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5 Ageing without children, gender and social justice

Robin A. Hadley

Introduction

This chapter takes Nancy Fraser's (2000) three domains of social justice – resource distribution, recognition and representation – and applies them to people who are ageing without children. This is a relatively new area of research, with very little literature preceding the past couple of decades (Kreager and Schröder-Butterfill, 2004; Dykstra, 2009; Ivanova and Dykstra, 2015; Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2017a). The growth of interest reflects an increase in childless older adults in many parts of the world, which has raised questions about the factors which influence the significance, or not, of the absence of children and grandchildren for later life (Dykstra and Hagestad, 2007). Notably, studies of childlessness, as with studies on parenthood, have so far tended to focus far more on women than on men, with considerable gaps in knowledge about men's experiences at all ages, including in later life (Schick et al., 2016). In considering these issues I will draw on my auto/biographical research into the life experiences of male 'involuntary' 'childlessness' (Hadley, 2015, 2018; Hadley and Hanley, 2011), as well as wider authorship on ageing with/without children.

Definitions

'Childlessness is a shifting identity within various storylines across time and circumstances' (Allen and Wiles, 2013, 208). The term itself has been criticised for being a deficit identity:

The childless are generally defined in terms of the category to which they do *not* belong: they are not parents and they do not have children. This conception of the childless as a noncategory has influenced the kind of research that has been done on the consequences of childlessness. Much of the research has focused on establishing what the childless do not have and what they are lacking.

(Dykstra, 2009, 682)

One of the reasons for this deficit approach has been its embeddedness in an unreflective acceptance of two sets of norms: pronatalist norms (which idealise and promote

human reproduction); and heteronormativity (the assumption that heterosexuality and biological family forms are the norm) (Zamora, 2017; Westwood, 2018). These frame the construction of parenthood as natural, unconscious, and spontaneous, serving to 'Other' those who are not parents, particularly women. The idealisation of motherhood in particular 'places women who do not conform to pronatalist norms of stereotypical femininity because they have no children, at risk of stigmatisation and social exclusion' (Turnbull, Graham and Taket, 2017, 333).

It is, however, difficult to distinguish between parents and non-parents without somehow using the language of 'lack'. Even the term 'childfree' can be exclusionary, denying the experiences of those who are involuntarily childless and feel little sense of freedom, but rather loss (Letherby, 2016). Moreover, the binary distinction between parenthood and non-parenthood is misleading:

There is no straightforward distinction between being or not being a parent: a person can become a parent as the result of having a natural child (with or without the help of assisted reproduction technologies), but also by adopting a child or becoming a stepparent of a partner's child. Thus, people can have children through different routes and at different points in their life course. A person can also cease to be a parent. The most obvious case in which this occurs is when a parent has survived his/her children. But there are also parents who, due to life events such as a divorce or an intense family conflict, have lost track of their children and no longer have contact with them. Other parents have children who live very far away. . . . Thus, we conceptualise parenthood and childlessness not as two fully separate conditions, but as a continuum of parental statuses.

(Albertini and Kohli, 2017, 354–355)

While recognising, and agreeing with, this continuum, for the purposes of this chapter, childlessness in older age is understood as a state experienced by older people who do not have living biological or social (foster, adoptive and/or step-) children.

Demographics

According to the Pew Research Center in the US, in 2017, 'Nearly one-in-five American women ends her childbearing years without having borne a child, compared with one-in-ten in the 1970s'.¹ This is matched by similar trends in Australia,² New Zealand,³ Canada⁴ and Europe,⁵ with increases in childlessness also reported in China⁶ and Hong Kong⁷ and among some, but not all, socio-economic groups in some countries on the African continent, for example among higher educated Black and White women in South Africa.⁸ By contrast,

In most of the less developed countries the percentage of childless women in their late 40s is typically under 10 percent. And in some populous nations, such as India, Indonesia, Pakistan, South Africa and Turkey, the proportion of women remaining childless by their late 40s is below 5 percent.⁹

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa and other countries has also created its own form of childlessness, with many older people being both without support from their adult children (who may be ill, or have died) and responsible for the care of their grandchildren and/or foster grandchildren (Seeley et al., 2009; Kautz et al., 2010). These grandchildren may then in turn provide care for their ‘childless’ grandparents when they are older (Kasedde et al., 2014).

