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*Me(n) on Me(n):  
interviews between involuntarily childless men.  
The treats and threats and of working with  
'Auto/Biographical I' in sociological research.*

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BSG Conference, Manchester, UK, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2018

#BSG2018 #BSG18 #BeeTogether

@BSGManchester18

# 'I' am

A mediated childless man: I was very 'broody' in my 30's;  
White-British, working class, Mancunian/Lancastrian;  
Hard-of-Hearing since birth with a 30% loss;  
58 years old



1971: Bronze Swimming Badge;

1970: Football Player of the Year, St Hilda's Primary School

2016: 7 short term contracts  
2015: PhD Soc., Gerontology  
2009: MSc Research Methods  
2008: MA Counselling  
2008: Exited 'work'  
2003: Vol., counselling  
1982: City & Guilds 744;  
1977: Entered 'work'  
1977: 3'O' levels;  
1976: 8 CSE's

# Ageing and childlessness

- Demographic change: increased longevity, decreased fertility, smaller families, increase in divorce, diversity in family formation.
- Potential or actual infertility has major implications for health, identity & well being.
- Older childless adults 'rendered invisible in social science literature.' (Dykstra and Hagestad 2007: p. 1275)
- Older childless adults: increased risk of loneliness, social isolation, depression & ill health. (Dykstra and Hagestad, 2007)
- Formerly married childless men: poorer physical & mental health, sleeplessness, more drinking and smoking than men with partners. (Kendig et al, 2007)
- Non-contact fathers & childless men increased deaths through suicide & risky health/social behaviours. (Weitoft et al, 2004).
- Paucity of data on male experience of infertility and ageing: men often condemned as difficult to access. (Lloyd, 1996; Letherby, 2010; Hadley, 2017)

# PhD: methodology and sample

- Draws on Chambers (2002) '*feminist life course perspective*': social/critical gerontology, life course, feminist approaches & *Auto/Biography*.
- 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. Age range: 49 – 82 years.
- 13 White-British; 1 Anglo-Celtic Australian.
- 12 heterosexual, 2 non-heterosexual.
- 7 single (5 solo living), 7 in relationships (1 LAT).

# Auto/biography (A/B)

- A/B widely associated with the feminist approach.
- Central to feminist scholarship is researcher reflexivity: 'to be explicit about the significance of their personal, as well as intellectual autobiography.' (Stanley, 1993, Letherby, 2014, p. 52)
- Mykhalovskiy (1996) argued that masculinity in the social sciences excoriated the 'texture and variety of men's experience.' No acknowledgement of infertility in masculinities literature:
- men marginalized as the 'second sex' in social sciences: assumption they are uninterested in reproductive intentions and outcomes. (Inhorn et al, 2009)
- A/B 'value explicit': self; involvement, privilege, and power are acknowledged in the research process. (Letherby, 2002b, Hugill, 2012)
- Views the biographies of 'the researcher and the participants are an inextricable part of the research process.' (Carroll, 2013, p. 457)

# Gender dynamics and research interviews

- Issues in cross gender interviews:
- Displays of masculinity; manipulation to 'heterosexual female role'; power reinforced. *(Grenz, 2005, 2010; Pini, 2005, 2010; Presser, 2005).*
- Men more disposed to talk with women than men. *(Lohan, 2000; Gatrell, 2006).*
- Maria Lohan *(2000: 177)* : ' I as interviewer, who was 'chatting-up' (men).
- Study of first time fathers: Only time men had to open up. *(Miller, 2011)*
- Ortiz 'Muted masculinity' strategy in his interactions with the female participants: 'male insider'. *(Ortiz. 2005)*
- Gender related to disclosure differences *(Padfield & Procter, 1996).*
- Responses to questions adapted to interviewer gender. *(Williams & Heighe, 1993)*
- Researchers used gender commonalties to establish rapport: 'gender script' enabled *(Broom et al, 2009)*

# Interviews between men.

- Robb (2004) interviews with British fathers and identity:
- Shared difficulty in the asking and answering of questions: Resolved by indirect reframing of the question: 'Others have said...'
- Walby (2010) male-for-male sex workers study found: many participants sexualised the interview:
- Researcher as 'sexuality insider': builds rapport and/or hides significance of events. (Roberts, 2014)
- Challenged stereotypical view that gay men are always pursuing hegemonic masculinity. (Walby, 2010; Roberts, 2014)
- Other factors influencing the interview: age, class, location, timing & duration. (Broom et al, 2009)



# Outsider-insider-outsider

- I am a heterosexual man and I did not 'advertise' my sexuality or the fact I am married nor I did not hide it. *(Bruni, 2006).*
- I did not disclose my sexuality with any participant.
- Both men lived in ground floor social housing flats. Both mentioned they had double beds. I did not interpret this as symbolic of any sexual positioning. *(Walby, 2004, 2010; Roberts, 2014)*
- But as reflecting a sense of loss: from partnered to solo-living through, breakup and bereavement. Symbolic of cumulative loss?
- While I am an insider regarding the wish for fatherhood, I was an outsider to other aspects of their lives.

