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The impact of male involuntary childlessness on men's health across the life course: implications for individuals, healthcare providers and practitioners.

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Men's Health World Congress 2023, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia

#MHW2023

Who are the childless?

- European figures show that 25% of men and 20% of women are lifetime childless (*Tanturri et al, 2015*)
- Childlessness cuts across all levels of society: a heterogeneous population
- Typically seen as a binary: involuntary and voluntary:
- Includes: never married, expected to be childless, childless-by-choice, childless-by-circumstance (biological, economic, social, relational), estranged from children, pre-deceased children or whose children have left home. (*Dykstra, 2009; Murphy, 2009*)
- Societies are pronatalist: childless labeled as 'other', 'stigmatised' and feel and treated as 'outsiders' and often subject to discrimination, exclusion, isolation, and mistrust from men and women. (*Letherby 2010, 2012*)
- Men's fertility history is not collected at birth registration: it is not possible to assess the level of childless men compared to women in the UK or much of the world.

'If you are not counted, you don't count, and if the people who do the counting won't count you, then you are doubly discounted.' (*Sheffield, 1979; Hadley, 2021; p. 271*)

Social networks and ageing

- Relationships and social support **are as important as physical health towards** well being **& preventing** isolation, loneliness **&** exclusion. *(White et al., 2020; Victor and Scharf, 2005)*
- **Older** childless adults **have an increased risk of** loneliness, social isolation, depression, **&** ill health. *(Dykstra and Hagestad, 2007)*
- **Network** size **and** type **affect** health: **those with** least resources **tend to have** poorer health behaviours. *(Wong and Waite, 2015)*
- **Marriage** is important to well being **in later life** – if the relationship is ‘good’. *(Wong and Waite, 2015)*
- Older men **especially see their** partner **as a** primary source **of** care **and** support. *(Arber, 2004; Arber and Davidson, 2003)*
- Older men **are** more likely **to have** very small networks **of** one person **or** less **compared to** equivalent women. *(Phillipson et al 2001)*

Ageing and childlessness

- Majority of informal care provided by family. *(Hadley, 2021)*
- Older childless adults are not disadvantaged when their health is good. When health deteriorates there's limited informal support = earlier entry into formal care and for longer. *(Albertini & Mencarini, 2014)*
- Older childless men have smaller social networks and poorer health and well-being behaviours than men married with children. *(Dykstra and Keizer, 2009, Keizer et al., 2009).*
- A Norwegian study found childless men in late middle age had higher mortality than fathers. *(Grundy and Kravdal, 2010)*
- A Canadian study found Social Isolation a '**potent driver**' in men's suicidality. The author reported 15% of the men were fathers. *(Olfiffe et al, 2018)*

Ageing, Male Childlessness and Health 1

- Unmarried and childless men face greater risks of poor midlife physical function than married fathers. There were no differences in outcomes among women (Guralnik, et al., 2009).
- Formerly married childless men showed poorer physical & mental health, increased sleeplessness, excessive drinking & smoking than men with partners. (Kendig et al, 2007)
- North American study found divorced, widowed, & never-married childless men reported higher rates of depression and loneliness compared to similar women. (Zhang and Hayward, 2001).
- Childless men have higher mortality risks than fathers (Dykstra and Keizer, 2009, Keizer et al., 2009).

Male Childlessness, Ageing and Health

- Childless men & non-contact fathers have higher mortality through suicide, risky health & social behaviours than comparable fathers. *(Weitoft et al, 2004)*
- UK 'Suicide & Safety in Mental Health. 2021' report found >60% of 'middle aged men' were 'childless' at the time of their suicide. *(Appleby, et al., 2021).*
- A Swiss study found 'Living alone, having no children and no religious affiliation' were associated higher rates of unassisted and assisted suicide. Excluding underlying health issues, the rate of unassisted suicide for men was nearly five times the rate for women. *(Steck, et al., 2018)*

PhD: Methodology and sample

- Draws on Chambers (2002) '*feminist life course perspective*' based on: Social/critical gerontology, Life course, Auto/Biography, Biographical & Feminist approaches.
- Semi-structured Biographical Narrative Interview Method. (Wengraf, 2001)
- Latent Thematic Analysis. (Braun & Clark, 2006)
- 14 self-defined Involuntarily Childless men were interviewed: 27 interviews in total.
- 13 White-British; 1 Anglo-Celtic Australian.
- Age range: 49 – 82 years.
- 12 heterosexual, 2 non-heterosexual.
- 7 single (5 solo living), 7 in relationships (1 LAT).

