Outliving the self: Perspectives of men without biological offspring

by

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Certificate of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged.

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Joanne Lawrence Bourne

Date: 1/8/18
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Abstract

The concept of ‘childlessness’ is not new. Yet, much of the academic and social environment has focussed on women’s experiences of childlessness, rendering the experiences of childless men relatively invisible. The specific aims of the current qualitative study are to explore and increase awareness of lived experiences of men who have not produced offspring, and examine discourse that influences meaning-making for childless men. Broader aims involve the exploration of how the concepts of childlessness and reproduction are perceived by, and incorporated into the lives of childless men. As pronatalistic ideology inextricably links reproduction with biology, questions are raised of the psychosocial wellbeing of men who have not produced offspring, and how a sense of being reproductive in other ways is developed.

To explore and integrate various perspectives on how childless men exist and experience the world in which most people have children, participating criteria included men who were aged over 50 years and who were not aware of having biological offspring. As a purposive non-probability sample, men were recruited by using adaptive sampling techniques, and invited to participate in two face-to-face semi-structured interviews. As human experience is multi-dimensional, to gain more than one perspective, a pluralistic approach was undertaken for mindful analysis. Two forms of qualitative analyses were applied to the data. The first was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which enabled personal insights and meaning to the experience of male childlessness to be identified. A second approach, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) helped to explore how wider discourses may have been internalised by the men and may have impacted on their subjective experiential accounts. While the dual approach provided different perspectives, they are complimentary, and at times, overlap with supportive insights.

Drawing from the narrations from 23 childless men, IPA identified four superordinate themes and one latent theme that highlighted noteworthy insights: 1) Desire, choice, and circumstances, integral with experience and meaning; 2) Meaning of ‘male childlessness’ not as straightforward as it seems; 3) Meaning of being ‘reproductive’ can be beyond biology; 4) The importance of relationships with other children, other people, and other species; and 5) A sense of continuation and discontinuation of self.
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FDA revealed eight discourses upon which how the men understood male childlessness and reproduction: 1) Discourse of the importance of having children; 2) The tension between passive tendencies and being consciously active in the face of reproductive discourse; 3) Assumptions of inherent risk with being biologically reproductive; 4) The embedment of reproductive thinking in biology and animal kingdom discourse; 5) Assumptions of heterosexualism within human reproduction; 6) The emphasis on female gender within the reproductive sphere; 7) Discourses on how to be a man; and 8) Categorisation and dichotomisation of being a ‘childless male’.

The phenomenon of childlessness is complex and difficult to disentangle. However, insights gained from the current study offer a diverse understanding of male childlessness that may help to reshape how childlessness and reproduction is understood. For male childlessness to be included in discussions within the reproductive realm has implications in particular, for the men themselves as they reflected on their lives without offspring.

**Key words:** male childlessness, human reproduction, qualitative, psychosocial wellbeing, homosexual, stepfathers, relationships
Chapter 1: Introduction to the research

1.1 Personal praxis and the beginning of the research

*I am the wisest man alive, for I know one thing, and that is that I know nothing ...*

*Socrates*

A key interest in the reproductive sphere has been a long-held professional interest as evidenced by my work in midwifery and study of psychology. This interest formed the historical context and foundation of the present research. Both on a practical and academic level, I have observed the diversity in human reproductive behaviour, in its similarities and in its contradictions. Assumptions and attitudes around reproduction are bound within pronatalist ideology and practice.¹

On a practical level, working in midwifery the inherent focus is on those who want to and have children. However, with a broader lens of enquiry I began to question the psychological impact for those who do not have children, who are not the biological parent of a child, and for those who intentionally do not want children. Anecdotal impressions of responses varied from sadness, jealousy, resentment and dismissiveness, to embrace, joy and relief in not having children. With such contradictory behaviours, I questioned our knowledge of childlessness. What is childlessness? Who does this term refer to and what is the psychological impact of childlessness? With a broader inquiry, how does childlessness relate to concepts in the human reproductive sphere?

With midwifery translating to being ‘with woman’, the central tenet of midwifery work is localised with the woman. Again, my observations turned to those who are not often considered within the reproductive sphere—namely men. Although there has been more interest in male reproductive behaviour in the literature over the

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¹ Pronatalism is a commonly used term but rarely defined in research papers. The term seems to have originated in France in the 1930’s as a social policy to counteract ‘denatalite’, low birth rate, which was occurring in many countries at the time. In turn, pronatalism, or pro-birth, has become the term used to describe nationalist discourse to encourage the bearing of children. Over time, pronatalism has also become synonymous with the glorification of parenthood and the assumption that all adults want to have children (Huss, 1990; L. King, 2002).
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last two decades, men are still on the fringe of, and are often not always considered within the reproductive space (Forste, 2002; Inhorn, 2000; Greene & Biddlecom, 2009). Even though it takes equal genetic matter from both female and male to produce a child, it is also biology that places men away from the central focus of reproduction, biology discourse thus forming a paradox. Moreover, biology seems to be socialised as positioning gender differently in relation to the reproductive sphere. Not producing children seems to push men further away from the reproductive sphere. As a corollary to this, my questioning of our knowledge of childlessness evolved to specifically focus on male childlessness and question our knowledge of male childlessness.

When compared to the animal kingdom, how does human non-reproductive behaviour differ from other non-reproducing animals? Do human males turn off their reproductive desire and ability due to circumstances beyond their control, like ‘sterile’ female worker bees? Why does an animal documentary camera stop following the stag that just lost the fight with his alpha male counterpart that won access to the female herd? The documentary then moves to the offspring that are born and the continued life cycle of the animal and the community of the animal species. Just like the stag who no longer has a role, I have often wondered what it is like for the man who is not part of the reproductive sphere, who is not the biological father of his family, yet who wants to have children. Does he consider himself a ‘loser’ in commonly understood reproductive terms? When Sir David Attenborough, a documentary producer and observer of many animal species’ reproductive behaviour, was asked this question through personal correspondence he commented that he had ‘not pondered’ what happens to the non-reproducing animal. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that humans do not often think of what it might be like for men not to have children.

Much talk, research, observation and documentary film on reproductive behaviour, regardless of animal species, tends to focus on reproduction in terms of producing offspring (I use italics here as a way of questioning what these terms really mean). Yet, and adapting Sir David Attenborough’s words, I have pondered what it might be like for the ‘non-reproducing’ male of the human species. Do the new human brain and cognitive functions enable human beings to reason and feel differently, if they are not producing offspring, compared to other animals that live
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within the cognitive boundaries of the old brain? Is the life experience of any non-reproducing animal not newsworthy?²

Within some animal species, such as female worker bees that ‘turn off’ their potential reproductive behaviour when the queen is present, and male drones who die after mating with the queen bee, predetermined yet varied reproductive behaviours are performed. In the present context, are there any parallels between such reproductive behaviour among bees and non-reproductive or childless human beings? Although the present research is not the forum to specifically compare reproductive behaviour of human beings with other animals, part of my inquiry is to explore the psychological impact of males ‘turning off’ their reproductive capability and choosing not to have children.

For humans, the psychobiology of reproductive events often becomes entangled in both the personal and public nature of reproduction. It tends be publicly visible if someone has or does not have children. However, the personal psychological impact of not producing offspring is less visible. As my interest in and notions of human reproductive behaviour evolved, my undergraduate study in psychology afforded me the opportunity to undertake an explorative study on the topic of male childlessness³. From a unique position of both experience as a midwife and near-completion of a psychology degree, a psychology honours dissertation provided useful qualitative insights into the male experience of being childless. The findings revealed that men do experience childlessness, and in different ways to other men (Lawrence-Bourne, 2012). Other key findings included childless men perceiving...

² Although the new brain-old brain concept is not universally accepted, the concept is commonly referred to in a bio-evolutionary context. It refers to the cognitive process that occurs before someone reacts to something, associated with the evolutionary reasoning aspect of the human brain. To help understand the concept, an early 20th century Indian philosopher, Jiddu Krishnamurti, gives the example of when someone says something to you, there is an interval. Whether you prolong it indefinitely, for a long period or for a few seconds, Krishnamurti describes that interval as a function of the new brain. The immediate reaction is the old brain, and the old brain functions in its own traditional, accepted, reactionary, animalistic sense. Its relevance in the present context, in part, resonates with human reproductive behaviour and decisions and desire to produce offspring.

³ Henceforth, the Honours dissertation will be referenced as (Lawrence-Bourne, 2012). This study was small exploratory qualitative study of male childlessness of ten Australian childless men. The data from the interviews were analysed using IPA to identify themes: 1) “Us and them”- A social division, 2) Freedom has two voices, 3) Building a life without children, and 4) Invalidation of men’s responses to childlessness. A key implication of the study was for childless men themselves, to be able to acknowledge their own experiences.
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a social division between those who have children and those that do not, and that there are different aspects of experiencing the freedom of not having children, rendering a renegotiation of life without children a necessity. On a conceptual level, the perception by men that the reproductive space in Australian society centrally focuses on women seemed to render their male experiences of childlessness as unimportant. While the findings of the unpublished dissertation were valuable in contributing to understanding the subjective experiences of male childlessness, the study was limited in terms of both its inclusiveness and scope.

Australian reproductive laws and practice are changing, in areas such as gay marriage, donor sperm and surrogacy, and questions arise of how childless men—those that do not produce offspring—perceive and respond to concepts of childlessness and reproduction in contemporary Australian society. Building on my earlier piece of research and recognising social changes occurring stimulated the beginning of a deeper exploration of these concepts and became the present research endeavour.

Exploration of how people understand concepts in everyday life is not new, as the origins of psychology are steeped in philosophical thinking. Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato often questioned knowledge and challenged the taken-for-granted ways in which people understood things. Early psychological enquiry will be elaborated on in chapter two. In the current context, exploring experiences of male childlessness will contribute to knowledge of how childlessness and reproduction are understood by those who have not themselves produced offspring.

1.2 Previous research and ‘knowledge’ of male childlessness

Although scholarly interest in male childlessness has slowly increased, the number of studies exploring male childlessness remains small. Census data in most countries, including Australia, do not include the number of men who have not produced offspring, with speculation that there are as many, if not more, childless men as childless women remaining unconfirmed (Carmichael, 2013; Gray, 2002; Rowland, 2007). One of the reasons studies of human reproduction focus so heavily on women is that data for women are more readily available and more accurate (Carmichael, 2013). Women know about the births they have had; men may not be
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aware of some births in which they are biologically implicated (discussion in section 2.3.2). The central reproductive focus on women tends to further influence the social taken-for-granted assumptions and ideology that women are more important when considering human reproduction. In terms of acknowledging the psychological impact of reproductive behaviour, men have mattered less. More often than not, the psychological wellbeing of men has not been considered. Returning briefly to anecdotal evidence, I so often hear the comment regarding the present research, ‘oh, I never think of men not having kids’. The small handful of studies that explore the experience for men of not producing offspring seems to reinforce the lack of interest in the psychological impact of not producing offspring.

Since ancient times when Greek philosophers such as Socrates referred to being disbarred from having children, academic interest in male childlessness has really only been taken up in earnest since the sexual revolution in the 1960s, when traditional social attitudes towards gender and reproduction were challenged and led to subsequent changes in reproductive behaviour (Hacker, 1957; Keith, 1983; Sawyer, 1970; Veevers, 1973). Subsequently, authors have highlighted the need to ‘employ a framework of reproductive equations to sort through seeming incongruities in how men matter’ in the reproductive sphere (Almeling & Waggoner, 2013, p. 837). Men need to be asked ‘what is it like not to produce offspring?’ which can then inform how male childlessness and reproduction might be understood from a psychological perspective. In order to ‘capture the multiple, interrelated layers of social life that affect men’s thoughts, feelings, and practices in the procreative realm’ (Marsiglio, Lohan, & Culley, 2013, p. 1027) further explorative studies are needed.

Understanding childlessness from a male perspective entails consideration of childlessness within concepts of masculinity and within the psychosocial development not only of adulthood, but also over the life span (Dykstra & Wagner, 2007). It therefore follows that undertaking research into male childlessness requires a life course approach, as the experience of not producing offspring is often linked with earlier experiences (Dykstra, 2009; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007a; Dykstra & Keizer, 2009; Dykstra & Wagner, 2007), and experiences which continue into old age (Hadley, 2015; Wenger, 2001). As with all human experiences, those of biologically childless men are diverse, depending on each man’s reproductive desire, choice and circumstances (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007b). Although there is diversity in experience, men do experience childlessness in some
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...way, and this experience will be elaborated on in Chapter two. Therefore, as with the importance of understanding the experience for women, the psychosocial lives of childless men need to be better understood, accepted and supported. Although childless women can experience similar emotional and social experiences as childless men (Letherby, 2002), more positive adaptations to childlessness have been found among childless women than childless men (Wenger, 2001), which highlights a warranted interest in exploring the psychosocial impact for men who do not produce offspring.

Aligning with Friere’s (1970) emphasis on the importance of raising social and political consciousness, as well as the importance of raising self-awareness from the process of reflecting on one’s life, one of the aims of the present research is to question the status quo of how men are considered within the reproductive sphere. More inclusive research, with more in-depth exploration and understanding of male childlessness, is needed so as not to rely only on a handful of studies as conclusive knowledge. Knowledge of phenomena instead evolves. In order to not become set, in a finite way of understanding human experience, exploration of experiential phenomena generates different ways of ‘knowing’.

1.3 Ontological and epistemological standpoint of the research

The research process which ontological assumptions inform asks the question, what is there to know? Ontology is a concept that can be conceived as being evolutionary (Fromm, 1987; Rogers, 1995), in terms of the boundaries of knowledge. Because the present research accepts knowledge as having no limits, ontology can be difficult to define and pin down. But that in itself forms part of its definition. Ontology is an interconnectedness to all things, allowing understanding of phenomena to grow. In the context of the present research, how can long-standing and common understandings of male childlessness and reproduction be brought into question? Regarding male childlessness and reproduction, what is out there to know? The present research explores different interpretations drawn from the narratives of childless men, but also recognises interpretations conveyed to the reader from a one-point-in-time perspective. Thus the kind(s) of knowledge that the methodology of the research aims to produce depends on its ontological and epistemological position (Willig, 2008). For the present research, asking ‘What can be known about the
experience of male childlessness?’ and, ‘Is what is known to be considered true and real?’ began with a phenomenological standpoint.

Taking a phenomenological position involves taking an interest in the way human beings experience the world, in a particular context, and at a particular time. It is concerned with how human beings interpret the phenomenon, how it appears to be, to them. As a result an individual perceives and experiences the world in a particular way in accordance with his or her own way of perceiving and understanding the phenomenon at hand. All phenomena or objects and subjects appear as something, and this something constitutes their sense of reality at any one time (Willig, 2013). This means that different people can experience the same object or phenomenon in vastly different ways, depending on the location, context, their perspective, and their ‘mental orientation’ – their emotions, wishes, judgements, desires and purpose (Willig, 2013, p. 85).

Meaning is then generated by everything that appears to exist in the world, which is, in turn, incorporated into subjective life experience. From a phenomenological perspective, ‘the world and the self are inseparable components of meaning’ (Moustakas, 1994, p. 28). Something does not exist until it has been perceived to exist. In other words, and in the context of the present research, the phenomenon of male childlessness may not exist until it is perceived, and is assumed to be perceived, interpreted, and experienced differently, by different men, culminating in subjective experience, upon which knowledge is built. Hence, from a phenomenological perspective, knowledge is gained through first-person experience, how someone interprets meaning from their personal experience.

As the research process evolved however—praxis in practice—the requirement to take a second, and critical standpoint, became evident. A corollary to the exploration of individual meanings of the experience of male childlessness is the exploration of what influences how meanings are developed. In other words, how do men construct meaning from their experiences of being childless? This idea will be discussed further in Chapter three. Teo (2009) argues that taking a critical perspective of knowledge through people’s narrated experience better enables human beings to be conceptualised as meaning-making agents embedded within socio-political contexts.

In the present research, the kind(s) of knowledge about childlessness and reproduction that the research aims to unearth will help inform qualitative,
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psychological principles and values. Although the two standpoints are separate, they complement each other in providing a richer understanding of life experience, communicated through the narratives of childless men.

1.4 Language and Interpretation

Praxis ... the manner in which we are engaged in the world and with others ... it is always entwined with communication

Calvin O. Shrag (as cited by Ramsey & Miller, 2003, p. 21)

Language is an important aspect of phenomenological knowledge and constructed knowledge (Willig, 2013), and of how people interpret and articulate their life experiences. In the present qualitative research, the interrelationship between language and experience is pertinent, in terms of the importance placed on language and the embedment of the use of language (Bradley, 2005; Gergen, 1973; Shotter, 1993; Smith & Cohen, 1996). The same phenomenon can be described in different ways, which therefore offers different insights into the phenomenon. Thus, the interconnection between language and interpretation is tied up with ontological and epistemological viewpoints. Words, however, have different meanings when used in particular ways and particular contexts (Shotter, 1993). Actual or real meanings of words have been pondered upon for quite some time, with one of the British philosophers of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1965, as cited by Shotter, 1990, p. 67), highlighting the arbitrary meaning of words:

In everyday life, words do not in themselves have a meaning. But a use, and furthermore, a use only in a context; they are best thought of not as having already determined meanings, but as means, as tools, or as instruments for use in the ‘making’ of meanings.

Phenomenological knowledge places less importance on whether someone’s experiential account is an accurate reflection of what really happened. In other words, although a person’s sense of reality is real, language does not necessarily mirror reality. Furthermore, language is being communicated as subjective experience, with language providing insights into the underlying structures that give rise to one’s
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interpretation of experience, and how people see the world (Ashworth & Greasley, 2009). Therefore in the current research I argue that taking an additional poststructural perspective to analyse the data will facilitate an understanding of how language constructs reality, and the discourses that then position the male interviewees. In other words, it is the exploration of the social construction, and the wider influences of how the men in the study interpret and articulate their experiences of ‘childlessness’. Fairclough (2013) and other critical discourse analysts express concern with the way power relations shape the production of what people say. In other words, how one senses reality and how everyday life is experienced influence and shape people’s experiences (Willig, 2008).

Words that are used to describe experience play a part in the construction of meaning, both subjective meaning and meaning that is underpinned by wider socio-political ideology. When examining the relation between social processes and cognitive function, the development of language and the production of subjective experiences, Urwin (1984) argues that language is not necessarily developed from a pre-determination of how language is to be used. Instead he argues that an understanding of the power of social regulation generates a process of recursive positioning. The individual interpretation and use of language, in one sense, mitigates notions of what might be considered appropriate use of language to describe experience (Fairclough, 2013). Heidegger (1993) argues that people are not necessarily aware of why or how they use language. Therefore, analysis focuses not on whether the language is appropriate, but more on preferred ways in which experience is described one way over another way, and preferences for using some words over others. It is from the words, whether they have been consciously or subconsciously chosen by the men, that I draw my analytic interpretations.

With language communicating experience, and in the context of the present research, meanings are taken from narrative accounts of men who do not have biological offspring; who are otherwise marginalised or discounted from the reproductive sphere. In the context of research, the process by which meanings are drawn from narratives generates a double process of interpretation—participants interpret the way they see and experience the world, and the researcher, or someone else, generates interpretations of each of the participants’ interpretations—a hermeneutic circle of interpretation (Heidegger, 1993).
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According to Shotter (1993), language emerges from research. As there is still very little research on the experience of male childlessness, men are likely to draw on language from other textual resources. This process was evident in my Honours dissertation on male childlessness (Lawrence-Bourne, 2012) where men used, for example, the word barren, which is traditionally related to female childlessness. Whether such words are considered appropriate is not the focus here. Instead, the assumption is that language has a function to describe subjective everyday experience and reveal underlying structures. In one sense language is praxis and can be thought of as the action of discourse within language, and men communicating their experiences are actioning their experiences through their own words.

To summarise, psychology is about people (Parker, 2007a, 2007b), and people’s representations of the world are mediated by their own interpretations of their experiences. To understand how men who have not produced offspring know about childlessness and reproduction is to ask them. Drawing on my Honours dissertation, men commented that they had never been asked to describe their experiences in their own words.

1.5 Co-authorship of knowledge

Given the importance of language that is mediated through collaboration with participants, different experiential accounts and different versions of knowledge are brought together, which will increase the body of knowledge of male childlessness. At the same time, qualitative research such as the present study can also be considered a discursive construction that is co-produced between me as the researcher, and the participant members of the study. In other words, knowledge is co-authored rather than discovered (Willig, 2013). While recognising the present research to be a collaborative co-authorship that shapes how phenomena are understood, it is important to highlight here that in the present qualitative collaborative research, multiple structures and different types of knowledge are depicted (Willig, 2013). In Newman’s (2004, p. 5200) scientific colloquium on scientific collaboration he similarly describes co-authorship as a ‘collaborative network depicting the structure of our knowledge’. In the present study, analytical interpretations from conversations between myself as the researcher and each participant member represent many ways in which male childlessness can be depicted.
Cognisant of the ways in which knowledge is produced, it is also important to understand how the researcher is implicated in the research process. Since qualitative research is interpretative, I as the researcher contribute to the interpretations of male childlessness as understood by the participants, and thereby convey experience and meaning to the reader. However, the concept of co-authorship contains boundaries. For example, participants did not take part in the analysis. Yet, as a way of contributing to the knowledge base of male childlessness, they received a summary letter of the findings to which they were invited to respond. Recognising my co-authorship contribution also recognises the implication of language and reflexivity, and bringing the different components of the discussion in this chapter together. Being cognisant of not being a childless male, but instead a mother of one child, the men’s contributions to the body of knowledge and understanding of male childlessness was highly valuable. Male childlessness is a personal and sensitive topic. Inviting men to talk about their experiences may give rise to various emotions, prior to, during and post contact with the men. During the research process when I was in contact with the participants, I was mindful of managing both my emotions and those of the participants, referred to as ‘emotional labour’ (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2008, 2009; Gray, 2009). However it was observed in my Honours study (Lawrence-Bourne, 2012) and in other studies (Etherington, 2004, 2007) that there can be a therapeutic effect for research participants when talking about sensitive topics. In this way, when conducted reflexively, the research becomes more transparent and ethical during the research process, thereby contributing to being good qualitative research when the findings are being conveyed to the reader.

1.6 Summary and remaining chapters

This introduction to the thesis outlines the philosophical underpinnings upon which the research was developed. The importance of language, reflexivity, and recognising that this thesis is a co-production of knowledge all inform the research process, drawing on the praxis nature of qualitative research and resonant of early Greek philosophical inquiry. In the face of praxis, and through the experiential accounts by childless men, understanding how male childlessness is experienced helps the momentum of knowledge of childlessness and reproduction to continue.
Chapter two provides a more detailed literature review of previous research on male childlessness and brings the concepts of childlessness and reproduction into question. Chapter three elaborates on the phenomenological and critical approach to the topic and outlines the relevance and usefulness of taking a pluralist approach to the present research. Chapter four outlines the method undertaken to obtain experiential data; how the research methodological process was actioned. Chapter five provides the findings from the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), and Chapter six provides the findings from the Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). The thesis then concludes with a discussion in Chapter seven of its limitations, and the foreseen implications of the research and the research process.
Chapter 2: Review of the literature, theory, and practice

‘... and so it is written ...’

2.1 Introduction

I have used the phrase ‘and so it is written’ for two reasons. The first reason is to indicate what is written in the literature about the experience of male childlessness. The second reason is to critique what is written, to add a question mark, alluding to what is written being not necessarily ‘all that is done’. Many historical and biblical references finish with ‘all that is done’, a statement, practice or behaviour that is to be accepted as a static and fixed way of knowing and understanding something, here childlessness and reproduction.

The overarching aim of the study is to explore and broaden the body of knowledge and understanding of the concept and experiences of male childlessness. As childlessness entangles many aspects of life, and at various stages, it is important to bring together literature and research conducted from different disciplines, as well as across time (Punch, 2000). In order to provide rationale for the current study, this chapter considers the topic of male childlessness and reproduction in terms of how these concepts are defined, quantitatively and qualitatively. What is written about male childlessness has been increasing but remains limited. I have outlined male childlessness as a topic of interest, followed by childlessness in different contexts—childlessness in demography, ageing, in involuntary and voluntary circumstances, experiences of homosexual childless men, experiences of stepfathers, adoptive fathers and non-biological fathering, men who are single and childless, social surveillance, and experiences of female childlessness—how it is written thus far.

2.2 Historical narrative of increasing interest in the topic of ‘male childlessness’

Society and religion concur and expect people to want and have children. In writing about the psychological and social aspects of childlessness, Pohlman (1970) discusses the social and religious perspectives. He provides as an example the Roman
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Catholic Church’s position that a marriage is validated when it has produced children and hence, getting married with the intent of not having children, invalidates the marriage. Pohlman also cites examples of early Hebrew life, where if a married man died without having produced offspring, a *levirate* type marriage may occur—a deceased husband’s brother, from his ‘raised up seed’, married the widow in order to continue the family name through offspring. In Judaeo-Christian tradition parenthood was worshipped, and children were viewed as blessings from heaven, while childlessness or ‘barrenness’ was a curse or punishment. Hollingworth (1916) and Waller and Hill (1951) wrote about the early pressures to have children, in particular recognising social control and acknowledging pressure on the childless to have children.

Up until the 20th century, reproductive discussions upheld heteronormative values and beliefs and reproductive research was often in reference to ‘wives’. Such beliefs and different emphases on parenthood have parallels in many cultural and religious beliefs, past and present. Yet, Pohlman (1970, pp. 11-12) indicates that disadvantages of parenthood were noted, as was the reality that having children did not suit some ‘husbands and wives’, and that population pressures would be eased if there was an increase in the number of childless couples. Other writers concur, noting that there are men who have identifiable agendas when it comes to fertility decision-making, including non-heterosexual men, religious men, and those with strong desires to have or not to have children (Dalzell, 2007; Fisher, 2002; Singleton, 2005). While Park (2002) and other authors suggest that the majority of childless adults do not choose to be childless, thereby raising concerns about the consequential impact of childlessness on those individuals, other authors suggest otherwise. It is not the intention in the current study to examine how many childless men are intentionally or unintentionally so. Instead, I wanted to explore how each man’s sense of choice and circumstances are integrated into their subjective experiences of childlessness.

Male childlessness has not always been a topic of interest. Indeed it has been a ‘non-topic’ (Morison, 2013, p. 1140) within academia and among the general public. Moreover, the childless men interviewed did not speak about it, as the fertility and reproductive decisions of other men were considered to be not their business. However, childlessness is not new, and understanding the psychosocial consequences of childlessness is still developing. While it is not the purpose of the current study to
analyse the catalysts of the current interest in men’s health, it is important to acknowledge aspects of the historical narrative of key social and political developments to help provide context to it.

In Australia and other Western societies, significant shifts in how men and women were positioned within society occurred during the 20th century. A few examples include: the development of the women’s union or ‘Suffragettes’ in 1903, the development of the contraceptive pill, the sexual revolution and changes in ‘family planning’ in the 1960s, the Men’s Liberation Movement (MLM) and the Men’s Rights Movement (MRM) in the early 1970s, and the gay liberation movement from the late 1960s through to the mid-1980s. The MLM and the MRM were to address issues of apparent discrimination against men in many social and political issues; they focused on realms of family law, domestic violence, education, health policies, parenting and reproduction, in all of which men’s rights advocates argued men were discriminated against.

Although men have not traditionally been included in reproductive health, since the landmark 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, Egypt (Dudgeon & Inhorn, 2003) definitions of reproductive health have gone beyond how to achieve population control, and included more emphasis on reproductive wellbeing. Reproductive health and various health programs have been emphasised for all individuals, including men, and framed in terms of human rights (Cliquet & Thienpont, 1995). Yet the focus remains on the biomedical nature of men’s reproductive health, the psychosocial aspects of not producing offspring receiving little attention.

Health awareness for men in Australia, in the sense of utilising health services, is of relatively recent concern to men, health professionals and federal policies, commencing in the 1980s but taken up more seriously in the 1990s. It was then acknowledged that men, through their lifespan, were more likely to experience ill-health than women, and that little had occurred at state or federal levels of government to formally address men’s health needs (Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, 1996). How producing or not producing offspring is interwoven into other health concerns for men was still not yet recognised. Men’s

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4 Whereas comparable demographic changes in post-communist societies, such as in central and eastern Europe, occurred later, only since the early 1990s (Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 2002; Sobotka, 2004).
health was not regarded as a gender health issue by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing, the federal department responsible for the primary care of Australians (Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, 1996). In light of concerns for men’s health based on 1992 Australian Bureau of Statistics findings, the first National Men’s Health Conference was held in Melbourne in 1995 (Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, 1996).

Dr Carmen Lawrence, who was at the time the Australian Minister for Human Services and Health, recalls that when she first raised the issue of men’s health in Federal Parliament, she was met with ‘derisive laughter’ (Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, 1996, p. 7) from both men and women in the chamber. She commented that for her political colleagues, men’s health seemed like ‘a bit of a joke’. Reflecting then current attitudes towards men’s health, it was suggested to her that if men were to take their health seriously, they would feel like ‘wimps’. Dr Lawrence noted in her opening speech at the National Men’s Conference that it was important to have a multi-disciplinary approach to men’s health. To make any progress in understanding men’s psychosocial health would require a combined effort by Commonwealth and State governments, health professionals, community organisations and men’s groups, and men as consumers of services (Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, 1996). To help understand male childlessness is to raise awareness.

2.3 Demographic context of male childlessness

2.3.1 What is childlessness?

In defining the term childlessness, Housekneckt (1987, p. 369) simply stated that childlessness denoted the ‘absence of children’. However, different kinds of childlessness are also recognised, mainly couched as being unintentional or involuntary or circumstantial childlessness, or intentional – voluntary or chosen – childlessness (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007). As Marchbank & Letherby (2007) emphasised, as there are different ways of understanding parenthood, so too there are different ways of understanding or defining childlessness. Mostly though, childlessness is referenced in biological terms, describing the number of offspring one
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has produced, such as children ever born to females over the age of 15 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016b). However, ‘childlessness’ is really quite ambiguous and difficult to define (Pohlman, 1970), and is not absolute. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) describes ‘families’ as including adopted, fostered and stepchildren, so a broad definition of individuals and couples who are ‘without children’ means without biological or non-biological children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016a).

Demographically, a woman may declare that she has had zero children ever born, but may have two adopted children, which then categorises her as ‘having’ a family and ‘with children’. According to Kendig et al. (2007, p. 1471), childlessness is having no living biological or adoptive children. Involuntary or unintentional childlessness, has been described as the ‘failure of an adult or a couple’ to produce children over a period of ‘several years’ (Pohlman, 1970, p. 2). Pohlman, however, also distinguishes between those who ‘deeply want children’ and those who are more ‘casual’. Reed (2008) acknowledges the lack of consensus around using the term ‘childfree’. With a view that the terms ‘childless’ and ‘childfree’ are both value-laden, Brym and Lie (2013, p. 249) proposed calling couples with no children ‘zero-child families’. ‘Childless’ therefore tends to refer to involuntarily childless, and ‘childfree’ to voluntarily childless. ‘Childfree’ was initially used in 1972 by The National Organization for Non-parents to stand in contrast to ‘childless’ (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008).

Voluntary childlessness is defined by Wasser & Barash (1983) as actively suppressing the production of offspring, and similarly by Pohlman (1970) as intentional. The decision of adults to have no children may involve a couple making a shared decision, or be undertaken with a degree of friction between partners (Pohlman, 1970). Those described as voluntarily childless are often described as being either ‘articulators’ who articulate early and are definite about not wanting children, or ‘postponers’ who delayed or never made a decision about having children, (Houseknecht, 1987; Lunneborg, 1999). Decisions with having or not having children involve theories of ‘rational choice’ and cost-benefit ideology (McDonald, 2000, 2002), and psychosocial considerations (Hakim, 2003; Miller & Pasta, 1995). However childlessness is not always about choice. Childlessness may be involuntary.
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It is evident from the literature that the number of childless men who do not want to have children remains unclear, as does the distinction between voluntary and involuntary childlessness, which is often blurred by varying levels of desire, choice and an array of life circumstances (Bulcroft & Teacherman, 2004; Merlo & Rowland, 2000; Park, 2002; Qu, Weston, & Kilmartin, 2000; Rowland, 1998, 2007; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2004), which can also shift over time (Letherby, 2002). Although some people tend to self-define as being voluntarily childless (Shaw, 2011) or involuntarily childless (Hadley, 2015), many are not easily defined as being voluntary or involuntary. For example, when exploring the experiences of couples, one person’s choice not to have children may become the other person’s circumstance, thus making the distinction between childlessness due to choice or to circumstance unclear (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007). While some make clear and intentional decisions early in life, others postpone decisions or are ambivalent about having children (Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1973). The intention to not have children ‘does not (necessarily) imply anything about the intensity of feeling that is associated with that intent’, which has implications for recognising permanent or temporary childlessness and involuntary and voluntary childlessness (Houseknecht, 1987, p. 370). Letherby (2002) extends on Monach’s (1993) idea that intentions can shift and there is often not a clear boundary between ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ childlessness, from which Letherby suggests ‘a continuum of childlessness’ (p. 8); a concept that has been followed up by Hadley (2015) in his study of older involuntarily childless men. The notion of a continuum—the fluidity of choice, circumstances, and evolving experiences throughout the life-course—seems appropriate for many complex human experiences; its importance or relevance will be observed in the men’s narratives in the current study.

The features of contemporary childlessness are different to what was traditionally portrayed (Sobotka & Testa, 2008). Parenthood has lost much of its centrality in people’s lives, and with much ambiguity about its pros and cons is increasingly perceived as a matter of personal choice. With an increasing number of ex-nuptial births (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012) and changing social living arrangements, non-marriage is not necessarily a ‘determinant’ of childlessness.

Without data on men who do not produce offspring, self-identified voluntary and involuntary childlessness remains unclear in Australia. In order to develop a
better understanding of the personal and individual impact of being childless, ‘male childlessness’, in the present study, is defined as men who are not aware of having biological offspring—zero fertility—as their entry point into their own narratives of how childlessness is interpreted in their lives.

2.3.2 How many childless men?

According to Carmichael (2013, p. 256) ‘fertility is by far the largest subdiscipline in contemporary demography’. Yet previous to the last two decades, he has observed ‘women [to] comprise virtually its sole objects of study. Men, if they appeared at, usually did so as shadows; as partners-by-implication of those engaged in childbearing’. With appropriate data it is possible to calculate male equivalents of Total Fertility Rates (TFRs)—which is strictly speaking a female focused measure—sometimes referred to as Total Paternity Rates or Ratios (Carmichael, 2013). TFRs may give a clue to change in female or male childlessness, however it can be misleading. For example, the sharp decline in Australia’s TFRs in the 1960s was driven more so by women avoiding births with the use of the oral contraception and sterilisation. The data that is more directly related with childlessness are census data on children ever born (CEB). However, such data for men has never been collected in Australia.

Overall, the world population continues to increase although at a slower rate due to declining Total Fertility Rates (TFRs) in developed countries (United Nations, 2013, 2017). The TFRs of many of the more economic populations are at, or below, replacement levels (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2007; UNICEF, 2014; United Nations, 2013). While a convergence of declining fertility rates seems evident, not all populations have decreased at the same rate. Furthermore, the overall TFR is influenced by subpopulation fertility rates of immigrants and indigenous populations, which can complicate our understanding of reproductive trends (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010; Taylor, 2011; UNICEF, 2014). It is estimated that the world population consists of a larger non-white than white population (Taylor & Cohn, 2012; Wolfgang, Warren, & Sergei, 2001), and it has also been posited that there is an 85 percent chance that the world population will stop growing by 2100 (Wolfgang et
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al., 2001), with the timing of the peak of population growth varying considerably across different regions (O’Neill, Scherbov, & Lutz, 1999).

The phenomenon of childlessness is not unprecedented, nor revolutionary. From a worldview perspective, cross-national surveys show that many fertility rates have fallen below replacement levels, with childlessness emerging as a major contributing factor (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010; Rowland, 2007; Wenger, Dykstra, Melkas, & Knipscheer, 2007; Wu & Schimmele, 2003). Although global fertility is declining, the Revisions of the World Population Prospects (United Nations, 2013, 2017) consistently show the world population is still expected to increase, although at a slower rate due to reductions in fertility, leading to population ageing. According to the reports, population growth is consistently expected to be particularly dramatic in the least developed high-fertility countries mainly in Africa, as well as countries with large populations in Asia, namely India and China (United Nations, 2013, 2017). Most developed countries are now below-replacement level fertility and have been for two to three decades. These figures would be expected to decline further if were not for the net increase of migration from developing countries to developed countries (United Nations, 2013, p. 2). Of all countries to show stagnant or below-replacement fertility levels 67 percent were found to be from more developed countries (United Nations, 2001). More recently fertility in all of European countries are now showing fertility levels below replacement levels (United Nations, 2017).

In a review of the historical trends of childlessness in developed societies, Rowland (2007) found that the number of childless women had been increasing since the 1960s and considered it unlikely that the number would fall back below 10 percent, with Hakim (2000, p. 51) predicting childlessness would plateau at around 20 percent by the 2020s. Norway is one country that collects data on men’s fertility trends. In 2014, Statistics Norway (as cited by Jensen, 2016) found 22 percent of men were childless at the age of 50, which was a sharp increase from 13 percent in 1995.

In Australia total fertility rates have been below replacement level since 1976 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). From the outset in Australia, there seems to have been very little demographic information on male childlessness. However, Australia is not the only country where the collection of male fertility histories is not undertaken (Office for National Statistics, UK 2014). Although the first Australian Census was held in 1911, the number of Children Ever Born (CEB) question was not
asked until 1981 and has only ever been asked of women. Gray raised the question in 2002 asking, ‘how many men remain childless?’ (Gray, 2002, p. 4); the question remains unanswered. During the time of the current study, I submitted a consultation with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), requesting that a CEB question be included for men in the next five-yearly Australian Census, which will be held in 2021 (I am awaiting a response from the ABS).

Some key scholars have taken up the topic of paternity and male childlessness in Australia and discussed the challenges of trying to estimate the number of childless males within the Australian population (Carmichael, 2013; Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Gray, 2002; Merlo & Rowland, 2000; Parr, 2010; Rowland, 2007). Gray (2002) draws attention to the sources of fertility data, upon which these authors elaborate. Data from birth registries and various studies are incomplete or unreliable. There is also the issue of men who are not aware of having offspring, are not told of having biological children, or with longer reproductive spans, who may still potentially ‘have’ children.

From an Australian perspective, trying to estimate the size of the childless male cohort within the Australian population is difficult and often discussed in relation to data on paternity and childless women (see discussion from Carmichael, 2013). Taken from Australian Census data, assumptions are made that if a specified percentage of women at a specified age are childless then potentially a similar percentage of men are also childless. However, there are also indicators from other surveys and studies. When examining the data for 1610 men aged 45 to 59 years in the 2001 Household Income and Labour Dynamics (HILDA) survey, Nick Parr (2010) found 12.8 percent were childless, compared to 9.5 percent of women of the same age. These percentages estimated that one in eight men were childless. In Wave 1 of an ongoing Australian nationwide longitudinal study, the Ten to Men Study (Australian Institute of Family Studies, n.d.), recruitment during 2013 and 2014 collected health and lifestyle information of 13,884 men, aged 18 to 55 years. Of the 17.7 percent of the men in the study aged over 50 years, 6.5 percent did not ‘have children’. Although Question 89a asked ‘How many children do you have?’ it included adult children, biological, adopted and stepchildren. At best, a possible indicator to estimate male childlessness is the percentage of women aged 40 to 44 years who are childless. In 2011, childless women were 16.9 percent of this age group and the percentage of women who were childless aged 35 to 39 years in 2011 was
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21.8 percent. A plateau of 20 percent of the population appears to be an indicative marker. Taking there is a degree of concurrence that the number of childless men is similar, but possibly greater than that of childless women, there is an estimation that childlessness in many developed populations will be around 20 to 25 percent (Hakim, 2000). Having a first child over the age of 50 is very unlikely (Parr, 2010) but still possible for men. Holton et al. (2016) randomly selected survey participants from the 2013 Australian Electoral Roll. Ninety percent thought it was acceptable for men to have children over the age of 50 years. However, most of them underestimated the effect of age on fertility and overestimated the effectiveness of assisted reproductive technology (ART).

From a homosexual perspective in Australia, additional light is shed on estimates of the number of childless men. Same-sex couples have been identified in the Australian Census since 1996 (Evans & Gray, 2017). Since collecting data on same-sex couples began, there has been a continued pattern of more male couples than female couples. For example, in 2011, 52 percent were male couples compared to 48 percent female couples. However, the pattern of significantly more female couples having children continues—for example in 2016, 25 percent of female couples had children while only 4.5 percent of male couples did. The key point here is that although the definitive number of childless men in the Australian population is still unknown, with fewer male same-sex couples having children, there are therefore more childless men. Although attitudes towards and of homosexual men are changing in Australian society, same-sex couples only account for 0.9 percent of all couple families (Qu, Knight, & Higgins, 2016). Given the still present challenges of the psychosocial reproductive wellbeing of homosexual men within pronatalist ideology and heterosexual society—as for all men—homosexual men need to be included in discussions and explorations of experiences of male childlessness.

While the exact number of childless men is not important, having better estimates is likely to have positive implications. Firstly, it would help answer the question of whether childless males are a minority cohort or an unrecognised majority. Secondly, with published Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) results, male childlessness would become more visible which, in turn, could help to raise awareness of ‘childless’ men. Thirdly, childless men could possibly feel more
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included in reproductive discussions, and how Australian population dynamics are understood psychosocially.

With low fertility rates and people projected to live longer, concerns are also raised for who will provide unpaid support for ageing populations in Western societies, particularly for those who are without children. For example, one UK report from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) focused on concern for care of the ageing population (McNeil & Hunter, 2014) highlighted projections that by 2032, there was expected to be an increase in the number of 60 percent of older people, but only a 20 percent increase in offspring to care for older parents (Pickard, 2015). Similar concerns are held in Australia with projections for 2101 that 25 percent of the Australian population will be over 65 years of age (Soloff, 2015). Given that the men in the current study are over the age of 50 years, relevant concerns of childlessness being an ‘urgent’ issue (Hadley, 2015) and a ‘contemporary issue of importance’ (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007, p. 112), and questions of who will care for childless men when as they age will be explored.

All species are capable of producing more than enough offspring to replace themselves. However, many human populations are reproducing at or below replacement levels with more individuals having fewer or no children. There are many assumptions and expectations around biological reproduction; mainly that people should want and are able to have children. Yet it is clear, within human populations, that there are people who do not want and cannot.

2.3.3 Pathways to childlessness

Reasons for not having children are endless, forming a complex grid of biological and psychological life circumstances (Bulcroft & Teacherman, 2004; Hagestad & Call, 2007; Rowland, 2007). Popenoe (1936, p. 472) suggested the majority of childless marriages were ‘motivated by individualism, competitive consumption, economics, and an infantile, self-indulgent, frequently neurotic attitude toward life’. The data in Popenoe’s study were provided by adult students in a Californian university, offering third-party viewpoints on childless couples they knew at the time, and also reflected social attitudes at the time. As times changed, the ways in which reasons for not having children were conveyed also changed.
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A common reason given why voluntarily childless individuals choose not to have children is to preserve their current lifestyle (Valenzuela, 2016). In Australia, reasons of lifestyle, more than financial or career reasons, or age seem to stand out in some studies (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Qu et al., 2000). Park (2005) explored motives for intentionally choosing not to have children. Men and women so choosing were found to be more educated, in professional and managerial type employment, had good incomes, were conventional, less religious and upheld less strict gender role ideologies. Although Lunneborg (1999) did not differentiate cultural differences or commonalities with her participants in her study of 30 voluntarily childless British and American men (Knodel, 2001), she found other reasons for choosing not to have children. These included work and money priorities, with some men having had poor relationships with their fathers, and others wanting to avoid the stress of parenthood. Regarding decision-making around fertility, the 14 Australian men in Singleton’s (2005) paper expressed concerns about their careers, the stability of relationships, childcare availability, cost, timing, age, and previous experience of children, which are all interlinked, and similar to findings in other studies (Qu et al., 2000; Weston & Qu, 2001). However, accounts from the three men that were childless in Singleton’s paper stated that the absence of a partner and coupled with age, were the key reasons why they were childless. Despite wanting to become fathers one day, given the younger ages of these three men, aged 22-34, they may have children or they may remain childless.

A growing reluctance and ambiguity around parenthood has been found to contribute to reasons for men delaying having children (Sobotka & Testa, 2008). Postponement of parenthood and not finding a partner until later in life became evident in both decisions and circumstances for some men around not producing offspring (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Hadley, 2015). Jensen (2016) suggested that perhaps social context and policies, like the Norwegian ‘daddy quota’ in the early 1990s, are linked to reproductive behaviour, creating a conflict for some men and making more men hesitate to have children. As Carmichael & Whittaker (2007, p. 114) highlight, the voluntary label ‘implies an agency that may not exist’, meaning

5 The so-called ‘daddy quota’ refers to the leave entitlement in Nordic welfare states for fathers. The leave quota was introduced in 1993 as a parental leave scheme reform that signified ‘symmetrical’ parenthood — meaning that both women and men engage symmetrically in paid work and unpaid caregiving (Ellingsæter, 2012).
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male childlessness by choice can play a prominent role in generating female childlessness by circumstance, and the reverse. Decreased fertility rates reflect a shift in reproductive ideation due to economic changes, improved birth control, and changing choices for women about when to conceive (Wu & Schimmele, 2003) and impacting reproductive desire, choice and circumstances for men. With the changing demographic fabric of Australian and many Western societies, intentions to have children are uncertain, as relationships have become less stable over the last few decades (Qu, Weston, and Kilmartin, 2000). This notion suggests that relationship breakups and shorter relationships are likely to influence the overall increase in childlessness and some people who may have wanted children but drift into childlessness.

Age is another reason why some men do not produce offspring. Even though men have longer reproductive spans, Neugarten’s ‘social clock’ [Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965; Neugarten, 1976] seems to prevail for some men, so that some British and Australian childless men felt they were too old to become fathers (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Hadley, 2015). Conversely, when Holton et al. (2016) randomly selected men from the 2013 Australian Electoral Roll, ninety per cent thought it was acceptable for men to have children over the age of 50 years. However, the inverse reasoning is often found, with most men underestimating the effect of age on fertility and overestimating the ability of Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) to facilitate later childbearing (Throsby & Gill, 2004).

Regardless of desire to be a biological father, reasons for not producing offspring are not always about choice. Circumstances of infertility or unsuccessful ART are major contributing factors to involuntary childlessness (Hadley, 2015; Hadley & Hanley, 2011). Other factors include remaining single or being in a relationship with someone who does not want or cannot have children. Moreover, social and religious ‘law’ has, up until recently, prevented non-heterosexual men from becoming fathers, therefore generating involuntary circumstances for some non-heterosexual men (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Dalzell, 2007).

Thompson, Lee, and Adams (2013) found that young men consider the roles of traditional breadwinner and involved fatherhood potentially conflicting. Completing education, establishing stable careers and developing personal maturity were often viewed by young men as ‘preconditions’ to fatherhood. However, these preceding steps may take longer than planned, creating a pathway to childlessness.
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with biological fatherhood not eventuating. Childhood experiences, the timing of leaving home, career expectations, remaining single, delaying children, infertility and ambivalence have all been found to influence pathways towards childlessness (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007b; Hagestad & Call, 2007; Thompson et al., 2013).

Pathways to childlessness are hugely varied and individual (Dykstra & Wagner, 2007). Hagestad and Call (2007) emphasise that before exploring late-life meanings of not producing offspring, as the current study does, the different contexts of multiple pathways over the lifetime need to be considered, and encapsulated as:

Of special importance is early adulthood, a phase in which circumstances and choices create conditions for many later transitions. Temporal location becomes central, as we need to consider biographical time—the individual’s movement through phases of life—as well as the historical times in which a life is embedded. Starting with a focus on pathways through time, we soon realise that it is essential to use a gendered lens. As men and women move through life in multiple domains, they often encounter different opportunities or constraints and are differentially affected by historical change. (p. 1339)

Various fertility theories help to explain causal interpretations of childlessness. According to Morgan and Taylor (2006, p. 388), low fertility ‘hinges on a cultural shift in dominant mental and cultural schema’. Thus, with changing perceptions about fertility (Mason, 1997), changing attitudes towards the ‘value-of-children’ (Morgan & Taylor, 2006, p. 386) and altruistic viewpoints regarding having children (van de Kaa, 2003), contemporary childlessness has more to do with choices for the individual, and less to do with infertility and not being married. Morgan and Taylor (2006) categorise fertility choices into technological, economic and ideological. They propose the interaction of these processes work simultaneously at a macro-level but also at an individual level, and have a powerful effect on fertility rates. Although proposed at a macro-level, these grouped categories could be applied to more proximate or personal interpretations of reasons for not producing offspring.

Relevant to the current study is the importance of recognising the diversity of reasons men give for being childless and how that impacts one’s sense of the distinction between voluntary and involuntary childlessness, which is not always
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straightforward. It is not about whether each man is able to self-define whether he is voluntarily or involuntarily childless; the aim of the current study is to explore the experience of ‘childlessness’, as lived. The demographic profile of childless men is only part of the story. In the current study, the men were not asked directly why they had not produced offspring. Instead, I wanted to explore whether reasons were integral to their experience, and positioned their narratives of experience, and in turn, helped shape their psychosocial wellbeing. The link between reasons for not having children and the psychosocial consequences of childlessness is not yet clearly understood. With different pathways to childlessness in mind, I now outline some findings of previous research on the experience of male childlessness.

2.4 Previous research on the experiences of male childlessness and wellbeing

‘no organism is advantaged by never conceiving’

(Bolvin, Sanders, & Schmidt, 2006, p. 252)

For humans, the experience of ‘never conceiving’ is subjective, with all its advantages and disadvantages, costs and rewards. One view of fathering is that it is transforming in terms of men’s behaviour and wellbeing (Palkovitz, 2002). Being the provider and having a commitment to family life, fatherhood forms part of the identity of men (Hatter, Vinter, & Williams, 2002). Changing social expectations of fatherhood and men’s involvement in the lives of children have been studied (Habib, 2012; Lewis, 1986). For example, in the mid-1980s, Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine (1987) conceptualised fatherhood as concerned with engagement, accessibility and responsibility for the child. A couple of decades later Condon, Corkindale, Boyce, and Gamble (2013) emphasised the bond and the feeling of love between father and child as being an important dimension of fatherhood. According to Habib (2012), a father can experience positive and negative feelings and emotions, a change in his self-concept, and is often influenced by his own parents, particularly his own father.

Research on the experiences of parenthood are often investigated in terms of costs and rewards with paradoxical findings ranging from joy to frustration (Gilbert, 2006; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003; Powdthavee, 2009). Studies regarding men’s reproductive behaviour has in the past, remained scarce (McAllister & Clarke, 1998),
yet with social changes that began five decades ago, studies focusing on men have slowly come to the fore (for example, Dykstra & Keizer, 2009; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001).

In many studies, fathering and fatherhood are conceptualised in biological and heteronormative terms, with non-fatherhood appearing with less favourable outcomes. For example, Keizer, Dykstra, and Poortman (2010) have quantitatively explored life outcomes for childless men in comparison to fathers specifically examining the things that fatherhood can offer—such as children becoming organisers of time, a source of daily stress and joy, men becoming role models—and found that these outcomes appear to be less relevant for childless men. Childless men, in comparison to fathers, were found to have lower levels of health, lower incomes, less contact with neighbours, lower life satisfaction, and lower moods. Associated with these negative outcomes was not having a partner, rather than being childless per se. While childless men tended to have more depressive symptoms than parous men, in other studies they did not differ (Bures, Koropeckyj-Cox, & Loree, 2009; Hansen, Slagsvold, & Moum, 2009).

Social and political emphasis on producing offspring—pronatalism—seems to impact on psychosocial outcomes. For example, in a study of the fertility intentions of individuals aged 18 to 39 years in 13 European countries, the Netherlands and Belgium demonstrated more positive attitudes towards childlessness (Sobotka & Testa, 2008), suggesting that not having children in these societies is less encumbered by pronatalist ideology. In Lunneborg’s (1999) study of the lives of childfree men, men who came from British and American cultures that upheld pronatalist ideas—albeit the differences not discussed—were found to feel societal pressures to have children more strongly. Yet societal pressures, with negative social stigma placed on childlessness, have been reported by childless men in different studies, including by those who wanted to be fathers and non-heterosexual men (Hadley, 2015; Hadley & Hanley, 2011).

An increasing number of scholars have pursued reproductive discussions and research within a social context. Park (2002), for example, proposed the existence of a reproductive social hierarchy, with parents and women generally positioned at the top and voluntarily childless men at the bottom. According to Park, not wanting children is deemed less socially acceptable than not being able to have children. Park’s
proposal aligns with Callan’s (1985) earlier study which also found parents of two or more children were perceived most favourably, followed by the involuntarily childless, then parents of one child, then the voluntarily childless. Perceptions of a reproductive hierarchy among childless men themselves have also since been found in other studies; these had a psychological impact on how the men experienced being ‘childless’ (Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Robertson, 2007). Gender differentiation over the past two decades have seen voluntarily childless men being evaluated more negatively than voluntarily childless women and involuntarily childless men and women. For example, in a study of attitudes toward childlessness among college students, Kopper and Smith (2001) found male participants to perceive those who are childless-by-choice more negatively. To help explain this negative perception, the authors conclude that males ‘view childlessness as disadvantageous’ (p. 2288). In the past, not wanting children was deemed as less socially acceptable than not being able to have children (Park, 2002). While personal circumstances leading to male childlessness are often hidden and complex, the social stigma of not having children is an issue that many childless men face through the course of their lives (Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Park, 2002).

The subject of ‘having’, or in the current context, ‘not having’, children touches on so many aspects of life they can be difficult to disentangle. Nonetheless, I have organised the findings of previous studies under several broad subheadings: involuntary childlessness, voluntary childlessness, experiences of homosexual men, experiences of stepfathers, adoptive fathers and non-biological fathering, men who are single and childless, ageing, some ‘positive’ experiences, and experiences of childless women. By no means are these subheadings exhaustive. Nor are they discrete, as many studies share emphases on factors such as desire, choice, circumstances, gender, age, relationships, socioeconomic position, culture, and religion, all of which are entwined in how the experience of male childlessness is conveyed.

2.4.1 Involuntary childlessness

Within dominant pronatalist discourse, childlessness as a result of involuntary circumstances may be the first consideration when understanding childlessness. According to some authors, most people want and expect to become parents (Holton,
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Fisher, & Rowe, 2011; Weston, Qu, Parker, & Alexander, 2004). Moreover, most men appear to want parenthood and desire parenthood, as much as women (Fisher, Baker, & Hammarberg, 2010), viewing fatherhood as fundamental to lifetime contentment and fulfilment (Dyer, Lombard, & Van der Spuy, 2009; Sylvest, Christensen, Hammarberg, & Schmidt, 2014; Thompson & Lee, 2011a; Thompson et al., 2013). Some studies have found involuntary childlessness to be more stressful, blocking anticipated life plans for biological fatherhood (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007a; Hadley & Hanley, 2011).

