a first child. A thematic analysis of interviews conducted with ten couples found that a paired contrast was often made between what were constructed as ‘childless others’, and a ‘natural’ or ‘innate’ desire to have children. The naturalisation of a desire to have children, however, was problematized when participants spoke about expectations from family members that participants should have children. The paper concludes by considering how the relationship between parenthood and adulthood may be a specifically class-based narrative.

**Keywords:** pronatalist discourse, adulthood, pregnancy planning, reproductivity, class

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## **Introduction**

Pronatalist discourses continue to hold sway across many societies, privileging and endorsing parenthood as a normatively expected part of being an adult ([Meyers, 2001](#); [Sevón, 2005](#)), and limiting the definition of ‘family’ to only those with children (Burman, 2008). As Morison and Macleod (2015) suggest, parenthood is commonly framed as a natural progression, a key part of normative ideas about what constitutes adulthood proper, occupying a central role in the standard developmental pathway of ‘courtship, early marriage... parenthood, family with adolescents, “empty nest”, retirement and old age’ (Morison & Macleod, 2015, p. 67). The capacity of pronatalist discourses to, at least to a certain degree, interpellate all adults into a narrative of reproductivity has, Turner (2001) suggests, become a hallmark of contemporary neoliberal citizenship.

To a certain extent, however, the continued hegemony of pronatalist discourses is at odds both with increasing concerns about the unsustainability of growing population levels, and with the proliferation of medical technologies that allow individuals to control their reproductivity (such as contraceptives and abortion). Rubin’s (1975) early work on gender and the political economy provides some insight as to why both of these factors are mitigated via a narrative whereby the heterosexual couple is constructed as a core social unit in western societies, necessary to the function of such societies in at least two ways. First, Rubin suggests, couple pairings and the subsequent birth of children are seen as regulating adult sexuality within a specific moral framework (i.e., monogamy). Second, reproductivity via the couple unit serves the purposes of capitalism, where the task of the couple is both to consume, and to produce more consumers.

The drive to reproductivity, then, is also a drive to consumption within neoliberal contexts, thus explaining why, for example, contraceptives or abortion are typically seen not as removing the need for choice (i.e., about whether or not to have children), but rather simply as delaying the inevitable (i.e., that

at some point the use of contraceptive will cease and a child will be conceived). Whilst this is increasingly true for both men and women, the normative expectation of reproductivity is most especially placed as an injunction upon women.

Furthermore, and as noted above, whilst the injunction to reproductivity is notionally placed upon all, there is a particular class dynamic that shapes whose reproductivity is especially valued. For example, in Australia, professional middle class women are often depicted as responsible for low national fertility rates ([Dever, 2005](#)), including the perception that infertility results from middle class women's investment in their careers ([Duvnjak, 2013](#)). This construction of work and motherhood as conflicting interests relates largely to middle class women, in contrast to working class women where this distinction is less often made, and where historically working class mothers participated in paid employment ([Thomson, Kehily, Hadfield, & Sharpe, 2011](#)). Another signifier of the privileging of middle class women to reproduce can be seen by Australian government financial incentives introduced to encourage women to have children, which were calculated so that high income earners benefited more than low income earners ([Dever, 2005](#)). In addition, as previous feminist analyses have showed, if we consider the disapprobation accorded to, for example, teenage pregnancy (e.g. [Macleod, 2001](#); [Macvarish, 2010](#); [Yardley, 2008](#)) or 'welfare mothers' (e.g. [McCormack, 2004](#); [Seccombe, James, & Walters, 1998](#)), then it is apparent that reproductivity is more greatly valued when it is undertaken by privileged socioeconomic groups.

Much of the above has been explored in detail elsewhere (as we shall see below), primarily either by considering the future parenting intentions of young people, or via the examination of how those who do not have children are constructed (i.e., as 'childless others'). What has been given less attention, however, are the ways in which those who choose to have children account for their decisions. Given, as was

suggested above, that having children is typically an expected part of adult life in pronatalist societies – particularly for middle class people – prospective parents are rarely asked for reasons *why* they want children, as compared with people who do not have children and who are frequently expected to justify this as a ‘choice’ (Morison & Macleod, 2015; Overall, 2012), or for people whose reproductivity is accorded less value, as we noted above, who may be discouraged from reproducing.