# Researcher analysed

- **Tim:** *Do you find what you're doing... Robin, do you find what you're doing a very lonely pursuit?*
- Interviewer: **It is lonely, yeah, yeah.**
- **Tim:** *Ah yeah. Yeah. Yeah.*
- Interviewer: **But** it is quite a lonesome job, **particularly with the data and you're analysing it**, it's just you and the data.
- **Tim:** *Yes, I can imagine.*
- Interviewer: **And the** data wins.
- **Tim:** *You're having a relationship with data, yeah.*
- Interviewer: **Er, yeah. Yeah...**
- **Tim:** *Yes. In the hope of procreation between you and the data.*
- Interviewer: **Yeah. Yeah...**
- **Tim:** *Not be fatherless...*

# My stuff

- Interviewer: And what has changed or stayed the same since the age of 50 with regards to life quality?
- Russell: *I am much happier. Erm...I mean I thought about suicide, erm, a great deal in my life, erm, and indeed attempted it, erm, on several occasions, but what's changed since 50, now is acceptance. Erm, it doesn't bother me now. Erm, I...I'm happier than I've ever been...*
- Interviewer: Hmm, hmm, hmm. And you're happier because you're not held to death or...?
- Russell: *What do you mean? You'll have to elaborate a bit more.*
- Interviewer: Erm, I'm digging myself a big hole here...

# Class (journal extract)

Extract from research journal: 2nd Interview with George

Came away feeling that I had disappointed him, that at times he was frustrated by my questions and said on one or two questions what was their point?

Perhaps I worded things poorly or was unclear. Perhaps its masculinity or class? Perhaps its me being too naïve in the interview. I wonder how much that he is already a PhD and was interested in the methodology and background to the study linked to my general anxieties about being not good enough and not being academic enough.

*It was George's fate to be the first interviewee and my nerves and unsureness permeate my notes. I am in awe of his use and ease with language and sense he feels my unease.*

# Gender script and/or probe?

- **Russell:** *This is another reason you see why I'd be such a terrific catch. And why women are so fucking stupid as to ignore me, you know?*
- **Interviewer:** *It...it's unbelievable...*
- **Russell:** *It is!*
- **Interviewer:** *It is unbelievable...*
- **Russell:** *I'm sure you've heard this every interview you've done, everyone you've interviewed has said, "I'm so wonderful, why hasn't someone grabbed me up years ago."*
- **Interviewer:** *No. No. Er, well once or twice, but you're the only one I've actually thought, "Yes, he's right."*
- **Russell:** *(laughing, claps hands) Well done! You say all the right things, go on.*

# Risk beyond the field

- There are risks 'associated with leaving the field, analysing sensitive data, and fulfilling commitments to research participants in the delivery of research findings' (*Sampson et al., 2008: 930*)
- Researchers can face 'professional danger' if they challenge or deviate from existing academic, theoretical, methodological, occupational, and/or institutional precepts.
- Gayle Letherby (*2000: 107*) was advised that the A/B approach was 'sloppy sociology': warned that colleagues might use personal material negatively.

# Reactions to research: researcher as outsider

- I have attended many academic events where I have been the only male. I try *not* to behave in the manner often associated with male academics: dominate the space and/or conversation. I place myself in the front row of the seating furthest away from the speaker and/or the chair or power holder.
- I have had a range of reactions to my research findings - from being asked if I can be hugged to covert and overt hostility including: exaggerated eye-rolling, imitation of crying with wiping away pretend tears and saying “Boo hoo” and “Why should I care? Oh, that’s right I don’t.”
- BSA study group: Dr X referred to the ‘paedophile in the corner’ looked at me and made a hand gesture in my direction. I have never met Dr X before and I was unaware of any of her academic work. The incident left me shaken and confused. No action taken by BSA.

