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'Fractured Fatherhood Phantasies'



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PhD (2015), MSc (2009), MA (2008),

City & Guilds 744 (1982),

3 'O' Levels (1977), 8 CSE's (1976),

Bronze Swimming Badge (1970),

St Hilda's Primary School Football Player of the Year (1970)

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Life is that dash between two numbers



Kenworthy Community Orchard, Manchester

Who am I? What's my privilege?

- 59, 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 few qualifications
- 1997- 2008 I worked as a scientific/technical photographer
- I am a 'mediated involuntarily childless' man: I was very 'broody' in my 30's
- I have written 1 thesis, 2 dissertations, 5 papers on 'involuntary childlessness', 10 invited blogs, and had pieces in the Guardian, the Daily Telegraph, the Daily Mail, and The Times
- I often have imposter syndrome

Myths of men and reproduction

- *Why research childless men?* Little research on men and....

Men are FASCINATING

- *Men can reproduce throughout their lives!*

But most men don't for two reasons: Biological & Social. Men have a slow hormonal decline (andropause) and sperm slowly loses its efficacy from the mid-30's onwards. Most societies have an age limit (social clock) of an acceptable age to be a parent. Men indicate they don't want to be 'old' dads that can't interact with any offspring.

- *Men are not broody & not concerned about becoming fathers!*

There are few studies on measuring male broodiness. My study (2009) found that the level of broodiness between non-parent men and women was about the same. But men scored higher for depression, isolation and anger than fathers.

Publically stating desire for parenthood = social stigmatisation.

Also if ½ the population were not interested in reproducing...

My studies of childless men

- Off the cuff suggestion for the topic for my MA dissertation in Counselling (2008): Interviewed 10 men aged 30 – 65:
- Research question, *'Was it only me'?*
- Found there was very little on men's desire for fatherhood.
- MSc in Research Methods (2009): Online survey of 232 men and women. Age range: 19 – 75:
- Question: *'Is it true women are 'broody' and men are not'?*
- Answer: No – its about the same level
- PhD in Social Gerontology (2015): 14 men; aged 49 – 82
- Question: *'What is the impact of involuntary childlessness on older men?' My PhD was funded by Keele University.*

Who are the childless?

- **Childlessness cuts across all levels of society:**
'not a homogeneous group' (*Wenger et al., 2007*)
- **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.'** (*Letherby, 2010*)
- Men **who challenge** 'traditional norms' **for example**, gay men, house-husbands, male nurses/carers **and** primary school teachers, **are often** subject to discrimination, exclusion, isolation, **and** mistrust **from men and women** (*Letherby 2010, 2012*)

Childlessness

- Majority of research focuses on the ‘involuntary’ and based on those accessing infertility treatment. *(Letherby, 2002, 2010)*
- ‘Involuntary childlessness’ often used as a clinical term for people post unsuccessful infertility treatment. *(Letherby, 2002, 2010)*
- Potential or actual infertility has the same affect as a diagnosis of serious or terminal disease on physical & mental health, identity & well being and socio-economically. *(Letherby, 2002, 2010)*
- Childless men who wanted to be a father scored higher for anger, depression, and isolation than similar women. *(Hadley, 2009)*
- Difficult to assess the level of involuntary childlessness because people who do not access treatment are not recorded.
- Men’s fertility history is not collected in the UK: it is not possible to assess the level of childless men in the UK or much of the world.

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 and risky health and social behaviours than comparable fathers. *(Weitof et al, 2004).*

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

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)*
- **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*

Impact of Childlessness

- *“I felt out of phase with...normality or the expectations of how, to how life is...” (Jeremy, 61)*
- *“There was a slight awkwardness...like people were implying there was something wrong with you” (Ben, 60).*
- *“Envy, envious - plum envious...I’ve got friends with children, all my sisters have got children.” (Ernest, 34)*
- *“I.f I didn’t want one so much, I wouldn’t be in the crap I’m in” (Shane, 33).*
- *“You know I’d look at my son growing up and remember me relating to my Dad.” (Phil, 51)*
- *“I felt the pain of it, emotionally there was a real gut feeling that you know, arghh...that I’m not a father of my own children.” (Ben, 60)*

Social impact

Isolation: *“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

Alienation: *“It is noticeable that friends who have children drift away.” Edward (60)*

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

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: *“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)*

“There is a richness of family history, which it's nice to pass on, again no one to pass it on to.” David

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

Martin's story

- *“The tests came back and they said, “You are infertile and have been probably form the age of 16”*
- *“I said to the parents, “You know, this baby when it comes hasn't got a paternal grandfather. Can I be a surrogate grandfather?” Which I am. They call me ‘Sgrampy’ -its surrogate grandfather, surrogate grampy. And particularly, I'd say, the surrogate grandchild, is a big part of the social thing.”*
- *“We arrived at the hospital just after she was born and they handed me this tiny little thing; I was just smitten. I'd never understood the bond between a parent and a child until that moment.”*

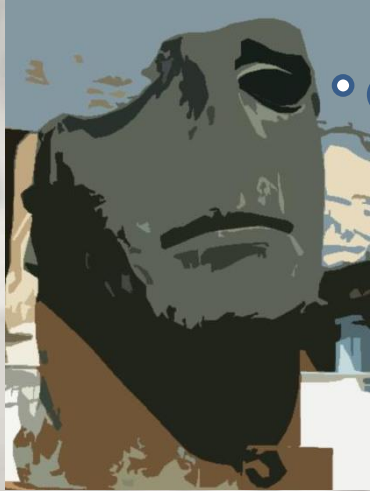
“And maybe that's what men who don't have children don't realise (...) you don't know what you're missing emotionally.”