The majority of studies on involuntary childlessness tend to focus on infertility and also tend to focus on women’s experiences, rendering the experience of men either invisible or of less importance. Much of this is because men often hide their experience, suppressing their own emotions in keeping with masculine norms (Berg & Wilson, 1991). For a couple unable to conceive, at worst, the female partner takes the blame for ‘their’ infertility (Greil, 1997), but predominantly men often ‘shoulder’ the burden. For example, Throsby and Gill (2004), in their exploration of experiences of unsuccessful IVF, noted that male partners seemed not to want to talk to and support women during and after unsuccessful fertility treatments, resulting in women feeling isolated and lonely. Meanwhile men felt they were ‘shouldering the burden’ of the distress that infertility was causing them both. Men felt they were being strong for their partner. Differing interpretations of reproductive experiences from men and women indicate that ‘gendered emotional scripts can have deleterious consequences for heterosexual couples wanting children’ (Throsby & Gill, 2004). Moreover, infertility can pose a threat to their masculinity (Boden, 2007; Throsby & Gill, 2004) that may engender ‘a deep-seated anxiety that [the men] are often unable or unwilling to share with their partner or anyone else’ which is subsequently misunderstood by women as not caring. On the other hand, for some couples infertility can have a positive effect in bringing them closer together (Boden, 2007). Similarly, in another study, men had put themselves second, being strong for their partners, hiding their emotions and also hiding how they were building up their hopes for a successful reproductive outcome (Malik & Coulson, 2008). Men experienced neglect and felt unimportant and lonely in the ART process, but also experienced a level of disassociation with the issue of infertility. Studies reveal a ‘lack of male perspective when providing emotional and information guidance’ (Malik & Coulson, 2008, p. 25).
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Male infertility-related distress is very much under-reported (Carmeli & Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1994; Wright et al., 1991). Earlier studies indicated that infertility of themselves or their partner could have a negative psychosocial impact on men’s self-esteem, and their role in relationships and in society. Findings from more recent studies have revealed that those who wanted children and had tried various forms of ART unsuccessfully may still feel childless throughout their lives, leading to long-term crisis (Cousineau & Domar, 2007; Herrmann et al., 2011). It is evident that men do, in fact, experience psychological impacts of infertility (Joja, Dinu, & Paun, 2015). The married men in Webb and Daniluk’s (1999) study experienced infertility as a sense of profound grief and loss, powerlessness and loss of control, inadequacy, betrayal and isolation with respect to the medical system, their bodies and God, who they perceived as having failed them. More than a decade later, Hadley and Hanley (2011) found similar experiences of childlessness in their study of men who wanted to become biological fathers, including negative feelings of a sense of loss, depression, exclusion, isolation and an increased likelihood of risk-taking behaviour.

Infertility can have quite a negative impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of individuals. There is increasing recognition of the importance, and the under-reporting, of the experience of childlessness in the context of male infertility (Greil, 1997; Greil, Slauson-Blevins, & McQuillan, 2010), in both the short term and the long term. For example, Glover, Gannon, and Abel (1999) found that men continued to feel anxiety 18 months after unsuccessful attendance at subfertility clinics in London. In another study, Boden (2007) interviewed British couples five years after unsuccessful assisted conception treatments. She found that with the destruction of hope, individuals can struggle with trying to reinvest in and readapt life goals, or may consider alternative options such as adopting or explore other life pursuits, in the hope of mitigating their psychological distress. Wirtberg, Moller, Hogstrom, and Tronstad (2007) interviewed Swedish women 20 years after unsuccessful fertility treatments, finding that with their peers having grandchildren, several felt they were experiencing infertility all over again. With men in the current study being over the age of 50, their experiences of peers having grandchildren will also be considered. Grief can be complicated, and its long-term effects have been found in other studies (Volgsten, Svanberg, & Olsson, 2010). Overall, as is to be expected, most studies have revealed childlessness due to involuntary circumstances to be more stressful than that from voluntary decisions not to produce offspring (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007). The authors
of a British study with involuntarily childless men would concur, finding that a level of sadness often lingers (Hadley & Hanley, 2011).

While some strategies employed for an alternative life to biological fatherhood are satisfying for some childless men, for those who desperately wanted to be fathers these strategies may not fully compensate for the void of not having biological children (Dykstra & Keizer, 2009; Hadley & Hanley, 2011). Qualitative research to capture the experiences of infertile people can assist in understanding the impact of infertility and how distress and despair can wane over time (Greil et al., 2010); the current study uses these methods. Infertility is not just an issue for couples; it is an individual issue within couples. The experiences of men being the biological source of couple infertility or the partner of an infertile woman needs further discussion in the literature. Even though circumstances for involuntary childlessness do not always involve issues of infertility — for example when a man is in a relationship with someone who does not want children, rendering the circumstances of being childless possibly perceived as ‘involuntary’ — the number of studies reporting qualitative male experiences of involuntary childlessness remain under-represented in the literature. It therefore follows that men who identify with being involuntarily childless are included in the current study.

2.4.2 Voluntary childlessness

The experiences of individuals choosing to go against the ‘norm’ has for many voluntarily childless adults elicited negative evaluations from others which have been the focus of a few earlier writers. These negative evaluations target individuals who not only do not have children, but do not want them (Callan, 1985; Park, 2002). Going against the reproductive norm creates a perception that there might be other flaws in the personalities of those who do not want children (Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1973). Consequently, a key focus of previous studies has been the management of social stigma. The voluntarily childless almost have to prove that voluntary childlessness can be a ‘viable and satisfactory alternate life style’ (Veevers, 1973, p. 199).

In an early Australian quantitative study with childless men and women Callan (1985) found that, overall, those who self-defined as being voluntarily childless were happier than those who were involuntarily childless. However, it was noted that
people are judged differently socially according to their fertility status. Men and women were not significantly stigmatised differently; it was more about perceptions of their low desire for children, which was viewed to reflect negative aspects of personality. For example, not wanting children was considered to be evidence of being selfish, materialistic, individualistic, not emotionally mature, not as loving, and disliking children. Reflecting pronatalist ideology, people with few children were considered to have less positive attributes. While the involuntarily childless were the most lonely, they were perceived with sympathy, for at least they wanted children.

Letherby (2002) demonstrated that women had to negotiate social expectations, censure and stigma, which she argued, had origins within dominant pronatalist discourse. Letherby’s findings aligned with other studies, particularly with Veevers’s (1973) finding that major religious groups endorsing procreation within marriage, led to discord for married couples who chose not to have children. Veevers also revealed that some individuals ‘delayed’ parenthood by arguing that adoption might be an option for later, as a way of rejecting the stereotypes of the childless being selfish and disliking children. Some voluntarily childless people extolled their different approach to life, interpreted the disapproval of parents as envy, and embraced not having children with a positive self-image to minimise social pressure for parenthood, to the point of ‘even producing a superior identity’. This shows how ‘reasons’ for not having children interplay with life experiences, and both need to be considered when exploring the phenomenon of childlessness.

Park (2002) observed in her study that participants used six different strategies for managing stigma associated with being voluntarily childless. These strategies were (p. 21): ‘passing, identity substitution, condemning the condemners, asserting a right to self-fulfilment, claiming biological deficiency, and redefining the situation’. Binding these strategies are the defence of decisions made not to have children, and a feeling that people have made the right reproductive decision for them.

Reed (2008) conducted a thematic analysis of 11 voluntary childless American men aged 30 to 60 years. While Reed found that most had received negative reactions from family, friends and co-workers, they stated that they did not let these reactions bother them. Few expressed concerns for their life prospects in late adulthood. The men reported not using any particular stigma management strategies, other than redefining their situations by explaining their decisions not to have children, and commenting that parents should explain why they chose to have children (my
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emphasis in italics). The older men in Reed’s study had reached an age when society does not expect people to have young children, and they reported that people no longer asked about children, reflecting Neugarten’s (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965) ‘social clock’ at about the age at which it is no longer considered appropriate to have children. While the men commented that people sometimes felt sad for them, they were also irritated by such comments, but shrugged them off. Most of the men in Reed’s study did not let being voluntarily childless define who they were in their self-concepts.

Managing social stigma and negative evaluations seems to be a common experience for those who choose not to produce offspring. More recent studies have shifted their focus to include the experience of voluntary childlessness in wider contexts. For example, within a social and political context, relations between parents and nonparents in Sweden at times become strained. While voluntarily childless individuals accept that a portion of their taxes helping to support parents, they felt upset and exploited when parents misused tax benefits and family rebates (Peterson & Engwall, 2016). Not enough is known of the viewpoints of voluntarily childless men in such wider contexts.

Studies of the experiences of individuals who choose not to produce offspring tend to reflect experiences as being ‘childfree’ and which stand in the face of pronatalist ideological norms. Although Koropeckyj-Cox and Pendall (2007) suggest that attitudes towards those who are voluntarily childless are changing, more needs to be understood of the experience of those who have chosen not to produce offspring.

2.4.3 Experiences of homosexual men

Although I do not want to single out homosexual men, and would prefer to be more inclusive, the purpose of separating data is to emphasise that non-heterosexual men also have reproductive experiences and experiences of childlessness. Assumptions that childless men are heterosexual and that the topic of male childlessness only includes heterosexual men implies that non-heterosexual men do not want to have children and will not have children (Dalzell, 2007). Childless homosexual men are challenged not only by the dominant discourse in a children-centred society, but also by heterosexual-centred discussions on childlessness. As Berkowitz’s opening line in her 2011 paper encapsulated: ‘Heteronormative
assumptions about appropriate parents, gender norms, and child socialisation continue to underpin the hegemonic view of family’ (p. 514).

Although reproductive choices are changing for many homosexual men in western societies, the negative reproductive consequences of ‘coming out’ for some homosexual men has been the realisation that they may not become biological fathers, therefore abandoning their dreams of fatherhood (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007). Dalzell in her British study of five non-heterosexual men aged 38 to 47 years (as cited by Hadley, 2015, p. 36), and Hadley’s work with involuntarily childless men have shown that homosexual men have reproductive desires, choices and circumstances of their own, and can experience negative emotions such as bereavement over not becoming a biological father. In other studies, Knauer (2000) and Grossman, D’Augelli, and Herschberger (2000) found social support and care for older homosexual men came from chosen, social families, not necessarily from kin family. Living alone and being single are risk factors for the psychosocial wellbeing of ageing homosexual and heterosexual childless men (Knauer, 2009).

Being childless and gay, as argued by Berkowitz (2011), positions homosexual men ‘under extreme surveillance and public scrutiny’ (p. 514). Social surveillance is not only about being homosexual but also in terms of being perceived as a potential paedophile. Fears of being viewed as a paedophile have been expressed by both homosexual and heterosexual childless men (Dalzell, 2007; Hadley & Hanley, 2011). While personal circumstances leading to male childlessness are often hidden and complex, the social stigma of not having children is an issue that many childless men face through the course of their lives (Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Park, 2002), as will be noted in the narratives of both heterosexual and homosexual men in the current study.

Social surveillance, however, is not only a concern for older men. A younger homosexual man in Reed’s (2008) study of 11 voluntarily American childless men also felt that he was ‘perceived negatively and stigmatised by society’ (p. 44), but it was not clear whether his perception was due to him being gay, announcing that he did not intend to have children, or both. Nevertheless, being non-heterosexual and without an intention to have children, his reproductive choices and behaviour may be perceived as a paradox. In one sense, being gay, he was not expected to want or have children. Yet expressing a wish not to have children would still raise an eyebrow or a look of bewilderment in many societies.
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Social trends in Australia and other countries are gradually shifting attitudes towards and of the non-heterosexual community regarding reproduction. Most notably, homosexual men are openly discussing children, and are having children. Even though reproductive decisions are becoming less synonymous with marriage, laws in Australia and other countries now enable same-sex couples to marry, and thereby ‘allow’ same-sex couples to ‘settle down and have kids’. Common understanding of the reproductive wellbeing of homosexual men is found more often in social media than in academic publications. For example, much-publicised British male same-sex couple Elton John and his husband David Furnish now have two children. Also publicised were the men undertaking a surrogacy program in America with their first son, where both contributed semen, a ‘mixing process’ banned in Britain occurred, and a randomly selected circumstance of one man being the biological father and the other being rendered ‘childless’ resulted. The challenges of how childless the non-biological father feels in a male same-sex couple are yet to be explored by academia. However, to follow from the cited example, the couple are photographed in traditional-style family portraits and the reporter commenting on ‘their’ excited children playing in the leaves (Daily Mail Australia, 2017). Similarly, in one of Australia’s highest selling weekly magazines, Woman’s Day, notable Australian Olympic swimmer Ian Thorpe talked about settling down, and that he has ‘always wanted to have a family’ of his own (Zubeidi, 2017). The reporter referred to notions of Thorpe regarding having children as being his ‘biggest milestone yet’ to be achieved, normalising anyone who wants to have children by bringing the children-centred-lens back in as a primary focus. The interview with Ian Thorpe also indicates that not finding the right person and a stable relationship in which to have children is important to homosexual men.

Studies regarding the reproductive behaviour of homosexual men have increased during the 21st century. However, only a handful have discussed gay men and surrogacy (Berkowitz, 2013) or asked childless homosexual men to recount their reproductive experiences (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Dalzell, 2007; Hadley, 2015; Kertzner, 2001; Knauer, 2009). The current study provides an opportunity for homosexual men to relate their experiences of being childless and to explore the relations between homosexual and heterosexual men in the reproductive realm.
2.4.4 Experiences of stepfathers, adoptive fathers and non-biological fathering

As Malik and Coulson (2008) suggest, more understanding of stepfathers is needed, particularly ageing stepfathers as they, like childless men, are less likely to contact family, ageing parents and siblings. There are only a handful of studies that explore the experiential lives of stepfathers; those who have children and those who are biologically childless. One explanation could be that it may be difficult for men to talk about their experience of being childless when they have adopted, fostered or have a close relationship with their stepchildren, making childlessness a potentially sensitive and hidden subject to discuss. For other biologically childless stepfathers, they may not perceive themselves as being ‘childless’.

A few studies, however, have broached the subject of the experience of stepfathers. Brennan’s (2016) thesis studying 86 New Zealand stepfathers aged 25 to 74 years found that some treated their stepchildren as their own, while some treated them differently, with each situation organised differently. Rare studies of the experiences of mothers in the stepfamilies—meaning the husband /partner is the stepfather to the woman’s children—revealed that mothers often have a relational management role between stepfather and stepchildren, generally to a mediator role (Fields, 2001; Seery & Crowley, 2000; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Brennan (2016), on the other hand, revealed that stepfathers generally found social expectations of the role of stepfathers to be inconsistent and unclear. Weaver and Coleman (2010) found that biological mothers in stepfamilies were gatekeepers, ‘not wanting the children to become attached and then suffer if the relationship did not work out [or] waiting to see if they can trust the man with their children’ (p. 314). In Brennan’s (2016) study, the men were very aware of social scrutiny and media reports about stepfathers abusing their stepchildren, with similar feelings of social surveillance to those experienced by other childless men.

Some childless men who are adoptive, foster or stepfathers may internalise persistent feelings of childlessness. The social fathering experience that is generated for these men appears to make them different from those without any children (Bures et al., 2009). While strategies undertaken to achieve an alternative life to biological fatherhood are satisfying for some childless men, for those who wanted to be fathers
they may not fully compensate for the void of not having biological children (Dykstra & Keizer, 2009; Hadley & Hanley, 2011). Further understanding of the experience of adoptive, foster and stepfathers who are also biologically childless is needed, and they were therefore invited to participate in the current study.

2.4.5 Single and childless

Being without a partner seems to be a contributing factor to diminished psychosocial wellbeing for heterosexual and non-heterosexual men beyond the age of 40 years, particularly in older age (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Keizer, 2010; Keizer, Dykstra, & Poortman, 2010; Wenger, 2001; Wenger, Dykstra, Melkas, & Knipscheer, 2007). The absence of children and not having a partner become sources of vulnerability and may negatively impact on the psychological wellbeing of some older adult men, particularly those who are both single and childless (Dykstra, 2009). Keizer (2010) found that without the presence of children and a partner older childless men were more inclined to risky health behaviours, and were poorer socioeconomically and psychologically, findings about which Dykstra and Keizer (2009) had previously expressed concern. Although Wenger et al. (2007) found single childless men to have less robust support networks, childlessness per se is not necessarily equated with social vulnerability as older childless adults were found to be equally as involved in the community as older parents. Concurring with other studies, rather than childlessness per se, being in a partnership seems to be more important for men’s wellbeing (Bures et al., 2009; Dykstra & Keizer, 2009; Keizer, 2010; Keizer et al., 2010; Wenger et al., 2007). In other words, being single can adversely affect men’s psychosocial wellbeing, self-efficacy and mood, more than childlessness does. While partnership history is important, when comparing fathers to non-fathers, other differences include those in community involvement, level of income and satisfaction with life (Keizer, 2010), and poorer quality family relationships (Dykstra & Keizer, 2009; Kendig et al., 2007). With men who are single and childless also taking more health risks and experiencing more premature mortality, this supports the socially integrating function of parenthood (Dykstra & Keizer, 2009; Offer & Schneider, 2007).

Although many of these findings are multilayered and entangled with other factors, being in a stable relationship and having children, overall, helps to broaden
and activate social networks, and contact with family and neighbours (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). From the literature, it seems that the negative impacts on psychological wellbeing are more significant if a man does not have a partner. This is explored in the current study.

**2.4.6 Ageing**

Ageing is a process, bringing past experiences to the present and influencing how in consequence the future may be envisaged. Malik & Coulson (2008) emphasise that experiences change over time. Results of previous studies on the psychological impact of not producing offspring have been mixed, which as Read and Grundy (2011, p. 126) observed is ‘possibly due to the multi-dimensionality of wellbeing’.

Many studies point to childless men not faring as well as childless women, mainly due to facing support deficits such as a lack of adult children, which do not necessarily become evident until very old age and when in poor health (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Wenger et al., 2007). In a health report specifying concerns for the increasingly ageing population in the UK, Pickard (2015) encourages all ageing individuals to be healthy and socially active. When compared to older unmarried women, older unmarried childless men exhibited more depression and loneliness (Zhang & Hayward, 2001). Moreover, in a cross-national comparative analysis of the psychosocial wellbeing of older adults who had and did not have children covering nine countries, including Australia, women fared better in social involvement and their social networks (Wenger et al., 2007). In this study the authors noted that it is ‘in the absence of good health that those without children can be disadvantaged’ (p. 1450). Another cross-national study of people in European countries aged over 50 years concurred, finding that having a partner, not being economically deprived, and being in good health helped to lessen feelings of loneliness for older adults without children (Fokkema, De Jong Gierveld, & Dykstra, 2012). In a comparison of older individuals from Australia, Finland and the Netherlands, formerly married childless Australian men were the most likely to report poor health, never married men were the most likely to report depressive feelings, and never married Australian men were least likely to engage in sport and most likely to report poorer physical and mental health (Kendig et al., 2007).
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While widowed childless men showed higher levels of depressive symptoms than married or single childless men in a large study of 17,000 adults aged over 50 years, conversely, ‘biologically and socially childless adults had the lowest predicted levels of depression across all marital groups’ (Bures et al., 2009, p. 670). Hansen, Slagsvold, and Moum’s (2009) study found that among men, parental status was unrelated to any of the wellbeing dimensions of loneliness, self-esteem, and negative affect. However, Hadley’s (2015) qualitative study with older British involuntarily childless men found that they experienced complex nuances and emotions of loss—loss of biological fatherhood and loss of identity. At different times in their lives, negative experiences of being childless such as feeling stigmatised, marginalised, isolated, depressed and lonely have been reported by some childless men, along with mixed feelings of regret and satisfaction, these emotions waxing and waning over the life course (Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Koropeckyj-Cox, 2008).

Conversely, regarding different aspects of quality of life the authors of another British study of men and women aged 51 to 79 years suggest that having children per se does not raise the quality of life in old age, and childlessness does not necessarily lead to a poorer or better quality of life (Read & Grundy, 2011). Rather, childlessness can have a similar or greater negative impact on the quality of life of men compared to women. Moreover, Read and Grundy found that ‘childlessness can enhance some elements of quality of life in women but that in men there are either no, or negative associations with quality of life domains after controlling for other factors’ such as relationships’ (p. 140).

Ageing childless men and women are becoming a topic of interest as the proportions of childless older adults in many populations increase (Bures et al., 2009; Dykstra, 2009; Hadley, 2018; Kendig et al., 2007; Pickard, 2015; Soloff, 2015; Wenger, 2001), and this is relevant to the current study of the experiences of childless men over the age of 50. In Australia there are emerging concerns about support for older individuals, but whether such books as Looking after your ageing parents (Miller, 2004) raise similar concerns for ageing Australian childless men needs to be explored.
2.4.7 Some ‘positive’ experiences

Not all childless adults are a ‘uniformly sad bunch of individuals’ (Dykstra 2009, p. 682), though for some men, not producing offspring can have a negative impact on life’s experience. However, emotions about not having children tend to be a mix of regret and satisfaction (Koropeckyj-Cox, 2008). Parenthood is only one of many ways to manage adulthood and age successfully (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986; Narushima, 2005). Childless men are also able to engage in activities that they enjoy and find meaningful, promoting their own sense of wellbeing and purpose (Ballinger, Talbot, & Verrinder, 2009).

Recent studies show evidence that childless adults can experience generativity not only through their own children, but through work and leisure activities (de St. Aubin, McAdams, & Kim, 2004; Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008) and developing bonds with other children (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007). While Gillespie (2003) highlights the rise in feminism, Letherby (2002) challenges the idea that if women do not have children of their own, they lead absolutely childfree lives. Whether childfree men lead a life absolutely free of children will be explored in the current study.

To help counter feelings of stagnation, adults without children reappraise their values and beliefs and build different lives to parents (Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Kainz, 2001), although with different degrees of satisfaction. Rothrauff and Cooney (2008) studied the association between the development of generativity and psychological wellbeing in adults aged 35 to 74 years. They concluded that childless adults did not differ from fathers and mothers in their ability to feel generative. While some studies have shown that childless women can fare better than childless men, one Australian qualitative study showed that some men report less conflict in the process of decision-making about having children compared to some women (Maher & Dever, 2004). This finding helps to demonstrate that experiences of childlessness are not universal; that there is a diversity of experiences by both women and men.

The conveying of ‘positive’ experiences of childlessness is undertaken with caution, as positive experiences may simply reflect a low level of acceptance as a way of moving forward. Conversely, feeling happy and content about not having had children may be experienced by some childless men, and not necessarily achieved through generative activities. The body of understanding of the role of non-biological
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children and other activities in the lives of childless men remains small, and will be further explored in the current study.

2.4.8 Experiences of female childlessness

Childbearing is the inevitable outcome in adult life in pronatalist ideology, with motherhood held as a fixed and natural fulfilling practice that is central to female identity (Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 2002; Park, 2002). Exploring the stereotypes and realities of women who have not produced offspring, Letherby (2002) emphasised that non-motherhood is complex, with a mix of experiences. Both international and Australian studies have found that some voluntarily childless women can feel childfree with no regrets, some involuntarily childless women can feel desperate with ongoing sadness, while others were ambivalent, never having made a decision one way or the other (Doyle, Pooley, & Breen, 2013; Hakim, 2001, 2003; Letherby, 2002; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008). Levels of support, acceptance, pressure and discrimination for not having children vary; Maher and Dever (2004) found that social attitudes are critical in how women manage their reproductive choices and circumstances.

While childhood experiences and career opportunities for women, as indicated in some studies, can affect reproductive behaviour (Wu & Schimmele, 2003), in other studies women without children do not necessarily prioritise careers over motherhood (Maher & Dever, 2004). Moreover, women with and without children do not necessarily criticise each other’s choices (Maher & Dever, 2004). Very little is known about how childless men respond to each other not having biological offspring, and this is explored in the current study.

Although childless women can experience the same emotional and social experiences as childless men (Letherby, 2002), more positive adaptations to childlessness have been found among childless women than among childless men (Wenger, 2001). Compared to women, men are found to have limited resources to access, including the language to be able to effectively verbalise their feelings. Many psychosocial studies focusing on wellbeing have tended to focus on women, with men also excluded in other areas of psychosocial health (Adamsen, Rasmussen, & Pedersen, 2001; Johansson, 2000; Jorgensen, 1999).
Reasons for women not having children also vary. Similar to childless men, they include desire, choice, and circumstances (Cannold, 2004, 2005). Having a sole focus on men in the present research is not intended to downplay the experiences of women. White (200) cautions that critiquing masculine, or male-focused literature highlights the hazards of how such a focus may disadvantage women. Connell (2005, p. xvii) elaborates on this point observing that ‘men and gendered behaviour can be part of the problem of gender inequalities’. However, as the literature on the reproductive space has predominantly focused on women, exploring male lived perspectives of childlessness helps to reverse gender inequalities within reproductive discussions. Rather, the aim of the current study is to generate gender balance in the study and understanding of the experience of ‘childlessness’.

Without debate of gender privilege ensuing, the aim of the current study is to extend understanding of reproduction with psychosocial perspectives from men who have not produced offspring. Data provided by the World Values Survey Association’s global research project from participants in over 80 countries—carried out by a network of social scientists—explored men’s and women’s values and beliefs since 1981 and how they had changed over time. Regarding gender equitable attitudes, results from men were similar to those from women and in some cases exceeded those from women. In the period 1995 to 2000, however, there was an increase in the proportion of both men and women stating they believed that women needed to have children to be fulfilled. There was no question asking whether men needed to have children to be fulfilled. With other survey priorities arising, the question was removed in 2000. Seguino (2007) explored evidence of global trends in gender norms and stereotypes, and how they perpetuated inequality and were embedded in social and individual consciousness. Inequality has both material and psychosocial dimensions. While surface phenomena may change over time, with more men not having children, transformations in terms of attitudes towards men not producing offspring are harder to detect. Since Seguino (2007) concluded that men tend to internalise gender norms more than women, this is something to consider when exploring the experiences of male childlessness in the current study.

As evidenced so far, the experience of childlessness for women and men is not a static phenomenon (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Marsiglio, Hutchinson, & Cohan, 2000; Patton, 2002; Wenger et al., 2007). Instead,
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the re-appraisal of self-identity, self-worth, beliefs and goals for childless women and men has been found to be an ongoing and complex process as each individual negotiates life without children differently Reproductive capability—with women having a shorter reproductive lifespan—and choice are key factors in how childless individuals perceive their experiences. For women, other factors such as race, religion, birth cohort, and childhood and family experiences play a role in whether individuals become biological parents (Wu & Schimmele, 2003). Consequently, personal and social matters mediate the experience of being childless.

Although scholarly interest in male childlessness has slowly increased, the number of studies remains small. Consequently, authors highlight the need to ‘employ a framework of reproductive equations to sort through seeming incongruities in how men matter’ (Almeling & Waggoner, 2013, p. 837), and ‘capture the multiple, interrelated layers of social life that affect men’s thoughts, feelings, and practices in the procreative realm’ (Marsiglio et al., 2013, p. 1027). Like all human experience, the lives of childless men are diverse and, like childless women, they need to be better understood, accepted and supported.

2.5 Masculinity and maleness within reproductive ideology

A fuller concept of humanity recognises that all men and women are potentially both strong and weak, both active and passive, and that these human characteristics are not the province of one sex. (Sawyer, 1970, p. 1)

What does it take to be a man? Is it simply the biology of his genetic makeup, his reproductive organs, his reproductive potential and actually producing offspring? Or is it also his psychology: how he thinks, feels and behaves in accordance with what is expected of him as a male within his cultural environment? How does any gendered human being exist in the world? Contemplating these questions is complex, as masculinity can be portrayed in different ways. By exploring the minutiae of meanings of masculine and role, in terms of the genesis of the concepts of masculinity and role and developing connotations, helps to provide a platform from which to build understanding of men’s reproductive behaviour within the current historical psychosocial context.
2.5.1 Background to syntactic meanings—masculinity and the male sex-role

According to online etymological meanings (drawn from the online etymological dictionary), the word ‘masculine’ was derived from meanings of ‘belonging’ to the male gender, that is, of the male sex. During the 14th and 15th centuries, being masculine included the characteristics that were considered to be ‘worthy of a man’. Developing in the mid-1600s and over time, meanings of ‘masculinity’ as a noun began to include describing men, those who portrayed the ‘appropriate’ qualities of the male sex, as ‘being manly’. ‘Masculinity’ as a noun evolved in the early 1900s to embody varying degrees of ‘maleness’, such as the appearance and function of a man’s body, and the way a man related to women and other men. Hence, meanings of the concept of masculinity, include ‘being’ of an ‘appropriate’ and ‘worthy’ man that include concepts and language around virility and power.

Conventional male behaviour is often referred to and described as being a role, the male sex role (Pleck, 1976). A role is the function assumed or part played by a person in a particular context. For example, how a man behaves at home and at work. The word ‘role’ has its origins in the early 17th century from the French ‘rôlé’, or ‘roule’, referring originally to the roll of paper on which an actor’s part was written. Similarly, conventional culturally constructed male behaviour could be recognised as prescribed male behaviour, prewritten for a male actor. His ‘rôlé’ as a man aligns with how sociologists have described gender as a ‘role enactment’, or a ‘display’ of maleness (Goffman, 1976). The ‘role’ also involves the ‘act’ of ‘being’ a man and ‘belonging’ to concepts of manhood. Ways in which people were ‘doing gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987) —the role of masculinity, its impact and the social ‘nature’ of masculinity and how it was ‘displayed’ (Goffman’s word) as the male sex role—were critiqued during the 1950s with a view that there were possibilities of change in male conduct and male attitudes, and what it was like ‘to be man’ (Hacker, 1957).
2.5.2 Male conduct, hegemony, and concepts of multiple masculinities

To be a man, and to be comfortable within oneself as a man can manifest in different types of maleness. Yet many men today have grown up with one way to be a man or aspire to be a man; a monologic form of masculinity, that being hegemonic masculinity. Hegemony was a descriptive word used in the 1970s to align with ideas of the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci in the early 1900s. Gramsci’s use of the word was in reference to class relations and the understanding of multiple hierarchies (Connell & Slatyer, 1977). Hegemony, through dual systems theory (Eisenstein, 1979), was then considered to be analogous with issues of gender relations (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Although hegemony is used in different fields, it is more commonly associated with Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell to describe one type of masculinity that is dominant and gendered towards males; within a hierarchy of masculinities (Connell, 2005).

Hegemonic masculinity pertains to the most virile, most powerful construction of being male, with heterosexuality and emotional detachment considered ideal (Connell, 2005). Drawing from the work of Jackson Katz (as reviewed by Klassen, 2000), masculinity is posited as a socially constructed ideal and a guise based on being tough, strong, and independent, with men hiding their vulnerability and lack of control behind a mask. Gender disparity is also argued to be typically explained by focusing on evolutionary and biological underpinnings of masculine behaviour, considered by some writers to be a reductionist focus which tends to ignore the impact of culture and, in particular, changes within culture (Bell & Bayliss, 2015; Fessler, 2010).

During the 1980s, however, the concept of hegemonic masculinity was formulated as a convergence of ideas and the growing interest in masculine and gender studies, including Australian research about social inequality in high schools (Kessler, Ashenden, Connell, & Dowsett, 1982) and discussions of the role of men in Australian politics (Connell, 1982). Highlighting different forms of masculinity influenced thinking about men, gender and social hierarchy (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity was at the top of the hierarchy the image of what men aspired to and compared themselves to (Connell, 2005), with Bell and Bayliss (2015, p. 567) referring to it as a form of ‘hyper-masculinity’.
Masculinity was also differentiated into either male qualities or female qualities, a viewpoint that reflects ancient Greek mythology. During the time of Greek mythology (BC), two versions of masculinity were presented. Heracles became synonymous with ‘Apollonian masculinity’, which emphasised characteristics that were circumspect and careful, a straight arrow and idealised patriarchy, order and regularity. Apollonian masculinity favoured patriarchal values of linearity and regularity, and being distant from feelings. Dionysus, on the other hand, favoured equitable egalitarianism, and emphasised emotion and sensibilities, a feminine form of masculinity. Dionysus became synonymous with an intrinsic connection to femininity and was called the ‘womanly-one’ and the ‘man-womanish’—her-within-him. Dionysus represented a possibility for masculine expression that included feminine aspects. It leaned towards a totality of masculinity with integrated expression, not burdened by patriarchal bias and limitation. The concept of ‘her-within-him’ extends the possibilities to more than just two masculinities, a hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinity, and therefore admits many ways to display one’s self, being a man.

The ideology of masculinity and femininity being somewhat intertwined has continued to evolve over the centuries, culminating as various men’s movements—such as the Men’s Rights and Gay Liberation Movements—in the early 1970s, and a psychological inventory of masculine and feminine traits (Bem, 1974). Bem’s Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) of the mid-1970s categorised a person as being masculine, feminine, or androgynous. Despite changing social and cultural attitudes towards maleness at the time, item number 56 on Bem’s inventory regarding children and which sex ‘loves children’ remained within the list of feminine attributes (Bem, 1974, p. 156). There were no items referring to children amongst the masculine items. Such inventories, while helpful to understanding gendered behaviour, tend to socialise biology into gendered categories and therefore maintain a status quo of gender division. The exclusion of ‘children’ within masculine attributes is problematic for men, with men seeming to be further excluded from the reproductive realm. Moreover, men are assumed to think feel and behave in one way that does not involve children unless ‘feminine traits’ are bestowed. This assumption will be explored in the present study.
Similarly to Bem’s dichotomised gendered inventories, Geert Hofstede, a Dutch social psychologist conducted a 4-dimensional study on fifty cultures around the world, with one of the dimensions being the extent to which cultures function according to masculine or feminine attributes. He describes cultures as being ‘broad patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting’ (Hofstede, 1998, p. 5). Hofstede described a masculine culture as striving for maximal distinction between the social roles of what men and women are expected to do. For example, a masculine culture instilled assertiveness, toughness, ambition and competitiveness. According to Hofstede, masculine behaviour encouraged a person to strive for material success and to respect whatever is strong. Conversely, femininity instilled modesty, care and nurturance of children and concern for the non-material qualities of life. Feminine behaviour in men would thus be viewed as weak masculinity.

These descriptions from Hofstede often ‘married’ with common viewpoints of what were considered to be traditional or conventional roles of men and women. Moreover, his views emphasised a dichotomous view of the sexes within the human race that somewhat aligns with the Apollonian and Dionysian masculinities mentioned earlier. Although Hofstede (2001, 2010) defends his research, the masculine/feminine dichotomy and other aspects of his research have attracted criticisms (see Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; P. Smith, 2004; Tarras, Kirkman, & Steele, 2010);. The same might be said about delineations between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities, which suggest that non-hegemonic masculinity is the subordination of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). However, placing the plurality of masculinities incorporating notions of femininity on a continuum, rather than treating them as a single dimension as Hofstede did, could also imply that one male individual is more manly than another man.

Masculinity considered in terms of hegemony and gendered binary pairing with femininity might convey it in a negative light. Masculinity is, however, not always negative. Exploratory viewpoints help to unpack ‘maleness’, and subsequently meaning-making for men who have not produced offspring. Berger & Krahé (2013) proposed broadening the concept of sex-role identity, so that the BSRI (Bem, 1974) was considered to be no longer up to date. They argued that positive and negative identity that was qualified in terms of masculine and feminine attributes only served to maintain what were considered to be ‘fundamental social categories on which
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individuals draw in their self-definition’ (Berger & Krahe, 2013, p. 530). While being placed in a positive/negative binary, masculine negatives—arrogant, boastful, harsh, inconsiderate, ostentatious, power-hungry—were not necessarily direct opposites of positive attributes of masculinity—analytical, logical, objective, practical, rational, solution-focused. However, it was found that negative attributes were unique predictors of gender-related differences in stable dispositions and behaviour (Berger & Krahe, 2013). If some men are not able to match up to what they consider ‘to be a man’, their perceived ideal way of being masculine, it may lead to relationship difficulties or other mental health issues (Bell & Bayliss, 2015). If producing offspring and loving children is framed only in feminine terms—as by Bem in her sex role identity inventory—do childless men, or are they supposed to, suppress any form of feminine identity in order to still be considered a man? Does not producing offspring and displaying feminine identifiers, such as care and nurture, become a double bind for childless men? These questions will be explored in the current study.

As Pleck (1976) highlights, men are ‘confronted by contradictory demands and expectations in their socialisation and in adult life’ (p. 160). Shifting individual-level and cultural-level sex-role perspectives can generate role strain, which Hacker (1957) highlighted in her book titled: ‘The New Burdens of Masculinity’. Hacker argued that males had traditionally been expected to be instrumental, competitive and controlling, but also to be expressive. Drawing from Hacker’s analysis, these two expectations lead to a conflict of male conduct that ‘cannot be satisfied simultaneously’ (Pleck, 1976, p. 160).

A masculine/feminine binary need not be synonymous with a positive/negative binary in terms of ‘subordinate’ masculinities embodying the ‘opposites’ to hegemonic masculinity, but recognises that identities are usually intertwined. Otherwise sex/gender binaries ground gender within individual social, institutional and cultural norms, which can have negative reproductive health effects (Bell & Bayliss, 2015; Dudgeon & Inhorn, 2003). While sex/gender binaries serve to reinforce binary discourse of gender relations, some writers assert that males and females are more alike than they are different (Rosin, 2012). Differentiating masculine and feminine ideologies can become static perspectives, and so entrenched that it becomes almost impossible for either side to see past its historical point of view. For example, the cyclical nature of the oppression of women and women
resisting becomes defined through its reinvention of patriarchy (Bannett, 2007; Blazina, 2003). Yet many societies, including Australia, are increasingly recognising people who identify with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning and Allied (commonly referred to as LGBTIQA) forms of gender fluidity, with the interface of both masculinity and femininity being operationalised as internal and external processes (Blackless et al., 2000). Sex-role theories and gender role enactment that is linked to a structure that is defined by biological difference, reduces and dichotomises gender into two homogenous categories, which ignores the blurring or fluidity of sex and gender differences (Connell, 2005). According to the literature, masculinity varies. In the current study, men will identify as being ‘male’ in order to meet the participation criteria. It is not the intention, however, to explore their experiences of childlessness with a bi-gendered lens; to not pull apart the ‘her-within-him’, but instead, the aim is to learn of the gestalt of each man, and how he sees himself as a man without offspring.

The ‘male’ ideal is changing, as men transmute patriarchal stereotypes of masculinity and reveal related kinds of masculinity. As Connell points out, there is an ever-growing library of descriptive studies, and therefore there is a need for a corresponding growth of more general ideas about men and masculinities and the interplay of these concepts in life today (Connell, 1982; 2005, p. xvii). For example, the authors of a German study reconceptualised the influence of both positive and negative attributes of sex-role identity (Berger & Krahe, 2013). They argued that there are both negative and positive attributes to sex and gender. When reviewing a redevelopment of gender identity inventories, they found that neither men nor women necessarily use masculine and feminine attributes, respectively, to a great extent in their self-descriptions, indicating a strong shift in the way women were influenced by stereotypical gender identity attributes such as those embedded in Bem’s (1974) sex-role theory. This shift in attitude and behaviour is reflected in a shift in some cultures whereby, for example, in Hofstede’s (1986) study, indicated Germany to be more strongly masculine and aggressive than possibly did Berger and Krahé’s (2013). Connell (2005) argues that continued global human migration will continue to shift gendered behaviour. Male reproductive behaviour and the ways in which men engage with concepts of male childlessness and reproduction are also likely to continue to change.
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While the world gender order mostly privileges men over women, ‘inequalities of the world gender order can produce resistance’ (Connell, 2005, p. 260). Perhaps in light of the example of women resisting, the present study could be viewed as focusing on men resisting against being excluded from the reproductive realm. Thus, from an experiential standpoint, men without offspring will be, ‘allowed’ to be more expressive, emotional, and to talk about a potentially sensitive and personal subject. The way in which men talk about not producing offspring in terms of love, nurturance, family, and interrelationships with other children will be examined in terms of whether masculine-feminine interplay is expressed as a tension or with ease. As Connell suggests, less descriptive and more experiential and existential studies are needed to help better understand the male experience of masculinity, particularly as it relates to the fundamental subject of human reproduction. In Heideggerian terms, how does a ‘childless’ man ‘exist-in-the-world’ with other men who have produced offspring? The entanglement of reproductive thinking and behaviour with masculinity is explored through the phenomenon of male childlessness.

Being big, brave and strong is no longer sufficient advice for men’s psychosocial health (Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, 1996). As argued in the 1970s (Nichols, 1975), if men are to view themselves as being masculine, traditional male conduct denies personal needs such as emotional expression and nurturing and other ‘growth-producing experiences’ over their life span (Moreland, 1980).

2.6 Life-course perspectives on the psychosocial development of adult males

*Life-course is one of the most important ... terms in the human sciences ... [Life-course] refers to the concrete character of a life in its evolution from beginning to end.*

(Levinson, 1986, p. 3)

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6 Martin Heidegger is a German philosopher and seminal thinker of the 20th century. His ideas of how people know and understand the world around them will be discussed in section 3.2.2 of the thesis.
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When asking men, well into their adult years, what is it like not having biological children, it is likely that they will reflect back on different phases of their lives, which helps to inform part of exploration and understanding of the phenomenon of male childlessness. Psychosocially, childlessness tends to refer to the middle and later years of adulthood, when people become more conscious of childlessness. However there is no set age when an individual develops a sense of being ‘childless’, and this varies in different social, cultural and religious circles. Adulthood is a phase in life that is linked to other phases that together comprise the life courses of individuals. Phases of human life are not only about physical and cognitive development; psychosocial development within adulthood is the interrelation between the psychological factors of individual thought and behaviour with social factors in the context of the combined influence of social and psychological factors on how individuals function and their wellbeing.

Over the lifetime there are different processes operating simultaneously—cultural, economic, ideological, biological, technological—impacting on the desires, choices and circumstances of individual reproductive behaviour (Morgan & Taylor, 2006). Temporal location becomes central when considering the biographical and historical time in which life experience is embedded (Hagestad & Call, 2007), the temporal location of different experiences, within their own ‘biographical time—the individual’s movement through phases of life—as well as the historical times in which a life is embedded’ (Hagestad & Call, 2007, p. 1339). Ideas of development are about phases or stages of change, a series of processes integrating change. Many of the major adult, personality and psychosocial developmental theories tend to take a life-course approach as a way of tracking or projecting the stages of development.

The words of Levinson—an American developmental psychologist, who was greatly influenced by Erik Erikson, a German-American developmental psychologist—highlighted a shift in viewing human psychosocial development beyond that of childhood and into adulthood. A comment from Levinson (1986, p. 4) that ‘it is not enough to solely focus on a single moment or over three or four moments as is ordinarily done in longitudinal research’ is relevant in exploring phenomenon like childlessness. Levinson cites Robert White’s (1952) writings that stress the idea that ‘life is in progress’ (p. 4). Research such as the 80 year long Harvard Grant Study, which has studied adult development over the course of lives, is
a contemporary example of the view that lives are in progress. Beginning in 1938, the study has explored how early life experiences affect ageing over time and has become the longest ever longitudinal study. The first 268 participants were male, but as the study continued to recruit more participants, it now includes women. The surviving original male participants are now in their 90s. An article in *The Harvard Gazette* emphasises comments from one study director that ageing starts at birth and is a continuous process (Mineo, 2017). This concurs with study findings that observing psychological adaptation with the interconnecting fluxes between relationships, physical health and psychosocial wellbeing throughout the course of life provides useful insights into successful ageing (Shenk, 2009; Vaillant, 2012).

Different theorists of adult psychosocial development and ageing, such as Erik Erikson, Daniel Levinson, and Bernice Neugarten, have viewed the course of human life as having a sense of order. This is somewhat encapsulated by Levinson (1986), who writes that:

… there is an underlying order in the human life course … [whereby] social structure, culture, social roles, major life events, biology … and other influences exert a powerful effect on the character of individual life structure at a given time and on its developments during adulthood. (p. 11)

Whether psychosocial development in adults is posited as being stage-related, age-related, or major life events-related—such as stable relationships, children, work, retirement—many of the theories are overlaid with how humans negotiate life over the course of their lives. Going through the same basic sequence there seems to be an intrinsic desire to grow and develop, to find human happiness and age successfully; to look back on life in late adulthood with a sense of integrity and feel good. With people living longer and ageing populations growing it is becoming increasingly important to view psychosocial wellbeing with a life-course lens. How important life-course factors are for the men in the study will be noted.

Conventional models, however, are thought to be constrained by the notion that adult development is linear and cumulative. Yet, life does not necessarily progress in stages; it is not necessarily lineal. According to Datan, Rodeheaver, and Hughes (1987) Heidegger believed that fragments of time, fragments of moments
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linked together to where one is now at this moment, connecting moments from the past and the potential moments of future. Moreover, development is perceived as the ‘course of human lives’ and reflected through life stories (Datan, Rodeheaver, & Hughes, 1987, p. 162).

From childhood and into early adulthood there are phases in which circumstances and choices ‘create conditions for many later transitions’ and experiences (Hagestad & Call, 2007, p. 1339). Psychosocial reinforcement comes from pronatalist ideology, with perceptions and values of children, anticipation and expectation of producing offspring in adulthood, and ideas about fatherhood often developing from a young age (Singleton, 2005; Thompson & Lee, 2011a; Thompson, Lee, & Adams, 2013). Furthermore, some young men spend early adulthood focused on organising their lives so they are ready to have children at a designated stage of life (Thompson et al., 2013). The envisaged designated stage may be socially, culturally or religiously driven or a matter of personal choice. But of course these preconditions may not eventuate or may take longer to achieve, or ideas may change. Perceptions and experiences of childlessness can begin when men are in their youth. A life-course perspective can link reasons for not producing offspring and how a man experiences childlessness thereafter. For most young men, in Australia and other countries, ‘settling down and having children’ remains (albeit vague at times for some young men) an expected life trajectory (Hagestad & Call, 2007; Thompson & Lee, 2011a, 2011b; Throsby & Gill, 2004; Umberson, Pudrovskak, & Reczek, 2010), with visions of fatherhood and paternal identities formed in younger years (Marsiglio et al., 2000). As population studies indicate, not all young men will meet their expectations of becoming fathers. How men in the current study remember looking ahead about potentially ‘having’ children will be explored.

While there is empirical support for the idea that men can have a desire to have children long before they try to have them, it can be a matter of when to have children. When they felt they had approached an appropriate age and stage; when it was considered to be a logical step in their relationship and one that fitted into the trajectory of their lives (Singleton, 2005). The notion of ‘when’ aligns with Neugarten’s ideology of a ‘social clock’ (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965; Neugarten, 1976), a trajectory determined by cultural or social structures of the appropriate time in life to have children, and experience other major life events, that seemed to occur in a predictable manner. Neugarten proposed the notion of a social
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clock to help explain ageing. It has been embraced by other authors since the 1970s. For example, in exploring the ageing of childless men, Hadley (2015) credited the ‘social clock’ notion when one of his participants observed that the age of 50 can be a turning point in not wanting to become an old father. Whether the social clock of deciding when to have children operates on a conscious or subconscious level will vary greatly across different cultural and religious communities.

Central to the present discussion, is an assumption of agency, a view that individuals construct their life courses through choices within opportunities and constraints defined by their social contexts. To explore the meanings of not producing offspring, experience needs to be considered within the historical context of individual life journeys. Highlighting that the experience of childlessness is not a static phenomenon (Wenger et al., 2007), the reappraisal of self-identity, self-worth, beliefs and goals for childless men can be an ongoing and complex process as each man negotiates life differently (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Patton, 2002), reinforcing a life-course approach to exploring experiences of childlessness. The experience of childlessness is a journey, and Shaw (2011) notes that just as it does for childless women, the journey for men needs to be more fully understood.

What is also central to the present discussion is the placing of considerable significance on having children as a key transitional stage in adulthood, particularly with earlier views from Erikson about ‘either assuming or prescribing parenthood as a central component of maturation in middle and old age’ (Koropeckyj-Cox, 2008, p. 77). Moreover, many of the psychosocial developmental theories convey a sense of needing to achieve each stage to reach maturity. In one sense this has parallels with traditional cultures’ initiation gestures and ceremonies. Western culture is often thought of as being contemporary or modern, however some major life events, initiations into adulthood and evidences of maturity, responsibility and care have been lost or have changed in value and presentation. The pattern of attainment of markers of adulthood has shifted, with fewer people getting married and more people delaying parenthood (Berlin, Furstenberg Jr., & Waters, 2010). Albeit they social changes, markers of adulthood are still synonymous with markers of maturity. Having not produced offspring, does the omission of one of the key markers of adulthood impact one’s sense of maturity for childless men? Whether ‘missing’ such an adulthood
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moment creates psychosocial distress informs part of the exploration in the current study of men over the age of 50 years.

Support for articulating experiences of childlessness in biographical narrative is found in other qualitative studies (Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Throsby & Gill, 2004). Integrating life-course perspectives acknowledges the heterogeneity in life course experiences (Kendig, Dykstra, vanGaalen, & Melkas, 2007; Keizer et al., 2010; Umberson et al., 2010) that which men bring to their interviews. Exploring life-course perspectives is appropriate for the present study and is an appropriate way to explore childlessness (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Keizer, 2010). Contemplating how psychosocial adulthood is presented in terms of maturity and generativity raises questions about how adulthood without offspring can be understood in other ways or can be expanded upon. As lives progress, individuals without offspring need to negotiate a different path. A discussion on generativity follows.

2.6.1 Elaborating on the notion of generativity in adulthood

From the different ideological frameworks for adult psychosocial development, the seventh of Erik Erikson’s proposed eight stages of psychosocial development over the life span has endured. His seventh stage in adulthood is the longest stage, extending from the age of 40 through to 64 with the concept of ‘generativity’ key. Generativity is primarily ‘the concern of establishing and guiding the next generation’ (Erikson, 1963, p. 267), originally conceived by Erikson as the task of bearing and raising children. If one could not achieve a sense of generativity one faced its polar opposite, ‘stagnation’, failure to find a way to contribute and give back to society or the next generation. Producing offspring was seen as the primary means to achieve generativity.

Empirically, people in midlife express more generative themes than younger adults when describing their lives and older people report more generative activities (de St. Aubin et al., 2004; McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1998; McAdams, Hart, & Maruna, 1998). Linking back to the ideas of dichotomising behaviour into being either masculine or feminine behaviour, Moreland (1980) found that men who negotiated ways to ‘integrate qualities such as nurturance, emotional awareness, and expressiveness’ were usually older (p. 808),
indicating that men could experience masculinity differently later in their lives and linking with the necessity of adopting a life-course approach to the current study.

When *generativity* was first coined by Erikson in the 1950s, his central tenet was that producing offspring would achieve generativity. Then like many ideas, theories, and thoughts, with social change, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, meanings of generativity have been incorporated into or elaborated on in many studies. As a result, adults differ in the extent to which they attain generativity (Bradley & Marcia, 1998).

Erikson was likely the first to reconceive the meaning of generativity from what he had first intended. It was the task of being responsible for, caring for and guiding the next generation; it not only included procreativity in the biological sense, but also productivity and creativity. It thus involved enabling the generation of new beings, as well as new products and new ideas, including a kind of *self-generation* that was concerned with further identity development (Erikson, 1982, p. 67).

Since Erikson reconceived generativity to be more inclusive of different ways people might give parts of themselves to the future, elaborations of the concept have followed in various studies and discussions. With the idea of nurturing the *next generation* also referring to care and contributions within the sociocultural sphere, McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) argued that generativity could be achieved through work life, professional activities, volunteer endeavours, participation in religious and political organisations, community involvement and through friendships.

In their work on the theory of generativity, McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) propose three motives that drive generative behaviour. The first, drawing on the work of Lifton (1979) and the need to develop a sense of continuity beyond death, is the desire for symbolic immortality. For example, leaving a legacy, or something similar, as an expression of oneself that outlives one’s lifetime. The second is the need to be needed, meaning to feel important to someone or something. The third motive that can drive generative behaviour is cultural demand and social expectation for individuals to contribute to society in some way. Of these three motives, McAdams & de St. Aubin found symbolic immortality to be the strongest link to generativity and wellbeing.

Kotre (1984) described four different types of generative behaviour: *Biological generativity* (with meanings attached to biological processes); *parental*...
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generativity (reworking heritage through children, grandchildren, stepchildren, and volunteer work); technical generativity (passing on skills and the meaning of skills, such as through communicating the medium of teaching to an apprentice, which also includes teaching courtesy, respect and obedience); and cultural generativity (the relationship between an individual and culture and society). According to Kotre, cultural generativity is the realm of most ‘generative ingenuity’ (Kotre, 1984, p. 263), and yet is the most ignored in research. He regarded the internalised representation of cultural entity as an ‘experience of identity, a foundation that leads to cultural fertility’ (Kotre, 1984, p. 263), where the flow of energy between person and action is social in character. Achieving a sense of being generative that is culturally specific enables individuals to feel ‘generative’ in a different way to parental generativity. For some individuals this may be difficult in the face of a dominant cultural discourse of individuals being assumed to want to achieve parental generativity.

In a quantitative study, Cox, Olson, and McAdams (2010) looked at two sets of personality variables and how they were associated with psychosocial adaptation and wellbeing in midlife. The study involved the ‘Big Five Taxonomy’; although different studies yield different factors, a taxonomy of five superordinate personality traits is used (Goldberg, 1993; McCrae & Costa, 1997). When observing specific traits, or lower order traits, Cox et al., found generativity more likely to be achieved when people were more extraverted, open, competent, achievement striving, dutiful, altruistic and trusting. Thus, if people felt vulnerable, anxious, or depressed they may not necessarily feel generative in their lives. According to the authors, their results were fairly consistent with other studies. Although the personalities of the men in the current qualitative study will not be assessed, their psychosocial adaptation to life without offspring will be explored in terms of their wellbeing and outlook on life.

Generativity is argued to be linked to personal wellbeing, with individuals feeling a level of satisfaction from their contributions and care in the sociocultural sphere, such as in industry, teaching, and creative activities, meaning that generative behaviour is a precursor to wellbeing (Huta & Zuroff, 2007; Keyes & Ryff, 1998; Vaillant, 1993). Psychological wellbeing—self-acceptance, personal growth, a sense of purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations with others—generates social wellbeing, which Keyes and Ryff (1998) refer to as social acceptance, social actualisation, social contribution, social coherence, and social
integration. Social integration and feeling socially well embedded in the context of one’s community and family are important determinants of quality of life in late adulthood (Fokkema et al., 2012), which Kotre (1984) describes as a sense of belonging.

From when it was first devised, generativity has become synonymous with positive wellbeing. However, in discussions of childlessness, the discussion of generativity usually begins with (not) ‘bearing and raising children’, which tends to return generativity to its meaning when it was originally coined, which may be problematic for those who are without offspring. Hence, questioning the stronghold of pronatalist ideology and innate levels of desire to produce offspring, for the men in the current study, is the ultimate, ideal, or preferred way of achieving generativity to ‘have children’, to reproduce? As they narrated their experiences of being ‘childless’, I explored how the concept of generativity was integrated into their lives and its relation to their psychosocial wellbeing, and explored metaphorically what was possibly being regenerated or reproduced. In order to explore generativity and reproduction metaphorically or symbolically, a brief discussion of reproduction is also needed and this follows.

