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#Blog for NetDoctor

How men get broody too

Increased life expectancy and lower fertility rates has implications for individuals and nations. Most people want or expect to be parents and the achievement of biological parenthood in most cultures and societies offers the surest way to a positively valued social identity. Factors that influence fertility decisions and outcome include the timing of exiting education, entry in to the workforce, relationship formation and dissolution, partner selection, economics, health and age also affected people's fertility decisions (Roberts et al., 2011, Simpson, 2008). Stereotypically, women are often defined by motherhood and men as ambivalent towards fatherhood. A diagnosis of potential or actual infertility can have significant life-long implications for mental and physical health, wellbeing, and close and wider relationships (Letherby, 2012). Post-infertility treatment men have often been reported as 'disappointed but not devastated' by not attaining fatherhood (Fisher and Hammarberg, 2012: p.142). This view still holds ground in much infertility literature despite that men have reported the treatment process had a profound effect on men's beliefs about themselves and their place in society (Throsby and Gill, 2004). Moreover, many involuntarily and voluntarily childless people have hidden their experience and status, to avoid stigma and/or protect themselves or others from pain (Letherby, 2012). For example, the UK's Prime Minister Theresa May's childless status became an issue during her leadership campaign. Her husband's childlessness was not mentioned.

The vast bulk of literature on reproduction is centred on women with little investigation of the male experience. This is based on the 'widely held but largely untested assumption' (Inhorn, 2012: p.6) that men are not interested in, and disengaged from, parenthood. Consequently, men have become marginalised as the 'second sex' (Inhorn et al., 2009: p.1) in all areas of social science scholarship and in the general media. In the UK, around 20% of women reaching the age of 45 have no biological children. The rate for men is unknown because a father's fertility history is not recorded at the registration of a birth. However, cohort studies show it is at least 25% for men. There is a paucity research on men's experiences on the desire for fatherhood. The little research that does exist concentrates on couples on fertility treatment, fertility intentions, fathers to be or those who are already fathers. Studies of health datasets have shown that childlessness has an impact on men's health and wellbeing. A Swedish study revealed that both lone childless men and lone non-custodial fathers had an increased risk of death through suicide, addiction, injury, poisoning, lung and heart disease (Weitoft et al., 2004). A cross-country study found that formerly married childless men recorded the highest incidence of excessive smoking and drinking, worse physical health, depression and sleeping difficulties (Kendig et al., 2007).

Let us start by busting the myth that men are not bothered about fatherhood. In order to see if that claim was true, I self-funded a study to try and find the level of 'broodiness' (2009, 2012, 2013) in men and women, non-parents and parents. I found that 59% of men (16) and 63% of women (51) said they wanted children. The main influences on men's wishes to have children were 'cultural and family expectations' with an underlying factor of 'biological urge' and 'personal desire.' Furthermore, non-parent men were as likely as non-parent women to want children were, and they felt more isolated, depressed, angry and sad than women were. The men that wanted children reported:

- 69% had experienced yearning for a child, compared with 71% women.
- 50% had experienced isolation because they did not have any children, compared with 27% women.
- 38% had experienced depression because they did not have any children, compared with 27% women.
- 25% had experienced anger because they did not have any children, compared with 18% women.
- 56% had experienced sadness because they did not have any children, compared with 43% women.
- 56% experienced jealousy of those with children, compared with 47% of women.
- No men had experienced guilt because they did not have any children, compared with 16% women.

In an earlier study and I interviewed 10 men aged (Hadley, 2008) about their experience of wanting to be a father. Fatherhood was viewed as a re-connection, repayment, repeat or replacement of their childhood experience. All the men reported having experienced depression: eight of the men thought that childlessness was an element in their mental health. The men also talked about feeling bereaved and isolated and some showed issues with alcohol and substance abuse. My PhD (2015) challenged the view that men are not as affected by involuntary childlessness as women. The 14 men who participated in the study spoke of 'missing out' on the father-child relationship. The majority of infertility literature highlights a transition from grief to acceptance. However, all the participants' expressed a complex constant negotiation of the loss of experience, identity, role, and intimate and wider relationships. Moreover, the continuity of disruption affects present and future agency: economic, existential, genetic, identity, legacy of familial stories and material, relational, role, and socio-cultural.

Summaries of my research can be found on my website: www.robinhadley.co.uk.

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