In this paper we report on findings from a longitudinal interview study that explores the experiences of white Australian middle class heterosexual couples who are planning for, conceiving, birthing, and raising a first child. Specifically, we focus on how the participants attempted to account for their desire to have a child, and in so doing we highlight the rhetorical strategies through which reproductivity is naturalised. Before presenting the analysis, we first provide an overview of the two bodies of literature indicated above (children as a normative expectation and the construction of ‘childless others’), and we conclude the paper with a discussion of how a focus on class adds to the existing literature on decision making about having children.

### ***Children as a normative expectation***

As noted above, having children is typically seen as a key ‘task’ of adulthood, and indeed the hallmark of ‘proper’ adulthood itself. As Blatterer (2007) argues, being recognised as an adult is not something one can claim for oneself, but rather it is measured by the ‘classic markers of adulthood’, namely marriage, parenthood, work, and independent living. Research with first-time fathers and young men who do not have children, for example, has found that having children is considered an important step to becoming or being viewed as an adult (e.g. [Finn & Henwood, 2009](#); [Marsiglio, Hutchinson, & Cohan, 2001](#)).

Furthermore, in their study of white middle class South African men and women with and without children, Morison and Macleod argue that ‘[h]aving children represents full adherence to the

requirements of what it means to be an adult woman or man' (2015, p. 30). Palkovitz and colleagues similarly argue that 'involved fathering' increases men's 'adult development' (Palkovitz, Copes, & Woolfolk, 2001).

Parenting is such an expected part of adulthood that it features in many young people's imagined futures. Studies with high school students and young adults have found that the majority of young people report that they desire to have children in the future (e.g. [Frisén, Carlsson, & Wängqvist, 2014](#); Mitchell, Patrick, Heywood, Blackman, & Pitts, 2014; [Thompson & Lee, 2011](#)). For example, Frisén et al.'s (2014) research with 24-26 year olds in Sweden found that most participants said they wanted to have children, although for many there was a desire to postpone parenthood. In particular, prior to having children the participants desired to be stable financially, be in an established relationship, and have had time to focus on their own dreams and choices, all of which may be viewed as constituting what is normatively expected of both parenthood and 'proper' adulthood. Thompson and Lee, in their research with 18-25 year old young Australian men who were 'single' and 'childless', depict their participants as 'men who are yet to fully engage in typical adult roles (e.g. full-time work, partnering and fatherhood)' (2011, p. 54), thus setting up distinctions between 'emerging adults' and 'adults'.

However, whilst there are normative expectations placed upon young people to have children, these are expectations that must be fulfilled in the *future*. [Sevón \(2005\)](#) notes that some of the 'highly educated' (p. 468) women in her study worried that they were too young to have children, or that it was 'too early' in their life plan. She argues this reflects the 'narratives of a good or appropriate female life course in Finland: first comes education and after that (and maybe also after a few years in the labour market) it is the woman's turn to have children' (Sevón, 2005, p. 475). This age and class-based caveat provides a counter narrative to the pervasiveness of pronatalist discourses, where teenagers who are mothers face

stigma due to their age and are constructed as a social threat ([Macvarish, 2010](#)), which is often based on white middle class assumptions about when to have children, and does not take into account mothers' own views or particular experiences ([Burton, 1990](#); [Yardley, 2008](#)). As we noted in the introduction to this paper, then, the injunction to reproductivity is not as simple as saying that 'everyone should reproduce'. Rather, implied in the injunction is the assumption that certain groups of people should reproduce at certain times, whilst particular marginalised groups of people should potentially avoid reproduction altogether, both of which are often class and age based narratives.