2.7 Concepts of reproduction and fertility

2.7.1 Reproduction

From the outset, reproduction is an elusive concept and defining reproduction can be difficult (Ginsburg & Rapp, 1991). This is partly because ‘reproduction’ can be embedded within psychological, evolutionary, biological, anthropological, demographic, social, religious, cultural, and political interpretations and meanings, culminating in different profiles of reproduction; namely biological and non-biological profiles of reproduction. At the centre of different meanings are people’s interpretations. Individual perspectives on reproduction are subsumed into people’s lives differently, thereby shaping the ways individuals think, feel, and behave towards reproduction.

In a critical look at the concept of reproduction as male ideology, Jaggar and McBride (1985) argued that theorists Marx, Engels and Simone de Beauvoir obscured the social possibilities of how aspects of reproduction and production could be
alternatively defined and organised in life; reproduction (private) was naturally assigned for women and production (public) was assigned for men. The second wave of the feminist movement of the 1960s, carrying the ‘personal is political’ slogan, was a way to begin the critique of male behaviour. It brought personal behaviour by men and women out of the household into the open for all to see and critique. Since Aristotle, Western tradition had upheld the distinction between what was considered to be public and that which was private. However, from the 1960s the personal realms of human existence became somewhat political.

The juncture at which personal experiences of reproduction are viewed publicly is also embedded within politics. For example, national policies to encourage citizens to produce offspring and tax rebates for those who have children emphasise and discriminate against those who do not have children. The renowned phrase ‘the personal is political’ underscores the connection between personal and private experience and larger social and political structures. In the present context, the slogan discloses the ways in which reproduction is ‘imbued with vastly different social and symbolic meanings from one society to another’ (Balin, 1988, p. 275), which can, in turn, impact on the desire, choice and circumstances of having or not having children (see also Ashley-Montagu, 1937; Vaughan, 1945; and Margaret Mead in Oakley, 1980 for discussion). Over time the reproductive sphere has evolved, not only in terms of scientific advances in Assisted Reproductive Therapies (ART) but also to be more inclusive of diverse family structures such as same-sex couples, and men.

Predominant interpretations of reproduction, however, still usually connote biology (Ginsburg & Rapp, 1991). According to the online etymology dictionary, ‘reproduction’ is thought to have been used circa the 1650s to define the ‘act of forming again’ and to mean the ‘generation of living things’ in the 1780s, before further evolving by 1807 to mean ‘a copy’ (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Subsequently, meanings around human reproduction have evolved to generally assume the production of biological offspring, both in casual parlance and in scholarly articles in medicine and health journals such as Human Reproduction.

7 ‘The personal is political’ was a rallying slogan of the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s. Carol Hanisch wrote an essay about how personal problems are political problems, with her memo notes edited into the popular slogan by Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt in ‘Notes from the second year: Women’s liberation’ in 1970.
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Socio-demographic concepts of human reproduction have evolved during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, generating what has been termed a ‘reproduction revolution’ (Garrido, 1996; Macinnes & Díaz, 2009). Concepts of a revolution were initially viewed quantitatively as a measure of the efficiency of human reproduction (Garrido, 1996), meaning time and energy that was spent on producing offspring in order to maintain human society. Women would spend most of their reproductive years undertaking reproductive work, giving birth, breastfeeding, and raising children. Patriarchy was strongly upheld.

Comments on the reproductive revolution, however, have later been expanded qualitatively in terms of social consequences and changing social relations between gender and generations (Macinnes & Díaz, 2009). This socio-demographic perspective on reproduction helps to demonstrate how it needs to be considered in both quantitative and qualitative terms, and that the ways in which reproduction is perceived have evolved.

Whether the decreasing reproductive work in human society is considered quantitatively or qualitatively efficient is not the main issue here. However, quantitative trends in biological reproduction cannot be ignored, with fertility trends discussed earlier in this chapter. Biological reproduction as represented in global fertility patterns reflects the didactic relationship between political, psychosocial, and cultural attitudes towards reproduction and reproductive strategies. Moreover, conceiving masculinity in terms of the science and politics of male reproduction, Daniels (2006) found interrelated assumptions: men are virile, however males are secondary in biological reproduction to females; men are less vulnerable to reproductive harm than women; and they are relatively distant from the children they father. Bearing these assumptions in mind, how do childless men fare when interrelating masculinity and reproduction, linking back to my earlier discussion of masculinity and how men without offspring embrace concepts of ‘feeling like a man’?

In examining how men’s reproductive contributions are understood, Almeling and Waggoner (2013) rethink the roles of men and masculinity within concepts of reproduction, with science and medical knowledge having become powerful resources to justify but position gendered knowledge. The authors comment that men are considered important in the role of conception a primary role and then less so thereafter, as they play a secondary role, during pregnancy and birth. In this view, men’s reproductive contributions resonate with Greek portrayals of conception, with
the primary role of men in creating life as if the sperm produces the pregnancy not the egg (Almeling & Waggoner, 2013; Delaney, 1986; Martin, 1991) and reflecting Greek views in modern colloquialisms such as ‘getting’ her pregnant. In other words, the eggs don’t have an equal part in the reproduction equation and this perpetuates the gendered importance of ancient yet persistent ideas that men create life with their ‘seed’ and women provide the nurturing ‘soil’ (Almeling & Waggoner, 2013; Delaney, 1986). This produces a paradox in traditional conceptions of reproduction and the focus on women.

While paying attention to gendered differences it is helpful to explore points of similarity. A finding in Almeling and Waggoner’s (2013) study was that some health professionals considered reproduction to be not 50-50. A nurse in the study commented: ‘We can’t get around it, it’s not the man having the baby’ (p. 836). Similarly, Jack, Atrash, Coonrod, Moos, O’Donnell, and Johnson (2008) identified 84 risk factors regarding preconceptual care specifically for women. Men were not included in the categories but rather at the end labelled as simply ‘Men’. Socially, in The New York Times for example, headlines like ‘Men, who needs them?’ (Hampikian, 2012) also convey a gendered reproductive bias. Returning to Almeling and Waggoner’s study, an epidemiologist commented that men are ‘generally involved in reproduction’, while another clinician ‘underscored the connection between reproduction and women’s bodies’ (2013, p. 833 my italics for emphasis), again reinforcing both the importance of women in the reproductive sphere and ancient and traditional understandings of the primary and secondary reproductive roles of men. While virility is deemed important in men’s reproductive identity, however, conception is most highly regarded as being significant. With issues of fertility, a fertility clinic is one place where men’s reproduction does take centre stage, reinforcing biology and the association of masculinity with virility.

2.7.2 Fertility

It is important to briefly explain the term ‘fertility’ here as it is often used synonymously with ‘reproduction’. The demographic concept of ‘fertility’ is the actual production of biological offspring. In biological terms, ‘fertility’ is the capacity to reproduce; its absence being infertility. Fertility rates typically reference females and are measured by the number of offspring born (Australian Bureau Statistics,
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2007). Male fertility rates are rare but are usually referred to as ‘paternity rates’. Although fertility will be used in both a biological and demographic context in the current study, my intention is to also explore other meanings of fertility. For example, fertility can be used figuratively in terms of one’s imagination (Drever, 1965).

According to Kotre (1984) fertility can refer to culture—‘cultural fertility’—where the experience of identity contributes to the foundations that lead to cultural fertility and the intergenerational transfer of culture. If generativity is giving a part of oneself to the future and releasing energy from generative acts is ‘intrinsically fertile’, Kotre (1984) then argues that culture needs to be nourished for fertility, or generativity, to occur. The new self is then validated and allowed a reproductive outlet, and to reiterate, is able to be generative in a different way to parental generativity. From this perspective, culture reciprocates enabling individuals to develop a sense of belonging, raising exploratory questions of how childless men develop a sense of belonging as they transition into and move through adulthood.

As with reproduction, psychological interpretations of ‘fertility’ can depart from conventional meanings and be conveyed using alternative meanings. A question of whether and how people who do not have biological offspring can feel productive, fruitful or generative informs the exploration of the research. In other words, how do childless individuals engage with meanings of fertility or feel fertile without having genetically related children?

2.7.3 Possibilities for alternative meanings of reproduction

A point of issue informing part of this research is that reproductive fertility tends to be referenced only in biological terms. This gives the impression that genetically related offspring are the only way we interpret adults to be ‘reproductive’; that children are the essence of reproduction. While abetting the causes of many declining populations through socio-demographic reproductive lenses, is it not possible to explore likely non-biological, higher channels of reproduction? As a departure from conventional approaches to reproduction and childlessness, this tangential psychological inquiry is not necessarily new. Kotre (1984) suggests that reproduction can be seen as a healthy and even indispensable human constant, one that suddenly finds itself in radically altered circumstances, raising the question, how are we to be fertile if not through children? I add the question, do individuals want to
feel fertile, reproductive, or generative? Moreover, with new pathways to fatherhood emerging (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001), does this allow men to now father in other ways?

In observing the psychological and social aspects of childlessness, intentional and unintentional, Pohlman (1970) refers to anthropologist Margaret Mead’s writings in her 1949 book *Male and Female*, which argued that women, and not men, have innate needs to have children, but that women don’t necessarily suffer from not having children if they are not fighting the innate need for children and have learned to want childlessness. Problems start when women, those who do not have the innate need to have children but have learned that they are expected to bear children, have to manage how to reject this learned expected reproductive behaviour. In the current study, I explore how this may also be so for men in terms of their perceived innate needs and how they negotiate their learning of the expectation to want, and have children.

Reiterating assumptions of reproduction to mean the act of ‘forming again’ or ‘copying’, ‘regenerating living things’ becomes synonymous with being fertile, productive, generative, and having the ability to contribute to the conception of offspring. Yet, like all mammals, when humans reproduce biologically, they are not reproducing the total of themselves; not making one-hundred-percent copies. At the birth of a baby a male and a female have only reproduced a part of their selves, imparting some of the physical and psychological characteristics of the self to a new biological creation. In like manner, I would argue that imparting aspects of our *selves* into the birth of non-biological creations such as work achievements or artistic productions, allows a sense of non-biological reproduction to evolve. Embracing alternative concepts of reproduction would help to broaden and deepen understanding of reproduction.

Help in illustrating meaning around a non-biological sense of reproduction is provided by an important evolutionary metaphor, spandrels, which are the three-sided architectural features that fill in spaces above the curve of arches that support the dome of a cathedral. Spandrels become a necessary by-product of mounting a dome on rounded arches, an architectural structure in their own right. The arches are the obvious key structure supporting the dome, and similarly, biology is likely to be the key supporting structure of reproduction. The spandrels are the non-biological architectural equivalent; the spandrels of reproduction.
Although the Spandrels argument was intended for evolutionary biologists to use against adaptations (Gould & Lewontin, 1979; Queller, 1995), it provides a creative and useful shorthand metaphor to help explore non-biological aspects of reproduction and to understand how reproduction can be more broadly interpreted.

There are several other theoretical and conceptual orientations that further contribute to the exploration of what we might understand about non-biological reproduction during adulthood (Erikson, 1963; Gilligan, 1982; Levinson, 1986; Vaillant & Vaillant, 1990). Overlapping Erikson with Freud, Jung, Levinson, and Jaques is a general belief that adult life consists of periods of stability and change, which must be negotiated in order to build or modify one’s life structure. Although some theories are more structured than others, most theorists have taken a broad life-span approach to the psychosocial and spiritual development of adults. Times of transition affect everyone in varying degrees during their adult years, and are believed to consist of a shifting of attention during the second half of life from material acquisition towards pursuing deeper meaning and re-evaluating or re-appraising values and beliefs. The process may involve looking toward the end of life, experiencing a crisis, or being challenged by life-long beliefs such as meanings of being a man or parenthood. Notions of parenthood or non-parenthood often begin during childhood years, and as life moves forward these ideas are moderated by desire, choice and circumstances.
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To help deepen our understanding of male childlessness, and be more inclusive of childless men within the reproductive realm, we therefore need to broaden our understanding of whether individuals can feel reproductive, or fertile, without having biological offspring. This necessitates bringing conventional biological interpretations and meanings of reproduction into question in order to explore how men without biological offspring engage with conventional and alternative meanings. As a relatively new area of research, can reproduction be described in non-biological terms, and what is its relevance to men without genetically related children?

2.7.4 Why rethink things? Why rethink reproduction?

In ancient times Socrates and others engaged in inquiry into how we understand things. For Socrates, questioning knowledge was a way to initiate changes in people’s psychology, the ways they thought, felt, and behaved towards particular topics. He focused on thought and questioned how we attain knowledge and how we know that something is true. How people—more specifically men in the historical context of the times—came to know something, was viewed by Socrates as having a fashionable view of life, referring to the current ideology at the time. He looked upon philosophical reflection as a way of overturning misconceived ethical and political views of the meaning of truth. Socrates believed that if a man could understand his thinking it would, in turn, help him to live better.

According to various sources, one of Plato’s dialogues (Plato, c. 369 BC), Theaetetus, involved concern about the nature of knowledge and Socrates’ concern was about what knowledge was. Socrates compared himself and his concern to a midwife, as a metaphor, because nature had disbarred him from giving birth and pursuing his mother’s occupation. However, the exception for Socrates was that his focus was on men, not women. Metaphorically, Socrates developed a method of questioning, sometimes referred to as the maieutic method, in which the questioner acts as a midwife in helping to give birth to others’ thoughts. He believed that a skilful and conversational style of questioning brought about a use of language which was circumspect initially, and would then evolve into something highly valuable which would, in turn, help men understand themselves. In one sense, Socrates stood back to
enable men to question and self-discover their own purpose and meaning in their lives. He considered his role was not to tell people what the truth was, but rather, to help them release the truths that were already inside them (Maheshwari, 2013). In this way, by a process of induction, Socrates assisted in evolving definitions, a philosopher’s praxis if you will.

Praxis is a term steeped in history, dating back to Ancient Greece where philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle utilised the word in reference to one of three activities that people would undertake in daily life when engaging in change. One activity involved ‘thinking’, another was ‘making’, and the third was ‘praxis’, a way of ‘doing’ something that generated change.

Centuries later, ‘praxis’ continues to be used, with attached meanings such as taking action with the intention of changing society and transforming its structures (Cieszkowski, 1838/1979; Friere, 1970). Praxis can also be described as a form of critical thinking, as a progression of human cognitive actions on the natural and social world (Scott & Marshall, 2009). In turn, and aligning with Socratic thinking, the philosophy of praxis tends to lead people to a higher conception of life (Gramsci, 2000, p. 445). In other words, ‘history in action’ (Gramsci, 2000), or is it simply life itself?

Drawing again from Socrates and the time of the ancient Greek philosophers, engagement with praxis was considered to be an endeavour of free people. Free, for such men at the time, meant having the freedom to ponder and discuss many philosophical topics. The concept of being free also aligns with agency, the freedom to enact something as a free thinker with limited personal bias, enabling one to have independent philosophical thoughts that can be discussed with others in order to contribute to changes in people’s thinking. Socrates looked upon philosophical reflection as ‘the most timely and practical of tasks, for if scepticism was to be the last word of the age, there would be little hope of escaping the nihilistic conclusions of the fashionable views of life’ (Maheshwari, 2013, para 13).

To bring these ideas into the present context, Teo (2009, p. 48) argues that ‘psychological practice that aims to explore and better understand how people think, feel, and behave is interrelated with ontology and epistemology’. Furthermore, in order to then learn and improve understanding of human thinking, action and agency (praxis), human beings need to be considered as meaning-making agents who are embedded in socio-political contexts. As a form of critical thinking, praxis enacts a
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progression of cognitive action, comprising the combination of reflection and action, ‘action that is directed at the structure to be transformed’ (Friere, 1970, p. 126). In the context of the present research, the structures that are to be explored are childlessness and reproduction, within which, as Socrates alluded, the female body has made women central within the reproductive sphere, leaving men disbarred, thereby invoking the circular paradox by which biology embroils men and women.

Cognisant of these points, can the ways in which we understand ‘childlessness’ and ‘reproduction’ be considered fashionable, for which a long-standing history of understanding endures unchallenged? As an antithesis of common interpretations, can we redefine what childlessness and reproduction mean to human beings? For men and women who are, using Socrates’ words, disbarred from having children, can they, as Socrates suggests, reproduce metaphorically?

Assumptions and ‘conclusions’ about how we interpret reproduction may not be this extreme, but similarly, with political and religious laws in Australia changing to accommodate changing social attitudes towards reproduction, it is timely to question our knowledge of childlessness and reproduction, and by rethinking matters to help to change the status quo.

2.8 Summary and the aims of the study

Within the context of the current study, questions are raised about how the ideas and research findings just reviewed might be reflected in how men articulate their experiences of childlessness and how they feel they are perceived in the reproductive sphere. In scholarly papers examining the importance of men in the reproductive sphere, when men are asked new insights find that they do have an active interest in reproductive processes (Locock & Alexander, 2006; Rapp, 2004; Reed, 2009), emphasising the importance of a qualitative approach to offer different perspectives on the phenomenon. Men’s reproductive and generative contributions need to be better understood, and so are explored in the current study.

Reproduction and mental health are key issues of concern in future endeavours of various organisations (World Health Organization, 2004). Both issues are incorporated into the present psychological research, in terms of exploring the ways in which male childlessness intersects with concepts of reproduction. As lifestyles change, a wider aim of this study is to contribute a broader framework within which
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to approach ‘reproduction’, and to be more inclusive of those who do not have children.

Although scholarly contributions on how we understand male childlessness have slowly increased, the body of knowledge remains small. I intend to explore and deepen our understanding of whether, and if so how, men who do not have genetically related children develop a sense of non-biological reproduction. In doing so, I will argue that exploring the non-biological aspects of reproduction, the spandrels, is not ‘performing an inversion of explanation’ but as part of the important and integral structures of reproduction (Gould & Lewontin, 1979, p. 583). Instead, psychological theories of adulthood will be explored in terms of how they contribute to the development of feeling reproductive without children, and whether the essence of reproduction can be captured.

Developed from a critical review of the literature, and to reiterate from the previous subsections of this chapter, the overarching aim of the present study is to explore subjective experiences of male childlessness as lived by each man. To help fill the gap in the literature and provide a gender balance in the discussions of reproduction, the aim is also to explore the experience of male childlessness in areas inclusive of those who are homosexual, partnered/unpartnered, and those who might be adoptive/social/stepfathers. The focus of the study is guided by the following key research questions:

- Identify and reflect upon insights into the experiences of the childless men.
- How does male childlessness intersect with concepts of reproduction?
- Can childless men develop a non-biological sense of reproduction?

In this chapter I have outlined what we know and understand of the experience of male childlessness thus far. Theoretical and ideological considerations that may help in providing insights into how male childlessness and reproduction are understood will be discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter 3: Review of the theoretical literature

3.1 Introduction

As will be developed more fully, the research that ensues has both a phenomenological and a poststructural foundation. In this chapter the phenomenological approach to childlessness is discussed, including the central tenants of phenomenology with a timeline of phenomenological thinking, and the relevance of phenomenology in psychology. The chapter then follows with a discussion outlining a critical perspective on phenomena and the relevance of critical thinking to the research. The phenomenological perspective predominantly draws upon the works of Heidegger (1962, 1977, 1993) and the poststructural perspective draws from Foucault (1969, 1980, 1982, 1988, 1994, 2000).

3.2 Phenomenological approach to childlessness

Phenomenology is a rich and complex philosophy that informs one of the methodological approaches to the current research. Lopez and Willis (2004, p.726) argue that ‘implementing a research method without an examination of its philosophical basis can result in research that is ambiguous in its purpose, structure, and findings’. Therefore, I have provided a brief overview of phenomenology, placing an emphasis on particular relevant aspects.

3.2.1 Central tenets of phenomenology

Lawthom and Tindall (2011, pp. 3-5) argue from the outset that trying to define phenomenology is ‘messy … [and that] the landscape of phenomenology is fissured and fragmented’, making it difficult to define effectively. Simply put, the study of a phenomenon means bringing to light the object of a person’s perception of a particular phenomenon (Larsson & Holmström, 2007), in the present case, the phenomenon of male childlessness.

In its essence, phenomenology is about how everything appears as something, making the world, objects, and us, interconnected with meaning attached, as we have interpreted the something, as something (Moustakas, 1994), and how phenomena are...
perceived and understood in human consciousness. Willig (2001) describes perception within human consciousness as contemplation and introspective attention to one’s own experience.

Epistemologically, phenomenology falls between realism, where the phenomenon and experiences are real in all their truth and existence, and relativism, where the experience is constructed by interaction with other people, social structures, culture and society and in historical context. Instead from a phenomenological standpoint experiences do in fact feel real to the person, and their meaning-making feels real. Everything presents itself as something, which then constitutes reality (Willig, 2001). Yet there may not be awareness of how experiences and perceptions are interrelated with and influenced by other social structures, and are generating intersubjective knowledge (Creswell, 2012); moreover, everyone can experience the same phenomenon differently. This explanation refers to how things seem to the individual; how the appearance of things is experienced and understood by the person. It is through our experiences that we come to know the world, how we see (perceive) the world. There are different ways to understand lived experience in its richness and texture. Phenomenology enables experience to be better understood through rich engagement with another person’s ‘life-world’ (Lawthom & Tindall, 2011, p. 4). It reveals the world as it presents itself to us as human beings, engaging with it within a particular context and experiencing it at a particular time (Willig, 2013).

Phenomenology portrays the firsthand understanding of experiences, as subjectively experienced, not as abstract statements about the world in general. The person is the knower, or the producer of understanding, meaning and knowledge about the world (Spiegelberg, 1975). In one sense the self and the world become inseparable components of meaning (Willig, 2001).

Bringing these explanations of phenomenology into the context of the current research, what is important is how the phenomenon of male childlessness is perceived, interpreted and understood by childless men as they have lived the experience. The intention of a phenomenological approach is to ‘gain a deep and useful understanding of the [phenomenon] of interest’ (Lawthom & Tindall, 2011, p. 8). It has long been recognised that phenomenology provides a framework that enables individuals to view, interpret and convey, as much as possible, the meaning-making of their experiences (Schutz, 1967).
3.2.2 From Aristotle to Heidegger

Phenomenology can be broadly located within the *interpretivist* paradigm rather than in opposition to a positivist inquiry (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994), entangling philosophical inquiry and scientific inquiry, philosophy and method. Although there is a plethora of writings about phenomenology, a brief outline and timeline are needed to appreciate the broad origins of phenomenological thinking (see Box 1):

Box 1: Timeline of Phenomenological Thought

- Aristotle (384BC–322BC) questioned the ‘meaning of being’.
- Aristotelian scholars continued to be involved in the early history of phenomenology.
- One scholar, Franz Brentano (1838–1917), a German philosopher and priest, wrote *On the manifold meaning of being according to Aristotle* (1862)—later read by and significantly influencing Martin Heidegger’s thinking.
- Brentano had an important influence on Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) (Farrell Krell, 1975). Brentano developed genetic psychology (*genetische psychologie*) and descriptive psychology (*beschreibende / deskriptive psychologie*). The former is psychological study from a third-person point of view, with the aim of meeting the requirements of *empirical science*, whereas the latter describes consciousness from a first-person viewpoint (Madras, 2006).
- Husserl, a German philosopher, established the school of phenomenology. Husserl is also considered a key founder of the philosophy during his lifetime.
- Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), during his high school years, read Brentano’s book on Aristotle, which stimulated his thinking on the pursuit of the meaning of being.
- Heidegger prepared for the priesthood. He became a Jesuit novice, but left the seminary due to health reasons and studied philosophy, mathematics and the natural sciences. During this time he became influenced by Husserl and became his junior colleague in 1906.
- Heidegger was very interested in Husserl’s phenomenological thinking. He lectured on phenomenology, but developed his own creative interpretations of Aristotle that led him to generate his radical reinterpretation of Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology. Martin Heidegger became a renowned German philosopher and seminal thinker in his own right.
- The next generation of phenomenological philosophical thinkers included Georg Gadamer and Hannah Arendt, who continued with their interpretations and attesting to the challenge posed by Heidegger which required a return to Aristotle and revisiting the question of the ‘meaning of being’, and also developing alternatives in the twentieth century to the dead-end of Cartesian dualism (Brogan, 2009). Gadamer’s approach, for example, was grounded in Platonic-Aristotelian as well as Heideggerian thinking, and he further developed ideas about hermeneutics and interpretative methods, grounding understanding in the linguistically mediated concept of tradition (Zalta, Nodelman, Allen, & Perry, 2010).
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Phenomenology continues to be an evolving approach. Caelli (2000) argues that it is possible to identify 18 different forms of phenomenology. Phenomenology as philosophy is itself not a unified system as there are different strands of phenomenology. Despite the different interpretations, they all share the value of the experiential subjective world of the individual, referred to as the life-world. Pivotal to phenomenological understanding of experience is subjective experience, with the aim of exploring how humans experience the world through first-person accounts of the quality and texture of individual experience (Creswell, 2012; Spinelli, 2003). Being cognisant of the change in how phenomenology is defined in part informs some of the aims of the current research—that is, asking how and whether male childlessness and reproduction might also be changing.

There are two key philosophical interpretations that are still undertaken today within phenomenological research paradigms. The first is a descriptive methodological stance that is predominantly informed by Edmund Husserl (Giorgi, 2000). The second is an interpretative methodological position informed by Martin Heidegger (Smith, 2010). It is Heidegger’s thinking that has been adopted for the present study.

One of the fundamental differences in Husserl’s and Heidegger’s thinking was bracketing. For Husserl, phenomenology was the analysis and detached description of consciousness of how objects are constituted. Husserl’s view was that one could suspend all presuppositions and biases as one contemplates a phenomenon; one could bracket off or shed all personal knowledge and bias in order to grasp the essence of experience, so that the researcher did not influence the study by which ‘reality is considered objective and independent of history and context’ (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p.728). However, Husserl’s thinking was also set in the historical context of empirical science, where objectivity was the aim and reflected the values of a traditional empirical scientific approach to human experience; that by applying intentional thinking—the power of the mind to stand for and represent things—a true essence could be extracted from human experience as a detached description (LeVasseur, 2003; Ramon, 2006).

Heidegger challenged Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology, expanding phenomenology towards an interpretative approach. Following Heidegger’s thinking, when we have already perceived the object, our subconscious is already disabling the

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ability to bracket off all presuppositions (LeVasseur, 2003). In opposition to Husserl’s thinking, presuppositions and assumptions can provide a better understanding of the phenomenon in every-day life. A central tenet of Heidegger’s thinking was ontology, the study of Being. Heidegger, unlike Husserl, believed that from an interpretative standpoint the researcher is as much a part of the research as the participant. He therefore challenged Husserl on the idea that the researcher could put aside any presuppositions about the topic. The idea of lived experience and Being-in-the-world was of key interest to Heidegger, who hyphenated the words to emphasise that there was no separation between our being and our world; they were as one. Heidegger’s concept of Spaciality refers to the space between people and things; of how people relate to each other and other things, in the way they carry out activities in daily life. The concept of ‘spaciality’ resonates with the concept of ‘intersubjectivity’ in terms of the interactive relations between people (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Putting these concepts within the context of the present study, it is the exploration of the ‘intersubjective space’ between men who have not produced offspring and how they exist in their world.

Through Heidegger’s main interest in ontology, the study of being (Sein), attempting to access Being occurs by means of phenomenological analysis of the experience of human existence (Dasein), which allows an entity to ask what it means to be. This was with respect to temporal and historical ways of appearing. Temporal in terms of how things change or appear to change over time, and historical in terms of how things appear now, being linked, shaped, and influenced by their history; of how something came to be shaped as it did. The something does not however necessarily appear to one person as it does to another person. This is because every person interprets something with his or her own temporal and historical characteristics. Temporality helps to explain how the existence of something at one moment represents historical context and the future possibilities of how that something might be understood. In a spiritual and material historically conditioned environment, Dasein, or being, is thought of in terms of being temporal; it projects, or is thrown upon various possibilities. Temporality involves the past, the future, and the present, in which both the past and the future exist in ‘being with’. The phenomenon that is being explored appears to be in the ‘thrownness‘ of movement, going back and moving forward. According to Heidegger’s thinking, everything is in motion, temporalised. In the context of the present research, the unity of Dasein’s temporality,
as it can appear within the phenomenon of male childlessness, is never fixed. The temporality of human existence in moments of thrownness with how male childlessness is temporalised.

Hermeneutics involves the role of interpretation of both participants and the researcher, a process of meaning-making. Interpretative processes occur during interviews and data analysis as the researcher interprets from the text of the interviews. Heidegger’s idea of the hermeneutic circle relies on an assumption that shared understandings, or shared meanings, exist between the researcher and participants, and places emphasis on language as the vehicle through which the question of Being can be unpacked. According to James Luchte (n.d.), an English Professor of Philosophy, Heidegger wrote that it is through thinking that the relation of Being to the ‘essence of man’ is expressed through language; that ‘language is the house of Being’ (Heidegger, 1977, pp. 217-218).

The hermeneutic circle has attracted both support and criticism. Support such as that from Gadamer (1975) and Schone (1983) who, respectively, further developed the concept by embracing it as an iterative process, as having a ‘conversation with the situation’; perceived in the present case as ‘male childlessness conversing with reproduction’. The circular character of interpretation derives from the researcher moving from the whole to parts of the conversation, then circulating back to the whole again. Yet Hollway and Jefferson (2008) caution that not all words necessarily have a shared meaning, and therefore caution about the notion of a shared understanding; a point to be mindful of when analysing the nuances of what participants say in their interviews for the research.

The human being is unique, because human beings have an openness toward Being. If humans turn away from being, forgetting their true selves, they deprive themselves of their own humanity. Heidegger believed that this was the case for contemporary humans, who have replaced authentic questioning concerning their existence with answers provided by ideology, social media and technology. Heidegger criticised Western philosophy and Western metaphysics and technology within which the question of being was becoming nihilistic, being obliterated and going nowhere. Western philosophy began with the human being defined as animal rationale, the animal endowed with reason. Over time, and with education bringing about transformations in all spheres of human life, reason has become highly valued, an absolute value. Heidegger argued that humans need to reason, not so much in a
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calculative sense, but in the sense of more openness and with more reflection on that which is nearest to us—Being.

3.2.3 Phenomenology within psychology

Permeating throughout these features of phenomenology is interpretation. According to Willig [2001], psychology and phenomenology have mutual interests in having roots in philosophy, a focus on the content of consciousness and the individual’s experience of the world, and being concerned with the diversity and variability of human experience. While discussing individual perspectives of the world Kvale (1996, p. 53) emphasised the importance of ‘describing in detail the content and structure [of a person’s] consciousness, [in order] to grasp the qualitative diversity of their experiences’ and to explicate their meanings.

Moreover, Willig (2001, p. 53) highlights that ‘in phenomenological psychological research, the research participant’s account becomes the phenomenon with which the researcher engages’. Any human experience that has appeal within the psychological community and psychological research can be explored from a phenomenological perspective. Phenomenological psychology is more concerned with the diversity of human experience than the ‘essence’ of experience in a Husserlian sense (Spinelli, 2003). Over time ideas have evolved, and psychologists have become more reflexive, not attempting to bracket off presuppositions and biases when contemplating phenomena. An interpretative approach to phenomenology is in keeping with psychological interest in individual experience and meanings of experience

3.2.4 Summary and context for the present research

Understanding people’s life-worlds through individual subjectivity, or lived experience, is argued to be the most central concept within phenomenology (Ashworth, 2003). Drawing on works from Merleau-Ponty (1962), a phenomenological philosopher who was strongly influenced by both Husserl and Heidegger, some common features of the life-world have been outlined. When considering the life-world within phenomenology the interplay of reflexivity,
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interpretation, and (not) bracketing⁸—which I have labelled the RIBs of phenomenology—underpins how we understand our own life-world and those of others. In other words, the encasement of understanding that surrounds the object or phenomenon of interest and lived experience.

For Heidegger, the problem with Husserl’s thinking was the problem of constitution, meaning how was the world as phenomena constituted in our consciousness? Furthermore, why did something have to be given in our consciousness in order for it to be constituted? Instead, Heidegger’s thinking asked what is the mode of being of that being, in which the world was constituted? The concept of Dasein, which is not directly translatable into English, is somewhat pivotal to the philosophical standpoint of Heidegger. Heidegger talks about many different modes in which we exist and encounter things. Consequently, Dasein, the state of being, involves other concepts, including authenticity and what feels real to someone, Sorge (care), Befindlichkeit (disposition and mood in which the experience is lived), temporality (the sense of time, past, present and future), spaciality (intersubjectivity), and hermeneutics (interpretation and meaning-making).

Heidegger questioned the meaning of being and how it was constituted. In the context of the current research what is the meaning of being childless? How does a man be childless? What is each man’s subjective experience and subsequent knowledge of ‘being’ a childless man? How does childlessness appear before them?

Further phenomenological work is required to develop understanding of childlessness ‘as lived’ (Shaw, 2011, p. 161). Exploring perceptions of men who have not produced offspring of how they are situated-in-the-world incorporates many aspects of Heidegger’s thinking. Interpretative phenomenology, according to Heidegger, linked people and their life-worlds. The link became the turn in his thinking, which placed emphasis on language as the vehicle through which the question of Being could be unravelled. Men narrated their experiences at given times and in various settings and specific contexts. Heidegger’s existence-orientated philosophy informs a broad, but key framework for this research; exploring one’s sense of being-in-the-world as a childless man.

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⁸ I included bracketing here to remind the reader that the research herein takes the position that it is impossible to shed all presuppositions and assumptions when understanding phenomena and all things in our life-world.
3.3 Taking a critical perspective on phenomena

Qualitative research affords the opportunity to be reflexive with respect to the research process itself. With that in mind it became evident from the first interview that a second analytical approach was needed to help deepen one’s understanding of subjective meaning-making within the phenomenon of male childlessness and what informed that meaning-making. This realisation led to questions regarding what influenced the way in which these men perceived and placed meaning on their experiences of not producing offspring. By adopting a pluralistic approach it became possible to engage with meaning and experiences in a specific social context, and to attempt to bring to light hidden features of an experience that might be overlooked by using a single approach.

While examining subjective human experience from an individual worldview in seeking to understand the heterogeneous nature of experience, such a worldview can also hinder mutuality, connectedness, and a psychological sense of community, which in turn can lead people to believe that these things are unimportant (Sarason, 1974). Fox, Prilleltensky, and Austin, (2009, p. 6) caution that an individualistic worldview can ‘blind people to the impact of their actions and lifestyles on others who remain oppressed’. They also add that in every society—although it varies from society to society—‘economic, educational, religious, and other institutions inculcate into their members’ preferred view[s] of human nature and social order’.

‘Preferred views’ can manifest as discourse which can have a powerful and authoritative, yet implicit, impact on the way people think, feel, and behave. The nature of discourse helps to maintain dominant ideology, and therefore also the status quo of particular preferred views. In the present context an example of dominant ideology is pronatalism⁹, within which reproductive and other discourses are enacted.

To help inform a deeper understanding of male childlessness an exploration of discourses within the men’s narratives of being childless is desirable. As one of many varied methods of consciousness-raising, the aim of the current research is to question reproductive ideology, and how it influences men to articulate their experiences of being childless—to explore ‘outside ideology’ (socio-political) that impacts on ‘inside

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⁹ It was noted three decades ago that pronatalism was at the social and political fore (Ginsburg & Rapp, 1991). Even though childlessness has become more accepted in many societies, childless individuals remain a minor cohort within pronatalistic ideology.
ideology’ (individual), through as reflected in what interviewees say. In other words, making the implicit explicit. Friere (1970) emphasised that developing a critical consciousness helps to break through ideological defences of the status quo and identify the source of their oppression.10

A critical approach to understanding human society has been explored by many philosophers and critical theorists. Knowledge is considered to be socially constructed, empowering some and not others, impacting on [and by] social discourses, and changing over time. I have therefore drawn predominantly on the work of Michel Foucault and Ian Parker in conducting the second analysis.

3.3.1 The relevance of critical thinking and Foucault to the research

With cultural concepts being recognised as changing over time, our relationship with culture also changes (Williams, 2005). Given social changes—such as the increase in the number of same-sex couples having children and the increased use of assisted reproductive treatments in Australian society—it follows that the relationship of male childlessness and reproduction with cultural change may also change. Therefore, rather than understanding a subject such as male childlessness and reproduction, with all its historical assumptions that underpin common understanding, as a fixed truth—that knowledge is accepted as static understanding—it is timely that the relationship of male childlessness and reproduction to Australia culture is critically explored.

Taking a critical perspective on the way childless men impose meaning on the phenomenon of male childlessness links history, that is past understanding of knowing, and future possibilities of knowing and understanding that are expressed in the present. A primary goal of critical psychology is to ‘identify and reveal ideological messages and related practices that direct our station away from the sources of elite power and privilege’ (Fox et al., 2009, p. 10). Pertinent to the present research is the exploration and understanding of power relations, and how men draw a line, and develop meaning, between personal and social phenomena.

10 No assumption is made that all men who have not produced offspring experience oppression. Rather, exploring whether men feel oppressed in some way helps to inform the findings of the present research.
The relationship of how to be in the world and the interrelations of human-cultural influences constitute a structure. Structures, or objects are not necessarily physical objects. Constructions of reality and truths can also be considered objects, the term not being restricted to physical concrete objects (Parker, 1992). For example, theology discourse generates the soul as being real, and people believe and behave in ways towards it, normalising the soul as an ‘object’.

A structuralist perspective on the relation between human culture and behaviour helps to disentangle personal experience and discourse from socio-political assumptions and how meanings for childless men are structured. The underlying structures that make human experience possible can be thought of in terms of a cultural product, evidence of a dominant ideology of how people live and experience. Discourses can materialise almost anything in terms of normalising it as being real. Likewise, reproductive or biology discourse may consider the absence of offspring as an object to which people respond. It therefore follows that objects do not necessarily directly reflect solid entities. Rather they ‘bring into being the objects they describe’ (Willig, 1999, p. 2).

Recognising that knowledge is a co-constructed understanding of the world, between people and human culture, does not necessarily mean there is a shared understanding of ‘reality’ between individuals. Men who have not produced offspring share the phenomenon of ‘childlessness’, but they may not necessarily share, describe, or understand ‘childlessness’ in the same way. Knowledge of ‘childlessness’ will vary, with a man bringing past understanding of what having children ‘means’ into his current context and throughout his lifetime.

When connotations are placed on objects and events by a society through the conduit of discourse, those inferences and subtexts are then widely adopted by its inhabitants as taken for granted assumptions and become ‘real’. While the experience of being ‘childless’ can vary for each man, what it means may be in conflict with dominant ideology. For example, one childless man might be quite happy with having not produced offspring, but against pronatalist ideology or in the face of gender discourse he might feel ‘abnormal’.

The concept of a norm is used to evaluate and exclude those who do not conform to normal categories of values and practices. Norms reinforce cultural rules, by reinforcing dominant discourse that places people in particular positions of power. Through norms, people are constructed within binary opposing pairs wherein, a
dominant idea has an opposing subservient counterpart. For example, people can be categorised as being normal–abnormal, qualified–unqualified, exhibiting male behaviour–female behaviour. The structure of the binary opposing pair is critiqued by poststructuralism\(^{11}\) in terms of how the binary pair relate to each other within a discourse, and rejecting the accepted notion of a dominant idea–subservient counterpart (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982; Foucault, 1980).

Relevant to the present study are the critiques of the binary opposing pairs of ‘those who have produced offspring–those who have not’ and ‘those who have children–those who do not’. Within pronatalist and reproductive ideology, how ‘childless’ men weigh up these concepts will be explored, while being mindful that the focus of the present study is on those that have not produced offspring. In order to understand multiple implicit meanings for the men it is necessary to unpack the assumptions and knowledge systems of how binary pairs are constructed through different discourses.

Discourse, and normality that is harnessed, can have more impact when based in truth and what is natural. How discourse and normality are interwoven into men’s experiences will be examined within what the men say and how they describe their experiences. Examining discourse as sets or patterns of meaning helps to bring phenomena into sight (Parker, 1992, 1999), and can refer to anything that takes form (Foucault, 1969, p. 42) and becomes taken-for-granted to exist as being real. According to Foucault, ‘the rules of formation are conditions of existence … in a given discursive field’. For example, in the discursive field of reproduction, taking the formation of being childless, the condition of existence could be assumed to be one that is negative, as childlessness might be considered a disruption to the common way of thinking or believing, or how someone is expected to behave. The discourse of normal reproductive behaviour is to want and to produce offspring. Foucault, through his work on sexuality, counters appeals to fixed states, hierarchies and values, and the ‘unmasking [of] false appeals to nature’ (Williams, 2005, p. 122). Meaning for the present context is to critique static approaches to manhood and reproduction, and the existence of a hierarchy amongst men who have and have not produced offspring, appealing to what is natural.

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\(^{11}\) Poststructuralism as defined by its relationship to structuralism and by its extending on and critiquing its predecessor (Williams, 2005).
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It is evident, however, that there are some humans who do not want to produce offspring (Veevers, 1973; Weston & Qu, 2001). Critiquing discourse and disrupting static ideology can ‘make available a space for particular types of self to step in’ (Parker, 1999, p. 9). How then, in the face of dominant reproductive and gender ideology, does discourse impact the experiences of childless men? Parker (1999) emphasises that an individual’s ‘sense of self’ is where discourse can be located, and finds a voice in terms of how a person conveys his thoughts, feelings and behaviour; how a childless man makes meaning of his life experiences in a world where the norm is to want and have children.

Foucault’s approach enables one to critique the historical processes of childlessness and reproduction and to also critique the accounts of those who narrate their experiences of being childless. Furthermore, the disruption of fixed ideology, the creative openings of relevant historical processes in view of contemporary movements and of resistance and liberation, can be further examined. Challenging false labels of childlessness as being unnatural or abnormal, it is through the works of Foucault, creating openings in ideology, that help affirm the variability in the ways in which people live—the variability of the aesthetics of existence12.

Foucault’s concern was for the active formation of oneself and of life, not a static sense of self. The self is constantly evolving over one’s lifetime, and with varying degrees of satisfaction with the self, with who we are. The eternal recurrence and the continuous formation and transformation of the self as we change through life has, according to Foucault, a transcendental quality and notion. Yet the way human beings are actively formed and constructed, the way people give style to their lives, is not necessarily at a conscious level. It is the implicit forces of particular discourses that interplay and enact the construction of how we see ourselves. Therefore, the active formation of one’s self is limited by how we are influenced by ideology and social indoctrination of how we should exist and appear to the world. For the

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12 The aesthetics of existence is an instrument, that of our self—as a subject or the form of our self—and how the self is created in multiple ways, forming indirectly through decisions about the self, a formation for that moment and that situation, as well as by historical forces well beyond our control, as we change and evolve in relation to power (Williams, 2005). The aesthetic of existence is an ethical commandment to question the relationship with oneself, to work on it and to follow the precept of transforming oneself into ‘a work of art’, creating ourselves as a work of art and actively selecting and developing a lifestyle, the breaking open of fixed truths and identities (Huijer, 1999, p. 79). See Huijer for a fuller discussion of the role of the aesthetics of existence in the work of Foucault.
‘childless’ men in the present study, I will be exploring how dominant reproductive and gender discourse impinges on the construction of their senses of self, and how their senses of self, their *styles of self*, may have changed over time given they have not produced offspring.

Regarding the functional relationship between objects and discourse, what people see and what people say may not be logical, but may perform a historical function which then becomes a statement for something, thus discourse in action. For example, are the men in the study saying something about not producing offspring to protect the dominant western discourse of masculinity in order to show they are still ‘men’ as constructed by the society in which they reside? Foucault’s reference to archaeology is about unearthing key statements that help to uncover the genealogy of a statement and variations of its function. Each statement during the interviews is inherently open to question and interpretation. Foucault cautions not to state an interpretation as a fixed truth, because interpretations are limited by dominant meanings and actors that influence the way in which an interpretation is made. This notion is an important consideration during analysis and when conveying research findings. Foucault’s works do not bring everything to a conclusion, but do bring it into question, creating ideological openings rather than settling for a new orthodoxy (Williams, 2005).

For Foucault (2000), reality is a historical question rather than one about the status of what is true and real. At a given moment, ‘individuals establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal and necessary’ (p. 19). In other words, when men are articulating their experiences of being childless, it will be their expression at that given moment. Foucault’s work encourages the observation of discursive structures over time, and the notion that discourses and people’s statements are not stable over time. In this framework, exploring men’s perspectives on not producing offspring is a class/gender/social conflict, which hopefully leads to greater equality in our understanding of the experience of humans not producing offspring in today’s society at this time in history.

As a way of communicating sets of meanings persuasively, I wanted to explore how reproductive discourse might have an authoritative, action-based nature in terms of the way in which objects and individual selves are constructed, which may, in turn, create opportunities for power through processes such as shaping, regulating, and normalising (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982; Foucault, 1980). Discourses
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provide frameworks to discuss how or why one way of talking dominates other ways. It therefore follows that although there are different forms of discourse, as Mills (2004) highlights, what they have in common is that they are to be considered in terms of being organised around practices of exclusion. This point raises questions of whether men feel excluded because dominant discourses are that men should produce offspring.

Foucault sees discourse as a larger field of power and practice whose relations are articulated in different ways by different paradigms. Through rigorous analytical work, a Foucauldian approach aims to establish these relations, or structures (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982). Discourses from a Foucauldian perspective can facilitate and limit, enable and constrain, what can be said by whom, where and when (Parker, 1992), and are therefore appropriate for the present study.

Consideration of power becomes fundamental within discussions and exploration of discourse, and for Foucault, discourse imbricates power with knowledge—one overlaid by the other. Frow (1985) asserts that power is not simply about negativity and repression, but is more about ‘asymmetrical dispersion’ (p. 206) throughout social relations, generating possible forms of behaviour as well as restricting behaviour. Building on the ideas of poststructuralism, discourses can be understood as constructed ‘representations’ of the world, whereby objects are identified using the metaphor of ‘gravity’ to describe how the weight of discourse is evident through what and how people talk and by its effects. Foucault (1980) argued that all knowledge is socially constructed under the conditions of power, and was more concerned with the struggles of power. He was less interested in whether a discourse was an accurate representation of reality, but more concerned with the way in which one discourse becomes the dominant discourse (Mills, 2004). Unlike other theorists who viewed power as always oppressing individuals, Foucault was more interested in the effects of power, and relations to power. How the relationship between power and knowledge—mediated by dominant pronatalist ideology and how dominant reproductive discourse is supported by government policies, social attitudes and the population as a whole—affects the way each childless man perceives the world around him, and is used to control perceptions and meaning-making, are explored in the current study. Ultimate ways of knowing are limitless, as each man is
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likely to respond differently, bringing his past experiences over his life-time to the present, mediated by discourse.

Poststructural thinking is that the limit of knowledge is ‘an ungraspable thing’ (Williams, 2005, p. 3). Therefore, through the works of Derrida, Deleuze, Kristeva, and Foucault, poststructural thinking is shown to be:

… a thorough disruption of our secure sense of meaning and reference in language, of our understanding of our senses … of our identity and of our sense of history and of its role in the present, and our understanding of language as something free of the work of the unconscious. (Williams, 2005, p. 3)

Here disruption is framed as a positive enterprise in terms of critically examining the power to resist and work against settled, taken-for-granted truths about reproduction. From a poststructural standpoint, knowledge argues that ‘you cannot identify the limit, but you can trace its effects’ [Williams, 2005, p. 3]. In the current study, this refers to the effects being how men articulate their experiences of not producing offspring.

Within linguistic behaviour, Foucault turned the how, why, and when of language and discourse into a political and methodological question (Said, 1984). Other philosophers, like Derrida for example, used the element of play in a linguistic sense, and critically examined the play on words and use of puns and humour. Discourse does not disappear, but can be invisible. On discourse, Said further comments that:

The effectiveness of modern discourse is linked to its invisibility … each discourse is itself, to some degree, a form of jargon but is also a language of control and a set of institutions within the culture over what it constitutes as its special domain. (p. 219)

As discourses have important implications for how power emerges, the relationship between discourse and power can become evident through language. Shotter (1993) highlights that political struggles can be located in already spoken words. Thus, in the current research, the narrative resources that are available to
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childless men in making sense of their lives need to be considered. For example, in my earlier research (Lawrence-Bourne, 2012), some men used terminology such as *barren* to help in their articulation of their experiences, but also revealed gender aspects of reproductive discourse, which will be considered for the present study.

From a poststructuralist perspective language constructs rather than represents. The way language is structured may be independent of intentions, and Parker (1999) argues that it therefore does not make any sense to ask people what they really mean. In other words, language becomes a societal tool for constructing knowledge. In the Forward to Shotter’s (1993) social constructionist view and discussion of the *Cultural politics of everyday life*, British philosopher Harré commented that ordinary everyday language affords every one of us some understanding of other people. He concurs with Shotter that ‘the world of human existence does not exist independently of human activity, but is a product of that activity’ (Harré, 1993). Knowledge grows with our participation in the acts of living (Shotter, 1993). Listening to how men interpret their experiences in everyday language, and deconstructing what they are saying enables a scrutiny of the underlying discourse. Understanding human society, where language plays a large role in the way humans reify perceptions of their world, also reveals the intersubjective structures of human society. As Butler (1997) contends, language acts, performs, and through its performative character has power. Even when I am exploring the force of the language of what someone has said, it is language that is used to convey research findings. Thus, I am ‘caught in a bind’ of also exercising the force of language (Butler, 1997, p. 1).

Foucault’s work can seem paradoxical. While his view of discourse is important for literary and cultural studies, it was not a primary concern for Foucault himself, as he considered literature a privileged zone that operated around institutions and as a process of exclusion for groups of people. Foucault did not want to get entrenched or pinned down within a set of ideas, his ideas, of power and knowledge and become fastened to academic and institutional *knowledge*. Instead, he wanted to set out to free the history of ideas (Riley, 1983), and not to bestow a life of its own on ideology as a course through history (Williams, 2005). Foucault aimed to provide new ways of thinking about our relation to the past and transformed the way in which individuals and social structures relate in terms of freedom and power (Williams, 2005). Without becoming a new ideological orthodoxy, discourse is important, for it allows the questioning of literature and critiquing of historical context (Mills, 2004)
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and, in the context of the current study, enables meaning-making by the men of their experiences of childlessness to be critiqued, thereby providing richer insights into the phenomenon of male childlessness.

Literature has been constituted as the object of a certain enshrinement (Macdonnell, 1986). As Mills (2004) highlights:

History texts are privileged in their relation to truth; autobiographical writings are privileged in terms of their supposed authenticity in relation to an authorial voice; and literary texts have a complex relation to both truth and value … seen as providing ‘truth’ about human condition. (p. 20)

Mills then adds that while this may seem superfluous to examining the literature, it can still be discussed in comparing texts across different literary ranges of texts; for example, exploring the discourses by which masculinity is constructed. Yet from a Foucauldian frame of reference the relevant literature also provides a platform from which cultural norms can be contested. For example, being able to critically analyse the plethora of literature that centralises women in discourses of reproduction and not producing offspring, and how that excludes men, and how that exclusion can impact on their experiences of childlessness. This is why Foucault’s contribution to ‘literature’ is relevant here, in order to examine the ‘arbitrariness of the range of discourses, the strangeness of those discourses, in spite of their familiarity’ (Mills, 2004, p. 23).

In doing this, the role of reflexivity bridges between the individual and the social, enabling us to reflect on language and ourselves. Reflexivity helps to increase awareness of our place in things, our position, and our differences with others (Parker, 1992), embracing a critical distance and awareness between the researcher and the research. In order to uncover social structures a critical lens is used to examine the possible influences of how the men place meaning on their experiences of being childless through the ‘performance’ of language. Shotter (1993) argues that knowledge comes from people and their experiences of everyday life, not necessarily from theorists and philosophers.

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13 Performance is used here in reference to how language is constructed, and how discourse is conveyed through language structure; the way discourse is enacted through language. See Butler (1997) as one example of how language ‘performs’.
3.4 Summary and bringing the two perspectives together for analysis

The purpose of this chapter was to outline phenomenology and Heidegger’s perspective, and Foucault’s perspective of discourse, and to try to bring the principles and practice of the two methodologies together. The aim was that both perspectives complement each other; not to create a methodological and ideological tension, yet noting that it is important to acknowledge the different epistemological viewpoints. Madill, Jordan, and Shirley (2000) formed an epistemological continuum between naïve realism (where all objects exist as being real and have true existence), and radical relativism (where knowledge and truth exist in relation to culture, society or historical context; a relational existence) that encloses various other epistemologies, where each of which is positioned on the continuum (see also Burr, 1998, 2003; Willig, 2013). In summary, a few implications which I consider important to note for the present research are reiterated.

Phenomenology tends to fall between the arbitrary ends of the continuum. On the one hand, people interpret what they see and how they experience something as being real and true for them, on the other hand it is also acknowledged that there can be different interpretations of the same phenomena, creating a paradox. The reality that is to be understood is the reality that is important to each man. This is not in the sense of discovering knowledge, or how things really are (Willig, 2001).

A critical discursive approach and poststructuralism, on the other hand, tend to be located closer to relativism in terms of the differently constructed versions of reality that are assumed to be built for particular purposes, with knowledge assumed to be constructed through discourse and discursive practices (Willig, 2001). Yet childless people still negotiate material conditions (critical realism) such as government policies, children’s playgrounds in parks, and pronatalist ideology, all of which they need to assess at different times in their lives. According to Sims-Schouten, Riley and Willig (2007), material existence cannot be ignored, and they argue on ethical grounds that to do so may not ‘do justice’ to the lived experiences of research participants (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007, pp. 103-104). Being aware of material conditions allows consideration of why particular discourses are available to people in the way they describe and generate meaning from their experiences of being childless.
A critical approach to epistemology is to ask *how* the relations of power have constructed the way we *know* things about the world, and thereby how that knowledge is inextricably linked to power. The phrase ‘the personal is political’ emphasises the way in which the realms of individual experience and relationships operate to reproduce, or challenge, patterns of power (Parker, 2005b; Rowbotham, 1979). Yet there is a level of *interpretation* of how social structures, or material structures, are ingested and then expressed in our psychology—our thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. Hence, people can express power and/or disempowerment through various discourses, as they may be in positions of both power and powerlessness at any one time.

Debates regarding the definitions of realism and relativism go back to the times of Plato. Dismissing the complexities of realism-relativism altogether might also dismiss ways in which phenomena can be understood and how the viewpoints of both approaches can offer different insights into the same phenomenon. Moreover, respecting their differences can contribute to the possibilities of different ways to understand human experience.

While one is exploring the experiential world and what one perceives as real, it cannot be explored further unless situated in broader structures; underlying material, social and psychological structures that give rise to the experience. While a phenomenological approach helps to provide a rich and detailed perspective on human experience it depends on how well participants can articulate their thoughts and feelings. A critical approach can help unpack what he is saying and the choice of words he has used. We are never free of context, including participants and the researcher when interpreting data. Heidegger (1993) affords a link with phenomenology and poststructuralism. He suggests that we are largely unaware of the background context from which our interpretations of experience and how we experience the world are built, and which influence how we make sense of the world. Being never free of context, we are always *amid* in the world.

In negotiating the strengths and limitations of both approaches it made sense to complement the phenomenological standpoint with a poststructural perspective, in order to draw on broader societal discourse of what it might mean to experience male childlessness. Drawing on the phenomenological subjective accounts of experiences and providing insights into how childless men ‘know’ the world around them,
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facilitates exploration of the links between the micro-processes of individual experience and the macro-structures within society.

