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Fictive grandfatherhood: the experiences of older involuntarily childless men



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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.

Childlessness

- Most societies are pronatalist: childless labeled as 'other'.
- Majority of childless research based on people in infertility treatment.
- Potential or actual infertility has major implications for physical & mental health, socio-economically, identity & well being.
- Men seen as 'difficult to reach' by researchers. (Lloyd, 1996).
- Men's fertility history is not collected: it is not possible to assess the level of childless men in the UK. (ONS, 2014; Cohort Fertility background notes).
- Future impact on demand for formal health & social care. Family (adult children) provide most informal care for older people. (Phillips, 2007).

Family practices

- Increased longevity and lower fertility rates resulted in change in family structure: Increased vertical ties & reduced horizontal ties. *(Bengtson, 2001).*
- A greater number of older people occupying grandparental role for longer, to fewer children. *(Timonen and Arber, 2012).*
- Research into grandparenthood has mainly focused on grandmothers. *(Mann, 2007).*
- Recent research has highlighted the contradictory and complex role of grandfatherhood: reflecting fluidity in family practices and configuration. *(Tarrant, 2012).*

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).
- **Timing of first relationship:** *"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).

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:

"If you don't have children, you're not gonna have grandchildren."

Frank (56)

"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. Their dad wouldn’t mind, but I don’t want people saying, “Oh, he’s a bit of a paedophile, this one, looking at the kids.” You know?” Raymond (70).

Grandfatherhood: Adopted

“They asked if they could adopt me as a granddad. That lasted 3 years, it was great.”

“They still always talk; he always comes down, the young one that still goes... he still comes down, or 'e waves, yells, and 'e always yells “Granddad!” Make me feel belonged. Makes me feel I'm part of something. That's what I miss.” Alan (82).

Grandfatherhood: 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.”

“I’m, sort of, much more aware of how they must feel now towards their grandchildren - I ‘adn’t thought about it before. (...) We do talk now - a new topic ‘as entered the conversational gambit, you know?”

“Liz’s ex-husband, he’s ‘Granddad’ and there’s a South American granddad – I am ‘Pappous’ the Greek word for Grandfather.” James (65)

Grandfatherhood: 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.”

“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.” 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).*

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).*

Existential: *“To be quite erm, brutal, death is the future, I mean that its... 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 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.

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Thank you for listening!
Any questions?



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