

## INTRODUCTION

---

‘I want to have your baby; you’ll be a great Dad.’ I have heard these words on relatively few occasions in my life, but each time my heart has either lifted with joy or plummeted with fear. As I approach sixty-two years of age, the words I hear now are, ‘You would have made a great Dad.’ Although my heart sinks a little, I dodge my sadness and move the conversation on. I am a childless man who has, at times, been desperately ‘broody’ to be a father. There have been times when I have ached to be a Dad. My reactions to ‘broodiness’ over the years have ranged across anger, elation, denial, depression, hurt, guilt, isolation, jealousy, relief, sadness, yearning and withdrawal. Infertility research has found that both men and women report similar reactions (Throsby and Gill 2004: 366). Consequently, this book is automatically auto/biographical; this approach situates the biographies of ‘the researcher and the participants as data and as an inextricable part of the research process’ (Carroll 2013: 547). The reasons for drawing on this approach (among others) are rooted in the landmark work of Charles Wright Mills (1959). Wright Mills (1959: 204) argued that ‘The social scientist is not some autonomous being standing outside society, the question is where he [*sic*] stands within it.’ Award-winning anthropologist Professor Marcia Inhorn (2012: 18) reasons that researchers should share their ‘methodological toolkit’ with readers. She argues that not to do so lessens the credibility of the research. The details of the methodology I used – the ‘why, how, who, what and when’ – are detailed in Chapter 3.

I believe that research in the field of older men who are involuntarily childless is important, not only because of the scarcity of material relating to the effects of involuntary childlessness on men as they age (Dykstra and Keizer 2009) but also because of the impact of actual and projected demographic change. The global

demographic trend of increasing longevity and declining fertility rates has been widely reported (Rozer, Mollenhorst and Poortman 2017). In 2017, The Pew Center website reported that in the United States of America, 'Nearly one-in-five American women ends her childbearing years without having borne a child, compared with one-in-ten in the 1970' (Livingston and Cohn 2010). Comparable trends have been found in Australia (Corsetti 2017; Parr 2009), Canada (Grenier 2017), China (Feng 2017), Europe (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka 2017), South Africa (Masebe and Ramosebudi 2016) and New Zealand (Boddington and Didham 2008, 2009; Didham 2016).

This book focuses on men's experience of involuntary childlessness and is based mainly on the research I conducted for my Social Gerontology doctorate (Hadley 2015). Throughout the book, I am concerned with increasing the understanding of the experiences of men who, for whatever reason, involuntarily do not father. In doing so, I hope that this will lead to greater comprehension of men and the male experience. In addition to revealing the real-life impact of unwanted male childlessness, this book shows how to conduct rigorous research with people who are disenfranchised socially in the real world and systemically in the academic and political spheres: their experiences are not cherished, counted, courted or comprehended. In this Introduction, I begin by describing my own motivations for studying male involuntary childlessness. I then move on to give a guide to the layout of the book, followed by a brief summary of the content of each chapter.

## **Why Study Childless Men?**

The incentive for undertaking research into male involuntary childlessness is grounded in my personal, professional and academic experience. My interest in male involuntary childlessness started as the subject of my dissertation for my Master of Arts in Counselling (Hadley 2008a). A number of clients had brought the subject to counselling and this had raised my awareness of the issue. The criterion for the subject of the dissertation was personal experience. I discussed the various topics with my supervisor Dr Liz Ballinger. I grew increasingly desperate as Liz gently rejected my grand schemes. I tentatively offered 'I was really broody in my thirties', and improvising from my own experience, detailed my feelings of 'broodiness'. Liz responded immediately, 'I've never

heard of that before. Do that.’ As I had been particularly broody in my mid-thirties, I wondered if other men had similar feelings. I am defining ‘broody’ as the behaviours, feelings, thoughts and urges that constitute the emotional and physical desire to be a parent. My reactions to my ‘broodiness’ have included: anger, depression, elation, guilt, isolation, jealousy, relief, sadness, yearning and withdrawal (Hadley 2008a, 2013). I was raised with the expectation of being a father: ‘You’ll have to make these difficult decisions when you have children of your own’, was a favourite refrain of my parents in times of dispute. On the two occasions partners have told me they wanted to have children with me, my reactions have ranged between relief, panic, joy, fear and pressure. In the first instance, these related to my age (mid-twenties), employment, normative role assumptions and self-doubt regarding my emotional, economic and skill capacity to be a ‘good’ father. After ‘trying’ for a baby, that relationship ended just before I turned 30 years old. The second occasion was in my mid-thirties, by which time my self-doubt had abated and my thoughts around fatherhood were along the lines of, ‘Yes, I can do this’. However, that relationship ended soon after that conversation. From my twenties onwards, my peers were becoming parents, and I became jealous of those who became fathers. For example, I told one friend, who had recently become a father, ‘You have the life I should have had.’ In my late thirties, I met my partner and, after the relationship became serious, we discussed my wish to become a father. I was in the position of either staying in a relationship with a wonderful woman or trying to locate a partner who wanted children with me. It was my choice and I placed our relationship first. However, I was conscious of not quite ‘fitting’ in with peers and not being able to access the social dividend of parenthood. In my early forties, I was also diagnosed with a 30 per cent hearing loss, and this, along with my counselling knowledge, gave me great insight into who, and how, I was.