The way in which the two theoretical approaches frame the research aims and questions is by respecting qualitative accounts of human experience. Both approaches acknowledge participants’ knowing and understanding of the phenomenon of childlessness from how they have experienced it. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) remind researchers that individual meaning-making requires the inclusive consideration of critical theory, particularly how phenomena and experience are institutionalised to exert a powerful influence on meaning-making. Philosophical assumptions driving methodological decisions need to be outlined and made transparent in terms of how the findings were produced and how the study is evaluated, so that the research is not criticised for appearing to use a relaxed, free-floating method (Parker, 2007a). In order to understand multiple meanings from the men’s experiences of not producing offspring, we need to unpack meanings, assumptions and knowledge systems. History, in terms of individual men reflecting on their lives, is emphasised in order to analyse and understand descriptive, yet interpreted concepts, and to be understood by readers in the present.
Chapter 4: Methodology to method

‘Ways of seeing ways of being ...’ (Willig, 2001, p. 131)

4.1 Introduction

The aim for the current study was to select a research methodology that would lead to adopting a method—from methodology to method—that would generate the type of knowledge I wanted to explore; that would provide insights into the experiential lives of childless men and explore what shaped their meaning-making experiences. At the same time, I was mindful of Tuhawai Smith’s (2012) caution to researchers about the ways they desire, extract and claim ownership over ways of knowing, but also of Heidegger’s thinking that I needed to remain open to all possibilities of understanding. Lopez and Willis (2004, p.726) emphasise that ‘because assumptions drive methodological decision, the researcher should be cognisant of the values and claims associated with each approach before making a commitment to a choice of method’. The two analytical methods used were outlined in the previous theoretical chapter.

In this chapter the methodology frames the method that was undertaken for the current study. Firstly, the overall design of the research is outlined, which is then followed by a discussion on the ethics in conducting the study including a minor dilemma in pseudonym assignment to the participants. Ethics is then followed a discussion on the recruitment and demographics of the participants, a discussion on the method of data collection and the rationale for using semi-structured interviews. The methods of data analysis are then discussed, followed by a discussion on participant feedback, and what makes good qualitative research.

4.2 Overall design of the research

The overall design of the present research was formulated within a qualitative paradigm. Fundamentally, in qualitative research of this kind seeks a strategic and complex perspective on the phenomenon of male childlessness (Kidder & Fine, 1987; Lawthom & Tindall, 2011). The entirety of the present research is concerned with identifying insights into human subjective experience and how people negotiate and
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experience life, ‘the quality and texture of experience’ (Willig, 2013, p. 8). This asserts that the men interviewed, themselves are the key contributors to the development of understanding of the experiences and meanings attributed to the phenomenon of male childlessness. Attempting to gain the richest possible account of subjective experience from the participants ‘ultimately helps to strengthen the authenticity of the findings’ (Lawthom & Tindall, 2011, p. 13).

Although the number of childless men is not known, estimations indicate that the majority of men in Australia are producing offspring. When exploring and conveying gender nonconformity, participants in Wylie, Corliss, Boulanger, Prokop, and Austin’s (2010) study found it difficult to choose a single response to describe their perceptions and experiences, further validating the appropriateness of adopting a qualitative approach to existential experiences and phenomena. In the current study, participants were encouraged to tell their stories of experience in as much detail as they could, to ‘promote natural, spontaneous conversation’ (King et al., 2008, p. 84).

To help facilitate a deeper understanding of experience, qualitative research collaborates with people within their own natural settings, such as at home or at work. Thus individuals operate in subjective interpretative worlds, the organisation of which offers different versions of reality. Inherent in these more ‘open systems’ is recognition of ongoing changes in the development of conditions and interactions affecting the phenomenon of interest in everyday life.

A corollary to identifying phenomenological insights is the uncovering of discourses, the expectations and assumptions that influence the experiences of this group of individuals, and how language is used to embed or maintain that experience (Foucault, 1969; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). A critical and questioning approach to life and knowledge, not necessarily taking it at face value, can provide insights which may in turn develop new theory, challenge existing assumptions, or bring new language into being.

Methodological pluralism challenges the assumption that due to differences in qualitative methodologies, researchers need to choose between them or find one perspective better than another. Instead, it is argued by Frost (2009, 2011) and others that a pluralist approach can provide a multi-layered understanding of a phenomenon; a wider range of insights informing different aspects of human experience. A pluralist approach is based on the assumption that ‘there is not one single truth that can be discovered about something’ (Willig, 2013, p. 178). For the present research,
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phenomenological epistemology seeks to explore subjective experience and meaning, while a Foucauldian discursive approach explores the ‘action-orientation of language’ (Willig, 2013, p. 179), the influences of what resources are available to the men in how they articulate their experiences, offering insights into the relationship between discourse and subjectivity.

The design of the present research offers a more panoramic view of the phenomenon of male childlessness, taking Big Q methodology beyond using a myopic lens to view data (Curt, 1994; Frosh & Saville, 2008). It does not adopt a pluralist approach in terms of its purest form of analysing the same data using entirely different qualitative methods. Instead, it takes a more binocular approach (Frosh & Saville, 2008) where interpretations of the same data are conveyed through two lenses, pluralism in a moderate form. Caution, however, is exercised due to the complex, multi-faceted and often contradictory nature of human experience. In using more than one interpretative lens, conveying the nature and quality of human experience should not be simply smoothed over or considered to fully reflect or make complete sense of the phenomenon of interest (Frosh, 2007; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

The aim of the present research is to convey different aspects of interpretation in ways that are complementary to one another, and do not generate tension between methodologies (Willig, 2013). Combining or integrating a cycle of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) helps to explore the interplay between language, culture, and experience, and convey a more coherent understanding of the phenomenon of male childlessness.

As in all qualitative research, the importance of critical reflexivity in how I interpret and present participants’ experiences of male childlessness is maintained throughout the study (Parker, 2006). The research concludes with how the findings can be disseminated to other fields of interest, both academically and in practice. From ‘methodologies to method’ this qualitative approach taken in the current study allowed access to people’s subjective worlds and meanings. This access to marginalised and often hidden populations needed careful ethical consideration.
4.3 Ethics

*Ethics exist in our actions and in our ways of doing and practicing our research ... Ethics are integral to the way we think about rigour and are intertwined in our approach to research, in the way we ask questions, how we respond, and the way we reflect on the material.*  

*(Davies & Dodd, 2002, p. 281)*

Ethical research behaviour, ‘the ability to sense, judge, and act, in an ethically committed fashion’ (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008, p. 278) is vital to the integrity of the research at hand. It involves necessary guidelines—guidelines of informed consent, research transparency, participant confidentiality, the right of participants to withdraw from the research and the opportunity for feedback—and is also important because ‘human interaction in qualitative research affects both the researcher and the participants, and the knowledge produced affects our understanding of the phenomenon’ (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008, p. 263). Forming part of the research design is the desire to create positive benefits for the participants, while also recognising potential social impacts the findings may have on each participant (van Dijk, 1987). Ethical implications, therefore, are also inherent in the dissemination of the findings (Willig, 2013). Thus, choosing suitable vehicles for the publication of research findings will be considered carefully. I was very mindful of my own ethical research behaviour, and aimed to remain ethically attuned throughout the research process.

Procedures for the research (field work of recruitment and interviews) began upon approval by Charles Sturt University’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (Appendix A). An amendment was made in order to develop a brief invitation script for participation when using social media for recruitment (Appendix B). Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis and participants were treated according to the guidelines of the Australian Psychological Society (Australian Psychological Society, 2007). HREC-approved written consent (Appendix C) was sought from each participant after he had read and understood the nature of the study as outlined in the Information Sheet (Appendix D). This enabled participants to understand the process they were entering into, and how the information might be
used and anonymity would be ensured. The extent to which anonymity is assured varies with each research study.

**4.3.1 Anonymity of participants and the dilemma of pseudonym assignment**

In qualitative research, assigning participants a pseudonym helps to facilitate anonymity and develop a sense of personalisation and respect for each individual participating. Pseudonyms can also help the reader become familiar with the participants through their quotes. The pseudonym is either chosen by the participant himself or left to the researcher to choose for him.

In this particular study, however, the assignment of a pseudonym by either the participant or myself as the researcher became a dilemma. While most men preferred me as the researcher to choose any pseudonym for them, a couple of men chose a name for themselves, a couple were comfortable with their own name being used, and one man expressed concern that a name might identify him.

The core of the dilemma, albeit mild, was mostly associated with personal meanings of names and what names, other than their own, meant to the participant and to me. Congruent with contextualising concepts of ‘shared meaning’ and how knowledge is constructed, a few men found themselves pondering subjective meanings of names. From a critical point of view, the assignment of another name seemed to be perceived as a form of deconstructing and reconstructing identities. To some extent this dilemma was a surprise, and to my knowledge the dilemma of impressions associated with names used in pseudonym assignment is not mentioned in other studies. A parallel that could be drawn is the case of parents choosing a name for their newborn child and discussing subjective meanings and judgements of each name. Albeit a minor dilemma, the *renaming* of participants raised questions around the level to which researchers need to heed and respect individual sensitivities of identity; familial, social, and gender. Given that the men volunteered to participate in the study, pseudonyms were ultimately assigned to safeguard their anonymity.
4.3.2 Collaborative agreement to participate – information, consent, and anonymity

The notion of collaboration begins with recruitment and continues throughout the research process. Adjunct to the recruitment process is the process of collaborative agreement and understanding between the researcher and potential participants. As the men were the producers of their knowledge of childlessness, and therefore provided the data for the study by offering various ways of illustrating their experiences of childlessness, my aim was to work collaboratively and respectfully with them. The men needed to feel as though their contributions were valued, and developing a level of rapport with them helped in establishing the collaborative foundations of the research.

To understand the details of the research, all potential participants were given an information sheet that outlined it. If they were unsure or felt uneasy about the questions they would be asked, they were given an example of the type of question to expect. They were also able to contact me by phone or at my university email address with any questions. When participation criteria were met, verbal or emailed consent was provided at first and then formal written consent was sought at the time of meeting before the interview commenced. The provided consent was valid for the second interview. The men were also told that they could choose to withdraw from the research project at any time up until the time of writing. All the men that became participants decided to continue with the research. Anonymity, as discussed in subsection 4.3.1, was part of the collaborative process in terms of the participants seeking anonymity and my agreement to ensure it. These conditions were also part of the ethics approval process.

4.4 Participant members of the research

4.4.1 Criteria for participation

To enable the inclusion of a wide range of backgrounds the criteria for inclusion in the research were:

- any man aged over 50 years
- self identified as being ‘childless’
- having no biological offspring that he knew of.

Participation in the research was on a voluntary basis and by men who had not participated my Honours dissertation. In view of the aims of the study and the collaborative process of generating credible findings with the researcher, participants were recognised as integral members of the qualitative research design.

### 4.4.2 Recruitment of participants

For qualitative psychological research to be informative, a range of individual experience is paramount. Although participants share the same phenomenon, they do not necessarily share the same experience. Hence, a heterogeneous sample was sought. As discussed in Chapter two, the experiential lives of childless males remain somewhat hidden, and recruiting childless men can be difficult at times (Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Oliffe & Mróz, 2005; Throsby & Gill, 2004), especially when exploring sensitive topics (Berg, 2007). Although this may not be the case for all studies, the potential was well appreciated for the present research when deciding which techniques were employed to recruit participants.

Having set criteria for a specific cohort of men meant that not all men in the Australian population were able to participate in the study. Therefore, *purposive non-probability* sampling methods were employed. However, as Neuman (2011) suggests, there are times when using an *adaptive sampling technique* is necessary. This requires ‘creative application’ of sampling principles and non-probability techniques (p. 270), which can more effectively tap into potentially hidden populations.

The key recruitment method was the Snowball Method (Neuman, 2011); not in its specific definition of asking participants to refer other potential participants so that the recruitment of participants ‘snowballs’, but instead applied in an adaptive way that assisted in the recruitment of potential participants. Neuman (2011) and Oliffe and Mróz (2005) suggest that referral through a third party can initially be a way to establish a degree of trust and rapport between the researcher and the participant. Yet, as was found in an earlier recruitment process, childless men can be reluctant to refer other childless men. Moreover, childless men, in particular single childless men, tend
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to have relatively small social networks and do not necessarily network together, which is not helpful for obtaining a snowball sample in its purest definition.

The reasons some men gave for reluctance to refer other men were a little unclear. Some men claimed that the subject was ‘too personal’ or ‘it was not their business’. One participant commented that he had a friend who was ‘desperate’ to have children, and in a joking manner said he would tell his friend that he had participated and that his friend ‘was a sissy’ if he wouldn’t agree to participate. His friend did not contact me. It is interesting to note at this point the way in which the man used humour and a macho manner when discussing referring other men for the study. It raises the question of whether women would respond in a similar manner around the topic of childlessness and referring someone else of the same gender.

What became an effective third party measure, however, were the referrals that came from women, as some men were referred, incidentally, by women. For example, one man ‘was told’ by his wife to participate, and it was suggested by a female friend to another man that he ‘should do it’. But mostly, it was women who simply offered to ask a known childless man if they would be interested in participating in the study. One explanation for this could be that women are still traditionally viewed as being—either naturally or in a constructed sense—‘safer’, less judgemental, and less threatening for men regarding personal sensitive topics (Arendell, 1997; Horn, 1997; Lee, 1997; Pini, 2005). Although it is only two instances—my Honours dissertation research and the present study—it is interesting to note that, in line with Chapter Two it appeared more ‘acceptable’ to be referred by a female into the study, highlighting gender roles and women as ‘gatekeepers’ of reproduction14 (Schoppe-Sullivan, Cannon, Brown, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowski, 2008).

Other forms of ‘third party’ adaptation used for recruitment were via the support of the Australian Men’s Shed Association (AMSA)—an organisation that supports all men, bringing them together to work on various projects and help prevent social isolation (see AMSA website for more information)—a radio interview, and

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14 Circumstances of ‘gatekeeping’ by women, allowing or not allowing their male partners and friends to talk about the experience of being childless, resonates with similar findings in my Honours dissertation (Lawrence-Bourne, 2012). For example, one woman who had majority male corporate clients informed me that none of the men would be interested in talking about their experiences of childlessness. Women ‘gatekeeping’ male inclusion in reproductive discussions will be addressed in Chapter 7.
Facebook contacts, all of which helped to recruit participants. Adapting different methods for the recruitment of male participants has been effective in other studies (Singleton, 2005). Participants who worked in areas of men’s health passed on the invitation to participate through their work and client email contacts. Referring to Neuman’s Snowball Method in its pure form, these childless men were referring other childless men on a professional level and not on a personal level, which seemed to mitigate the social barriers to men referring other men. On reflection, adapting the snowball method for recruitment reflected the AMSA motto: ‘men don’t talk face to face they talk shoulder to shoulder’ (as cited by Australian Men’s Shed Association, n.d.). In turn, referrals through women became the most effective adaptation to the snowball method for recruitment.

In addition, another type of non-probability sampling, self-selection sampling, became necessary. Within non-probability samples there can be times where the researcher needs to select participants. Men may want to participate for legitimate reasons (De Souza & Ciclitira, 2005; Seymour-Smith, 2008), but this may not always be appropriate. In the present context there were two potential participants who really wanted to be members of the study. The first was a man involuntarily childless due to infertility and unsuccessful IVF. However, he was under the age of 50, and therefore his request to participate was necessarily declined (but as requested, he would be contacted with the findings of the study when completed, given his stated concern about the ‘lack of discussion on the topic’ of male childlessness). The second was a man who identified himself as childless. However, when the interview commenced he explained that he was ‘not sure’ if he had a genetic connection with a child. Men not really knowing if they have a child can become a conundrum, not least for the recruitment of ‘childless’ men in the current context.

As the man was not sure if he had a child, his identification as being ‘childless’ provided a reason for me to invite him to participate. On the grounds of his input potentially providing valuable and important insights into the experience of male childlessness, I decided to continue the interview. Forming part of the inquiry in this research is a desire to explore the phenomenon of male childlessness and the diversity in experiences and meanings of not producing offspring. Being adaptive in the recruitment process helped me to obtain a wider range of individual experience and thereby helped to establish the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.
Although previous authors have noted difficulty in recruiting men for studies exploring sensitive topics (Berg, 2007; Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Jensen, 2016; Throsby & Gill, 2004), it was less evident in this study. Reasons for not participating are more difficult to understand; reasons were not often given, and emails and contacts via intermediaries were not responded to. A total of three men decided not to participate in the study. Two married men decided not to participate in the study. The first alluded to a reluctance to raise the topic again and resurface negative emotions. The second married man commented that he would feel guilty talking about being (biologically) childless when he had adopted children. Jensen’s (2016) explanation that participating may seem irrelevant for some men who did not want children. This was the case for the present study with one single man who told me the topic was irrelevant because he did not want children. For those that did participate in the study, two partnered men commented that their wife/partner would not approve of them talking about it. Other explanations may involve stereotypical viewpoints that men do not want to talk about, or are not capable of talking about personal topics. Yet the converse was found in the current study. Reasons for not participating in a study are not usually addressed. Yet motives can reveal ways in which other non-participating men are living with childlessness, their lived experience.

4.4.3 Demographic information of participant members

Men aged between 50 and 75 years participated in the study. Although men potentially have a longer reproductive span than women, the age criterion was informed by survey data showing that the percentage of men who remain childless tends to plateau from around the mid-forties (Gray, 2002). In casual parlance and given the propensity to live longer lives, the age of 49 is approximately mid-life or more accurately mid-adulthood. Rowland (2007) observed that demographic figures for female childlessness often refer to the cohort aged 45–49 years, for the obvious reason that very few women have children at older ages. Including men from the age of 50 helps to compare and contrast findings in past and future studies of how women experience everyday life having not produced offspring.

Other demographic information emerged during the interviews revealing a diverse range of work and social backgrounds. Work environments of the men
interviewed included those who worked as professionals, tradespeople, in management, education, finance, agriculture, and the arts; and from having one stable job all their lives to moving through a series of jobs with long periods of being unemployed. Two men had high socioeconomic status, two were on social benefits, and the remainder were financially in between. For reasons of relevance and safeguarding their anonymity, other demographic details are not included in Table 1. Of the 23 men, 20 were heterosexual, and 3 men were homosexual. Cultural backgrounds of four participants included Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. To my knowledge none of the men had Asian or Indigenous cultural backgrounds. Although seven men were currently raising non-genetic children two other men have had non-genetic children in their lives with a previous partner, leaving 14 men who have never raised children. Participants represented all the states of Australia except for the Northern Territory, as there were no respondents from this area of Australia.

From the outset, it was explained to the men that they would not be asked why they had not produced offspring. However, reasons for not doing so would often emerge as the interview discussions progressed, and with varying degrees of detail. Reasons why they had not produced offspring included choosing not to; having a partner who did not want children; remaining single, divorced or widowed; unsuccessful IVF and other reproductive treatments; ‘having children’ as a low priority; wife/partner had a pregnancy terminated, took the ‘morning after pill’ and/or had suspected miscarriages (although not all men were sure of this). Reasons for not having children spanned a complex mix of desire, choice and life circumstances.
Table 1. Demographics of Participants (in alphabetical order)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Member</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Heterosexual</th>
<th>Gay</th>
<th>Single (no current partner)</th>
<th>In a long term relationship / married</th>
<th>Major urban city</th>
<th>Regional/ Rural Town</th>
<th>Remote/ Farming/ Island</th>
<th>Definitely Wanted Children?</th>
<th>Raising/caring for non-genetically related children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Adam</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1 x adopted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Alastair</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3 x defacto stepchildren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Andrew</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Anthony</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Brendan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Charlie</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ [divorced]</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3 x defacto stepchildren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Colin</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Craig</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. David</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Felix</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Harry</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ [widowed]</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Partner’s 10yr old son</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Jack</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Luke</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Stepchildren &amp; grandchildren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Martin</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Mick</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Stepchildren &amp; grandchildren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Noel</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2 x adopted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Paul</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3 older defacto stepchildren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Peter</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Richard</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Robert</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Stepchildren &amp; grandchildren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Russell</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3 older defacto stepchildren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Simon</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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| 23. William | 75 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | no |
4.5 Data collection

Data collection predominantly involved interviews with the men, but also included field notes and any participant feedback. Communication with the men involved emails, phone calls, text messages, and one Skype. I asked each man how he would prefer to be contacted. Some men preferred to be contacted only during work hours, while others preferred an email or a text message and they would then return my call. It was observed that the researcher-participant dynamic would improve when there was direct face-to-face or voice contact with the participants. This was not necessarily from a gender perspective but more that the men could develop a sense of the researcher, who is ‘researching’ a personal topic such as reproduction. As was to be expected, different forms of communication suited different men. If for example, one man was more forthcoming in a particular form of communication, it then encouraged/enabled us to continue communicating in that manner. (The researcher-participant gender dynamic is also discussed in section 7.2.2).

4.5.1 Interviews

Interviewing participants is one of the most powerful and widely used methods of generating qualitative data, making it an important research tool (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Patton, 2002; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). However, there needs to be context to be able to explore the meaning of an experience (Patton, 2002). It is argued that a good interview can provide access to how a participant perceives his world through the complex milieu of context and experience (Burman, 1994), ‘laying open thoughts, feelings, and knowledge’ (Patton, 2002, p. 353), not only to the researcher but also for the participant.

Finding language to express thoughts, feelings and experiences, however, can be difficult. This is not only because it may be a sensitive topic; it can also be difficult if participants have not yet had the opportunity to develop language to describe their experiences. Not everyone can articulate well what they are thinking and feeling. Put simply, the everyday person can only express his everyday experience using his everyday words; laying open the experience of childlessness in different voices that can be heard by other people. The extent of being able to lay open one’s experience therefore depends on what access to language resources the participant has had; an
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important point for me to bear in mind when analysing the data. Access to language and language use can thus empower or constrain how people express themselves (Billig, 2008; Cromby, 2007), and what emanates from various discourses. Moreover, regarding the use and effect of language, interviews can be thought about in terms of the interconnection between two people in a conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Schön, 1983). The notion here is that the inter-action of the inter-view emphasises the circular interplay of the way in which the researcher and the participant are having a conversation with the research topic; as language is actioned by the other person’s responsive views. Subsequently, the voice of experience then materialises, a material existence by which the participant negotiates the way in which his account is constructed and which voice is enabled and disenabled as particular accounts emerge in the conversation; coproducing data. It is on this premise that during interviews there was an emphasis on the nuances of what was said, and the construction of the narrative and information between the interviewer and the interviewee was noted.

In reference to Hollway and Jefferson (2000), the interview process was enacted as a vehicle for the research process, emphasising two key concepts of importance for the current study. The first concept involves free association, whereby the participant is invited to say whatever comes to mind. When each man is free to structure his own narrative it is assumed that ‘unconscious connections will be revealed through the links that [he] makes’ (p. 315). The second concept involves Gestalt, in terms of eliciting and understanding the whole; how participants, at the time of interview, converge different parts of their experience of childlessness as a contribution to revealing more about their lives as their meaning frame, their gestalt, emerges.

According to Hollway and Jefferson (2008, p.307) there are four key strategies for eliciting narratives and ‘the production of the participants’ meaning frame, or gestalt’: 1) using open-ended questions so as to impose as little structure as possible; 2) with a psychosocial perspective, eliciting indexicality of accounts [the features of the language used to specifically account for the context of male childless experiences] that have actually happened can be enlightening in terms of content and the chronological order in which accounts are narrated; 3) avoiding the ‘why’ question where possible, because it elicits an ‘intellectualisation’ and the response can be ‘uninformative’ in terms of the research question; and 4) in order to elicit further narratives, follow-up questions should be constructed by using the participant’s
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ordering and phrasing, thereby respecting and retaining the participant’s meaning frames and requiring attentive listening by the interviewer.

A central tenet of Hollway and Jefferson’s interviewing method is that people’s lives have a biographically unique reality, which is largely constructed and mobilised at an unconscious level. The authors describe this mobilisation as a defended subject, which is believed to have a significant influence on the way people live, their behaviour and relationships (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, 2013). As psychosocial beings, frames of reproduction and being childless may change over the lifespan out of necessity, choice and circumstances, and cognisant of the aforementioned recognition of the ongoing changes in development of conditions and interactions affecting the phenomenon in everyday life. How men feel reproductive may or may not be congruent with perceptions held earlier in life and may be at a more subconscious level. Consequently, as defended subjects, ways in which participants interacted with the topic of childlessness and talked with me on this topic, the way they used language—contradictions, disfluency, metaphors, word-choice—and the way language positioned them as subjects in discourse, such as within biology and reproduction discourse, was considered carefully during the analysis of the men’s narratives.

As suggested by different authors, as the interviews commenced a good opening question that was formulated around the aims of the research became an effective strategy to invite expansive responses from the participants (Hayes, 2000; Hollway & Jefferson, 2008). As I was interested in initial responses to the topic of childlessness, my opening question was: ‘When you think back to when you were first contacted about this research project, tell me about your first reaction’. With this question I wanted to elicit a raw unsolicited response, which became an effective starting point to our conversation. The question allowed men to say whatever they wanted to say, which helped to open up free associative links to say something else, and thereafter the interview progressed. In the event of some men initially being reluctant to talk, by way of a monosyllabic response or a shrug, I followed up with another question. For example: ‘Could you tell me what’s it like not to have children?’ Even though I had reiterated the nature of the interview—it was not a survey with a long list of specific questions—a couple of men seemed to indicate that that was what they wanted, because they thought they had nothing to say. The converse was evident. Finding an aspect of the topic that they were comfortable
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talking about opened up other experiences, conveyed in a few sentences by some men and elaborated in detail by others. Most of the men talked about experiences that they never thought they would talk about before or had never talked about; emphasising the effectiveness of the guiding strategies from Hollway and Jefferson, underpinned by the concepts of free association and gestalt, in producing insights into the phenomenon of male childlessness. To close the interview, a more neutral question was asked: ‘Is there anything else you would like other men to know about your experience of not producing children?’

For all interviews Willig (2008, p. 25) cautions ‘sensitive and ethical negotiation’ of rapport. To help men establish rapport, and recount the stories of their experiences of childlessness, the interview would thus begin with what would seem appropriate for them. The interview approach taken was in general guided by the participant, rather than following the exact order of scheduled questions (see Patton, 2002). Some participants waited for the opening question, whereas a couple wanted to say something right from the outset. Being flexible helped with the flow of the interview and participants’ reflection on their experiences.

Interviews are a reflective process for the interviewee (Patton 2002). In the current study participants often left the interviews more aware of things about themselves, and unintentionally, the interview process became an intervention for them. In this light, participants were invited to also participate in a second interview to focus on concrete aspects of their present experiences. As participants talk they impart meaning (Seidman, 2005), and therefore subsequent interviews offered them the opportunity to be more reflective on their experiences and to provide fuller and richer descriptions of their childlessness (Polkinghorne, 2005; Seidman, 2005). Some participated in a second face-to-face interview, others by phone due to distance and time, a couple by email for reasons of time constraints, and one man declined saying he had said enough. I sensed a couple of men had recoiled from what they had talked about in their first interviews, in response to which anonymity was reassured.

No interview is completely unstructured because the researcher decides on the initial topic of the research conversation and broad-strokes the line of inquiry (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Runswick-Cole, 2011). In what may appear similar to semi-structured interviews, a narrative approach maintains a focus on the unstructured aspect of the interview, further refining the purpose of the interview. Acquiring high quality narrative for in-depth analysis contributes to a better
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understanding of how the concepts of childlessness and reproduction are incorporated within the lives of childless men. Following a pilot interview with a childless man who did not want to participate in the study but offered to discuss the questions, resulted in rewording of some of the questions and additional questions (if needed) were developed and adopted when required (Appendix E).

Interviews (field work) began upon approval from the University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and recruitment of the first participant. Data collection finished with the completion of the 23rd interview\textsuperscript{15}. Interviews were held at a venue chosen by the participant. However, to avoid potential issues of indecipherable recordings, participants were asked if they could choose somewhere quiet. Hence interviews were held in the homes of participants or in private interview rooms at the work place such as an office boardroom, a quiet room at a university, a school library, and three interviews were held in the business centre (or similar) of hotels. Choosing somewhere quiet and with fewer distractions also enhanced the opportunity for engagement and participation during the interview conversation. Due to a time constraint and difficulty of access to participant location, one interview was conducted via Skype. All interviews were digitally recorded, lasting 1 to 1½ hours and transcribed verbatim. Each participant was offered his transcript to confirm that it was an accurate record of his experience. Some men declined this offer, commenting that they did not want to know what they had said.

To overcome potential concerns and difficulties over being interviewed, I offered to provide an example of the interview questions to the men in advance. This was primarily so they could gain a general sense of what type of questions would be asked to allay anxieties about the interview (Oliffe & Mróz, 2005), but I also found that it allowed the men time to give the topic some thought. Furthermore, I ensured that no-one else would join us during the interview, including partners. Although it might have seemed obvious to some men that this should not happen, a few other men seemed relieved. Interviewing without partners being present has been found to provide a greater sense of anonymity, enabling men to talk about a wider range of lived experiences (Malik & Coulson, 2008; Singleton, 2005; Throsby & Gill, 2004). This resonated in the current study, where the men felt that they could express their thoughts more freely; demonstrating the need for appropriate space in order for men

\textsuperscript{15} Please note that while the interviews had finished contact by the participants was made afterwards, and is discussed in the ‘epilogue’ at the end of thesis.
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to feel comfortable to express their emotions and experiences honestly. As a result, the men’s narratives yielded richer data on the lived experiences of biological childlessness.

4.5.2 Qualitative research and the dilemma of saturation

Although qualitative research is usually associated with a small number of participants, Neuman (2011, p. 267) points out that it is not pragmatic to recruit ‘all possible cases that fit particular criteria’. It is generally considered, however, that data collection should cease when saturation is reached, when no new insights can be extracted. Many authors question whether saturation is possible, because the next interview might reveal new and interesting insights for the study (Bowen, 2008; Hayes, 2000). Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006, p. 65) argue that the aim should be a ‘reliable sense of thematic exhaustion and variability’; simply put, adapting the sample to include the ‘maximum variation’ possible (Patton, 1989). In other words, the aim is to attain as much quality as reasonably possible, so that the goal is to purposively sample the widest possible variation of experiences within the limits of the research (Seidman, 2005).

While what constitutes ‘saturation’ is somewhat still under discussion, the endeavour of the current research was to explore a range of experiences, with emphasis on the quality of the data, and less emphasis on the quantity. Guided by Neuman it therefore made sense that the goal was to sample purposively, the widest variation of experiences within the limits of the research (Patton, 1989; Seidman, 2005). By limitations I mean the findings being particularly salient for the sample of men who are comfortable to talk about their experiences of a sensitive topic. Thus, the findings are limited to the men who have volunteered to participate in the study. Different forms of recruitment helped to extend and diversify the sample, in pursuing the acquisition of a heterogeneous sample (Gibbs & Flick, 2007), resulting in the recruitment of 23 men. It might be well noted here that in keeping with qualitative findings, the experiences of these 23 individual men are not aimed to be representative of a larger sample size of childless men within the Australian population.
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4.6 Initial interpretations of the research data and methods of analysis

All interviews were transcribed within a couple of days of each interview. I transcribed the interviews myself, as this process provided valuable immersion into the data. I was able to take note of initial thoughts and impressions, which became useful for deeper analysis later. Journal entries were handwritten field notes (Appendix I) of my observations and thoughts following each interview. They are not considered to be comprehensive or conclusive, but instead, served as subjective reflections of my impressions at the time. At times I referred back to my notes to remind me of impressions or initial thoughts.

While transcribing relevant text, of anything that each man had said that I thought might be valuable for later analysis was highlighted. I attached any additional notes to each transcript accordingly. This initial process also helped in reflecting upon collaboration in data gathering. For example, whether my discussion and my use of language was at a level appropriate for each man, to stimulate his engagement and participation.

The main focus of the analyses was the transcripts of the discussions with the men. Other materials such as my reflections upon my observations and field diary notes were small yet valuable contributions. When the final interview was transcribed, the initial notes and highlighted texts were then formulated onto a mind map, with a whiteboard used to begin grouping my observations, thoughts and impressions. Each transcript was re-read multiple times, which helped create familiarity with the data. As groupings developed, pen and paper were used to map, and re-map, evolving themes, sets of meanings and discourses, with interconnecting arrows indicating how these aspects of subjective experiences were interwoven into their narratives; the connections and disconnections.

The data were first explored with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analytical (IPA) lens, asking questions such as: ‘What is the everyday experience of being childless for these men as lived by them?’ and ‘What does being childless mean to them?’ As I was re-reading the transcripts and taking notes, it became apparent that there was more that underpinned the data. Here, by chance, was a fortuitous opportunity to interpret the data in another way: to not only look at the meaning, but also to become cognisant of the dominant discourses that were ‘emerging’. Following consultation with my supervisor, it was evident that the findings of the study would
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benefit from subjecting the data to Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). Consequently, a second exploratory approach was undertaken using an FDA lens.

IPA and FDA are not mutually exclusive, as they both offer perspectives on human experience. The dual approach can be complementary in understanding phenomena, rather than becoming two separate studies (Lawthom & Tindall, 2011). There are relatively few studies that combine IPA with discourse analysis. One example is a British by Johnson, Burrows, and Williamson (2004), which combines IPA with FDA to explore women’s experiences of changing body image when pregnant. The authors interviewed six women in the third trimester, the latter third months of pregnancy. They found that IPA can ‘reveal aspects of personal and collective lived experience but FDA reveals how background practices, processes and social structures present in the accounts shape experience’ (p. 371). Evident from this paper is that by combining methods such as IPA and FDA it can increase our understanding of human experience, rather than using a single perspective. For the present study, IPA and FDA can be used to help explore how ‘male childlessness’ is constructed and the implications of those constructions for lived experience. Aligning with introductory ideas of praxis and research in action, the present process was organic and dynamic. The plural analytical combination made sense for analysis of the present study.

4.6.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method

Steps taken for analysis drew on guidelines from Smith and Osborn (2008). Cognisant with interpretative in-depth thematic analysis, IPA was a dynamic and recursive process (Hollway & Jefferson, 2008), involving re-reading transcripts and looking for themes that reflected how this sample of men had experienced childlessness.

I have tried not using the terms emerging or identifying themes. This is because these two words can assume the themes existed as fixed truths and were there for me to find. Each conversation with the men took its own unique pathway. The way I have interpreted the men’s experiential accounts may be different to what another researcher analysing the data would have produced.

After transcribing all the interviews, I re-read and re-highlighted particular comments that stood out as pertinent to the research questions relating to how
childlessness was experienced by these men. Bringing my initial notes together with the highlighted portions of the transcripts, I then re-read each transcript again, this time annotating preliminary themes down the righthand side of the transcript. After identifying broad themes, I brought all the comments together under each developing theme and transferred them onto pen and paper mind maps and tables (examples shown in Appendix F). Human experience is complex, and so it was not surprising that aspects of various themes overlapped. With so many themes mind maps helped me to organise, condense and interpret a more succinct group of superordinate themes. Subsequently, and with multiple re-reads of the transcripts, I interpreted four key aspects of the men’s experiential accounts of being ‘childless’—the four superordinate themes are outlined and discussed in the following Chapter 5.

Although these themes were interpreted from more readily accessed transcript data, a ‘latent theme was constructed late in the analysis, as it required deeper interpretation at a conceptual level. The construction of themes was not necessarily based on their prevalence within the data, but on how each of the themes helped illuminate the experience of childlessness, upon which the method of the second analytical lens was applied to the data.

4.6.2 Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) ‘method’

Foucault did not necessarily prescribe a method of doing analysis, commenting that he ‘take[s] care not to dictate how things should be’ (Foucault, 1994, p. 288). Wetherall (2001) emphasises that tensions can arise between doing poststructural analysis and satisfying the conventions of academic writing. With no universal truth(s), the aim is not to substitute one truth for another. According to Wetherall, analysis is always interpretative. The objective is to consider not whether male childlessness is true, but how childless individuals and their understanding of childlessness are formed. FDA helps to ‘map the systems of formation’; how the group is seen or known as a concern (Scheurich, 1997, p. 107).

Foucault’s theories and understanding of discourses and elaborations by Parker (1992) and others informed my approach for this part of the analysis. Foucault does not claim that analysis establishes a truth, nor did he prescribe exact steps in this type of analysis; hence the inverted commas around ‘method’. There are no set rules, procedures, or method to conduct FDA (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Hook,
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2001). However, as Parker (1999) emphasises while remaining sensitive to language, there needs to be a point at which an appropriate method is arrived at. The interpretative activity that is needed when engaging with the transcripts is considered to be more important than the methodological steps in analysis.

For the purpose of the present research, an important aspect of a Foucauldian approach is to deconstruct dominant paradigms that have the potential to reduce power that can be problematic for some people without offspring. Within this approach it is not assumed that a reality can be described. Instead, the aim is to question and thereby explore people’s sense of reality and what influences their construction of truth and reality, and the truths that have been taken for granted. This form of discourse analysis focuses on written and spoken interpersonal interactions, engaging discourse at a significant level. To reiterate some aspects, discourses are sets of meaning from which objects and subjects are constructed, and which create the opportunity for power through processes such as shaping, regulating, and normalising (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982; Foucault, 1980; Willig, 1999).

Fundamental to discourse analysis is the exploration of the contradictory, the unexpected, what is different in what is said (Parker, 2005a). Furthermore, observing the actions, ways of speaking and behaviour of the men who enact and consolidate the phenomenon of male childlessness and the common understanding of reproduction (Butler, 1997). There is a focus on the interjection of the concept of norm and how it is used to control people, evaluate and exclude those who do not conform to normal categories of values and practices (Foucault, 1980, 1982). Through what is said by the men and how it is said, Davies and Harre (1999) add that:

Once having taken up a particular position as one’s own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned’. (p. 35)

In order to explore the relationship between language and subjectivity, I drew guidance from Willig (2013), and Arribas-Ayllon and Wakerdine (2008). In undertaking FDA, Arribas-Ayllon and Wakerdine (2008) focus on three broad dimensions: 1) Historical inquiry or ‘geneology’; 2) The mechanisms of power and
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the functional effects of power; and 3) Subjectification, meaning the way subjects (individuals) are formed and their subjective experiences. I have outlined both and, as can be seen, they overlap. I have intentionally included both approaches to demonstrate that, even though Foucault did not specifically prescribe a method of ‘doing’ FDA, there are common ways of approaching FDA (see Box 2):

Box 2: Two approaches to FDA as ‘method’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Select statements</td>
<td>1. Identify the discursive construction, the discursive object. Look for both implicit and explicit references, not necessarily the keywords.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How discursive objects and practices are made problematic, and how this becomes visible and ‘knowable’. Often occurring at the intersection of different discourses, exposing ‘knowledge/power’ relations</td>
<td>2. Explore the different ways in which the constructive object is constructed, and locate the different forms of construction in wider discourses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Identifying the technologies, or the practical forms of rationality of the government of self and of others. As part of the four technologies that form a ‘matrix of practical reason’ [Foucault 1988 p 18], Foucault focuses on the external [such as knowledge, buildings, spaces, other people] technologies which include the power to govern human conduct from a distance, and internal technologies whereby humans seek to govern their own conduct themselves; the interaction of oneself with others—resonating with intersubjectivity (Hollway &amp; Jefferson, 2008)—and how power is exercised over oneself in the technology of the self. For example, conversation is an act of accomplishing or performing something—resonant with the performance of language (Butler, 1997)</td>
<td>3. Explore what is gained or achieved by the action of the way in which the object is constructed, meaning, what is the orientation of the action of a particular construction?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Subject positions of people through the cultural discourses available to them</td>
<td>4. Explore and identify what subject positions the constructions offer to the participants, what subject positions are offered from which to speak and act.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Subjectification in terms of how people fashion and transform themselves ethically, such as attaining happiness, and feeling good about their lives—by exploring through which practices and authority subjectification operates.</td>
<td>5. Explore the relationship between discourse and subjectivity and the way it develops a person’s social and psychological sense of ‘reality’. How does this influence the ways-of-seeing the world and ways-of-being in the world? What can be said and done from within the different discourses? Furthermore, consider the consequences of taking up such subject positions within their experiences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Given the importance of institutional discourse within the Foucauldian approach, government and social (dis)interest and policies were also considered in my analysis. This enables questions to be asked about the relationship between discourse and subjectivity, and discourse and practice. A corollary to this was questioning how the phenomenon of ‘male childlessness’ came to be, locating the topic in time and history (Parker, 1992). Moreover, questioning how it came to be elaborated, reified, and considered to be (un)natural and abnormal. Upon re-reading the transcripts the data revealed eight discourses that reflected how childlessness and reproduction were constructed for, and by the men —the discourse are outlined and discussed in Chapter 6.

4.7 Participant member feedback

All the men in the study expressed interest in its findings; mostly they appeared curious about the views of other childless men. Each participant was contacted to confirm that he would like to be sent the summary letter and all men confirmed. I then sent to each participant a summary letter of the general findings of the study to help validate those findings (Appendix E). Participants responded positively, with some adding further comments (Appendix F), which helped to verify the findings. Acknowledging and providing feedback to the summary letter was voluntary; two participants did not respond to the letter. Feedback or reporting back to participants is never a one-off exercise or a task that can be signed off on completion of a written report. It may be easier for researchers to simply hand out a report, but it contradicts the philosophy of collaboration and the sharing of knowledge (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

4.8 Good qualitative research

A trustworthy study is one that is carried out fairly and ethically and whose findings represent as closely as possible the experiences of the respondents ... Trustworthiness is not a matter of blind faith, it must be demonstrated.

(Padgett, 2008, p. 184)
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What is considered to be good research has been drawn from understandings of critical psychology. One key point is that the findings from research are often obscured due to the way the message is couched in academic writing, which does little to raise awareness more widely within society (Fox et al., 2009). Good research, therefore, needs to be accessible to the reader. The way in which qualitative research often studies people’s subjective experiences first hand, and subsequently explores meanings and interpretations that people develop in their lives, requires a shift away from, or a re-translation of terms, that are traditionally associated with quantitative research. For example, instead of rigour, Davies and Dodd (2002, p. 288) suggest the use of other words, such as ‘empathy, carefulness, sensitivity, respect, honesty, reflection, conscientiousness, engagement, awareness, openness, (and) context’. Yet qualitative research still needs to be evaluated in a way that demonstrates the validity and trustworthiness of the findings (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Rigour, therefore, also involves key components such as credibility and authenticity, dependability and confirmability of the findings being drawn from the data (Liamputtong, 2013).

One of the strategies to help improve the rigour of the present research was to have as much engagement with the participants as possible, such as through follow-up questions and conversations. Having more communication with the participants helped to build trust and rapport with each of them, which then helped in eliciting honesty in their responses and communication. Moreover, having access to the lived experience of childless men also helped to avoid criticism that academic endeavour is too removed from the everyday lives of people (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Thus, in compatibility with the present epistemological and ontological foundations of the research—the assumption that there are multiple realities that people interpret, construct and give meaning to from within their own contexts—credibility requires as authentic and accurate as possible representations of their experiences (Chilisa, 2012). In line with member checking, another strategy was to provide participants with a letter outlining my preliminary analysis and findings. As subjective and constructed realities cannot be measured, but can be interpreted, these representations needed to be seen as plausible by the participants. Giving participants the opportunity to provide feedback was a way of validating my interpretative process. The findings resonated for them, which in turn, confirmed the study as credible (Creswell, 2012).
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Good research should adopt a methodology that allows participants meaningful and genuine participation and collaboration. Implicit in using a method that effectively engages with participants whose experience is being researched is an acknowledgment that they are the experts and have expert knowledge about their lives (Parker, 2005a). In qualitative research, understanding human experience cannot be separated from context (Liamputtong, 2013). Hence, effective methods should allow participants to provide their own accounts that reflect their own everyday experiences, from their own standpoint

The opportunity to talk to men and listen to them as they talked about their experiences of being childless was undertaken with appreciation and respect. Participants need to feel part of the research, with considerate and respectful involvement, and need to feel that their accounts are respected as being authentic and worthwhile. Effective engagement and respect helps with the accuracy of data, and improves the relationship between participants and researcher (Liamputtong, 2013). Outcomes of the research will hopefully contribute some benefit to the lives of the men and others experiencing the phenomenon being researched.

Ethics and reflexivity are also integral to good qualitative research. Ethics require attentiveness to research practice throughout the process, and also engage reflexivity. As researchers, ‘consciously exploring and critically reflecting on how our own values and assumptions affect our theoretical and methodological goals, activities, and interpretations’ is paramount (Fox et al., 2009, p. 10). In other words, I as a researcher, needed to be critically aware of my own position in how I influenced the ways in which data were shaped and analysed (Parker, 2006).

It is recognised, however, that assessments of what constitutes good research and a meaningful positive and significant contribution will differ amongst readers. There are different ways of knowing and understanding different realities. It is hoped that this research will be judged to have brought forward new approaches to childlessness and reproductive research.

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16 The notion of a childless man’s standpoint as used here has its origins in standpoint theory; when research begins from the standpoint of a particular marginalised group who have experienced the phenomenon being researched (Swigonski, 1994) they experience a different reality as a consequence of their situation. As research that is cognisant of the logic of Feminist Standpoint Theory—which is rooted in the Marxian analysis of the conditions of the working class (Harding, 1991; Hartsock, 1983)—this research seeks to ‘stand in the viewpoint of’ childless men in order to explore each man’s perspective and understanding.
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4.9 Summary

The rich, diverse and nuanced accounts from participant interviews verified the need for and appropriateness of a pluralistic approach to this complex phenomenon. Landridge (2007) and Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) have acknowledged that it is important to show how language and politics structure people’s subjective experience. Only using one analytical approach can limit our understanding of a phenomenon and changes to the individual. We are amid in the world and in our life experiences of phenomena. We are not always aware of other structures that influence how we experience phenomena. It can be argued that aspects of FDA can be used to further interpret the data, and reveal other potentially hidden understandings and background influences (Becker, 2002; Dreyfus, 1991).

Various forms of discourse analysis can add a critical aspect to our understanding of subjective lived experiences, and help pave the way for social change, such as individual and social awareness of how men without biological offspring experience and understand male childlessness within the reproductive sphere. From other epistemological and methodological standpoints, there would always be other perspectives and other versions of the ‘truth’. However, it remains that the men are central and the experts in the experience of their not producing offspring. Without diluting the importance of either analysis, both IPA and FDA involve interpretation, and uphold important principles for exploring the experience of ‘childlessness’.

Drawing on the narrations from childless men, two analytical approaches have been applied to the data. The first was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which enables personal insights and meaning ascribed to the experience of male childlessness to be conveyed. Thereafter, I applied Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) to the data, in order to explore how wider discourses may have been internalised by the men and so impacted on their subjective experiential accounts. At times the approaches overlap, providing supportive insights into how ‘male childlessness’ and ‘reproduction’ are understood by those experiencing male childlessness. Despite undertaking two forms of analysis, not all potential themes and discourses could be covered in the present thesis. Following an extensive methodological and analytical process, Chapters five and six of the research provide some explanatory findings and insights into phenomenological and critical questions.
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about male childlessness. The findings of these two chapters will then be integrated in a discussion in chapter seven.
5.1 Introduction

The ways in which the men in the present study articulated meaning about their lived experiences of not having produced offspring were diverse. From within this diversity of experiences and attitudes, however, four superordinate themes highlight noteworthy insights: 1) Desire, choice, and circumstances, integral with experience and meaning; 2) Meaning of ‘male childlessness’ not as straightforward as it seems; 3) Meaning of being ‘reproductive’ can be transcend biology; and 4) The importance of relationships with other children, other people, and other species. A latent theme highlights a sense of continuation and discontinuation of self. Meanings around ‘reproduction’ and ‘male childlessness’ help to illuminate a deeper understanding of the broader topics of ‘what it is like not to have a genetic relationship with a child’ and how childless humans exist-in-the-world where the majority of the population are ‘having children’. This chapter discusses each theme followed by a summary.

5.2 Theme 1: Desire, choice, and circumstances, integral with experience and meaning

This theme explores how desire, choice and circumstances are associated with the diversity of what it is like not to have a genetic connection with a child. Due to the sensitive and personal nature of this topic, and for reasons of not wanting to deter potential participants, the men in the study were informed that they would not be asked why they do not have children. Yet it was evident that reasons for not having children were integral within the meaning of their lived experiences. Although each interview was guided by a few key questions, I was curious about the free associative thinking on this topic from some of the men. Reasons for not having children were at the forefront of their thinking. Consequently, from the outset I enabled some of the interviews to begin with men self-instigating details of why they did not have children:
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[sitting in a large company boardroom] Ok. So would you like a little bit of background to how we got to where we are now? Would that help? Or would you like to drag it out ... slowly? [laughing] ... No no no, I’ll tell you right now ... I have never ... wanted to have children, which makes me... I ... I ... I expect ... an oddball, and I always, and [his wife] knew that, and I always wondered if it was the result of seeing families where they’d had, um, close friends and family who had severe disabilities, and what that did to the parents’ lives. I mean, their lives are vastly different than what they would otherwise have been ... and that sent a logical reason, and I couldn’t think of any other logical reason [as to why he did not want children]. (David)

[pauses, sighs, pauses again as if he was about to make a speech, and takes a big breath] ... Got married in 1986. It happened really quick. I asked my partner to marry me. And my partner said, “I don’t want children”. Straight out. This all happened in one weekend. All in the same two days. And I thought, “I don’t want children either”. I don’t know what made me say it. I hadn’t thought about it. I hadn’t thought about the consequences of going down this track, if in fact that was the track we went down, and subsequently it was. And to this day, I’ve never regretted this statement. And that was a long time ago. 1986. That’s a long time ago ... [exhales]. (Alastair)

With me, it’s very difficult, because having children is never an issue. I knew, from an extremely young age, that I didn’t want children. Not so much because I don’t like children, but because my experience from a very young age was that ... I didn’t like parents [laughs] ... Not really anybody’s, but particularly mine, and that I didn’t want to be in that situation myself. From a very young age I had a mantra that ran something like, “never get into anything that you can’t get out of “. (William)

Whether men began with such details of why they did not have children or interwove the details throughout the interview, reasons for not producing offspring were related to their level of desire, their sense of choice to have or not have children, and set within a milieu of life circumstances. Apart from not wanting children, staying with a partner who did not want children, and reflecting on negative childhood
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experiences, other reasons for not having children were associated with remaining single or divorced, unsuccessful IVF and donor sperm IVF, concerns with the risks of having children, being same-sex attracted, and having had negative parental relationships.

The diverse range of circumstances that had resulted in not producing offspring created a complex matrix of positive and negative experiences, which often reflected men’s desire to have or not have children. Comparatively different to the comments from the participants above who did not particularly want to have children, and felt as though they had ‘not missed out on anything’ (Robert) because they had not had children of their own, one participant who was married recounted his experience:

All the IVF and all that stuff was very taxing and you know, dreadful business ... and I do feel there’s a mourning thing. I do think there’s a gap in your life.

(Brendan)

Brendan later commented that he got tired of listening to people talk about their children:

Then you get to my age, it tends to be the grandchildren thing! ... I remember when it dawned on me, thinking ... oh shit it’s going to be bloody grandchildren now isn’t it. And then you’re going to have that lack as well, and that loss ... oh Jesus! It doesn’t end!

When asked whether his sense of loss had become exhausting, he sighed and responded:

Yeah I think so ... but what can I do? What’s the other choice, kill yourself ... that sounds very dramatic, but that would get you out of it! When asked if he had contemplated suicide: Oh yeah. Whether that’s because of the lack of children or my particular malaise that I’ve always had forever, I don’t know. It would certainly provide some relief [scoff laugh].
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Brendan’s experience reflected the integral meaning of children and the associated purpose of children in his life. This sentiment was similarly imbued into the experience of other men’s lives, commenting on the ‘social connection’ that children provide (Jack) and ‘what’s the point of working this hard if there are no children’ (Russell), and a general loss of purpose in life by those who wanted to be married with children. While Jack described feeling like an ‘outsider’ and a ‘bystander’, others never felt discrimination because they did not have children, which demonstrates the complex interconnection of experiences and meaning with desire and circumstances. Russell, on the other hand, felt ‘desperate’ and ‘lonely’ not to have children, and was careful not to be perceived as a paedophile when spending time with children of his friends and family, a point also raised under the next theme. Although Russell felt purposeful through his successful work, he said that he would give it all up for the ‘husband-wife-3 kids package’. It appears that those men who acknowledged a high desire to have children had had relatively more negative experiences than those who did not want children, or for whom it did not matter if they did not have children ‘of their own’. This concurs with Hadley and Hanley’s (2011) UK study, with men who were involuntarily childless experiencing negative emotions.

Conversely, not producing offspring was less of a concern and aroused less emotion for other men. Yet even amongst these men, desires, decisions and circumstances varied, particularly in regard to their personal relationships:

Oh, I can’t have any complaints. I don’t think I would have ever wanted to ever have kids … well never wanted is not quite right … I never got into a relationship where I thought this is what I want, you know, and spend the rest of my life with this one person … I’m quite happy with my own company. I don’t have, you know, ‘gee I wish I had someone’ or ‘gee I’m lonely’. No. Never … Like I say I don’t really give it much thought. (Mick)

I’ve had no regrets … I like other people’s children. It’s just … never had an urge to be reproductive … There was never a time when I recall thinking that I would like to reproduce, have family, have children. I felt bad because, even though [wife] didn’t push it … I knew she would’ve liked children, she would have been a great mother. So I feel a little guilty that, um, she accepted that,
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and she’d never been misled on that … [his wife] wanted to have children, would have preferred to have children … and um … [long pause] … accepted that we wouldn’t … and she did get pregnant and we had a termination, which … she had regrets about, but she also recognises that there’s a whole lot of things that she’d subsequently done which she probably wouldn’t have had the opportunity to do otherwise. So, um … I don’t think … there’s clearly regret … there will be regrets, but she doesn’t articulate them. (David)

It is important to note here that such was David’s desire not to have children it actually impinged on his wife’s autonomy to have a child. Returning to Alastair’s circumstances, his wife was clear that she did not want to have children, thereby leaving Alastair with a reproductive ultimatum. It is clear that when people decide that they do not want to have children, their desire and choice can impact on other people and ultimately their reproductive circumstances. In other words, one partner’s choice can become the other partner’s circumstance of being childless.

William, who never wanted to have children, and was divorced from a wife who also did not want children, was a quietly spoken 75 year old American-born man who grew up during the second World War and was cared for from a very young age by different people, including a Japanese couple who were interned in a POW camp for a period of time. He had built up a philosophy and lifestyle founded on self-resilience:

The only thing that remains is what you build inside of you. The rest of the world is completely undependable [small quiet laugh] … I’ve always wanted out of life to do what was interesting. It’s the only thinking that’s ever mattered. Making money’s never mattered. (William)

Being a child in adverse circumstances like William, or like David who observed other children and parents in adverse circumstances, can permanently impact one’s desire and decision around having children. However, for William and David childhood experiences that contributed to their lack of desire to have children were crystallised differently, in who they married and in their reproductive behaviour. When asked if having children was considered an interesting path to take, William quickly responded: 
No. I don’t think people really think about it. I think most people stumble along and do what’s in front of them. And do what their parents did, and their grandparents. And I didn’t have any kind of that direction from my family. I didn’t know what my parents were doing … I’ve never had any regrets. I don’t know if I’ve ever been happy, but always been content. Always … I sometimes briefly wonder what life would have been like [with children], and I think about that, but not with any sense of regret, because I can’t imagine how it would have played out [laughs] … in quiet times, maybe before you fall asleep or something, but that’s it.

