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**'I'm missing out and I think I have something to give':  
experiences of older involuntarily childless men**

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## Introduction

There are few studies on the lived experience of childlessness in later life with childlessness often only viewed as an element of demographic change (Schnettler and Wöhler, 2016). The vast bulk of socio-cultural discourses surrounding reproduction have historically centred on women (Marsiglio et al., 2013) with women's fertility intentions often viewed in the context of 'their maternal instincts' and social expectations (Cannold, 2005). Inhorn (2009) argues that men have become the 'second sex' in all areas of reproduction scholarship based on the unverified hypothesis that men are not interested in reproductive intentions and outcomes. Infertility research has until recently, labelled men as 'disappointed but not devastated' by not attaining fatherhood (Fisher and Hammarberg, 2012). However, men either in, or post, infertility treatment reported the process had a profound effect on their identity and their place in society (Throsby and Gill, 2004). There is also an absence of research literature reporting men's lived experience of ageing. It is projected that in the United Kingdom there will over a million people aged 65 and over without children by 2030 (McNeil and Hunter, 2014). It is not possible to give the number of men in that figure because of the non-collection of male fertility history (Office for National Statistics, 2014). This has implications for the future provision of health and social care given that most informal care for older people is undertaken by their adult children (Pickard et al., 2009). Moreover, the gender profile of the ageing population is changing as men's age of mortality increases (Dunnell, 2008). The contemporary focus on youth and the young body has challenged the value of older men as experienced and powerful (Simpson, 2013). Older men are frequently viewed as 'dirty old men' (Scrutton, 1996) and as 'sexually driven, but also sexually inappropriate and/or sexually impotent' (Walz, 2002).

Recognition of the impact of involuntary childlessness on men is important, not only because of actual and projected demographic change but because of the lack of material examining male involuntary childlessness (Dykstra and Keizer, 2009). The aim of the study were to explore the lived experiences of childless men aged 50 to 70 years and who currently or in the past, wanted to be a father. The data presented here was drawn from my auto/biographical (A/B) doctoral study (Hadley, 2015) and follows the tradition of being written in the first person (Letherby, 2012). Stanley (1993) argues that the 'auto/biographical' approach acknowledges '...the active inquiring presence of the sociologists in constructing, rather than discovering, knowledge.' Consequently, researchers are not detached, neutral observers.

## Background

The attainment of genetic continuity brings a positively valued social identity, and is considered central to the 'normal, expectable life-cycle' (Neugarten, 1969: 125, Veevers, 1980). Disruption to socio-cultural age/stage expectations and meanings presents challenges to roles, identity existential meaning, and emotional and biographical processing (Becker, 1994, Lee, 1996). Those not participating in the heteronormative pronatalist ideology of the 'motherhood mandate' (Russo, 1976) or the masculine ideal of unchallenged virility are subject to stigmatisation and report a sense of social and relational 'outsiderness' (Whiteford and Gonzalez, 1995, Letherby, 2012). Consequently, many childless people protect themselves or others by hiding their experience and status (Miall, 1986, Letherby, 2012). Men who challenge prescriptive stereotypes, for example, gay men, househusbands, and male primary school teachers, are often subject to discrimination, exclusion, isolation, and mistrust from both women and men (Smith, 1998, Sargent, 2000, Rosenfeld, 2003, Brescoll and Uhlman, 2005).

Increased life expectancy, lower fertility rates, and increased demand for assisted conception has impacted on family structures and practices (Bengtson, 2001, Purewal and Akker, 2007). Family forms embrace bio-legal, genetic, claimed families, families of choice, and the assigning of biological kin status to 'non-family' - 'fictive kin' (MacRae, 1992, Jones-Wild, 2012). Although the childless are 'not a homogeneous group' (Wenger et al., 2007: 1434) many studies have included the never married, expected to be childless, childless-by-choice, childless-by-circumstance, empty-nesters and those who were 'functionally childless' through bereavement, estrangement, miscarriage, and stillbirth (Dykstra, 2009, Murphy, 2009, Allen and Wiles, 2013). Allen and Wiles (2013) gathered older peoples' detailed accounts of childlessness. Their participants' views of childlessness ranged across: positive, of no relevance, prevention of repetition of childhood experience, fatalism, and loss. Reasons for their childlessness encompassed health issues, cohort affect (World War 2), partner selection ('no Mr Right') and family dynamics (Allen and Wiles, 2013: p.212).

