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# Life without fatherhood: the experiences of older involuntarily childless men



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# Acknowledgements

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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.

# Background

- Demographic change: increased longevity, decreased fertility & smaller families. Future impact on demand for formal health & social care. Family (adult children) provide most informal care for older people. *(Phillips, 2007)*
- Lack of data on the lived experience of older men and male childlessness.

## Aims

1. To investigate the influences on how older men became involuntary childless.
2. To explore the participants' attitudes and behaviours to the experience of involuntary childlessness.
3. To examine the influence on the participants' quality of life.
4. To suggest policy recommendations relating to the needs of involuntarily men as they age.

# Gerontology: the invisible men

- Recently 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*)
- Older men were seen as advantaged: economically stable, married with care dividend.
- Older men died at an earlier age than women.
- Men are seen as poor in accessing health care.
- Partner-less older men more likely to be placed in residential care than equivalent women.
- Seen as socially reticent and difficult to access for personal research. (*Arber et al., 2003*).

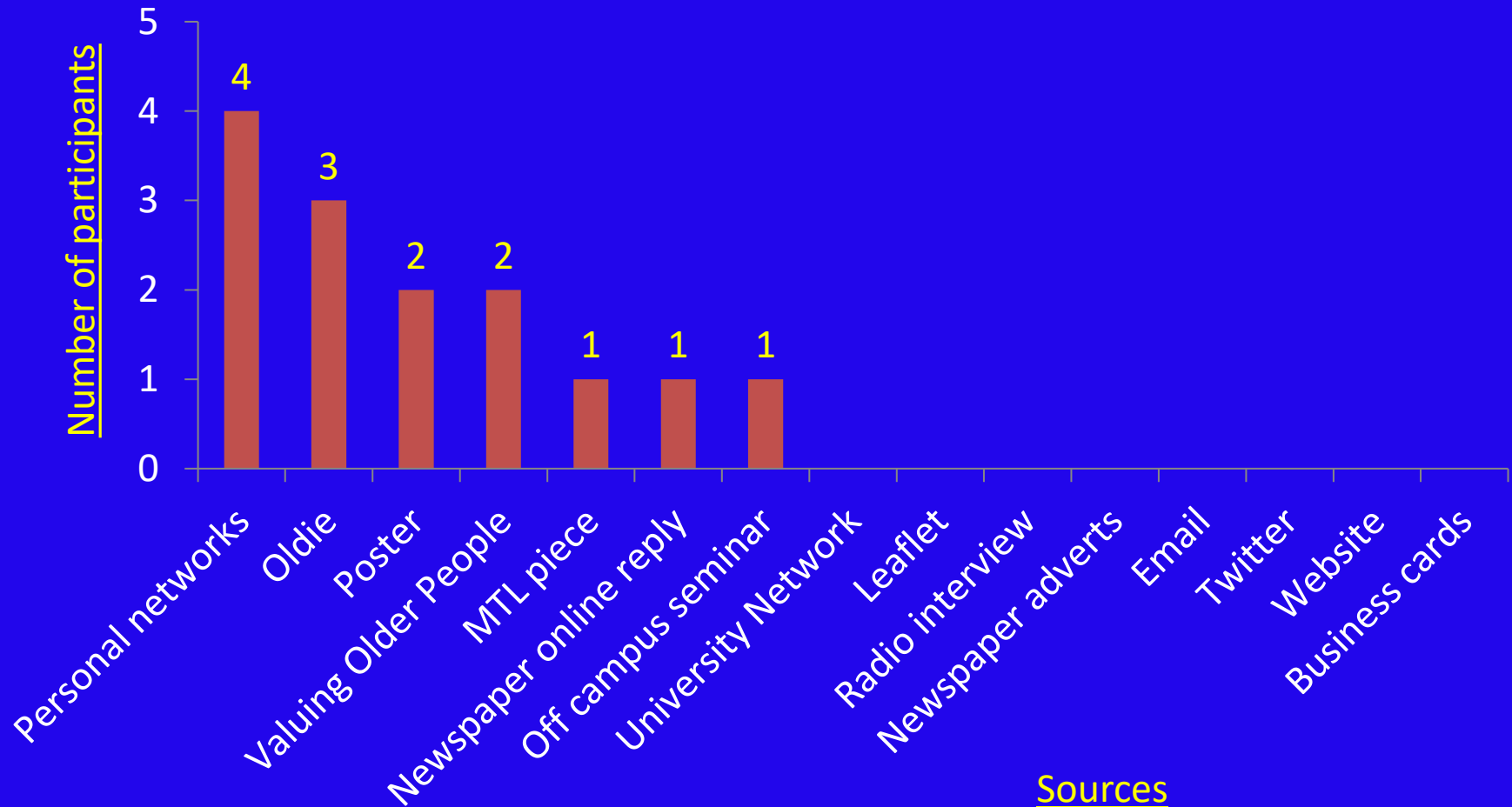
# Ageing and childlessness

- 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)
- Potential or actual infertility has major implications for health.
- Men's fertility history is not collected: the number of childless men in the UK is unknown. (ONS, 2014).
- Men reported as difficult to recruit by infertility researchers. (Lloyd, 1996).