Any sense of regret in William’s comments was more about life generally, not about not having children, as he was quite firm on this point. Yet this is an example of the complexity in human reproductive behaviour—William did not have any desire to have children, but his desire and choice was driven by childhood experiences, and he was quite content with not having had children. When asked if he had experienced times when he had felt sad, depressed or lonely around not having children, he responded:

No, not around anything … I didn’t want to live my life in a group. Even if it was a family group, I preferred to be on my own. Even when I was married, we lived very independent lives and we were both doing very demanding jobs.
(William)

To try and disentangle desire, choice and circumstances from particular levels of positive and negative experiences is endless and perhaps pointless given the complexity. What is important, however, is to note that one’s desire, choice, and circumstance is an individual experience upon which individual meaning is placed. The diversity across which this takes place is immense and not always at a conscious level or at face value, all of which has been found in both the present study and previous ones (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Dykstra & Wagner, 2007; Hadley, 2009).

As an observational note, asking the men upfront about why they did not have children can seem daunting and may have deterred some potential participants. For
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Most it was a very personal area of their lives, which meant that some men brought it up possibly to get it over with, while others discussed desire, choice and circumstances as they relaxed into the interview. Yet it is clear from the present narratives that the reasons why people do not have children become integral to life experience, with a greater meaning placed on some experiences than others. Reasons for not having children should not be ignored, or assumed, when interacting with someone who has not produced offspring.

Diverse as their experiences are, grouping men as ‘childless’ in studies such as this is not to assume that their experience is homogenous. Therefore, one needs to remain mindful of the diversity of experiences and attitudes that are only linked by the absence of genetically related offspring; that is, when ‘childlessness’ is defined in physical terms as not having a biological connection with a child. The following theme highlights not only biological interpretations of the ‘male childlessness’ terminology, but also entanglements of alternative meanings for this group of men.

5.3 Theme 2: Meaning of ‘male childlessness’ not as straightforward as it seems

The term ‘male childlessness’ invoked many meanings for this group of men. However, the term is not necessarily one that is recognised or related to at face value, nor as straightforward as it seems. This second theme highlights how men perceived the terminology to be unfamiliar to them, and although some were not very interested in it, or did not relate to it, they spoke of the assumptions and negative connotations that they believed to be associated with using it.

5.3.1 Unfamiliar, unrelated and uninterested in the meaning of ‘male childlessness’

The term ‘childlessness’ is more familiar within the academic arena (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Dykstra, 2009; Veevers, 1973), which tends to focus more on women. ‘Male childlessness’, childlessness specifically pertaining to men, has only been taken up more recently (Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Parr, 2010). Likewise, ‘childless’ terminology has recently been used increasingly and more compassionately in social media (Gorman, 2014; Munro, 2014). However, it
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remained an enigma for many of the men in the present study, with a few examples of their comments listed below:

I don’t think I’d ever heard of it before you mentioned it … It’s not locker room conversation. (David)

It neither offends or comforts me as a description. (Richard)

It’s not a term I give any credence to. (Martin)

Honestly I’ve never given it any thought. It’s not a term I relate to. (Craig)

I understand the words, however, I have never seen it set out in this way. (Alastair)

I’ve never heard of the term until I heard it from you. (Russell)

In a rather dismissive or uninterested tone, a few men commented in jest:

I guess I’ve never thought of the term, just as I’ve never thought of “male bicycle-lessness”. (William)

“Male childlessness” sounds like a good hash-tag! (Charlie)

I’ve never thought there was such a category in men. I haven’t heard it before, and I thought well, if I can remember the words I might be able to use it in a sentence. Otherwise it didn’t mean much. It means nothing. (Andrew)

Regarding the word ‘childless’, the men were more aware of a similar term referencing women, encapsulated by a comment from Colin:

I’ve never really heard of it. I don’t have a particular opinion on it. I’ve heard of female childlessness. I’m quite conscious of the discussion that goes around
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women. There’s some crazy attitudes out there. People saying that people who
choose not to have children are unbalanced, and not normal. But, I don’t hear
about it regarding men. There’s never any discussion around childless men.

Men seem to relate the experience of childlessness more to women than to men. The
assumption that reproduction, and non-reproduction, are more important to women is
further discussed in the following Chapter when exploring with a discursive (FDA)

Although the men in the study had not produced offspring, it did not
necessarily mean that they did not ‘have children’. Although they recognised that they
were childless in a biological sense, they did not necessarily identify with feeling
childless. For example, Robert still lived with his ex-wife and her now adult children,
with whom he had a very close relationship. He stated quite clearly:

The two girls are as good as my real daughters now ... in every aspect I treat
them as my kids. And I call them my kids.

For Robert, the fact that he was not genetically related to his ex-wife’s children and
grandchildren, was ‘irrelevant’, and he continued to call them ‘my daughters’ and ‘my
grandchildren’. To various degrees, the sentiment that biology does not matter was
similarly expressed by other men who did ‘have children’ through donor sperm and
IVF treatments, fostering, adoption, step-parenting and circumstances of
‘godparenting’. Alastair, for example, who chose not to have children to marry his
wife over three decades ago, and had a godchild and nephews, commented:

The fact I’ve got no children doesn’t mean I can’t have children in my life.
I’ve had children in my life, as a backdoor. Have I had children? No. Have I
had children? Absolutely!

Alastair’s comment suggests that a sense of ‘having children’ can be achieved in other
ways, on a psychological and symbolic level, rather than only in a biological context,
which is addressed later in this chapter.
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5.3.2 ‘Male childlessness’ imbued with misunderstandings, assumptions and negative connotations

While some men were unfamiliar with or did not relate to the term ‘male childlessness’, as my conversations with the men continued, most of them expressed a deeper level of negative meaning which had had an impact on their experience of being ‘childless’. The term ‘male-child-less-ness’ uses a combination of words that seems to imbue negative connotations for these men. The following four comments recognise the negative connotation in the terminology, and yet they refer to the negative connotation in different ways:

I’m very good at living in the now and dealing with what is, rather than with what isn’t. (William)

It sounds a bit sad, because it puts an emphasis on something that is lacking … I don’t look at my life in that way. I see it as just choosing another path that is still life-giving. (Anthony)

It sounds like we non-replicators have some sort of a disease; some sort of medical condition when really it is more a social affliction in our society … Personally, it’s slightly pejorative. (Richard)

It can mean they don’t have children or no-one has told them how many children they’ve got … Males, we’re not beyond being monkeys … Male childlessness … it doesn’t mean you haven’t had kids. I haven’t had kids. Kids don’t live with their fathers all the time. There’s that saying “you always know who your mother is but you don’t know who your father is”. So male childlessness doesn’t mean much to me … you could be a sperm donor, does that mean you’re childless? (Andrew)

Some men drew on terminology, normally used to refer to childless women:

It sounds a bit like some sort of lack. It sounds like a deficiency. I don’t really like the term. It doesn’t sound … I mean the whole idea of female
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childlessness, it’s just the same. I’m not saying it’s worse than that. I think both of them are not really attractive terms. They’re one step up from “barren” ... Julia Gillard was described as being barren by one of the awful people on the other side of politics. I don’t strike myself as being a barren male! [and suggests] “non-fathers” ... Male childlessness sounds sad. It doesn’t sound cheerful. It doesn’t have to be sad. I’m not sad. But yes, “non-fatherhood” might be an idea. Are there any other ideas? (Harry)

Likewise Peter, who had stepchildren with his gay partner, used similar language:

I've not encountered this term before. But it makes me feel barren or incomplete. It's not a term I like.

Russell, who was desperate to have children, was equally concerned that people made assumptions about why he did not have children of his own:

I don’t know whether that’s the way I’d put it ... only for the reason, and this might sound ridiculous, for it might encompass, for example, that the male may not have been able to have children, through some, you know ... not having any sperm or something, I don’t know [uncomfortable quick laugh]. For me, it’s a little bit harsh. There’s no alternative. I’ve tried to think of an alternative but I can’t ... The “childlessness” bit... I think it encompasses too many ... um ... sort of, I wouldn’t say “derogatory” is the main problem... It just seems a little bit harsh that’s all ... It’s like putting you down a bit, because it’s not the fact that I didn’t want to have children.

This last comment concurs with comments reported in my Honours dissertation (Lawrence-Bourne, 2012) and a social media article (Munro, 2014) in which childless men defended having to explain why they did not have children, arguing that parents were not asked why they had children. Russell’s comment also reflects how connotations around ‘male childlessness’ can be absorbed into a man’s identity as a man.

Not having children can be highly, yet negatively, visible in a society where most men have children, thereby having an impact on whether a man feels socially
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accepted or isolated because he has not produced offspring. Luke highlighted this point from a wider animal kingdom-species perspective:

>You could easily see it as a derogatory term because ... it’s in our DNA, if anyone doesn’t fit the group. We are still very tribal. People do notice that someone’s different.

These comments from the men highlight the importance of terminology used to refer to childless men, which can impact on men’s experiences of having not produced offspring. The reasons for not having children are not always straightforward and not always what is assumed. However, it might also be worth noting that it is a common human trait to shorten longer, more explanatory terms into shortened versions, a form of memory ‘chunking’\(^\text{17}\). Instead of using ‘men who have not produced genetically related offspring’ or a ‘man who does not have a genetic relationship with a child’ the concept becomes chunked, or abbreviated, to ‘childless men’ and ‘male childlessness’. I have done this throughout this thesis, and expressed it as a concern in my acknowledgments.

Similarly to concerns with people not misunderstanding those who do not have genetic offspring, a few men commented on their concerns that other people might think they had paedophilic tendencies and could not be trusted. For example, while Russell was talking about how he did not like the term ‘male childlessness’, he made an associative comment:

>When I was in my younger years, if you go to the beach, I used to play with the kids, other people’s kids, and they enjoyed playing with me ... and I don’t mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m not a paedophile at all. I mean, yeah, it’s just that, [the terminology] it’s slightly clinical ... I don’t want people to think I’m a dirty old man or anything.

This comment demonstrates that some childless men felt the need to counter any assumptions by ‘others’ that they may not like children by stating that they loved

\(^{17}\) Essential to daily life, chunking (a psychological term) is a memory technique that uses knowledge stored in long-term memory to group information rather than single words. Chunking operates when working memory interacts with long-term memory systems, which in turn helps to expand the capacity of the working memory (Westen, Burton, & Kowalski, 2006).
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children, such as their godchildren. Yet they then felt the need to qualify their ‘liking’ of children to counter any assumptions by ‘others’ that they were a paedophile. Reporting that he dearly wished he had children of his ‘own flesh and blood’ further qualifies Russell’s love of children and counters the clinical connotation of the ‘childlessness’ label. This can become, for some childless men—particularly those who are single and childless—a tumble of explanations and defensive talk, in the perceived need to explain why they have not produced offspring.

‘Relationship appropriateness’ with other people’s children was an issue for another man. While Jack was talking about a former relationship with a woman, he talked about the times when he was putting her children to bed:

_It can become problematic. There’s always this fear of something untoward in relationships with young kids ... of course, there’s a bit of an unspoken rule, you don’t sit next to them and, you know ... because they’re not your own. It’s considered some sort of risk. Even in the recesses of someone’s mind. This is the media of course._

Both of these men would clearly have loved to have children. They both indicated that they loved children and cared for children in individual and special ways. Over the years, they had put a lot of time into relationships with their nieces and nephews, children of friends and neighbours, and one of them, a disabled child. They felt desperately sad, miserable and lonely for not having children, compounded by not being married or in a permanent relationship, and both now questioned their purpose in life. Their desire to reproduce, to have offspring, was strong. Perhaps their innate desire to have children had been channelled towards other children, and they felt the need to defend their relationships with other children. They were fully aware that their relationships with other children might be judged as motivated by other than good and sincere intentions.

Although not all men felt this way, paedophilia is a sensitive topic. The perception that ‘others’ might think childless men are paedophiles, imbues male childlessness with strong negative connotations. For these childless men, the notion of paedophilia was dealing with fraught misunderstandings. I felt that it was important to highlight this topic separately, as paedophilia is also topical given the increasing number of public legal cases around the world. Men seemed to want to differentiate
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their perceptions of paedophilic judgements from others of their childless situations from real legal charges. Do these men fear negative assumptions because they have not behaved in the positive way that they wanted to, meaning, to show genuine respectful love of their own children? Childless men defending themselves against judgements of being paedophiles have been reported by other studies (Hadley, 2018), which is important to raise when exploring the psychosocial wellbeing of childless men.

5.3.3 Defining self as ‘childless’ not always appropriate

The men in the research often spoke of not seeing themselves as ‘childless’, which may seem a paradox, as they were participating in a research study about ‘male childlessness’. Being described as being ‘childless’ encroached on their identity as a person, identity as a man, or drew attention to an aspect of their lives that they did not deem important. If asked if they saw themselves as a childless man, some men were quite clear:

No. (William)

I’ve never thought of myself that way. (Peter)

The thought has never occurred to me. (Andrew)

I certainly don’t define myself as being without child. It just doesn’t occur to me. (David)

Absolutely not. I have many children in my life of various ages and sex. (Alastair)

While the association of biology with being childless was denied by some, other men prefaced their response by firstly offering biology as a primary understanding of being childless. For example, Russell, who was desperate to have children, responded: ‘Firstly I am [childless]’, and then talked about his relationship with his nieces and nephews. This may have been to help soften the disappointment of not having
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children, but his comments also alluded to other meanings, of how the term childlessness was assigned into his life. Other men made similar comments:

    I know I am, statistically speaking, but it’s not something I dwell on. There are plenty of children in my world and I enjoy their presence enormously.  
    (Richard)

    It’s not something that defines me. No. I’ve become really close to my stepdaughter. She is as much a part of my life as if she’d been my daughter.  
    (Martin)

Martin had decided not to push his wife, who already had children, into having a child with him when they married. The difference between being biologically childless and psychologically childless was also identified by other men:

    It’s two-fold. Not because I’m gay. But there’s not the social expectation to have children. The fact that I’ve been single most of my life, it hasn’t crossed my mind to have children. So I don’t see myself as being childless. It just hasn’t crossed my mind. But now I’m in a relationship with someone who is younger and potentially wants to have a child … I don’t see it as an automatic assumption that we, or anyone, would have a child. I don’t feel like we would be ‘child-less’ … there’s no expectation to feel child-less … It doesn’t define me today … It comes down to it being a personal expectation … Will we feel childless? Probably not … I don’t think it’s going to be an issue for us really and don’t feel as though we’re missing out. (Colin)

    I don’t actually see myself as a childless man … But then, I have to keep on reminding myself that I am actually a stepfather, given that my partner has two adult daughters, and I have been part of their life for more than half.  
    (Peter)

    Frankly, having children was never something that I put a high priority on, to have my own children. I just didn’t do it … I met [ex-wife], and I got three kids overnight [laughs] … I have two kids, and talk about them as if they are
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my own. (Robert)

Although the degree of importance attached to having other people’s children in their lives varied, it seemed to impact on the degree of how childless they felt. The men would qualify their childless selves in different ways, differentiating between being biologically childless and psychologically childless.

In the entanglement of circumstances, desire, and how appropriate the term ‘childless’ was assigned to his life, Simon explained that he was not sure if he had a biological child from a brief relationship many years ago, but assured me that he was ‘childless’:

*I have no idea. I mean I’m definitely a man who’s never had any children in any way at all ... I wouldn’t consider myself as someone who has ever had children as such ... There’s that physical possibility that I could’ve had other children that I don’t know about ... I see myself as childless.*

Simon seemed to identify with being ‘childless’ in terms of psychological notions of ‘parenting’. By outwardly identifying with being childless, the potential of any parental attachments was not associated with his single life and series of relationships, and how he saw himself as a man.

Even though they may not have had a genetic relationship to a child, most of the men in the study did not necessarily feel childless. Robert, who still lived with his ex-wife and loved her now young adult children did not feel, or identify himself, as being childless: His last comment re-emphasises the importance of having a relationship with other children, which in turn influences the way in which some men see themselves. Conversely, for other men in the study, the outward declaration that one was ‘childless’ challenges their internal sense of manhood. Brendan, who is married and lived on a small remote Australian island, had tried to have children through IVF. He felt that ‘not having children’, the outward visibility of having not produced offspring, did not necessarily have an impact on how he saw himself as a man, but at the same time, he felt that he needed to defend himself as a childless man:

*It’s heightened here because of the maleness of the males ... I think I have good relationships with the boys and the girls though at school. As the boys
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get older, they get a bit more, you know, we don’t have that common language of cars or football or whatever… then it becomes a bit more problematic. I mean I am a childless man, but I wouldn’t describe myself as that. (Brendan)

When asked whether he might have considered himself ‘childless’ if he had adopted a child instead, Brendan responded, ‘No’, which reinforces the sentiment from other men that some men do not feel they are childless, or in one sense, as childless, if they have adopted, fostered or have stepchildren.

Without biological children, defining themselves as men was more challenging and more overt. The importance of having the potential to produce offspring was noted by a few men. Alastair chose not to have children when marrying his wife who did not want children, and the following four men had spent much of their lives in a series of relationships:

I still don’t regret my original decision. But the reality is [little laugh] I still could actually achieve that … really, if I wanted to have a child, I could have a child really. That’s the reality. You’ve just got to find the right person to agree. And in my current circumstance, that’s not going to happen. (Alastair)

Men who couldn’t have children, I suppose my sadness for them is caused partly by the fact that the physical ability to do so, and finding suitable partners, which is something I had no trouble with at all … Over the years you hear men sort of say they really want to have kids … almost to the point of obsession … it would be a very down part of their life … I think it would be very sad if those men were infertile because that’d be really bad … well what do you do? Maybe it’s not the same as adopting or having a donor … to replace it … I always sort of assumed that one day I’d end up with somebody who wanted to have kids, and have kids … but that hasn’t happened. And considering my family, it could still. (Simon)

I always wanted to have offspring. But that didn’t mean I wanted to bring them up … If I have any illegitimate children, I don’t know about them. There could be a few familiar faces. I’ve been told that, but I don’t know … I wasn’t into one night stands. It doesn’t bother me … I think [being fertile] is very
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important. I think it’s important to people. I think people’s perceptions of anyone changes whether they’re fertile or not. And it can be very, very hard on women. I s’pose it can be hard on blokes too. Actually it’s probably more threatening to men. Women can always get, you know, if they’re fertile, they can get pregnant. But if he’s infertile, he’s in big trouble [laughs]. Someone else’s going to have to do it, and he’ll know! And [more seriously] that must create a lot of stress … I didn’t have confidence with the idea of having children. I had hell of a confidence that I could get a woman pregnant … The idea of getting a woman pregnant is very exciting. (Luke)

In quieter moments, when one is feeling like I do sometimes, when self-esteem is down, a level of inadequacy with life and thinking, mmm … I can’t pump out my chest and say I’m a father of a line of children and that shows. Virility, that virility, I’m a real man. Quite possibly that’s why I’ve had a lot of relationships, partners, a way of proving that I am a man to myself but, I don’t dwell on it. But I’d be lying if I said it never crosses my mind, but it certainly doesn’t take up a lot of my thinking. I would suggest, I do occasionally think along those lines and I’d be foolish to say that I didn’t. (Charlie)

These quotes demonstrate that rendering a man childless can be appropriate for some men but not others. In terms of its biological meaning, these men were childless. However, not all of the men felt and perceived themselves to be ‘childless’. Physical and psychological experiential meaning seems to generate different levels of self-esteem and behaviour, and what it means to ‘a childless’ man. Highlighting the individuality of experience, Martin commented:

_I don’t think that such a group [as childless men] exists, except maybe in some people’s minds. But plenty of people would never think like that._

Martin’s comment demonstrates to scholars and health professionals, that group of men such as that in this study do not necessarily see themselves as belonging to a class of men labelled ‘childless’. Researchers, academics and society in general need to be mindful of the potential psychological impact when affixing labels to particular cohorts of people.
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The theme stressed here highlights how the men were unfamiliar with, unrelated to and uninterested in the meaning of male childlessness. The experience of male childlessness can be filled with misleading assumptions and negative connotations, highlighting the potential negative perceptions of terminology and labelling. What may seem like an obvious biological meaning does not always resonate, and in part, informs what it means to be a man. It is clear from the experiences of the men in the present study that while they were biologically childless, some didn’t feel childless and did not identify with being childless, suggesting that the significance of not producing offspring can go beyond biology.

5.4 Theme 3: Meanings of being ‘reproductive’ going beyond biology

The third theme highlights the experience and meanings of production and how meanings can overlay with experiences of reproduction. In other words, being ‘productive’ can unknowingly be imbued with meanings of being ‘reproductive’. To elicit a connection or disconnection with feeling productive, men were asked how they might define reproduction and production. Although it may seem a semantic distinction, it is worthwhile in terms of exploring how childless men incorporate these concepts into their everyday lives—for example, at work or through their relationships with other children.

Some of the men made a clear distinction between the two words, which reflected upfront and what may seem an obvious response:

Reproducing, well there’s no end to that … So you’ve reproduced and there’s no end, there’s no end to it. This child is never finished … [Whereas productive] there’s a finish. There’s an end to it. You can start and stop. (Alastair)

Being reproductive has a concrete definition in my mind. Reproduction is having children. I don’t see being reproductive in other areas of my life. Maybe I’m a bit obtuse but I don’t actually see that concept in other areas of my life. I can produce something, but I can’t regenerate life. (Felix)

They mean totally different things to me. (Craig)
I don’t see the connection between these two words. Reproductive means nothing to me. It doesn’t sort of produce a … it means nothing to me. It’s never been a word in my conscious thinking … Being productive is very different. That’s been channelled into work, and careers and other activities.

(David)

As seen in their initial comments, and at face value, reproduction tends to refer to biology and producing offspring, whereas the concept of being productive tends to refer to other areas of everyday life. All the men wanted to feel productive in some way. To be productive was important to them, and highly regarded. Men experienced and placed meaning on being productive mostly through their work, whether paid or voluntary. David was about to cut back on his paid work, and explained that he still wanted to be ‘gainfully employed’, which included organising his wife’s 70th birthday and working on various Boards. Other men described being productive as producing something that was tangible: ‘Looking back on the day and see what you’ve done’ (Anthony); ‘Doing things that you regard worthwhile’ (David, Mick); ‘Having a sense of achievement’ (Luke, Harry); ‘Accomplishing what you set off to accomplish’ (William); ‘Something that gives me value’ (Brendan); ‘A contribution’ (Peter, Noel); and providing a ‘purpose’ in life (Andrew). To be productive was conveyed as being a positive experience and something that all the men desired.

With a slightly different view, and blurring the distinction between being reproductive and productive, another participant commented: ‘I don’t really measure material things, but being productive in life is building a family and relationships’ (Robert). Hence, being productive was to involve and utilise, or contribute, something of himself—his skills, his intellect, his interest, his fertility—which then created something else that became part of his purpose in life. A corollary to this is that, for some men, being productive also embodies producing offspring:

[Being productive is] the whole gamut of life experience. (Felix)

There’s very little difference really. Reproductive is just an identified, and for me isolated, slice of the whole productive pie. Some people spend their lives focusing
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too much at the pieces of the human condition instead of stepping back and being engaged, being productive, in the whole picture. (Richard)

I think having children is part of being productive. Productive is a much broader word. It can mean anything, from gardening, to your line of work to being a parent or a homemaker, all of which is valid and very important. (Harry)

For the following two men, initially reproduction was embodied within being productive. But then they defaulted back to orthodox thinking of referring to reproduction at face value as producing offspring:

[Being productive] can refer to anything … meanings can overlap, obviously they can, but for me, they haven’t, just because I haven’t reproduced any children. (Martin)

It’s about my purpose in life … it appears that the purpose of life is to breed, and yet for me there’s no overlap, in spite of the apparent contradiction. (Andrew)

The comments from Martin and Andrew suggest that on a personal level meanings can only overlap if one has offspring. Moreover, to some extent there seemed to be a sense of not having succeeded in life by not having children.

Not all men had achieved a feeling of being productive. Craig, who did not want children, described feeling ‘frustrated’ with his work nine times, whereas Russell, who wanted the ‘wife-kids-work package’ experienced a ‘feeling of not doing what [he] could be doing’, not reaching his potential of what he wanted to ‘achieve in life’—how he expected to live his life. Subsequently he asked, ‘why am I working so hard?’ For Russell, not being ‘reproductive’ overlapped, or became entwined with how he perceived his overall productivity in life. Not producing offspring was associated with a confused life purpose, and a depleted sense of life fulfilment. Although Russell was highly successful in his work, like Craig he expressed feelings of being ‘frustrated’, in not being able to contribute to society in the way that he wanted.
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For Russell, productive-reproductive concepts became entangled with ideas of how one was successful or had failed in life. Producing offspring seemed also to be regarded as one of the markers of life’s success in the following comments:

*My brother succeeded. He has a remarkable family that all stayed together.*
(Andrew)

*I look at my youngest brother, who’s one of the lucky ones, he and his wife just knew immediately that they were right for each other and they’ve been together ever since, they got married when they were very young, and they had their family.*
(Harry)

While Andrew and Harry focused on the ‘success’ of others, for other men, such as Jack, there was a more personal and deeper sense of failure and purpose in life:

*The fact that I haven’t fathered a child has caused a lot of angst in my life ... in one way, it contributed to the failure of a marriage, and once that was established, it sort of changes the possibilities that one has in life, which can be disastrous. It could be better, but I’ve found it a negative impact. The disillusionment and not so much having a focus on a future or a plan for life, wondering what one should do. In my particular case with career, a feeling, well really, what’s the point, there’s no dependants ... I think of myself as a failure. Some people say I’m not but, you can see yourself in many ways, and I think of myself as a failure. I don’t dwell on it, that’s counterproductive.*
(Jack)

Although the sense of achieving productivity in their lives was at different levels, reproductive-productive meanings engaged both physical and psychological interpretations. Psychological perceptions of reproducing are encapsulated by a more philosophical comment from Anthony:

*For any man, any human being, a sense of being reproductive gives meaning to life.*
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One’s sense of being reproductive, or being ‘fertile’ can be understood as being beyond biology, as was alluded to by Martin when he commented that being reproductive: ‘can be the same, I suppose, as doing anything that is worthwhile’. While talking about how reproduction and being productive was understood in his own life, Charlie posed a question on behalf of parents: ‘Am I being productive in producing children? That’s an act, a positive activity’. On a similar trajectory of thinking about people who did produce offspring, Noel remarked: ‘Meanings can overlap because people go into parenting with the belief that they are contributing’. How people are contributing to something and develop a sense of reproduction is elaborated further in the final theme. However, its relevance here, drawing from what the men said, is that ideas about reproduction can go beyond biology and incorporate other aspects of life.

Even though the concept of reproduction can expand beyond biology, an impression of a ‘reproductive hierarchy’ could be detected. By this I mean that, for some men, producing offspring is equated with being more successful, or having a higher reproductive value, than developing one’s sense of being reproductive in other areas of one’s life. If viewed in this light, I would argue that the importance of a reproductive hierarchy would be individual and may well impact psychosocial wellbeing. For example, someone who did not want children at all would not put a high reproductive value on producing offspring but may well place a high value on his contribution to a project at work.

Feeling ‘reproductive’—in a biological and non-biological sense—however, is usually not at a conscious level. Parents may not necessarily think in reproductive terms when they produce offspring. One man in the present study, David, commented, ‘I certainly don’t think in reproductive terms’. Hence, developing a sense of being reproductive tends to be more at a subconscious level. While keeping the present theme—concepts of reproduction going beyond biology—another man enlightened himself with some new insights. After talking for an hour he realised he was developing a pattern to his work and personal life:

_I had never thought that my life would be incomplete without a child. But now that I reflect on, on the way in which I’ve lived my life ... perhaps, I’ve created my own sense of completion [through] the relationship with my nieces and_
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[partner’s] daughters, and other friends’ children ... So I think that’s probably what I’ve done, without realising it ... (Peter)

Another man, who was married and went through a number of IVF cycles without success and had come to accept that he and his wife would not ‘have children’, also found some self-enlightenment towards the end of our conversation. With reshaping how ‘reproduction’ was perceived, Richard aligned new definitions into his own working and personal life, with some bemusement but also with a more serious meaning:

*When you make a little breakthrough with someone or something, that is really valuable. It gives them a shaft of light that they haven’t seen before ... Give them a slap of education. That’s reproductive. They carry it off. It’s a genuine exchange that will reflect in the future. That’s certainly one way of reproducing ... if you have a child, the genetics are ameliorated anyway ... It’s actually quite interesting, I’m rooting everybody ... rooting everybody intellectually [laughs].* (Richard)

With a sense of priority, or a hierarchy of how to be reproductive, while not having genetically related children in their lives, men are not consciously aware of feeling ‘reproductive’. This resonates with Heidegger’s (1962) thinking that meaning placed on experiences is interpreted at a subconscious level.

The present theme identifies meaning in the different ways of being reproductive that can take the psychosocial wellbeing of childless men beyond biology, and make them able to feel fulfilled in other ways, predominantly through their work. Those who have not been able to find fulfilment or satisfaction in other areas of their lives need to be considered. One of the participants in the present research who worked in men’s health made an observation:

*I think the work thing is really important for men, in that sense of meaning and purpose stuff. [There are programs] which are for men aged 50 and up, trying to find purpose in life, because I think men get to a point in life, it’s really about spirituality. To a point in life where we go, I’m at the top in my career, but my mum and dad are dying, I’ll probably die soon ... Oh God what
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was I here for, I’ve forgotten what was I here for. And so it’s trying to unpack that, finding a sense of meaning in life, and a sense of purpose. (Noel)

Meaning and purpose in life are very much incorporated into reproductive-productive concepts, and into the psychosocial wellbeing of the men in the present study. With overlaps of meaning and behaviour through their descriptions, other ways to be ‘productive’ open up, and therefore it follows that raising questions as to how reproduction can be redefined or expanded upon is helpful in understanding the everyday lives of men who have not produced offspring. Although men who have produced offspring can also feel productive and reproductive in other ways the evidence here shows that ‘childless’ men can find levels of purpose and satisfaction, a way of perpetuating the self in other ways, without having to produce offspring. The core of ‘re’ in reproduction for childless men is more psychological, rather than in the biological/physical sense. This point will be discussed further with the latent theme in section 5.6.

5.5 Theme 4: The importance of relationships with other children, other people, and other species

In terms of reproduction being perceived in ways that go beyond biology, the fourth theme herein highlights the importance of having relationships with ‘others’. Throughout their narratives, the men spoke about their relationships with other children, other people and, at times, special bonds with their pets.

5.5.1 Relationships with other children and other people

Developing relationships with other children and other people was not necessarily as a replacement for biological offspring, but more on an innate primordial level of human ability and desire to care, nurture, and help evolve another living being. There was a naturalness with the way in which men had developed their relationships, as with one man who was married and talked about having had their six-year-old niece stay with them for six months. Reflecting on her visit, he commented:
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Within that six months, she was at that stage where she needed to have a father type of figure who could drive her around and look after her and listen to her … As far as the genetic connection between the child, it seems as if the relationship and the genetics are two separate things to me. They can certainly have just as much effect either way. Just because you share the same genes, it doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s going to work … Breeders do not necessarily get to do all the expression in a society with their DNA … Non-breeders can influence the expression outcome too, not just the breeders … the way you develop in your life, who influences you the most? Is it your genes that influence you? Or is it the people you grew up with? People can have more influence, or just as much influence as your genes can. (Andrew)

Andrew’s comment highlights that the genetic connection to children is less important to some men. He highlights the role and the importance of relationships that childless men develop with other children and their valuing, in doing so, something deeper than genetics. The positive impact that their relationships can have on other children was also expressed by other men:

I’ve had fairly significant input into the lives of my nephews and nieces, and various cousins … Some of the nieces used to call me dad when they were little, because I saw them more than [their father] did … I was a professional uncle … a fathering uncle … It’s almost like being a second parent … it gives a sense of purpose. (Anthony)

I think I have made a difference with the next generation. (Richard)

At the moment I have a step-son, a de facto step-son who is really nice. He’s a great kid. We get along very, very well. I think I’m probably the only sensible male role model he has. After knowing him for 10 years, I think he and I have something more than that [de-emphasising the importance of a genetic connection] in our relationship. (Harry)

A comment from another man who desperately wanted to have children and was now a godfather to five children went further:
People will drop their children off here for a couple of hours while they go shopping or whatever. I’m more than happy to entertain them. Do whatever they want to on the day. That’s what heartens me. That people do trust me to that degree, particularly when they’re leaving their children quite often … [the children] speak to you more than they’ll speak with their parents about really private stuff … they do have this trust in me. And I also think they might do it because I don’t have children … I’d describe it [his role] as parental … for me it’s a privilege that I’m trusted. It’s a really good feeling … it fills me with happiness. (Russell)

While talking with Russell, he was reminded of a 1970s song called ‘Teach Your Children’ sung by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young:

It’s basically saying, you know, look after your children, take care of them, and hopefully by the time they become adults, they remember what you’ve taught them … it’s having that influence on them without overriding their parents.

Continuing the conversation about the impact of relationships with other children, Adam advanced an overarching metaphor for his influential role with his adopted son:

It’s the layer on top isn’t it, really. That’s how I see it. There’s the genetic part, and you get that given to you and you grow up with that, and that’s what you have. But what we’ve given him is the veneer on top. That’s how I see it. With a genetic child, you still have that because she or he would have [wife’s] genes, and my genes. But then as a parent, you give them the veneer on top.

While listening to the men, there was a sense of ‘it takes a village’ to raise a child in their comments. The men could recognise that their influence on the lives of other children was a positive extension of that from their parents. Co-existing was the extension of oneself, meaning, just because they had not produced offspring, not produced a biological extension, a man’s contribution to the raising of other people’s children became a non-biological extension of himself. Hence the interconnection that
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human society could generate created a sense of belonging to a larger family, or a social family. This seems to have a positive impact on a man’s psychosocial wellbeing, as was again reflected in a comment from another man, who enjoyed talking about the neighbourhood children popping in for visits and something to eat:

_They were like a pseudo-family. The younger boy, [aged about 7] he said to me, “Are you family?” He’s called me, not grandad, he’s called me “Pop” on some occasions. I said, “I dunno, what do you think? You can treat me however you like”. And then he called me, Pop. (Jack)_

However, Jack then despondently added: ‘The older boy corrected him ... it’s know your place. You’re closer to them when they’re young, uncle this and so on’. Jack found that his role as pseudo-Uncle or Pop waxed and waned:

_I’m optional, I feel like the hubcap that, when driving a car, it falls off and it rolls into the bushes and they keep driving ... When they’re younger, they need you. I s’pose it’s true with natural parents, but they can tug on a lead and get them back._

Therefore, for Jack, when a relationship with his partner ended, he experienced:

_Loss of the extended family. It’s like losing your nieces, your nephews, your grandchildren ... It’s miserable ... Sometimes parenting in a relationship like that won’t allow the new partner to assume too much of a role with the children. They hold you at a distance. I call it “white-anted” ... I wouldn’t have been in any of the relationships if I thought I was having a negative effect on anyone._

While relationships with other children can be beneficial for both the child and the adult, a psychosocial boundary can exist for some men. The boundary that Jack highlighted exists to varying degrees for people who are in step-parenting roles, which impacts on the didactic relationship between the adult and the child. Drawing from the men’s experiences, relationships with other people’s children seemed to be two-fold, with varying combinations of positive and negative elements. A man who
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was in a same-sex relationship with someone who had two children from his previous heterosexual marriage commented that he had not thought of himself as a parent, until he was listening to other parents talking about their parenting experiences at work. He reflected:

*When you have a relationship with someone who has children, you always have a relationship with them and their children. At that point in my life, I’d reached the point where I no longer saw that parenting was part of my paradigm. And now, we talk about the kids daily. They are a part of our lives. We make decisions jointly about them ... But, as a step-parent, it is a very different dynamic to being a biological parent. I don’t have the same rights. There’s a boundary ... When I reflect on my time with my nieces and nephews, it is parenting I suppose, without it being called parenting. I’m “uncling” if that’s such a term. That’s parenting isn’t it? ... I suppose I’ll never know what it feels like to have kids of your own, but I’ve realised that you can actually parent without you realising you are parenting ... I probably never call myself a “step-parent” to them, but, the fact that I’m invited to their key milestone events is indicative of how much they see me as a part of their life, and part of their family ... I’ve become a sort of a pseudo-parent by being the gay uncle, or the pseudo-uncle. (Peter)*

Similarly to other men in stable relationships, Peter’s relationship with his partner’s children has continued into their adult lives. Yet for other men, the reciprocated benefits of relationships are not always within an adult-child dynamic. They may also occur in an adult-adult relationship, in the way of one adult influencing another adult through sharing their knowledge and education.

‘Relationships with children’ may occur more symbolically in terms of mentoring students, as was the case for Noel:

*You get more interested in the kids as they get older. It’s really kind of nice. I can’t describe it any other way, to see them develop. I think men my age who have some skills and something to give, find it really rewarding ... I’m channelling my energy into those two people. I guess it’s imparting skills but*
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it’s a bit more than that. It’s also being someone they can toss ideas around with. As they’re adults, I don’t necessarily see it as a parenting role.

Although Noel did not think of it as a parenting role, the tone with which he proceeded to talk was in a manner similar to a parent talking about what their children are up to:

... and the other one’s doing really well in his studies. He topped his class and now he’s doing some voluntary work and group work, and a support group leader. I guess it’s imparting skills but it’s a bit more than that.

Noel’s remarks implied a symbolic meaning of a parent-child relationship, and a naturalness to its development and meaning. He later reflected as the conversation continued:

That social connectedness, being a value to someone else, that father-son relationship that automatically happens. I guess what I’m doing with the mentoring is similar to that ... it’s a bit different, but they’ve got similarities.

The experience of having a mentoring role and sharing ‘wisdom’, a part of one’s self, was similar to most of the men who had ‘other’ children in their lives. For example, Brendan who worked in a primary school and had constant involvement with the children of the island community, commented:

I think, being on the island for quite a while, you have lots of different roles.
And I think that’s one of the things that helps me, community-wise.

Even though the men were aware that ‘There’s nothing you do deliberately to try and invoke ideals’ to children (Mick), ‘at the same time, there’s a sense of responsibility, which is perhaps a little glimpse of what biological parents must feel ... that responsibility of whatever you do and say will be incorporated into your child, or could be’ (Harry). Regarding his influence through his different connections with children Brendan hoped that, ‘some of those things are carried off’, that they would take away some positive aspects of him and their relationship. However, he was
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aware of the nature of the way in which relationships with other children developed and changed over time, and not always positively. He talked about what could happen when the school children left the island and moved to the mainland, and a visit from his niece from the UK:

*I’ve been here long enough at the school to basically know, what you think is a really strong relationship with that child, and they go and, you’re pretty much dead to them ... kids move on pretty quick. [And regarding his niece’s visit] ... It’s hurtful when she doesn’t correspond or engage or when you’ve invested so much time. I’m sure parents feel like that. I don’t think I’m replacing whatever I lack through those relationships. Obviously you don’t know until you’ve experienced that, but I form quite strong relationships with children that aren’t related, so I don’t think [biology] would make a difference ... It’s more to do with the experience really. But maybe, there’s a strong human imperative that is underlying other thoughts, but it’s not something I’m aware of. (Brendan)*

Brendan, who was disappointed and somewhat depressed with the experience of unsuccessful IVF treatments and the emotional turmoil that the experience had had on his marriage, was aware of his desire, or need, for more positive and reciprocated relationships with other children. The imperative for many of the men in the present study, including those below, was about the experience and meaning from developing relationships again, with a de-emphasis on the genetic component:

*Love kids. Always had them around me. Pretty much have four godchildren. Involved with two of them since birth. I was almost the third parent living around the corner and stuff. Now I feel like I’ve had the experience almost of having children, without the drama, and the expense. And often I’ve looked at it [to have children], it’s not just at Christmas. It’s for life ... In many ways I’ve stepped in as the paternal influence on kids. I’m their godfather, but they see me as dad in many ways ... So I go to all the father’s day things, school things, I go as the step-in father. So I get that experience which is really lovely ... that unconditional love ... but it’s a two-pronged thing, it helps me to guide and nurture, as opposed to creating ... It’s been a great influence on me,*
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settles me and gives me another interest in life. It fulfils what might have been a biological connection. I don’t think it’s necessarily more important. My relationship with those kids is enough, and I don’t think I need the big investment in having a biological child. I get enough satisfaction out of the experience I have with the godchildren or the extended family. (Colin)

I don’t feel really that I’ve missed anything by not having my own genetic children. I do have stepchildren … I’m separated from their mother now, but they are still, essentially to me, my kids. It’s a role as a quasi-father … They’ve bonded to me … In every aspect I treat them as my kids. And I call them my kids. One of the daughters calls me “dad”. It’s not a word I use lightly, but I love the two girls, and always will. I know that’s returned to me … I guess even if they’re your biological kids, or your step-kids or whatever, it’s fulfilling to know that they’ve grown up and prospered. (Robert)

It’s more about the relationships … We only know about the connection, how we feel about him … When you talk of having children, of our own, and that’s the thing, if you had your own child, would there be that connection thing? … and would that be the difference? … you know what I mean … is that the difference … the feeling that that gives you, something that triggers inside you that says, that’s my flesh and blood? I can see that that’s different. But I don’t know, people have to tell me. (Adam)

With a similar experience to Colin, Robert, and Adam, Paul—who suffered injuries from an accident, and underwent IVF cycles with donor sperm with his wife who now had a terminal illness—was more matter-of-fact. Yet he made a tangible link with having the same psychological disorder as one of his now adult sons:

I’m their father. Simple as that. I s’pose it would be [an issue] if I thought about it, but I don’t really think about it. It doesn’t worry me … It doesn’t matter to me … Worse things can happen. No point yelling at anyone. I’m still their father. I’ve taught them things … [One of the boys] suffers from a bit of anxiety and depression which I do too. That can happen to anyone’s child … [And if the boys have children] they’ll be my grandchildren. You work for
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your children, like my father did, to make it a bit easier. That’s what this is all about. [When talking about not passing on his genes] I’ve done that … sort of. (Paul)

While de-emphasising the importance of having a genetic relationship with a child, the following two men highlighted the role that (non-genetic) ‘grandchildren’ played as enabling a balance, a tightening, or a bracing of the self into the family unit in which they lived and experienced:

My concept of family has changed a bit by marrying [his wife] who had two girls by a previous marriage. A key thing has been the grandchildren … I think subconsciously, it’s providing some of the sort of relationship with kids that [genetic] parents would have … In a lot of ways, it’s almost a parental sort of thing, and yet, you’re not one of them [a biological parent] … With no doubt I am closer to the girls [stepdaughters] than their biological father … “Stepfather”, it’s only a word. The reality is, in actual fact, quite different. My relationship is much more of a father figure than their biological father. Emotion supersedes genetics. I think it really does. (Martin)

We’re lucky, in terms of being a human being and able to have partners without having to have children, which is the category I now find myself in … I was going to say I’m not disappointed but sometimes I regret not having children, now that I’m nearly 60. A relationship with children now, it comes in the form of being close to now young adults through [partner’s] children … The grandchildren, they’ll never be my bloodline, but the next generation, they will know me from the time they’re born, because we will be a part of their lives. We will be the grandparents. That’ll mean I’ll be Grandpa or whatever they want to call me [laughs] … The balance is right out at the moment, for sure. It will be far more even with grandkids. I feel quite good about that! (Charlie)

With tears in his eyes, another man talked about the fairly recent death of one of his godchildren, aged four. With much emotion, he talked about the impact of their relationship on him and how it changed his worldview:
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I’ve *had* children in my life. I feel I’m, a softer person, a more giving person, making time to look at the different colours of grey. I think I’ll always be black and white, but I see it’s diluted over the years. I have been a godfather to two children ... one’s passed away unfortunately... but ...[very teary] that was another eye-opener... So that was another giving side of me in society when my godchild... passed ... so again, there were children in my life and I enjoyed the little time with that ... Having not had children, that would be the closest. Have I had children? No. Have I had children? Absolutely! And I’ve enjoyed that ... I feel that’s been a substitute to my family, but I don’t feel I should have had children and that’s my debt [to society]. (Alastair)

Although there is a biological separation between genetic and non-genetic relationships with another individual, psychosocial relationships blur or somewhat soften non-biological relationships. It was evident in men’s narratives that the value they placed on non-genetic relationships with others varied. However, the reciprocal nature of relationships with children and other people highlights the importance of human relationships and the interweaving of the interconnections between people and generations, encapsulated by Simon:

*I certainly used to have an influence on them when they were growing up. I had a very strong influence on their lives ... we’ve built a friendship that’s quite strong. Their father was influential on my life when I was growing up ... the bond that creates a relationship ... Everybody are other people’s children.*

Not all the men had strong relationships with other children or in mentoring circumstances. A couple had very little contact with children at all. Yet, for those who had developed, and valued, their relationships with other children and other people, the experience was mostly positive, within the limitations of the non-genetic boundaries identified. While children and students tended to be the focus of building relationships, there were also a few men who valued their relationships with other animals.
5.5.2 Relationships with other species

As in other studies, relationships with other species, predominantly pets, was also a topic that a few men raised during their interviews. (for example, Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007). Like with children and with other people, there was a sense of connection with other living beings, upon which one could impart aspects of oneself. For some men, there was an expression of who they were through their relationships with their pets and various projects involving animals.

It is perhaps easy to think about pets simply as replacements for not having children, as in the following comments. Harry referred to the idea of replacement through comments from his late partner, who was adamant that she did not want children:

*That a child was a poor cat substitute, which was one of her favourite jokes. She didn’t really mean it but ... it was just a cliché that people, especially elderly women whose cats are something to love if they don’t have a baby or a child growing up, a daughter.*

Simon, who had been in a series of relationships, admitted to being somewhat an alpha male. He thought he would end up with someone who wanted children, and concluded with a reassurance that his dog was not a replacement for children:

*I think my life would’ve been very different [if he had had a child]. But, would I have got joy from it? Yeah, I probably would’ve. No doubt that I would’ve. You know, I get joy out of a funny little dog that I sort of inherited ... It’s a Shih Tzu crossed ... I’ve had Dobermans all my life, crossed with ... something, I don’t know. [He shows me a photo of his dog] One of those things. A little ... He has a name, but I call him “Fluffy”. So, I’ve always called him Fluffy [laughs]. He’s a tough dog. My choice of dog, are Dobermans. I had two beautiful, three, but the last one was killed very early ... [and quickly adds] It’s not a replacement thing.*

The way in which Simon talked affectionately about his dog, and then informed me his preference was for a tougher breed of dog, gave the impression that
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talking warmly or in a ‘cute’ manner was not alpha male enough—a conflict of the inner and outer self—or was perhaps simply a way to appeal to the ‘caring and nurturing’ aspect of women, as he was talking with a woman. Although Simon was somewhat bemused with himself in the way in which he was talking about his dog, Fluffy, it seemed to provide a conduit for him to express his inner self—a way of being able to extend his more caring and nurturing inner self that he had not been able to extend to offspring.

Describing the experience of relationships with their pets in affectionate, caring, and nurturing terms seemed to mean, to some of the men, an association with female characteristics. Apart from Simon’s comments, and Harry referring to ‘elderly women’ above [underlined], another example was a comment from Anthony, who was a religious leader and had made a conscious decision and accepted the consequences of his choice not to have children:

_I don’t spend as much time with her as I should. She was a stray. Her mother abandoned her, and I found her, and she went “meow meow”. Such a little thing, I picked her up and she purred, and I fed her, and that was that. I’ve been the mother ever since [laughs]. It was sweet. She’s an affectionate cat. A real smoodge._

Concepts of replacement, however, might also include replacement for the need for love, companionship, care or nurturing, which again was displayed in different ways. Perhaps Anthony’s comments could be interpreted in this way, as he needed to meet the requirements of celibacy for his work. On the other hand Felix—following unsuccessful IVF and now considering adoption—while attributing some relief from the distress for both he and his wife to their cat, mixed ideas of replacement for children and ‘needy’ emotions of his wife:

_We dealt with it by getting a cat. We also have some backyard [suburban] chooks. Obviously you’ve got to look after them ... [when asked if he fathers the cat, he responds] Oh yeah, but not as much as [his wife] does. I mean, I like having the cat around no question but my wife’s channelling some of that wanting, maternal instinct into that, so definitely a child substitute in that sense ... I like the relative peace that [the cat] has brought._
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While discussing the possibility of fostering a child, Felix added:

*It may sound trite but this cat we’ve taken on, this cat was fostered ... She’s a crazy mixed up little pussy-cat and that’s a bloody cat, not a human being. So how disturbing fostering can be for a child.*

The crossover of a reciprocal connection with other animals helps some men to express their personalities and articulate their experiences. To care for and look after another living being helps individuals feel good. There are more recently an increasing number of studies demonstrating the benefits of ‘animal assisted therapy’ to help improve emotional wellbeing (Nimer & Lundahl, 2003).

A slightly different perspective on their relationship with their pets was drawn from comments from two men, both divorced, and happy in their own company, who never wanted children but loved having a dog. At the very end of Mick’s interview—in which he did not express much emotion—he added:

*I’ll finish by saying that my family, where I express my, for a better word, love, is to dogs, my dogs. With the dogs I’ve had, I’m bloody sure the way the animal is treated is the way it develops ... I find that with dogs, they just don’t ... no matter what happens they sort of still ... um ... what’s the right word ... Give up themselves so fully I find ... Well, I think most dogs are similar. I just find them very faithful, and shall we say intelligent, knowing. Sometimes they look at you as if they know what you’re thinking.*

William, who had experienced difficulty with attachment due to childhood experiences with his parents and war, spoke quietly, patiently and with a tone of contentment:

*The first week we were together, she [his dog] decided to do whatever made me happy. And she looks at me for guidance and she’s never done one thing wrong. She’s never chewed anything [laughs] ... Oddly enough, my biggest attachments are the two things that are dependent on me. If something, someone, depends on me, I’m sunk. I just can’t turn my back on it.*
For each man, his dog gave him loyalty, trust and dependability. Similarly, in return, each man gave his dog loyalty, trust, and patience. The ways in which both men described their relationships at work, they each offered the same qualities of themselves. For these men a dog provided more consistency and unconditional love than they had experienced in their childhood. His dog and a few close friends was enough for each man to feel socially connected.

David, on the other hand, combined his relationships with people and animals, except he had a larger circle of friends and a large social network. He jokingly said that because he did not want to have children, he might have been an ‘emotional shell’, an ‘emotional vacuum’, and talking about his cats was perhaps an effort to mitigate any ideas that he did not care about other living beings:

I said vacuum, but no, I don’t think I am. We have cats. We’re always jokingly calling them our child substitutes [laughs] ... [The previous cats] really were family. Mortality takes its toll. There’s waterworks everywhere. There was a bit of grief. You’d hope there’s some transfer of feelings to other people’s children, to other people, to cats ... By the way my earlier joking comment about “no we don’t have children we have cats” ... there may be an element of truth in that. Our cats get a hell of a lot of affection [laughs]. (David)

For David, however, his caring and nurturing energies were focused in other areas of his life. David seemed to be more involved, extending his self, within the ‘bigger picture’ of caring and nurturing in terms of being involved in ‘quite a range of not-for-profit-organisations’, and wider society’s interaction with animals. One example was his involvement in a large animal project in central Australia, where introduced species were being removed to allow native species to return. David talked about his satisfaction and feeling good, in terms of both the animals and the people:

It’s a good cause. It’s a good thing to do. When you see those little mammals, when you go out at dusk, it’s just another world. It’s how it used to be. It’s extraordinary. It’s like the Garden of Eden, all these little tilling animals, digging holes, water would collect, and the leaves would grow. It’s just extraordinary ... The primary satisfaction comes from those organisations
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doing things that you regard as worthwhile and, contributing to the community welfare ... And the second part is the people you mix with. A lot of them are friends, or have become friends. It’s social interaction of another kind ... dealing with a lot of people you enjoy and enjoy their company, and be stimulated and be challenged. I get a real buzz out of that.

David’s relationships with other people and animal welfare projects such as that mentioned were indeed on a greater scale than those of some of the other men. However, his sense of their value was somewhat similar. The men did not seem to like to use the words ‘care’ and ‘nurture’, often referring to these qualities as ‘channelling energy’. The energy that they were referring to seemed to be a kind of ‘reproductive energy’, imparting a part of their selves to influence, reshape someone or another living being, a different way of creating.

The men seemed to be naturally drawn to developing and valuing relationships, evidence of humans as social beings. They did not necessarily need offspring to achieve this. In the following comments, men considered how symbolic fathering and paternal roles extend the conventional meaning of being ‘reproductive’ beyond biology:

It’s something to do with my dog. Like children, dogs take a certain amount of caregiving side of things. That’s inherent in a lot of people ... [and then questions whether] it can be determined if the energy, or the frustration of being childless, could it be re-channeled somewhere else, productively? (Jack)

There’s no doubt that we have all sorts of vicarious things that we lavish our affections on. Sometimes they’re animals, sometimes they’re other things, children ... [talks about his cats, then adds with a lighter tone, referring to some men placing their affections and channelling their energy on inanimate objects]. Cars ... cars are a strange breed as far as I’m concerned. But they probably think I’m a strange breed ... [laughs]. (Harry)

Apart from talking about more overt relationships with nieces, nephews, godchildren and stepchildren, their pets, work and community projects, my
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impression was that there was something deeper or more intricate about the men’s relationship with the subject of ‘children’. There seemed to be an underpinning of the ongoing influence that one can have, a sense of a part of oneself that continues on, perpetuating something, and developing a greater sense of self.

5.6 Latent Theme: Continuation and discontinuation of self, associated with self-esteem, family tree, religion, spirituality, and self-philosophy

Throughout the narratives from the 23 men in the study, there was an inference towards a continuation of their ‘self’ in some way, or in some cases, not wanting any part of themselves to continue on. This seemed to be at both the conscious and subconscious level. The concept of continuation or discontinuation was associated with passing things on, the family tree, religion, spirituality, and self-philosophy, which at times are associated with self-esteem.

5.6.1 Continuation and discontinuation of self

While being reproductive was, for these men, primarily synonymous with biology and genetic continuation, a sense of non-biological continuation was also evident. In other words, one’s sense of self was continued in some way other than having produced offspring.

For example, when Anthony commented that he hoped one of his church parishioners would ‘carry it off’, he was referring to one of his church parishioners taking away with her his impartment of support and counsel, a part of him. For Anthony, reshaping a parishioner’s outlook and emotions changed a person, ‘hopefully for the better’, he added. When he was with some families, where people had produced offspring, he had observed that ‘there’s no nurturing, no passing of anything on much’. The positive input he liked to make generated a positive change in another person, and thereby contributed to Anthony’s psychological wellbeing—in terms of reproducing, not through offspring, but through creating change in another human. In this sense, and although it was also ‘through the image of God’, Anthony had recreated a part of his self. Anthony described it as ‘a passing on of self-worth, self-replicating’. Reproducing or replicating in this way, his work as a Catholic priest
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was deeply entangled with his personal life in terms of the agreement to not produce offspring.

