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# 'Point number one in your bloody PhD': The experiences of involuntarily childless men as they age

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# Background

- Based on PhD research project:  
'Not being a father: the experiences of involuntarily childless men as they age.'
- Aim of study was to explore the experiences of involuntarily childless men aged over 50.
- Funded by Keele University.

# 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).

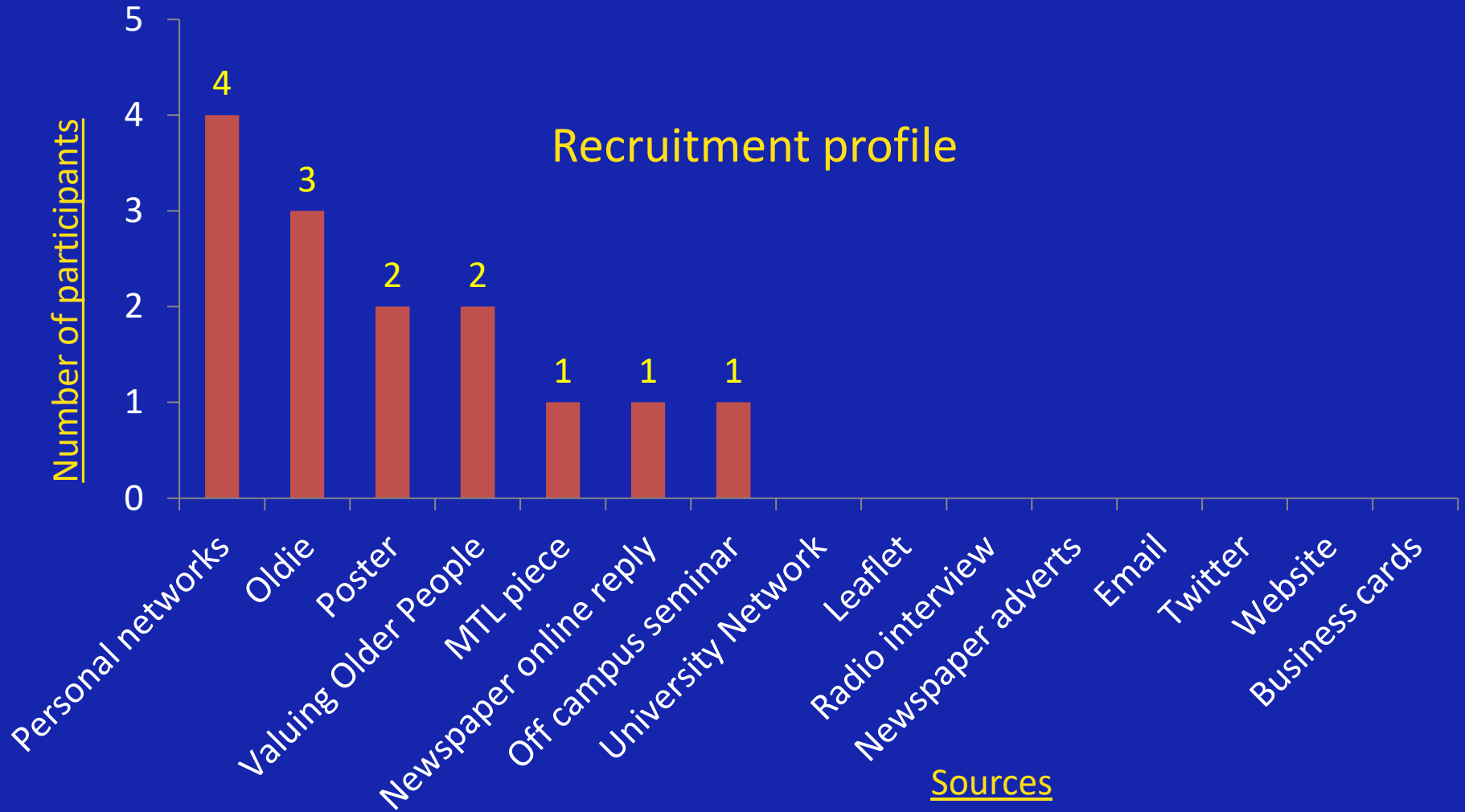
# Childlessness

- Childlessness was typically divided into two types: 'voluntary' and 'involuntary.'
- Childlessness often seen 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, people's status change e.g. relationship formation/breakup, choice of new partner (Letherby, 2002).

