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# ‘Fracking fatherhood: the da(d)ynamic of fatherhood and the me(chanics) of male childlessness.’

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# My background



- 59, White-British, born working class, Lancastrian-Mancunian
- I am Hard-of-Hearing since birth with a 30% loss in both
- I am a 'mediated' childless man: I was very 'broody' in my 30's
- I often have imposter syndrome
- WARNING: this talk contains POETRY... (well sort of poetry...)

# Life is that dash between two numbers



Kenworthy Community Orchard, Manchester

# Why study fatherhood & male childless?

- *Why research on men?*

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 bothered 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 those men scored higher for depression, isolation and anger than fathers.

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

# Background

- Global decline in fertility levels & increase in the age of mortality.
- Men have become the “second sex” in all areas of reproduction scholarship based belief they are not interested. (Inhorn 2009, 2011)
- Biological parenthood highly valued social status: parenthood & childlessness mostly associated with women.
- Around 20% of women in the UK are biologically childless.
- Unknown: the level of childless men in the UK: 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 researchers reported the paucity of men's experience. (Throsby & Gill 2004; Letherby 2010).
- Male Infertility/childlessness NOT studied in Masculinities



# How are men viewed?

- Men are the 'second sex' in academia: anthropology; social sciences; sociology; demography; health. *(Inhorn, 2012)*
- Men are blamed/dismissed for not accessing 'health care'. Or does 'health care' not access them?
- Men viewed as 'socially reticent' and 'difficult to access' by gerontology researchers. *(Arber et al., 2003)*
- Men reported as 'not interested' and 'non-participation condemned to be meaningful' by infertility researchers. *(Lloyd, 1996)*
- Older men are viewed as genderless, impotent, and as a sexual threat. *(Walz, 2002).*

# 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)
- Broad 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).



# Fatherhood: the good, the bad, & the ugly

- An important component of social structure that assigns 'rights, duties, responsibilities and statuses' via cultural, legal, and societal precepts' (Hobson and Morgan 2002, p. 11).
- Recent increase of interest in & scrutiny of, the role of fatherhood.
- Contemporary discourse where fathering has moved from 'provider/disciplinarian' of an ideal of 'new' & 'involved & intimate' fatherhood.
- Viewed as a re-connection, replacement, repayment, or repeat of childhood experience. (Hadley 2008)
- Research into grandparenthood until recently focused on grandmothers . Contemporary research highlighted the complex role of grandfatherhood: especially in times of estrangement.

# Fatherhood: the good

- Generational change in fathering practices:
- Active engagement in childcare & home life important to fathers' sense of identity.
- Work relationships improved due to 'shared experience'
- Significant & positively affect social & community engagement: inc., older men whose children have left home.
- Fathers reported 'greater happiness, subjective well-being, psychological need satisfaction, & daily uplifts than men without children.' (Nelson-Coffey, Killingsworth, Layous, Cole, & Lyubomirsky, 2019: 01)

# Fatherhood: the bad

- Contemporary fathers struggle to combine childcare and breadwinning – not least because of poor paternity rights.
- Feel excluded from health & care services over the perinatal period. (Earle & Hadley, 2018)
- ‘Stay-at-home-dads’ & ‘house-husbands’ report being stigmatised & pressured to conform to traditional provider roles
- GBT men, male nurses & primary teachers subject to exclusion, isolation, mistrust & stigmatisation by both men & women.
- Social ambivalence: fatherhood is celebrated but expressing a desire for parenthood is ripe for social sanction.
- Parenthood is seen as ‘natural’ for women and ‘learned’ for men.

