


Please cite the Published Version

Hadley, Robin  (2017) "The most significant thing is I haven't got kids": the impact of male involuntary childlessness. In: One-Day Symposium: Research Impact in the Social Sciences and Humanities, 24 January 2017, Aberystwyth University, Penglais Campus, Wales, United Kingdom. (Unpublished)

Version: Presentation

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/634248/>

Usage rights:  In Copyright

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

“The most significant thing is
I haven’t got kids”:
the impact of male involuntary childlessness



Dr Robin Hadley

Manchester Metropolitan University

rahadley7.8@gmail.com

www.wantedtobeadad.com

Acknowledgements

- To the men who participated in this study – my infinite gratitude.
- PhD studentship funded by the Centre for Social Gerontology, Keele University.
- Supervisors: Prof., Mo Ray & Dr Emma Head.
- My wife and everyone else who has supported me and that I have whinged at, moaned to, bored, & used.
- I acknowledge that terms like ‘childfree’ ‘childless’ ‘voluntary’ ‘involuntary’ ‘infertile’ ‘old’ ‘older’ ‘elderly’ ‘gay’ ‘straight’ and others I may use are contentious.
- Thank you for asking me to speak today.

Background

- Demographic change: increased longevity, decreased fertility, smaller families, increase in divorce, diversity in family.
- Future impact on pensions, health & social care funding and provision. *(Wittenberg et al 2008)*
- Family (adult children) provide most informal care for older people. *(Phillips, 2007)*
- Most childless research on affects of infertility as it has major implications for health, wellbeing and identity.
- Lack of data on male experience of infertility/childlessness. *(Letherby, 2010)*
- Lack of data on men's ageing experience. *(Arber 2004, Arber et al, 2003).*
- Older men are seen as both genderless and a sexual threat. *(Walz, 2002)*

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)
- Older childless are not disadvantaged when their health is good. If health deteriorates the informal support declines and the formal care does not take up the shortfall. (Albertini & Mencarini, 2014)
- Partner-less older men more likely to be placed in residential care than equivalent women.
- Men viewed as socially reticent and difficult to access for research on personal matters (Arber et al., 2003).

Sample

- 14 self-defined involuntarily childless men were interviewed in 2012: 27 interviews in total.
- 13 White-British; 1 Anglo-Celtic Australian.
- Age range: 49 – 82 years.
- 12 heterosexual, 2 non-heterosexual.
- 7 single (5 solo living), 7 in relationships (1 LAT).

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)

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

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

Alienation and Isolation

“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)

“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)

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)

