Mining the Gap: 
A Literature Review of the Male 
Experience of Involuntary Childlessness

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My background.
Sources of Literature

◆ Hard copy & Virtual.
◆ Organisations: professional and interest groups.
◆ Networking.
◆ Two categories: Demography and Infertility.
World view


◆ Increased debate regarding falling fertility rate and ageing population (Agree & Glaser, 2009)
Life course perspective

- In the UK population set to increase to 71.6 million in 2033 (Pickard et al, 2009).
- By 2033 average age will be 42.2 from 39.9
- Oldest ages (85+) increasing fastest (ONS, 2009).
- An increasing trend in older people in solo households living - especially men (Jamieson, 2009)
Demography


- Childlessness: a new phenomenon?
- What influences fertility trends?
- Lifestyle attitudes: Timing of decision to have children.
- Male attitudes to women, socio-economic, and health.
Routes to childlessness

- Timing of transitional events influenced childlessness (Hagestad and Call, 2007):
  - Leaving home, educational level,
  - marrying later, early divorce,
  - employment type.
Later life health and childlessness

- Affects on lifestyle in later life include (Kendig et al 2007):
  - Poor health behaviour in the elderly childless male and female.
  - ‘A group at risk of social isolation, loneliness, depression, ill health, and increased mortality’ (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007: 1288)
Involuntary childlessness

- No difference in level of desire for parenthood between childless males and females (Hadley, 2009).
- Approximately 1 in 6 couples seek medical help regarding conceiving (HEFA, 2009).
- Diagnosis of infertility has serious affects on identity and wellbeing (Bartlam, 2004).
- Difficult to estimate the level of involuntary childlessness (Monach, 1993).
Involuntary childlessness and men.

- Most infertility studies have concentrated on women (Throsby & Gill, 2004).
- Most research on childless men based on infertility treatment and father’s to be.
- Male infertility negatively affected mental and physical health and social profile.
Health and childless men.

◆ Divorced childless men suffered poorer health. Excessive drinking, smoking, depression and sleeping difficulties (Kendig et al 2007).

◆ Lone childless men and fathers have increased risk of death through suicide, addiction, injury, external violence, poisoning, lung and heart disease.

◆ Linked to ‘emotional instability and willingness to take risks’ (Weitoft et al, 2004).
Material on involuntary childless men


◆ Findings: focus was on provider, economic safety, independence and professional status.

◆ Unlike women IVC not viewed as reflection on identity or social position.

Findings include sense of loss and also a ‘gap’ between themselves in peer, social, and family relationships.

Results of later study she found similar issues for gay childless men: complex bereavement.

Common between the two was different ways of negotiating of dominant pro-natalist hetero-normative assumptions.

Findings include sense of a gap; discriminated against in close, familial, social, & work settings.

9 reported episodes of depression with 8 feeling childlessness was an element in that.

Also of loss, isolation, addiction, substance abuse and social stress
Emerging Research Questions

- How does childlessness affect older men?
- What are men’s experiential accounts of being childless?
- How does being childless impact on childless men’s relationships with others?
- How do childless men feel others treat them?
- What are men’s perceptions of childlessness.
Thank you for listening.
Any questions?

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References


Dalzell, A. (2007). “The expectation has always been that I’ll not have kids” - the narratives of childless gay men. Unpublished M.Ed dissertation, University of Bristol, Bristol.


References 2


