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Negative perceptions of older childless men

Older men who have never had children are a disadvantaged group but tend to be overlooked or worse, seen as a threat.

By Dr Robin Hadley

Listen

Who are MAWF?

Men ageing without family (MAWF) are a group that are invisible and an affront to traditional expectations. The MAWFs are all around and occupy every social category – so how are they invisible? The major reason why MAWFs are invisible is that the UK (unlike most countries, except Norway) only collects details on how many children a woman has had.

The level of childless men is not known although a **cohort study** indicated that in 2012, 25.4% of men and 19% of women had no biological children of their own.

Older men at risk

As Independent Age's work has found, older men are at **greater risk of social isolation**: 14% of older men experienced moderate to high social isolation compared to 11% of women. Older men without partners are more likely to be placed in residential care than equivalent women.

Childless adults are often seen as 'available to care' and are 20-40% **more likely to provide support** to their elderly parents than people with children. It is estimated that by **2030 there will be at least two million people** aged 65 and over without an adult child to support them if needed. Not knowing the level of MAWFs has serious implications for the men and for institutions.

A single, fatherless, gay friend said to me, '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?'

'Dirty old men'

Older men are viewed, at best, ambivalently. In academic and professional discourse, older men are of little interest for three reasons. First, they have been viewed through the political-economic perspective and judged by being married, having a pension and being retired. Second, men tended to work then die. Third, they have been viewed as hard to reach and uncommunicative and therefore condemned by their non-participation.

Research indicates that older men are viewed as a **threat and stereotyped as sexual predators**. Lone older men have frequently been viewed as '**dirty old men**' and as 'sexually driven, but also sexually inappropriate and/or sexually impotent'. I interviewed Harry (64 and involuntarily childless) in 2012 for my PhD.

After his partner's death, he feared being viewed as a paedophile, "When Helen was alive some of the [neighbours'] kids liked to come in and play with the dogs. [Following her death] I have to say, 'No! Look, go and get your dad.' It's things that bother you – I'd hate someone to look saying, 'Watch that old man, always got kids round him.' I don't want anyone looking at me thinking that."

More MAWFs in the future

Given that men's life expectancy has increased, there is a case that there will be more men living longer lives without having children. In later life it has been shown that relationships and social support are as important as physical health for wellbeing and preventing isolation and exclusion. Older men are more likely

to have very small networks compared to women. It is time to listen and take account of MAWFs – for we are legion.