### ***Constructing the 'childless other'***

One of the ways in which pronatalist discourses are bolstered is through comparison to an 'other' – to people without children. Despite the increasing number of people who do not become parents, and the projected future figures in this regard ([Belcher, 2000](#); [Hayes, Weston, Qu, & Gray, 2010](#)), people without children are often constructed as living non-normative adulthoods. Moreover, this judgement is differentially applied, along gendered, racial, and class-based lines. Thus, those whose reproductivity is valued (i.e., white middle class women) but who do not have children are framed in comparison to, or as lesser counterparts of, people who have children. Notably, whilst the reproductivity of those who are accorded less social value (i.e., those who are not white and/or are not economically privileged) is often stigmatised and treated as less culturally developed – particularly evident from state interventions into the lives of working class parents ([Gillies, 2008](#)) – white middle class people who do not have children are often seen as missing out on a significant aspect of adult development, where parenthood is linked to psychological growth and change ([Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007](#)).

Some previous writing has attempted to break down the binary of parent/non-parent, by highlighting a number of different circumstances which lead to being a 'non-parent'. For example, some feminist writers

have suggested there are three groupings of women who do not have children: those who do not desire children (voluntary/choice), those who are unable to have children (involuntary/chance), and those who lack the opportunity to have children (circumstance) (Morell, 2000; Sevón, 2005). Whilst people who are involuntarily 'childless' are often afforded sympathy (or pity) because they cannot fulfil a normatively expected role, all people who do not have children (but particularly women) may be viewed as 'not adults' and as immature, deficient, deviant, selfish, and/or abnormal (Maher & Saugeres, 2007; Meyers, 2001; Morell, 2000; Morison & Macleod, 2015; Sevón, 2005). What is most striking here is that reproductive 'choice' is used only in relation to people who 'voluntarily' do not have children, in comparison to the absence of discussions about choice for people actually having or wanting children.

Overall, the strength of pronatalist discourses can be seen in the continued need for people who do not have children to justify their reasons for *not* wanting (or having) a child, whereas reasons for having children are rarely required and may not be viewed as explicit decision-making or choice (Morison & Macleod, 2015; Overall, 2012). Furthermore, women without children are likely to have reflected much more on why they do not want children, in comparison to the likelihood that women with children will have reflected on why they decided to have children (Maher & Saugeres, 2007). Women with children have often assumed that they would have children at some stage, therefore any barriers to the fulfilment of this assumption are typically related to time and circumstances rather than whether or not to actually have children (Maher & Saugeres, 2007).

## **Methods**

The study reported in this paper – *Feeling, wanting, having: The meaning of children to Australian heterosexual couples* – commenced in 2015. A key aim of the study was to examine the desire to have children amongst a normative sample of white middle-class Australians, given that whilst this population

is typically treated as the norm, they are less often examined explicitly in terms of the operations of said norm (Morison & Macleod, 2015). The first stage of this longitudinal qualitative study involved interviews with heterosexual couples intentionally planning a pregnancy via reproductive heterosex (i.e. without the assistance of reproductive technologies). Subsequent interviews not reported in this paper have or will occur once the couple is pregnant, six months after the birth of the child, and eighteen months after the birth. Ethics approval was granted by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Ethics Committee.

### ***Participants***

The inclusion criteria for involvement in the study were that potential participants were in a heterosexual relationship (married or de facto) planning for their first child, were Australian citizens living in Adelaide, South Australia, and had no (known) history of significant fertility concerns. Participants were recruited during February-May 2015 by advertising in local media and community newspapers, specifically targeting areas more highly rated in terms of sociodemographic indicators, and on Facebook, Twitter, and a range of internet forums that focus on parenting. Whilst neither race, income, nor class were treated as exclusion criteria, the purposive recruitment strategies generated a normative sample of white, middle-class participants.

Ten couples participated in the first round of interviews. At the time of the first interviews, the women's ages ranged from 25-38 years old (mean 31.9) and the men's ages ranged from 26-41 years old (mean 32.6). All women participating had a bachelor degree or higher, whereas the highest qualification attained by four of the men was either secondary school or a trade certificate. Most participants worked full-time, with three participants being full-time students. 12 participants identified as 'somewhat' or 'quite' religious, with their religion named as Christian or Catholic.

Most couples were married (6 couples) with the other couples engaged or in de facto relationships (i.e., living together and legally recognised as a couple but not married). Couples had been together for between just over a year and just over 13 years (mean 6 years) and had lived together for between 6 weeks and over 12 years (mean 4.5 years). Of the married participants, couples had been married for between 4 months and 9 years (mean 4 years).

