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## **Behind the buffers: 'How is a man supposed to be a man? Male childlessness a Life Course Disrupted.'**

Men are a bit fascinating yet their lived experiences – especially when it comes to not reproducing – are seldom told. For example, many childless men say they are the 'end of the line' (see Webb and Daniluk, 1999). There again, I am biased as my MA (Hadley, 2008) and PhD (Hadley, 2015) focused on male involuntary childlessness. However, my experience of researching into the impact of unwanted male childlessness has identified both the paucity of material on the subject and the need for these men's voices to be heard (Throsby and Gill, 2004).

I am a mediated childless man – I am a man who always expected to be a father and at times was desperately 'broody' to be one. However, a 'constellation of circumstances' including shyness, economics, partner selection and the timing of entry and exiting of relationships all influenced my childlessness by circumstance. This journal - way back in 2012 - published my piece 'Navigating in an uncharted world: how does the desire for fatherhood affect men' (Hadley, 2012) based on my MSc (Hadley, 2009). At that time I was just two fifths of the way through my PhD examining the lived experiences of older childless men (Hadley, 2015). The results of my study are now a central

tenet of my recently published book 'How is a man supposed to be a man? Male childlessness - a Life Course Disrupted' (Hadley, 2021a). Why a book on older involuntarily childless men? A great question and one which - like so many in these times - seems simple but one for which the answer is complex. I hope I can answer in a brief but thorough way, using the six 'W's': Why, How, Who, Where, When and What.

### *Why*

The global trend of declining fertility rates and an increasingly ageing population has serious implications for individuals and institutions alike. Childless men are mostly excluded from ageing, social science and reproduction scholarship and almost completely absent from the majority of national statistics. However, from the available data it is safe to say there are more childless men than childless women. The context of the study is set out in the Introduction where I describe my personal journey and set the background for the study.

### *How*

Professor Marcia Inhorn (2012: 18), argues that researchers should disclose their 'methodological toolkit' because not to do so lessens the credibility of the research. The sample consisted of fourteen men who identified as being involuntary childless (wanting to be a father) and not being a biological or any other form of father. A qualitative approach was taken and the Bio-Narrative Interview Method was employed using semi-structured interviews. I used a

latent thematic analysis to explore the rich data generated. The methodological and theoretical foundation of Auto/Biography, Biographical, Critical Gerontology, Feminisms, and Life Course perspectives and the methods used are described in the Introduction and Chapter Three.

### *What*

The study examined the lived experiences of a hidden and disenfranchised population: men who wanted to be fathers. I interviewed fourteen men aged between 49 and 82. One man refused the second interview but agreed to the inclusion of the material from his first interview. Details of the sample are described in Chapter Three.

### *Where*

Thirteen of the interviews were with men who lived in England and Wales and the fourteenth man lived and worked in Thailand. However, the literature review on childlessness and ageing draws on material from across the globe.

### *When*

The interviews took place in 2012. It is my great regret that I did not immediately author the book on the completion of my PhD in 2015. However, the advice at the time for those seeking an academic career was to focus on publishing academic papers: 'publish or perish.' I also needed to earn some money. I describe my experience of undertaking the PhD and my experiences post- PhD in the Discussion Chapter and the Epilogue.

### *What*

The men's experiences revealed the complex intersections that influence childlessness over the life course: age, attachment, biology, capital, class, economics, education, gender, infertility, mental and physical health, identity, intimate and wider relationships, sexuality, socio-cultural environment, social networks and upbringing. I describe the main themes drawn from my analysis of my participant's life stories in Chapters Four to Seven:

Chapter 4: Pathways to involuntary childlessness

Chapter 5: Negotiating fatherhood

Chapter 6: Relationships and social networks

Chapter 7: Ageing without children

The book is set out so that the reader can dip into subjects that interest them:

### *Introduction*

In this Introduction, I describe the background to the study including my own childlessness and paucity of material academic, clinical or general on men's lived experience of childlessness. I then move on to give a guide to the layout of the book followed by a brief summary of the content of each chapter.

### *Chapter 1: Contexts of childlessness*

In this chapter I explore the key literature to understand the contested meanings surrounding childlessness, including the exclusion and marginalisation of men from the socio-cultural narratives that surround parenthood and non-parenthood. Key issues include limiting the definition of involuntary childlessness to only those who have accessed medical advice and

the symbolic violence and structural exclusion of men (Inhorn et al., 2009) especially older men, from reproduction research.