For other men, a person, a community, had changed, had evolved from their relationship and connection. Although expressed differently, the sentiment somewhat paralleled that of Anthony:

When you make a little breakthrough with someone or something that is really valuable. It gives them a shaft of light that they haven’t seen before ... Give them a slap of education. That’s reproductive. They carry it off. It’s a genuine exchange that will reflect in the future. That’s certainly one way of reproducing ... if you have a child, the genetics are ameliorated anyway ...

It’s actually quite interesting, I’m rooting everybody ... rooting everybody intellectually [laughs]. (Richard)

I had a godmother but she was never an influence like a godparent like I think you should be, you know, somewhere between a friend and a parent role, in a child’s life ... I don’t think any of the genetics is anything of major importance ... I’m fairly fatalistic in my attitude, like when I die, I don’t want a grave with a headstone. I wouldn’t care if my ashes were tossed off into the ocean. I don’t have a sense of urgency to record my place on this earth. I don’t feel as though in terms of my genetics needing to carry on, not at all. I want to be remembered, but I don’t need it to be marked. I think I’ll make my impression on this world by my relationships that I’ve made ... I know that’ll be an ongoing thing throughout their lives. People will take away from that, and that’s enough. I do think we are only here for a period of time. (Colin)

Although the concept of non-biological continuation is expressed differently, it reveals a sense that continuation goes beyond biology. Having children or not having children is more than passing on one’s genes and DNA. This could be one explanation of why some people find satisfaction and fulfilment in relationships with other children, their pets, partners, work and projects, a social connection that many humans need.
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However, we do not always realise the impact that we have on other people’s lives, how we might change them in some way. Another man referred to the unknown impact, or unknown continuation of his self:

You can pass on a legacy to society. There’s nothing there from me, I don’t think. There might be something tiny that might happen. [To me] you might publish a research paper, publish and someone might read it. It’s like “throwing a stone in the pond” ... “fractal”, a butterfly flapping, it’s about influence, unseen influence, something little. One small thing can have a great effect. A butterfly swings in Central Park and they’re having a hurricane over there. The ripple effect. (Jack)

Referring to Jack’s metaphor of the ‘ripple effect’, the concept of leaving something behind of lasting effect was expressed by other men. Colin alluded to this ongoing effect in his comment above, and Martin and Richard had similar thoughts, but offered them with slightly different perspectives:

For me, in some ways, the question of what one leaves behind is significant. But, in some ways, I suppose, one of the things that happens is what we leave behind is memories. As long as someone who knows us, lives. Then you can continue living. You live in those people living. For example, your nieces and nephews, work, mentoring ... I suppose it’s a question of wanting a life to have been ... giving it value I suppose. Seeing one’s life as being worthwhile, as valuable. And that in some ways, one of the things that influences what I do, writing books. I see books as being more substantial [than the magazine he writes for] ... as leaving a slightly bigger imprint. [Yet while] I’m conscious of the fact, the books I’ve done already might have had an influence for a time, it’s still ephemeral ... that’s one of the ways I measure the contribution, or impact to the world, to people ... that’s my bit. [But] you almost forget about it with time. It is ephemeral in some ways but, it does mean, at some stage, you’ve touched the lives of other people. (Martin)

You’ve got to admit, once you step off the planet nobody remembers you for more than five minutes so don’t get anxious about it. Just do what you can
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during your lifetime ... I think it’s interesting, to leave something behind ... I want a statue to me [laughs] ... That’s my deal. [more seriously] No, there’s no, no-one ... People get paranoid. Not paranoid, but they want to be remembered, but you don’t get remembered. It would be nice, say, if someone was writing the history of this area and they mention [him and his wife]. That’s enough. If it’s in the literature anywhere, or on the website [laughs] that’s as much as you can expect ... It’s like self-replicating. It’s like a de facto child ... It’s the basis of it all. It’s the background to it all. It’s sort of the building blocks ... I still see those pressures to conform to the pre-destined patterns of life stages without any kids. One of the most common questions beyond the "have you any children?" is "what’s your succession plan?" given you haven’t any children ... how’s it all going to continue... (Richard)

The idea of non-biological continuation being somewhat short lasting, for some men, may help explain why producing offspring—genetic continuation—is deemed to be so important by some men. In other words, some men may have felt that producing children was a stronger, more definite, and longer lasting way to develop a sense of continuation. While non-biological continuation, or self-replicating through one’s ‘succession plan’ was unknown, biological continuation was perceived to be ‘better known’.

However, not everyone expressed the desire to have a part of their self continue on or wanted to be remembered. This reflected, to some extent, muted self-esteem. Craig commented: ‘I’ve never felt I needed to leave a mark on the world, have never considered myself important enough to need to do this’. But he then added: ‘Hopefully people will remember me fondly’. After another man stated that he did not want to be remembered in any way, then added:

It might sound funny, but I don’t have great self-esteem. I don’t think highly of myself [and did not want to] father some poor bloody kid that ended up with my quirks and insecurities. I wouldn’t want that ... I think when I was 23, 24, I thought ok, I’m not going to get married, I’m not going to have a family, what happens when I die? So I got onto the Cremation Society of Australia, and paid the princely sum ... The deal is, ok, I’ll be cremated and then the ashes just chucked in the nearest bin. That’ll be end of story ... end of the line.
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That’s that, insofar as the hereafter ... I try and do something useful while I am here and when I’m gone, that’s it. What’s there to be remembered? I suppose if you have got family, that might make a difference, I don’t know. (Mick)

For some men like Craig, the unknown of what life might have been like if they did have children, their influence on that child, was imbued with potential risks. Yet for men who are desperate to pass on their genes, to pass on their self in a biological manner, Harry commented, ‘I don’t understand that’. Harry felt it was ‘quite a sobering thought’ to think of the ongoing influence he may have on his de facto partner’s now adult son, with whom he had a good relationship.

Having a sense of ‘pseudo-fatherhood’ (Robert), or non-biological fatherhood, and the potential non-biological continuation of self through that child was, however, not always a discouragement. Thoughts about one’s ongoing influence on a child were, for some men, perceived as something potentially positive, and coming from more positive self-esteem. For example, Alastair, who had decided not to have children in order to marry his wife who did not want children, remarked:

I’ve been told I’d have been a really good father. That’s the irony of it! That’s really nice, but I still don’t regret my original decision.

Simon, who fluctuated between wanting and not wanting children but also thought he would ‘end up with a partner who wanted children’, commented on his own reflections, when observing male friends with their children:

[regarding having children] It’s not a totally negative thing. It’s just “oh my God, how would I cope?” I know I would have. And, you know, most people, most girls who know me well, make the comment that I would’ve made a really good dad.

Russell, who was desperate to have children, went further in his comments, describing how he potentially would have had a positive influence on a child:
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There’s something missing in my life, which is a child ... and I know, because of the feedback you used to get. God knows still, I suppose, I would’ve made a good father. That’s one little area that I can’t use ... I actually think I’ve got a lot to offer, regarding if I’d had children ... I think that’s probably the thing that really gets me the most, there won’t be a carry on of me ... this is going to sound really egotistical, but I just know I would’ve made a really good father! And that bit never occurred ... and that’s why I have to fill it [life] in with all these other things. Plus, to make a good father you need a good partner.

Drawing from what the men said at the time, and somewhat mediated by self-esteem—in how they saw themselves as potential fathers—not becoming a biological father and realising their potential of being a ‘good dad’ saddened some men a lot more than others. Some men, like Russell, accorded a higher priority and had a deep desire to have their self carried on genetically. But it was enough for other men, like Simon and Alastair, to simply feel good in that they had the potential, and utilise other areas of their selves.

It is important to note that not all men understood their existence-in-the-world in terms of continuation, what part of themselves they would pass on. Rather, and in particular for one man, existence was expressed in terms of discontinuation:

I don’t want to leave a legacy. My goal is to slowly fade away until there’s nothing left, just to disappear within myself ... I want to fade away and leave the world completely untouched. (William)

When asked if his successful film work and script writing could be perceived as an ongoing footprint on the world in some way, William responded:

Yeah, but it’s all very temporary stuff. It goes away, over time. The only thing that remains is what you build inside of you. The rest of the world is completely un dependable. It’s just the way things are.

William was not maudlin when talking. Rather, his comments were resonant of what some of the other men were saying—that is, if one is to be remembered and a part of who you are continues on in memories, it is temporary, with a time limit. Not
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only was their meaning of continuation mediated by self-esteem, it also appeared to be mediated by one’s connection with family members.

5.6.2 The family tree

By most definitions, a ‘family tree’ is a diagrammatic representation showing the relationships between people in several generations of a family. For the men in the present study, thoughts about their position within the family and connection with other family members were articulated within a context of biological continuation. Although the ‘family tree’ metaphor was useful to help articulate a sense of belonging, some men placed a different level of emphasis on the continuation of both the family name and the bloodline of the family.

In biological terms, most of the men were well aware that they were at the ‘end of the line’ (Simon, Mick), both in name and bloodline, and with varying levels of acceptance. Although many of them had siblings, nephews and nieces, the expressed thoughts and feelings were at a more personal level, being associated more with the discontinuation of self. Russell desperately wanted to have children that were ‘of his own flesh and blood’, it being more about the continuation of his bloodline than ‘about the name so much’. Conversely, Charlie, who had a very traditional upbringing, and was the only son, felt a greater sense of responsibility to continue the family name, and consequently ‘a bit guilty’ for not doing so. Another participant coincidentally, was at the time, drawing up his family tree. Martin’s wife already had two children when they met and got married. He had decided to forego biological fatherhood and not push his wife to have another child. He shared some of his reflections:

... Their branch is dying out. You get really interested in the family and see how it evolves over time, and it does affect the ... you sort of think mmm, in some ways it would have been beaut, if there had been ... purely in genealogical terms, you know, it’s not anything rational, and it’s not something I particularly regret, it’s just a bit different. It’s not regret, because I don’t have any regrets. It’s ... it just makes you pause a bit and think about it. I s’pose I’m really keen to see our branch of the family continue, and fortunately there are enough boys to keep it going. It’s beaut to see a family
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continue ... the impulse is documenting history. It’s partly love of family, but it's also, the wanting to know where you’ve come from ... I am conscious of the notion of branches ending, and ... you know, I was going to say there is a sadness about that, but not really ... that something has come to an end I suppose. (Martin)

In Martin’s comment there was a level of melancholy, and his expressed acceptance of not ‘having children of his own’ (his wife had children from her previous marriage) seemed tenuous. However, for David, who did not want children, having the family tree stop with him was not of concern:

Not an issue at all. It never occurs to me that it’s something that I should worry about. Not at all ... I’ve got nieces and nephews and second cousins [to pass on the family name], but I never give that a second thought.

Other men echoed David’s view that it was acceptable for other members to carry on the family bloodline: ‘My brothers all have children so I don’t consider that the family tree branch stops with me’ (Craig). Another man—who was married, and who with his wife had tried to have children through IVF—also held a pragmatic view for his adopted, now adult son:

I actually have a family tree, and I’ve put [adopted son] on it, but I have [marked him on the tree] as being adopted. If someone has a look at it in the future, they need to know what happened. So they can make sense of it. But it is interesting to see how the family tree grows, and how it develops ... my brother has a couple of children. So as far as the family tree is concerned it might not carry on in my line but it will carry on. (Adam)

Another married man in the study had tried to have children with his wife. They were now in their 60s, and with a level of accepted sadness had put all their energy into a successful vineyard and winery. At their present stage of life, and without children, they were currently negotiating what to do with their lifelong business. In trying to be pragmatic, he remarked:
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It is not something I have put too much thought into. If my bloodline stops here, so be it. However, we [Richard and his wife] would like to be remembered through legacies. Passing on my genes doesn’t matter to me.

(Richard)

Having negotiated life without offspring, Richard now placed less importance on genetic continuation. However, he mentioned that he was thinking of passing on the vineyard to an interested nephew, which could be interpreted as a symbolic gesture of continuation. Not through genetics, but through passing on his and his wife’s life’s work to their ‘offspring’, along the branch of the family tree to his nephew.

As a variation of the family tree used as a metaphor, Harry offered an alternative:

As far as branches in family trees go, I’m more of a vine type and vines are supported by every favourable available structure in their environment.

Harry’s metaphor provides an insight into his life and his subjective experience, something he has contemplated in order to continue on. Without offspring, and for some men, without a partner, some of the men sought ‘favourable supportive structures’ from more spiritual environments.

5.6.3 Religion, spirituality, and self-philosophy

Conversations about not having children and the meaning of life were often associated with a sense of continuation within the context of religion and spirituality, which subsequently evolved into a self-philosophy. For Russell—who wanted to have children—religion and spirituality were touched on lightly. When he talked about when often looking after children, including teenage children of his friends and family, he remarked:

I’m not religious, but I sort of impart the fact that you can enjoy life without going overboard.
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Yet for Jack—who on reflection would have loved to have had a successful marriage and children—religious thoughts turned to deeper, more spiritual thinking:

Repurposing things ... there would be nothing better than to pass onto your children ... No-one likes to think they’re the dead end, the cul-de-sac in life ... the act of having children is just another dimension of you, trying to stay alive, keep the spirit alive, you know, you get to ... whether you’re religious, Christian or Buddhist ... I’m just making the observation that if you look at society, if you look at the Kooris, the dreaming, there’s always a quest for an explanation ... so spiritualism might fulfil that, religion might fill it in a more ... human form rather than the sun, spiritual something.

Likewise William, reflecting on life without children—he did not want to have children—was insightful with his more philosophical thinking:

Life is there to be enjoyed, and to find the good things in it. The things that excite you, the things that stimulate you ... It’s really what you can do with what you’ve got, and maximising your potential I guess ... Not religious, but spiritual, and somebody who, when I was young, was very hooked up in looking for the way, and looking for the answers, and I think it happened basically when I was 14 [when he joined some friends in an Indian initiation ceremony] ... My friends said it meant nothing to them. I had an experience ... What became clear to me at that time ... people talk about higher selves and things, which I don’t believe in. It’s just, there’s an original self that was there before you start adding all things on, and adding things on that, to a large part, desperation that you added it out of the need for security, or fear or greed ... your original self when you were born kind of gets buried, in a lot of external attachment and ... a lot of people go out searching for the way, for the answers and things. It became very clear to me at the age of 14 that the ritual I went through with the Indians, that it wasn’t a matter of searching ... the way found you, you didn’t find it. And the way came from inside. It’s there all the time. When you can be quiet enough and be patient to just put all that stuff aside and sit down and listen ... Everything that matters is internal, not out here. So that, all through my life, dictated how I lived, and I still live.
The last quote demonstrates how, for some men, religion and spiritual thinking was part of how life was negotiated without producing offspring, despite the level of desire to do so. Religion is often conveyed in terms of continuation, following the behavioural parameters of being a positive influence on others, and leading to a life everlasting, in other people and the hereafter. There may be an innate cognitive process that the experience of not producing offspring links with subconscious ideas of continuation. Religious and spiritual references in men’s speech was part of their own free associative thinking during their interviews. As Harry mentioned at the end of the previous subsection, being ‘supported by every favourable available structure’ in his environment, religious and spiritual thoughts may help to support psychological wellbeing.

While the concept of continuation and the meaning of life was associated with religion and spirituality, it was also, for a few men, associated with the 1983 British satire Monty Python’s – The Meaning of Life. For example, when mentioning the words ‘meaning of life’ during the interview, one man, Mick, responded immediately with a wry smile and tone: ‘Oh the life of Brian’. For Felix, however, at the time of the interview married and exhausted by the emotional turmoil of many cycles of IVF, the ‘endless’ explorations of adoption and other ideas of how to ‘have children’, associative links of Monty Python the meaning of life, religion and spirituality, all became part of one narrative thread:

*Look, I’m not spiritual. I have a low level religious belief. I believe there’s something after all this, but I’m not searching for meaning. I’m not ringing up the Dalai Lama and asking for advice. I’m certainly not a Buddhist in that ... the holistic life philosophy of Buddhism. Sometimes I wish I were ... And certainly my Catholicism has ... lapsed. I believe, but I’m not active. I certainly don’t think of things spiritually ... I don’t believe deeply in anything, one way or other ... I’m very bland in my spiritual, higher thinking, I suppose. I’ve probably become more like that as I’ve got older. And again, it’s probably a good thing we don’t have children ... I’m a value-free zone [then quickly cuts himself off from what he is saying] oh actually that’s probably*
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going too far. [And then adds] 42, the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy\(^\text{18}\), [chuckles], life, universe, and everything. Look, I don’t dwell on the meaning of life. I just want my obituary written, which means that I’ve actually done something worthwhile, made the world a little better for my presence, notwithstanding the fact that I haven’t had children. (Felix)

Although Felix was saying that he was not spiritual or searching for meaning, these topics still arose in his thoughts when he was talking. The instant association of the phrase ‘the meaning of life’ with Monty Python and the number ‘42’ seems to indicate a lampooning of the seriousness of life, religion, and the structure of our lives, and how we are supposed to live and experience life regarding children.

The men’s responses raise questions around their behaviour when faced with talking about personal aspects of their lives; whether women would respond with humour in a similar or a different way. Or perhaps the reference to Monty Python reflects the Australian sense of humour as a way of releasing any tension with the topic of not producing offspring\(^\text{19}\).

The word ‘religion’ is related to the Latin word *religare* (van den Hemel & Szafraniec, 2016), meaning to bond or bind people together, to be connected together within a community. Having children, and in the present context not having children, internalises ideas of continuation—one’s sense of continued existence and experience in the world, within human society. Those that talked about losing the social connection that children can offer and who did not feel productive in their life projects, or their work, seemed to have lost their sense of *religare*. Human beings are social animals. Social connection with other living beings is in a sense interconnected with continuation of oneself. Without offspring, a sense of continuation and life meaning is sought elsewhere, intentionally or unintentionally. Utilising the evolutionary cognitive processes that enable enquiry, exploration of reason and

\(^{18}\) The reference made by Felix and other men in the present study to the number 42 relates to Monty Python and Douglas Adams’ publication of the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* in 1979. Unintentionally, the number 42 has commonly become the answer to the meaning of life (see Bignell, 2011).

\(^{19}\) As an anecdotal, however poignant, event of gendered responses to sensitive topics, I was sitting in a social group of ten friends in a café. When I responded to an enquiry about my PhD topic, one of the men laughed and said I ‘should be studying Tim’, because ‘he’s single and doesn’t have kids’. The men in the group laughed and the women smiled silently. Tim, the ‘childless man’, looked blankly at me, almost for help. I have since wondered if this was associated with male behaviour or Australian humour, or a combination of both, which is somewhat reflected in the present research.
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acquisition of wisdom are not necessarily religious, but more supportive structures in understanding one’s own experiences in life without offspring. Another explanation for the thought process linking social connection, continuation, and philosophical meanings may be that it is part of getting older.

Some men were more philosophical than others. The different ways in which they contemplated notions of continuation and discontinuation seemed to underpin their thinking, therefore influencing the way they reflected and understood their life experiences and meanings of being ‘childless’.

5.7 Summary

‘Reproduction: I was just using your word. I never thought about it in those terms … reproduction means nothing to me. It’s never been a word in my conscious thinking’ (David)

As David’s comment attests, lived experiences of male childlessness are not always thought of in overt reproductive terms. Having talked with men—who, as far as they were aware, had not produced offspring—and how they existed-in-the-world and gave meaning to their everyday experiences, shed both familiar and new light on ‘male childlessness’. The everyday experiences of being ‘childless’ for these men, were quite diverse, and were somewhat mediated by their desire, choice, and circumstances around ‘not having children’. Although exploring reasons for not having children was not the purpose of this study, those reasons greatly contributed to how the men gave meaning to their lives. While some felt childless, others did not. A comment from Russell, who was desperate to have children in his life, had a tone of pragmatism when he remarked: ‘You just have to focus on other things’. This was not necessarily easy for those who wanted children, who were single and had small social circles. But reflecting diversity, other men who were also single and had small social circles remained content with their lives. The difference perhaps was that they did not want children. However, the line between wanting and not wanting children was blurred by, again, varying levels of desire and circumstances.

All the men developed relationships and connections with other people, other children, pets, and through their work and other projects, with various levels of satisfaction. This gave them a sense of meaning, purpose and having a positive
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influence, imparting a part of their self on someone or something. For most of the men, from the ways in which these relationships and connections developed, or they longed for their development, it became evident that they were activating—whether intentionally or not—a momentum of continuation of who they were: individual men who had not produced offspring.

To help better understand the context and complexity of experience and how the construction of ‘childlessness’ and reproduction’ has implications for lived experience, the following chapter discusses the wider discourses following Foucauldain Discourse Analysis (FDA).
6.1 Introduction

As one of the two approaches to analysis used in this thesis, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis facilitates critical exploration of the discourses within which the men narrated their experiences. Attention is given to the wider influences that can shape meaning in everyday life. Exploring the narratives and the men’s experiences of life without biological offspring through a critical discursive lens highlights some of these influences.

A Foucauldian discourse analysis of the data revealed eight discourses reflecting how the men understood male childlessness and reproduction:
1) Discourse on the importance of having children; 2) The tension between passive tendencies and being consciously active in the face of reproductive discourse; 3) Assumptions of inherent risk in being biologically reproductive; 4) The embedment of reproductive thinking in biology and animal kingdom discourse; 5) Assumptions of ‘heterosexualism’ within human reproduction; 6) The emphasis on female gender within the reproductive sphere; 7) Discourses on how to be a man; and 8) Categorisation and dichotomisation of being a ‘childless male’. The power implications of these discursive constructions on the often ignored cohort of childless men resulted in tension between the men complying with, and resisting, reproductive assumptions.

From the narratives, it was difficult to tease out and separate each discourse as an isolated construct. The entanglement of discourses is evidence, that human experience is itself indeed complex. Nonetheless, the embodiment of ‘children’ and the discourses around the subject of children interweave throughout these wider influences on how men experienced being biologically childless. This chapter outlines and discusses each discourse, followed by a summary.

6.2 Discourse on the importance of having children

*Children are front and centre ... we live in a society where we put a huge emphasis on children. (Noel)*
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The topic of the present study is to explore what it is like not to have a genetic connection with a child. Yet as indicated by the opening quote, many of the men talked about having children, along the lines of: who has children, why people have children, what having children can mean, the benefits and risks of having children, and so forth. The participants seemed to defend or deflect the assumed importance of ‘children’. This was interesting in terms of ‘children’ becoming a discourse in itself which men ‘without’ children had to negotiate within their own lives.

For some of the men who wanted to have children, the ‘husband-wife-3 kids-package’ (Russell) was perceived as synonymous with fulfilment and satisfaction, and thought to generate life purpose:

In my world, I think [having children] is an added bonus, a huge added bonus, why I exist. If you can have your own children and bring them into the world ... I believe that’s why you work ... why am I working, earning really good money when I’m not actually working for my own children? (Russell)

Another man, who lived in a small rural and remote island community, felt the same. However, at times Brendan became cynical over the centrality of children in the everyday lives of others:

It’s a very child-orientated place here ... on my bad days, I would say that they’ve got nothing else to talk about apart from their bloody children. But the world revolves around children. Maybe it’s the same everywhere ... There’s more to life but, when it comes down to the nitty-gritty, why do people want to live ... generally it’s [children], those things that give people so much pleasure and satisfaction, and it seems to be the stuff of life ... well what’s the point, what’s the point [a half laugh]. I don’t think having children is the point, or having grandchildren is the point ... Maybe it’s a turning point if you have children. I don’t know. But when you don’t, you just keep doing the same thing you’re doing. Nothing really changes ... and again in this community, what else do people talk about, get excited about. Why do people live? ...

Children give you worth or whatever, and obviously I don’t know, because I’ve never had a child. Everyone goes on about the whole, “you don’t know love until you’ve had your own child” ... Sometimes I meet new people that I
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really… it sounds like I’m very arrogant and up myself but, it’s very nice to meet someone who is interesting and have something to talk about other than, and I’m not, I don’t think “oh thank God let’s talk about something other than children”, even if it is about children, it’s from another perspective.

Brendan expressed feelings of depression and had had thoughts about suicide. Unsuccessful IVF contributed to his ‘bad days’. With a sense of the relentless continuation of the omnipresence of children, and then children’s children, Brendan added:

And then you get to my age, it tends to be the grandchildren thing. You know, thank God, all these people’s kids are growing up now, so I don’t have to … but then [sighs] I remember when it dawned on me, thinking, oh shit it’s going to be bloody grandchildren now isn’t it! And then you’re going to have that lack as well, and that loss … oh Jesus! It’ll be the same [sarcastic tone] even more fascinating and interesting to talk about that, and I won’t have that [children] again. It doesn’t end! It’s not like their kids leave school and bugger off. It just starts again.

While Brendan’s perspective was very emotional, other men in the study—whether they wanted children or not—were also critical of or cynical about the importance that society bestows on ‘children’, but from different perspectives. For example, while Felix—who with his very distressed wife had made endless attempts to have children—was talking about wanting to make an impact on the world, he commented that:

We all probably want to do that, but you don’t have to have children to do that. You can be a good person without being a father or a mother. There’s more to life than families with 2.5 kids … I would politely tell them [parents] to open their eyes and have a look, because you can’t be so blinkered that you ignore the world around you, just because the light of your life is in front of you. Of course, you could take the converse of that. If life’s in front of you, why look anywhere else? I bristle at people who imply that you haven’t had a full life because you haven’t had children … and usually when you experience
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it, it’s unconscious on their part. But that does hurt from time to time … I’ve never felt that having children is the key to fulfilment … as if that is the ultimate in life.

Felix’s comment reflects important meanings placed on biological fatherhood and challenges those dominant discourses. When he expressed the impact of the beliefs that parents had, that one needed to have genetic offspring to experience a full life, it reflected how dominant discourses privilege parents and ‘otherise’ those who do not ‘have children’. Comments on the omnipresence of children were at times made dismissively, such as by Alastair:

I see people wrapped up [with their children] and that’s all they can see.

Other comments were made with less emotion, and by men who felt less ‘otherised’ than Brendan and Felix:

I do think back at how my life will be judged. But it’s more in terms of the things that I’ve done, the relationships that I’ve formed. Not having children is irrelevant. With one of my brothers to whom I am close, having children was much much more important. (Martin)

Life couldn’t be more fulfilling. The godkids add fulfilment, pleasure, experiences. Kids are pivotal to most people. To procreate. Kids play a huge role. People build their life around what it takes to bring up children. Children are pivotal in those situations. But it’s not pivotal to me. Not really. [For a female friend] it’s about having her own. I don’t feel the same way. (Colin)

Children are everything. When it comes down to it, the only thing that really matters, are children. We’re not important. It’s the kids that are important, because they’re the future. If you don’t bring up those kids properly, there won’t be a future … If people don’t want to have children, that’s not a problem. It might be a problem for them, but it’s not a problem for society. Well is it? (Luke)
Not being interested myself but, obviously, with friends, well they’re finding it fulfilling raising their children. For them, they’ve been successful, as parents I suppose. I don’t feel that I haven’t been fulfilled. I don’t feel unsuccessful because I haven’t had kids … I suppose for some people, the children are their whole purpose. But I don’t think my gene pool is going to make any difference to the world. (Mick)

The comments above express a dominant belief that children are important, to society and to the people that have children. Although the desire and circumstances around having children varied, the men still acknowledged the importance of children to other men and society. However, for them it was less of an issue, even in Alastair’s comment before those of these four men.

Other men were more philosophical in their comments about the importance of children to other people:

All of those other parts that make up, there’s a whole array of other things that you have, as a life experience. It’s not just solely the children, that’s just a part of that, isn’t it. If “children” are the focus and the only way to live, there would be a lot of sad people out there. If “children” is the sole thing that makes up your life, I think you’re missing out on a lot. There’s a lot more out there than just children you know. I think that’s a very narrow concept if “children” is all you want to have to feel good in life … it might be the only way for some people, but I think, to life, there’s more than just children. (Adam)

[Parents] say that was the best thing I ever did in my life is to have these wonderful children. I hear that all the time. These people are easily satisfied if they think having kids gives them meaning. I shouldn’t say that, but … children are not the only way. The general consensus is that it’s the most popular way to develop a purpose for one’s life. It seems to have the greatest depth of all things, including joy and grief, and lasts a lifetime. I went the path of developing what’s left, and that is trying to be useful. (Andrew)
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Given the importance placed by society on having children, Adam and Andrew’s comments seem to be defending life without biological offspring. Their comments also demonstrate how discourse influences the meaning of their experiences of being childless, the value of adopting two types of analyses to reveal deeper understanding of ways in which male childlessness is operationalised in society, and within the lives of childless men.

Andrew also talked about ‘breeders’ and ‘non-breeders’, making biological reference to those who ‘have children’ (have produced offspring) and those who do not. Even though he was content with not having children, his reference to ‘what’s left’ still implies a sense of how life is discursively prioritised. As a possible resistance to the hierarchy afforded biology and political privilege of the ‘breeders’, Andrew adds: ‘The breeders do not necessarily get to do all the expression in a society with their DNA. Non-breeders can influence the expression outcome too, not just the breeders’. In other words, people who do not have biological offspring can have other inputs and contribute to society in other ways that are valuable and not necessarily inferior to the contributions made through offspring.

The following comment from Alastair rejects the importance placed on and the benefits received for having children by/from government, which also entangled his decision to marry and not have children with his wife, who did not want children:

*All you’ve done is make a decision. So my money, is helping you, where I’m getting nothing … You’re not paying any tax towards my life. Nothing! All you’ve done is make a decision … the luck that you have … I’m white, English speaking, male. I’m the top of the tree … the top of the tree in society, when you look at colour, race, religion, disabilities, lack of education … when you think about it, the top … I realise how lucky I am, through my birth. That’s it. Is there a debt to society to some degree for that? Absolutely … absolutely there’s a debt that I need to pay back, but that’s an individual thing. The government can’t make me do that … that’s perhaps me paying my debt for having no kids, looking after other people’s. You don’t need a child in your life to be a part of a community … The fact I’ve got no children doesn’t mean I can’t have children in my life.*
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While Alastair’s comment critically reflects an awareness of the government’s priority for those who have children, it also bespeaks a perceived debt to society. He understands white privilege, yet his position at ‘the top’ seems to be undermined by having not produced offspring. Alastair admits to being very ‘black and white’ in this thinking, hence his annoyance at the government supporting and rewarding those who have made the decision to produce offspring, rather than the decision not to. In his last comment, Alastair seems to feel the need to defend his position as a community member, and reify a dominant pronatalist view that indeed he does ‘have children’, albethey his godchildren and nephews.

For men who have stepchildren, fostered, adopted and/or godchildren, these relationships can blur one’s sense of ‘having’ children. All the men in the present study had had to negotiate social reproductive expectations during their lives in some way. Some were still negotiating them. Over the lifetime for others, it had been a relatively smooth life journey, feeling very little pressure related to the importance of having children. For others it had been like travelling on a gravel road, negotiating the periodic corrugations of people’s comments:

_During the biologically possible years many of [wife’s] acquaintances, close and distant, thought it their role to offer uncalled-for advice to [wife], and I know that proffering of sometimes sympathetic shibboleths did neither of us or our relationship any good! (Richard)_

_That was the mid-80s. You’re born, meet a partner, get married, have a child, buy a house, die. That’s the formula. So we had veered off the formula of, at that time, mainstream society. (Alastair)_

_There’s this solid expectation that, you know, your life journey involves getting married, having children [tapping the stages of life on the table] ... Before I’d come out to my parents, they would constantly talk to me about marrying and having children ... Being of a Greek background, family and children are front and centre. (Peter)_

_There are people who make it their business to make you feel that way... There’s the pressure thing, “when are you getting married?” or “when are
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“you having kids?” It’s just bizarre. I find that very strange. To me that’s really a quirky and interesting phenomenon. Why do people who’ve chosen that path, and who’ve got married and/or had kids, why do they put this pressure on their friends to do the same? ... all that sort of stuff. [Laughing] “look, you’ve wandered off the path of what’s important in life for a while, and so we’ll get you back on again”. (Harry)

Although social attitudes are changing in Australian society, producing offspring still forms part of the expected trajectory in life. Having your ‘own’ children is a dominant social discourse on what is expected when in a permanent relationship. In Foucauldian terms, intersecting bio-power with bio-politics reinforce the importance of ‘having children’. The comments from the men in the present study highlight reproductive discourse and the importance of children extending beyond the individual, to wider social contexts, which then recoils back within how men experience childlessness. Underpinning the discourse is that children, either in their presence or in their absence for ‘childless’ people, represent the core of our society, by which humans live and gain purpose.

6.3 The tension between passive tendencies and being consciously active in the face of reproductive discourse

In the face of reproductive discourse—of the importance placed on wanting and having children—the men’s narratives revealed tension between a passive tendency, and being consciously active, towards having or not having children. By this I mean, on the one hand having a relaxed psychological approach—the way men think, feel, and behave—in their desire and decisions around having children over the course of their lives. And on the other, being consciously active in trying to have a baby by various means.

Drawing from what the men were saying, concepts of reproduction are quite powerful. They seemed to have an impact on their behaviour towards reproduction, which was mediated by their level of desire to have or not have children. According to the men, reproduction was constructed in a way that society assumed people want and will have biological offspring; as Luke remarked: ‘After all, we are here to procreate’. However, their responses to these assumptions varied.
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‘Passive tendencies’ were revealed in a more casual and covert manner, but evident in the way in which men were talking:

I should have got tested. (Felix)

I should have made more effort. (Jack)

I sort of always, without ever planning it or whatever, but always sort of assumed that one day I’d end up with somebody who wanted to have kids and I’d have kids ... but that hasn’t happened ... (Simon)

Their passive behaviour towards the notion of having children seemed to manifest as a concession, like an awakening as they now reflected back on their lives. With a somewhat different tone, Craig made a similar comment that also incorporated cultural differences:

When we were in Bali a couple of years ago, our guide who was driving us around, said to us “why don’t you have children? You have to have them so they can support you when you get old”... oohh, never thought of that before ... is that what we were meant to do? [laughs].

Despite its humour, Craig’s comment suggests that many men were not consciously aware of their passive tendencies when younger. Yet a few men were able to articulate the passive natures of other men, and of themselves:

Look, the natural inclination is to have a child. But obviously, a lot of people, men, they’re not completely one way or the other. (Luke)

I think some men are lazy. They’ve never actually made the decision to do it or not to do it. They’ve just drifted, and it just happened by accident that they ended up without kids. (Harry)

Noteworthy here, when I repeated Harry’s use of the word ‘lazy’, he corrected me: ‘lackadaisical’ ... and then continued:
I think there’s an awful lot of that, and I think there’s a little bit of that in me, and my brothers.

Harry’s correction reminded me of another interview in a smaller psychological research project a few years earlier.20

Having a longer reproductive lifespan than women is, one possible part explanation for some men exhibiting a passive tendency towards reproduction. Men do not necessarily have, the same biological imperative to produce children by the age of 50 as women do, as was encapsulated in comments from Alastair and Simon:

The reality is, [laughing] I still could actually achieve that. Really, if I wanted to have a child, I could have a child. Really! That’s the reality. (Alastair)

Without ever planning it or whatever, I always sort of assumed that one day, I’d end up ... have kids ... considering my family, it could still [happen].
(Simon)

For both men the notion of having children was strongly associated with the ability to produce a child, and not necessarily raising a child, hence revealing psychological implications in their passive tendencies towards reproduction. While some men demonstrated passive psychological behaviour towards having or not having children, others were consciously active in their ‘high desire’, or their ‘no desire’ to have children.

Men who wanted children and were consciously active in their attempts to produce offspring had experienced unsuccessful IVF cycles, accepted donor sperm, and looked and hoped for suitable partners with whom to ‘settle down and have children’. Other men, who would have loved to have offspring ‘of their own’, had

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20 While interviewing a transgender 20 year old, they stated that a stable relationship with someone was important to be able to then consider having children ‘one day’. Although they referred to themselves as ‘queer’, when I repeated their use of the word ‘queer’ I was corrected and asked to use the word ‘transgender’. It was done in a polite manner, and yet, as a reflexive account of my interviewing experiences, it forms an interesting co-production of data in an interview process. It also highlights a sense of ‘ownership’ of language, and/or performs as a defence mechanism because words such as ‘lazy’ and ‘queer’ could be misused with negative connotations by an ‘outsider’. This is a useful and important reflexive observation, in terms of how well researchers are listening to the participants.
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made conscious decisions and actively declined biological fatherhood as a way of saving a marriage or if their wives already had children. Reflecting on their reproductive desire and effort, some of these men remained sad, desperate, lonely, and at times had suicidal thoughts, while others had found comfortable levels of contentment in their relationships with their partners and step/adopted/godchildren, nephews and nieces.

For those men who were consciously active in not producing offspring, some moved from one relationship to another to avoid having children, the wife/partner had a termination or took the morning after pill when she became pregnant, they married someone who also did not want children, or they chose to remain single. Some of this consciously active behaviour associated with low or no desire to have children was underpinned by fear of the risks of having children, or involved couples with low self-esteem—discussed previously in section 5.3.3.

Passive tendencies or being consciously active in trying to have, or avoid having children are not necessarily straightforward. For example, one participant opened the interview conversation by taking a deep breath, and immediately springing into what happened 20 years ago:

Got married. It happened really quick. My partner said, “I don’t want children”. Straight out. This all happened in one weekend. And I thought “I don’t want children either”. I don’t know what made me say it. I hadn’t thought about it. I hadn’t thought about the consequences of going down this track, if in fact that was the track we went down, and subsequently it was. And to this day, I’ve never regretted this statement .... And that was a long time ago... [and then he added] ... So I made my mind up. We made our mind up, and then we’ve had a very fulfilled life ... But from that decision I went down a really dark path of... I don’t want children in my life at all. I don’t want them in my house! I don’t want them in the supermarket, because I made this conscious decision, to have a nice, quiet, childfree life, and I find myself in the supermarket with a screaming child ... and that was a really dark patch for us in the house that, we then said, well, if we invite people over for dinner, we don’t want people with children. And being of that age, and that cohort.... (Alastair)
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Alastair, if he had remained in his hometown of birth in another country, probably would have been married with children. Therefore, in one life trajectory, he would have been likely to have had a relaxed reproductive approach and gone the expected path of getting married and producing offspring. But instead he ‘veered off the path’, and actively went with his wife’s desire not to have children. For Alastair, there seemed at times during the interview to be tension between one life trajectory of the possibility of having children and ‘the irony’ of the potential of ‘being a great dad’, and his current life trajectory of having actively decided not to have children. Alastair also mentioned that, to this day, he had not asked why his wife did not want to have children, which resonated with the experience of another man encountered in my Honours research. From another perspective, passive, relaxed reproductive behaviour could also be interpreted, with Alastair having gone with the flow of his wife’s desire not to have children. In this sense, the passive tendency is reflected as reproductive life that ‘could have gone either way’, as Harry observed of himself, and of other men.

Another man who thought ‘having children’ could have gone either way also exemplified a relaxed, passive approach towards reproduction. Brendan was aware that he was not very proactive when he met his wife:

*I think when we got together, we decided to, I can’t remember what happened, whether she talked me into it, or whether I decided it would be a good thing… and then it didn’t happen anyway.*

Brendan, who lived on an island, lamented that it was ‘all such an effort’ having to go to the mainland for IVF and other treatments and tests, and recounted the toll the distress was taking on his marriage and his everyday life. His comment reflected the view that he was not sure if he really wanted children anyway, and so experiencing the effort required in trying to have a child had created a tension. The tension between slumbering tendencies and having to make active decisions around having or not having children seems to also depend on the limited reproductive lifespan for women. Another married man who had two children by IVF by the same sperm donor had found out in his adult years that he was infertile due a pituitary dysfunction in his childhood:
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I wasn’t going to get married because I was too busy sailing [laughing] I thought I didn’t want children. It was a bit of a shock for me too [finding out he is infertile]. I was 32 when I married. I was a having a good time sailing [laughs]. I was 36 when we had [first son] and 40 when we had [second son]. You have to start the IVF before 40 to have the second child. We just snuck in. (Paul)

Even though Paul’s wife was more consciously active in having children as she was nearing the end of her reproductive lifespan and really wanted children, Paul needed also to be consciously active, like Brendan, in ‘having children’:

I don’t feel sad about it. There was something I could do about it. It was something good. (Paul)

Using Richard’s expression, ‘those reproductively possible years’ are somewhat bound and powerfully controlled for men by the limited reproductive lifespan of women. It therefore follows that the shorter reproductive lifespan for females can contribute to tension for males, between passive attitudes towards, and being consciously active in, producing or not producing offspring.

The diagram below helps to illustrate that although reproductive discourse holds implicit assumptions that people want and have biological children, reproductive behaviour shows something different. A tension exists between passive tendencies towards having children and being consciously active in trying to, or trying not to, have children. The dotted line indicates that the reproductive behaviour is not as defined, more ambivalent, as those who are taking direct action. Whether the men wanted or did not want to have children, or were ambivalent, their reproductive behaviour resulted in psychological outcomes of regret and satisfaction:
The institutional foundations of reproduction consist of humans wanting and actively having children within their reproductive lifetimes. For men, having a longer reproductive lifespan and varying levels of desire to have children mediates human consciousness to take reproductive action. The tension between passive tendencies being subconsciously inactive towards reproduction and being consciously active is not well documented. Questions are raised about whether it is innate for some men to subconsciously comply with biology. In other words, due to having a longer reproductive lifespan, with no biological decision point, is it simply the nature of men not to feel the same level of urgency—as women—to decide about having children?

If passive tendencies are to some extent innate, the psychological imperative to actively want, or not want, children could be viewed as being a form of resistance.
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to existing passive tendencies. The resistance takes the form of being consciously active in their reproductive behaviour—in trying to produce children or avoid producing children. Alternatively, being consciously active—or intentional—in trying to produce offspring may also be innate reproductive behaviour, whereas intentionally avoiding producing offspring reflects the ‘humanness’ in the concepts of how reproductive behaviour can be understood. The observation of passive tendencies and conscious action towards reproduction is intended to help illuminate a critical understanding of men’s reproductive behaviour.

6.4 Assumptions of inherent risk in being biologically reproductive

Associated with discourse on the omnipresence of children and decisions and desires to have and not have children was, for some men, the notion that there is a level of risk to having children. For example:

To look after the consequences if it went wrong... (Alastair)

The risk of having children and having them grow up as ungraciously as I did [and] the responsibility of looking after them. (Charlie)

The reasons for concerns about risk were not always clear. Some men’s comments reflected what they had experienced in childhood or poor relationships with fathers. Low self-esteem seemed to be an important association with perceived inherent risk in having children, although not for all men in the study.

For example, during my interview with David, whose friends had described his self-esteem as ‘probably excessive’, he questioned me as a woman, not the researcher, about having children. David had observed a family with severely disabled children when he was younger, and saw the impact the impairments had on the lives of the parents. He thought the experience had influenced him in not wanting children. I purposely kept my answers short and as ‘neutral’ as possible as I was curious as to where the questioning might lead, and also about the nature of interviewer-interviewee interchange being temporarily reversed:
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David: Have you got children? Am I allowed to ask?
Interviewer: Yes. Sure. One
David: How old?
Interviewer: Eleven
David: Right... and how old are you?
Interviewer: 52
David: So that was pretty late to have a child...
Interviewer: I was 40
David: So... so... that would have been quite a hard decision at 40, 41, wouldn’t it?
Interviewer: Not for me
David: [thinking] It ... It ... It ... health-wise, it would have been a bit of a risk, wouldn’t it?

David worked in a high-risk area of finance. It was clear that his sense of level of risk was somewhat different from my perception of risk associated with having a child at a ‘pretty late’ time of my life. David’s questions were rhetorical. His certainty of risk and not wanting children had been challenged when his wife became pregnant, and subsequently had a termination. Witnessing the lives of parents of a child with disabilities became David’s ‘logical reason’ for not wanting children, and helped him rebuff, without regret, the assumptions of the importance of having children—linking with the previous discourse.

For many of the men, the risk of having children later in life was pertinent. Concerns of becoming an older father were often expressed in calculated numerical terms, as by Felix:

You start to think about ... ok, having a child at 54, the child will be 16 when I’m 70 ... 20 when I’m 75 ... bored to bits. You know, do you want to saddle a child with an elderly parent?

Perceived risks of older biological fatherhood demonstrate that although men have longer reproductive spans, some develop a sense of when they are ‘too old’ to become a father. As the men in the study were over the age of 50, most considered they were now too old to have children, as they would be, like Russell, ‘running the risk of not
being able to keep up’. While a few, like Simon, liked the idea that ‘it could still happen’, risks associated with having children were also reflected in emotional concerns: ‘How would I have coped!’. Hence, there were not only genetic and physical risks, but also psychological risks.

Risk was also associated with success and failure. While observing friends and family with children, Andrew and Harry reflected:

\[I\text{ can’t imagine perfect sons, or daughters. My brother succeeded.}\text{ (Andrew)}\]

\[\text{One of the lucky ones ... [in light of their having children and a successful marriage]}\text{ (Harry)}\]

Risk, here, is portrayed as a dichotomy. It will either work out perfectly or fail miserably. The following comments demonstrate how some men would have preferred more certain outcomes if they were to have children:

\[\text{Look there’s always been a very powerful urge in me to be reproductive biologically and there’s another side to me, [laughs] to be sensible. You’re not going to do this unless you know it’s going to work.}\text{ (Luke)}\]

\[\text{I think having your own [genetic] children is less of a risk ... for the simple fact that you know where they’d come from [his own genes] ... unfortunately the failures I’ve seen [of friends who have adopted children].}\text{ (Russell)}\]

\[\text{I didn’t want to be responsible for a kid growing up, in what I call these troubled times, and what their future’s going to be, [but he also adds] ... So I think ok, if I, you know, fathered some poor bloody kid that ended up with my quirks and insecurities ... I wouldn’t want that.}\text{ (Mick)}\]

\[\text{[when asked to donate sperm for a friend] What it came down to, I don’t think I’m mature enough at 40, with what I’m doing, to go into this, and I don’t want to stuff it up ... for them.}\text{ (Noel)}\]
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From these comments, the uncertainty of progeny outcomes was recognised by some men as an incalculable risk of nature and nurture. Richard and Adam concurred: ‘Having children is no guarantee’, as did William: ‘you’re not sure with children’. It then follows that some men avoided biological fatherhood to avoid the risk. Given that the men were over 50 years of age, it is also possible some used this as a rationalisation for childlessness ‘after the event’. Andrew admitted that he had self-preservation in mind when he remarked:

> You can never be certain that the children will fill all your expectations ...
> Any families are very unhappy. I didn’t want to have children because I know what life’s like.

Uncertainty and risk, for some men, became a reason for not having children. Risk avoidance may be a way of resisting dominant pronatalist ideology, in that everyone is assumed to want, and have, children. Perceptions of risk, deep-seated or otherwise, may cloud someone’s deep desire to not have children, and be swept over with the phrase that ‘everything turned out well in the end’. David alluded to this point when he talked about how his wife would have loved to have had a baby, and yet he added that she had achieved so much in life that she may not have achieved otherwise. It was evident in the men’s narrations that the sense of risk clearly varies.

For many of the men in the present study, having children seemed to be one of the greater risks in life. They seemed to have taken a step back and weighed up, or calculated, the potential risks of producing offspring. To what extent the reproductive behaviour of each man was driven by risk avoidance and low self-esteem is not known. Yet not having control over nature, and the circumstances of having children, may also be factored into assumptions of the inherent risk of having children. A metaphor from Harry encapsulates the feeling of risk when contemplating the psychobiological outcomes of producing offspring:

> It’s like terroir and wine. Everything we do as human beings, has our touch, has our input, is subtly moulded ... [children] are like growing grapevines from seeds. It’s not the way to do it, because anything can happen.
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6.5 The embedment of reproductive thinking in biology and animal kingdom discourse

Reproduction is fundamental ... that’s physical ... it’s in the animal world
(Anthony)

Implicit in their comments recognising the importance placed on having children, producing offspring, and countered by the potential risks brought the men’s thinking about reproduction right back to ground level—back to the basics of biology and the animal kingdom. Reiterating some of my observations in Chapter 1, people can overlook or disregard the way humans are situated within the animal kingdom, and whether they have the same biological priming as other species.

The way the men in the study perceived the connection with basic biology was inherent in what they were saying. For example, preceding his comment above, Anthony referred to reproduction ‘in its raw meaning’. Felix concurred, with reproduction having an ‘obvious concrete definition’, that referred to by Felix and David as ‘having children’. Interpreting ‘having’ as something physical within the animal kingdom, as Anthony did, other men perceived reproduction in a similar manner:

An animal having another animal. (Alastair)

There are breeders, and there are non-breeders. (Andrew)

You assume it’s normal, the innate desire to, well, the act of having children.
(Mick)

Although some men were more overt than others in their expressions, it seemed that when talking about a ‘grass roots’ topic like human reproduction, language brought man and other species closer together. When Mick referred to ‘normal’ reproductive behaviour, he was referring to the expectation of producing offspring, which raised the question of the men themselves being ‘not normal’ (David).
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A few men expressed a comparative view of what was ‘normal’. Adam for example, who had an adopted son whom he loved, implied that adoption was not the normal way to ‘have a child’, and added:

Even in your normal … if you had a child of your own, you have genes from this person and genes from that person that goes into the mix.

It follows that the articulation of ‘normal’ biology, being scientific and fundamental to the men, became a strong index against which to compare oneself. For Russell, biology was shaped as being ideal and fundamental to a happy life, like he had had with his parents, as he explained:

If they’re not your own blood, well, it’s very important I believe. The blood is somehow, that’s where the personality comes out … That’s the whole point. If I had my own children, they’d have a bit of me, and a bit of my partner in it, which would be ideal! … and knowing full well that you have a child that comes from a happy mum and a happy dad, well you have something to play with there, and enjoy life with. It’s probably being a bit selfish, but it’s more about my own flesh and blood, yeah, absolutely, it’s about the genes, not the name so much. (Russell)

Russell was not one of the men who contemplated risk with biology—quite the opposite. Although successful in other areas of his life, all Russell wanted was to be happily married with children. Yet not all men aspire to the ‘wonderment’ of biology. For example William, who decided from a young age that he did not want to have children, was more philosophical:

Animals have an instinctive drive, they say, to promote their genetic line. I have chosen to live my life according to something much more objective than some long-buried instinctive memory.

Russell, however, felt so desperate to have children that he had contemplated adopting, so he could ‘have children’ and become a father. For Russell, adoption was the ‘next option’. But adoption came with risks, risks emanating from an unknown
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bloodline and personality. Biology was considered a safer guarantee and the best option, generating something of a hierarchy of how to ‘have children’ and attain ‘ideal’ fatherhood.

Similarly, Simon had wanted to marry a long-time, yet periodic, girlfriend who was pregnant to another man. He had asked if she would have a termination, and said that otherwise he would not marry her with a child to another man. Simon thought he would ‘end up with someone who wanted children’. However, if he was going to have a child, and become a father, he felt quite strongly that his child needed to be his own genetic offspring, of his own blood. Ideas of preferably not wanting to raise someone else’s child resonate in other areas of the animal kingdom (see Gray & Anderson, 2010).

For the group of men in the study, having a patrilineal bloodline perceived in a hierarchical framework crossed cultural and same-sex relationship boundaries. For example, one of the homosexual men in the study, who was like a father to his godchildren, talked about his previous relationship with a younger man who, despite being gay, was being pressured by family to perform his duty to produce offspring:

*He came from an East Asian background, and his familial expectation is to have children. He’s the only boy and he feels a sense of pressure. He said there’s an expectation that he would, and in that world the expectation, well, to be gay ... but they’ve got their head around that. But the expectation to carry on the family line is very important to them ... like a case of you do what you have to do [regarding being gay], but you still have to have [genetically related] children. It’s a serious expectation, a familial, a cultural, religious, it’s a societal thing for them. (Colin)*

Colin, who had been single most of his life, then talked about the cultural differences within his current stable relationship with a South American man:

*They have their own familial bonds and expectations, but it’s not anything like [former partner’s] experience.*

As Colin highlighted, different cultures and religions, which may once have been rigid in their pronatalist views of heterosexual married couples having biologically
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related offspring, have relaxed some of these parameters — (assumptions of heterosexualism and reproduction are discussed in the following sub-section). Some couples who may have remained childless are now able, in accordance with revised religious guidance, to produce offspring with donated sperm and undergo IVF (Inhorn, 2006), necessitating a shift in attitudes towards how men and women ‘have children’.

From the men’s narratives, biology discourse seems to have a persistent influence in everyday language, in phrases that people might use in a casual, off-hand manner. For example, the phrase: ‘It’s just in my nature’ (Simon). When musing back on his young adulthood days, a third man commented: ‘When my mates in those days were pairing up and getting married …’ (Mick). When reflecting on social friendships over his life, another man indicated that: ‘Maybe that’s a natural selection thing, that maybe when people don’t have kids, they fall away’ (Brendan). Simple comments like these demonstrate how ‘biological speak’ is an integral part of language when talking about reproduction. The topic of childlessness seems to generate subconscious psychobiological thinking which, in turn, triggers an articulated reminder from men of the primordial connection that humans still have with other living beings of the animal kingdom.

With the bigger picture in mind, the imperativeness of biological reproduction for human survival was noted. It was not surprising, therefore, to hear comments about world population, and the tension around what human beings — like any species community — are ‘supposed’ to be engaging with. Comments from Jack and Alastair help to illustrate this point:

I think people want to contribute [to society]. I think it’s because we’re primates, a social group. It goes back through genetics and evolution, an advantage that, group survival socially … tribalism, and in fact, they’ve done studies about society, about the pressure of numbers. (Jack)

I see people who have more children than perhaps they can manage … so if I’m looking to replace myself, numbers wise, that person has replaced themselves 5 or 6 fold, [laughs] so that more than covers me. I’m concerned about environmental issues, and there’s more than enough people in the world, I don’t need to replace myself. The fact is, a country needs to replace
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themselves to keep going … well there’s enough, more than enough … too many! (Alastair)

For some of the men, the issue of world over-population became a platform from which to defend their choice in not having children, not participating in what living beings are programmed to do. To help support their reproductive viewpoints about global over-population, a couple of men offered critical opinions about the wrong types of people who were producing offspring:

I think the problem [half laughing] is that a lot of people who have children shouldn’t have children … and I say that seriously. A lot of people, particularly men, who are not good fathers, and were never going to be good fathers, and they probably would’ve been better off not to … but um … but I’ve never thought it strange [that some people don’t want to have children]. Does that mean I’m screwed up? [half laughing] … I do suspect a lot of people have children because they don’t think about it. (David)

I know we can’t control the human race because people have tried in history, and it’s not good. But why, whoever designed us, has allowed this to happen, are the big questions that I find difficult within myself, because I just can’t believe we keep allowing uneducated people to reproduce. (Charlie)

David’s comment in particular speaks to the strength of dominant discourse to have children. It is so automatic to assume that an adult will have a child in society that people do not always think about it as a conscious act. In evolutionary terms, humans are able to make a conscious decision, using reason, to create wisdom about producing or not producing offspring. However, reason and wisdom are subjective, creating a sense of right and wrong for those making decisions to have or not have children. David and Charlie seem to have been resisting or defending themselves against the automatic, ‘innate’ act of producing offspring, and claiming that their active decisions were made for the right reasons.