# Interviewing men

- Generalisations of men and masculinity:
- *'...self-fulfilling prophecies that serve to inhibit or discourage the interviewer'* . (Oliffe and Mróz, 2005)
- Cathartic experience:
- *'...most men enjoy having someone attentively listen to their point of view...'* (Oliffe and Mróz, 2005)
- Managed experience:
- *provide men with the research questions and a few specific interview questions one week before the interview.*
- (Oliffe and Mróz, 2005)
- Self disclosure: infertile man interviewing infertile men:
- *'... had never before shared this experience so fully with another man'*. (Webb & Daniluk, 1999)



# Conclusion

- **Ethics:** Without enforcement or sanction **what value are Ethics?**
  - Strength **of A/B was the** reflexive process **that 'allows for, and indeed** demands, the consideration of **such** issues **that may** not otherwise be thought about **within a research project.'**
  - **Highlighted how** gender **is** one of many dynamics **in operation in the research interview. Risk** extends from the field and other settings far beyond research.
- *Men are fascinating!*

# Thank you for listening!



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- My wife and everyone else who has supported me and that I have whinged at, moaned to, bored, & used.
- I acknowledge that terms like 'childfree' 'childless' 'voluntary' 'involuntary' 'infertile' 'old' 'older' 'elderly' 'gay' 'straight' and others I may use are contentious.

# 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.

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# Post 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.

# Example of threat

- ,Dr X made comments to the effect that my participant's narratives were untrustworthy because "I bet they have had children." By chance, I then attended Dr X's talk. As is my usual practice when I am the sole male attendee, I placed myself in the front row of the seating furthest away from the speaker. By doing so I hope that all the other attendees can see me and I am not near the powerful figures in the room. During her talk Dr X referred to the 'paedophile in the corner' looked at me and made a hand gesture in my direction. I have never met Dr X before and I was unaware of any of her academic work. The incident left me shaken and confused. I continue to be affected by the incident and will not attend any events at the University where Dr X is in post and, ironically, sits on the ethics committee.

# Interview method

- Two interview method semi-structured method adapted from the BNIM (Wengraf, 2006).
- First interview: Three sections:
  1. **Biography:** *'Can you just tell me a little about yourself please'?*
  2. **Childlessness:** *'When did you first become aware of Fatherhood?'*
  3. **Health and QoL data:** *'Generally speaking, what would you say defines a good quality of life?'*
- Second interview: Focus on issues arising from analysis of first interview. Participant representation verified.

# My MA reflections

*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 not complete*

# Autobiography in Five Short Chapters by Portia Nelson: “There’s a Hole in My Sidewalk”

- Chapter One: I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I am lost . . . I am helpless. It isn’t my fault . . . It takes forever to find a way out.
- Chapter Two: I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don’t see it. I fall in again. I can’t believe I am in this same place. But it isn’t my fault. It still takes a long time to get out.
- Chapter Three: I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it there. I still fall . . . it’s a habit . . . but, my eyes are open. I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately.
- Chapter Four: I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.
- Chapter Five: I walk down another street.

# Influence of counselling in practice.

- Counselling Research: support 'naturally' built in to research.
- Monitoring and managing of self.
- Use of self-reflexive diary and other therapeutic methods: drawing, poetry...
- Aware of own limits: emotionally, physically, mentally, relationally.
- 'Internal supervisor' (Casement, 1985): during interview, analysis, writing.
- Supervision: Bryne (2007) suggested that ethical practice be discussed at every supervision meeting.
- Researchers' to have own therapy common working practice.
- Peer support groups formal/informal common
- Post interview notes to include own performance/reaction as per practice.

# Threats

- My experience illustrates that danger, harm and risk does not end with data collection, as there are other risks 'associated with leaving the field, analysing sensitive data, and fulfilling commitments to research participants in the delivery of research findings' (Sampson et al., 2008, p. 930). In addition to physical, emotional, and ethical dangers, Geraldine Lee-Treweek and Stephanie Linkogle (2000, p. 20) argued that researchers can face 'professional danger' when they challenge or deviate from existing academic, theoretical, methodological traditional norms. Gayle Letherby (2000) highlighted how she was advised that the auto/biographical approach was 'sloppy sociology' and was warned that colleagues might use personal material negatively (Ibid, p. 107). Moreover, she postulates that fear (and experience) of emotional, intellectual, and professional violence leads researchers and writers to compose 'the personal' outside of reports and articles, if at all (Letherby, 2014)