The causes for the increase in childlessness are framed within competing ideological narratives:

Some commenters have characterized increasing childlessness as an outgrowth of an individualistic and ego-centric society . . . or have blamed childless women for the rapid aging of the population and for the looming decay of social security. . . . Meanwhile, commenters on the other side of this debate have called for a ‘childfree lifestyle’ and have recommended ‘bypassing’ parenthood. . . . From a feminist perspective, the decision to remain childless has been described as an expression of a self-determined life, as in previous generations a woman’s life had been constructed around the roles of wife and mother.

(Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2017b, 3)

Data on childlessness rates are patchy, due to both how such information is recorded, and how it is searched for and retrieved; moreover, what data there is primarily focuses on women rather than men (Dykstra, 2009; Hadley, 2018). Exact figures for those who experience ‘involuntary childlessness’ are difficult to calculate because people who do not seek medical advice concerning their ‘childlessness’ are not recorded (Greil, Slauson-Blevins and McQuillan, 2010). The overall level of ‘childlessness’ in the United Kingdom is around 20% (Berrington, 2015, 2017). The UK, like the vast majority of countries, bases their figures on the collection of a women’s fertility history at the registration of a birth (Berrington, 2004; Hadley, 2018; Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2017). The lack of available data on men’s fertility is partly down to the historical attitude that fertility and family formation are relevant only to women, combined with the view that men’s data may be unreliable and/or difficult to access (Berrington, 2004).

Most studies on the impact of childlessness have therefore examined the effects on women only, and have overlooked or simply neglected men. . . . Recent studies which have investigated the extent to which men’s lives are affected by remaining childless have concluded that the implications of childlessness are no less significant for men than for women, but that the effects may be different.

(Keizer and Ivanova, 2017, 313–314)

This is further nuanced by sexuality/sexual identity: older lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals are less likely to have children than older heterosexual

individuals, with older lesbians and bisexual women more likely to have children and grandchildren than older gay and bisexual men (Guasp, 2011; Choi and Meyer, 2016; Westwood, 2016).

Resources

The considerable knowledge gaps about childlessness in later life, especially among men, means that the resource implications are not yet well understood. While the earlier literature had suggested that childlessness had a detrimental effect in life, recent empirical evidence does not support the assumption that childless older people have lower levels of economic, psychological or social well-being than their counterparts who have children (Hank and Wagner, 2013). In many areas the resource implications of childlessness remain contested.

Material resources

In terms of material resources,

According to an influential theory of the modern transition to low fertility, one of the main reasons why people had children in the past was because the children were expected to provide social and economic support when the parents became old and frail and were no longer able to be self-sufficient . . . whereas today older people no longer depend on the support of their descendants in old age because they can now rely on pensions, health care, and social services provided by the welfare state. . . . Some authors have argued that such old-age security motives for having children – ensuring material support and care in old age – still apply today, not just in low-welfare developing societies, but to some extent also in affluent societies with extensive welfare states . . . this controversy has yet to be resolved.

(Albertini and Kohli, 2017, 353)

While the material implications of childlessness for men are not yet fully understood, it does appear that they do have some significance for women. Average women's earnings continue to be less than those of average men's (see Vlachantoni, this collection). This is due not only to the enduring gender pay gap, but also to women being more likely to work part-time (due to informal care commitments) and in low-paid care work. This in turn impacts upon their ability to accrue capital in later life. However, childless women are less likely to be affected in this way (Mika and Czaplicki, 2017).

