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# Childlessness and Parenthood in Two Centuries

## Different Roads—Different Maps?

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The article focuses on findings that were replicated across several countries and considers their relevance for future older adults. Key findings are that (a) childlessness makes more of a difference in men's than in women's lives, (b) never-married women are a childless category with particularly favorable characteristics, and (c) childless people face support deficits only toward the end of life. In future cohorts, the authors expect to see (a) clearer contrasts between childless men and fathers, given indications that men are being more strongly selected into parenthood; (b) diminished differences between childless women and mothers, given the improved conditions for combining work and care; (c) fewer differences in reliance on formal support between older people with and without children, given the increased levels of education and material resources; and (d) that involuntary childlessness will be all the more distressing, given that a chosen life path has been blocked.

**Keywords:** *childlessness; future older adults; gender; parenthood; selection into fatherhood*

In the introductory article of this two-part special issue (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007), we argued that to understand what it means to be without children in late life, researchers need to stop viewing childless old people as an

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undifferentiated group. Rather, the diversity among them must be recognized and respected, pathways leading to childlessness must be taken into account, and gender contrasts need be considered. A new, variegated view will also challenge the common assumption that they are a uniformly sad bunch of individuals who lack essential fulfillment in their lives. Furthermore, their lives need to be put in context, with attention to shifting political, economic, and cultural landscapes, including historic upheavals such as the two World Wars and the Depression.

The findings reported in this issue came from surveys that were not specifically designed to examine the meanings of childlessness in late life. Nevertheless, the studies had sufficiently large sample sizes to allow comparisons, for men and women, between older parents and childless individuals, and to compare the circumstances of those who had remained childless in marriage to those who never married and therefore had no children. The data sets also made it possible to examine whether the consequences of no longer being married were similar for those with and those without children. Whereas most of the surveys only had information on the number of surviving children, some allowed the distinction between never having had children and outliving all one's children.

Across articles, we see illustrations of how important it is to consider marital history (i.e., differences between those who are currently married, formerly married, or never married) and gender when looking at late-life differences between parents and childless individuals. Few clear main effects of childlessness emerge. Rather, the typical pattern is that not having children makes a difference under specific circumstances or for specific categories of individuals. In what follows, we paint a broad picture of contrasts in life outcomes that emerge from the articles. Whenever possible, we focus on general patterns that were replicated across several countries where necessary data were available. In many instances, the consistency in findings is striking, although survey-specific variations do exist. We end with a discussion of the relevance of the findings for future cohorts of old people.

## **Patterns That Emerged**

### **Socioeconomic Status**

Data on late-life socioeconomic status were available for Australia, Finland, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States (articles by Dykstra & Wagner, 2007 [this issue]; Kendig, Dykstra, van Gaalen, & Melkas, 2007 [this issue]; Koropeckyj-Cox & Call, 2007).

Parenthood (measured as having surviving children) did not show up as a correlate of socioeconomic inequality among older men; however, marital history did. Among men, the currently married, regardless of parental status, consistently emerged as the most advantaged group, in terms of educational level, occupational prestige, and income. Their superior socioeconomic status compared to that of formerly married men is probably to some extent a cohort effect: Men with intact marriages are younger, that is, from cohorts that had better opportunities in the labor market, given the increased prosperity that started in the 1950s. The superior socioeconomic status of married men compared to never-married men is conceivably also attributable to differential selection into marriage: Men with poor socioeconomic prospects are less likely to find partners than are men with “good provider” potential (Becker, 1981/1991; Bernard, 1972/1982; Oppenheimer, 1994).

As was the case for men, marital history, rather than parenthood status, emerged as a predictor of socioeconomic inequality among older women; however, the pattern of marital history contrasts was different. Across surveys, findings consistently showed a strong socioeconomic position for never-married women—who were childless because they had remained single. Their advantaged status might well have contributed to their not marrying. Several authors have pointed out that for high-resource women in these cohorts, marriage with a traditional gender-based division of roles may have had limited attraction (Freeman & Klaus, 1984; Havens, 1973). It typically meant lost investments in schooling and career, as well as giving up employment ambitions. High-resource women might also have been unattractive potential partners for men in search of a wife who would assume home-making and family responsibilities (Oppenheimer, 1997; Sweeney, 2002).

