

“How is a man supposed to be a man?”: The experiences of involuntarily childless men

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1. Introduction

The aim of this study was to examine the lives of older involuntarily childless (IvC) men. Research in the field of older IvC men is important, not only because of an increasingly ageing population and a declining fertility rate (Dykstra 2009), but also because of the lack of research material on men as they age (Dykstra and Keizer, 2009) Divorced and widowed childless men show higher rates of depression than same status women (Zhang and Hayward, 2001). Older childless men have smaller social networks and are poorer in terms of health, diet, self-care, and wellbeing than those married with children (Dykstra and Keizer, 2009).

2. Lacunae

Men are missing from both childlessness and ageing research. Childlessness is typically divided into two types ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary.’ Most research focuses on the latter and is based on those in pre, participating in, or post, infertility treatment. Men are generally excluded from this research (Dykstra and Keizer 2009). Most gerontological research has focussed on older women, as they lived longer, had high chronic co-morbidities, received more state benefits, and occupied the majority of the home care sector (Arber et al, 2003; Arber, 2004). Financial research has focused on differences in women’s marital status (Arber, 2004).

Quotes and Themes

Identity

‘I’d hate someone to look saying, ‘Watch that old man...’ (Harry, 64)

Existential Masculinity

‘How is a man supposed to be a man?’ (Frank, 56)

Reproductive capital

‘The currency of the sort of social network is children, usually.’ (Martin, 70)

Solo living and future health

‘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?’ (Michael, 63)

Relationship disruption

‘We split up. I was 42, she was 35 - she wanted kids but with someone her age or younger’ (Steven, 49)

Economic disruption

‘The bloody interest rates hit 13%. It needed the two of us to be working - that made us delay...’ (John, 59)

Born at the right time

‘I was very fortunate, the NHS had just been established, I managed to buy and sell houses just before it all went tits up’ (Martin, 70)

Adopted grandfatherhood

‘They asked if they could adopt me as a granddad. That lasted 3 years - it was great. I felt I belonged...that’s what I miss’ (Alan, 82)

Peer relationships

‘He had two daughters, I went through a period of being immensely jealous of him.’ (Edward, 60)

Latent grandfatherhood

‘I was 15, I knew I was gay, I wouldn’t be getting married - you had to be to have kids then.’
‘I think, in a way, of the two little ones at work as the grandchildren I’ve never had.’ (Raymond, 70)

Isolation

‘People have no conception of just how isolated someone who hasn’t got kids in middle age is.’ (Russell, 55)

3. The study

Qualitative semi-structured biographical interviews* were held across the country with 14 men, aged between 49-82 years. Giving an age range of 33, mean age of 63.5 and a median of 60.5. 13 of the participants were White-British, one Australian, and two Gay. 13 participants were interviewed twice with one refusing the second interview. Most interviews were held in the participant’s home with 11 men interviewed face-to-face, 1 via Skype, 1 via email, and 1 via telephone. Total interview time ranged from 1hr 57 mins., to 7hrs 58minutes. Nvivo9 was used to store, retrieve, and aid the on going thematic analysis. *Pseudonyms have been used.

4. Findings

Preliminary findings highlight the complex intersections between agency, structure, masculinity, economics, transitions over the life course, and relationships. The majority of the men reported the impact of shyness: both in their formative years and throughout life. The fear of being viewed as a paedophile (erastophobia) was prevalent throughout the study. Quality of life and health were often conflated especially for those with chronic conditions. Future health was seen as one of decline with the loss of being active the commonest fear. Fictive kin were mostly via partners family. Grandfatherhood had been experienced via four routes: Latent, Adopted, Surrogate, and Proxy.