Health and well-being

In terms of health and well-being, again, some research has suggested that older people ageing without children were more likely than older parents to suffer from

greater and earlier physical and mental health problems, and to die comparatively sooner (Modig et al., 2017). However, other research has contradicted this:

There has been a tendency to view childless older adults as a problem group, but findings show they are not more prone to poor psychological well-being and social isolation than older parents.

(Dykstra, 2015, 671)

A key factor affecting well-being would appear to be the reasons for childlessness, the adjustments made to it and the particular circumstances of an individual. In other words, ‘*How* someone ends up with no children may be more important than not having a child *per se*’ (Albertini and Kohli, 2017, 352). Chosen childlessness is less likely to cause psychological distress than involuntary childlessness. However, even among those who are involuntarily childless and/or who have suffered the death of a child, adjustments and accommodations can be reached in later life, ‘ranging from a wistful regret to acceptance’ (among men, according to Hadley and Hanley, 2011, 63) and from ‘solo-loneliness’ to ‘meaningful futures’ (among single women, according to Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2017, 321). Well-being among childless older people is nuanced by gender. In a recent review of the literature, Keizer and Ivanova (2017) observed,

The impact of childlessness among men is conditioned to a much larger extent by partner status than it is among women. . . . For example, Kendig et al. (2007) showed that never-married and formerly married childless men were more likely than married childless men to report being in poor physical health, whereas among women there were no significant differences in self-reported health among childless women based on partner status. Other studies have shown that the life outcomes of never-married childless women are much more favourable than those of their married counterparts (Koropecjy-Cox and Call, 2007). Taken together, these findings suggest that the presence of a partner is more important to the wellbeing of childless men than of childless women.

(314)

There is a need for further research in order to better understand the consequences of childlessness upon the health and well-being of older people, especially older men.

Social networks

Earlier research focused on childlessness as a deficit:

In previous research on childlessness, a recurring theme has been the consequences for an individual’s risk of social isolation and insufficient informal support, particularly in later life. . . . From the perspective of public policy, childless elderly people are usually seen as a problem group . . . it

is generally assumed that compared to adults who have children, childless adults are at higher risk of lacking the social and emotional support they will need when they become frail and dependent.

(Albertini and Kohli, 2017, 351)

However, drawing upon their study of older people in 11 European countries, Albertini and Kohli suggest that there are two main reasons for these assumptions to be flawed:

First, childless elderly people are not only on the receiving end of support; they also give to their families and to society at large by establishing strong linkages with next-of-kin relatives, investing in non-family networks, and participating in voluntary and charitable activities. Taking these transfers and activities into account, we have found that the differences in the support exchange behaviours between parents and childless adults are small (Albertini and Kohli, 2009). Second, childless elderly people are not a homogenous group. . . . The social consequences of being childless in later life depend on the specific paths into childlessness (Dykstra and Hagestad, 2007; Keizer et al., 2010; Mynarska et al., 2015), and they may also depend on the specific family and kinship constellations of each childless individual. (351–352)

In terms of intergenerational support, Pesando's (2018) analysis of the study of ageing in Europe suggested that childless middle age and older adults may provide more upward intergenerational support (i.e. to people older than themselves) – in the form of financial, practical and emotional transfers – than middle age and older parents. This was echoed in my own research. For example, George (60) and his wife were seen as 'available-to-care' for her ageing parents, 'We are supporting my wife's family [parents] now. We're the main support and we don't have children. My wife's brothers, have children' (Hadley, 2015, 225).

In terms of personal support networks, 'the childless have more friends and extended kin, and they are more likely to consider them as potential supporters, than parents' (Schnettler and Wöhler, 2016, 1339). Indeed, 'some childless people not only successfully substitute friends and collateral kin for children and lineal kin, but also seem to have ties that are more efficient in providing them with support' (Klaus and Schnettler, 2016, 95). However, these support networks may be insufficient in relation to complex and/or personal care needs (Deindl and Brandt, 2017).