## Health

Surveys from Australia, Finland, and the Netherlands had data that allowed for analyses of men’s and women’s health by parental and marital status (Kendig et al., 2007). All three studies included self-report data on physical health, mental health, and health behaviors. In line with the perspective that parents are subject to social control in ways that the childless are not (Umberson, 1987), the findings showed parenthood differentials for health behaviors more than for physical and mental health for men and women. The childless (i.e., those with no living children) were more likely to engage in health-compromising behavior such as smoking or drinking alcohol and less likely to engage in exercise and other health-promoting activities. Differences by age and socioeconomic status (educational level) were controlled for.

The parental and/or marital status differences in health were greater for men than for women. Among women, no specific category emerged as having particularly good or particularly poor health. In contrast, never-married and formerly married childless men were found to be disadvantaged across a wide variety of health measures (e.g., self-rated general health, depression, engagement in physical exercise). These differences remained after controls for age and socioeconomic status (educational level). Controlling for socioeconomic status is, admittedly, an inadequate approximation of selection effects. Nevertheless, it appears that men without the ties of marriage and parenthood are missing out on the health protection that these bonds have been found to bring (e.g., House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). The poorer health status of formerly married childless men compared to formerly married fathers suggests that men's resilience in the event of partner loss is lower when they are childless than when they are parents. This may be due to missing out on the social control and support associated with parenthood.

### **Social Embeddedness**

Analyses of the social embeddedness of aging parents and childless individuals, using several measures of social contacts and support, were based on survey data from Australia, Finland, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In addition, findings from Spain and Israel were included (Dykstra & Wagner, 2007; Wenger, Dykstra, Melkas, & Knipscheer, 2007 [this issue]). With regard to participation in the local community, few differences between parents and nonparents (defined as having no living children) were found. Nonparents, regardless of marital status and gender, were as likely as parents to be active in the community, engaged in volunteer work and voluntary organizations. Never-married childless women were particularly likely to be active in church and to attend religious services frequently. In contrast, contacts with relatives showed a clear effect of parenthood. Interaction with relatives was more frequent among those with children than among the childless. Of course, we need to keep in mind that old people without children and grandchildren are likely to have fewer relatives available. Formerly married childless men had particularly low levels of contact with relatives. It is interesting to note that women appeared to compensate for the lack of direct descendant ties: Childless women, regardless of marital status, interacted with friends more frequently than did mothers, whereas frequency of contact with friends did not differ between fathers and childless men. Married childless women also had the highest frequency of neighbor contact of all parental and/or marital status groups.

Apart from social contacts, support networks were considered, using Wenger's (1991) network typology. The childless were more likely to have networks with limited support potential than was the case for parents who generally had networks with high support potential. A relatively high proportion of the childless had only one major support provider, often a member of the household (a spouse or a coresident sibling), with no or few backups. The backups tended to be the kinds of associates who are ill equipped to provide intensive amounts of support over extended periods of time. Childless men, regardless of marital status, were more likely to have shallow networks, compared to childless women. The risk of encountering support deficits was greater for the formerly married without children than for the never-married and the currently married. These marital status differences were greater among childless men than among childless women.

The findings on social embeddedness suggest that old people with no children and aging parents are equally able to sustain their style of life when there is no need for intensive instrumental help or personal care. However, in the face of impaired mobility, failing health, or increasing frailty, the childless are in a vulnerable position. Given increasing dependency, individuals without a partner and no children typically have no network members with strong commitment and normative expectations regarding care provision over extended time. Even though norms of reciprocity may give some assistance from individuals whom they helped in the past, their "care accounts" run empty sooner (Romøren & Hagestad, 1988). Consequently, as several studies have shown, those without children are more likely to depend on formal services at the end of life (Aykan, 2003; Chapman, 1989; Choi, 1994; Freedman, 1996; Larsson & Silverstein, 2004) and to utilize such care for a longer duration than is the case for individuals with children (Romøren & Hagestad, 1988). In countries with few formal care arrangements available, frail childless elderly are particularly vulnerable.

## Gender

Traditionally, being a parent has been considered more central in women's lives than in the lives of men, and men have been neglected in research on childlessness (Bulcroft & Teachman, 2003). Judging from findings reported in this collection of articles, it appears to have been an unfortunate omission. Repeatedly, data presented here showed greater parental status differences (insofar as they existed) in men's than in women's late-life outcomes. As we saw, the findings showed that never-married and formerly married childless men were particularly disadvantaged with regard to health and the support potential of their networks. When men were married, the absence of

children appeared to have few consequences for their well-being. For men who did not have a partner, being childless was a source of vulnerability.

