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“I will never be a grandfather”:
the effects of involuntary childlessness
in the lives of older men.



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Background to study

- Demographic change: increased longevity, decreased fertility, smaller families, increase in divorce, diversity of family.
- Future impact on pensions, health & social care funding and provision (*Wittenberg et al 2008*).
- Family (adult children) provide most informal care for older people (*Phillips, 2007*).
- Potential or actual infertility has major implications for health, wellbeing and identity.
- Lack of data on male experience of infertility (*Letherby, 2010*).
- Ageing research has focussed on older women as they lived longer, accessed more state benefits and health & care services (*Arber 2004, Arber et al, 2003*).

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, 2008).
- Childless men and non-contact fathers had higher death rate through suicide and risky health and social behaviours than comparable fathers. (Weitoft et al, 2004).

Ageing and childlessness

- **Older childless adults:** *'rendered invisible in social science literature'* (Dykstra and Hagestad 2007: p. 1275).
- **In UK 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).

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 also defined by their earlier death than women...and constructed as pre-death...even invisible' *(Hearn, 1995, p.101).*
- Men are 76% of suicides in the UK *(Office of National Statistics, 2017)*

PhD: Methodology and sample

- Draws on Chambers (2002) '*feminist life course perspective*' based on: social/critical gerontology, life course, Auto/Biography & feminist approaches.
- Semi-structured Biographical Narrative Interview Method. (Wengraf, 2001)
- Broad Thematic Analysis. (Braun & Clark, 2006)
- 14 self-defined IvC 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 ideal: 'The package deal'

"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

- **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:** *“My parents had me in their 40’s. So I thought it would be like falling off a log basically.” 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*

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*

“I felt out of phase with normality or the expectations of how, to how life is ” (Jeremy, 61)

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*

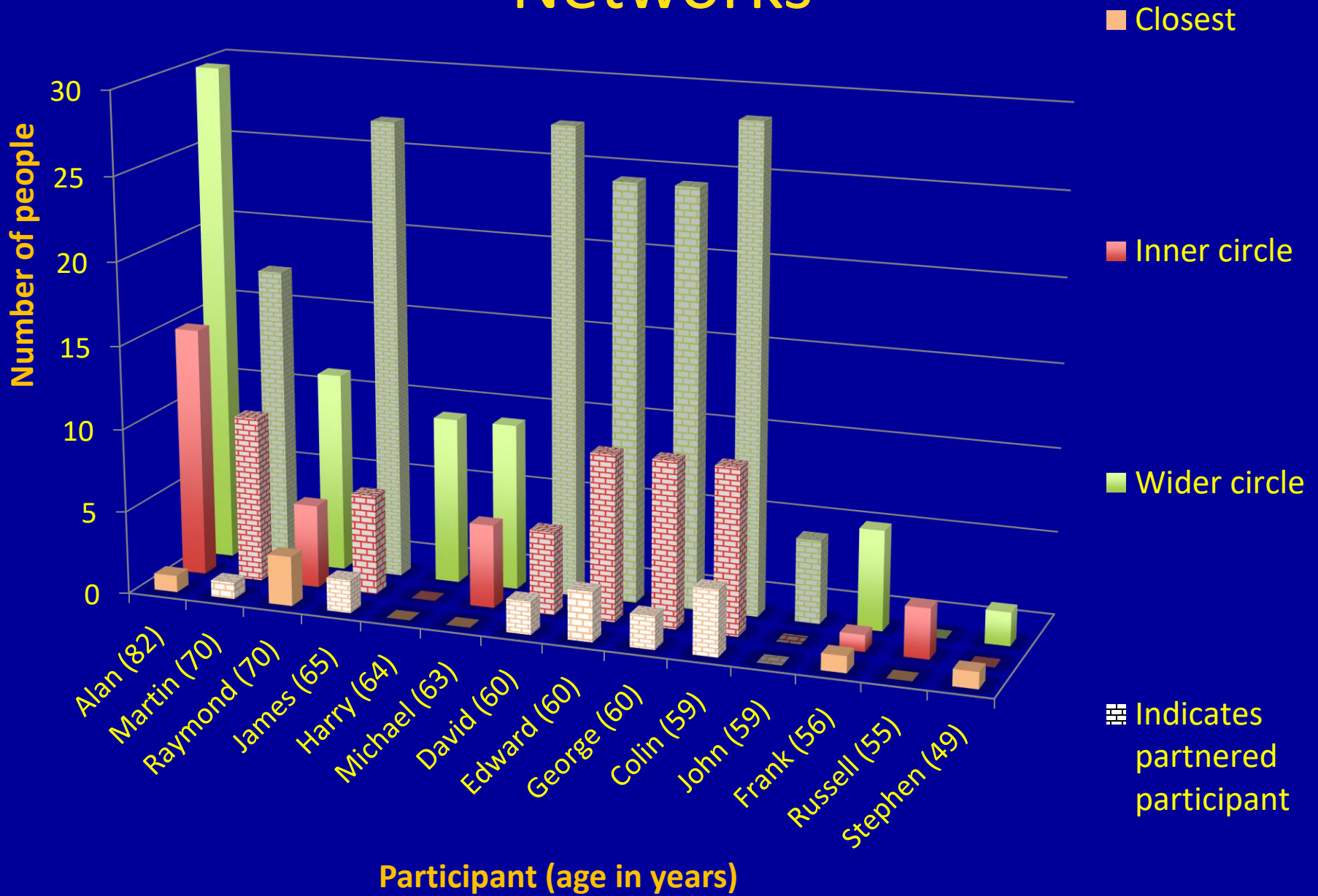
Social networks and childless people

- Relationships and social support are as important as physical health towards well being & preventing isolation & exclusion. *(Victor and Scharf, 2005)*
- Marriage is important to well being in later life – if the relationship is ‘good’. *(Wong and Waite, 2015)*
- 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 & Mencharini, 2014)*
- Network size and type affect health: those with least resources tend to have poorer health behaviours. *(Wong and Waite, 2015)*

Social networks and men

- 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)*
- Partner-less older men are more likely to be placed in residential care than equivalent women. *(Arber and Davidson, 2003)*
- Concern over older men's isolation has led to projects such as 'Men in sheds' & 'Hen Power'.
- 'Out in the City' 50+ type groups offer support to older LGBT people.

Networks



Alienation and Isolation

Alienation: *“When couples get older, they have a whole raft of experiences, you know, first day at school - if you haven't had those experiences you're shut out along with everything else. You're on the fringe - you haven't experienced: that is alien to you.” Russell (55)*

Isolation: *“People have no conception of just how isolated someone who hasn't got kids in middle age is. That's point number one to get through in your bloody PhD.” 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)

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

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

“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)

Difference and 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)*

Summary

1. **Influences on routes to childlessness**: complex intersection between agency & structure: age, social status, relationships, economics, culture, health, & timing of events: 'social clock'.
2. **Attitude and behaviours**: informed by gender, sexual orientation, social expectations, upbringing, relationship skills, relationships, economics, location & social networks.
3. **Quality of Life**: influenced by health, relationships & social networks. Men with chronic co-morbidities felt older than their age; men with siblings & partners had larger networks than those without; positive impact of support groups e.g. MTL & +50 LGBT.
4. **Policy**: The childless not recognised in policy & practice documents. Masculine stereotypes embedded in service delivery add to exclusion, isolation, & stigmatisation of older men.

Ageing Without Children (awoc.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.
- Seeking funding to conduct more research.

Publications

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Thank you!



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