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“If you don’t have children...” the life experiences of older involuntarily childless men.



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Study background

- Based on my qualitative PhD thesis:
‘Life without fatherhood: a qualitative study of older involuntarily childless men.’
- 14 men were interviewed in 2012: 27 semi-structured biographical interviews in total.
- Age range: 49 – 82 years.
- 2 non-heterosexual; 12 heterosexual.
- 7 single; 7 in relationships (1 LAT).
- 13 White-British; 1 Anglo-Celtic Australian

I acknowledge that terms like ‘childfree’ ‘childless’ ‘voluntary’ ‘involuntary’ ‘infertile’ ‘old’ ‘older’ ‘gay’ ‘straight’ are contentious.

Context

- Demographic change: increased longevity, decreased fertility, smaller families, increase in divorce, diversity in family set-up.
- 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*) .
- Later-life discourse: 'active ageing' v 'health & socio-economic' poverty/burden of older people.
- Ageing research focus on older women. Longevity = demand state benefits and health & care services (*Arber 2004, Arber et al, 2003*) .
- Paucity of data on men's experience of ageing. (*Arber et al, 2003*).
- Paucity of data on male experience of infertility. (*Letherby, 2010*).

Childlessness

- In most societies the childless labeled as 'other'.
- Childlessness is often viewed as a life-choice (Moulet, 2005).
- Potential or actual infertility has major implications for health, wellbeing and identity.
- Most childless research based on those accessing infertility treatment. Missing are the childless who do not seek treatment.
- Men's fertility history is not collected: it is not possible to assess the level of childless men in the UK. (ONS, 2014s).
- Involuntary childlessness now viewed on a life course continuum: people's status change over time: relationship formation/breakup, choice of new partner. (Letherby, 2002).

Ageing and childlessness

- Older childless adults: ‘...rendered invisible in social science literature.’ (Dykstra and Hagestad 2007: p. 1275).
- Survey data indicates 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 health, excessive drinking and smoking, depression, and sleeping difficulties than men with partners (Kendig et al, 2007).
- Men seen as ‘difficult to reach’ by researchers. (Lloyd, 1996; Arber et al, 2003)

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).*
- **Choice of partner:** *“She said she was terrified of childbirth. I put any inklin’s about that to the back of my mind.” James (65).*
- **Relationship timing :** *“I was getting on towards 30 before my partner and I did get together. (...) With my parents both in their 40’s when I was born, I thought it would just be like falling off a log.” (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).

Social network: *“It is noticeable that friends who have children drift away.”* 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).