## Methodology

1 The methodological framework used was formed by biographical, life course,  
2 gerontological, and feminist approaches (Chambers, 2005). Childlessness is a sensitive  
3 subject and I drew on my counselling background to be authentic and genuine in my  
4 interactions with all respondents (Etherington, 2004). For the majority of the participants  
5 this was the first time they had discussed their experience. On first contact, all the  
6 participants enquired about my about my parental status which I willingly shared. I believe  
7 sharing my childless status helped build rapport in the interview.  
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10 Fourteen men aged 49 – 82 years formed the small homogenous purposeful sample.  
11 Recruitment was difficult and a wide range of methods were employed (see Hadley, 2014).  
12 Two of the men self-identified as non-heterosexual and the remainder as heterosexual.  
13 Seven of the participants were in relationships, seven were single, and two were  
14 widowers. One participant was Anglo-Celtic Australian and the rest were White-British.  
15 Thirteen participants' were located in the United Kingdom: one man was based in  
16 Thailand. Semi-structured Biographic-Narrative (Wengraf, 2001) interviews were used to  
17 collect each participants' life story. All the interviews took place at locations and methods  
18 of the men's choosing. Eleven of the interviews were face-to-face, two interviews via  
19 Skype and one by email. Nvivo9 was used was used for the management, storage and  
20 analysis of all material. A broad latent thematic analysis was applied to the data (Braun  
21 and Clarke, 2013). The analysis was an iterative process that involved open coding that  
22 formed provisional themes, which fashioned candidate, and main themes. Pseudonyms  
23 have been used and Keele University Ethical Review Panel approved the study.  
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### 43 Findings:

44 The participants' attitude to parenthood ranged from those wishing to be a parent to those  
45 who accepted that they would not become biological parents. My analysis highlighted how  
46 older men related to, and managed non-fatherhood across the life course, and the  
47 influence it had on their behaviours, attitudes, and identity at different times and locations.  
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#### 55 *The social clock*