# Fatherhood: the ugly

- Belief **that** men **are** not interested in reproduction **is widely held in everyday life**: ‘men are not interested in parenthood.’
- **Deeply** embedded **in the** social sciences:  
‘men can father children from puberty until death’
- **There is increasing evidence** sperm declines in efficacy **from about the** age of 35 years **onward with a** correlation **between** older fathers **and** genetic issues. (Yatsenko & Turek, 2018).
- **Sperm is affected by the day-to-day environment - diet, heat, and stress all adversely affect sperm** (Li, Lin, Li, & Cao, 2011).
- **Few men become** older fathers: **>2% of men in England & Wales** registered **as fathers** were aged 50 or over. (Office for National Statistics, 2017).
- Young fathers **labelled as** ‘Feckless’ **and/or** ‘downbeat dads’

# Fatherhood: the good 2 –working with young fathers.

- Tarrant, A. and Neale, B. (2017) (eds.) Learning to support Young Dads, responding to Young Fathers in a Different Way: **Project report on:** Advocacy for young fathers to create a more father-inclusive environment across the health and social care.
- **Thanks to** Dr Anna Tarrant **for this quote:** *'Fatherhood & father involvement **has been shown to be** significant in progress towards gender equality **with** benefits **for** men, women & children. **If you have** happy engaged dads, **it usually** follows that **women are more** empowered **and able to develop** a better work-life balance. Children do better **across a range of indicators like** education, emotional development and well-being.'*

<http://followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk/responding-to-young-fathers/>

# Redemption Ethos

- When [there is] a pregnancy ... they care a lot about it. There are some young men ... who are dangerous ... but they are a real minority. ... Young fathers get excluded, especially if they're considered risky. ... It needs to be seen that they're just as important as mothers. Someone needs to try and understand them and work with them. Yes, they might end up being too risky, but then it's actually safer to identify who they are and work out what the issues are than just ignore them. *(Staff Nurse, Secure Training Centre).*

*Slide from Seeing Young Fathers in a Different Way by Bren Neale and Carmen Lau Clayton (2015) .*

<http://followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk/responding-to-young-fathers/>

# Summary

- **Despite** countless obstacles and difficulties, young fathers were committed to their children **and striving to** 'make a go' of parenthood.
- A policy **and** practice **framework that more** proactively acknowledges, supports **and** encourages **young** fathers-to-be/ young fathers **would be** beneficial to young fathers, their children and wider families.

*Slide from **Seeing Young Fathers in a Different Way** by Bren Neale and Carmen Lau Clayton (2015)*

<http://followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk/responding-to-young-fathers/>



# Who are the childless?

- **Childless adults** 'occupy all classes and classifications'
- Typically seen as a **binary**: involuntary **or** voluntary
- Often viewed as a life-choice
- **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)*

# *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

# The impact of male childlessness

- Formerly married childless men showed poorer physical & mental health, sleeplessness, excessive drinking & smoking than men with partners. (*Kendig et al, 2007*)
- Childless men & non-contact fathers had higher mortality through suicide, risky health & social behaviours than comparable fathers. (*Weitoft et al, 2004*).
- Effects of male infertility have been measured at a similar level to those with heart complaints and cancer.
- Older men in relationships have better health and socio-economic outcomes than solo-living men of equal status.

# 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
- **Timing:** *"I thought it would be like falling of a log because my parents had me in their 40's."* Edward (60)
- **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

# 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)*

# Ageing and childlessness

- **Studies report** significant positive health outcomes for parents compared to 'childless' adults.
- **Older childless adults are** not disadvantaged **when their** health is good. **If** health deteriorates **the** informal support declines & formal care does not take up the shortfall. *(Albertini & Mencarini, 2014)*
- **Older childless adults have an increased risk of** loneliness, social isolation, depression, **&** ill health. *(Dykstra and Hagestad, 2007)*
- **92% of informal care provided by family** *(AWOC.ORG, 2016)*
- **The** childless not recognised in policy & practice **documents.**
- Masculine stereotypes embedded in service delivery may add to exclusion, isolation, & stigmatisation of older men.

