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## 'There's something missing in my life': non-fatherhood on 'Fathers Day'

Almost every country in the world holds some form of national celebration to acknowledge the roles that Mothers, Fathers, and Grandparents play in the lives of their loved ones. In the United Kingdom, 'Father's Day' is on Sunday 17th June and on this day many men who perform the role of 'father' will receive cards and presents in thanks and celebration for their fathering activities. For a significant minority of men however, Father's Day has a different meaning. Unlike women, a man's fertility history is not recorded at the registration of a birth, as a result it is difficult to access precise figures about the rate of male childlessness in the UK. However, estimates suggest that around 25% of the UK adult male population is biologically childless which is approximately 5% more than the population of childless women. Childlessness is most often associated with women and, despite the growing numbers of women who remain voluntary childless, these women are still often subject to a range of responses from sympathy to hostility, suspicion and even aggression. For men however, the range of responses are more limited and often delivered covertly.

Childlessness is commonly viewed as binary of 'voluntary' and 'involuntary.' However, the reality is often much more complex and instead it is better to view childlessness as a continuum with two distinct groups at either end with the remainder locating themselves at different points at different times as personal circumstances change. Whilst some people make a decision early in life not to parent they may become a parent through other means, for example, forming a relationship with someone who is a parent. Other people who wanted to be a parent but ultimately do not have children are often labelled as 'involuntary childless.' This term is often associated with people who have had attempted to conceive using Assisted Reproductive Technologies but who were unable to create a family. However, there are many factors that influence people's parenthood status such as age, culture, economics, early years experience, gender, health, partner choice, and sexuality.

Accurate figures for those who experience involuntary childlessness are difficult to determine because people who do not seek treatment are not recorded. Furthermore, whilst numerous studies have examined the experience of involuntary childlessness following unsuccessful IVF treatment, much less research has examined the experiences of people who were unsuccessful in conceiving but did not make use of medicalised fertility treatment or who never tried to conceive but wanted to become a parent.

Further difficulties in capturing the experiences of those who never become parents' lies in how those experiences are defined. Much of the discussion around non-parenthood draws on a language of deficit: 'child-less'. Furthermore, alternatives such as 'childfree' 'childless-by-choice' may be viewed as excluding the experiences of those who feel a loss as opposed to freedom due to their non-parent status (Hadley, 2018 forthcoming). However, no matter how childless people self-define their status as 'not a parent', this has an impact on them across the life course, in terms of not only their self-identity but also how others perceive them.

Compared to women – who are most often socialized to assume 'maternal futures' (Hinton and Miller, 2013) – men are often seen as 'free' from the biological and social pressures of parenthood. However, whilst their reproductive actions or inactions are not exposed to the same level of scrutiny as women's, fatherhood remains a part of many men's normative expectations. Yet very little is known about their concerns, understandings or experiences of child desire or of potential future fatherhood (Culley, Hudson, and Lohan, 2013; Marsiglio, Lohan, and Culley, 2013).

My research examining older men's experience of involuntary childlessness found that factors such as infertility, partner selection, and timing of relationship formation and/or dissolution were the

most significant issues that shaped men's experience of unwanted childlessness. Furthermore, whilst these men developed a rational 'acceptance' of their childlessness, the reminders of not being a parent were ever-present. Whilst many of these men had not undergone medicalised fertility treatment to try to conceive a pregnancy, they reported elements of complex bereavement and disenfranchised grief often associated with infertility and failed fertility treatment. Other men also spoke of a feeling of loss, these losses included the roles and social dividend associated with parenthood, family status, and grandparenthood and a sense that 'There's something missing in my life.' A further underlying concern discussed by these men was how they would face old age as a, most often, single childless adult and whether they would be able to finance good quality health and social care services in later life in the absence of family members who may have otherwise been able to care for them (Hadley, 2015, 2018a).

On fathers-day we should doubtlessly give thanks to the men who raised us or parented children with us, whilst defining fatherhood as inclusively as modern parenting arrangements now allow. This includes the actions of cis and transgender men, men who are genetically related to the children they care/d for, stepfathers, claimed fathers, chosen fathers and those who 'parent' children or adults in their work or social life. However at the same time it is perhaps important we remember the men who have not, or did not, get to parent children in the way in which they desired.

In writing this blog, I wrote this poem:

No candle

No candle to light, no cake to cut, no nappies smelly, no teeth to keep, no hand to squeeze, no stories read, no surprise to feign, no plays to see, no shoes to clean, no sports-day drama, no parties to piece/police, no presents to buy, no amends to make, no scrapes to clean, no kiss-it-betters, no tears to dry, no hearts to mend, no embarrassment to give, no graduation photos snapped, no 'Can you help with this?' No now-empty nest, no grandchild to hold, no legacy to give, no one to call, no one to catch the fall, no wishes heard, no life-lived described, few tears shed, no candle lit.

By Robin Hadley, Independent Researcher

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