### ***Procedure***

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the second author, with male and female partners interviewed separately. Existing research suggests that individuals within heterosexual couples are likely to have different investments in and desires to have children, and thus that data should be collected with each member of the couple separately ([Miller, Severy, & Pasta, 2004](#)). Such an approach also allows for a more specific analysis of the ways in which gender discourses impact on experiences and understandings. Interview questions focused on what it would mean to have a child, reasons for wanting a child, and expectations about having a child (including others' expectations that they would have children). Participants signed consent forms after being provided with an information letter detailing the research.

Interview recordings ranged in length from 33-81 minutes (mean 52.2 minutes). On average interviews with women (mean 60.1 minutes) lasted longer than did interviews with men (mean 44.2 minutes). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service.

Participants were allocated pseudonyms by the authors following transcription.

### ***Analytic Approach***

As signalled in the introduction to this paper, the data were analysed through a critical feminist theoretical framework, as developed in the work of [Burman \(1994\)](#). Such a framework considers how gendered (and

here specifically heterogendered) and classed discourses may differentially shape men's and women's experiences of the injunction to reproductivity. Drawing on this framework, a deductive thematic analysis was undertaken. According to [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#), thematic analysis can be used to explore a specific issue indicated by previous research or theory. Given both the special issue focus on adulthood, and the summary presented above of previous literature on the topic of how parenthood is framed as a normative expectation placed upon most adults, it was considered appropriate to analyse the corpus of data to ascertain whether the participants specifically orientated to adulthood and parenthood as mutually constitutive. Braun and Clarke refer to this analytic approach as 'contextualist', in that it seeks to understand how people construct meaning in their lives, and how this meaning reflects broader social contexts.

In terms of the specific steps involved in a thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six: 1) becoming familiar with the data, 2) generating codes, 3) identifying themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) refining specifics of the themes, and 6) selecting extracts that best illustrate the themes identified. In terms of the first stage, both authors repeatedly read the entire corpus of data, coding for instances where participants spoke about adulthood, parenting intentions, and the meaning or value of parenthood. Having coded all of the data in this way, the coded extracts were then reviewed by both authors for themes that best described patterns evident in the coded data. The first author generated these themes and the second author then reviewed and confirmed them. Representative extracts from each theme were then selected by the first author, and the focus of each theme refined. In the analysis presented below, and again following [Burman's \(1994\)](#) work in the discursive tradition, we consider how broader discourses of pronatalism appear to inform the participants' talk. As such, we do not simply focus on the semantic content of the extracts we include, but also focus on what Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to as 'latent' content (i.e., the normative assumptions that shape what participants treat as intelligible).

## **Findings**

The thematic analysis of the interviews identified a first theme ('children as a natural progression') that arose from a grouping of interview questions focused on decisions about having a child, the desire to have a child, and what it means to have a child. A second theme ('formative role of others' expectations') was identified, and was to a large degree a product of one interview question that asked about the responses or expectations of family members to the couple announcing that they were planning to have a child. A third theme ('constructions of the "childless other"') drew upon a diverse range of interview questions, none of which were intended to elicit the types of responses that were given. This final theme is presented first, as in many ways it provides a backdrop to the other two themes, as it offers a paired contrast between 'others' who do not desire to have children, and how the interviewees framed their own desires.

### ***Constructions of the 'childless other'***

Whilst outside the focus of the interviews, presenting the theme of the 'childless other' first sets up the type of rhetorical work that is at stake in the following theme (which focuses on children as a natural progression). In other words, individuals who have a stake in representing themselves in a particular way with regard to parenting decisions may often make recourse to comparisons with other people who do *not* have children. Such comparisons serve to bolster or naturalise the desire for children. In this first theme there was a degree to which some of the interviewees depicted friends or family members who do not have children as less than natural, and thus as questionable.

In the first extract below, at the conclusion of the interview the second author asked if there was anything further that the participant wished to add. It is somewhat surprising, given the desire *not* to have children was not a focus of either the research or this particular interview, that the participant then oriented to the topic of not having children:

Interviewer: Is there anything else you wanted to add?