A combination of that awareness, my counselling of involuntarily childless men and finding that there was little research on men’s desire for fatherhood inspired me to consider taking my interest in ‘male broodiness’ further. However, my attempts to find a funded doctorate failed and as an interim measure, I self-funded a Master of Science (MSc) degree in research methods (Hadley 2009). In my MSc research study, I attempted to find the levels of desire for parenthood between women and men, non-parents and parents. One of my assumptions had been that women would be considerably ‘broodier’ than men would. The findings, however,

showed that childless men were nearly as 'broody' as childless women (see Chapter 1). Moreover, the few studies that did call attention to the male experience were from a feminist perspective. Having gained a distinction in my MSc I then spent several months looking for a funded doctorate. In 2010, I was fortunate enough to be offered a full studentship by Keele University in the Centre for Social Gerontology, on the understanding that the study would focus on older childless men.

In the process of completing the Masters I had grown increasingly aware of how biological parenthood is accorded adult status in many different sociocultural forms, with the vast majority of societies and faiths exemplifying the parenthood ideal (Monach 1993). Moreover, I understood how those women who do not achieve the 'motherhood mandate' (Russo 1976: 144) and men the ideal 'package deal' (Townsend 2002) of work, relationship and fatherhood were subject to stigmatization (Brescoll and Uhlman 2005; Smith 1998; Veevers 1980). Furthermore, I had found that many sociological studies have concentrated on measuring women's marital status, fertility intentions, age at first birth and family size. Because of the historical attitude that fertility and family formation are relevant only to women, there is little available data on men's fertility intentions and history (Dykstra and Keizer 2009; Murphy 2009). Nonetheless, recently there has been an increase in both the academic and general media material on fatherhood, fathering and grandparenting (Arber and Timonen 2012; Doucet 2006; Lupton and Barclay 1997; Van Wormer 2019).

In the past, fatherhood has only been viewed through the lens of the cultural, legal and societal rules that dictated 'rights, duties, responsibilities and statuses' (Hobson and Morgan 2002: 11). Nevertheless, contemporary studies have highlighted the complex relationship between sociocultural practices and men's experiences of being a father, fathering, fatherhood and grandfatherhood (Brannen and Nilsen 2006; Doucet and Lee 2014). In many Western societies, the concept of fatherhood has moved from the traditional 'provider/disciplinarian' to an ideal of 'involved fatherhood'. In this type of parenting men are expected to be both intimate and involved parents (Hadley 2019a; Lupton and Barclay 1997, 1999). Nonetheless, research highlights the strains and limits between the practice and cultural ideal of 'involved fathering' (Daniels and Chadwick 2018; Featherstone 2009; Lupton and Barclay 1997). Some fathers have found that involvement in childcare and home life was fundamental to their sense of identity (Daniels

and Chadwick 2018; Shirani, Henwood and Coltart 2012). Likewise, some new fathers have found work relationships improved because they 'could share that experience' with colleagues (Goldberg 2014: 158). Nicole Daniels and Rachele Chadwick's (2018: 725) study of South African men found 'selfless masculinity' to be a key masculine ideal 'in which giving and service during birth was constructed as integral to being a good father and man'. However, Daniels and Chadwick observed that post-birth, there was a tension between maintaining caring and nurturing roles and traditional provider and protector roles. Equally, Caroline Gatrell et al. (2015: 235) found that some contemporary fathers struggle to balance 'the need, or desire, to engage in childcare' and breadwinning. Similarly, some 'stay-at-home-dads' described feeling strong social pressure to return to the traditional provider role (Shirani, Henwood and Coltart 2012). However, the large volume of academic literature and general media on motherhood highlights the small amount on fatherhood. Significantly, there is even less work on male involuntary childlessness and childlessness-by-circumstance (Hadley 2019; Throsby and Gill 2004).

The lack of men's voices in the literature surrounding reproduction is matched by a similar absence in ageing research (gerontology). Gerontological research in the last twenty years has focused on the lives of older women, mainly because of the disadvantageous status of women in terms of economics, health and care (Arber, Davidson and Ginn 2003; Fennell and Davidson 2003). Although in the past, women lived longer than men, demographic forecasts predict that the age of men's mortality will almost equal that of women in the next few decades. Moreover, demography highlights that with an ageing population there is also a growing demand for care in later life, because more people are living for longer with increased health issues.

