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Childless-by-circumstance: Is it different for men?

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The grief, and stereotypes, that childless-by-circumstance women experience were movingly described by Jody Day (<http://gateway-women.com/>) on BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour on the 1st of October, 2013 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01hvg71>). During the programme, I tweeted that men are also childless-by-circumstance, and this was acknowledged by the host, who went on to suggest that, 'The stereotypes don't so easily attach themselves to men do they?' Jody, to her credit, speculated that although men had a similar emotional journey as women it was a different one. The problem identified here relates to the heteronormative pronatalist view that 'mothering' and 'nurturing' are the 'ideal' default positions for women, while 'virility' and 'providing' are those for men. Women who do not conform, such as the voluntarily*¹ and involuntarily* childless, are subject to a range of reactions from sympathy to antipathy. Moreover, the former tend to be viewed with less sympathy than the latter (Brescoll and Uhlman, 2005).

What then for men?

There is a paucity of research into male childlessness compared to the cannon of material on women (Throsby and Gill, 2004). Infertility studies report that men, diagnosed as infertile, are subject to negative behaviours, including: suspicion, exclusion, discrimination, and isolation, from both females and males, as are house-husbands and fathers who are widowers (Smith, 1998, Throsby and Gill, 2004, Hadley and Hanley, 2011). Men, who do not conform to fatherhood mandate - the patriarchal construct of 'virility-proved-by-fertility' (Lloyd, 1996) - may behave in more extreme masculine ways or reduce their voice, and visibility, thus becoming 'liminal' (Hudson & Morgan, 2000; Ribbens & Edwards, 1998). Moreover, the male gender socialization is associated i.e. the ideal of hegemonic masculinity with symbolic roles of dominance, power, and control. These include masculine traits of machismo, virility, and objectivity and displayed through such behaviours as being emotionally distant, rational, and controlling. Wong and Rochlen's (2005) study demonstrated that although men have the same emotional experience as women, their wherewithal to access, process, and verbalise their feelings were limited. In addition, research has indicated that childless men have a

¹ * These are contested terms: space does not allow for any thorough discussion of the issues involved. Any term used would be disputed and this reflects both the subjectivity and sensitivity of procreativity.

similar level of yearning for parenthood as childless women and, furthermore, childless men had higher levels of anger, depression, jealousy, and isolation than women (Hadley, 2009, 2012).

The distribution of stereotypes that the Woman's Hour presenter alluded to reflected the dominant pronatalist positioning of women as nurturing/caring and men as aggressive/rational. As a researcher studying older childless-by-circumstance men, and as an involuntarily childless man who was very broody in his thirties (Hadley, 2013), challenging those stereotypes is not easy. Research in the field of older men who are involuntarily childless is important, not only because of actual and projected demographic change but also because of the lack of material reporting the effects of involuntary childlessness on men as they age (Dykstra and Keizer, 2009). For example, there are implications for the childless at national levels with much political rhetoric advancing the future centrality of family in the care of older relatives, with the demand for familial care in England projected to grow by about 90% by 2041 and exceed supply (Pickard et al., 2009). Gerontological research has shown that relationships and social support are as important as physical health for personal development and wellbeing. In Britain, there are a growing number of households of solo occupancy with an increasing number of older people living in that circumstance, the majority of whom are men. Childless people are clearly absent from policy discussions; for example, they are not referred to in the last Government's strategy paper 'Building a society for all ages' (Department for Work and Pensions, 2009).

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