Ben: Well what I find interesting is people that don't want to have kids. A friend of mine has said - and she's a woman - just said she never wants to have kids. I think that's odd obviously because I really want to have them.

Although it is perhaps understandable that for Ben, like anyone, the desires or interests of another may be experienced as foreign, it is nonetheless surprising that Ben appeared unable to entertain the idea that another person would not want children. Ben's comment is also notably gendered, or at least it appears notable to Ben that the person who did not want children was a woman, thus demonstrating the ongoing normative assumption that all women should want to have children.

Whilst Ben's response appeared to come something out of the blue in terms of the interview questions (though clearly not out of the blue in terms of the paired contrast of a naturalised desire for children and an 'odd' non desire for children), other responses that touched on the topic of the 'childless other' often occurred when participants were asked how much they had thought about the reasons why they wanted children, as can be seen in the following two quotes:

Interviewer: How much have you thought about the reasons why you want to have a child?

Fiona: No, not much at all. I think it's something innate for me at least, and for [my husband], that we have both always known that we just want a family to the point that when my older sister said that she didn't want a family, didn't want to have children, or was considering that she didn't want to, I was quite stunned, not on her

behalf but just the thought that someone from my background and my own walk of life would choose that as well.

Interviewer: So, I was going to ask how much have you thought about the reasons why you want to have a child?

Todd: Well, I mean the reasons are, as I said - like I said at the start, it's kind of that social obligation that you know you have a family. You know, people that grow up without having kids can kind of be perceived upon as selfish. And I know a couple of people that have made that decision, like they say their dog is their child.

The first extract above from Fiona mirrors to a certain extent the statement made by Ben, namely that a family member who doesn't want a child – whose desire doesn't neatly mirror that of the participant – is experienced as odd, or in the case of Fiona as something that 'stunned' her. Different to Ben, however, who spoke about a friend, for Fiona the information provided by her sister is 'stunn[ing]' because they had a similar (white, middle-class) upbringing, one in which reproductivity is naturalised and expected. As such, for Fiona the differences in their desires appears unintelligible. In the second extract above Todd takes the suggestion that someone who does not desire to have children is 'odd' or 'stunn[ing]' a step further in suggesting that the 'decision' (or what Fiona refers to as a 'choice') is selfish. Whilst Todd doesn't target this statement at any particular individual, he nonetheless makes a generalisation that could be applied to all people who do not have children. Furthermore, Todd almost appears to belittle those who consider an animal companion as a child, thus privileging human-human relationships over cross species relationships.

As we noted above, we chose to present this theme first as it provides something of the discursive context through which the following theme is framed. The construction of the ‘childless other’ as ‘selfish’, ‘odd’ and ‘stunn[ing]’ serves to legitimate the types of claims made to decision making about having a child elaborated in the following theme.

### ***Children as a natural progression***

With few exceptions, when asked to account for how they came to the decision to have a child, or their desire to have a child, the participants consistently made recourse to the idea that having children was both natural (i.e., an ‘innate desire’) and a natural part of a relationship life course. This second theme of children as a natural progression was thus comprised of these two prongs: wanting a child is natural, and having a child is a natural part of a relationship. In terms of the naturalisation of wanting a child, both men and women evoked this idea:

Interviewer:            You just mentioned that the desire to have a child is ‘innate’. Can you describe a bit more what you mean by that?

Julian:                    It's just this feeling or something inside that sort of drives that - it feels natural, like I haven't had to be coerced or talked into it or you know I haven't had to Google the pros and cons or anything like that; it just feels - I don't know.

Interviewer:            So, are there any other things that you feel are innate or natural?

Julian:                    I guess sort of working hard. I guess my career, like the type of job. I don't want to just do something sort of nine to five to get money and then sort of leave, like I

want to - I don't know, sort of contribute to something a bit more than the bank balance, I guess. I think that's always been an innate thing in me. But that's probably the only - it's a strong word so it's probably reserved for strong things.

