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*“Kids is a way of  
producing a sense of  
continuity. Otherwise,  
death feels very final”:  
later life male involuntary  
childlessness*

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# My background



- PhD Social gerontology (2015), MSc (2009), MA (2008);
- 60, White-British, born working class, Lancastrian-Mancunian
- I am Hard-of-Hearing since birth with a 30% loss in both ears
- I left secondary education with three 'O' levels and 8 CSE's
- I am an involuntarily childless man: I was very 'broody' in my 30's
- **WARNING:** this talk contains POETRY... (well sort of poetry...)

# Who are the childless?

- **Childlessness cuts across all levels of society.** There more childless men than equivalent women (**probably**).
- **Typically seen as a binary:** involuntary **and** voluntary
- **Includes:** never married, expected to be childless, childless-by-choice, childless-by-circumstance, estranged from children, pre-deceased children **or whose** children have left home (*Dykstra, 2009; Murphy, 2009*).
- **Archetti** (2020) argues 90 % of childless people are involuntarily childless (10% infertile): 10% 'chosen' childless. (*Keizer, 2010*)
- **Societies are pronatalist:** childless **labeled as** 'other', 'stigmatised' **and** feel **&** treated **as** 'outsiders.' (*Letherby, 2010*)
- Men **who challenge** 'traditional norms' **e.g.** gay men, stay-at-home-dads, male nurses/carers **&** primary school teachers, **are often** subject **to** discrimination, exclusion, isolation, **and** mistrust **from** men **and** women. (*Letherby 2010, 2012*)

# Background

- Decline in fertility levels & increase in the age of mortality.
- Around 20% of women in the UK are biologically childless.
- Unknown: the level of childless men in the UK because men's fertility history is not collected at birth registration. (ONS, 2014)
- Potential or actual infertility has major implications for physical & mental health, identity, intimate & wider relationships, socio-cultural & economic contexts & well being (Letherby, 2010)
- Feminist scholars of Assisted Reproductive Technology highlighted the invisibility of men's experience. (Throsby & Gill, 2004)
- Male Infertility/childlessness NOT studied in Masculinities

# Ageing and Childlessness

- 92% of informal care provided by family *(AWOC.ORG, 2016)*
- Older childless are not disadvantaged when their health is good. If health deteriorates the informal support declines and the formal care does not take up the shortfall. *(Albertini & Mencarini, 2014)*
- Older childless adults have an increased risk of loneliness, social isolation, depression and ill health. *(Dykstra and Hagestad, 2007)*
- Formerly married childless men showed poorer physical and mental health, sleeplessness, excessive drinking and smoking than men with partners. *(Kendig et al, 2007)*
- Childless men and non-contact fathers had higher death rate through suicide, risky health and social behaviours than equivalent fathers. *(Weitoft et al, 2004).*

# 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 2012:**  
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).**

## Social context: 'The package deal' (Townsend 2002)

*"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 think from about like 15 years old I knew I was gay, so in my mind even then I knew I would never get married. So I suppose I didn't even think too much about children because you don't get married them days you didn't have children." Raymond (70)*



# Pathways to childlessness

- **Upbringing:** *“I was not abused as such, but it was aversive.” John (59)*
- **Economics:** *“The bloody interest rates hit 13% - so that made me delay, you know, overtures in those directions.” John*
- **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)*
- **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*

# Affect of childlessness

**Regret:** *“I’ve never discussed it (IVF). If people ask if we have children I say “regrettably no.” I quite like people to know we did want a family.”” Edward (60)*

**Peer network:** *“It is noticeable that friends who have children drift away.” Edward*

**Existentialism:** *“I think having kids is a way of producing a sense of continuity. Otherwise, death feels very final. If you're leaving kids, you've left something of yourself.” David (60)*

**Advantages:** *“The advantages then, of course, are not having to plan and worry about others.” Edward*

# Social impact

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

*“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)*

*“When couples get older, they have a whole raft of experiences... you're shut out along with everything else.” Russell*

# Continuity of disruption

*“It would suddenly hit me - I would see the relationship between a father and son, or a daughter, and I was thinking “Ah” I’m never really going to get that - you know ... I miss that.”* George (60)

*“It’s something I will never stop regretting. You know, it won’t go away.”* Martin (70)

*“I’m never going to be able to say, “This is my grandson” am I?”* Harry (64)

*“How is a man supposed to be a man?”* Frank (56)

