

Knowledge production about voluntary childlessness as a family form: A systematic review of trends



Researching family forms

- Heterosexual nuclear family normative, but not a *statistical norm*
- Socially credible and familiar family unit = married hetero couple, cohabiting with their biological, dependent children
- Research expanded to also consider **'non-traditional'** family forms:
 - families formed by LGBTI persons
 - single parent families
 - reconstituted families
 - non-marital cohabitation
 - voluntary childlessness



Childfree families?

- ‘Voluntarily childlessness’ to distinguish adults who have no desire / intention to procreate, from those who are involuntarily childless
- Stigma that accrues to childlessness (deficiency, pathology), and if **voluntary** - deviance, selfishness, psychological damage
- ‘Childfree’ coined to denote “an active and fulfilling *choice*”
- Powerful heterogendered norms, centered on HNF
- Implications for reproductive justice?
- Transform what “counts as 'family'?” (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012)



Systematic literature review

- Research “intricately interwoven with the sociohistorical and socioeconomic power relations of modern society” (Macleod, 2004)
 - Determine general trends in knowledge production re VC
 - Systematic literature review – integrative & interpretative
 - Codebook; 2 sets of independent coding (between 5 coders)
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Key word search: ‘childfree’; ‘voluntary childlessness’; ‘voluntarily childless’; ‘childfreeness’• Social science & humanities databases: Academic Search Premier, PsycINFO, Cambridge Journals, JStor & SocINDEX• Peer-reviewed articles | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Excluded articles:<ul style="list-style-type: none">≠ Infertility or involuntary childlessness;≠ CF or VC only in passing;≠ Demographic focus on general fertility trends, not focussed on VC• 195 articles |
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Findings

1. When and what kind?

- Types, theories, methodologies, main focus

2. About whom is knowledge produced?

- Sample characteristics (gender, “race”, class, age, sexuality, relationship status, country location)

3. Who produces the knowledge?

- Gender of first author
- Author country location
- Regional research interests

When and what kind?

Decade of publication	Percentage
1920-1929	0.5
1930-1939	1.5
1940-1949	0.5
1950-1959	0
1960-1969	0.5
1970-1979	11.3
1980-1989	39
1990-1999	9.7
2000-2009	28.7
>2010	8.2
Total	100

When and what kind?

Types of studies	Percentage
Empirical using participants	74.4
Empirical using documents or texts	3.1
Theoretical/conceptual	15.4
Meta-analysis/review articles	7.2
Total	100

Methodology used	Percentage
Quantitative	55.9
Qualitative	10.8
Mixed methods	2.6
Not applicable, n/a	30.8
Total	100

When and what kind?

Theoretical frameworks used		Percentage
'Hard' science frameworks		43.6
Individual-focused theory	1980s	19.5
Feminist	1970s & 2000s	4.6
Social theories		3.1
Post-modern/critical frameworks	2000s	2.6
Systems-orientated theory	1990s	1.5
Classic theories		1.5
Communication studies		1.5
Unavailable / ambiguous / unstated		22
Total		100