### **A Sad Bunch?**

As this overview of findings has shown, childless older adults did not emerge as the sad bunch they often are assumed to be. Their childlessness made no appreciable difference in terms of socioeconomic status. Neither did it tend to affect their health, except in the case of unmarried men, who fared relatively poorly. Childless older adults were at least as socially active in their communities as older parents were. It is important to emphasize that one childless category emerged as having particularly favorable characteristics: never-married childless women. Toward the end of life, however, childlessness was found to make a difference. Old people with no children lacked key relationships with the strong commitment and norms of mutual obligation typically found in filial ties. Consequently, the childless who were single and frail faced potential support deficits. Will these patterns persist among future old people without children?

## **Aging Parents and Nonparents in Future Cohorts**

The findings reported here were based on cohorts born between 1890 and 1930. To assess the relevance of the findings for future cohorts of old people, we need to consider contrasts in demographic characteristics, gender roles, and lifestyles.

### **Demographic Changes**

*Levels of childlessness.* Although journalists and policy makers frequently draw attention to high rates of childlessness in contemporary cohorts of adults, current levels are not without historical precedents. The article by Rowland (2007 [this issue]) shows the ebb and flow of childlessness across cohorts. Among women born at the turn of the 20th century, approximately one fourth remained childless. Two World Wars and the Depression left their imprints on life pathways in these late-19th- and early-20th-century cohorts. In subsequent cohorts, childlessness rates were on the decline, reaching a record low of around 10% for women born in the 1940s. Childlessness rates among women born in the 1950s and 1960s have been on the increase; however, they are not reaching the levels of those born at the beginning of the 20th century (Dykstra, 2004; Sobotka, 2004). Projections of childlessness

rates in 16 European countries and the United States for women born in the 1970s show a continued increase (Sobotka, 2004); however, again, the projected levels are not as high as the rates recorded for cohorts born in the first decades of the 20th century. Given recent work on the significance of parenthood to men and women, it is worth noting that data on fertility continue to exclude men (e.g., recent overview by Billari, 2005).

*Marital history and family networks.* The pathways leading to childlessness have changed. In the cohorts discussed in this two-part special issue, marrying late or never marrying were the primary reasons why people ended up childless. Given that childbearing was closely linked to marriage, and that reliable and safe contraceptives were not easily available, the distinction between voluntary and involuntary childlessness makes little sense in reference to these cohorts. This is not to say there was never deliberate control of childbearing among them (Gordon, 1977). Nevertheless, the voluntary/involuntary distinction emerged among younger cohorts, who were more likely to remain childless while in long-standing heterosexual relationships. Whether *voluntary* also implies explicitly choosing not to have children is an issue of debate. Several scholars pointed out that in contemporary cohorts of old people, many of those who are childless never made a conscious decision—either to have a child or to not have children (e.g., Bartlett, 1994; Kemkes-Grottenhaler, 2003). Billari (2005) suggested that recent evidence indicates that childlessness as a choice and undesired childlessness have increased.

Compared to contemporary childless older persons, the childless old of the future will more often have lived in a marriage or consensual union. Like contemporary parents, they are also more likely to have had complex couple histories, characterized by a succession of partner relationships (Allan, Hawker, & Crow, 2001; Cooney & Dunne, 2001; Dykstra & Komter, 2006). Relationship breakups at key points in adulthood might actually have been a precursor to their childless state (Keizer, Dykstra, & Jansen, 2006). Moreover, repartnering could mean the arrival of stepchildren, making it important to consider whether those who are biologically childless have, nevertheless, been involved in social parenting.

A greater likelihood of stepchildren among those without biological offspring is not the only expected change in the family networks of childless older adults. Another demographic contrast between current and future cohorts of childless old people is that because of declining fertility rates, the latter will have generally smaller family networks. Current older persons grew up in relatively large families and will have had many cousins, nieces,

and nephews. The older adults of the future will have been surrounded by a more restricted number of siblings, cousins, nieces, and nephews through the course of their lives.