56 The social clock was central to reproductive decision-making and the study exposed the  
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2 complex interactions that affected the participants' reproductive actions. The heterosexual  
3 participants viewed marriage and parenthood as a transition integral in the life course  
4 trajectory 'package deal' of work, marriage, and family (Townsend, 2002). Martin (70)  
5 described the embeddedness of the biological imperative into socio-cultural assumption.  
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11 **Martin:** *"It's a social norm isn't it? You get married, you have children, and that's the*  
12 *way it is."*  
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18 The dominance of the pronatalist heteronormative had a significant influence on the  
19 attitude and actions of the self-defined gay participants, Raymond (70) and Alan (82).  
20 The social normative of parenthood only through marriage led each to forgo any  
21 thoughts of fatherhood.  
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28 **Raymond:** *"I think from about like 15 years old I knew I was gay, so in my mind*  
29 *even then I knew I would never get married. You don't get married them days you*  
30 *didn't have children."*  
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37 Raymond and Alan highlighted their respective life course changes in values from their  
38 formative years that have been enshrined in UK law. The Equality Act (2010), led to  
39 changes in child adoption policy. Consequently, there is a generational difference between  
40 older and younger Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex people in the  
41 potential identities and roles that are available in the UK.  
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48 **Alan:** *"I think if it could 'appen now [to adopt]. If I was in my 40's now and I was*  
49 *with a permanent, proper relationship - I think, yes, I would."*  
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55 Both Raymond and Alan's individual experience reflected an age appropriate normative  
56 for parenthood that was a common theme for all men in the study. Many of the men  
57 stated that a child would not want to be associated with an 'old' father. Martin's  
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1 observation highlighted the mechanics of the 'social clock' in relation to socially  
2 appropriate age/stage parenthood/grandparenthood normative.  
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8 *Martin: "And once you get to 50 then it ceases to be tenable because nobody*  
9 *wants a 70 year old father when you're 20."*  
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15 How the men negotiated, their childlessness was not linear: interpersonal, intrapersonal,  
16 and wider societal forces influenced each participant's response. The men viewed their  
17 involuntary childlessness differently at different points in time across the life course:  
18 'aspirational', 'uncertain', and 'mediated' (table 1). The men in the 'aspirational' category  
19 desired parenthood, those in the 'uncertain' set questioned the likelihood of parenthood,  
20 and the 'mediated' category reported a qualified acceptance of their childlessness. Four of  
21 the men in the 'mediated' category divulged a form of 'grandfatherhood' role.  
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29 *Aspirational: fatherhood wanted.*  
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32 Three men expressed a desire to be fathers: Stephen (49), Frank (56) and David (60).  
33 Stephen lived in shared accommodation, Frank was solo living and David was recently  
34 married. Age and relationship framed their view of the future. All three articulated an  
35 awareness of missing the parent-child relationship and associated social relationship,  
36 roles, scripts, and status.  
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43 *David: "It just seems to me that's one of the central experiences of human life, I'm*  
44 *missing out, and I think I have something to give and it's a pity. It's one of the*  
45 *challenges of life, which, somehow, I feel I've missed out."*  
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51 Stephen and Frank had only recently become aware of their desire for fatherhood.  
52 Therefore, their need was to be in a relationship with a partner willing to have children, or  
53 who had children already. Not being in a relationship with a possibility of reproduction-  
54 highlighted the complex intersection between age, biological primacy and social morés.  
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4 Stephen: *"It's more about whether I could find a viable partner who would even*  
5 *want to have children with someone of my age... and I've found that they see my*  
6 *age as a deficit."*  
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12 Stephen's experience highlighted the influence of age in the pronatalist normative.  
13 Frank's positive outlook negotiated both the 'social clock' and the age-equals-decline  
14 narrative.  
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20 Frank: *"Also, with my health, I wouldn't let that put me off. I mean, you don't have*  
21 *to play football with your child until he or she is 15."*  
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27 The different perspectives of these three participants highlight the influence of their  
28 relationship status on their opportunity to become fathers. Only David was in a  
29 relationship and had considered ways-of-being an older father.  
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35 David: *"If it really became impractical to juggle even limited part-time work with*  
36 *looking after a baby I would say, "Right I will stop working, look after the kid."*  
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42 David's strategy negotiated the age-related biosocial clock by drawing on 'involved  
43 fathering' narrative including his wife's capacity to become the main breadwinner. David's  
44 narrative countered the pronatalist normative that the 'third age' (midlife) was a period  
45 related to freedom from parenthood. The impact of not having children had multiple  
46 consequences: existentially, familial, and genetically.  
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51 David: *"I have a bit of a sense of the way values and experience has been passed*  
52 *down the family tree. I think having kids is a way of producing a sense of continuity.*  
53 *Otherwise, death feels final. If you're leaving kids, you've left something of yourself."*  
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1 All three men in the aspirational group demonstrated how they attempted to negotiate the  
2 societal age/stage prescripts surrounding parenthood.  
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6 *Uncertain: fatherhood in limbo.*  
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8 Michael (63) and Russell (55) conveyed no ideation concerning how they may achieve  
9 fatherhood. Neither did they state they were *not* going to become fathers. For economic  
10 reasons both men had worked overseas for varying periods. Michael had not found a  
11 partner willing to become a mother. His awareness of the biosocial clock ran throughout  
12 his deliberations.  
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20 Michael: *“To have that sense of unconditional love and that unfathomable sense of*  
21 *that paternal feeling that only comes with having a child. If my mind does wander*  
22 *to what might have been or what might be then it is still with that one thought: can I*  
23 *have a child at my age now?”*  
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30 Awareness of the biosocial clock was also evident in Russell’s deliberations. Russell and  
31 his ex-wife experienced impoverished upbringings that were influential in their  
32 determination for financial security before raising a family. They divorced when Russell  
33 was 40 years old.  
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40 Russell: *“Now I’m 55, 15 years have gone and, in the back of my mind ... the*  
41 *light’s been getting dimmer of me ever being a father. I think there does get to be a*  
42 *point of no return. It’s not just women that have biological clocks.”*  
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48 Russell’s narrative underscored the impact of economic hardship in formative years  
49 affecting reproductive intentions. In contemplating his future, Russell had realised that  
50 with the legacy of non-fatherhood came an additional layer of grief: the loss of  
51 grandfatherhood.  
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Russell: *“First thing is that, my own demise is becoming more real. More importantly, the very few people that are significant others to me are very close now to their demise and that makes me extremely anxious. I’m also grieving that, just as I won’t have the paternal role, I won’t have the grandfather role either.”*