- *“To be quite erm, brutal, death is the future, I mean that it's... I reckon I've got, if I've got fifteen years, that'll be alright. [...] I'd like to see my surrogate granddaughter grow up, she's three, 15 years will take her to 18. So, that's about right, you can see them be an adult then, can't you?” Martin (70)*

Ageing Well Without Children (awwoc.org)

- Grass roots organisation campaigning for the recognition of 'AWoC' people. Includes those childless by circumstance, choice, bereavement, disruption, & self defined.
- More people now in their 40s will age without children than ever before; estimates are between 20-25%.
- The population of older people in the UK is increasing.
- Assumption in health and social care policy and practice that older people will have family members to fill the gap left by the state.
- The ageing childless are not recognised in policy and practice documents.
- Recently relaunched.

AWOC wonders...

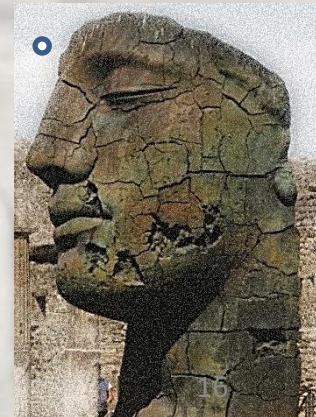


1: In the UK **1 million people over 65 never been parents**: how did they miss that?

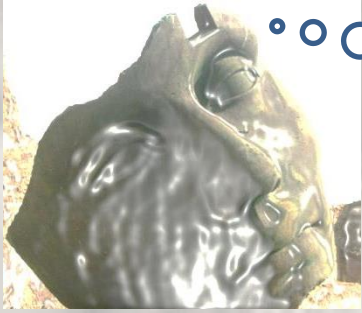
2: Adult children **provide and facilitate care for older people**. Yet **total silence around the impact for AWOC people**?

3: Why is so there much **personal anger and institutional defensiveness, denial, and resistance** about points 1 and 2?

UK 2030: at least 2 million people 65 and over Ageing Without Children

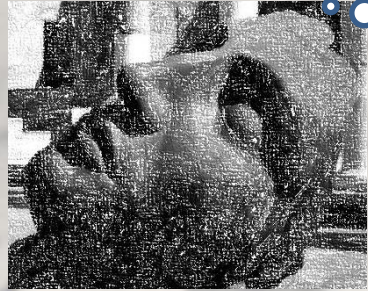


How is a man supposed to be a man?



At least 24% of men are childless

Childlessness/infertility excluded from masculinities literature



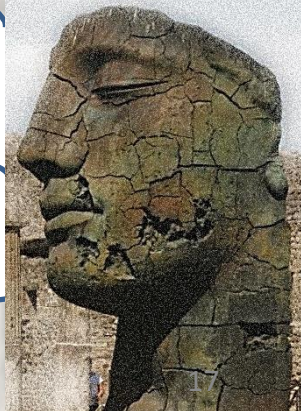
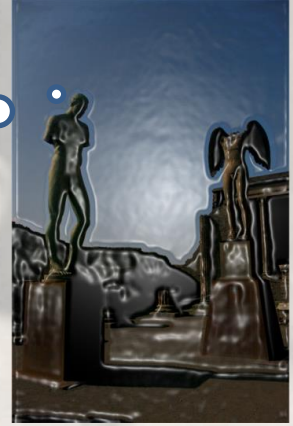
Childless men are less wealthy and less happy than fathers

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



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...*

Thank you!



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My publications

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Recommended reading

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How to structurally alienate and isolate men: don't collect data

- Lack of data on male experience of infertility/childlessness. (*Letherby, 2010*)
- Lack of data on men's ageing experience. (*Arber 2004, Arber et al, 2003*).
- Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority 'Fertility Trends Report 2014' word count:
 - Men = 0
 - Man = 1
 - Male = 7 (4 x 'no male partner')
 - Sperm: 35
 - Women = 105
 - Woman = 52
 - Female = 5
 - Egg = 95

PhD: processing

"It's crowded he said" and I agreed with the man on the tube who looked like Richard Dreyfuss from Jaws.

His Irish accent surfed roar of the human wave that swirled around and washed out and in and out again.

His voice dips and swells as he skims the lifescapes of the Irish greats of the English

'I am one of those' when he heard about my research.

The few times he had the chance and if he could go back and he would do it different.

We are swimming in the sea of the unspoken and the latent currents of regrets unites and separates us.

The shark exits at Finchley Central.