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Life without fatherhood: the biographical narratives life of older involuntarily childless men



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- I acknowledge that terms like ‘childfree’ ‘childless’ ‘voluntary’ ‘involuntary’ ‘infertile’ ‘old’ ‘older’ ‘elderly’ ‘gay’ ‘straight’ and others I may use are contentious.
- **Most childless research is based on those accessing infertility treatment. Missing are the involuntarily childless who do not seek treatment.**

Background

- Demographics: increased longevity, decreased fertility, smaller & more diverse families, increase in divorce & solo living older people.
- 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)*
- 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)*
- Paucity of data on both the male experience of infertility and ageing. *(Arber et al., 2003; Letherby, 2010)*

Ageing and childlessness

- Older childless adults: *'rendered invisible in social science literature.'* (Dykstra and Hagestad 2007: p. 1275)
- 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)
- Long-term non-contact fathers & childless men have higher death rate through suicide & risky health & social behaviours. (Weitofte et al, 2004).
- "Older men are also defined by their earlier death than women...and constructed as pre-death...even invisible." Hearn (1995: p.101)

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 context: 'The package deal'

(Townsend, 2002)

"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:** *“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. They get into into other circles of friends who have children and that’s been very marked ”* Edward

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

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

“I seem to think more and more I think, now and again, it would suddenly hit me “Ah” you know? I would see the relationship between a father and son, or or a father and 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)

“I’m never going to be able to say, “This is my grandson” am I?” Harry (64)

Negotiating fatherhood

Attitude	Participant	Age	Relationship status
Aspirational	Stephen	49	Single
	Frank	56	Single
	David	60	Married
Uncertain	Russell	55	Single
	Michael	63	Single
Mediated	Colin	59	Long term relationship
	John	59	Long term relationship
	Edward	60	Long term relationship
	George	60	Married
	Harry	64	Single/widower
	James	65	Long term relationship
	Martin	70	Married
	Raymond	70	Single/widower
	Alan	82	Single

Aspirational

“You think, “Well, if I produce kids at the age of 61 then by the time they’re off to University I’ll be 80.” And if I make it beyond 80, which I hope I will, I mean to fund them through university.” David (60)

“I’ve become, sort of, more aware then of how nice it can be to have children, you know, from the families and the people I know.” Frank (56)

“It’s more about whether, you know, I could find a viable partner...” Stephen (49)

Uncertain

“Now I'm 55, 15 years have gone and, in the back of my mind, the candle's been going, or the light's been getting dimmer and dimmer of me ever being a father.” Russell (55)

“If my mind does wander to what might have been, or what might be, then it is still with that one thought: can I have a child at my age now?” Michael (63)

Mediated

- **Age:** *“Since I was about 47 I accepted that it won’t happen.” Colin (59)*
- **Health:** *“That was when I found out I was infertile and probably had been from being a teenager.” Martin (60)*
“It’s something I will never stop regretting. You know, it won’t go away.” Martin (70)
- **Relationship:** *“Liz [ex-wife] stated that she didn't want children, I just quickly put those inklins’ to one side...” James (65)*
- **Sexuality:** *“I could never have been a [biological] father, I don't think so.” Alan (82)*
- **Fictive Grandfather Role:** Latent, Adopted, Proxy, Surrogate

Grandfatherhood 1 & 2

Latent: *“I mean I think in a way of the two little ones in the pub as the grandchildren I’ve never had. I don’t say that in the pub to anybody, I don’t even let them know it, or their Dad.” Raymond (70)*

Adopted: *“They asked if they could adopt me as a granddad. That lasted 3 years - it was great. I felt I belonged - that’s what I miss.” Alan (82)*

Grandfatherhood 3 & 4

Proxy: *“Liz’s grandchildren appeared on the scene - I discovered what a pleasure that is, you know? I’m keenly interested in them, as I would be if they were my genetic grandchildren, I think. Liz’s ex-husband, he’s ‘Granddad’, I am ‘Pappous’ - the Greek word for Grandfather.” James (65)*

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. They call me ‘Sgrampy’, which is an ‘orrible word, but its surrogate grandfather, surrogate grampy. And particularly, I say, the surrogate grandchild, is a big part of the social thing” Martin (70)*

Reflections

“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)*

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)

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

Threat: *“I don't want people saying, “Oh, he's a bit of a paedophile, this one, looking at the kids”.” Raymond (70)*

Biological lineage: *“If you don't have children, you're not gonna have grandchildren.” Frank (56)*

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)*

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: chronic co-morbidities felt older than their age; most 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 may add to exclusion, isolation, & stigmatisation of older men.

Thank you for listening: any questions?



Image from: <http://wallpaperonview.com>

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