We have explored this naturalisation of the desire to have a child in further detail elsewhere ([Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2016](#)), where we noted that there is a paired contrast implicit to the type of statements made by Julian, namely that for those for whom having a child is not 'innate', there is a degree to which this pathologises people who do not have children. Whilst this likely was not Julian's intent (given he was focusing on himself), it is nonetheless notable to us that the language of 'natural' or 'innate' always carries with it the spectre of its opposite. Furthermore, it is notable that when Julian was asked by the second author to provide other examples of things that he experiences as 'innate or natural', he makes the comparison to work. Here Julian discusses his dedication to his own career, which he views as 'contribut[ing] to something a bit more than the bank balance' and going beyond a 'nine to five [job] to get money and then sort of leave'. That Julian compares the desire for a child with the drive to make a 'contribution' via work suggests to us that a strong work ethic is naturalised in ways similar to the desire for a child.

Whilst some participants, such as Julian, made explicit recourse to the idea that having children is natural or innate, others such as Ingrid below treated such ideas as axiomatic, almost as requiring no explanation or as being something that cannot be explained:

Interviewer:           Have you thought through why you want a child or not; like how much have you actually thought about it?

Ingrid: [My husband] and I were literally having this conversation outside. I'm like, "We're going to be asked this." I'm like, "Why do we want a child?" And we both just started giggling and we were just like, "Because it's the thing that you do." And we just both started laughing. So like as I said, it's just what you do.

There is a sense in which Ingrid's claim, which to a degree she minimises through reference to 'giggling', is something of a bottom line argument. To say that having a child is 'just what you do' constructs it as unassailable. Whilst claims to wanting a child being innate or natural are potentially open to challenge (i.e., by pointing out that not everyone wants children), to say that children are 'just what you do' leaves little room for negotiation.

In regards to having children as a normative expectation of a heterosexual relationship, many of the participants drew upon relatively uniform narratives to evoke a standardised developmental relationship logic. In the extract below, Ana both invokes the desire to have a child as natural, and then extends this claim to naturalisation to all aspects her relationship trajectory, following a prompt from the second author:

Interviewer: How have you come to the decision to have a child?

Ana: My husband and I we've always talked about it. We've been married for ten years and he always wanted to have kids... I guess it's just, for us, it's just a natural thing. It's just you get to know someone, you marry and we knew that both of us wanted to have a family one day, so we stuck together.

Interviewer: Can you talk more about what natural means to you?

Ana: It's just, I guess if you think that you go to high school and once you finish high school you go to uni. You finish uni, you go, you get a job, you move out of the house, start a relationship, get married. I guess for, us, it just doesn't make sense for us just to be the two of us. We do need to have I guess, more of a purpose, otherwise what is it that we are doing and working so hard for?

In unpacking why having a child is 'natural', Ana makes recourse to the implied 'childless other', for whom there may be less purpose, and less point to life. In so doing, not only does Ana naturalise the normatively expected pathway from high school to university to employment to home ownership to marriage and then to a child, but she implicitly renders as a failure individuals who stop at any given point in this expected trajectory (or who skip a step). Henry too, in the following extract, first naturalises the desire to have a child, before then placing such a naturalised desire in a wider normatively expected life course:

Interviewer: So, what would it mean to you to have a child?

Henry: I think for [my partner] and I it's just the natural next step in life is children. I think it will fulfil both of us quite a bit. And yeah, the planning, yeah, I think for us there's been quite a bit of planning towards it realistically.

Interviewer: You spoke about children as 'the next step'. Have there been other steps you've taken and what would some more steps in the future be in your relationship?

Henry:                    Yeah, I suppose - what's the next step? I suppose the steps in our relationship have been pretty typical. You know, getting to know each other and then going on holidays together and then getting engaged and then moving in together. You know, planning on getting married. I suppose this just - I think, you know, that's probably what we were both kind of brought up with as the natural progression of a relationship.

Henry's suggestion that the normative expectations he adheres to come from something he was 'brought up with' foreshadows the third theme, where expectations about a particular lifecourse may to a certain extent be driven by the implicit and explicit expectations of others. Henry's reference to the norms that one is brought up with also echoes the extract from Fiona in the previous theme, who was 'stunned' that her sister does not share her desire to have a child. The role of upbringing, then, appears to play a significant role in shaping parental desires and their naturalisation, as we shall explore more in the discussion section.