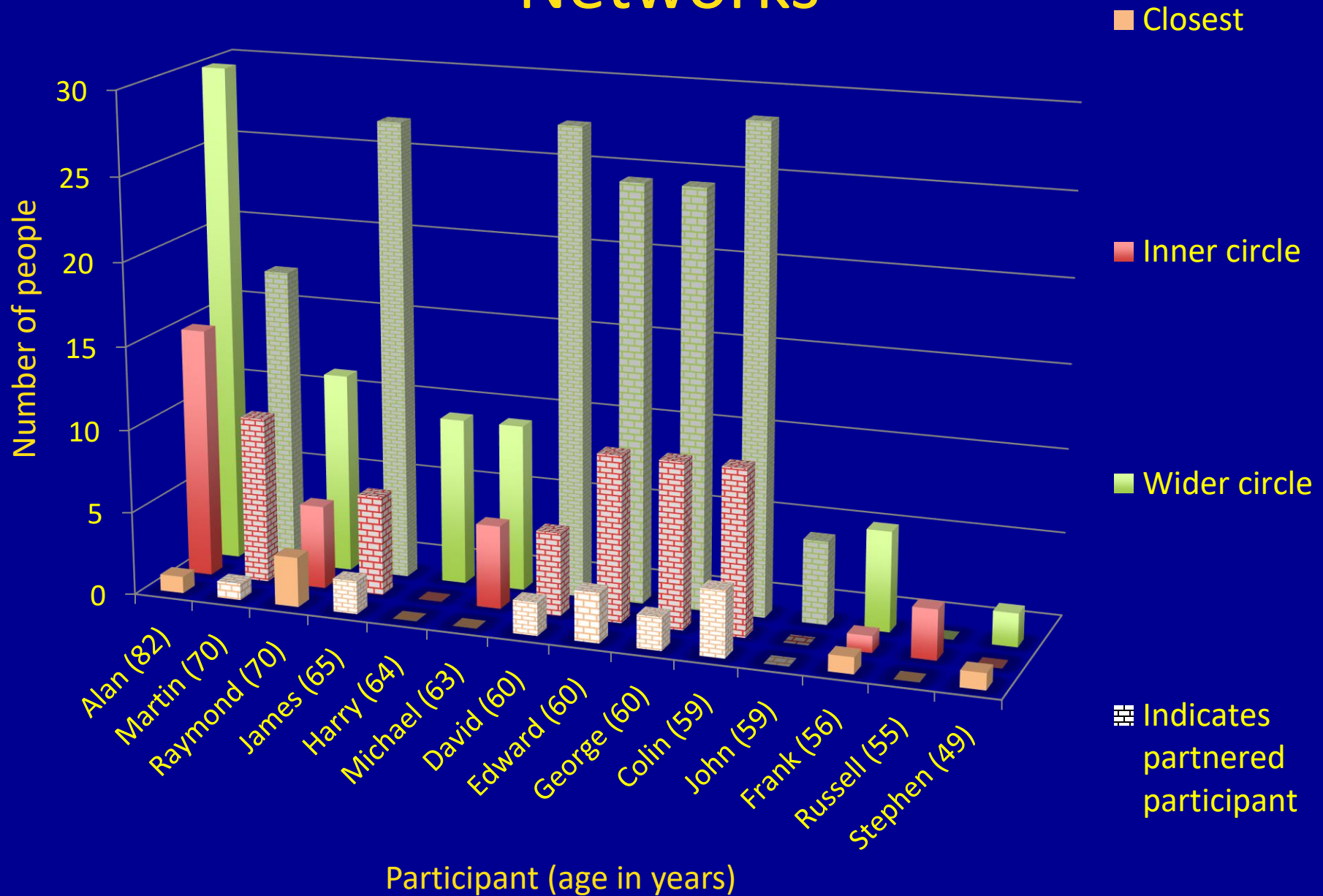
“I’m never going to be able to say, “This is my grandson” am I?” Harry (64)

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

Social networks and ageing

- Relationships and social support are as important as physical health towards well being & preventing isolation & exclusion. *(Victor and Scharf, 2005)*
- Network size and type affect health: those with least resources tend to have poorer health behaviours. *(Wong and Waite, 2015)*
- Marriage is important to well being in later life – if the relationship is ‘good’. *(Wong and Waite, 2015)*
- Older men especially see their partner as a primary source of care and support. *(Arber, 2004; Arber and Davidson, 2003)*
- Older men are more likely to have very small networks of one person or less compared to equivalent women. *(Phillipson et al 2001)*

Networks



Continuity and family dynamics

“I have a great relationship with my partner and my brothers, they are most important. My family was, and is, extremely close. Very happy, and fun, childhood.” Colin (59)

“My childhood [...] I was not abused as such, but it was aversive [...] even now, my mum, it's still a bloody monster. My middle brother I can't have any respect for him at all. I'm in contact with me brother [youngest]. Cousins, I would be hard-pressed to recognise - it's been so long. So now relative strangers.” John (59)

Singletons: partnered & bereaved

“I think my wife and I are very much for each other, so we tend to be our own social field. How do we socialise? Family. Of course it’s my wife’s family, ‘cos I’ve not got any. And that’s really just her siblings saying, “Let’s visit”, and the surrogate grandchild.” Martin (70)

“There’s no inner circle, no. [...] Loads of activities around here from people we knew. I’ve dropped out of that because I hate going on my own. [...] A problem – I’ll solve it. I’m the only one - I don’t know anyone. [...] There’s two long time mates that I got that, if I rang, would come at a click.” Harry (64)

Organisations influence on social networks

“I've the people at the pub and I've got the group. With the group, if you're not well [...] I ring and then they know I'm not just, sommat's happened, I've not gone. I had a couple of phone calls back, see if I were alright, you know. You think, “Well somebody cares,” you know? [...] It's most of my life - going to the pub or the group. So, I mean, you take that away from me and just sit here forever? Then might as well curl up and die now, you know?” Raymond (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)*

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)*

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)*

Ageing Without Children (awoc.org)

- Grass roots organisation campaigning for the recognition of 'AWOC' people. Includes those childless by circumstance, choice, bereavement, disruption, & self defined.
- More people now in their 40s will age without children than ever before; estimates are between 20-25%.
- The population of older people in the UK is increasing: in 2030 over 2 million childless people aged 65 or over.
- Assumption in health and social care policy and practice that older people will have family members to fill the gap left by the state.
- The ageing childless are not recognised in policy and practice documents.
- Seeking funding to conduct more research.