Socio-cultural context: 'The Ideal Life Arc and Lifescape'

(Hadley & Hanley, 2011)

"I just naturally, in growing up, rather assumed I would leave school, do university, get a job, get married, and have a family." David (60)

"I always imagined I would have children." Harry (70)

"I'm never going to be able to say, "This is my grandson" am I?" Harry (64)

Pathways to childlessness

- **Economics:** *“The bloody interest rates hit 13% - so that made me delay, you know, overtures in those directions.” John (59)*
- **Social clock:** *“Nobody wants a 70 year old father when you’re 20.” Martin (70)*
- **Biological clock:** *“We just don't want to let time go by and let nature take the decision for us.” John*
- **Partner choice:** *“My ex-wife stated that she didn't want children, I just quickly put those inklins’ to one side...” James (65)*
- **Timing:** *“My parents had me in their 40’s. So, I thought it would be like falling off a log basically.” Edward (60)*
- **Changing relationship dynamics:** *“She said, “I never thought you are responsible enough to have children” Which, I guess, is the time I started drinking seriously.” John*

Social impact: Isolation

“People have no conception of just how isolated someone who hasn't got kids in middle age is..” Russell (55)

“I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't get out... if I go on the train, I don't speak to anybody but there's voices around me...at least I feel like I'm on the planet you know?”

Raymond (70)

“... you're shut out along with everything else.” Russell

“There's no inner circle, no. [...] Loads of activities around here from people we knew. I've dropped out of that because I hate going on my own. [...] A problem – I'll solve it. I'm the only one - I don't know anyone. [...]” Harry (64)

Future

Health: *"Who's gonna take us to the hospital? Who's gonna push us? When we fall on the floor, who's gonna pick us up?" Michael (63)*

"You're suddenly aware you're no longer invincible." John (59)

Threat: *"I don't want people saying, 'Oh, he's a bit of a paedophile, this one, looking at the kids'."* Raymond (70)

Legacy: *"There is a richness of family history, which it's nice to pass on, again no one to pass it on to." David (60)*

Existentialism: *"How is a man supposed to be a man?" Frank (56)*

Summary

1. Circumstantial childlessness: a disenfranchised grief where some losses are not socially valid = loss of expected self; social identity; status; present & future role. Add losses associated with ageing. (Doka 2002)
2. The older childless are an increasing population.
3. Men are blamed for not accessing 'health care'. Or does 'health care' not access them?
4. Masculine stereotypes & expectations embedded in service delivery - adds to exclusion, isolation & stigmatisation of childless and older men.
5. Older men are viewed as 'other': genderless & sexual threat. (Walz, 2002).
6. Policy: The childless: 'a non-category' an ignored but increasing demographic:

Who is going to care for you if you have no family?

No candle

*No candle to light,
no cake to cut, no nappies smelly,
no teeth to keep, no hand to squeeze, no stories read,
no surprise to feign, no plays to see, no shoes to clean,
no sports-day drama, no parties to piece/police, no presents to buy,
no amends to make, no scrapes to clean, no kiss-it-betters, no tears to dry, no
hearts to mend, no embarrassment to give, no graduation photos snapped,
no 'Can you help with this?' No now-empty nest, no grandchild to hold,
no legacy to give, no one to call, no one to catch the fall, no wishes heard,
no life-lived described, few tears shed,
no candle lit.*

(Hadley, 2021)

Thank you!

Book: How is a man Supposed to be a Man: Male Childlessness – a Life Course Disrupted':



Discount codes (ends 31-12-2023):

Paperback, **25%:** HADL1296

E-book, **25%:** HADL3924

Hardback **50%:** HADL1875



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