### *Chapter 2: Ageing and male involuntary childlessness*

The focus of this chapter is on three aspects of ageing. I look at the relationship between ageing and gender before examining masculinity and ageing. I then explore the wider context of ageing and childlessness in family and social relationships. I argue that childlessness is much more complex than the widely held belief that people either do or not want to become parents. The majority of material regarding involuntary childlessness focuses on the fertility intentions, behaviours and experience of couples and women in ART treatment. Yet, childless people who have not accessed treatment are excluded from datasets and statistics. Consequently, a large population of childless people are invisible to policy makers and other stakeholders and their experiences are not gathered.

### *Chapter 3: Methodology, method and analysis*

In this chapter I describe methodological and theoretical foundation of, and the methods used in, the study. I examine the rationale for my use of a qualitative approach to my fieldwork that draws on life course, critical gerontological, feminisms and biographical perspectives. I describe the stages of the data collection from the pilot interview and fieldwork through to an account of the latent thematic analysis used to examine the participant's narratives.

### *Chapter 4: Pathways to involuntary childlessness*

This chapter illustrates the varied factors and events that influenced the men's involuntary childlessness. These include the interaction between the men and their age-stage, biology, health, partner selection, relationship dynamics, sexual orientation, social, economic and political situation, timing of transitions and upbringing (see also: Hadley et al., 2019). Acknowledgement of the complexity and diversity in the men's experience is key to understanding the experience of involuntary childlessness.

### *Chapter 5: Negotiating fatherhood*

In this chapter I demonstrate the affect that not becoming a father had on the participants had on the men's lives. The men's attitudes to fatherhood formed a transition across 'Aspirational' Uncertain' to 'Mediated ' (see also: Hadley, 2019b, Hadley, 2019a) A principal element of the process was the participants' view of their age in relation to social expectations. Most of the men indicated a 'social clock' factor to their view of fatherhood that related to a socially approved appropriate age for roles of father and grandfather, respectively. Nevertheless, all the men expressed they had 'missed out' on, for example, the father-child relationship including those who had gone through ART treatment also used the word 'missing' rather than bereavement, grief or loss. As with disenfranchised grief (Corr, 2004, Doka, 2002); there is little societal resource for men to draw on and a dearth of recognition of the loss of identity, role, and emotional experience.

### *Chapter 6: Relationships and social networks*

In this chapter I explore the men's view of their non-parenthood and the impact that it has had on their wider lives. Their relationships and social networks highlighted how agency and structure intersect over the life course through communities; location; personal life; relationship dynamics; roles; and social networks (see also: Hadley, 2021b). Significant influences included drive to relate, familial background; geographic location; personality; relationship status; socio-economics; and quality of family relations.

### *Chapter 7: Ageing without children*

This chapter presents an insight into my participants' views of their economical position, health, and thoughts regarding the future. The men's opinions of ageing reflected how they related to who they are in the present, and how, who, and what they would be in the future tempered by the dominant socio-cultural narratives that formed their world-view and how they navigated their life-scape (Hadley and Hanley, 2011). Their ideation surrounding later life associated ageing with decline, dependency and challenge with the older men's acute awareness of mortality and the younger men not wanting to contemplate it.

### *Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion*

In this chapter I discuss the findings, both in relation to the review of the literature in Chapters 1 and 2, and the research questions. I then consider the contribution that my study has made to this area and draw attention to possible theoretical approach and areas for further research. This is followed



by a critical examination of the study, including its limitations. The chapter ends with my reflexive summary and final musings on undertaking this research (see also: Hadley, 2020).

### *Epilogue*

Here I discuss my experiences since completing the study and offer suggestions on how the findings may be applied by practitioners and stakeholders in academia, health and care, nursing, counselling and psychotherapy, and social work. I examine and debunk the myths around men including 'men are not bothered about fatherhood' and can have 'children at any age.' I also account for why do not find it easy to express their emotions and offer ways of collaborating with men. I argue that there needs to be an acknowledgement that the biopsychosocial complexity of life that is applied to others is also shown to men. Men are people too.

Why do I find men fascinating? Because of how they try to operate given such limited social scripts to draw on. As Michael Kaufman (1994: 152) identified, 'there is no single masculinity or one experience of being a man'. For mediated childless men like me there is life beyond the buffers at the end of the line.

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