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‘Navigating the unexpected Lifescape: the invisible experiences of older 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 individual experience.
- 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.

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*)

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)

Passing: *'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 then 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:** *'I said, "C'mon, we really need to make a decision, you know, we just don't want to let time go by and let nature take the decision for us.'* John
- **Timing:** *'I was getting on towards 30 before my partner and I did get together.'* 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

Loss: *'It's something I will never stop regretting. You know, it won't go away.'* *Martin (70)*

Peer network: *'It is noticeable that friends who have children drift away.'* *Edward (60)*

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*

'Point number 1 in your bloody PhD'

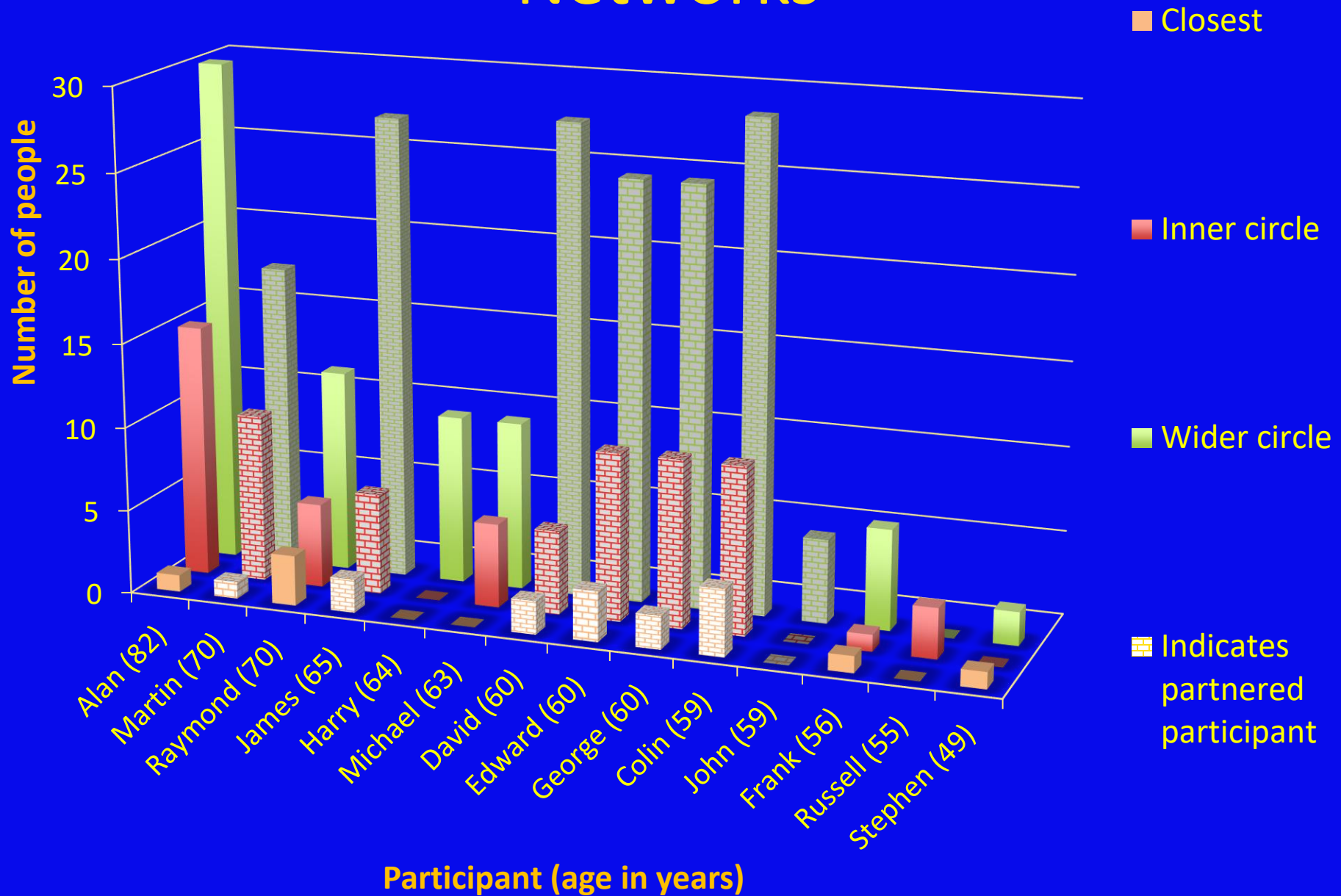
Outsiderness: *'When couples get older, they have a whole raft of experiences, you know, first day at school - if you haven't had those experiences you're shut out along with everything else. You're on the fringe - you haven't experienced: that is alien to you.'*

'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)

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, you know ... I miss that.' George (60)

Networks



Future

Vulnerable: *'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 (63)

'Liz's grandchildren appeared on the scene - I discovered what a pleasure that is, you know? James (65)

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

Thank you for listening.
Any questions?



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