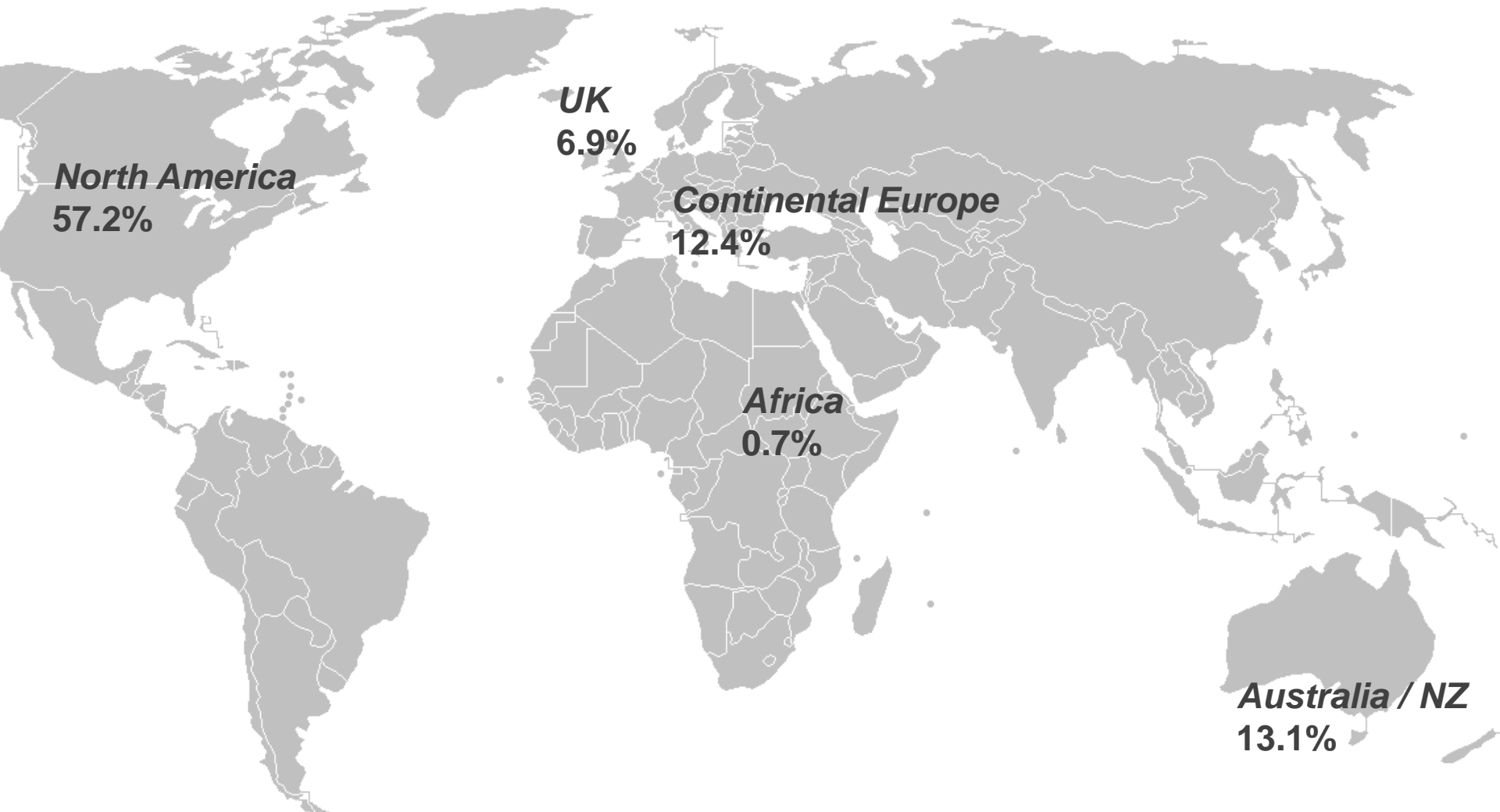
When and **what kind?**

Main focus of article	%
Explaining voluntary childlessness	18.5
'Outcomes' of being voluntarily childless	13.8
Fertility trends/prevalence including VC	13.8
Explaining general fertility, with reference to VC	10.8
Decision-making, pathways	10.3
Attitudes, perceptions towards, acceptance of, VC	8.7
VC as phenomenon	6.7
<i>Gender/'sex roles'</i>	5.1
<i>Race</i>	2.6
<i>Social representations/discourses</i>	2.1
Other foci (each less than 5 articles – age, life-course issues, <i>stigma</i> , <i>subjective experiences</i> , laws & policies, family forms)	7.6
Total	100

When and what kind?