References

- Arber, S., Davidson, K. & Ginn, J. (2003). Changing Approaches to Gender and Later Life. In Arber, S., Davidson, K. & Ginn, J. (Eds.), *Gender and Ageing. Changing Roles and Relationships* (pp. 1-14). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Arber, S. (2004). Gender, marital status, and ageing: Linking material, health, and social resources. *Journal of Aging Studies* 18(1), 91-108
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77 - 101.
- Cannold, L. (2004). Declining marriage rates and gender inequity in social institutions: Towards an adequately complex explanation for childlessness. *People and Place*, 12(4), 1-11.
- Chambers, P. (2002). Hidden lives: Multiple narratives of later life widowhood. PhD Thesis, Keele, Keele University.
- Coles, T. (2008). *Finding space in the field of masculinity: Lived experiences of men's masculinities*. *Journal of Sociology*, 44(3), 233-248.
- Dykstra, P. A. & Hagestad, G. O. (2007). Roads Less Taken: Developing a Nuanced View of Older Adults Without Children. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(10), 1275-1310.
- Hearn, J. (1995). Imaging the aging of men. In Featherstone, M. & Wernick, A. (Eds.), *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life*, (pp. 97-118). Routledge: London.
- Kendig, H., Dykstra, P. A., Van Gaalen, R. I. & Melkas, T. (2007). Health of Aging Parents and Childless Individuals. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(11), 1457-1486.
- Inhorn, M. C. (2012). *The New Arab Man. Emergent Masculinities, Technologies, and Islam in the Middle East*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ
- Letherby, G. (2002). Childless and Bereft?: Stereotypes and Realities in Relation to 'Voluntary' and 'Involuntary' Childlessness and Womanhood. *Sociological Inquiry*, 72(1), 7-20.
- Letherby, G. (2010). When Treatment Ends: The Experience of Women and Couples. In Crawshaw, M. & Balen, R. (Eds.), *Adopting after Infertility: messages from practice, research, and personal experience* (pp. 29-42). Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London
- Morgan, D. H. J. (1981). Men, masculinity and sociological enquiry. In Roberts, H. (Ed.), *Doing Feminist Research*, (pp. 83-113). Routledge: London
- Moulet, C. (2005). Neither 'Less' nor 'Free': A long-term view of couples' experience and construction of involuntary childlessness. PhD Thesis, Australian Catholic University, Fitzroy.
- Office for National Statistics (2014). Email communication with R. A. Hadley: the number of childless men in the UK, 21st January 2014.
- Phillips, J. (2007). *Care*. Polity Press: Cambridge
- Townsend, N. W. (2002). *The Package Deal: Marriage, Work and Fatherhood in Men's Lives*. Temple University Press: Philadelphia
- Walz, T. (2002). *Crones, Dirty Old Men, Sexy Seniors: Representations of the Sexuality of Older Persons*. *Journal of Aging and Identity*, 7(2), 99-112.
- Weitof, G., Burström, B. & Rosén, M. (2004). *Premature mortality among lone fathers and childless men*. *Social Science & Medicine*, 59(7), 1449-1459.
- Wengraf, T. (2001). *Qualitative Research Interviewing. Biographic Narratives and Semi-Structured Methods*. SAGE Publications Ltd: London
- Wittenberg R, Pickard L, Malley J, King D, Comas-Herrera A, Darton R. (2008). *Future Demand for Social Care, 2005 to 2041: Projections of Demand for Social Care for Older People in England*: Personal Social Services Research Unit, The LSE

Thank you for listening!
Any questions?



rahadley7.8@gmail.com

[@RobinHadley1](#)

www.wantedtobeadad.com