Given the view that there are a lot of people contributing to world over-population, some men in the study felt as though they could not escape the perception that ‘everyone’ seemed to be having children. For example, Brendan—who lived in a
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small rural environment on an island, was married, and felt quite depressed about not having children—wished to escape the constant conversation about children. He felt frustrated and directed an unresolvable question out loud to the universe: ‘Is there some remote community somewhere where people don’t have children?’ Brendan then answered his impractical question with a resigned but practical answer that acknowledged the fundamental role of biological reproduction: ‘I mean it wouldn’t be thriving for very long if there was’. Although it was intended as a throwaway remark, it was evident that he felt disempowered by not having children and thereby losing purpose in his life. In other words, the powerlessness felt by some men over the ever-pervasive dominant discourse to produce offspring, was again emphasised.

Meanings placed on their experiences of childlessness were influenced from within a framework that the men already knew, that being biology and reproductive behaviour within the animal kingdom. Their comments were a reminder of the primal connection with other living beings. It then followed that the men placed their experience in the context they had observed, and what they ‘knew’, which then implicitly shaped their meanings.

6.6 Assumptions of ‘heterosexualism’ within human reproduction

I had never thought that my life would be incomplete without a child. But now that I reflect on, on the way in which I’ve lived my life … perhaps, I’ve created my own sense of completion, the relationship with my nieces and [partner’s] daughters, and other friends’ children … So I think that’s probably what I’ve done, without realising it. (Peter)

Associated with fundamental understanding of reproductive behaviour within the animal kingdom is the assumption of heterosexualism. Although there has been some social change in reproductive attitudes and practices, both towards and by homosexual men, in Australia (Qu et al., 2016), as implied within Peter’s comment above, homosexual men are still having to discursively construct their procreative decisions and identities within a heteronormative construction of reproduction. Two of the same-sex attracted men in the present study remarked on the changes in social attitudes:
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Surrogacy wasn’t even on my radar back then … It is interesting that, I have sat around the dinner tables with gay friends, and we’ve had the conversation about, ‘would we want to have children?’ And this was before I met [partner]. The general consensus among my network was a resounding “no” but I often had wondered, even back then, I wondered if the resounding no, was actually a way of legitimising what’s occurring, rather than reflecting on how we really feel. (Peter)

To extrapolate from Peter’s comment, the last point he makes, that men try to explain the meanings they have created around not having biological children as opposed to reflecting on what it is really like for them, may be the same for other men, other heterosexual men. Regarding circumstances for same-sex men, Peter continued:

I think it’s fantastic that society’s attitudes are changing to enable that to happen more. . . I have noticed this change in my own network. More and more gay men are having children either on their own, in relationships or through other co-parenting arrangements. (Peter)

A few years back now, [while studying] I was in my 50’s. There was a young girl there, she must have been 18 or 19. After a few months it came out that I was gay, and she said, “Oh are you gay? Oh God, I’ve never met anyone who’s gay. Do you have any children?”… Like it was the second question! And I thought “what?” That was really interesting. She went from gay to children. That was the last thing I’d expect someone to say … We’re living in different times. I think there is a huge difference, a huge social difference because LGBTI people now can have children, and that’s what a lot of them want to do. So things have changed. When I was growing up, being gay, the last thing you would ever think of is having children. The change in society, the changes in social structure. (Noel)

Both comments reflect a shift in both the attitudes and reproductive behaviour of homosexual men, which by their comments neither man had considered possible as a younger gay man. Despite changes in societal attitudes to same-sex relationships and changes in family structure within Australian society, the narratives from some of the
heterosexual men in the present study demonstrated that reproduction continues to be predominantly and powerfully understood in terms of male and female gender, and nature—overlapping with ‘basic biology and the animal kingdom’ discourse. Before cloning and mitochondrial transfer make further advances, the biology of one ovum and one sperm creating another human being seems fundamental. The science of reproduction appears to be more powerful than psychological aspects of existence. Yet both science and the law are changing, and ‘allowing’ changes in reproductive practices for both heterosexual and homosexual human beings. Consequently the force of the edges of how reproduction is fabricated, or constructed, now has to be interwoven with these social changes. It was evident that this is somewhat problematic for some men, as concepts of homosexuality and reproduction were still at odds and became entangled within their narratives:

I’ve never known a man [to have children without a partner] … Well I suppose we’re getting into gay couples here, and… gay men who have children, obviously they don’t have them themselves. They adopt them or have a surrogate mother … I find that extraordinarily difficult to handle personally, but that’s only my upbringing, and that’s just my personal opinion. If that’s what they want to do, that’s fine. It’s accepted by our society … I’ve got a gay cousin. I’ve got gay friends, and personally, I like them. But I do find it difficult to … [sighs] comprehend how … only because of how I was brought up, and to me, children ideally, should be brought up by a mother and a father. I mean that’s the law of the jungle. Humans have changed the way the animal kingdom works, only because we’re at the top of the tree, and we’re reasoning type animals and we don’t play by the basic rules anymore … Why are we being allowed to change? We could be witnessing something extraordinary. The animal world says you need a male and female to reproduce another human being … and yet, we allow, and that’s the environment they should grow up in and be nurtured and cared for until they’re old enough to do their own thing … and yet we’re permitting our society, whether they’re right or wrong, and I’m not here to judge, to allow two of the same sex, even though they can’t produce something, but they’re allowing two of the same sex to take someone out of that environment that is
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what I call natural, and that’s how we’ve evolved, and put them into ... I feel, it might be a pleasant environment, it’s not a natural environment. (Charlie)

Our culture is changing ... where we have ... why is it we have so many people who are transgender, homosexual, whatever, where ... we used to have this thing where ... I remember gay people used to say ‘I don’t want to have kids’. Now they want kids! ‘I don’t want to get married. Now they all want to get married! How much of it’s fashion? ... How much is it, people wanting to do what they’re told they can’t do? How much is it where the perception of homosexual relationships is changed? ... where they may have been married before, and they want the same legal rights and status, as a straight marriage. Maybe all of it’s mixed in ... there obviously seems to be a lot of homosexual men and women who want to have children, so the instinct to breed and rear children must be in a lot of people ... There seems to be a lot of gay people who now want to have kids, when they didn’t before, which interests me. Do they have a thing where they have fashions as well? It could become fashionable to not have kids, or is it fashionable to not have kids amongst certain couples? (Luke)

The view taken here — of homosexual men having reproductive desires and choices as being ‘fashionable’—seems to imply a temporary anomaly in human reproductive behaviour. The idea of contemporary thinking being ‘fashionable’ links back to Socrates, who understood that thinking, and therefore attitudes and behaviour, were constantly changing and open to change (Maheshwari, 2013); that human existence, in the form of thinking and praxis, human society evolves, rather than just being an anomaly.

Referencing homosexual men having children as fashionable behaviour was also mentioned by one of the homosexual men in the study, but with less condemnation and concern than displayed by the men in the above excerpts:

I look at our networks of same-sex couples, and having a child now is as fashionable as having a dog [small laugh]. I think it’s fantastic that people can do that. I think it’s fantastic that people can have the options, the tools, the ability to have children now. (Peter)
Peter’s reference to fashion may have been a way to quell negative attitudes towards same-sex attracted men having more reproductive choices. Yet describing things in this way also facilitates the acknowledgement of positive changes for homosexual men and recognises that they, like all men, have their own reproductive thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

For some of the heterosexual men in the study it seemed that having to accept homosexuality was one thing, but also having to accept homosexual men having children and forming families was somewhat beyond what they were comfortable to accept, whether it was taking concepts of reproduction too far or perhaps too fast. As a way of resisting change, falling back on the biology and animal kingdom discourse, they were also maintaining the status quo of heterosexual power within reproduction discourse, the ‘law of the jungle’. Doing so may be creating a form of hierarchy of childless men, positioning childless homosexual men as ‘otherised’. An example of not acknowledging the reproductive feelings and experiences of childless gay men was recounted in a story from Noel, from when he had been seriously unwell ten years ago:

*So going through that experience, if I had been a heterosexual male, one of the things they would have normally discussed with me before going in for treatment, if I wanted to have children, because they can freeze the sperm before the treatment starts and store it away for the future. It was never raised with me. They knew I was gay, so they, the doctors took the attitude, well, we don’t need to talk to him about that. It wasn’t an issue. It was an assumption. I should have said to them, “hey my partner and I were thinking about having children…” I didn’t bring it up, because I didn’t want to have children. But I thought it was really interesting that they never brought it up with me. “Oh he’s gay. He’s wanting to be childless”, which is quite shocking really. The assumption that all gay people want to be childless! [half laugh].*

The subjugation of people living differently—in the present case the discourse that, at the time, homosexual men did not procreate—was understood by many of the participants, homosexual and heterosexual alike. Similarly, childlessness becomes a conduit to broader minority cohorts. As one example, Brendan—who was
heterosexual, married, and had tried to have children—lived in a small island community, and in the face of strong rural and remote heterosexual reproductive attitudes and practices positioned himself, his childless self, with minority cohorts of same-sex men, counterculture teenagers dressing in gothic clothing and other people who were perceived, and not accepted, as living and existing in the world in a different, deviant or ‘othered’ way:

The chances of having someone else, who’s interested in the same things as you... If you were gay, how many other gay people are you going to know ... if you can find any ... (Brendan)

Regarding normative values, religious and cultural expectations also play a role in heterosexual assumptions around reproduction. One of the younger homosexual men in the present study, aged 50, was in a stable relationship with a younger partner who had raised the subject of ‘having children’. Colin talked about cultural assumptions as somewhat mitigating the pressure to have children:

Culturally, being gay is something to get used to [for his family]. Not having children is a bit odd. Being gay is left-field as well. But he’s not unaccepted by his family. They think of, well, if you’re happy... but there’s no mention about having kids [laughs]... They would probably find that a bit odd, if we were talking about having kids. My family, well, for dad, he wouldn’t care if we did or didn’t. Mum would probably feel caught between having kids. She’s still got issues around me being gay. I know she’d be torn between wanting to be a grandmother and her son being gay. She’s 87.

Colin’s comment also highlights the generational changes that are occurring with regard to homosexuality and reproduction. He also included a narrative about a former male partner who was from South America, an only son, whose family was putting pressure on him to have children, pushing aside the fact that he was a same-sex attracted man. Again it highlights that for many, homosexual and heterosexual men alike, being in a good relationship is important. Colin remarked that family and cultural pressure to have children ‘sort of vetoes the relationship, and is enough of a reason to think carefully about [decisions to have children]’, adding that his former
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partner had ‘got plenty of time to have kids’. The latter comment, again, emphasises the psychosocial changes in reproductive attitudes among younger homosexual men, compared to comments from the older homosexual men in the study.

The integration, or disintegration, of culture and reproduction with assumptions of heterosexuality was illustrated by Peter, who was in a long-term relationship with his same-sex partner—who had two teenage children from a previous heterosexual marriage when they met. Peter talked about his European background and family putting pressure on him to have children up until the time he ‘came out’ to his family about being gay:

\[\text{There is no question in my mind that the Greek community’s incredibly homophbic. And also, there’s this solid expectation that your life journey involves getting married, having children [hand tapping table indicating life’s steps, expected path], working, retiring. I try not to see life as being linear like that anymore ... I suppose before I’d ‘come out’ to my parents, they would constantly talk to me about marrying and having children. When I ‘came out’, it was like shock, horror, and they didn’t know how to deal with it. And they didn’t deal with it. They just fluffed it under the carpet, until I started to bring a partner home, and they got to know him ... I think that because I’m gay, my family assumed that I would never have children, because I couldn’t ... biologically. They have never mentioned children again! It would be interesting to see what their reaction would be if I came back and announced I’ve made surrogacy arrangements, to have children ... I don’t know how they would react to that ...} \]

Peter and another man, Noel, commented not only on the social change towards and among homosexual men, but also on the compliance and resistance to bio-power and bio-politics within society; referring to discourse that governs social and biological processes. These changes manifest as heterosexual values, expectations and reproductive behaviour within the construct of reproductive concepts, a socially constructive intuitiveness:

\[\text{Homophobia or discrimination is still strong and around in all communities. Straight men without children remain an enigma. Gay men without children} \]
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are considered normal for gay men. Of course this attitude will change as more and more gay men choose to have children. (Peter)

Men my age don’t have to defend why we don’t have children. But for gay males in their 20s and 30s it might be more so. (Noel)

In Foucauldian terms, bio-power forms the foundations of societal reproductive norms and expectations, and subsequently privileges heterosexual men. The ‘egg + sperm’ heterosexual underpinning of reproduction remains somewhat powerful. Yet the scaffolding of how reproduction is understood is changing, with more same-sex men making their own reproductive decisions. The equation ‘egg + sperm = heterosexual marriage’ is being challenged.

‘Childless’ homosexual men still have to negotiate gendered and heterosexual boundaries, but perhaps less so. When Berkowitz and Marsiglio (2007) conducted their study in the United States ten years ago, exploring procreative narratives of 20 homosexual fathers and 19 childless homosexual men, they found that homosexual men were still growing up in a world organised by heterosexuality. Even though homosexual men face more challenges, in having to discursively construct their procreative identities within a heterogenous construct instead of the governance of population and the privilege of bio-power, it is important to note that some homosexual men resist, and explore levels of freedom with ‘reproduction’.

6.7 Assumption that reproduction is more important to women

In one sense heterosexualism within reproduction discourse could be posed as a subtext of biology and animal kingdom discourse. However, there was another assumption that is posed in a similar manner for the men in the present study—an assumption that reproduction was more important to women. Throughout their narratives, men in the present study would often allude to the greater importance of women within the reproductive sphere, in terms of the reproductive nature of women, their biology, and their innate psychology towards reproduction. The following are more than the usual number of quotes taken from the men’s narratives which show how women are referenced in different ways whilst maintaining their centrality within reproductive concepts:
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The role of the mother is primary, natural, indispensable. Role of the father is external, more adoptive ... The mother-child relationship is fundamental, that it’s biological, and therefore, it’s the primary relationship. Whereas, any father, or any male’s role, is by nature, secondary, and it has to be learnt, because there’s not an automatically natural bond, like there is with the mother. (Anthony)

[In reference to his wife] She mothers the cat ... her maternal instinct ... her channelling the wanting of a child ... the cat being her child substitute. (Felix)

I think society frowns if you haven’t got kids. [His wife] might feel that a bit more ... It’s a bloke thing really. Heterosexual men don’t chat about these issues in my experience but during the biologically possible years, many of [his wife’s] acquaintances, close and distant, thought it their role to offer uncalled-for advice to [his wife] and I know that proffering of sometimes sympathetic shibboleths did neither of us or our relationship any good. In some ways, to get her through those very difficult years, it was then and remains now, my role to do the bloke thing. Point out that the glass is more than half full and if that fails, change the subject. It’s what married men who care for their partners the world over do. (Richard)

I think women feel more like nest-builders and maternal than men. I think so on the whole. I think that’s the way it works. It’s biology. I could be wrong. But I reckon that’s the way it works ... I never had that need, to make sure there’s all these children out there ... I think women have that maternal urge in the first place. I think it’s kind of in the nature of men, the difference between being a man and being a woman. (Adam)

I’m here for people who don’t have children ... who are childless, but who are not childless through choice. Women as well ... that’d be very sad to be a woman and not, you know ... I think it’s more so than for men ... because it’s sort of a biologically more ... tied up with their femininity. (Jack)
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[Referring to his wife who did not want children, so that he had to choose between having children or his wife] She’s never had a parental vein in her, and that is really quite unusual. And we often talk about people who want children and can’t have them, primarily the female, what if she [his wife] had been able to produce five kids, quite easily ... we’ll never ever find out ... there’s a whole combination of how the female arrives at the place of being a parent, or not. (Alastair)

For some of these men, the centrality of women within the reproductive sphere resided in women naturally yearning to be mothers and having a primary role in parenting, something further reinforced by the nurturing discourse. Men can feel secondary, disempowered as ‘the second sex’ and ‘othered’ in reproduction complicating the notion of women as the second sex (de Beauvoir, 1949). By this I do not mean men felt disempowered in a hegemonic sense, but that their experience was conveyed with feelings and emotion, and at times internalised lament. The perceived centrality of women might then be considered female privilege, in terms of a man not ever becoming a biological father without the ‘permission’ of a female to father a child, or her being willing to donate an egg, or consenting to birth a child for him.

When Peter was asked if he had male friends who desperately wanted to have children, he responded:

Not that I know of. I have women friends who fit that. Women who are now in their 50s who do feel that very much, and talk about being childless. I don’t know of any men who feel like that.

Charlie made a similar comment referring to his ‘personal view’ about people having an innate urge to have children—‘the greater percentage would be female’. Yet it was evident in his later comments that his personal views as to the biological centrality of women were a lot stronger:

That expectation, and your mother’s saying, “I can’t wait to be a grandmother”, and all those titbits ... But also you jump to the innate side, the inherent side of being a human being where the female ... and this is what makes me laugh about today’s society ... I mean it does come down to basics.
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women are the ones who bear children, still, thank goodness, and most women possibly do, start to feel that maternal instinct and say, I really would like to have a child of my own. And that’s where, that’s just bred into us as human beings, well, animals, we’re head of the animal kingdom. All animals do it. It’s nature. (Charlie)

Although women were perceived to hold much power within the concept of reproduction, a few men tried to resist that power, but then reverted back to the dominant position of females:

You quite often hear the other side, regarding females not having children. But you don’t often hear about men. Well mothers are the natural nurturers, I absolutely get that ... Sometimes I think it’s expected of them. I would say the majority of times, females, I think it’s the gene thing, animal kingdom stuff ... I’m a mad keen watcher of David Attenborough, and I was watching something once, about gorillas, and a lot of the male gorillas would look after the children, the baby gorillas, while the female gorillas go out and do their hunting, and then they hand them back obviously, afterwards. I find that interesting. (Russell)

Noel, on the other hand, was more objective in terms of commenting on the changing social attitudes towards reproductive behaviour. He also highlighted that it is much easier for women to decide to have a child on their own than it is for men. There is added complexity for a male to become a single biological father without input from a female:

For younger generations, there are changes for both women and men. I think with women, not always, but a lot of the time, they’ll reach a point where a woman goes, well I’d really like to have a child, with or without a partner, and it’s possible to do that. And so that’s fine too ... I would guess that the social pressure to have kids is stronger on women as they get older, more so than on men as they get older. But I’m not even sure about that one anymore ... women have traditionally been, almost, if they don’t have children by a certain age, other people go “what’s wrong with you?” Whereas, maybe,
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they’re reluctant to do that to men. Women get more of that. Women get more of the biological pressure … there’s a new State Premier, and already, people are questioning the fact that she’s single and has no children. That’s very interesting... If it was a male Premier or Prime Minister who was single and had no children, would they ask the same questions? So there’s a gender thing happening there.

Female politicians were referenced a few times in the men’s narratives. In another example, Harry remarked disapprovingly on the way in which other people had commented on childlessness in women, particularly in the case of a former Australian Prime Minister:

The whole idea of female childlessness, it’s just the same. I’m not saying it’s worse than that ... [The childless label] is one step up from ... aahh barren! Julia Gillard was described as being “barren” by one of the awful people on the other side of politics ... I don’t strike myself as being a barren male! [half laughing]. (Harry)

I can see why it’s worse for women, you know, that whole drumming it into you from when you’re basically, drumming it into the girls to have children and get married and all that sort of stuff. To me, it seems, it’s so gendered, I think it’s drummed into girls more than boys at a young age. Look, I don’t know obviously, and I’m sure there’s more to it than just being indoctrinated, but indoctrination is a very strong part of it, I think ... To generalise, I think it’s much more damaging and harmful to women because they’re seen as, that's what they’re seen as ... men are not seen as a father but, women are seen as mothers, potential mothers. I think it’s much more adherent ... and the language surrounding that, I’m sure would be very different. A bloke not having a child is a free spirit, we couldn’t tie him down, you know, he’s just sowing his wild oats and enjoying himself... but for a woman, how would you describe that? ... Barren ... oh God, what a word, it’s crazy ... or a maiden aunt or ... (Brendan)
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Both Harry and Brendan used language such as ‘barren’ or ‘maiden aunt’ to negatively describe a childless woman. This language reflects the dominant discourse of the importance of reproduction for women (from when they were young girls); what it means to be an adult, and how family systems emerge. In turn, there lies a paradox for men; on the one hand their comments demonstrate how the importance of women renders men invisible (such as ‘men not being thought of as fathers’), but at the same time some of the men feel ‘lucky’ that they do not have to face the same procreative indoctrination as young boys, or ridicule as an adult through labels such as ‘barren’. When men talked about feeling pressure as adults to have children, responses continued to incorporate the topic of women:

That’s what you say to a woman, “you must be unfulfilled because you never had kids”. It doesn’t apply to men. No-one has ever said that to me, “do you regret not having kids?” I’ve never heard of it said ... But of course some people say “I’m not going to be fulfilled until I have a child”. Women who are getting on, beyond the safe time for child rearing are saying, I do need the child to fulfil my life, and it’s like “I’ve got to have one”. (Andrew)

When [partner] and I first started, the first few years of our relationship, there was a bit of that again, not kids, but to get married, “where’s the ring on her finger?”, all that sort of stuff [laughing]. “Look you’ve wandered off the path for a while and so we’ll get you back on again”. There’s a bit of that. But she reacts more than I do. And she’s had more of that than I have ... Women get more pressure [to have children] than men because they’re more vulnerable ... It has more of an effect, because of the biological clock. There’s a limit beyond which they can’t do it. (Harry)

Drawing from their comments, it seems unlikely that childless men are ever described as being unfulfilled, vulnerable or barren for not having children, implying that there is particular language used for childless women. However, as there is very little qualitative research on male childlessness, men in the present study adopted, or borrowed, language typically used for women.

Some men in the study, however, showed a level of resistance to the centrality of women in the reproductive sphere. For example, while Russell talked about women
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as ‘the natural nurturers’, he then commented: ‘but certainly there are men who do want to nurture’. When I asked Jack if men could have a deep yearning to have children, he responded: ‘Yeah, I do’, and then added ‘Everyone’s different’.

Although their comments demonstrating resistance were at a low level, they highlight that men can also be caring and nurturing human beings. Russell alluded to this when he commented earlier on the David Attenborough documentary showing male gorillas caring for and nurturing their young, while the females were out foraging. From an anthropological perspective, Gray (2010) also reinforces the caring and nurturing nature of some males in discussing the evolution of fatherhood. Men drew from a women-centred framework to reference this point. However, in one sense it can mediate resistance to the dominance of females in their concepts of reproduction:

*I suppose it’s the female feminine aspect of male in caring and nurturing.*

*(Jack)*

*I think that there are men who are more maternal and want to have children. I’m sure there are.*

*(Adam)*

*People talk about female childlessness, and all the emphasis is on women, and why should that be? Maybe there are men who have just as strong feelings as women, and maybe they’ve been overlooked.*

*(Harry)*

The assumption that having children is more important to women is not new. Plato’s view that ‘the womb is yearning and not well for not having children’ also refers to the assumed centrality of children in the lives of women.

As seen in the present study, however, some men question these assumptions that align procreative desires and decisions with women, not only in terms of the caring for and nurturing of children but also in terms of a time-line defining stages of life, and when a man feels too old to become a father. Instead of the saying ‘it’s a man’s world’, with respect to the reproductive sphere—suggested with caution and respect to women’s engendered plights—it could be re-phrased ‘it’s a woman’s world’. Some may view this as one of the few times a central discourse is dominated by females, with the male voice less visible. However, to reiterate, one of the aims of
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the research is to increase understanding of male childlessness, to achieve gender balance in discussions of childlessness and the reproductive sphere, not to compare women and men.

Some cultures behold women and their ‘power’ to gestate, give birth, and sustain life for the survival of their society. Australian society, like many societies, is including men more in the reproductive sphere. However, some men do not want to be included in the producing, nurturing and raising of children, which can make the inclusion and exclusion of men and women in one of the most fundamental aspects of life rather complex. The bio-power and bio-politics of human reproduction can be difficult to disentangle—as evident in Charlie’s and Simon’s comments—engaging ideas about biology, the animal kingdom, and the roles of men in and around the reproductive sphere:

Children, ideally, should be brought up by a mother, and a father. I mean that’s the law of the jungle. Humans have changed the way the animal kingdom works, only because we’re at the top of the tree and we’re reasoning-type animals and we don’t play by the basic rules anymore ... I suppose relating it back to the animal world, if you take the king of the jungle, the lion, generally there’s only one alpha male amongst a lot of males. And a lot of males don’t get the chance to have their own family, procreate, and they are banished to ... a world of slavery, I suppose, outside the female realm. We’re lucky, in terms of being a human being and able to have partners without having to have children, which is the category I now find myself in ... I’ve been with [partner] for 10 years, and seeing her children, their father is still very much on the scene, so I’ve always been just her boyfriend ... From a male–male, he’s the alpha male and I’m an alpha male under different circumstances. He’s in charge of his brood. I don’t feel any threat or comprise, I don’t particularly like him as a human being ... I’ve been warned, by the mother [partner] saying “I know you’re concerned, but ...”. It’s not my territory. So I feel like a bystander. She’s protecting me and the kids. (Charlie)

It’s interesting. I think women who don’t have kids struggle, probably more so than some men who wanted to ... maternal instinct is probably something stronger, as a natural thing, which is probably why the whole species ‘re-
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create’. I think that’s the need to have a child. I mean, in the animal kingdom, there’s that physical natural drive of the male to mate, but it’s just a natural drive and once he’s mated he doesn’t care, in a lot of cases, you know, species and stuff. Whereas, I think, the women nurture … Even in the animal kingdom you can’t say that males mate because he wants to have a … to procreate. I think he just wants to get laid. (Simon)

Charlie’s comment is not too distant from the images that Russell was referring to earlier when watching a David Attenborough documentary on a pride of lions, or a troop of gorillas, and the roles of males and females. However, as Andrew remarked, ‘we are beyond monkeys you know’, defending the difference, and therefore the position of human behaviour within the animal kingdom. Men do care and nurture, but in different ways, and drawing from some of the men’s narratives, in ways secondary to those of women. Although there are some men who feel desperately sad that they do not have children, it is clear there are also men who are not. Perceptions of manhood and male behaviour are clearly diverse.

6.8 Discourse on how to be a man

Freud was right wasn’t he? If you take away sex, life doesn’t have any meaning, there isn’t any need to continue on. It’s such an incredibly powerful motivator. (Andrew)

Drawing from Andrew’s comment, the association of sex, alpha males and hegemonic masculinity can indeed be powerful, and still exists within Australian society, as exemplified by the following comments:

It’s just natural instinct, to breed. Look, I’d be happy to just breed. I didn’t particularly want to bring them up. It’s just instinct to breed. That’s all it is. I didn’t want particularly to be a father. A lot of stress, you know, and a lot of responsibility … I think instinct is hugely powerful, incredibly powerful in people – that will drive behaviour, to me, more than anything … I think [fertility/virility] it’s important to men. I think it’s natural that it’s important … It comes down to roles. Is a man programmed to be a father? I don’t know.
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To me the role of a father is to rear children. Otherwise all he is, is some …
what’s the correct word for it … someone who goes round pollinating flowers? What do you call him? He’s just a rogue bull, just a breeder, [and makes a reference to Genghis Khan and Henry VIII] … Are those men simply interested in getting women pregnant because that’s some sort of status thing to other men? … I didn’t have confidence with the idea of having children. I had hell of a confidence that I could get a woman pregnant … their subconscious is hammering away saying I want to get pregnant … but the bottom line is, your conscious says, I don’t want to get this woman pregnant. (Luke)

Masculinity, just talking to guys, you get that feeling that it’s a little bit of that, maybe proving their masculinity through their fertility … [then adds later]

Even in the animal kingdom, you can’t say that males mate because he wants to have a … to procreate. I think he just wants to get laid. (Simon)

Not all the men viewed manhood in the same manner. For both of these men, their outward expressions of aligning with hegemonic ways of being alpha males seemed nonetheless to be in tension with the facts that they had not produced offspring and were not in stable relationships.

Perceptions of manhood, for some men, were thought about carefully or were challenged when provoked by hegemonic attitudes. For example, Paul became quite annoyed when telling a story of a woman he knew who had died of breast cancer:

‘Her husband wouldn’t let her take her breast off. He said in a boofy voice, “I don’t want a wife with no breast”. I said, “you’re a dickhead” … She died. That sort of attitude I don’t like’. Paul had faced alpha males a few times over his lifetime and alluded to having been bullied when young. He was told that he was infertile due to a childhood disease, but now had two adult children by donor sperm/IVF.

For other men, as a comparison, hegemonic maleness was weighed against themselves, on a much more personal level. Brendan and Charlie recognised hegemonic maleness, but they identified with the concept differently:

I don’t think not having children has an impact on how I see myself as a man … I don’t think so. It’s only heightened here [living in a small rural
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environment] because of the maleness of the males ... To a certain degree, in terms of dealing with children ... they see that I’m a bit softer, but in other ways they just don’t understand what’s happening. They don’t understand what the relationship is ... “What football team do you go for?” “I’m not interested in football” “But you have to go for a team!” “No I don’t have to go for a team” [laughs]. I have that conversation over and over again, and so maybe they find that disconcerting, especially the boys ... As the boys get older, they get a bit more, you know, we don’t have that common language of cars or football or whatever. Then it becomes a bit more problematic ... I don’t classify myself as a particularly normal man. I’m happy to talk about things. I’d rather people talk about their emotions, than the weather or the children. (Brendan)

I’m sure a lot of men think that having children is everything, the height of manhood. I don’t personally, only because I’ve never placed that much importance on having children ... but, there are many men in our society, they think reproducing children is the height of manhood. I have met them. I can’t think of one who’s an actual friend, but I’ve met them in my working career ... I’m not sure whether it’s important to them [to have children] or they use it as showing it as a sign that they can perform like a true man ... It hasn’t happened recently ... I remember people like that when I was Jackarooing and the early bush days, where people would say, and I’m paraphrasing here but, they’d say, “Oh I’m a bit of a stud, I’ve had three kids already”, and I thought “well whoopie-doo-for-you!” [laughs]. It doesn’t do a lot for me. (Charlie)

While talking, Charlie then added more reflectively:

Virility, yeah ... that virility of, I’m a real man ... Quite possibly that’s why I’ve had a lot of relationships, partners, a way of proving that I am a man to myself ... but I don’t dwell on it. But I’d be lying if I said it never crosses my mind.

Many conversations with the men about manhood involved other men ‘boasting’ about their offspring. For example, while Andrew was saying that he did
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not want children, there seemed to be other underlying issues at hand. Andrew then
switched to describing a neighbour:

A handsome great guy … I asked him if he had kids, and he said in a boasting
tone, “I’ve got kids all over Australia” … so he’s got quite a few of them ...
[soft critical scoff]. (Andrew)

Describing his neighbour as a ‘handsome great guy’ seems to comply with images or
the adult male discourse of heightened manhood, possibly the antithesis of how
Andrew felt about himself. There was an impression given, when he described his
neighbour as ‘boasting’, that it was said somewhat through a deflective lens of
lowered self-esteem.

However, not all men in the study had low self-esteem, or felt deflated by not
having produced offspring. David, who was a highly successful man, ‘channelled’ his
sense of being productive through his work and other activities. He commented that
he:

Never wanted to have children … which makes me I expect, an oddball … I
didn’t feel abnormal by not wanting to have children, but it seemed to me that
it probably was abnormal … I don’t feel like an oddball, but, I understand that
most people want to have children. [He stated that he had] no regrets, [and
added] no, no … my self-esteem wouldn’t allow me to think that [laughs]. It’s
always been the way it is, and it’s never bothered me.

David seemed to have upheld a sense of ‘reproductive prowess’—in the present
context, fertile strength as a man—through his successful career and status in his
field, the numerous boards of non-for-profit organisations he sat on, and his
generosity with his wealth. Yet although stating he was comfortable with his
reproductive decisions with his wife, there was still a sense of comparison with
fathers, and a weighing up of being normal or abnormal. For David, and many of the
men interviewed, the adult-male-manhood discourse may be in the background, but it
existed and was shaped differently to that relying on offspring.

Fertile strength, however, can also be apparent in other more covert ways.
There was evidence within the men’s narratives of quiet strength, encapsulated by
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Brendan as he described being supportive of his wife as they experienced the turmoil of unsuccessful IVF treatments:

_That was such a focused, everything, the build-up, the timing of everything, the [travelling], the waiting, the aftermath. I’d start to get excited in my head. I wouldn’t have vocalised it to my wife, because, I wouldn’t raise expectations or let her know how much I was, in my head, if this one worked, then it would mean the baby would be born, and then we could go back home and show it to the family ... you know, doing all those calculations, which I’m sure are very common, and allowing yourself that fantasy of indulgence of where life will be ... But I would never share that because it would seem too cruel. I would worry after it happened, she would say to me “oh you said ...”, whatever it was. So I would keep all that to myself, and try and be the strong, cool type of person, rather than [laughs], spouting all my emotions like I’m doing now._

Brendan then talked about how it was ‘very rare’ for him to cry. But after talking about how upset his wife was, he added: ‘It hadn’t come up for a while but, it’s always there ... I don’t really cry about it ... I think it’s probably true that men may suppress it more than women’. Brendan’s comment resonated with another man’s experience of IVF and withholding emotions:

_I don’t know whether it’s a male thing, but I’ve got relatively detached about it. I’ve tried not to get emotionally involved in my wife’s ... um ... struggles. She probably thinks I’m not being supportive enough. (Felix)_

What start as intentions of trying to be strong for their partners or as self-protection from their own emotions may in turn perpetuate popular lore that not having children does not matter to men. The potential for misunderstanding ‘distant’ behaviour of men was found in my Honours research (Lawrence-Bourne, 2012). According to theorists of adulthood such as Levinson (1978), seemingly detached behaviour is underpinned by men being independent and self-reliant.

Underpinning the scaffolding of adulthood is also the expectation of how life is supposed to be lived (Erikson, 1963, 1982; Levinson, 1986). The men in the study seemed well aware of the attachment of parenthood with adulthood in early to
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midlife. Peter referred to life’s ‘normal’ trajectory as the ‘linear pathway in life’ within which children were an integral focus. Other men also reflected on this association. For example, when one man was approached as a potential sperm donor for his friends he felt that he was ‘not mature [enough] at 40 to have a child’ (Noel). Other comments included:

*I feel that, just because you’re of adult age, and you’re reaching that stage of life, it should not be expected that everybody is, to have children, even though the human race is to continue.* (Charlie)

*I have felt I’ve never ... I haven’t been able to grow up somehow or rather, because I haven’t had kids. I haven’t had that sort of responsibility. But it hasn’t affected with the way that I relate to people.* (Andrew)

With comments about some men ‘pumping out their chest’ (Charlie) after having offspring, Paul commented that if he came across another man who thought he was better than him for having children: ‘... that’s his problem. If he thinks that way he’s been brought up wrong’. Although a background of bullying when he was young and the discovery of infertility in adulthood due to a childhood disease mediated Paul’s comment, the comment was about fairness, and treating people with respect for who they were, with or without children. Paul now has two adult children through IVF with donor sperm. To what extent his sense of ‘having children’ gave him agency to stand up to hegemonic masculinity is not known. But if a man’s sense of having children is perceived as an achievement in life as a man, as being a sign of virility and maturity, is the status quo of the hegemonic aspect of masculine discourse regarding the importance of ‘having children’ in adulthood maintained?

Being an adult male without children was of deeper concern for some men. For Brendan, not having children seemed to negate his sense of maturity, which made it difficult to move forward in life:

*Sometimes I’m stuck in a, in a ... not a teenage or childish but ... but stuck in a role that isn’t, that I’m not a proper adult or something ... I sometimes feel that the way I behave, and my outlook on life is more stunted because I haven’t ... I’m not doing those things that a proper person does. I don’t*
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consider myself to be immature. I don’t consider myself to be clinging onto youth gone by, or anything like that. Sometimes I think, perhaps, maybe I’d be the same even if I did have children. My outlook isn’t necessarily the same possibly as other people of my age or ... oh, I don’t know. You’re constantly reading that, “you don’t know what life is until you have a child”, or, “It wasn’t until that moment that I realised that ...”, whatever it might be. All this sort of thing negates the experience of childless people. But it’s not quite like that. But, sometimes it’s like I’m stuck as a, stuck as a ... stuck as a man, stuck as a teenager...

For Brendan, the discourse of how to be a man overlapped with the discourse of the importance of having children. I included the last part of his comment to show how different discourses and meanings are not separate entities. Brendan, who was more creative and sensitive, lived in a community where most adults had children, talked about their children, and he was aware that he did not have similar ‘male’ interests as other men, nor with the boys. Brendan said that he ‘might be depressed’, with a culminating effect of more than one discourse negatively impacting his psychological wellbeing and his forward outlook on life.

Although the men in the study recognised that there were different ways to be a man, concepts of adult manhood seemed to maintain the status quo of a hierarchy of manhood with powerful hegemonic ways of being an adult male at the top, or at one end of the continuum of maleness. A few of the men aligned themselves, overtly and covertly, as alpha males, with one’s sense of virility held in high esteem. But for most, hegemonic maleness was not beholden with desire and appeal, but more in the sense of being an entity by which they compared themselves—both positively and negatively. It was also evident there were men who felt comfortable and content with who they were as men. As Connell (2005) highlights, and was evidenced in the narratives of the men in the present study, there are many ways to be a man. Yet some men found it difficult to feel comfortable with themselves as men, without ‘childlessness’ overshadowing their masculine identities.
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6.9 Categorisation and dichotomisation of being labelled a ‘childless male’

*I’m un-reproductive, that’s what I am, because I’m infertile.* (Felix)

When exploring personal and often sensitive topics such as male childlessness and reproduction, men who meet the criteria may not necessarily want to be ‘categorised’. Even with the best intentions, categorisation as childless can, in turn, dichotomise men’s existence—separating them somewhat from those who have produced offspring, and the experiences of childless women.

The topic of being a childless man, for example, was quite ‘raw’ for Felix, as he and his wife had spent the past few years trying to have a baby. In doing so, Felix had delayed being tested and had since been told that he is infertile. Felix’s response to and comment on the topic of male childlessness was straightforward. At face value, he was not something (not reproductive), because he was not something else (not fertile) and therefore grouped and labelled by others (academia and social media), as not having something (child-less). The negative meanings of the term ‘male childlessness’ were highlighted through the IPA lens in the previous chapter, however here, with an FDA lens, the very nature of the research topic positions men as the ‘other’, against which some of them felt defensive about their lives without biological offspring. Hence, for some men like Simon, the topic of the present study provided a platform to articulate bio-political points of view and experience, to ‘give the other side’, assuming that ‘sides’ actually exist. The men took the opportunity to defend their various positions of [non-biological] fatherhood, regardless of whether they wanted children.

Although the men in the study identified themselves as being childless, they did not necessarily see themselves as a cohort:

*I don’t think that such a group exists [cohort of childless men] except maybe in some people’s mind. But plenty of people would never think like that.*

(Martin)

*It’s like if you don’t tick all the boxes for any job, any group, you may as well join another group. I don’t have one. I don’t like groups. People like to pin you down ... get an angle on you.* (Luke)
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*I’ve never really wanted to do what everybody else’s doing and never wanted to be in that crowd. I always had to find my own way to do what I needed to do on my own ... I didn’t want to live my life in a group. Even if it was a family group. (William)*

In academic, and more recently social media arenas (Gorman, 2014), however, childless men are grouped as such. Men who have not produced offspring do not necessarily see themselves as belonging to a ‘group’, as a bound cohort. Drawing from their narratives, the single aspect of their lives that binds them is that they have not produced offspring. When researching sensitive topics, there needs to be mindfulness of the variety of discourses that may be harnessed with the topic.

6.10 Summary

From a Foucauldian Discourse Analytical perspective, this chapter has explored some of the wider influences on how ‘reproduction’ and ‘male childlessness’ are experienced throughout many aspects of the lives of men, their identities and how they live their lives. For the participants, the source of the reproductive, and thereby the childless narrative is powerfully bound in biology. This then has a performative effect of the recounting of experiences of childlessness by the men in how they are related to power and identity for each man. The wider narratives of the men’s experiences reflect how experience is structured and thereby expressed. Discourses influence, and are influenced by their experiences of not producing offspring—the ways in which they live, think and behave as men, their own human biology and that of women, the perceived risks of producing offspring, their sexuality, and the past emphasis on only considering women in discussions of reproduction—upon all of which an overarching emphasis on the omnipresence of children was evident. The bio-politics of reproduction—the authoritative power of the politics of reproduction grounded in biology and the body—is a construct that all men without biological offspring negotiate in one way or another. These interconnected discourses have over their lifetimes, influenced the men’s senses of truth and knowledge, inevitably shaping the way in which they narrate their experiences and develop meaning and
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understanding of themselves and the world around them. The insights from IPA and FDA are integrated into the Discussion in the following chapter.
Chapter 7: Discussion

To think about being reproductive as only having children, is being a reductionist. If that’s the only emphasis, you have missed something very rich. (Anthony)

If people don’t want to have children that’s not a problem. It might be a problem for them, but it’s not a problem for society. Well is it? (Luke)

7.1 Introduction

Producing offspring is one in the fundamental happenings as a living being. Yet not all living beings of all living communities produce offspring. Human beings are no exception. Estimates that up to 20 percent of many Western populations are childless give rise to exploring the psychosocial consequences for those who have not produced offspring; in particular for men, whose experiences still remain somewhat hidden. Even though demographic pictures of many populations are changing, a central reproductive focus on women remains; the dominant discourse on pronatalism is still to the social and political fore. While childlessness is becoming more accepted in some societies, parenthood still constitutes a highly-valued and normatively-supported part of most individuals’ biographies. Therefore ‘negative’ fertility outcomes are of particular interest (Sobotka & Testa, 2008). Whether individuals wanted or did not want to have children, the subject of ‘children’ is negotiated at some point in their lives. Even a decision not to have children necessitates engagement with the subject of children.

At face value, male childlessness reflects a particular relation to the reproductive sphere, that is of being outside the sphere, and not having produced offspring. Does the absence of offspring require childless individuals to adopt higher channels of being fertile? Drawing from the narratives of childless men in the present study, they seemed to engage with reproduction in different ways. Deepening understanding of male childlessness and the positive and negative psychosocial consequences of being childless requires conventional biological interpretations, as well as meanings that go beyond biology. Asking the simple question ‘What is it like not to produce offspring?’ elicited both simple and complex responses.
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Drawing from a comment from Hakim (2001) in reference to women breaking through assumptions and stereotyping, likewise for men; if we want to know what matters to childless men, what meanings they place on their individual experiences and how their experiences of childlessness can be incorporated into reproductive concepts, it makes sense to *ask them* directly and ‘take their responses seriously’ (Hakim, 2001, p. 10). Adopting an interview approach that encouraged men to talk as freely as possible about their experiences of male childlessness yielded rich narratives that inspired the application of two analytical lenses to draw out different perspectives on the same phenomenon: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. Human experience is not one-dimensional; taking different analytical approaches helped to reveal complexities, and enriched the understanding of male childlessness. Different epistemologies can be complementary in terms of how the interpretations of narratives are harnessed; what meanings men have generated from their lived experiences of childlessness, and wider discourses that they have internalised and which have impacted on their meaning-making. From within their own narratives the men moved sometimes fluidly and at other times abruptly from one experience to another and from one discourse to another, highlighting insights gained by using the tenets of the free associative narrative interview process; enabling participants to ‘go with the flow’ of their thoughts and what they said. This chapter seeks to place the men’s individual experiences into broader concepts of childlessness and reproduction.

Human experience is complex. While not wanting to emphasise one approach over the other, insights gained by using IPA and FDA lenses are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they not only offer different perspectives on how ‘childless men’ exist-in-the-world, but also work together in helping to provide a broader and deeper understanding of *male childlessness* and *reproduction*. Although IPA and FDA have been presented in separate thesis chapters—with IPA focusing on individual meaning-making of lived experiences, and FDA focusing on wider discourse that impacted on participants’ sense of experience—in reality they were not separated within the men’s narratives. Instead, the methodological framework I employed highlighted how IPA and FDA were intertwined and enmeshed within individual realities and influenced how men developed meaning in their lives. We often approach all things from an individual standpoint; a standpoint influenced by many things. Similarly, how each man without biological offspring reflected on his life after the age of 50 was very
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individual. A process steeped in the level of desire to have children, choosing whether to have children, and a milieu of variable life circumstances has produced both negative and positive experiences.

The aim in adopting a pluralistic approach encompassing the phenomenological and the critical was to elicit different and overlapping insights. However, it is important to integrate these insights towards a gestalt of male experience of childlessness, and not simply to describe two separate studies. Integrating the two analyses does not necessarily involve aligning one finding with another. Drawing from the extensive data I am able to advance some interpretations of the men’s lived experiences, and link them to the key research questions:

- Identify and reflect upon insights into the experiences of the childless men.
- How does male childlessness intersect with concepts of reproduction?
- Can childless men develop a non-biological sense of reproduction?

The insights drawn from the analyses were further deepened by returning to the literature and integrated a more in-depth discussion. This chapter continues with a discussion on the various understandings of reproduction and childlessness, in terms of biology, religions, and how ‘childlessness’ is qualified. Further discussion entails generativity and the relevance of evolutionary theories and adaptation. This subsection is followed by a discussion on the hidden experiences of childless men, the nuances of men participating in qualitative studies and interviews, women as gatekeepers of reproduction, the preface for men participating in taking action, nuances of women interviewing men, and the way men distance themselves from sensitive topics. The chapter then concludes with a summary and directions for future research.

7.2 Integrated understanding(s) of male childlessness and reproduction developed from the analyses.

In the present study 23 men over the age of 50 from different areas of Australia, from different backgrounds, and who had varying desires to produce offspring, were all asked ‘what is it like not to have produced offspring?’ As each man contemplated this question, all reflected on their experiences of being childless over the course of their lives, demonstrating as other studies have that an
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understanding of childlessness can benefit from examining it within a life-course framework (Dykstra & Wagner, 2007; Hadley & Hanley, 2011). The life-course approach taken by the men often started from within their childhoods, which influenced their thinking towards wanting, or not wanting, to have children ‘one day’. This finding also aligns with other studies where experiences during childhood and young adulthood have been shown to develop into ideas about fatherhood (Thompson & Lee, 2011a; Thompson et al., 2013). However, some men in the study met their partners later in life or their partners decided that they wanted to have a baby before they were 50. These men’s narratives on childlessness started in their mid-adult years, when they were confronted by decisions around having or not having children—however they would often talk about their childhoods later in their interviews. Narratives beginning from different times in men’s lives demonstrated how ‘childlessness’ is not only about not producing offspring, it also involves psychosocial meaning. In other words, the narratives revealed that childlessness is more about how one feels and less about how one is. Yet thoughts and feelings were integrated with biology and experience.

While exploring the psychosocial experiences of childlessness, biology is not to be dismissed, as childlessness and reproduction tended to be synonymous with biology; a dominant discourse in which most of the men grounded their experience and meaning. Biology had let some men down, in terms of a man or his partner not being physically able to produce offspring, greatly contributing to their negative experiences of being childless. Thinking about childlessness led the men to thinking about biology and the animal kingdom, which became strong reference points for some of them while discussing experiences of childlessness and thoughts about reproduction. While there are other animals that do not produce offspring, most human beings have the potential to apply thought and reason—animal rationale—to the discussion of their reproductive behaviour; a few of the men alluded to lingering primordial behaviours in both men and women. A few also acknowledged that ‘we are at the top of the tree’ in the animal kingdom, we are thinking animals, and expressed surprise that ‘we’ had allowed evolution to construct procreative thinking and behaviour. Reproductive thinking being framed in biology made sense in terms of human beings being members of the animal kingdom; as living beings, like all organisms, there was a progressive course to follow within the life span.
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Underpinning the narratives of what it was like not to have produced offspring was a process that when the body did not perform as it was expected to (i.e. by producing offspring), this in turn impacted on the psychological and social existence and wellbeing of individuals. In other words, the social environment impacted on biology (how the body functioned) and biology impacted on the social environment—a dialogue between our reproductive bodies, and our personal and social expectations. When the biology of not producing offspring is socialised—a man interacting with his social environment without biological offspring—the process becomes an experience for the individual. For humans with animal rationale, meaning is placed on experience, which is then integrated into the psychosocial experiences of childlessness.

West-Eberhard (2003), a biologist, has written about the concept of a socialised biology in terms of how the environment shapes animal evolution and speciation. She notes that with reproduction, exact copies are not made, with ‘the new structure that has evolved containing past efforts of reproduction then impact[ing] on future reproduction’ (West-Eberhard, 2003, pp. 31-32). Within the concept of biology as socialised, childlessness and reproduction offer more meanings within which to explore the phenomenon of childlessness with reproduction involving cultural discourse of attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviour. How the environment is socialised determines which aspects of human biology are deemed to be enriched for what is considered to be a successful life; virility and the production of offspring as animal rationale thinking is considered a high priority. This can then become an underpinning of discourse and impact on experiences of childlessness. Biology discourse was fundamental in shaping the men’s meaning-making of their experiences of being childless. Biology and social reaction to their non-reproducing bodies was found to be variously a source of frustration and sadness, contentment and manliness. Lewontin and Levins (2007, p. 36) affirm that ‘human sociality is itself a consequence of our received biology [so that] human biology is a socialised biology’. English philosopher Riley (1983) has also elaborated on the concept of socialised biology. According to Solomon (2014, p. 168), Riley ‘pointed to the need in socialist-feminist praxis to interrogate the categories of the biological and the social’. In Riley’s terms, childlessness and reproduction are critically entangled as socialised biology, taking the slogan ‘the personal is political’ further. Moreover, Riley ‘expands the concept of a socialised biology to include human capacities and wants, human growth and
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ageing’ (Solomon, 2014, p. 169). Bringing the theory of socialised biology closer to the experiential lives of childless men helps to provide an explanation of how different concepts of reproduction can be appreciated as human life progresses.

Within historical context, experiences differed over the course of men’s lives. As they aged, and in the face of remaining childless, most now looked at their lives differently from when they were younger. Inherent in being a male human being is the potential for having a longer reproductive lifespan than females, but there was a perceived age limit beyond which it was inappropriate become a biological father. Even though the idea of still being able to become a biological father had some appeal, the men thought practically and reasoned that the age of 50 was a ‘turning point’ or ‘the hump’ when it was considered to be too late. This has also been found in other studies (Cannold, 2000; Hadley, 2009, 2015), and is resonant of Neugarten’s ‘social clock’ (1976). One explanation for the age of 50 being an arbitrary cut-off point for men may be that it aligns with the shorter reproductive span for women. Although other men talked about the ‘cut-off age’, the stronger, more emotive responses were from two men who at the time were, undergoing different measures with their partners to have babies. Both indicated that they were emotionally exhausted, and may also have been looking for practical reasons to stop, to draw a psychological, emotional and perceived social line in the sand. One of the men felt distressed listening to friends talking about their experiences as grandfathers, causing his distress with not becoming a father to resurface. Ageing is a process of change throughout the course of life, of physical changes and psychological changes.

Alongside ageing, the men identified with the concept of maturity, with the notion of ‘having children’ being held by many to be one of the key markers of adulthood (Erikson, 1982). ‘Every culture has its own unique rituals and rites of passage to adulthood’ (Larson & Martin, 2012, p. 39) and individuals negotiate meaning that is inherent. Passage is in part underscored by a change in social position and age (van Gennep, 1960).

Some men, both married and single, felt maturity and all markers of adulthood quite strongly; some felt markers of adulthood such as marriage, but not children. While some men had reached a level of acceptance of remaining childless, reluctantly or otherwise, others were still reappraising their identities and self-worth, with fluctuating emotions, and had not yet reached a level of acceptance of permanent childlessness.
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Associating ageing with biology, the animal kingdom and the notion of animals pairing at some stage over the life-course, a couple of men referred to ‘finding a mate’ or ‘pairing up’. Ageing men who are both single and childless are often noted in other studies as being more vulnerable to having smaller social and support networks, poorer health, earlier mortality and less community involvement than fathers and childless women (Keizer, 2010). In the current study there were two single childless men who ‘fit’ this picture, one of whom, in his 60s, came to notice when he was unwell and had to postpone his interview. He commented over the phone that the topic reminded him of who would ‘look out for him’ if he was ‘old and sick’. Only two men talked of concerns about support in their old age, both of them single. One man had a very supportive network, whereas the other said that he would not be able to rely on his mates down at the pub. Some married childless men in the study had small social circles, but having a stable relationship helped to mitigate vulnerability to isolation and poor support. There was one single childless man who was unhappy and discontented with life; not having children was a contributing factor. But others were content with life, had close and supportive friends of all ages, and were well and healthy. Ageing is not just an issue for the single and childless, with a UK health report encouraging all ageing individuals to be healthy and socially active (Pickard, 2015). Not everyone seeks a large social network, and in Australia distance often precludes close contact with families and therefore proximate social families provide support. Engaging with other children seemed to offer the men in the current study a sense of being socially active and belonging to the community. Again, this emphasis on the importance of psychosocial wellbeing appeared to be impacted by the types or quality of relationships that the men had, with people of all ages, and their pets. There are a couple of potential explanations for this. First most of the men who were partnered had younger partners, whence there might have been a passive relaxed attitude towards the future and old age. Second, those who were intentionally childless and single seemed less worried, but they were also in good health. The two men who were concerned about old age would have liked to be in stable relationships with children, again highlighting the importance of relationships to the men. Ageing is often synonymous with ‘old’. An increasing ageing population has prompted publications such as the Australian book, Looking after your ageing parents (Miller, 2004), which is aimed at individuals. However, an increasing ageing childless
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population also raises political concern for looking after your ageing childless people, particularly those who have poor support and are not in good health.

Recognising that lives are in progress (Levinson, 1986; White, 1952) helps to understand the nature of human experience; that it becomes meaningless to construe any form of childlessness as something that is static and enduring (Shaw, 2011; Wenger, 2001). The experiential accounts from the men in the present study demonstrate the inherent fluidity in the journey of childlessness, found in other studies (Shaw, 2011), and justify the need identified in other studies, the need to take a life-course approach when exploring experiential phenomena such as childlessness (Dykstra & Wagner, 2007; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). Integrating a life-course perspective recognises the ‘heterogeneity in life-course experiences’ (Umberson et al., 2010, p. 613), with life plans often intersected by circumstances and choice. As they do for parents, costs and benefits in the ebb and flow of life for non-parents impacted on the men’s wellbeing. As human life progresses, biologically and socially, the social becomes embedded with discourse, social norms and expectations. When individuals do not meet these expectations, whether it was intentional, can result in negative psychosocial outcomes; but not necessarily for all individuals. To reiterate, the men in the study who definitely did not want children seemed to fare better than those who wanted and expected to have children in their lives.

The key finding emphasises the diversity of experiences and meanings of male childlessness, and how meanings are incorporated into their concepts of childlessness and reproduction over the course of their lives. The diversity within the men’s narratives generated what other studies had found to be a mix of regret and satisfaction (Koropeckyj-Cox, 2008). Although experiences ranged from feeling extremely negative to feeling quite positive about not having children, the men’s journeys were by no means straightforward or linear. Closely associated with how they perceived their desire to have children, their senses of choice and circumstances in not producing offspring and reasons for not producing offspring, although not asked directly21, were closely integrated into their life stories of childlessness.