The demand for both social and healthcare services increases with age, and recognition of the impact of this has raised serious concerns for governments, institutions and individuals regarding the cost and provision of such services (Pickard 2015; Wittenberg et al. 2008). For example, by 2033 the population of the United Kingdom is predicted to rise to 71.6 million, with those aged 85 and over more than doubling to 3.3 million (Office for National Statistics 2009). Those needing care are projected to grow by around 90 per cent by 2041, with carer numbers predicted to only increase by approximately 27 per cent (Pickard et al. 2009). Moreover, adult children typically undertake informal care with an 'oldest old' relative (Hoff 2015).

'Childless' adults are often seen as 'available to care' (Beth Johnson Foundation/Ageing Without Children 2016) and are 20–40 per cent more likely to provide support than equivalent adults with families (Pesando 2018). In the UK, 58 per cent of carers are female and 42 per cent male (Carers UK 2015), and it is estimated that by 2030 there will be at least two million people aged 65 and over without an adult child to support them if needed (McNeil and Hunter 2014; Pickard et al. 2012). Older childless men have smaller social networks and poorer behaviours in terms of health, diet, self-care and well-being than those married with children (Dykstra and Keizer 2009). Therefore, it is important to move beyond statistics and find the lived reality of being an older involuntarily childless man. An in-depth understanding of the why, how, what, when and who would give insight into individuals who are little understood.

All my academic work has been influenced by the work of feminist scholars (this is discussed further in Chapters 3 and 8). As a male researcher I acknowledge the influence feminist research and feminisms have had on qualitative research in general, and my work in particular (see Pease 2000, 2013). Drawing on that background, and in common with the sociological concept of reflexivity, I will now locate myself within this research by supplying a brief autobiography (Birch 1998). I am a White British, heterosexual male, 61 years old, divorced and remarried, with a non-genetic lifelong hearing impairment. I am the seventh youngest of eight children and I was born, raised and educated in Old Trafford, a working-class area of Manchester. I worked for thirty-one years as a scientific and technical photographer before training, and qualifying, as a counsellor. My academic background follows my multimodal counselling style, in that it draws on the knowledge, experience, myths and legends of different tribes. As such, and much like many childless people, I define myself by what I am 'not' – I am not solely a counsellor, educationalist, gerontologist or sociologist. However, I drew on all those fields, and more, in the undertaking of this study. I am a childless man who has, at times, been desperately affected by the desire to be a biological father (Hadley 2008b, 2012b, 2013). My age and childlessness reinforce the auto/biographical methodological foundations of this book. Moreover, my background and lived experience permeate this study in many ways – both consciously and unconsciously.

Wright Mills (1959: 216) urged social scientists to 'learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine it and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship [*sic*] is the centre

of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you ... work.' Liz Stanley (1992) highlighted the relationship and intersection between a researcher's and participants' biographies by her use of the term 'auto/biography'. Michael Brennan and Gayle Letherby (2017: 156) argue the case for an 'autobiographical continuum' ranging from *auto/biography* to *auto/biography*. The former refers to academics who write about themselves and identify the significance of others in their story. The latter write about others but in the process recognize the importance of their own experience. However, auto/biography has been criticized for self-indulgence and as a means of covering poor work (Letherby 2002c; Merrill and West 2009). Nevertheless, the same accusation has recently been levelled at 'objective' research methods, including 'gold standard' clinical randomized control trials (Goldacre 2008, 2012). In addition, Cotterill and Letherby (1993: 67) argue that 'all academic research and subsequent writing involves, whether acknowledged or not, the weaving of the biographies of all participants and significant others'. Stanley (1992, 1993) meanwhile concludes that the 'auto/biographical I' demonstrates 'the active inquiring presence of the sociologists in constructing, rather than discovering, knowledge' (Stanley 1993: 41). The auto/biographical approach emphasizes that researchers are not detached, neutral observers and that self, involvement, privilege and power are acknowledged in the research process (Hugill 2012; Letherby 2002c). Moreover, I want to represent the participants as accurately as possible and believe that the auto/biographical approach automatically adds the important dimension of critical reflexivity to this work. This was demonstrated earlier in this chapter and will be apparent throughout the text – for example, in Chapter 3, where I describe the methodology and methods used, and then in Chapter 8, in how I arrived at my conclusions. Chapter 8 also contains my final reflections at the end of the study, and I acknowledge how the research has changed my understanding and worldview. In the Epilogue, I take a more 'improvised' approach to describe male childlessness, examine common myths around men and reproduction, suggest ways of working with men and draw on contemporary research to illustrate how men are the second sex in other fields as well as reproduction. Pen portraits of the participants are presented in Appendix 1. Each pen portrait is based on my notes taken post-interview, and each ends with a brief description of my reflections on the interview interaction. I therefore strongly believe that the approach I have taken is academically and sociologically credible,

plausible and valid. Finally, central to my research is the enabling of the previously unheard voices of involuntarily childless men to be heard. On that basis alone, it would be both unethical and ironic not to include my own voice.