### ***Formative role of others' expectations***

As we noted in the previous theme, how having children becomes naturalised as part of an expected adult life course may at least in part be explained by how the injunction to parenthood (particularly following marriage) is placed upon middle class heterosexual couples by their family members. Certainly not all of our participants noted that they had experienced such an injunction, but the majority had, either implicitly or explicitly, received messages from their families – and particularly their parents – that having children was expected of them. In terms of implicit expectations, Andy provides an example of the long-term nature of comments suggesting that he is expected to have children:

Interviewer: Do you think your parents and family expect you to have children?

Andy: Yeah I think so. Well I don't think they've really directly said anything of that nature but my parents, they just talk about, like saying "we'll keep this because maybe your kids will want it one day" or something like that. I suppose it's always been - actually I guess from even when I was little and just having random toys or whatever I think they've said, you might want that for when you have kids one day. So I guess it's always been - don't know if it's expected or just assumed that one day I'd have kids.

Certainly it is notable to us that Andy reports that even from a young age his parents were saving toys for his potential future children. As Andy notes, whilst this may not have been accompanied by explicit statements or questions reinforcing an expectation (i.e., 'when are you having children?'), it is nonetheless treated as an *a priori* assumption. For those participants who *did* talk about explicit expectations, this was often framed in terms of their parents' assumptions about a normative adult life course and relationship trajectory, thus mirroring the second theme reported above:

Interviewer: So do you think your parents and family members expect you to have children?

Gina: I think there is a small part of that especially when you get married, just after you get married, the questions go from, you get engaged and the questions become when are you getting married and then you get married and it's "when are you having babies?".

Interviewer: So you do feel like it's still an expectation even though you want children?

Gina: It's definitely an expectation. I think my parents would expect us to have children at some point. If we weren't so open about it I would say that they would ask us, they would have asked us by now probably if we weren't so open about it.

Interviewer: Do you think your parents and family members expect you to have children?

Julian: I think that they would be very surprised if I said, "No, we're not going to have kids". If you're a heterosexual couple in a stable relationship everyone's going to say, you know, "When are the kids coming?" Even with just a heterosexual couple being married, you know people just naturally, "Oh, when are the kids coming?" sort of thing, like it's just a mindless question. So, yeah, definitely.

As Julian notes, the progression from relationship to marriage is presumed to 'naturally' bring with it the expectation of children. Whilst neither of these participants spoke about pressure from their parents to have children (even if the expectation itself may have been experienced as a pressure), for other participants there was considerable pressure exerted by parents, such as was the case for

Simon:

Interviewer: So, have you told people that you're thinking about having a child soon?

Simon: No. Our parents on both sides have sort of been putting a bit of pressure on. We don't want to either get their hopes up or - it's probably not that so much, it's more

they sort of feel we owe them children. Like it's pretty full-on the language they've used, so [my wife] is just like "Well, it's not really any of their business; we can do whatever we like."

For Simon and his wife, not only is there considerable pressure to have children, but also a sense of 'owing' parents a grandchild.

This third and final theme highlights both one of the sources where normative expectations about adulthood and children come from, but also that whilst a small number of participants (such as Simon, who experienced this strongly) sought to resist such expectations, others appeared to willingly take them up.

### **Discussion**

The findings we have presented in this paper contribute to the aims of this special issue of *Feminism & Psychology* by considering how particular normatively expected adult-related developmental tasks were naturalised by a sample of ten white middle class heterosexual couples planning for a first child. It is perhaps unsurprising that the participants would talk about children as an expected part of adulthood, given the focus of the research. Yet the findings suggest that, in comparison to what was constructed by many as the 'choice' of not having children, having children by comparison was not positioned as a choice. Instead, having children was positioned as 'just what you do'. When pushed to account for why they wanted to have children, many of the participants – both men and women – struggled to provide an explanation that went beyond the claim that the desire to have children is 'innate' or 'natural'.