# 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)

*“To be brutal death is the future... I'd like to see my surrogate granddaughter grow up... 15 years will take her to 18. You can see them to be an adult then, can't you?”* Martin (70)

# *Something missing*

There's something missing  
A conversation ended before it began  
Scatterlings of cuda, shuda, wuda, **dada**  
The latent maelstrom of the none man

There's something missing,  
holding a life-wide gap,  
breathing wallpaper,  
I am whole and incomplete

There's something missing,  
first to be left behind,  
first to be sent in,

this line is incomplete

# Academia: Ageing & Reproduction

1. Childlessness or Ageing seldom feature in masculinities' research, including Connell's (1995) and Kimmel, Connell and Hearn's (2005) influential books.
2. Inhorn (2012, 2009) & Marsiglio et al (2013) argued that feminist scholarship has retained the theoretical and experiential spotlight on women's reproductive issues.
3. Inhorn (2009) argued that men are now the 'second sex', in all areas of reproduction scholarship because of the 'widely held but largely untested assumption' that men are not interested & disengaged from, reproductive intentions & outcomes.
4. Lohan (2015, p. 215) argued that men are absent from literature 'on family planning, fertility, reproductive health and midwifery.'

# Summary

1. Involuntary childlessness as disenfranchised grief (*Doka 2002*) where some losses are not socially valid: Loss of expected self & social identity & present/future role. Add losses associated with ageing.
2. *'If you are not counted, then you don't count'* (*Sheffield 1979*). If those who do the counting will not count you - then you are **doubly discounted**.
3. The older childless not **recognised** in health & care policy & practice.
4. Men are blamed **for** not accessing 'health care'. Or does 'health care' not access them?
5. **Masculine** stereotypes set embedded in-service **delivery** adds to exclusion, isolation & stigmatisation **of** older **and** childless men.
6. Older men are viewed as 'other' genderless a sexual threat (*Walz, 2002*).



# How is a man supposed to be a man?



Approx., 24% of UK men are childless

Childlessness/infertility excluded from masculinities literature



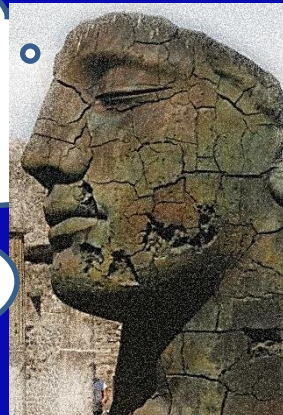
Childless men are less wealthy and less happy than fathers

Childless men have higher death rate through suicide than fathers



Older men are more likely to be placed in formal care than equivalent women

Older men fear being seen a paedosexual





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# Thank you for listening!



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# A Brief history of Psychology and Infertility

- <u>1970's</u>: infertility often diagnosed as psychogenic and assumed to reside in the female. Also belief that adoption facilitated conception by relieving neurosis/worry/stress: disproved.
- > 1970's: improved diagnosis of biomedical cause of infertility.
- psychodynamic & other therapies view external sources of stress may negatively influence fertility, then...
- stress/distress seen as a consequence not a cause: concept of infertility as an unfolding major life crisis.
- Leads to: support groups; motivation for research, hypothecation of emotional expression, patient/client experience & practice: grief process recognised.
- Couples response to infertility as numerous threats & losses inc., identity, self-esteem, self-control, socio-cultural expectations, status, intimate & social relationships, beliefs & world view.

# Men, semen, infertility and mental health

- Some studies show no issues for men before infertility treatment but changes during & after .
- US survey of major adverse life events of 744 fertile men with pregnant partners. Men reporting two or more recent events were twice as likely to have sperm below normal standard for concentration, motility, & morphology: authors proposed that an endocrine pathway with increased stress hormones led to reduced essential precursors for sperm production. (Gollenberg et al 2010)
- Lit review of link between psychological, social, or behavioural factors & semen quality: higher age, smoking, alcohol consumption, & psychological stress were all risk factors for poorer semen quality (Li et al 2011)
- Links between psychological factors & semen quality: anxiety scored highest. Men with high anxiety also had higher rates of cigarette smoking, alcohol use, & sexual difficulties. Infertile men significantly less likely to discuss emotions.
- Infertile men had specific impairments in quality of life related to self-regard. (Fisher & Hammarberg 2017)
- Men's responses to male factor infertility equal women's infertility responses: sense of loss, stigma, & reduced self-esteem.