


Please cite the Published Version

Hadley, Robin  (2023) The avoided and excluded knowns: people ageing without children/family. Ageing Issues Blog.

Publisher: British Society of Gerontology

Version: Accepted Version

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Additional Information: This is an accepted manuscript for a blog post which was published at Ageing Issues Blog

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Blog: Ageing Issues published 08-08-2023

The avoided and excluded knowns: people ageing without children/family.

In the Western world, childlessness affects one in four men and one in five women. In the UK the numbers of people ageing without children aged over 65 years is projected to rise to above 2 million by 2030. Although precarity in ageing is increasingly recognised in academia, people ageing without children are not acknowledged as a group and dismissed as a 'non-category' ^(1, 2). This means they are in danger of being invisible to academia, policymakers and other institutional stakeholders.

'If you are not counted, you don't count' has become a mainstream saying: few acknowledge that it was written by Horace Sheffield ⁽³⁾ to encourage the African American electorate to vote. More recently, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA) campaigners in America highlighted the importance of completing the census because of the link to state funding of food, health and housing support ⁽⁴⁾. The LGBTQIA community have high rates of accommodation precarity, homelessness and poverty ⁽⁴⁾ and more likely to be childless – especially gay men⁽⁵⁾. Taken in hand with a couple of popular management mantra's, 'If you can't measure it, you can't manage it' and 'What gets measured gets managed' ⁽⁶⁾ highlights the importance of being 'counted.' This leads to the question who gets counted? When it comes to measuring groups who decides who is included and who is excluded? Who is structurally excluded and/or made invisible? Does this matter? One such group is those ageing without children.

The global trend of an increasingly ageing populations has significant implications for both individuals and institutions alike given the demand for care increases in later life ^(1, 7).

Moreover, there is an increasing 'care gap' where demand has outstripped supply – and this

gap is set to increase in the future. At the same time in many parts of the United Kingdom (UK) there has been increased reliance on informal support as formal care services funding have been cut. This has led to both the raising of the entry criteria for statutory support and a reduction in the provision of low level support. Similarly, many voluntary organisations funding has reduced or ended meaning that advocacy and home based services have been withdrawn. For older people, the majority of unpaid care is carried out by adult children and/or spouses or partners. The social health and care system in the UK is almost completely reliant on family members to perform the bulk of adult informal care. As stated in the report by the House of Lords Committee on Adult Social Care ⁽⁸⁾ “‘Gloriously ordinary life’’: spotlight on adult social care’ it is the adult childless who are viewed as available to care for their older parents and/or other family members.

In the UK there is a significant gap in the population data which public bodies base current and future policy ⁽⁹⁾. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) published two reports on the increase in the age of mothers’ first birth ⁽¹⁰⁾ and a predicted tripling in the number of older childless women by 2045 ⁽¹¹⁾. It is important to realise that these reports are based on the mother’s fertility data given at birth registration and thus does not account for those who are childless for other reasons. For example, people may be ‘functionally childless ‘by-choice’ ‘by-circumstance’ ‘by familial disruption’ ‘by estrangement’ ‘chosen’ and parents may be ‘functionally childless’ (through bereavement, estrangement, geographical absence, miscarriage and stillbirth). Importantly, the omission of people ageing without children’s statistics from the datasets which current and future policy and practice are based, means health and care services at all levels will be under increased pressure from a known but uncounted and structurally excluded population. In both reports there are no equivalent statistics on men. This is because the number of children a father has is not collected at the

registration of a birth (see above). It is essential to note the impreciseness of the data on men compared to the accurate data on women and the failure to acknowledge there are more childless men than childless women. Parity in data collection is essential for both institutions and individuals alike.

The issue for those ageing without children/family is if they require support, they do not have the safety net of family. Consequently, many of those ageing without children/family are concerned on who will care for them when they need support ^(2, 9, 12, 13, 14).

Apprehensions include:

Financial implications: you may not have anyone to help you access support and you may need to rely on your own financial resources.

Social support: you may become more reliant on others for emotional and physical support.

Consequently, the size and dynamics of your familial and social network may become critical to your quality of life. You may need to draw on paid carers and/or rely on institutional services.

Health and Care: paucity of support may mean you do not access health and/or care services (or those services do not connect with you). For example, if you are admitted into hospital/care you may have concerns about pets and property.

Death: you may be worried about your funeral arrangements and if your wishes will be carried out ⁽¹⁵⁾.

Legacy: your family name may end and heirlooms, family stories and traditions are not passed on.

As the ONS reports emphasize, childlessness has serious implications for the provision of services across all ages - particularly for older people who need access to support as they age. Because people without children details are excluded, we will not know how many lack access to care and/or support from family members.

Author biography: Dr Robin A Hadley

Robin is an Associate Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, an Early Career Researcher and founder member of the campaign group Ageing Without Children. His sole-authored auto/biographical book, 'How is a man supposed to be a man? Male childlessness a Life Course Disrupted,' (New York, Berghahn Books) has won critical acclaim.

Robin has published several academic papers and contributed chapters in edited books and his research has been widely published in international and national media.

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