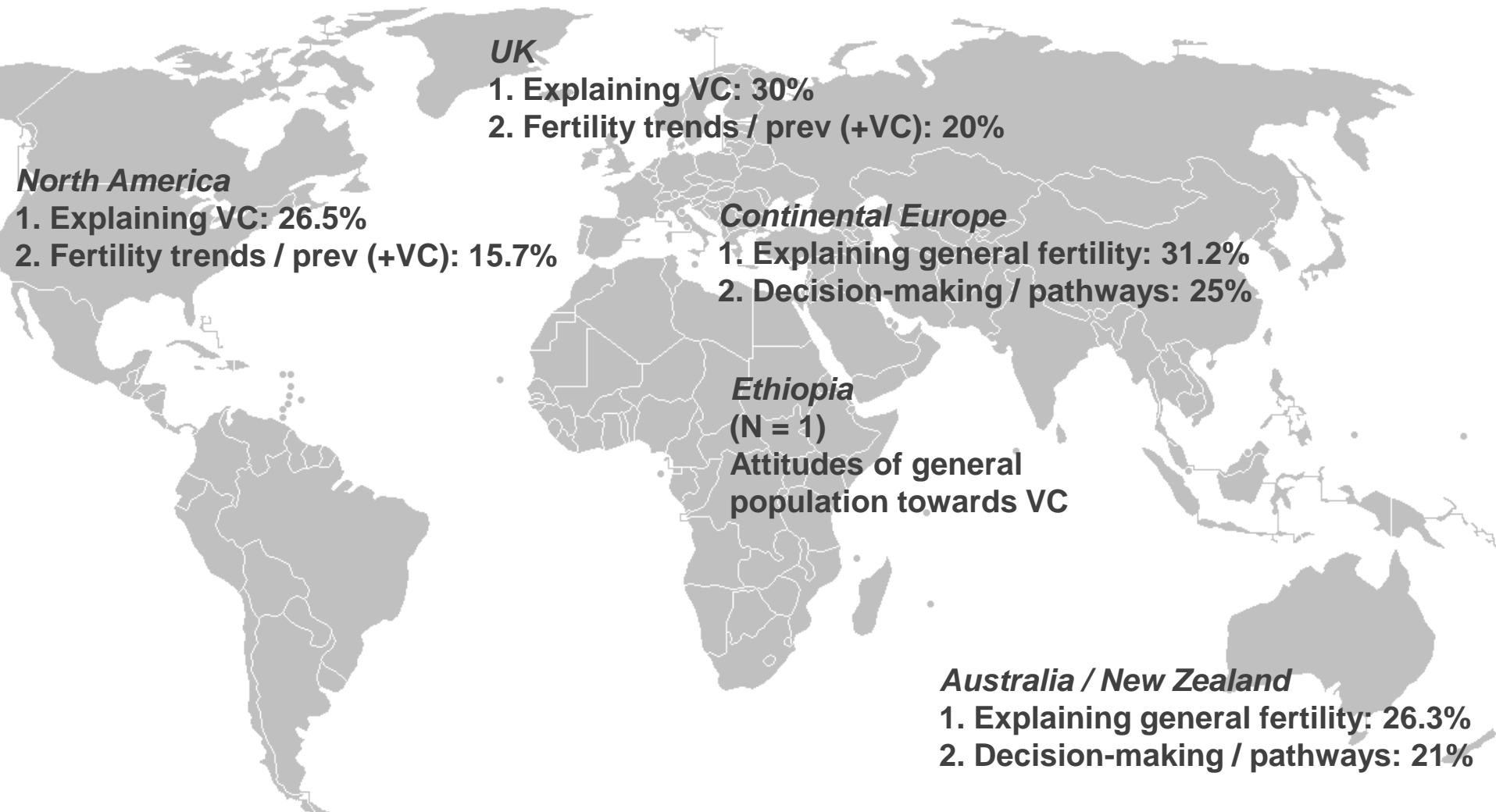
Decade	Most researched	% articles in decade	Least researched	% articles in decade
1970s	Fertility prevalence	18.2%	Age/life-course, race, stigma, social rep, subjective experience	0%
1980s	Explaining VC	22.4%	Family forms , stigma , subjective experience, laws/policies	0%
1990s	Explaining VC	36.8%	Explaining fertility, family forms, age/life-course, race, gender, social rep, subjective experience, laws/policies	0%
2000s	Explaining fertility, 'Outcomes' of VC	12.5%	Family forms, age/life-course, race	1.8%
>2010	'Outcomes' of VC	25%	**	