*Outliving children.* Apart from never having had children, older people might be childless because they have no living children left. Little information exists on the likelihood of outliving one's children (see Rowland, 2007, for further details). In the 1992-1993 Berlin Aging Study (BASE), with respondents age 70 and older, 3% of the men and 7% of the women had lost all their children. The 1992 Dutch survey on the Living Arrangements and Social Networks of Older Adults (NESTOR-LSN), which had an age range of 70 to 89, found that 1% of the men and 3% of the women had lost all their children. What can we say about future trends in the likelihood of outliving one's children? Two opposing developments operate here. Declining family sizes imply an increased likelihood of outliving offspring, whereas the improvements in mortality imply a decreased likelihood. Using fertility and mortality estimates provided by Statistics Netherlands, Beets (2005) predicted little change in the likelihood of becoming childless as the result of outliving one's children. He suggested that the proportion of Dutch women who outlive all their children will remain small: less than 1%. Countries in Eastern Europe must be mentioned here. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of communist regimes, sex differentials in mortality have widened dramatically, at a time when many other countries have witnessed sharply decreasing differences between male and female life expectancies (Nolte, McKee, & Gilmore, 2005). The sex differentials, combined with very low fertility, suggest that in the near future a significant number of women in this part of Europe will outlive their sons and may face old age with no children.

*Infertility.* Infertility affects between 3% and 5% of couples (see Rowland, 2007). Again, historical context is critical (Letherby, 2002). We would argue that lives are more seriously marred by infertility among contemporary adults than was the case for the cohorts discussed in this two-part special issue. Individuals born in the first decades of the 20th century did not have the range of fertility treatments available today. Most likely, infertility was viewed as a fate one needed to accept. The increased availability of treatments to assist those who are unable to have children unaided has likely added to the stress experienced by people with fertility problems. Given the wider range of such options, failure to conceive or to bring a pregnancy to full term is all the



more distressing. The large-scale use of effective contraception and the growing popularity of reproductive technology have contributed to the belief that female fertility can be manipulated according to wish, and at any stage of life (te Velde & Pearson, 2002). The likelihood of solving fertility problems through new reproductive technology is grossly overestimated (te Velde & Pearson, 2002). Furthermore, "the psychology of choice" (Beck-Gernsheim, 1996) assumes that when a choice has been made, it is brought to fruition through individual agency. Not realizing the path chosen may lead to a sense of loss or failure.

## Changes in Gender Roles

*Working mothers.* Marriages with a traditional gender-based division of tasks were the dominant pattern when today's old people started adult lives (Pott-Buter, 1993), especially in the middle class. Men provided financially for their families, whereas women were responsible for housekeeping, child care, and child rearing. The combination of mothering and employment activities was barred by legal restrictions, an absence of institutional supports, and stigma. Women who worked outside the home generally did not have children, whereas mothers generally did not have paid jobs. This situation changed toward the end of the 1960s. Spurred by a complex set of factors such as their rising levels of educational attainment, the call of the women's movement, the expansion of jobs in the service industry, and the creation of jobs for secondary earners (Hakim, 2000), married women and mothers started entering the labor force in greater numbers than before.

Mothers generally work fewer hours and have lower incomes compared to childless women (Budig & England, 2001; Cohen & Bianchi, 1999; Gustafsson, Dex, Wetzels, & Vlasblom, 1996). Nevertheless, we think it is reasonable to expect that with regard to employment histories, and the associated financial, social, health, and insurance benefits, future cohorts of older women will show diminished differences between mothers and childless than what has been revealed in the current articles. Avellar and Smock (2003) provided arguments for why the so-called motherhood penalty might decline over time: decreased employer discrimination, increased contributions by husbands to child care and housework, and the introduction of family-friendly policies. Contrary to expectations, their comparison of two cohorts of American women (1944-1954 and 1958-1965) failed to show evidence for a decline in the price of motherhood. However, it is important to note that these women were only followed to age 40.

*New fathers?* In descriptions of contemporary fatherhood, two almost opposite images are presented (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Skevik, 2006). The first is one of the “new father,” who is actively and substantially involved in raising children. The other is that of the “absent father,” who has no contact with his children as the result of divorce or single motherhood. In older cohorts, men typically were the sole or main breadwinner, and to be a good father was to be a good provider (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006). Under that model, men used paid work to exempt themselves from child care and domestic work. “Fathering” is a model that is emerging in younger cohorts: the practice of care and relationship building with one’s children (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006; Duindam & Spruijt, 1997; Lamb, 2001). This model is currently actively encouraged by a number of European governments (Leira, 2004; Lewis, 2004).