## **The Aims of My Research Study**

The vast bulk of this book is based on my doctoral research study. The aim of that study was to address the gap in evidence surrounding older men's lived experiences of involuntary childlessness. To achieve that objective, I had to acknowledge the contextual background of an increasing ageing population, a falling fertility rate and the decline in familial support in later life. Likewise, the impact of involuntary childlessness on the men's health, identity, well-being, relationships, social networks and social interactions had to be explored. To understand the influences on how older men became involuntarily childless, the study aimed to:

- explore the participants' attitudes and behaviours in relation to the experience of involuntary childlessness;
- examine the influences on the participants' quality of life;
- suggest policy recommendations relating to the needs of involuntarily childless men as they age.

One objective of the study was to add to the debates surrounding reproduction and ageing by bringing the experiences of older involuntarily childless men to the attention of the public, academics, policymakers, service providers and practitioners. To address these research aims the study posed the following research questions:

*Research question 1:* What are men's attitudes and behaviours in relation to their experiences of involuntary childlessness?

*Research question 2:* How do men describe the influence of involuntary childlessness on their quality of life and relationships with close, familial and wider social networks?

*Research question 3:* What are involuntarily childless men's expectations of the future?

*Research question 4:* What are the future policy and service implications of the findings in relation to the above?



## Structure of the Book

Following the Introduction, the book consists of a further eight chapters and an Epilogue, which are briefly described here.

The two chapters that immediately follow examine and evaluate the literature surrounding childlessness and ageing. In Chapter 1, I explore the contested meanings and understanding surrounding childlessness, including the exclusion and marginalization of men from the sociocultural narratives that surround parenthood and non-parenthood. I look at the key literature on the dynamic and complex issues that surround childlessness over the life course. Chapter 2 examines three aspects of ageing. Firstly, I explore the relationship between ageing and gender, before focusing on masculinity and ageing. I then scrutinize the broader implications of ageing and childlessness in the wider context of family and social relationships. I move on to propose that a biographical interview method would be a suitable means of gaining an in-depth understanding of involuntarily childless men's experiences over the life course. Chapter 3 depicts the methodological and theoretical foundation of, and the methods utilized in, the study. I examine the rationale for my use of a qualitative approach to my fieldwork that draws on life course, critical gerontological and biographical perspectives. I describe the stages of my fieldwork, from the pilot interview through to an explanation of the thematic analysis used to examine the participants' narratives.

The subsequent four chapters present the findings of my research. In Chapters 4 to 7, I describe the main themes that I have drawn from my analysis of my participants' life stories. Chapter 4 illustrates the different factors and events that influenced the men's involuntary childlessness. Chapter 5 elucidates the affect that not becoming a father had on the participants' 'closest', 'inner' and 'wider' relationships and social networks. Chapter 6 reports on the men's views of their childlessness and the impact it has had on their lives. Chapter 7 provides an insight into my participants' views of their economical position, health and thoughts regarding the future. Chapter 8 concludes the research, and in it I discuss my findings, both in relation to the earlier review of the literature and the research questions. I then move on to consider the contribution that my study has made to this area of research and highlight a possible theoretical approach and areas for further research. This is followed by an examination of the study, including its limitations.

The chapter concludes with my reflexive account of the study and final reflections on undertaking this research. Finally, in the Epilogue I discuss my experiences since completing the study and offer suggestions on how the findings may be used by practitioners and stakeholders from nursing, counselling and psychotherapy, and social work.

My research project was in the field of social gerontology: a field covering the sociology of ageing that tends to focus on later life. However, the subject of male childlessness has seldom been explored, even though it covers many of the disciplines of the humanities and the social sciences: for example, anthropology, demography, education, health, human geography, law, media, philosophy, politics, psychology, sociology and religion. Interest in my work has come from all those disciplines. Consequently, I have written this book from my background in gerontology, and I touch on many of the above areas. Accordingly, the likelihood is that a specialist in a particular discipline may be disappointed that I have not covered a specific subject in detail. I hope you understand that it was not possible for me to do so. However, I do hope that all readers can engage with the participants' experiences and apply their personal or professional lens to the material. Consequently, the book has been written so that the reader can dip in and out of chapters. For example, some scholars may be particularly interested in the methodological approach taken (Chapter 3). Others may be more interested in reading about the life stories and experiences of the men who participated in my research (Chapters 4 to 7).