Russell’s assessment of his position uncovers the complex intersections between being-in-the-world and self-concept across the life course. The disenfranchised grief of involuntary childlessness was compounded by the loss of present and future role. Both men highlighted how childlessness contributed to feeling, ‘outside’ ‘different’ and ‘alienated’. Moreover, childlessness affected on ways-of-being-in-the-present and in potential ways-of-being-in-the-future. With childlessness comes the knowledge of non-continuity of genetic legacy, heirlooms, role, and identity.

*Mediated: fatherhood negotiated.*

All of the nine men in this group commented that they were not going to become fathers. Three men were single and solo living: Harry (64, widower), Raymond (70, widower), and Alan (82). The remainder were in relationships and cohabiting with the exception of James (65) who was in a Living-Apart-Together (LAT) relationship. Edward (60), George (60), and Martin (70), related their involuntary childlessness to the cessation of In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) treatment. Following unsuccessful IVF Martin accepted that he was not going to become either a biological or a social father. He highlighted three elements in his ‘coming to terms’ with not being a father.

Martin: *“So, once you’ve got over the denial bit...Then you can get to the acceptance bit and, eventually, you can come out of the other side of it. It’s something I will never stop regretting. You know, it won’t go away.”*

Similarly, George and his wife had withdrawn from IVF treatment. However, 15 years later George had become increasingly aware of the difference between himself and his peers.

1  
2 George: *"You know I would see the relationship between a father and son, or a*  
3 *father and a daughter, and I was thinking, "Ah! I'm never really going to get that." I*  
4 *miss that - I'm not having that."*  
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10 George highlighted the loss of both the parent-child bond and the longitudinal experience  
11 of fathering. Edward's jealousy, anger, and envy highlighted the value he placed on  
12 fulfilling the pronatal norm and how integral it was to his sense-of-self. Moreover, his  
13 reaction demonstrated the depth and complexity of his loss. The lack of any social script  
14 meant that Edward had no narrative to help him rationalise and negotiate his experience.  
15 Consequently, in social situations Edward had to manoeuvre between his own self-  
16 concept and social expectations:  
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25 Edward: *"When they ask me if I've got children of my own, or if I'm a dad ... I*  
26 *normally say, "Regrettably, no." I do let people know that I would've wanted*  
27 *children."*  
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33 Martin, George, and Edward's experience illustrated how not being a father had to be  
34 negotiated at the micro and macro levels. Consequently, involuntary childlessness  
35 involves dealing with a continuing discontinuity. James and John's acceptance of not  
36 becoming a father reflected the 'biosocial clock': age related social expectations,  
37 biological capacity, and the dynamics of their respective relationships.  
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45 James: *"I met Liz [partner], who has a grown up family plus she was no longer able*  
46 *to have children anyway. So that was the end of that in a way".*  
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51 James's views reflected both the heterosexual norm surrounding pregnancy in later-life  
52 and the fertility/virility-based assumption of life-long fertility. Moreover, it shows both the  
53 importance of the timing of entry and exit of relationships and partner selection. Three  
54 participants related their mediated childlessness to a particular age and circumstance.  
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2 Harry (64) related his position to both his withdrawal from the adoption process and his  
3 partner's demise.  
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8 Harry: *"I always imagined I would have children... The biggest regret is that I would*  
9 *have liked some part of Helen to still be here."*  
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15 Childlessness was an additional loss to the grief Harry felt over his partner's death some  
16 two years previously. Harry's experience highlighted a different form of legacy: a legacy of  
17 discontinuity. Harry also drew attention to his awareness of how older men were  
18 perceived.  
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22 Harry: *"Now, there's loads and loads of really young children along this street. I'd*  
23 *hate someone to look saying, "Watch that old man, always got kids round him." I*  
24 *don't want anyone looking at me thinking that."*  
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28 Harry's experience reflected research that show widowers struggle with their post-  
29 bereavement identity: they use traditional stoic social scripts in public but struggle  
30 emotionally in private (Bennett, 2007, van den Hoonaard, 2010). Significantly, all of the  
31 men in the study alluded to the fear of being viewed a paedophile.  
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### 38 *Fictive grandfatherhood.*