Care needs

With an ageing population – i.e. there are more people living for longer and into older old age – there is also a growing demand for care in later life. At the same time there has been a reduction in formal care provision in many parts of the world, including the UK, with an increasing emphasis on (dwindling) informal social support (Daly and Westwood, 2017). Most unpaid care for older

people is provided ‘either by their children or by their spouses or partners’ (Pickard, 2015, 97). However, as Pickard has shown, there is now a growing ‘care gap’, with supply no longer able to meet demand. Among childless older people these issues arise sooner and disproportionately:

On average, 10 per cent of older Europeans today have no children. Sporadic informal support for these elders is often taken over by the extended family, friends and neighbours, and thus the lack of children is compensated within the social network. Intense care tasks, however, are more likely provided by professional providers, especially in the case of childless older people. In countries with low social service provision, childless elders are therefore likely to experience a lack of (formal) support, especially when depending on vital care.

(Deindl and Brandt, 2017, 1543)

This means, according to Dykstra (2009) that ‘in countries with few formal care arrangements available, frail childless elderly are particularly vulnerable’ (683). However, such ‘vulnerability’ is highly contingent upon personal circumstances and context:

Identifying vulnerable older people and understanding the causes and consequences of their vulnerability is of human concern and an essential task of social policy. To date, vulnerability in old age has mainly been approached by identifying high risk groups, like the poor, childless, frail or isolated. Yet vulnerability is the outcome of complex interactions of discrete risks, namely of being exposed to a threat, of a threat materialising, and of lacking the defences or resources to deal with a threat.

(Schröder-Butterfill and Marianti, 2006, 9)

Nonetheless, in many countries single childless adults are more likely to spend the last years of their lives in receipt of formal care provision, and to be disproportionately represented in older age residential care facilities (Dykstra, 2009; Koropecj-Cox and Call, 2007). In the Netherlands, van der Pers, Kibele and Mulder (2015) found that older people with children living nearby were less likely to enter residential care than those with children living further away. This highlights that functional or *de facto* childlessness (Kreager and Schröder-Butterfill, 2004) may be as significant as actual childlessness.

Recognition

Social status and visibility

In the majority of societies, biological parenthood provides the surest way to a positively valued social identity within normative understandings of the life course. All the main religions promote the childbearing ideal as a

'blessing' and not conceiving as 'barrenness'. Moreover, the 'childless' are socially disenfranchised through the absence of any positive cultural narratives recognising their status. Indeed, people ageing without children are mis-recognised almost to the point of invisibility because childlessness counters the structurally embedded pronatalist and heterosexist normative. In older age, the statuses of parenthood and grandparenthood can mitigate some of the negative stereotyping associated with ageism and sexism (Calasanti and Slevin, 2013), with grandparenthood in particular being a positive status identity for older people (Timonen and Arber, 2012; Tarrant, 2012). Grandparenthood can be a form of social currency from which non-grandparents cannot benefit:

Colin (59). 'The only time I ever think about what I might have missed out on is when I see people putting comments or pictures of their grandchildren on Facebook.'

(Hadley, 2015, 223)

Childless older people not only do not benefit from the 'protective' identity of grandparenthood but may also be Othered by their childlessness. Their 'outsiderness' (Hadley, 2018, 1) is informed, for older men, by their failure to comply with the 'virility-proved-by-fertility' normative (Hadley, 2018, 8). Whereas,

Old women who are childfree violate heterosexual life-course norms, indeed 'women without children' can be understood as 'a contradiction in terms' (Hird and Abshoff, 2000, p. 347).

(Westwood, 2016, 101)

For the childless older men in my research, there were particular anxieties in relation to being perceived in negative sexual terms:

All the men expressed a fear of being viewed a paedophile; the widowers and single men expressed this most strongly. The negative portrayal of older people is well established with lone older men particularly viewed as 'dirty old men' and sexual predators.

(Hadley, 2018, 8–9)

For example, when Harry's partner was alive the local children would ask to see and play with their dogs. However, following her death Harry (64) was concerned about how he would be (mis)recognised:

Some of the [neighbours] kids like to come in and play with the dogs. And you have to say, 'No! Look go and get your Dad!' I'd hate someone to look saying, 'Watch that old man, always got kids round him.' I don't want anyone looking at me thinking that.