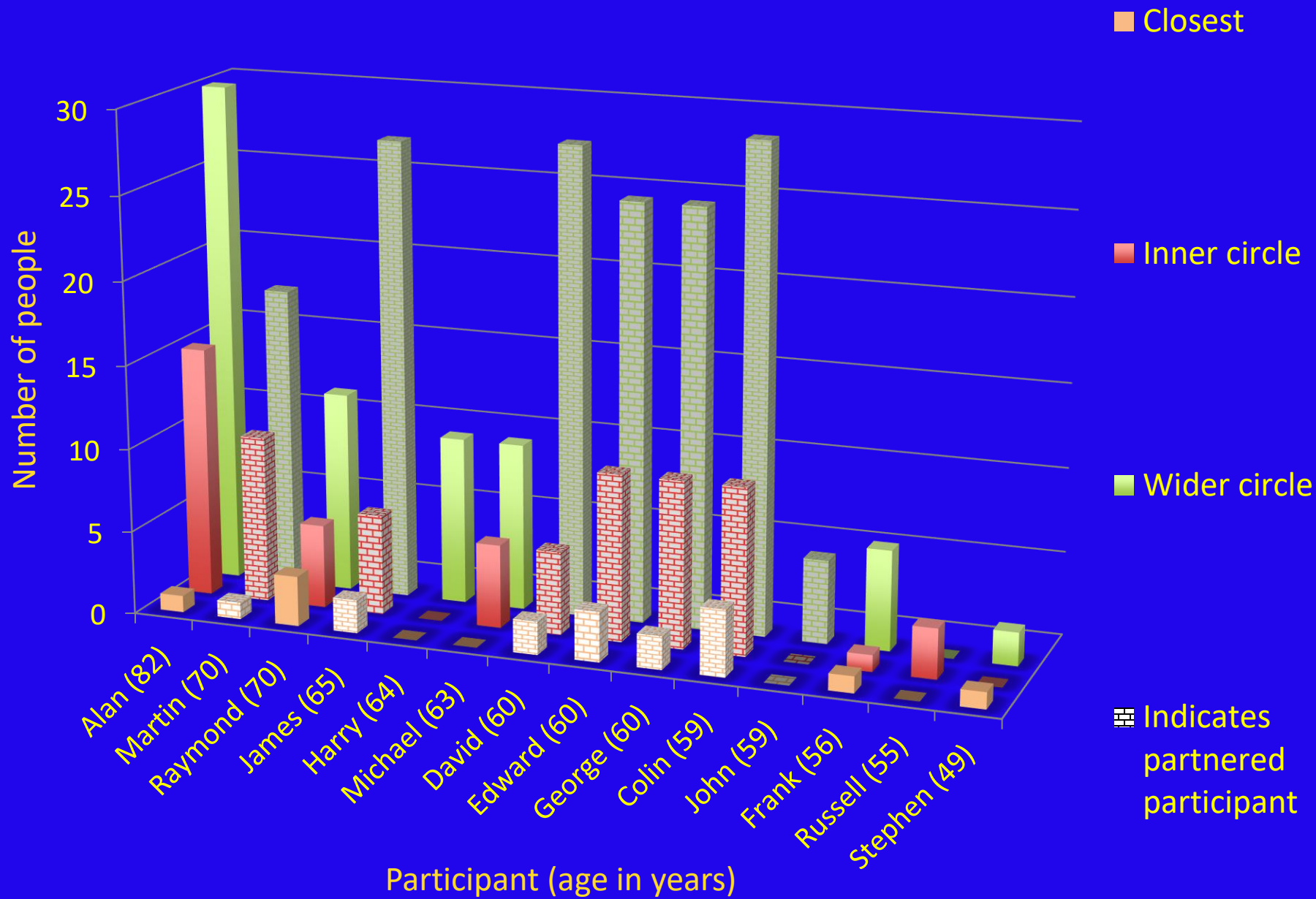
Advantages: *“The advantages then, of course, are not having to plan and worry about others.”* Edward.

The continuity of discontinuity

“But as I have gone on in my life, and seen others with their children, and I've, several times over the last I don't know 10-15 years - and I'm now 60 - so probably from my mid-40s, 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, I knew, you know, I miss that .”

(George 60)

Social networks



Wider social dynamics

Alienation: *“When couples get older, they have a whole raft of experiences, you know, first day at school, whooping cough etc.,- if you haven't had those experiences you're shut out along with everything else. You're on the fringe, that, 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.”*

Attitude to 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

Fictive grandfatherhood

Aspirational and uncertain men related grandfatherhood to biological primacy:

“I cannot recall having any thoughts about being a Granddad because there was, or is, no possibility of it.” Michael (63)

Four of the nine *mediated* men had experienced a form of *fictive grandfatherhood*. The remainder took similar positions to the *aspirational and uncertain* men.

Grandfatherhood

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 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).*

Proxy: *“Liz’s grandchildren appeared on the scene...I’m keenly interested in them, as if they were my genetic grandchildren, I think. 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’ ... its surrogate grandfather. The surrogate grandchild, is a big part of the social thing.” Martin (70).*

Future

Anxiety: *“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).*

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

Health: *“You're suddenly aware you're no longer invincible.” John (59).*

Legacy: *“There is a richness of family history. Again no one to pass it on to.” David (60).*

“To be quite erm, brutal, death is the future. 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)

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

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)

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 have 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: <http://wallpaperpersonview.com>

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Future relationships

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

Inner: *“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 'Pappus' - the Greek word for Grandfather” James (65)*

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

Grandfatherhood 1: Latent and Adopted

Raymond (70): *'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.'*

Alan: *'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'*

Grandfatherhood 2: Proxy and Surrogate

James (65): *'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 'Pappus' - the Greek word for Grandfather'*

Martin (70): *'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.'*