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40 The majority of the participants held firmly to the primacy of biological lineage. Five of the  
41 'mediated' group dismissed any thought of grandfatherhood. However, the remaining four  
42 members of the mediated group described 'fictive grandfather' roles that consisted of four  
43 categories: latent, adopted, proxy, and surrogate. The categories reflect the different  
44 sources and performances of the relationship. Raymond and Alan's experiences were  
45 related to their social networks. Raymond did not feel he could risk losing the 'latent' role  
46 he had developed with his colleague's children. Alan's 'adopted' role had been in  
47 response to a school project. Martin (surrogate) and James's (proxy) experience were  
48 directly connected to their partners' family circumstances. However, their non-biological  
49 status meant they could not be called 'grandfather'. Instead, their role was acknowledged  
50 by, respectively, 'Scrampy' (surrogate grandfather) and 'Pappous' (Greek for  
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2 grandfather). Martin's experience had given him an insight into the emotional and  
3 physical world of parenthood.  
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8           Martin: *"And maybe that's what men who don't have children don't realise because*  
9 *you can see what you're missing physically. You know, social connections and all*  
10 *the rest of it, but you don't know what you're missing emotionally."*  
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17 Martin's narrative suggests that involuntary childless men's understanding of fatherhood is  
18 limited to the visible, external, and tangible elements of the parental relationship. His  
19 insight into the emotional bond of the 'grandfather' role illustrated that a core element of  
20 the parent-child relationship was intangible and could only be negotiated through  
21 experience.  
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## 28 **Discussion**

