


Please cite the Published Version

Hadley, Robin  (2014) "People have no conception of just how isolated someone who hasn't got kids in middle age is": the experiences of older involuntarily childless men. In: Midlands Health Psychology Network 10th Annual Conference: Ten Years of MHPN: Looking Back and Moving Forward, 20 February 2014, The University of Northampton, UK. (Unpublished)

Version: Presentation

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Additional Information: Slides presented at: Midlands Health Psychology Network 10th Annual Conference

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‘People have no conception of just how isolated someone who hasn’t got children in middle age is.’

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Background

- Based on PhD research project:
'Not being a father: the experiences of involuntarily childless men as they age.'
- Qualitative study to explore the experiences of involuntarily childless men aged over 50.
- Broad Thematic Analysis
- 4th year: writing up. Funded by Keele University.

The Sample

- 14 men were interviewed in 2012
- 27 semi-structured interviews in total
- Age range: 49 – 82
- 2 non-heterosexual, 12 heterosexual
- 7 single, 7 in relationships
- 13 White-British; 1 Anglo-Celtic Australian
- Nationwide recruitment (see workshop for more details).

Childlessness

- Childlessness was typically divided into two types: 'voluntary' and 'involuntary.'
- Often viewed as a life-choice (Moulet, 2005)
- 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 (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).
- Later-life: policy of ‘active ageing’ v discourse of ‘health & socio-economic’ poverty/burden.

Social context

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

David (60): *'I just naturally, in growing up, rather assumed I would leave school, do university, get a job, get married, and have a family.'*

Raymond (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.'*

Influences on childlessness

- **Social clock:** *'Nobody wants a 70 year old father when you're 20.'* **Martin (70).**
- **Health:** *'The IVF was very stressful for my partner so, after two cycles, we called it a day basically.'* **Edward (60).**
- **Economics:** *'The bloody interest rates hit 13% - so that made me delay, you know, overtures in those directions'* **John (59).**
- **Timing:** *'I was getting on towards 30 before my partner and I did get together.'* **Edward.**
- **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

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

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

David (60): *'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.'*

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

Post IVF Counselling 1

Edward (60): *'We did both have counselling after the failed IVF and I found that a useful experience. Certainly for my partner it was not just useful, it was very cathartic.'*

'We eventually realised that we would enter old age as a childless couple - well we both needed a shoulder to cry on...I might've had a little cry on my own in the corner.'

Post IVF Counselling 2

George (60): *'We had, I think, a couple of meetings with her. And that was really helpful. And in a sense, it wasn't just - I think what we both felt - was not just brushing it under the carpet. We are making this as a clear conscious choice, we've gone so far down this route, we don't want it to go any further and so we're making this decision.'*

The continuity of discontinuity

George: *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.'*

Future relationships

Michael (63): *'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?'*

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

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

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'*

Social dynamics

Russell (55): *'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.'*

'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.'

Negotiating masculinity:

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

Stereotypes: provider, attractive, active, virility, strength, heterosexual, non-feminine, emotionally distant, subordination of others = Hegemonic masculinity 'Ideal' type.

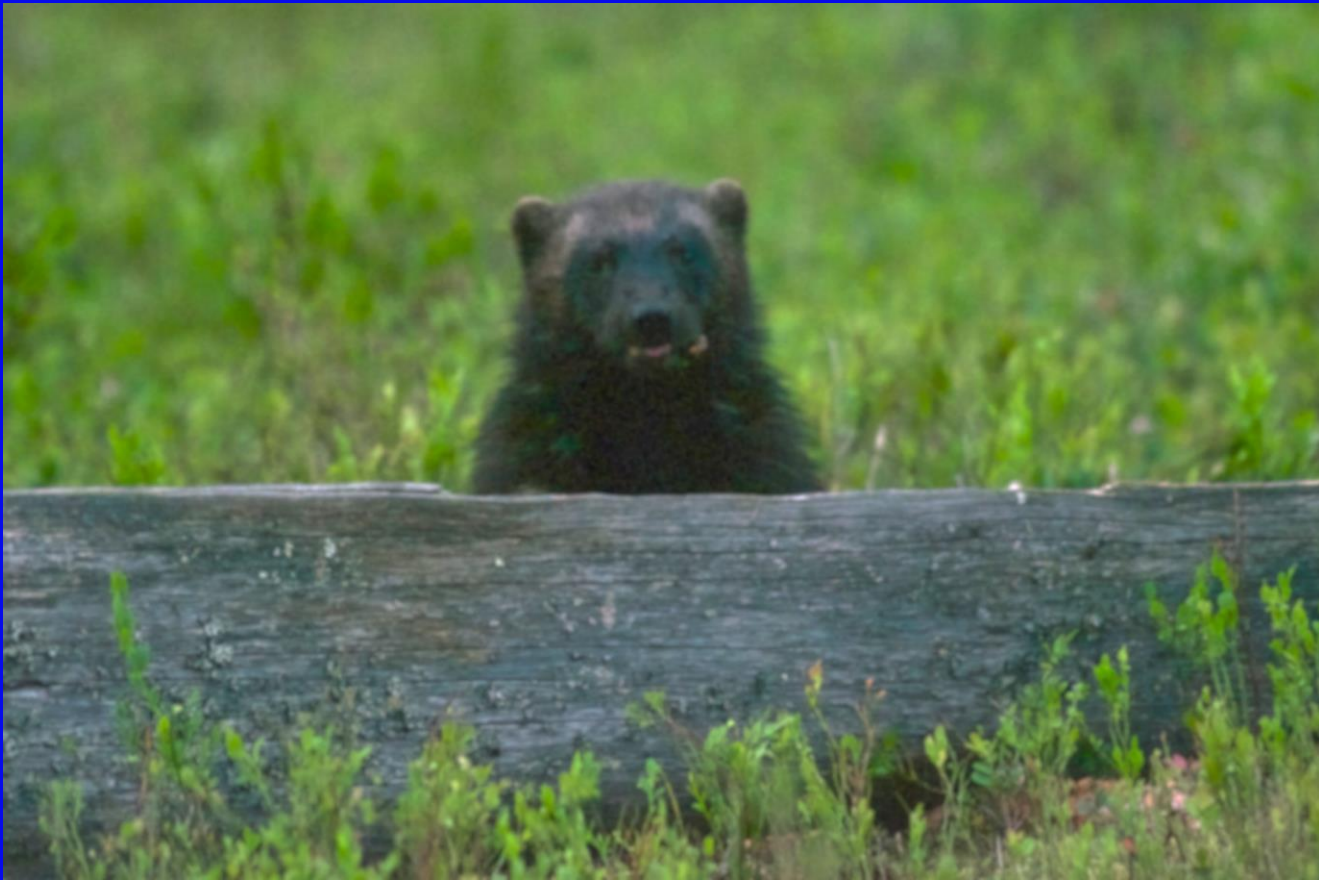
Hegemonic masculinity: Domination of society/social relationships through patriarchy: Few men achieve the hegemonic 'ideal.'

(Connell, 1995)

Emergent Masculinity: Men now behaving in ways that counter/reject the hegemonic masculinity ideal/the old ways: *The New Arab Man: ART and Islam* (Inhorn, 2012)

Adaptive masculinity: *I'm working on it...*

Thank you for listening.
Any questions?



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