



## Daughters and their mothers: The reproduction of pronatalist discourses across generations



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### ABSTRACT

The expectation that all women will become mothers, and that they will mother in particular ways, has been a focus of feminist attention for many decades. What has been less considered is how pronatalist discourses are reproduced across generations within the same family. This article draws on interviews with five pairs of white middle class daughters currently planning to have children and their mothers living in South Australia, in order to examine the ways in which mother–daughter relationships are a key site for the reproduction of pronatalist discourses. Three recurring themes are examined: 1) expectations mothers have of their daughters to have children, 2) (grand)mothers as advice-givers, and 3) generational differences relating to paid work combined with the continued privileging of mothering. The article concludes with a discussion of the ways in which pronatalist discourses are mobilised in mother–daughter relationships, and how these position women in relation to motherhood.

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### Introduction

The expectation that all women will become mothers, and that they will mother in particular ways, has been a focus of feminist attention for many decades (for an overview see O'Reilly, 2007). Specifically, significant attention has been paid to critiquing cultural assumptions that link women and motherhood, and countering this by denaturalising ideas of motherhood as a biological imperative. These ideas were raised forty years ago in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (Rich, 1986), where she critiqued the ways in which the institution of motherhood is imposed on and thus limits women, as well as in Ann Oakley's seminal work examining women's transitions to motherhood (Oakley, 1979, 1980). Despite these critiques and those that have followed more recently (e.g. Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010; O'Reilly, 2004), motherhood continues to be culturally framed as significant, if not central, to being a woman.

One of the ways in which the injunction to motherhood is reproduced is through relationships between daughters and their mothers. As we document below, however, interest in such relationships has been more focused on generational change historically across the years, rather than specifically intergenerational influences with regard to reproduction. While more recently some feminist researchers have examined mothers and mothering across generations within the same family (e.g. Fox, Heffernan, & Nicolson, 2009; Thomson, Kehily,

Hadfield, & Sharpe, 2011, discussed further below), and quantitative studies have found correlations between fertility patterns for mothers and daughters in the same family (e.g. Pouta, Järvelin, Hemminki, Sovio, & Hartikainen, 2005), further focus is needed to more fully understand the ways in which mothers impact upon their daughters' decisions and expectations in relation to motherhood.

As such, in this article we pay attention to the ways in which pronatalist discourses are mobilised in mother–daughter relationships. Doing so allows for consideration of how women are implicated in taking up, reproducing, and resisting such discourses. As Lupton and Barclay argue when elaborating a specifically Foucauldian account of the intersections of discourses and individual desires:

[t]he Foucauldian understanding of power relations is that central discourses invite and persuade individuals to conform to norms and expectations rather than directly coercing them, appealing to individuals' desires and wants at both the conscious and the unconscious levels.

[(Lupton & Barclay, 1997: 11)]

Thus we are interested in how pronatalist discourses are reproduced within mother–daughter relationships, including how these are taken up by both mothers and daughters. We argue that mother–daughter relationships are a key site for the reproduction of pronatalist discourses, yet also show how individual desires and 'choices' are shaped by wider cultural meanings.

In order to do this, in this article we explore the findings from our Australian interviews with five mother–daughter pairs to examine

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intergenerational practices which reproduce pronatalist discourses. We draw on two rounds of interviews with daughters derived from a longitudinal study with heterosexual couples who were intending to become parents in the near future, and separate interviews with their mothers. The article begins by situating the study by providing an overview of pronatalism and a review of current feminist research about generations and mothering, before documenting our study and turning to the analysis of our mother-daughter pairs.

### Pronatalism

Pronatalism refers to the widespread promotion of reproduction, which is both cultural and institutional (Lovett, 2010). Through pronatalist discourses, parenthood is constructed as 'normal' and key to adulthood, and something that should be desired (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2016a). One of the key ways in which pronatalist discourses are upheld is via the negative construction of the 'childless other' (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2016a). This particularly occurs via the marginalisation of women who do not have children, who may be stigmatised, constructed as deficient, selfish, and immature, excluded socially, perceived as 'unfulfilled', and/or viewed as being 'career women' (e.g. Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 2002; Meyers, 2001; Morell, 2000; Turnbull, Graham, & Taket, 2016). As such, while men too are impacted by pronatalist discourses, women are typically more significantly impacted given that women are expected to carry and birth children, as well as shape their lives around raising them. Importantly, pronatalist discourses are perpetuated in reworked forms over time, meaning that women continue to be positioned in relation to motherhood. As Gillespie argues:

[d]espite significant social change, and despite women's gains in terms of fertility control and greater freedom, pronatalist cultural discourses and those that posit motherhood at the cornerstone of feminine identity persist, albeit in a manner recast and transformed. [(Gillespie, 2000: 231)]