# The Sample

- 14 men were interviewed: 27 semi-structured interviews in total
- Aged between 49 – 82
- 2 Gay, 12 heterosexual
- 7 single (5 solo living including 2 widowers ; 1 lodged; 1 in family home)
- 7 in relationships (6 living together; 1 LAT)
- 13 were White-British; 1 Anglo-Celtic Australian
- 6 drew pensions (4 working part-time)
- 3 were seeking work (1 unregistered); 1 DLA
- 3 full time employment; 1 not seeking employment

# Recruitment methods



# Social Normative

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

**Raymond (70):** *'I think from about like fifteen 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.'*

**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'*



# Biological & Social clocks

**John (59):** *'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." '*

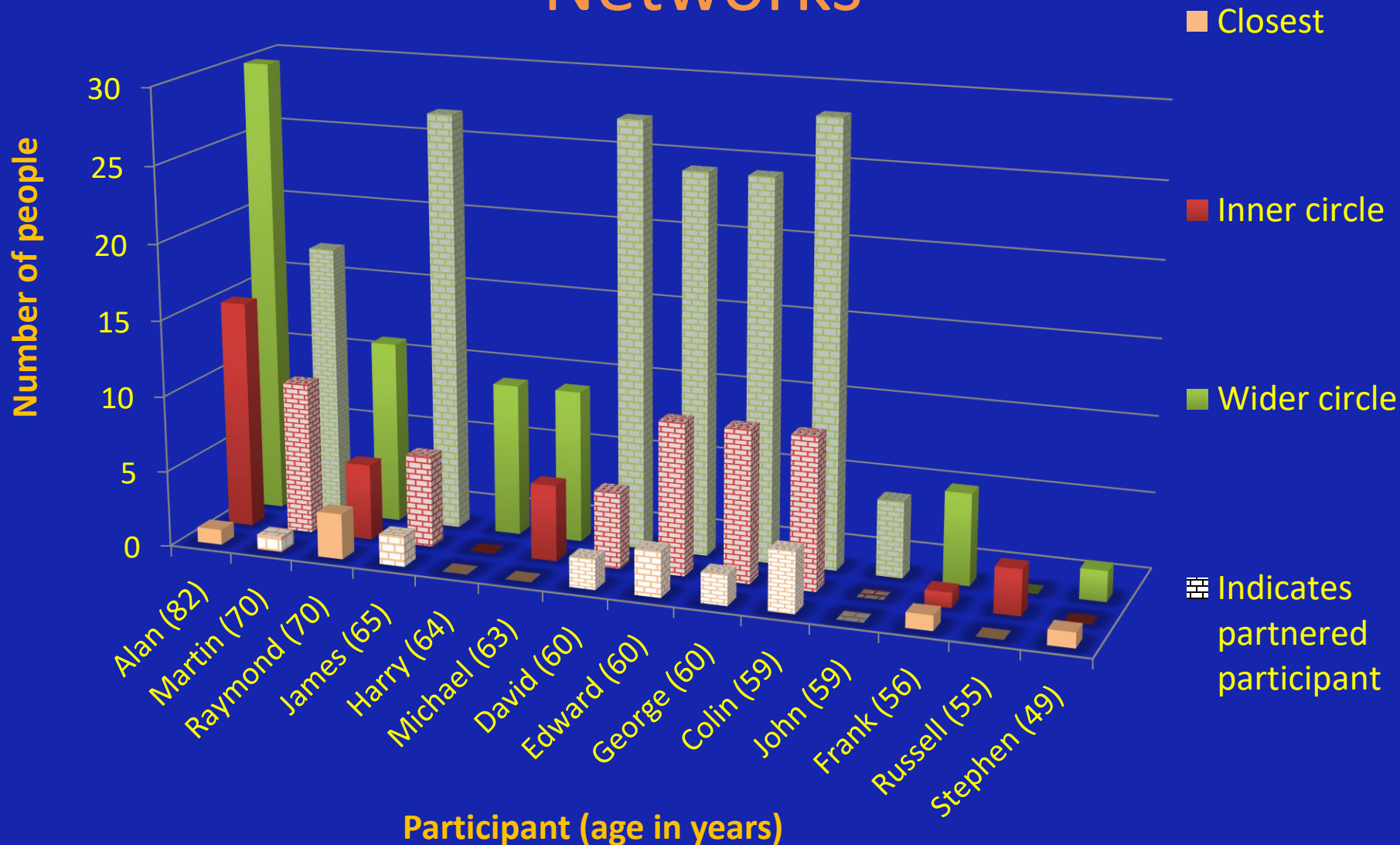
**Martin (70):** *'My thought would be, "Well do I want a twenty year old to have a ninety year old father?" And the answer is no because that's just screwing up someone else's life, you know?'*