(Hadley, 2015, 169)

Harry's concerns reflect ageist stereotypes whereby lone older men are frequently viewed as 'dirty old men' and sexual predators (Walz, 2002; Gutmann, 2009). In other words, the men in my study were concerned about issues of mis-recognition in that their childlessness, rather than make them *less* visible, made them *more* visible, but in risky and inaccurate ways.

In Westwood's (2016) study of older lesbian, gay, bisexual and non-labelling (LGBN) individuals, she reported that older lesbians also experienced issues in relation to non-grandparenthood and identity, in ways which were both similar to, and yet different from, the men in my study. Many of her participants also felt 'Othered' by their childlessness.

In May's interview, for example, she attributes this to her sense of difference when she tried to join the Women's Institute (WI):

I think you do stand out of the crowd more because you're not like everyone else. So I tried to join the WI. And I was different. I don't have a man to talk about. And everyone was going on about their grandchildren and their bloody husbands, and I get a bit bored by that. What is there to talk about? Very empty. People made me welcome, chatting away, but I didn't feel part of it. I didn't go back. I've got nothing in common with them (May, aged 64).

(Westwood, 2016, 100)

Other lesbian participants in Westwood's study, unlike the men in my study, felt they were made less, not more, visible by the grandparent stereotype:

And there's the assumption because I am an older woman that I must be heterosexual, that I must have children and grandchildren.

(Diana, aged 69)

As a single older woman, you immediately fall into that stereotype of 'a granny'. And 'a granny' is heterosexual by default. And people are always asking me about my bloody grandchildren. I don't have any grandchildren, lesbians didn't have children in my day (Audrey, aged 67).

(Westwood, 2016, 100)

Comparing my own findings with those of Westwood (2016), suggests that gender *and* sexuality play a role in the mis-recognition of childless older men and women. For the childless older men in my study, it involved Othering, and the potential mis-recognition as sexual predators. For the childless older lesbians in Westwood's study (unlike the older lesbian parents), non-grandparenthood was also understood as a source of Othering, but also as a lack of visibility, rather than an unsafe visibility. Childless older men (both heterosexual and gay), it would seem, are concerned about being mis-recognised through a deviant sexual lens, whereas childless older lesbians are concerned about not being recognised at all.

Social policy

Social welfare policies in many parts of the world are predicated upon notions of ‘the family’ (i.e. children) as the first tier of support for older people (Daly and Westwood, 2017). These do not take into account those childless individuals for whom such support is not available (Westwood, 2018). In Mediterranean parts of Europe, such as Italy, where the norm is for family-care for older people, childless older people face a deficit due to the absence of primary intergenerational support:

Childlessness is an increasingly common condition in many European societies. The consequences that this demographic phenomenon might have on welfare systems – and long-term care policies in particular – are widespread. This is particularly the case for the familistic welfare states of Southern Europe . . . in Italy elderly nonparents . . . are likely to miss those forms of support that are most needed in the case of bad health. [They] are more likely to be helped by nonrelatives and not-for-profit organizations and to a lesser extent by the welfare system.

(Albertini and Mencarini, 2014, 331)

By contrast, in Northern Europe, with less familistic welfare policies, and greater expectations of state support in older age (Haber Kern, Schmid and Szydlik, 2015; Albertini and Pavolini, 2017) this is less of an issue. There is then a need for social care policies which take into account the needs of the growing population of older people ageing without children.

Representation

Older childless people are under-represented in three ways: in research; in advocacy; and in social policy.

Research

There is a need for more research on the life trajectories of older people ageing without children:

Pathways and meanings of childlessness vary so much that it is unwise to assume that people have similar experiences of nonparenthood, especially in later life.

(Allen and Wiles, 2013, 206)

In terms of this variety, much more needs to be understood about ageing childless men:

Research on childless older adults has suffered from historical myopia, a neglect of men and a disregard for the diversity among the childless.