Importantly, reproductivity is valued for particular groups of people. Specifically with regard to the gendered nature of the injunction to reproduce, in Australia, for example, professional middle class women are often depicted as responsible for low national fertility rates (Dever, 2005), and there is a perception that infertility is a result of middle class women's investment in their careers (Duvnjak, 2013). This privileging of middle class women's reproductivity is further evidenced by financial incentives to encourage particular women to have children, such as an Australian federal government initiative which benefited high income earners more than low income earners (Dever, 2005). The pronatalist push in countries such as Australia relates to an ageing demographic, but also highlights the focus on reproducing the *white* population in the face of increasing immigration (Dever, 2005). As King argues, 'nationalist (implicitly conceptualized as ethnonationalist) discourse tends to define women as the biological reproducers of the national community, and racial/ethnic minorities as "outsiders"' (King, 2002: 371). In addition, the privileging of certain mothers over others can be seen in the negative discursive framing of 'teenage pregnancy' (e.g. Macleod, 2001) and 'welfare mothers' (e.g. McCormack, 2004). Therefore, the injunction to have children is commonly placed on white middle class women. This background to the pronatalist political climate in Australia and more broadly provides a context for which the mother-daughter relationships in our study occur.

### Generational studies of mothers and motherhood

There are two key ways in which generations of mothers and motherhood have been examined in existing qualitative research. First, research has focused on historical shifts in mothering practices, and has found that there are differences between generations due to historical

contexts (e.g. Bulbeck, 1997). Second, attention has been paid to generational narratives of mothering experiences, and has found that generations within the same family impact upon one another, in particular noting that mothers influence their daughters' conceptualisations of, and choices in relation to, motherhood (e.g. Fox et al., 2009; Thomson et al., 2011; Zhu, 2010). We outline these two key bodies of work briefly below, highlighting that a focus on mother-daughter relationships in terms of the reproduction of pronatalist discourses has yet to be fully explored.

As with feminist writing in many areas, attention to motherhood often focuses on historical changes across generations in different time periods. In other words, comparisons between women now as compared to in the past have received much of the attention. For example, in Australia Bulbeck (1997) provides a historical comparison of women including access to and use of contraceptive methods, marriage, and work. She divides her participants born between the mid-1910s and early 1970s into three generations, arguing that the older two generations expected domestic work to be the central goal of their lives, in contrast to the youngest generation whose lives were shaped by expectations about education and careers, as well as the availability of contraceptives. More recently, Everingham, Stevenson, and Warner-Smith (2007) critique the idea of a progress narrative in their research with three different age cohorts of women (aged 26–31, 53–58, and 65–70 in 2004). They suggest that for the youngest generation, women are constructed as both mothers and workers which, in an era of 'choice' and consumerism, does not mean increased equity. Davis's (2016) study in the UK with women who became mothers between the late 1960s to 1980s shows how 'intergenerational transmission' from mothers to daughters in terms of attitudes towards motherhood occurs both consciously and unconsciously, and continues to have an impact despite parenting in different time periods.

Despite the above summarised recognition of intergenerational continuity and change, narratives of mothering experiences across generations within the same family (i.e. daughters, mothers, and sometimes grandmothers) are rare. An exception to this relative lack of attention to specific mothers and daughters is the 'Making Modern Mothers' study (e.g. Thomson, 2008; Thomson et al., 2011) in the UK, which included intergenerational case studies of twelve women and their mothers (and sometimes grandmothers). The study found that mothers and daughters discussed presumed shared experiences of pregnancy and labour (even when they were not biologically related), making claims to similar bodily experiences; the act of giving birth brought generations together; and daughters became more interested in their mothers' experiences as they prepared for motherhood. Thomson and colleagues also discuss the impact of generational change, including in terms of the material culture of mothering (with a shift towards consumerism), the increase in domestic appliances cutting down domestic labour time, pregnancy becoming public and celebrated rather than private, and the increased involvement of fathers.

The 'My mother, myself' project in the UK also examined generational experiences of pregnancy and motherhood, including some interviews with mothers and daughters with children (Fox et al., 2009; Heffernan, Nicolson, & Fox, 2011; Nicolson, 2010; Nicolson, Fox, & Heffernan, 2010). This research found key differences between generations, particularly relating to surveillance and policing of pregnant bodies (in relation to the rise in media attention to pregnant bodies and the glorification and visibility of pregnant celebrities), along with the increased medicalisation of having children. Perhaps because of this information overload and increased scrutiny, Heffernan et al. found that the mothers from the older generation had more confidence in their own 'embodied instinct' in terms of what to do during pregnancy than did the younger generation (Heffernan et al., 2011). Similarly, Zhu's (2010) research in China focusing on ten mother-daughter pairs found that mothers from the older generation relied on their own knowledge and experiences which differed from their daughters' generation. The older generation were sceptical of the new 'scientific' knowledge, just

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