# Economics

**John (59):** *'You know, we've been working together, you know, to find a suitable place, you know, to be our nest, get moved in. And then just after we moved in, you know, interest rates, the bloody interest rates hit 13% or whatever it was. So, that made me delay, you know, overtures in those directions.'*

**Russell (55):** *'Both of us wanted to ensure that it was a so-called planned birth, from a financially responsible sort of viewpoint, as well as from an emotional one. So we were extremely careful about conception.'*

# Networks



# Transitions of involuntary childlessness

Position	Participant	Age	Relationship status
Pre-transition	David	60	Married
	Frank	56	Single
	Stephen	49	Single
Transitional	Russell	55	Single
	Michael	63	Single
Post-transitional	Alan	82	Single
	Colin	59	In a relationship
	Edward	60	In a relationship
	George	60	Married
	Harry	64	Single/Widower
	James	65	In a relationship
	John	59	In a relationship
	Martin	70	Married
Raymond	70	Single/Widower	

# Pre-transitional

Three men expressed the desire to be father:

**David (60):** *'You think, "Well, if I produce kids at the age of 61 then by the time they're off to University I'll be 80." And if I make it beyond 80, which I hope I will, I mean to fund them through university.'*

**Frank (56):** *'I've become, sort of, more aware then of how nice it can be to have children, you know, from the families and the people I know.'*

**Stephen (49):** *'It's more about whether, you know, I could find a viable partner...'*

# Pre-transitional: awareness

**Frank (56):** *'Maybe it's a really stupid idea to want to be a father; maybe there's just so much hassle with it, so I don't know. All I can do is try it.'*

**Stephen (49):** *'So the concept of being fatherless is a new phenomenon to me but it's been significant, and, you know, quite devastating really.'*

**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.'*

# Transitional

These two men held no definitive views on becoming, or *not*, becoming a father.

**Russell (55):** *'Now I'm 55, 15 years have gone and, in the back of my mind, the candle's been going, or the light's been getting dimmer and dimmer of me ever being a father.'*

**Michael (63):** *'If my mind does wander to what might have been, or what might be, then it is still with that one thought: can I have a child at my age now?'*

# Transitional: awareness

**Russell (55):** *'I don't think people that have got kids have got any conception whatsoever 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.'*

**Michael (63):** *'So as I get older, I am aware of the fact that it's great when you're fit, but if you are fatherless, there is no son or daughter checking up on you, phoning you, knocking on the door, or saying, "You look terrible - go to hospital".'*



# Post-transitional

Nine men accepted they were not going to become fathers for various reasons:

- **Age, Colin (59):** *'Since I was about 47 I accepted that it won't happen.'*
- **Health, Edward (60):** *'The IVF was very stressful for my partner so, after two cycles, we called it a day basically.'*
- **Relationship, James 65):** *'Liz (ex-wife) stated that she didn't want children, I just quickly put that to one side...'*
- **Sexuality, Alan (82):** *'I could never have been a [biological] father, I don't think so.'*
- **Loss, Harry (64):** *'If you have a child there would be a part of Helen still walking the streets.'*

# Post-transitional: awareness

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

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

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

**Edward (60):** *'It is noticeable that friends who have children drift away; they get into other circles of other friends who've got children and that's been very marked.'*

# Post-transitional: Missing relationship

**George (60):** *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.'*

# Grandfatherhood

*Pre-transitional* and *transitional* men related grandfatherhood to biological primacy:

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

**Michael (63):** *'I cannot recall having any thoughts about being a Granddad because there was, or is, no possibility of it.'*

Four of the nine post-transitional men had experienced a form of grandfatherhood. The remainder took similar positions as the *Pre-transitional* and *transitional* men.

# Grandfatherhood 1: Latent and Adopted

**Raymond (70):** *'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.'*

**Alan:** *'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'*

# Grandfatherhood 2: Proxy and Surrogate

**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'*

**Martin (70):** *'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.'*

Thank you for listening.

Any questions?



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