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# “That’s what I’m missing”: The experiences of older involuntarily childless men



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# Background

- Based on qualitative PhD research project:  
*‘Life without fatherhood: a qualitative study of older involuntarily childless men.’*
- Aim to explore the experiences of involuntarily childless men aged over 50.
- Methodology draws on Chambers (2002) *‘feminist life course perspective’* informed by: social gerontology, (pro)feminist, & life course approaches. Underpinned by social constructionism and focus on life history.
- Broad Thematic Analysis. *(Braun & Clark, 2006)*

# The Sample

- 14 men were interviewed in 2012
- 27 semi-structured individual interviews in total
- Interviews via: face-to-face, Skype (1), telephone (1), email (1).
- Age range: 49 – 82
- 2 non-heterosexual, 12 heterosexual
- 7 single, 7 in relationships,
- 13 White-British; 1 Anglo-Celtic Australian
- **Nationwide recruitment:** *Twitter, website, local radio interview, regional newspaper & 'Oldie' magazine advert, bussiness cards, flyers, personal & professional network email.*

# Childlessness

- Most societies are pronatalist: childless labeled as 'other.'
- Childlessness typically divided into binary: 'voluntary' and 'involuntary.'
- Most research focuses on the 'involuntary' as it is based on those pre, participating in, or post infertility treatment.
- Difficult to assess the level of involuntary childlessness.
- Recently involuntary childlessness seen as a continuum: events, over time, may change people's status e.g. relationship formation/breakup, choice of new partner, family dynamics.*(Letherby, 2002)*

# Ageing and childlessness

- Older childless adults: *'rendered invisible in social science literature.'* (Dykstra and Hagestad 2007: p. 1275)
- Most gerontological research has focussed on older women, as they lived longer, had high chronic co-morbidities, received more state benefits, and occupied the majority of the home care sector. (Arber 2004, Arber et al, 2003)
- 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).

# Social context

*'I always imagined I would have children.'* Harry (70)

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

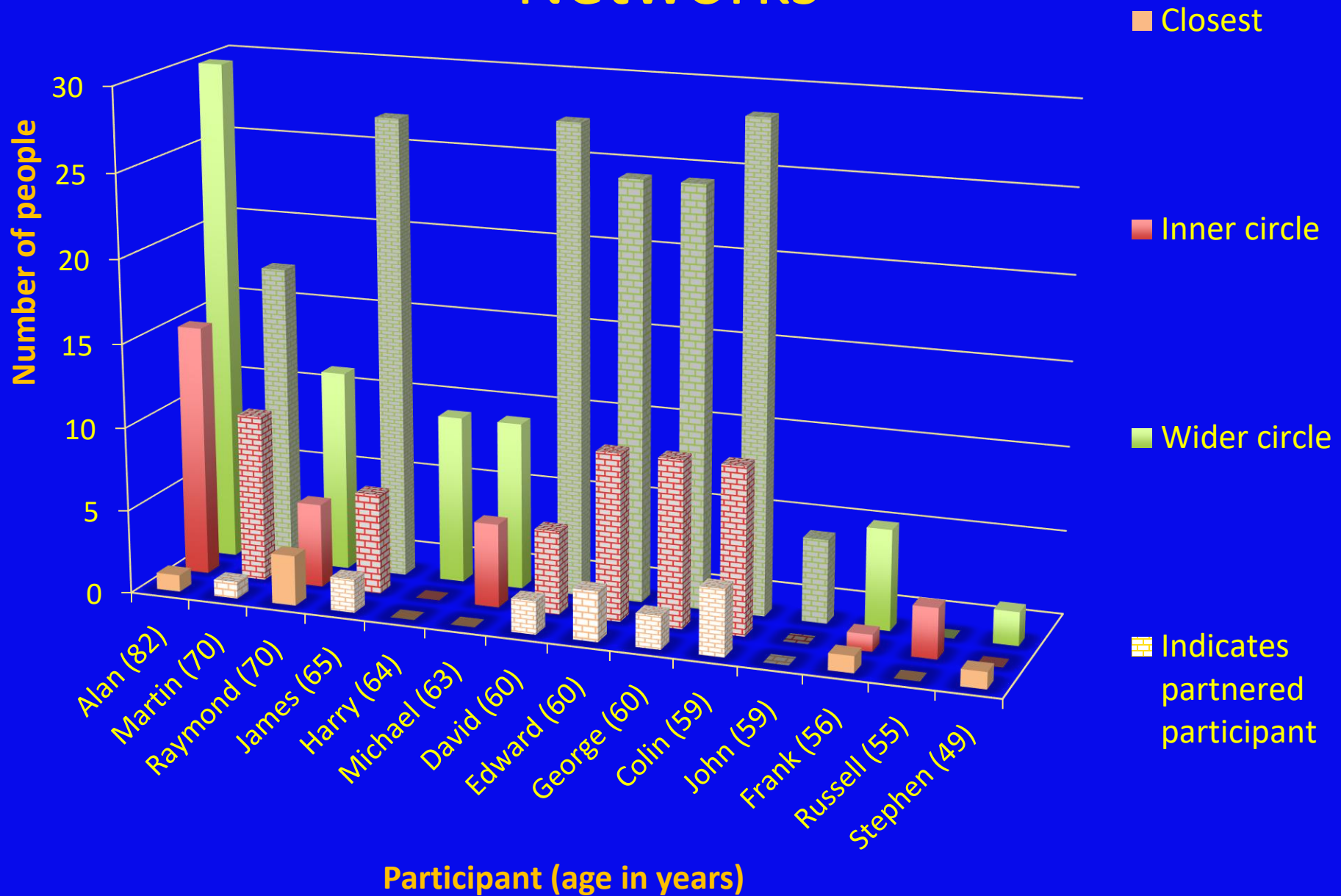
# Negotiating discontinuity

*'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)*

*'I'm never going to be able to say this is my grandson am I?'* *Harry (64)*

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

# Networks



# 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)*

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

**Lineage:** *'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*

# 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 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)**

**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. Pat is 'Gruntie' because she's actually a great aunt.'* **Martin (70)**

# Reproductive Capital

Letherby (2010: p.31): *'I would suggest that those who parent children are seen to hold maternal/paternal capital, although the level of status may vary with reference to how parenthood is achieved.'*

Thank you for listening.  
*Any questions?*



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