(Dykstra, 2009, 671)

Additionally, there is a need to better understand not only the positive adaptive styles of older childless people, but also the extent to which, and how, they may form alternative intergenerational relationship ties:

The paucity of research on intergenerational friendship reflects the focus of existing research on homophily, and consequently friendships among older *or* younger adults; and that this in turn reflects a social construction of older adults as unsuited to friendship with younger adults. Investigations of intergenerational friendship can help challenge the images and models of ageing and older adults that both research and societies currently operate with, and are constrained by.

(O'Dare, Timonen and Conlon, 2017, 1)

Other intergenerational ties, beyond friendship ties, involve godparenting, and this may also be an important source of two-way support, and in particular a care resource for older childless people in later life (Westwood, 2016). This too requires further research, as well as other forms of 'fictive kinship' which are sources of support and resilience for childless people in older age (Jordan-Marsh and Taylor Harden, 2005).

Advocacy

In the UK the organisation which represents childless older people is Ageing Without Children (AWOC) ¹⁰. It is a grassroots organisation founded in 2015 by four people (including myself) who wanted to raise awareness among governments, academics, health and care institutions and charities. The AWOC report '*Our Voices*' (The Beth Johnson Foundation [BJF] and AWOC, 2016, 3) asks the critical question '*How will and should older adults without children approach their later years?*' The report outlines AWOC's fourfold aims (5) which are:

- To carry out more research into the issues associated with ageing without children, to inform policy, practice and planning
- To develop a network of local groups for people ageing without children
- To campaign for issues affecting people ageing without children to be included in mainstream thinking and planning on ageing, and to challenge the judgements made about them
- To work with other organisations to develop solutions to some of the difficulties faced by people ageing without children.

The report highlights how relevant organisations, policymakers and stakeholders need to recognise the increase in the population of people ageing without children and for planning, policy and services for older people to reflect these societal changes. This group receives no funding support. While many age-related issues such as isolation, loneliness and dementia have recently gathered

extensive attention (and funding) people ageing without children is a subject that remains unreported, under-researched and under-represented at all levels.

Policy inclusion

As Pesando (2018: 1) observed, ‘policy makers should take into more consideration not only what childless people receive or need in old age, but also what they provide as middle-aged adults’. AWOC has developed a range of policy recommendation (BJF and AWOC, 2016, 31–32), which include:

- Ensure that central government planning on ageing takes into account that increasing numbers of people will get old without family support.
- Require local authorities to identify how many people in their area are likely to age without children and incorporate this into their strategies on ageing.
- Enable GPs, hospitals and social care services to identify people without family, to provide support or care at an early stage and to guarantee involvement of other services to ensure they are not left without support.
- Invest in intergenerational programmes and activities so that people ageing without children still have the possibility of engaging with other generations.
- Develop a national strategy for people ageing without children that brings together individual people and Ageing Without Children, along with national and local government, the NHS, housing providers and key bodies from civil society.

Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, there is a pressing need for a deeper understanding of the experiences of the growing numbers of childless older people, especially men. The contingencies which determine health and well-being in later life and the nature of support networks, particularly in relation to intense care needs, need further research. The diverse experiences of older childless people no doubt span the spectrum of potential later life outcomes. However, it is important to know more, for them to become more visible, and for social policy to be better informed, so that the needs of childless older people are not overlooked.

Notes

1 Livingston and Cohn, 2010.

2 Corsetti, 2017.

3 “Childless couples and empty-nesters the future for NZ.” October 28, 2017. www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/parenting/family-life/98325547/childless-couples-and-empty-nesters-the-future-for-nz.

4 Grenier, 2017.

- 5 Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2017a.
- 6 Feng, 2018.
- 7 Tam, 2017.
- 8 Masebe and Ramosebudi, 2016.
- 9 Chamie and Mirkin, 2012.
- 10 Ageing Without Children. For a Positive Later Life Without Children. <https://awoc.org/>

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