Now that more and more women seek to participate in the labor market on an equal footing with men, it is conceivable that in choice of partners, they select men more strongly for their fathering capacities. Recent reports on rates of permanent singlehood (Dutch data; see Dykstra & Poortman, 2006) and childlessness (Norwegian data; see Rønsen & Skrede, 2006) among highly educated men currently in their forties and fifties appear to be consistent with this perspective. Although highly educated men born early in the 20th century had a high likelihood of marrying and becoming fathers, this is less the case for men born in the 1950s and 1960s. One explanation for the new trend might be that these men are unwilling to put in an equitable share of parenting duties and thus are unattractive to their female counterparts. An alternative explanation is that the men are postponing family formation because they wish to first establish a solid position in the job market. In either case, women may face a shortage of desirable potential fathers for their children. Recently, several authors have discussed the “recirculation” of men (Ekamper et al., 2003; Rønsen & Skrede, 2006), whereby previously married men become partners for single childless women. Possibly, women who would like to become mothers are selecting men on proven qualities (i.e., having fathered and provided in a previous relationship). Put bluntly, they may prefer a highly educated, financially secure, but “slightly used” father to an “unused” childless man with moderate education and income.

Admittedly, the evidence suggesting greater selectivity into fatherhood is sketchy and largely indirect; however, we suggest that it is an issue in need of further investigation. In any case, the new fatherhood and the notion of greater selection into fatherhood suggest that in future cohorts of older men, fatherhood will have made more of a difference throughout the course of life than in the cohorts discussed here. Concomitantly, we would expect

to see clearer contrasts between fathers and childless men in future cohorts, particularly in terms of their social networks (given the socially integrating function of parenthood) and health (given the social control function of parenthood).

As the “absent father” image implies, in the future a larger proportion of men will enter old age with a history of broken ties. A significant proportion of fathers will not have lived with their underage children for extended periods of time (Eggebeen, 2002). This development draws attention to the importance of distinguishing between biological childlessness, social childlessness (i.e., not being actively involved with one’s underage children on a daily basis), and active fathering (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Skevik, 2006). These distinctions are central when we ponder well-being and sources of support among individuals who will be part of “the great grey wave” that will hit many aging societies around the year 2020.

### **Lifestyles Among Future Cohorts of Old People: Dilemmas of Dependence?**

The cohorts that have been under the lens in this two-part special issue have often been described as relatively collectivistic in their orientation and as having a somewhat fatalistic outlook on life. They often accepted their station in life as a result of fate and believed in the individual’s duty to “make the best of it.” Having grown up in uncertain times with relatively high mortality, many of them did not expect to reach advanced old age; they are “surprised survivors” (Hagestad, 1998). Neither did they grow up with welfare state arrangements that guaranteed public provision of basic care. How sharp the contrasts between their old age and that of future cohorts will be is an open question.

A voluminous literature has discussed growing individualism among cohorts born in the second half of the 20th century. Strong themes in this work are autonomy, choice, and the creation of one’s own life (Beck, 1986/1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2000; Beck-Gernsheim, 1996; Giddens, 1991). Consequently, it is often assumed that future cohorts of old people will have taken measures to ensure potential long-term care. In countries with well-developed welfare states, today’s old people prefer formal services to family care (Daatland, 1990; Wielink, Huijsman, & McDonnell, 1997). Recent analyses of help provision show a mix of family support and welfare state services in Europe and North America (Chappell & Blandford, 1991; Daatland & Herlofson, 2003; Künemund & Rein, 1999; Motel-Klingebiel, Tesch-Roemer, & von Kondratowitz, 2005). However, it is important to note that the Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement (SHARE), which includes 2

Nordic welfare states among the 10 societies surveyed, concludes that children remain a critical source of help among frail old people (Attias-Donfut, Ogg, & Wolff, 2005). A similar conclusion is drawn from the five-country Old Age and Autonomy: The Role of Service Systems and Intergenerational Family Solidarity (OASIS) study (Daatland & Herlofson, 2003). The importance of adult children in this informal/formal support mix has led several authors to ask what happens to older adults who have no children (Kreager, 2004; Wenger, Scott, & Patterson, 2000). There are reasons to believe that the differences in the reliance on formal support between childless older adults and older parents will diminish in future cohorts because of increased levels of education and the material resources to purchase assistance in a service economy. Yet it remains to be seen how frail childless old people will meet more intangible needs for emotional support and a sense of connectedness. Here, concerns about the future of biologically and socially childless men may be warranted.

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