About whom? Sample **location**



9.7% of articles geographic location of sample not available

About whom? Sample **location + focus**



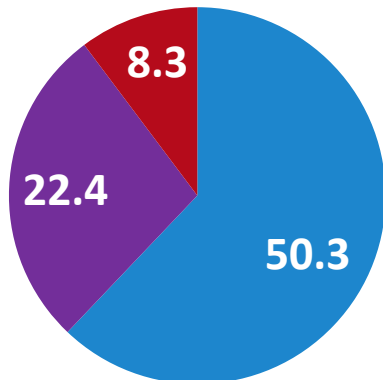
About whom? Participants' demographics



“Race”

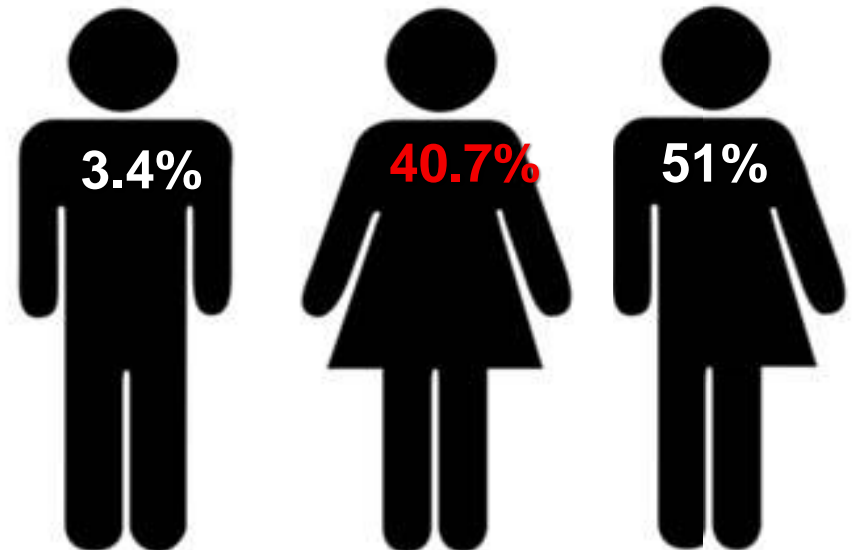
Mixed / population:	35.9%
‘White’:	10.3%
‘Black’:	0.7%
No mention:	33.1%

Socio-economic status (SES)



