

# “I will never be a grandfather”: the effects of involuntary childlessness in the lives of older men.

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## 1. Aim

This paper examines how involuntary childlessness impacts on the lives and identity of older men. The worldwide decline in fertility levels and increase in the age of mortality has serious implications for nations and individuals. For the state, the concerns are the funding of both pensions and social and health care. For older people family and social network are important for access to informal and formal health and social care. In later life, isolation and loneliness directly affect health and well-being (Hadley, 2018). Not fulfilling the dominant social status of parenthood challenges identity and health. The experiences of childless men are mostly absent from research in the social sciences.

## 2. Data & Methods

For this purpose, in-depth semi-structured biographical interviews with 14 self-defined involuntary childless men were held. The men's ages ranged from 49 to 82 years (mean 63.5) and cover the third age transition (Phillipson, 2013). One man was Anglo-Celtic Australian and the others White-British. Two men self-identified as gay and the remainder as heterosexual, seven had partners and seven were single. Two men were widowers. Eleven of the interviews were face-to-face; two were conducted via Skype and one by email. The methodological framework encompassed four approaches: biographical, critical gerontology, feminist, and life course. Nvivo9 was used to manage all the material and a latent thematic analysis applied the data. Keele University Ethics Panel approved the study.

## 3. Results

The findings showed the different factors that led to involuntary childlessness: upbringing, socio-economics, timing of events, relationship skills, sexuality, choice and attitude of partner, relationship formation and dissolution, and bereavement. Health, relationships, and social networks all affected quality of life. Feeling of being an “outsider” and a fear of being viewed a paedophile were widely reported. The results highlighted how non-fatherhood influenced behaviour, attitude, and identity locations across the life course.

## 4. Conclusion

From these findings, recognition of those ageing without children or family is of great importance to both the state and the individual. All the men felt they were 'missing out' on the expected identity, role, and emotional experience of fatherhood. Acceptance of childlessness was not linear: each man's response was influenced by interpersonal, intrapersonal, life course and wider social factors. Older people without adult children access formal social and health care at an earlier than equivalent peers with adult children (Albertini & Mencarini, 2014). In addition, the duration of their access to services is also longer. By not acknowledging those who are ageing-without-children, government and health and care organisations are excluding a significant minority of the population from current and future policy and practice.

## References

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