It could of course be argued that the findings reported in this paper simply replicate the broader literature on parenting, given such literature by and large focuses on white middle class couples. Contrarily, it is suggested here that the purposive focus within the research project on a normative sample draws attention to specific issues that are otherwise not typically attended to when white middleclassness is taken for granted amongst participants. Specifically, and following the work of Morison and Macleod (2015), the findings suggest that white middleclassness may serve as a structuring factor in the lives of the participants. This is not to suggest that gender – and specifically the ways in which the injunction to reproductivity is most clearly placed upon women – is not also a salient analytic category. Rather, it is to suggest that the men and women in the sample provided relatively homogenous accounts of ‘childless others’, the desire for children, and the expectations of others. What produced this homogeneity, it can be argued, is the idea of shared cultural values that some of the participants (such as Fiona and Henry) alluded to. That a white middle class sample would have the financial means to consider having children, the cultural endorsement of their desire for children, and the normative expectation from their families that having children constitutes entry into adulthood proper, echoes a suggestion made earlier in this paper, namely that whilst pronatalism may operate as a general principle in countries such as Australia, it specifically targets privileged groups of people who are seen as the most desirable in terms of reproductivity. As such, the findings reported in this paper highlight specifically how white middleclassness facilitates the unproblematised uptake of pronatalism, and indeed enshrines it as a normative aspect of white middle class ways of being, at least for this heterosexual sample.

As such, whilst the findings may be considered limited by the sample, who were middle class and largely well educated, this in fact is a strength of the project. That a normatively expected adult life course thus involved, for many of the participants, a university education and home ownership, in addition to marriage and having children, thus says as much about *middle class* expectations about adulthood as it

potentially does about adulthood more generally. Whether or not justifications for the desire to have children or the normative expectation of having children is true across a range of groups warrants further attention in future research. As noted in the introduction to this paper, there exists an injunction *against* reproduction with regard to certain socially marginalised groups, including the derision of teenage pregnancies. That the participants' desires would be lauded by their families and society more generally thus potentially speaks volumes about their social position as middle-class couples.

If we consider the three themes together as a whole, we can thus see something of the broader discourses with regard to how the desire to have children is naturalised. Specifically, for many of the participants a desire to have children represented something of a desire to occupy a normative place within social hierarchies, where *not* having children was often depicted as an undesirable 'choice'. Having children, then, is to occupy a place within a norm, rather than to be 'odd' or 'selfish'. Additionally, the analysis suggests that the directive to have children may come explicitly from family members (and specifically parents), with the normative trajectory of marriage and children enforced in some cases. As such, the participants were faced with the injunction to avoid the spectre of the 'childless other' by reproducing. Whilst not wishing to dismiss the genuine heartfelt desire that many people may experience in regards to having children, the analysis presented above nonetheless sought to emphasise that such desire is always already framed by normative expectations, perhaps particularly for white heterosexual middle class couples.

Furthermore, and to return to the work of Rubin (1975), there is a degree to which the political economy of reproduction is rendered largely invisible in the justifications provided by the participants for why they want children. As noted above, it is largely unsurprising that white middle class heterosexual people would be unable to see the norms in which they are invested, and through which their desires are shaped.

Nonetheless, it is notable that the naturalisation of reproduction was so relatively invisible to the participants, especially when on the one hand they could clearly see the normative expectations placed upon them by their parents, yet on the other hand they do not appear to see their inculcation into a normative logic upon taking up the injunction to reproduce. If anything, we might suggest from this, and following the point above with regard to the relative similarity between men's and women's accounts in terms of their unproblematised uptake of pronatalism, that the current neoliberal iteration of the norm of reproduction – framed as it is within the realms of white middleclassness as allowing for equality and choice – further naturalises men's and women's roles by making it appear as they are chosen, rather than externally imposed.

In conclusion, despite having emphasised how 'choice' amongst our sample appeared to default to 'nature', it is important to note that the types of normative expectations of adulthood voiced by the participants belie the reality of many heterosexual adults for whom reproductivity may be a burdensome expectation, or an unachievable goal. Pregnancy loss, infertility, relationship breakdown, or the unexpected death of a partner or child all interrupt the normative trajectory endorsed by the participants. Whilst these types of interruptions cannot be predicted, their very description as 'interruptions' highlights the normative focus of developmental accounts of adulthood. Deconstructing pronatalist discourses is thus not simply to challenge the injunction to reproductivity, but it is also to challenge the assumption that reproductivity is always already simple and straightforward.

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