# Methodology and method

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

# Recruitment strategies



Sources



## Social context: '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)*

# 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

# 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*
- **Health:** *“IVF was very stressful for my partner so, after two cycles, we called it a day 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

**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

# 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)

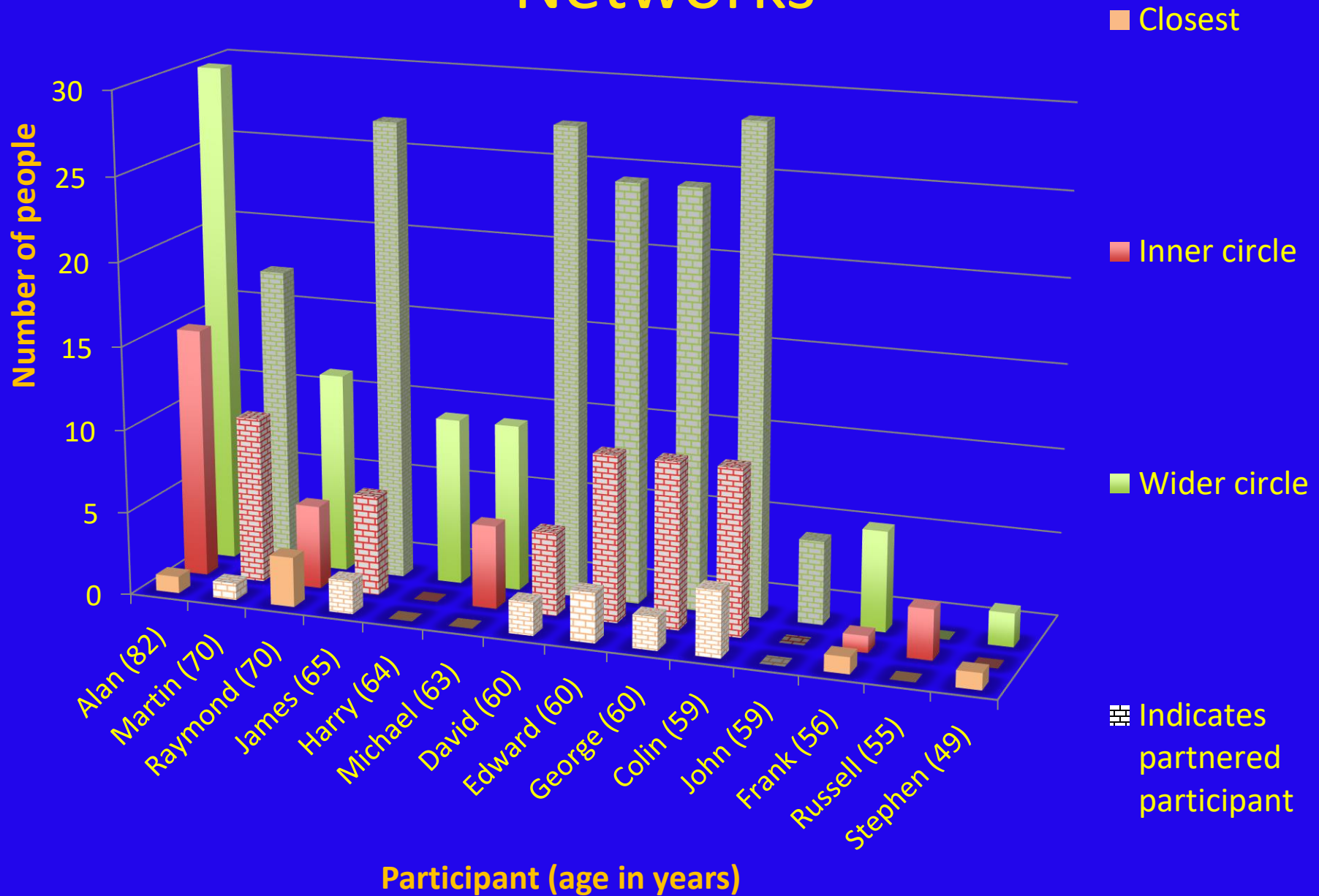
*“It’s something I will never stop regretting. You know, it won’t go away.”* Martin (70)

*“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)

*“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 (55)

# Networks



# 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

**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)*

**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)*

*"So, when the last of us dies then the estate skips a generation."  
David (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.

# Ageing masculinity

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

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

**Stereotypes:** provider, active, virility, strength, heterosexual, non-feminine, emotionally distant, subordination of others = ‘Ideal’ type.

**Hegemonic masculinity:** Domination of society/social relationships through patriarchy: Few men achieve the hegemonic ideal. *(Connell, 1995)*

**Emergent Masculinity:** Men now behaving in ways that counter/reject the hegemonic masculinity ideal/the old ways. *(Inhorn, 2012)*

**Mosaic masculinity:** Older men adapt parts of masculine scripts to form their masculine identity. *(Coles, 2008)*

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# Thank you for listening!

## Any questions?



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