29  
30 This article illustrates how older involuntary childless men negotiated the dominant 'virility-  
31 proved-by-fertility' normative. The men's narratives demonstrated how deeply **the** pronatal  
32 normative is embedded into socio-cultural structures. Fundamental to the findings was the  
33 myriad of factors that influenced people's procreative decision-making. For the  
34 heterosexual men, the expectation that fatherhood would happen at some point was  
35 framed by their cultural, economic, geographic, social, temporal, and view-of-others and  
36 view-of-self contexts. The gay men's relationship to fatherhood was determined by  
37 historical socio-cultural factors. By taking account of these factors over the life course, the  
38 contingencies, differences and similarities of male involuntary childlessness, were  
39 exposed. For example, many of the men proposed that a child would not want to be  
40 associated with an 'old' father. My study supports the view that childlessness should be  
41 viewed as a continuum of reproduction where people's individual reactions to their  
42 childlessness varies across time and are influenced by personal circumstances and  
43 external events (Letherby, 2012). The findings highlight that although men do not have the  
44 same choice as women they may face similar life course, socio-cultural, and relational  
45 accords. Identity is negotiated through a complex process involving not only what one *is*  
46 but also how one relates to what one *is not*. However, the acceptance of childlessness  
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1 was shown not to be linear: each participant's response was influenced by interpersonal,  
2 intrapersonal, life course and wider social factors.  
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6 How the men navigated a disrupted life course trajectory was revealed in their attitude to  
7 fatherhood and non-fatherhood, and formed a typology of 'aspirational', 'uncertain', or  
8 'mediated'. The men who formed the 'aspirational' group all wished to be fathers and were  
9 aware of the social expectations concerning the age appropriate for parenthood. Similarly,  
10 the two 'uncertain' men were concerned about their age and the factors that influenced  
11 their relationship with fatherhood. The 'mediated' group had a nuanced acceptance of  
12 involuntary childlessness. The heterosexual members of the 'mediated' group correlated  
13 their age and the dynamics of their intimate relationship as the point of acceptance of non-  
14 fatherhood. The gay men highlighted how, over the last few decades, developments in  
15 Assistive Reproductive Technology, familial diversity, and political and social policy  
16 affected their sense of being-in-the-world. The participants' narratives highlighted the  
17 complex intersections between individual agency and the dominant structural normatives  
18 of heterosexuality and pronatalism. Navigating the virility-proved-by-fertility mandate  
19 involves negotiating non-continuity in many arenas: economically, existentially, genetically,  
20 kin and non-kin relationships, identity, materially, role, and socially.  
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32 The disruption that involuntary childlessness brings continues across the life course: while  
33 some of the participants took a 'mediated' approach to their childlessness, others pursued  
34 their desire for a form of parenthood or grandparenthood. The influence of the social clock  
35 was demonstrated in the views expressed concerning the appropriate age for fatherhood  
36 and grandfatherhood. Studies into grandparenthood have historically focussed on  
37 grandmothers. Mann (2007) argues that the role of grandfatherhood has been  
38 misrepresented through the construction of women as central kin keepers and men  
39 downplaying their contribution (Tarrant, 2012). Demonstrating the embeddedness of  
40 pronatalism, the majority of the participants related grandfatherhood solely to biological  
41 lineage. However, four participants' revealed 'fluid family' practices where grandfather-type  
42 roles had been accessed through a range of strategies: Latent, Adopted, Proxy, and  
43 Surrogate. The participants' view of fatherhood highlights the complexity of ageing identity  
44 processes across the life course (Davidson et al., 2003, Mann, 2007).  
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56 The majority of infertility literature reports men as being emotionally unaffected by  
57 unsuccessful treatment compared to equivalent women. In this research all the  
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1 participants articulated complex nuances of loss, expressed as 'missing out' on the father-  
 2 child relationship across the life course. Non-fatherhood involves dealing with the loss of  
 3 identity, role, and emotional experience. This is compounded by the scarce societal  
 4 resource available for involuntary childless men to draw on to aid their self-concept and  
 5 social identity (Letherby, 2012). Consequently, the men may view their childlessness as a  
 6 'secret stigma' (Whiteford and Gonzalez, 1995) and as a discreditable attribute against the  
 7 pronatalist normative. All the men expressed a fear of being viewed a paedophile; the  
 8 widowers and single men expressed this most strongly. The negative portrayal of older  
 9 people is well established with lone older men particularly viewed as 'dirty old men' and  
 10 sexual predators (Scrutton, 1996, Walz, 2002).  
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## 22 Limitations

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 24 The study is based on a small sample and therefore the findings are not generalizable to  
 25 the population as a whole. The men I interviewed cannot be considered a representative  
 26 sample of the involuntarily childless male population of the UK.  
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Table 1: Typology of childlessness.

<b>Attitude</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Relationship status</b>
Aspirational	Stephen	49	Single
	Frank	56	Single
	David	60	Married
Uncertain	Russell	55	Single
	Michael	63	Single
Mediated	Colin	59	Long term relationship
	John	59	Long term relationship
	Edward	60	Long term relationship
	George	60	Married
	Harry	64	Single/Widower
	James	65	Long term relationship
	Martin	70	Married
	Raymond	70	Single/ Widower
Alan	82	Single	

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