- Varied SES
- Middle to upper
- No mention

Gender



About whom? Participants' demographics



Age

Mixed:	55.2%
Young adult:	9.7%
Middle adult:	6.9%
Late adult:	2.8%

Reproductive status

Childfree +:	51%
Childfree only:	18.6%
General population:	8.3%

Relationship

Mixed:	42.1%
Married:	31.7%
Single:	2.8%

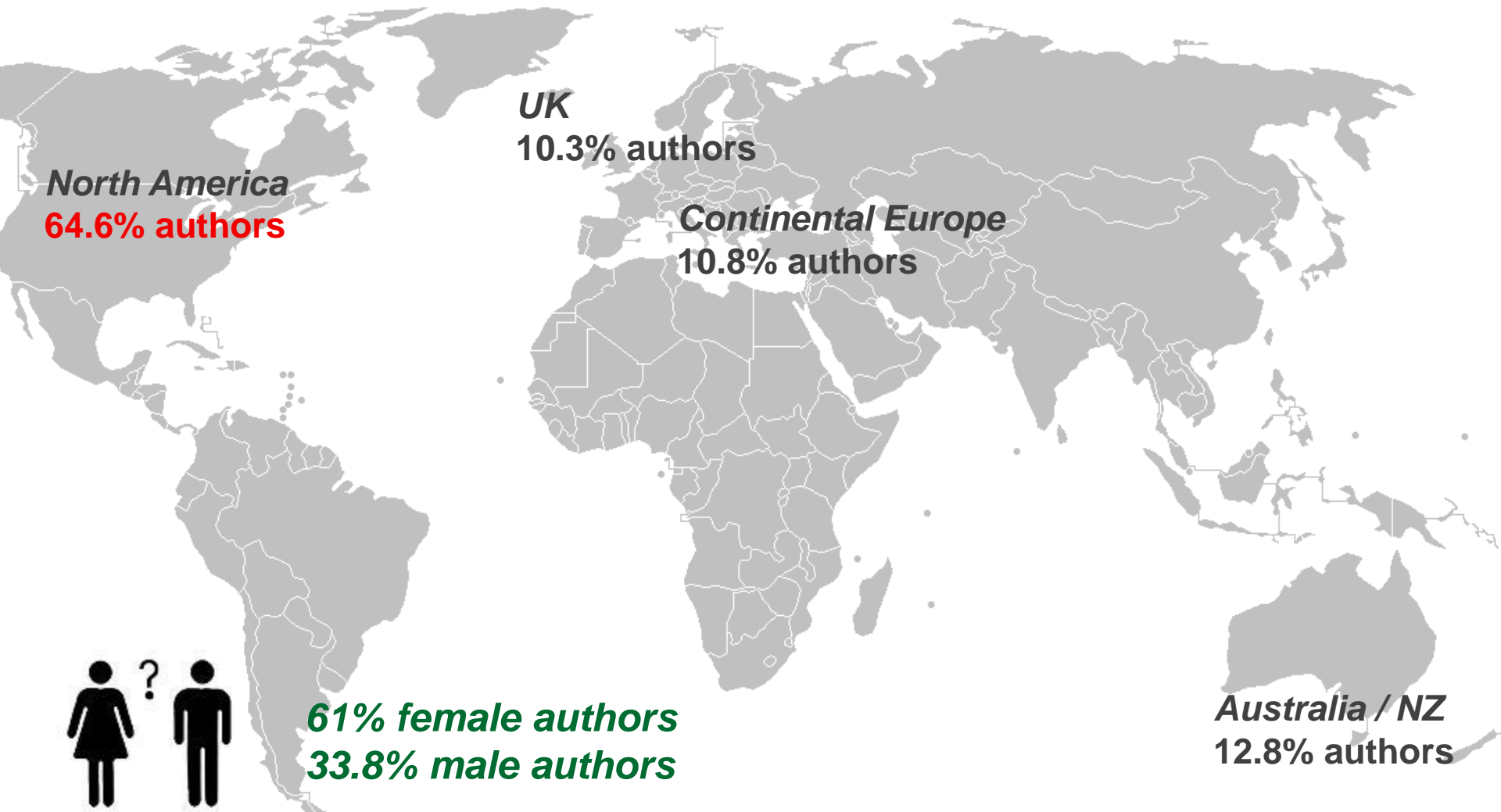


Sexuality

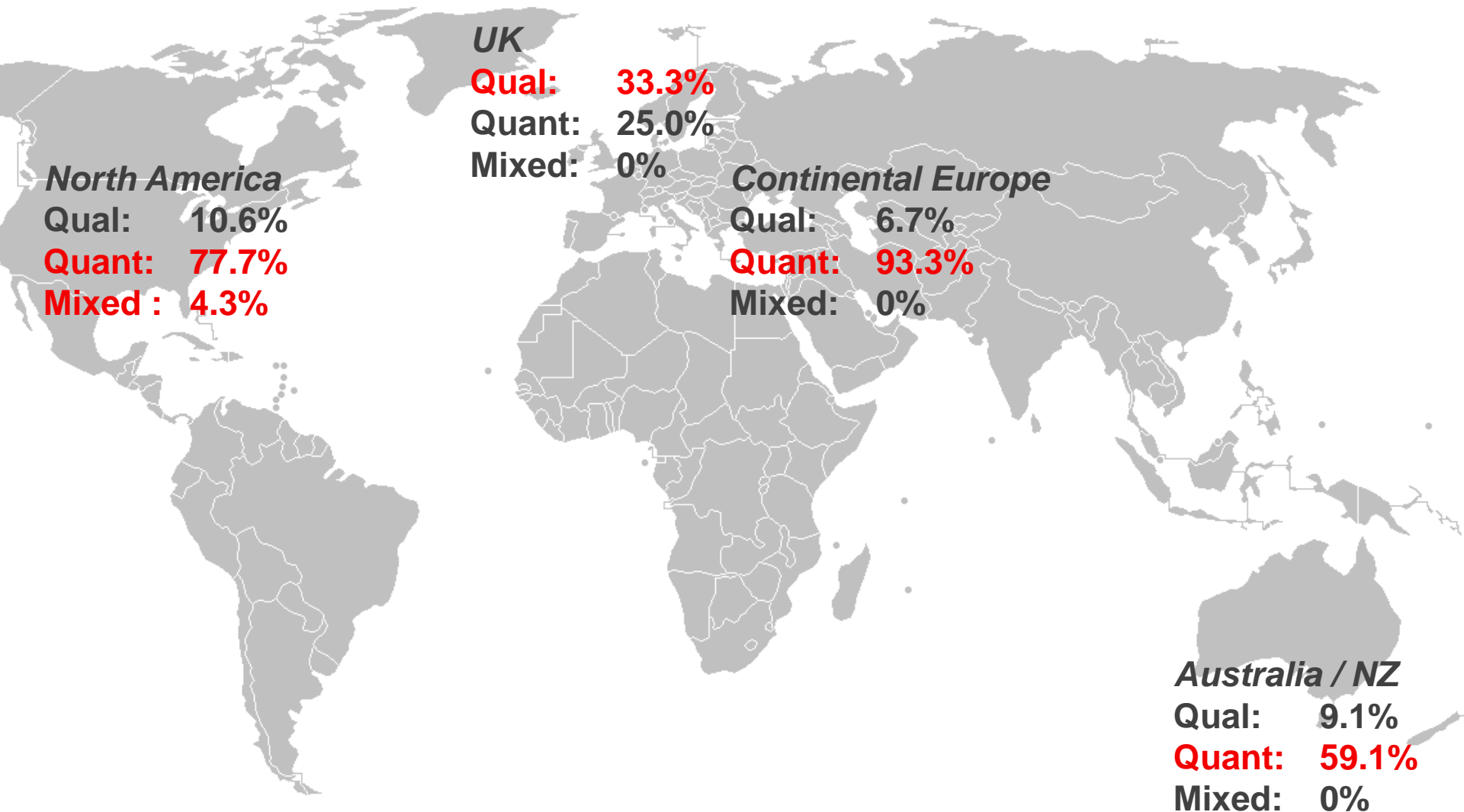
No direct reference:	75.8%
- Heterosexuality (inferred):	37.9%
Heterosexuality (stated):	2.8%
Lesbian and/or bisexual +:	4.9%



Who produced knowledge?



Who produced knowledge?



Who produced knowledge?

Region	Most used theoretical framework	%	Least used theoretical framework	%
North America	'Hard science' framework	49.2	Post-modern/critical frameworks	0.8
Aus/NZ	Individual focused theory	52	Social theories Systems-orientated theory Classic theories, Feminist Communication studies	0
Cont Europe	'Hard science' framework	61.9	Individual-focused theory Classic theories Post-modern/critical frameworks, Feminist Communication studies	0
UK	Individual focused theory	20	Social theories	0

Conclusion

1. When and what kind?

- First discovering, then explaining, then considering ‘consequences’
- Surge of studies in North America in 1970s – sexual politics of 60s?
- Few qualitative studies, critical feminist work (heterogendered norms & reproductive justice?)
- Some theoretical (reflection?)

2. About whom is knowledge produced?

- Not noting “race”, sexuality: Heteronormativity & assumption of whiteness
- Dominated by North American samples (married, young, female)

3. Who produces the knowledge?

- Women scholars
- Global north (notable absence of *any* global south voices)