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“Who is gonna pick me up when I fall?”: life stories of older childless men



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- 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)

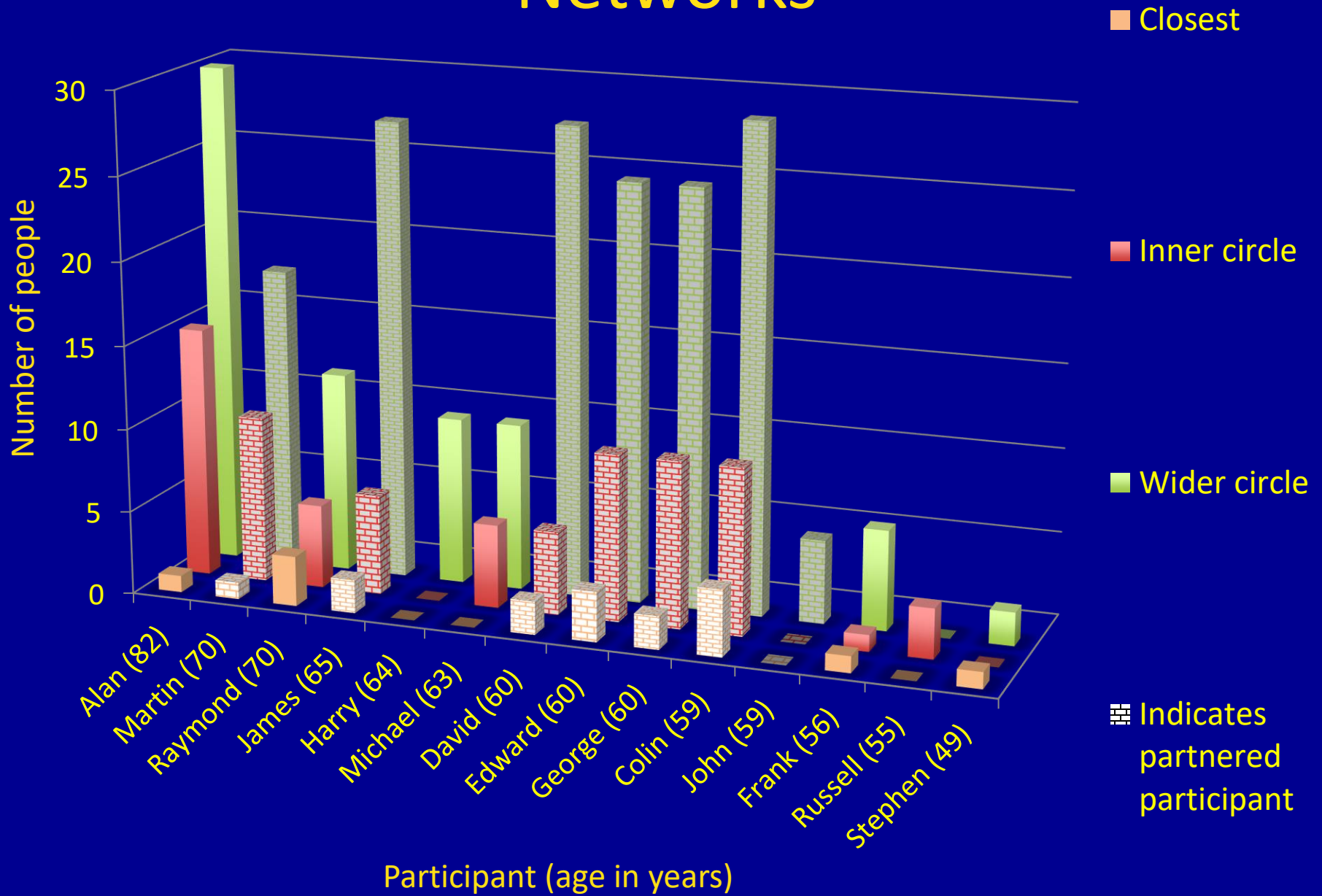
“I’m never going to be able to say, “This is my grandson” am I?” Harry (64)

“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.

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Thank you for listening!
Any questions?



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