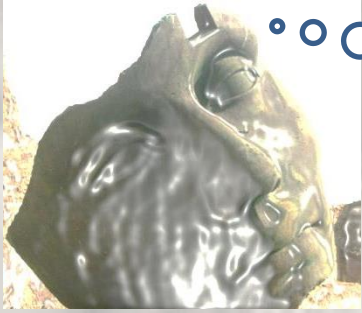
# Ageing masculinity

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

- **Masculinity:** provider, active, virility, strength, heterosexual, non-feminine, emotionally distant, subordination of others = ‘Ideal’ type.
- **Ageing associated with loss of:** control, independence, strength, and physical and mental health. **Consequently, older men are** viewed as ‘other’ **and seen as** both genderless **and a** sexual threat *(Walz, 2002)*.
- **Emergent Masculinity:** Men now behaving in ways that counter/reject the hegemonic masculinity ideal/the old ways. *(Inhorn, 2012)*
- **Mosaic masculinity:** Older men adapt parts of masculine scripts to form their masculine identity. *(Coles, 2008)*



# How is a man supposed to be a man?



At least 24% of men  
are childless

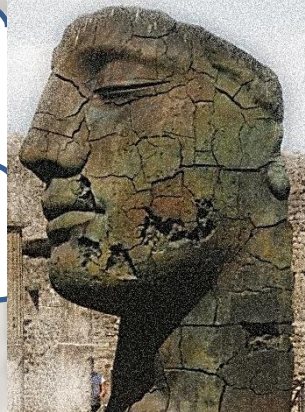
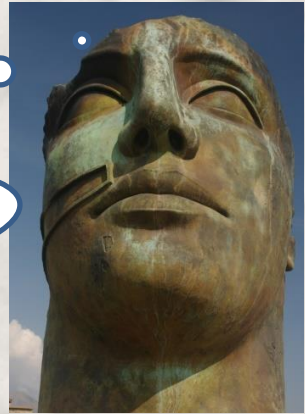
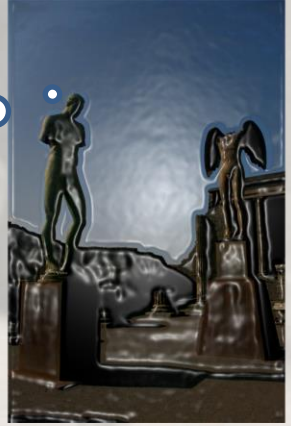
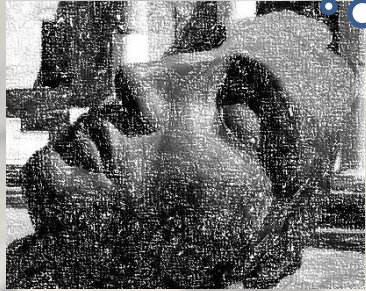
Childlessness/infertility excluded  
from masculinities literature

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.*

# Considerations for practice

- Childless challenges dominant pronatalist cultural norms.
- Men have limited social scripts to draw on.
- May be viewed as a discreditable attribute compared to the 'ideal' of fatherhood.
- Has an emotional and long-lasting impact
- Potential loss of identity, role, & emotional experience
- All participants used the term 'missing out' to describe their personal feelings and thoughts.
- All so 'missing' from: academia; government (national and world); health & social care; and wider social discourse.

**It is time to listen & mark our word - for we are legion.**

# The missing 'something'

**Surrogate:** "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."

**Difference:** "We arrived at the hospital just after she was born and they handed me this tiny little thing; it was, what six hours old? And I was just smitten - I'd never understood the bond between a parent and a child until that moment. I just looked at her and said, "If I had been a father, I can, you know, nurture you for the rest of your life. So then I understood what the whole parent thing was, really. So that's why she is important to us."

**Missing:** "And maybe that's what men who don't have children don't realise because you can see what you are missing physically. You know, social connections and all the rest of it, but you don't know what you are missing emotionally." Martin (70)

# Thank you!



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# My stuff

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# Summary

1. **If you are not counted then you don't count**
2. The childless not recognised in policy & practice documents. Masculine stereotypes embedded in service delivery may add to exclusion, isolation, & stigmatisation of older men.