In comparison to my Honours research (Lawrence-Bourne, 2012), childless men were less inclined to invalidate their own experiences of childlessness by accepting the centrality of women within the reproductive sphere in the current study.

21 The reason I did not want to ask directly as to why they did not produce offspring was because I did not want to trigger defensive responses; nor responses that they perceived to be the ‘right’ answers.
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Reproductive discussion focused on women was certainly acknowledged, but it did not seem to impact on experiences and meaning-making to the same extent for all men. One explanation was that all ten men in the Honours study wanted to have children, and those who were in relationships had tried to have them. They also expressed being more traditional and conventional in their expected life trajectories of marriage and children, whereas the men in the current study were more heterogeneous in their approaches to life and their backgrounds. The strength of the present study is that it demonstrates and reinforces the diversity of experiences amongst childless men.

For the men in the present study, being ‘childless’ was not necessarily central to their everyday lives. Some were still yearning for fatherhood; others rarely thought about it. Albeit fleeting for some, all men had had moments of wondering what it might have been like to be a father. These moments had been filled with emotions ranging from sadness, depression and suicidal thoughts, and having had missed out, to reluctant acceptance, to feeling good and content with not having children. For many their thoughts and feelings depended on whether they attributed being childless to voluntary or involuntary circumstances, and how consciously active or passive they had been in their reproductive desires and behaviour.

Psychosocial outcomes for men who had been longing to become biological fathers in other studies included emotions of crisis, a profound sense of grief and loss, powerlessness and loss of control, and senses of inadequacy, betrayal and isolation with the medical system, their bodies and God, who they perceived as having failed them (Cousineau & Domar, 2007; Hadley & Hanley, 2011; Herrmann et al., 2011; Joja et al., 2015; Webb & Daniluk, 1999). Similarly the men in the present study who wanted to have, and had tried to have, children reflected on that phase of life as a very stressful phase, and expressed this in varying degrees of detail and with similar emotions to other studies. A couple of men were at the interview still in crisis mode, with unsuccessful IVF attempts having resulted in tension within their marriages. One man commented that these emotions were reignited by other men talking about being grandfathers. Men’s emotions were often misunderstood by partners as being distant or not caring. However, they explained that they often contained their emotions, usually to protect their partners. It could not be assumed that since the men were all over the age of 50, crises were over and negative emotions dealt with. There were levels of acceptance, but a soft sadness often lingered.
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Earlier studies have shown that voluntarily childless individuals are generally happier and more content with life (Callan, 1985). From the narratives of men in the present study it seemed that the experiences of those who indicated that they intended not to have children tended be more positive and less filled with regret than those of men who were childless due to circumstances. This is not, however, to be taken as a generalisation for three reasons. First, there were varying degrees of regret and satisfaction as each man had negotiated his life without biological offspring. Second, indications as to whether men were voluntarily or involuntarily childless were not always clear, and were confounded by an array of life circumstances. Third, the impact of different cultural and spiritual discourses influenced individual experiences of childlessness.

Childless men are diverse in their reasons for not producing offspring. Voluntary and involuntary statuses are both often conveyed either positively or negatively. As for women (for example, Shaw, 2011), for some of the men perceiving themselves as voluntarily or involuntarily childless can become part of their identities; but for others this aspect of their lives is more fluid and variable, and is related to other experiences and statuses in life. Viewing childlessness in binary voluntary–involuntary terms brushes over the complicated pathways to childlessness. As Calhoun (1994, p.28) argued: ‘To see identities only as reflections of “objective” social positions or circumstances is to see them always retrospectively. It does not make sense of the dynamic potential’. Human experience is complicated. Consequently, human text is complicated. Therefore, as evidenced in the present study, different men have different experiences; childless men are not homogenous. While they share the phenomenon of not producing offspring, their experiences of being ‘childless’ may not necessarily be the same. There are many facets to human experience, and the ‘interpretative status of the evidence’ (Morrow, 2005, p. 256) need not be limited in order to capture and respect multiple perspectives on male childlessness. More importantly, it is how men feel when reflecting back on their reproductive desires, choices and circumstances, and it is then that any regret becomes evident.

Like many human experiences there is a continuum of subjective meanings of childlessness (Letherby, 2002). Not all men necessarily think about belonging to this group of ‘childless’ individuals; as one man commented, he considered such a group existed only in the minds of some people. Furthermore, not producing offspring was
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not always considered a life deficit in its entirety. Unlike a group of men ‘sharing’ an illness and supporting each other (Adamsen et al., 2001), ‘grouping’ childless men together, or grouping them into self-declared voluntary and involuntary categories, could divide them rather than bring them together. On the other hand, by opening up avenues such as internet forums and holding conferences on men’s health, men could be relieved to have a space to talk about the issue of not producing offspring. The shortage of appropriate spaces for childless men may be because male childlessness is not necessarily considered to be a health issue; wellbeing is not a category in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (known as DSM). Although there is some overlap in their mutual experiences of being ‘childless’, the only thing that clearly links these men is that they do not have a genetic relationship with a child. How they understand and reflect on this phenomenon is clearly diverse. As one man commented after reading the participant summary letter, while appreciative of the letter the array of experiences detailed was evidence of ‘a group of Homo sapiens with all its variations’. It is the variations of experience that inform the findings of the present study; how they impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of childless men, and the wider meanings that the men draw from their different experiences.

Reasons for not producing offspring varied as much as the experiences of childlessness did, and yet reasons were closely associated with the experiences. The men talked of risk. They were happy to take risks elsewhere in their lives, such as with work, travel, agriculture, riding motorbikes, working at heights, climbing trees, but these risks seemed to be more calculable or controlled than the risks of producing offspring. Risk arguments may have been a defence to justify why some participants did not have children. Even men who were trying to have children held concerns over risk, although not to the extent of deliberately remaining childless. Different reasons for not producing offspring seemed to identify a tension between being consciously active in trying to ‘have children’, or avoid becoming a father, while some men were ambivalent and passive, eliciting comments such as ‘it could have gone either way’ and ‘I just thought I would end up with kids one day’.

Reproductive decision-making by women can also contribute to childlessness for men (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Wu & Schimmele, 2003). From the evidence in the present study, reproductive decisions can be reciprocal occurrences between partners and can also cause friction; the reproductive desires, choices and circumstances of both men and women can impact the desires, choices and
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circumstances of their partners. In other words, one partner’s choice becomes the other partner’s circumstance, which may result in one of them having to decide to remain in the relationship. Cases in which men wanted children but their female partner did not was evident in the study. In one example, one man’s partner had told him ‘women control the fertility’, rendering his inability to have children as involuntary. He loved his partner, therefore decided to forgo fatherhood and stay in the relationship. In another example, a similar decision was made to forgo biological fatherhood, as his female partner, who had children to a previous relationship, did not want any more children. However, in another case, the man’s wife had at his behest terminated her pregnancy, rendering her involuntarily childless and which maintained his decision to intentionally remain childless. Similarly, another man asked his ex-girlfriend if she would terminate the pregnancy as he did not want to rebuild the relationship when she was pregnant to another man. Men’s and women’s decision-making can impact on and blur voluntary and involuntary circumstances and decisions to have children.

Regardless of a man’s real reasons for not producing offspring, some of the men felt that they were supposed to ‘come up with a valid reason why’ they did not have children. At the same time they felt it was nobody’s business, but neither did they want other people to make assumptions about their not having children. The entanglement of personal reasons for not having children and public assumptions resonated with Park’s (2002) notion of a reproductive social hierarchy, with some men experiencing value judgements by others, and sweeping assumptions being made about why they did not have children. Men’s experiences of being childless were influenced by other people’s reactions and by social policies, the embedment of dominant pronatalist discourse in which discriminated against those who did not ‘have children’, legally or genetically.

Social stigma involves a perception of judgement by others. For example, one man in the present study who was childless and single felt like a failure in a society where most people were in stable relationships and ‘had children’, and he had achieved neither. For many of the men, a perceived sense of social surveillance reinforced perceptions that having and not having children was more important to and mattered most to women. Maher and Dever (2004) found that social attitudes were critical in how women managed their reproductive choices and circumstances. By contrast some men in the present study internalised negative attitudes from other
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people—that may also have fuelled low self-esteem—while others were able to shrug it off. One explanation for different strategies for managing social stigma could be that women may be more subject to pronatalist attitudes than men, with reproduction being more closely identified with female identity (Calhoun & Selby, 1980; Reed, 2008). The men commented that stigma had been more of an issue for their female partners or for other female friends. For some of the men there seemed a perceived ‘call to account’, like fathers and women have reported in other studies (Morrell, 1994; Shaw, 2011). However, the way some of the men talked about people’s responses to their decisions and circumstances of not having children indicated that attitudes toward childlessness were changing in terms of childlessness becoming more accepted within Australian society; a finding also recognised in other studies (Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendall, 2007; Qu et al., 2000).

Similar to the women in Shaw’s (2011) study, social stigma for the men in the present study was often conveyed as perceived fear of stigmatisation. In other words, some of them expressed concern that other people might think that they did not like children. In this regard, childless men can feel misunderstood. Although earlier studies showed that people who chose not to have children were thought to have other personality issues (Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1980), three decades later concerns about the character of a person who does not ‘have children’ also arose. The most poignant was the perception for a few men that sometimes they were not able to be trusted with children. Although this concern has arisen in other studies (Hadley, 2015; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001) the sense of mistrust in the present study was experienced by both married and single heterosexual men, and less so by homosexual men and a religious leader, but not by all men. In one sense this reinforces a hierarchy of who can be trusted, and that men who do have children are perceived to be ‘more trustworthy’. Concern about social perceptions seemed to be somewhat mitigated for men in stable relationships and who had adopted children and/or stepchildren. An explanation for this ‘softer’ view could be that at face value, the outward appearance that they ‘have children’, and thereby conforming to social pronatalist norms, disavows notions of untrustworthiness.

Social stigma entangles social expectations and perceptions of social norms which were incorporated into the men’s discussions of their experiences. Men in the current study drew on masculine and feminist concepts of equality. They wanted to present themselves as legitimate members within the reproductive sphere,
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commenting as well on the existing inequality in the way men were included in the realms of reproduction. Comments tending toward stigmatisation suggested how men were supposed to behave, which then formed a paradox; to ‘get’ a woman pregnant and produce offspring but not raise children, or to want the ‘wife-child-provide’ package—meaning to be in a stable relationship and make reproductive decisions together. A couple of men related to the former model but most, especially those who wanted children, related the latter. Shaw (2011) found similar views among the women in her study, who also wanted to present themselves as legitimate members within the reproductive sphere. This seems to reemphasise the recurring nature of gendered discussions of power, position and respect by, and against, both men and women.

In defining themselves as men, most men felt that not having produced offspring did not impinge greatly, if at all, on their self-image of manhood. The exception was one man who was grappling with infertility while undergoing ART procedures, and felt self-blame for not getting tested sooner.22 The men recognised and acknowledged that there were different ways to be a man, saying that it was up to the man himself to choose a model. Manhood could be portrayed through, and in reference to, multiple masculinities (Connell, 2005), including ‘reproductive masculinity’ (Daniels, 2006) or in relation to the view from the ancient Greek philosophers of the concept of her-within-him. However, drawing from the present narratives of the men in the study, much of their referencing to manhood was hegemonic masculinity. The men seemed to align themselves with, or defend themselves against, the positive and negative characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (Berger & Krahe, 2013; Hofstede, 1998). Daniels (2006) coined the phrase ‘reproductive masculinity’ to frame the vulnerabilities that men endure. It is based on assumptions encapsulated by Almeling and Waggoner (2013) as they engaged with the nuances of how men and women are positioned in reproductive equations: that men are secondary to biological reproduction: that they are virile: that reproductive outcomes matter less to men; and that men are more distant from the health problems of the children they father. Potential vulnerabilities within the

22 Some of the men in the study learned later in their adult years that they were infertile. A couple commented: ‘I’ve always wondered…’ and, ‘I had a gut feeling that that was the case … I think I always knew’. A point that I would like to highlight is that the various tests that confirmed infertility or subfertility confirmed intuitions that men had kept to themselves for many years.
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framework of ‘reproductive masculinity’ mean it lends itself to also be reframed into ‘reproductive psychology’, mindful of the potential vulnerabilities associated with all ‘corners’ of the reproductive ‘sphere’.

Given different forms of masculinities, discourse displayed as social scrutiny has ‘disabled’ homosexual men from expressing their ‘reproductive masculinity’, their own reproductive desires (Knauer, 2000). Drawing from the narratives of the homosexual participants, homosexual men were not *expected* to have children, whether they wanted them or not, and hence experiences of involuntary childlessness were invalidated by internalisation of the assumptions of heterosexualism in reproductive experiences. But then, as one of the homosexual men observed, gay men may not necessarily *feel* childless or involuntarily childless because it was never expected of them to ‘have children’. Listening to the men talk and being mindful of social media coverage of gay men having children, experiences of fatherhood *and* childlessness may well rise. While challenges still face same-sex families in most societies, according to Qu, Knight, and Higgins (2016, p. 1), the Australian statistical data indicate that ‘community views about same-sex couples appear to have changed significantly over the past decade’. In one sense the social surveillance lens, through social media, has moved away a little from homosexuality, putting the spotlight back onto the core subject of ‘children’, and beginning to normalise the reproductive desires and behaviour of same-sex men. The experiences of childlessness of the homosexual men in the study, aged 50 to 63, illuminated the possibilities that childlessness is likely to continue to evolve over future years for younger homosexual men. However, the evidence in the present study is that homosexual men wanting and having children was still an enigma for a couple of the heterosexual men. With shifts in social demography and attitudes, albeit some differences remaining, it seems that the childless narratives for homosexual and heterosexual men may be converging, with some overlap in their subjective experiences.

Dominant reproductive discourse is not only evident in gendered discussions, it is also shaped by broader cultural and religious discourse that upholds traditional values—associating production of offspring as fundamentally paramount to a life trajectory, along with marriage and heterosexuality. Stories were relayed from within the men’s narratives about their own experiences, or those of people they knew, where ‘culture’ had either annulled the subject of producing offspring if a man was known to be same-sex attracted, or such a sexual orientation had been sidelined by a
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higher priority to produce offspring anyway, out of obligation to the family and community. Either way, traditional cultural and religious perspectives on biological reproduction leave homosexual men with little agency in their reproductive decisions. One of the heterosexual men talked about his wife ‘getting harassed’ by the Church about why she was not pregnant soon after they were married. Pohlman (1970) wrote of society, culture and religion requiring children to validate marriage. More recent writings on fertility and religions seem to still give very little attention to ‘childlessness’ (Blyth & Landau, 2009). The pressure to validate a relationship with offspring may have softened in some societies over the past five decades, but in part the pressure to procreate still exists.

Still on the topic of religion, childlessness by celibacy is becoming a contested area as some religions did not begin advocating this reproductive practice. As it is a sensitive area, neither my one priest participant nor I broached the subject of whether he perceived the level of mistrust with children that some of the other men had raised. However, he did comment that some men had left the priesthood because they wanted to pursue relationships and some of them had changed their minds about not wanting children. Nonetheless, it was evident in the narrative of this religious man that traditional religions maintain the status quo of a dominant reproductive and gender discourse impacting on the meaning that he made of childlessness. Women were natural nurturers, and fathers and men were disconnected from the reproductive realm. Moreover, for this man childless by celibacy was a choice and a commitment. It may then seem counterintuitive to talk about childlessness within the context of celibacy, but as indicated in his narrative, some men do change their minds and want to make different reproductive decisions.

Traditional reproductive views echoed by the priest participant resonate in some writings about fertility and religion. For example, Blyth and Landau (2009, p. 221) write about Orthodox Jewish women having two names: ‘woman like man [as one name], to understand and become intelligent, and the other is the name of Eve, to bear children and to raise them’. The implication is that if a woman cannot produce life, she is able to undertake another task that is no less important and no less connected to God, and still be a successful, productive and fulfilled human being, even though she has not fulfilled her primary role in producing life. According to Blyth and Landau, this is an attempt by the Jewish faith to connect the infertile with God. However, there is no mention of men who have not produced offspring. In
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almost every culture of the world the ethical norms that seek to guide answers can be found in the dominant religion of the culture in which the question is being asked. Hence, different human societies with different religious and cultural influences provide different answers and a different way to live with a different range of choices in reproductive behaviour. From a religious perspective, the ‘new power in human hands’ with regard to reproductive behaviour and choice, and ART procedures, ‘raises some fundamental ethical questions’ (Harris, 2009, p. 9), which religions are grappling with in the face of childlessness. In Australia as in many Western societies, the influence of different dominant religious and cultural reproductive discourses may impact on the experiences of childless men and women. According to Harris (2009, p. 10), ‘we now live in a world in which different cultural and religious beliefs impinge and impact on one another as never before’. What religion has to say about reproductive behaviour and practice, particularly given scientific advances and changing reproductive laws, is important for clinicians, counsellors and those involved with social policy, and for future academic studies.

With different influences impacting on the experience and meaning of childlessness, different kinds of childlessness are coming to light in the present and other studies (Hagestad & Call, 2007). Qualifying ‘childlessness’ can be as difficult as qualifying ‘having children’ or ‘having children of my own’ (Roberts, 2009). For the men in the present study, perceived meanings of the term ‘male childlessness’ denoted ‘a lack’ and held negative connotations. Although some of the men used the terms ‘non-fathers’ or ‘non-parents’, Reed (2008) found that some voluntarily childless men in his study preferred the term ‘childfree’, largely as a defence against the dominant discourse that people are supposed to want and have children. Other men in Reed’s study and the present study did not use any label, possibly as a male way of distancing themselves from a problematised concept of ‘childlessness’. The men assumed that childlessness was a negativity within dominant pronatalist discourse, because at face value they were going against the norm, and were grouped as such. Yet while the men may belong together in terms of not having produced offspring, they ‘belong’ to a group they do not necessarily want to belong to. Furthermore, while some men were still in an emotional state about not producing offspring, others were renegotiating life, such as their self-worth and life-purpose, and had moved on or were still trying to move forward.
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When the men were describing how important it was to feel productive, the overlay of meanings with language of production incorporated meanings of reproduction, and blurred distinctions between the two. It was through their meanings of feeling productive that they inadvertently seemed to be also describing a level of reproductive fulfilment, although the men did not necessarily think of it in these terms. Having developed a sense of achieving something fulfilling, rewarding, giving a part of themselves and getting something back in return resonated with theories of generativity. The experience of generativity entails looking back on life, the duration of life related to ageing with integrity and satisfaction, implicating the gestalt of life-span and within a life-course perspective. By this I mean a life-course perspective that elaborates on the importance of time, context, processes and meaning on human development and family life (Bengston and Allen, 1993), be it a genetic family life or social family.

Huta and Zuroff (2007, p.47) described generativity to be inclusive of ‘every bit of work that serves other people … [and it] is the basis of the existence and evolution of civilization’. This evolution is described by Zock (2004, 2011) as the cogwheeling of generations as new things and new selves develop. Everyone has something to contribute to the human society in which they live, and it is not always, or necessarily according to the men, in the form of offspring. The notion of cogwheeling invites a sense of continuation, of self-evolving, and the continuation of self. It seems to be an appropriate metaphor from the perspective of psychosocial developmental theories—for example, Erikson and Levinson—of things fitting in or not fitting together with regard to how individuals progress through life without offspring. Conversely, when men felt they were not producing or achieving anything, generating nothing, they felt stagnant and frustrated and questioned their purpose in life.

For the men in the present study, generativity was expressed through concepts of creation and creativity, spirituality and religion, and ultimately outliving the self. In one sense it is evidence of humans getting on with life, taking different turns and directions and developing a sense of purpose. Drawing from their narratives, the motivating purpose seems to be a subconscious need for a part of oneself to continue, to further evolve the ‘self’ in some way. Some men wanted to continue their selves and achieve a sense of generativity through biological fatherhood. However other men, often in conjunction with low self-esteem, did not want any part of their ‘self’ to
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continue; not producing offspring was a way of *discontinuing self*. Their life’s work, their relationships, and the activities that they were currently involved in seemed though to indicate the contrary. These activities were not a direct substitute for children *per se*, but were performed in a similar way to achieve a sense of generativity—without having the genetic link to offspring that might have reflected some ‘concerning’ family traits. With multiple ways to be a man and with new fatherhood emerging (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001), men may well be *allowed* to *reproduce* in other ways as well. In light of Heidegger and Foucault’s thinking, defining meanings and understandings and knowledge(s) of childlessness and reproduction is limitless. Knowledge is limitless, as long as it remains within relevant understanding, depending on what discourses are influencing our thinking and what understanding we bring to new knowledge(s).

Although it may not seem a problem on a conscious level, finding ways to achieve a sense of generativity was different for each man. Drawing on Jean Lave’s work in the 1980s, the culture of a setting plays a key part in shaping the nature of problem-solving processes, from which Lave proposed the situation-specific ‘social anthropology of cognition’ (see Sampson, 1993, p. 184; Lave, 1988, p.1). Relevant in the present context are the situation-specifics of childlessness. The environment in which a man is rendered ‘childless’ depends on his social and cultural environment, his immediate environment of childhood and family, his educational environment, his work and relationship environments, and the wider environment of the national culture in which he lives. These environments, or settings, shape his experience of how ‘childlessness’ is perceived and lived. The ‘shaping’ of his experiences also depended on the extent to which ‘childlessness’ was problematised on a personal and social level, his internal and external environment; reiterating one man’s rhetorical question that ‘it’s only a problem for the individual if it feels like a problem for him, but it’s not a problem for society, is it?’ With different influences on how individuals perceive the world around them, how each man moves forward and develops a sense of generativity will also be different.

How men move forward without biological offspring integrates many aspects of their lives, predominantly involving relationships and work. Drawing again from Lave’s (1988) and Sampson’s (1993) ideas of human nature—social conventions, beliefs and practice provide and structure the terms by which human experience is organised and self-understanding is accomplished. Thereby practical everyday aspects
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impact on how men negotiate their lives without biological offspring, and the extent to which each man experiences childlessness as a problem in his life. If discourse supplants these conventions as a reality, we are obliged to enter into a collaborative dialogic relationship to learn how childless men function in their world.

Various adaptation and evolutionary theories have been explored in attempts to provide explanations for different human reproductive behaviour (Kanazawa, 2003; Kaplan, Lancaster, Tucker, & Anderson, 2002; Vasey, 2007). For instance, in chapter two I introduced the metaphor of architectural spandrels, the decorative by-product of cornered arches meeting (Gould & Lewontin, 1979) that could be applicable to the experiences of and meaning to those who have not produced offspring. Buss et al. (1998) also drew parallels with the spandrels metaphor in exploring alternative reproductive behaviour as co-opted by-products of adaptation. Drawing from the evidence in the present study, the men’s narratives revealed a fundamental belief that the primary structure of human society was that most people produce offspring. It might follow that the spandrels refer to those who have not produced offspring, intentionally or otherwise. My interpretation is two-fold. Firstly, if producing offspring is considered a key structure of human society, a privileged position might then be assumed of those who have children with consequential discourse impacting on the construction of meaning-making for childless individuals. Secondly, while the spandrels metaphor seems appropriate, its function was not necessarily understood as secondary or purely decorative, or as a by-product. The men seemed to resist, in overt and covert ways, in their contributions to the overall design of human society. The psychosocial effects for childless men do matter, not as a secondary function but having a different function. There are psychosocial consequences of producing and not producing offspring. One of the themes in the study was that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’. Likewise it takes different people to raise (contribute to) the village. In other words, everyone has something to contribute. It may seem more obvious that mothers and fathers in the village help to raise child, yet there are many others who also play a role (Hrdy, 2009). From the evidence of the present study, ‘villagers’ include some childless men.

The attempt here to address the research questions is by no means exhaustive, and hopefully raises more questions for further explorations of the subjective meanings of male childlessness. Common themes in reproductive diversity enable other disciplines to project the topic of human beings not producing offspring into
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other domains that may reflect back different perspectives on male childlessness. Findings in the present study revealed meanings going beyond biology. Notions of continuation, leaving something of the ‘self’ behind, generated something that became spiritual, even though most of the men were not religious. The experience of the man who was childless by celibacy did not necessarily stand out from those of other men who made the decision to forgo biological fatherhood. Perhaps the key difference was that his sense of reproduction was not to reproduce or recreate a part of his ‘self’, rather he wanted to recreate the *image of God.* For the men in the present study, reproduction was considered part of being productive, but the line between was not always definitive in the way they talked about the two concepts. The institution of reproduction seems to have a bulwark that can impede finding ‘growth-producing experiences’ (Moreland, 1980), thus impacting on the psychosocial wellbeing of those who have not produced offspring.

In sum, like all other living organisms we need to biologically reproduce for the continuation of the human species. As reproductive discourse was grounded in biology, most men did not consciously think of their creative endeavours as being reproductive. These were played out through their caring and nurturing in relationships, their work, artistic creations, leaving a mark or a legacy behind, something of themselves being carried on. A part of themselves has continued, so that that reproduced, restructured entity, be it art, relationships, or their work and business, would *outlive* them. However, biology did not account for the entirety of their narratives. In many of the men’s narratives, the notion of children seemed to become more symbolic over time, over the lifespan. At a more conceptual level, exploring what it is like not to have a genetic relationship with a child has revealed that in the physical absence of children, symbolically and metaphorically, ‘children’ are present in the way childless men experience life and develop meaning and purpose. This is not meant as a direct and obvious substitute for not producing offspring, but is something that is more ephemeral or innate about living human beings, with ‘children’ represented as productivity, caring, the creation and birth of something new or the reshaping of something that already exists. While findings of the present study have taken experiences of male childlessness well beyond biology, individual experience beset in an array of thoughts, feelings, and emotions, should not be forgotten. As our social world evolves, the ways in which biology discourse impacts on the psychological experiences of childless men need to be better understood. From
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the men’s narratives in the present study the diversity of experiences are a reminder that some men suffer in silence, others are content and rarely give childlessness a second thought, and most men are somewhere in between.

7.2.1 Men’s experiences hidden

All the men in the present study referred to the experiences of childless men as being hidden and a much-neglected area of research. They referred to the use of social media to raise men’s health issues, such as an interview with Australian swimmer Ian Thorpe, a same-sex attracted man talking about his aspirations for fatherhood; the television series ‘Man Up’; and printed media on the topic of male childlessness. A couple of men also referred to animal documentaries such as those by Sir David Attenborough to help express their thoughts and feelings about not producing offspring. Social media (a vehicle for faster communication) seems to be taking up the subject of male childlessness, broaching the topic of the psychosocial wellbeing of men without biological offspring in Australia, with input from surveys, men’s health groups, and peer-reviewed scholarly papers lagging.

The exclusion of men from research agendas on the basis of untested assumptions is problematic for a few reasons. According to Singleton (2005) this lack of research results in incomplete understanding of men’s perspectives. Furthermore, it amplifies and perpetuates narrow conceptualisations of men’s roles within the reproductive sphere, culminating in socially prescribed gender roles that restrict both men’s and women’s choices; women’s in the sense that it overemphasises their role and agency, and positions them as solely responsible for demographic change (Thompson et al., 2013). In reality, it is a combination of both men and women who contribute to change.

Dudgeon and Inhorn (2003) also highlighted a few reasons why men have been excluded from the reproductive realm. They noted that the limited resources available have focused more on women, as they have a more direct role in producing offspring. Assumptions about men’s lack of involvement in the reproductive sphere have been seen as a lack of interest, which has had negative consequences for their inclusion. Ideological issues about reproduction and the primacy of women, and the lack of research, have also reduced men’s involvement, creating a problematic circle for increasing public and political awareness of the psychosocial experiences of
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childless men. However, according to Dudgeon and Inhorn (2003), while men are a contributing influence on the reproductive health of women, most societies still privilege their position within reproductive health and the social structures and positions of authority within arenas such as medicine and health, law and politics. On a personal and individual level, though men do not perceive a sense of privilege within the reproductive realm. Their experiences are rendered almost invisible by the central focus on women. Furthermore, from the evidence in the present study, while some men were more involved than others with reproductive decision-making, there were also others for whom women held total control, in being either adamant about not wanting children or adamant in their efforts of trying to conceive. Some of the men gave the impression of being passive in reproductive decisions, suppressing their own emotions and going along with whatever their partner wanted.

When a study participant hid emotions, when undergoing ART/IVF treatment or remaining single, for example, other people were not aware of his feelings. Concerning ART, men talked about internalising raised hopes and excitement, but also about protecting their partners from disappointment. This caused them, as found also in other studies, to feel drained, and emotionally and psychologically exhausted (Malik & Coulson, 2008), and yet, they would often hide their emotions from other men albethey childless men or fathers. One man talked about this friend: ‘He doesn’t give a shit. He’s not interested. I don’t think it crosses his mind.’ Yet when I asked him if they had ever talked about it he replied ‘no, never’. If men talked about their childlessness socially, with a woman, and it was in the sense of ‘confiding with her’, again highlighting the role of women in the reproductive sphere for some childless men.

In a dialogic account of human nature, Sampson (1993) provided a few examples of how women serve a vital role in society and are thus present, yet are never developed in their own right, and are therefore absent. Sampson refers to this paradox as absent presence. Adopting Sampson’s context of power, the notion of absent presence can also be applied to some of the men in the present study; those men seemed to be present in the reproductive realm, yet felt simultaneously absent and were not least relatively absent in the minds of some health professionals. While we are accustomed to thinking mainly about women in the reproductive space, it is timely that men (with and without offspring) are also considered. Men also have distinct reproductive histories and experiences in their own right and should not have
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their reproductive experiences limited to being the partner of a woman (Greene & Biddlecom, 2000, Inhorn, 2009).

7.2.2 Nuances of men participating in qualitative studies and interviews

The present research revealed a few nuances of male participation in studies that involve talking about personal and potentially sensitive topics. Reasons for participating were not fully known for each man. However, to reiterate, men were aware that participation was voluntary and would involve semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the study was to listen to both positive and negative experiences of childlessness.

Women as gatekeepers: Even though participation was voluntary, some men reported being ‘sort of pushed’ into participating by female friends, and one man was ‘told’ to participate by his wife. On the other hand, some women controlled whether certain men participated, mostly by not passing on the invitation to participate. Some men got around this issue by not telling their wives and female partners that they were participating. Others were not aware of gatekeeping occurring, and therefore missed the opportunity to talk about their experiences of being childless, be they positive or negative. Women controlling what reproductive knowledge is shared becomes a form of gatekeeping. Broadly, gatekeeping refers to a ‘process of controlling information as it moves through a gate or filter’ (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009, pp. 10-11). Gatekeeping in reproductive terms tends to be used more often in reference to ‘maternal gatekeeping’, as a collection of beliefs and behaviours that inhibit men from having an active fathering role (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). But it was evident in the present research that the notion of reproductive gatekeeping not only occurs with women controlling decision-making about not having children. It also occurs around any topic bearing on reproduction by inhibiting non-fathers/childless men from even talking about reproduction. Consequently, some of the voices of male childlessness as lived are not heard, covertly dominated by reproductive discourse focusing on women. Herein lies a paradox, with women on the one hand becoming an effective part of the recruitment process but on the other hand vetoing the opportunity for other men to participate. Although female gatekeeping occurred both incidentally and intentionally, it is not something that can necessarily be controlled when recruiting men for such studies. Recruitment of men for studies such as this not only raises
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questions of the subjectivity around attitudes and behaviour of not producing offspring amongst men. It also raises questions about the intersubjectivity of this topic between men and women. For example, access to potential male participants was refused by one professional woman whose clients were predominantly male, because allegedly ‘none of them would be interested’. While it is acknowledged that men also play a role as reproductive gatekeepers, it is important to highlight the prominent involvement and centrality of women in every aspect of the reproductive sphere, including their influence on men talking about childlessness and becoming part of the study sample itself.

Gatekeeping of reproductive ideas and behaviour could also be extended to religious and cultural ideology. The notion of reproductive gatekeeping has possible implications for future studies in terms of findings being limited by limiting those who have the opportunity to participate and barriers being erected that impede the sharing of men’s experiences—positive and negative—thus causing some male experiences to remain hidden. This may lead researchers to misconstrue how some phenomena are understood. Moreover, the notion of gatekeeping may help to explain why some men participate and some do not.

Preference for action: Drawing from the narratives in her qualitative study in the UK of men and women who had a serious illness, Seymour-Smith (2008) found that women tended to accept that they needed help, whereas men resisted the notion. The author noted that gender became a barrier for men to take action and talk about personal topics. According to Seymour-Smith (p. 795), there was some currency in the notion of a ‘preference for action-orientated’ approaches to health, but it ‘may be linked more to the presentation of a hegemonic masculine identity than to a real preference for action’. A couple of men who declined the invitation to participate in the present study commented that they had ‘already dealt with it’ and were ‘not wanting to open that can of worms again’. While some men wanted to let other people know what it was like not to have offspring, others responded to the invitation as if it was a counselling session and they needed help with ‘the problem’. These men distanced themselves from the concept of male childlessness, deciding not to participate.

A finding that ‘men appear to justify legitimate involvement’ (Seymour-Smith, 2008, p. 794) was also evident in the current study, and in another study (de Souza & Ciclitira, 2005). It is a reminder to be mindful that with potentially personal
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Research topics, men may tend to display hegemonic values. If the topic is presented as though men have a problem or an issue, a direct approach may be perceived by potential participants as men being judged to have a ‘troubled’ identity (Seymour-Smith, 2008). Reed (2008) found in his exploration of identity and stigma for voluntarily childless men that men rebuffed his questions, saying that how they felt was not anyone’s business. Not producing offspring implied trouble, and disrupted male identity. In another form of deflection Jensen (2016) observed that in her study, some men provided what they presumed to be ‘correct’ answers, seeking to affirm the norm, without necessarily disclosing their own feelings and emotions. While discussing reproductive behaviour with white South African men, Morison (2013) found that they became defensive when questioned and tried to turn the conversation, imposing stronger gendered views regarding reproduction. As proposed by Adamsen, Rasmussen, and Pedersen (2001) in their Danish study, taking a less direct approach to access the personal lives of men may be more effective given different gendered coping styles. Men may be more likely to respond to a less direct approach. An effective example in Australia is the approach taken by the Australian Men’s Shed Association (AMSA), with some men’s shed groups discussing psychosocial topics. As one of the men in the study commented, men could continue working or they could stop and listen; physical action integrated with mental action. Similarly, in a private antenatal class I found that men legitimised their attendance by supporting their partners. Over the duration of the class they found they attained personal benefits from talking openly about a personal topic. Likewise, attending an interview on the topic of childlessness is not necessarily problematising childlessness for all men, but some men wanted to defend or resist their reproductive position as men.

Women interviewing men: A potential concern for the present study was the gender difference between interviewer and participants. Of course not all researchers can be ‘in-group member’ to the research topic (Adler & Adler, 2002). Moreover some studies have found that power relations with same-sex interviewing can be more complex than those where sexes are different (Currie & MacLean, 1997; Hollway & Jefferson, 2008). As a woman interviewing Australian canegrowers, Pini (2005) found gender difference in the interviewing process generated displays of masculinity, as it did at times in the present study, providing useful data for the study.

Although found in much earlier studies (Arendell, 1997; Horn, 1997; Pini, 2005), being perceived by the participants in the present study as empathetic, non-
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threatening and different not only highlighted still-existent traditional gender roles, it also helped to facilitate the narratives of the men. I also found that being an individual of a similar age to the men made a positive difference, particularly when speaking with them on the phone and when we met face to face. Nevertheless, when agreeing to the location for each interview I needed to consider the risk and trust my intuition.

While being critical of how discourses can impact on the research process, instead of becoming a potential limitation to the present study my being a woman interviewing men may have been a strength. Moreover, interviewing men without their partners enabled them to feel less inhibited, and therefore able to talk more freely; a finding which was also found in Throsby & Gill’s (2004) study of couples who unsuccessful experiences of IVF.

Men distancing themselves from the subject: When interviews had started, the men began to relax and reported feeling comfortable talking, at times to the extent of talking about things they had never talked about before and ‘spilling out their emotions’ (Brendan). Following interviews however, most men ‘switched off’. They did not want to read their transcripts, with one man saying that ‘it’s said and it’s out there. It’s done’, ‘no need to go over it again’. Another said that he had ‘given enough to the topic and didn’t want to give any more’. I reflected back on their interviews, during which they had said that they were talking about things they hadn’t talked about before and were now looking at their experiences from a different perspective. Most of the men said they enjoyed the interview and talking with me, giving the impression of a positive interview experience. However, the safe space for talking openly, closed for most men at the conclusion of the interview. Some were not able to legitimise a reason for opening back up again.

These few nuances intertwined male and female gender discourse, inhibiting and disinhibiting power in either direction at different times. In one sense, inhibitions can hinder data generation, yet on the other hand, again, it provided useful data for the present research; the co-production of data.

7.3 Summary and directions for future research

The process of the present study was similar to that followed by Socrates and the ancient Greek philosophers in terms of questioning knowledge as it is fashioned today; in this case, questioning the knowledge of male childlessness and reproduction.
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Going back to the minutiae of meanings of ‘childlessness’ and ‘reproduction’ helps to reshape the development of meaning and open up possibilities to re-think how these concepts are relevant to and inclusive of childless men. The knowledge co-produced with study participants is not intended to be surface knowledge, or ‘pamphlet knowledge’ (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 16). Instead, I have aimed to contribute to the literature in developing broader understandings of the concepts of ‘childlessness’ and ‘reproduction’. It is not meant to leave the men’s experiences in an academic wake, but to embrace their experiences both theoretically and on a practical level, reporting back to them (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012) and society. It is my hope that this research offers something deeper; building on current understanding but also demonstrating new ways of thinking about issues of concern and phenomena. Emulating the song lyrics in Leonard Cohen’s 1992 ‘Anthem’, ‘there is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in’, questions can be asked of common understandings, or what appears to be the fixed truth of how childlessness and reproduction is understood.

The findings of the present study build on the small yet slowly increasing body of knowledge and understanding of male childlessness. The findings depict the experiences of 23 Australian men, and are not necessarily representative of the experiences of other ‘childless’ men. Like all knowledge, it will never be complete. For the present study, interpretation is understood as a process, one that continues as our relation to the world keeps changing (Parker, 1992). Its insights will not become fixed truth. With social and demographic change, how we understand experiential phenomena continues to evolve. From the evidence in the study, ‘childlessness’ is a problem for some ‘childless’ men but not for all. Likewise, defining childlessness varied for each man. Recognising diversity is key. Different aspects of their working, financial and educational backgrounds did not seem to have a significant bearing on their experience of childlessness, nor their ability to articulate their experiences.

Definitions and experiences of ‘childlessness’ and ‘reproduction’ are indeed subjective. Desire, choice, and circumstances leading to not producing offspring, and discourse, are interlinked and all impact on what meaning men put on their experiences of being childless. Although experiences of male childlessness often remain hidden, participants’ narratives revealed that men do in fact experience childlessness, whether as mostly positive or negative experiences. Moreover, their experiences have a place within the reproductive sphere. Men do matter.
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Understandings that embrace both the practical day-to-day lived experience of male childlessness while also offering philosophical perspectives on the concepts of childlessness and human reproduction, encourages the dissemination of findings to be applicable to many practical and research areas — psychology and mental health, midwifery, ageing, and areas involving reproduction, demography, biology and anthropology. For example further exploration of the psychosocial experiences of the increased number of men, heterosexual and homosexual, who are having access to advances in Assisted Reproductive Techniques (ART). Moreover, with global migration and cultural diversity increasing within many Western populations, our understanding of the experience of male childlessness would be further benefited, by exploring the experiences of men from diverse cultural backgrounds. From within the Australian population it would be interesting to explore the experiences of male childlessness from ‘childless’ men within Indigenous and Chinese communities. As a third example of further research a complimentary perspective could be undertaken in exploring psychosocial or demographic patterns, or trends, in male experiences of childlessness, and further develop an understanding of the implications of not producing offspring have on men’s mental health.

To understand human nature within fundamental concepts of childlessness and reproduction we cannot isolate people in their interrelationships with other people and other things, other structures. It is not possible to have a monologic view of human nature and, I have argued, nor is possible to have a monologic view of the concepts of childlessness and reproduction. Monologic views adopt a singular perspective for negotiating the diversity of human experience. Sampson’s (1993, p. 25) dialogism ‘emphasises the conversations in and through which self and other are constructed’. As a concluding remark the difficulty of the entanglement of childlessness involving so many aspects of life was encapsulated by Luke:

*It’s hard to put something into a category by itself...*
**Conclusion**

*Producing offspring is just an identified, ... isolated, slice of the whole productive pie ... while focussing on the pieces of the human condition we need to remember to step back ... being engaged, being productive, in the whole picture. (Richard)*

Richard’s concluding comment elucidates how concepts and experiences of childlessness and reproduction need to be considered within other aspects of human experience. Childlessness exists. It exists through absence. It is how the individual and surrounding culture contextualise the absence of offspring, what it means and thus, how it impacts on the psychosocial wellbeing of the *gestalt* of individuals.
Heidegger’s notion is that fragments of time, fragments of moments link together to where we are now at this moment, with moments from the past and potential moments of the future. Life does not necessarily go in stages, and it is not lineal. Notions of temporal change were highlighted in the lives of two men from the study at the conclusion of writing. As Carmichael and Whittaker (2007) indicated, remaining childless is not necessarily irrevocable, and transformations in circumstances in life do occur whereby a childless man has the opportunity to become a father. With different levels of acceptance of remaining ‘childless’, both men contacted me to tell me that they were facing potential circumstances of fatherhood.

In order to maintain anonymity and having agreed to meet with the men ‘in the strictest of confidence’, they agreed that some of their circumstances could be shared but with specific details withheld. The first man was very content with his life and had genuinely felt that he had accepted his circumstance of not becoming a biological father. Yet, when unexpectedly he met a younger woman who wanted to have a baby, the opportunity had ‘stirred something up, something primal’ which had surprised him. He was not sure whether he had ‘unknowingly’ internalised a persistent feeling of childlessness, but wanted to share his new experience; to demonstrate that while what he had said during the interviews had been sincere and accurate at the time, developing circumstances have given him cause to ‘rethink things’.

The second man contacted me to tell me his wife was pregnant and that he is not the biological\(^{23}\) father. For him there were enduring concerns about soon becoming ‘older parents’ and a sense of having been ‘dragged’ along with the strength of his wife’s aspirations for parenthood. Amongst his many emotions that were ‘swirling around’, there was a level of building interest and tentative excitement with the thought of being a father. In different ways both men quietly appeared to be excited about the prospect of finally becoming fathers.

Although this is not empirical evidence, both altered circumstances add to a blurring of notions of reproductive agency, demonstrating that reproductive circumstances can potentially change for men. Including an ‘epilogue’ in a thesis may

\(^{23}\) A point that was briefly discussed was that the point of difference in terminology where a mother can be ‘biological’ and ‘genetic’, or both, whereas fathers can only be biological or non-biological.
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seem unusual, and perhaps ‘afterword’ may better suit the title. However this section of the thesis serves as a comment rather than a conclusion to a story. I wanted to demonstrate that narratives of human experience, the context and complexity of experience are ongoing, and to reaffirm that interviews are a one point-in-time articulation of experience and what it means to the individual. Knowledge and understanding of reproductive experiences—including those of not producing offspring—have historical context, not only on a scholarly level but also on a very personal level.


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APPENDIX A: HREC Ethics Approval

5 January 2016

Ms Joanne Lawrence-Bourne
103 Coronation Drive
ORANGE NSW 2800

Dear Ms Lawrence-Bourne,

Thank you for the additional information forwarded in response to a request from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

The CSU HREC reviews projects in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council’s National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans.

I am pleased to advise that your project entitled “Outliving the self: Perspectives of men without biological offspring” meets the requirements of the National Statement; and ethical approval for this research is granted for a twelve-month period from 5/1/2016.

The protocol number issued with respect to this project is 2016/001. Please be sure to quote this number when responding to any request made by the Committee.

Please note the following conditions of approval:

• all Consent Forms and Information Sheets are to be printed on Charles Sturt University letterhead. Students should liaise with their Supervisor to arrange to have those documents printed;
• you must notify the Committee immediately in writing should your research differ in any way from that proposed. Forms are available at: http://www.csu.edu.au/__data/assets/word_doc/0007/963763/Report-on-Research-Project_20130503.doc (please copy and paste the address into your browser);
• you must notify the Committee immediately if any serious and or unexpected adverse events or outcomes occur associated with your research, that might affect the participants and therefore ethical acceptability of the project. An Adverse Incident form is available from the website: as above;
• amendments to the research design must be reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee before commencement. Forms are available at the website above;
• if an extension of the approval period is required, a request must be submitted to the Human Research Ethics Committee. Forms are available at the website above;
• you are required to complete a Report On Research Project, which can be downloaded as above, by 18/11/2016 if your research has not been completed by that date;
• you are required to submit a final report, the form is available from the website above.

YOU ARE REMINDED THAT AN APPROVAL LETTER FROM THE CSU HREC CONSTITUTES ETHICAL APPROVAL ONLY.

If your research involves the use of radiation, biological materials, chemicals or animals a separate approval is required from the appropriate University Committee.

www.csu.edu.au
CRICOS Provider Numbers for Charles Sturt University are 00086F (NSW), 01947G (VIC) and 02965E (ACT). ABN: 83 878 708 551
The Committee wishes you well in your research and please do not hesitate to contact the Executive Officer on telephone (02) 6338 4628 or email ethics@csu.edu.au if you have any enquiries.

Yours sincerely

Julie Hicks
Executive Officer
Human Research Ethics Committee
Direct Telephone: (02) 6338 4628
Email: ethics@csu.edu.au
Cc: Professor Ben Bradley

This HREC is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council’s (NHMRC) National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)
APPENDIX B: Script for social media

Ethics Amendment /Social Media for recruiting participants

CSU Ethics Approved Project no 2016/001

The script to be used for social media would be proposed as follows:

The study is being conducted by Joanne Lawrence-Bourne, School of Psychology at the Charles Sturt University, in NSW, titled ‘Outliving the self: Perspectives from men without biological offspring’.

The purpose of the research is to generate a better understanding of the experiences of male childlessness. The research also explores how men can feel reproductive in their lives without biological offspring, and whether feeling reproductive is important.

We are seeking a broad range of men aged 50 years and over and who are not aware of having any biological offspring to participate in this research. This may include men who are married or single, heterosexual, gay, religious, have various cultural backgrounds, or have adopted, fostered or stepchildren.

Men who participate in the study will not be asked why they don’t have biological offspring and their identities kept confidential and anonymous.

The researcher will meet with you at a time that suits you for two separate interviews. The purpose of the first interview is to explore the topic and the second interview is to reflect on what you have said. Each interview is anticipated to last for about an hour, however, this is flexible. The nature of the interview is guided by a few semi-structured questions, allowing you to talk about what you think is important. The interview will be recorded, transcribed and you will be invited to read over it if you wish.

If you, or anyone who know, might be interested in participating in the research, please contact Joanne Lawrence-Bourne on: jlawrence-bourne@csu.edu.au, or leave a message on 0409 008 112.

Thank you.
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APPENDIX C: Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Research Title: “Outliving the self: Perspectives of men without biological offspring”

Principal Researcher: Joanne Lawrence-Bourne - PhD Candidate
M.Mid., Grad.Dip.Psych., BSocSc(Psych)(Hons)

Principal Supervisor: Professor Benjamin Bradley
BA Human Sciences, MA Human Sciences, PhD Psychology

- I agree to participate in the above research project and give my consent freely.
- I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Information Statement, a copy of which I have retained.
- I understand I can withdraw from the project at any time, and do not have to give any reason for withdrawing.
- I consent to participating in interviews and understand that the interviews will be audiotaped.
- I understand that my personal information will remain confidential to the researcher.
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- I have had the opportunity to have questions answered to my satisfaction.

Print Name: _______________________________________________________

Contact Details: _____________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

Signature: _________________________________Date: _______________________

NOTE:

Charles Sturt University’s Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the

Committee through the Executive Officer:

The Executive Officer
Human Research Ethics Committee

Tel: (02) 6338 4628 Email: ethics@csu.edu.au

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Research Title: “Outliving the self: Perspectives of men without biological offspring”

Principal Researcher: Joanne Lawrence-Bourne - PhD Candidate
M.Mid., Grad.Dip.Psych., BSocSc(Psych)(Hons)

Principal Supervisor: Professor Benjamin Bradley
BA Human Sciences, MA Human Sciences, PhD Psychology
School of Psychology, Charles Sturt University.

Invitation

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores how men, who do not have biological offspring, can feel reproductive in their lives.
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The study is being conducted by Joanne Lawrence-Bourne, from the School of Psychology at Charles Sturt University.

Before you decide whether or not you wish to participate in this study, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish.

1. What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of the research is to generate a better understanding of how men can feel reproductive in their lives without biological offspring.

2. Why have I been invited to participate in this study?

We are seeking a broad range of men aged 49 years and over and who are not aware of having any biological offspring to participate in this research. This may include men who are married or single, heterosexual, gay, religious, or have various cultural backgrounds.

3. What does this study involve?

The researcher will meet with you at a time that suits you for two separate interviews. The purpose of the first interview is to explore the topic and the second interview is to reflect on what you have said. Each interview is anticipated to last for about an hour. The nature of the interview is guided by a few semi-structured questions, allowing you to talk about what you think is important. The interview will be recorded, transcribed and you will be invited to read over it if you wish.

The researcher will contact you, by phone or email, to discuss any further questions, which you may have regarding what is involved.
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4. Are there risks and benefits to me in taking part in this study?

Although most people find participating rewarding and fulfilling, personal reflection can raise some sensitive issues. If this is the case, you are able to withdraw from the study at any time up until the completion of writing the analyses. A contact number is provided - Lifeline (24 hours) 131114.

5. How is this study being paid for?

This research is funded through the university PhD Scholarship.

6. Will taking part in this study (or travelling to) cost me anything, and will I be paid?

There is no financial reimbursement for participating in the research. However, to minimise any cost for you, the researcher can discuss to meet for the interview at a time and location that is convenient for you.

7. What if I don't want to take part in this study?

Participation in this research is entirely your choice. Only those people who give their informed consent will be included in the project. Whether or not you decide to participate, is your decision and will not disadvantage you.

8. What if I participate and want to withdraw later?

If you wish to withdraw from the study at any time up until the time of writing the results, you may do so without giving a reason or a penalty. You will be asked if you would like the information you have provided to be discarded.

SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY
FACULTY OF ARTS

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Wagga Wagga Campus:
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Tel: +61 2 6933 2249

www.csu.edu.au
CRICOS Provider Numbers for Charles Sturt University are 00005F (NSW), 01947G (VIC) and 02960B (ACT). ABN: 83 878 708 551
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10. How will my confidentiality be protected?

All information is confidential and anonymous. To protect your identity, your name and anyone else you mention, will be replaced by a pseudonym of your choice. Please note that there are limits to confidentiality in extreme cases when there is specific and identifiable risk of serious harm. Information will be stored for at least five years as a password protected computer file.

11. What will happen to the information that I give you?

The audiotape of your interview will be transcribed as a paper copy using your pseudonym. You will be offered to review your transcript if you wish to do so. Individual participants will not be identified in any reports arising from the project. Participants will be offered a summary report of the results.

12. What should I do if I want to discuss this study further before I decide?

If you would like further information please contact the researcher Joanne Lawrence-Bourne on - 0409 008 112.

13. Who should I contact if I have concerns about the conduct of this study?

Charles Sturt University’s Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the Executive Officer:

The Executive Officer
Human Research Ethics Committee

Tel: (02) 6338 4628

Email: ethics@csu.edu.au

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

Thank you for considering this invitation.

This information sheet is for you to keep.
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APPENDIX E: Example of interview questions

Signed Consent form
Age:
Pseudonym:
Rural / Remote / Country town / City
Relationship:
Description of Work:

Interview Questions

Can you describe your initial response to this study / this topic?

What’s it like not to have a genetic relationship with a child?
    Prompts - relationship with other children? / pets?

What does the term ‘male childlessness’ mean to you?
    Prompts - do you feel like a childless man?

What does reproductive and productive mean to you?
    Prompts - describe where you get pleasure or satisfaction in your life?
        - differences & overlapping of meanings

General Questions

Why you decided to participate in the study?

How do you feel with talking about this?

Is it important to understand what it’s like for men?

Is there anything else you would like to add?
APPENDIX F: Example of mind-mapping and theme development
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meanings of Reproductive &amp; Productive</th>
<th>Reproduction</th>
<th>Production</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic meaning of reproduction</td>
<td>P1 Art of replacing, not like Sengali [372], reproducing who I am, but not forcing myself onto them [100]. For any man, any human being, a sense of being reproductive gives meaning to life [149]. Not trying to mirror his life but God through him [390]</td>
<td>P1 Being productive is when you can work hard and you can look back on the day and see what you’ve done [141] There are times when it is useful to kicking back watching DVD or reading a book, quiet time [497]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productive encompasses broader meanings.</td>
<td>The begetting of a child is the primary way but that’s only half of it. It’s the rearing [213] on different levels for different people [222] … To think about being reproductive as only having children, is being a reductionist. If that’s the only emphasis, you have missed something very rich [271]…</td>
<td>Not being unproductive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproductive one aspect of being productive</td>
<td>To pass on self worth… we all get to live with the consequences of our choices one way or the other [544]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primacy of Biology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t think of reproduction only in solid terms of having a genetic child</td>
<td>P2 Never had an urge to be reproductive [42] There was never a time when I recall thinking that I would like to reproduce, have family, have children [47]… I was just using your word. I never thought about it in those terms [64]. Reproductive means nothing to me. It</td>
<td>P2 Being productive is very different. [that what? What is ‘that’. P3 talks of wife ‘channelling’ her maternal instincts towards their cat] That’s been channelled into work, career and other activities [74]… [involved with] quite a range of non-for-profit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Letter to Participant Members

Dear Men,

When we met for your interview everyone expressed interest in the findings of the study. I am now sending you a summary of these findings, which is longer and formatted in a way that you might not have been expecting. It is not a quantitative study whereby I provide statistics. It is written as a list of comments, drawn from what you talked about in the interviews. It is written in keeping within the agreement of anonymity and confidentiality. For this reason, I have included general findings and not quoted you individually.

As I mentioned the purpose of this study was to cover a broad range of experiences of what it is like, at this point, in your life, not to have produced offspring. The specific aim was to develop a deeper and broader understanding of male childlessness — to hear it from you. Broader aims were to contribute understanding of general concepts of childlessness and reproduction. Ultimately, it is the hope that research of this kind will generate a greater appreciation of reproductive diversity in Australian society, which is one of many societies that hold strong beliefs and values around 'having children'.

Your initial responses to this research varied — from surprise and intrigue that there is interest in this subject, to feeling emotional that someone has finally asked them 'what's it like not to have children?'

Background of the men that participated

- 23 men, aged 50-75 yrs, from different areas of Australia.
- Heterosexual & homosexual men.
- Men who are partnered, married, single, de facto, divorced, widowed.
- Working backgrounds included full time/part time/retired/unemployed.
- — agriculture, artist, food & wine industry, film industry, company directors, teaching & education, labourers, men's health, non-for-profit organisations & groups, publishing, stockbroking & trading, tradesmen, religious leader, writers.
- Although you have not produced offspring, the study included men who have adopted children, stepchildren, 'grand-children', children by donor sperm/IVF, and those who have very little contact with children.
- All your names have been changed in the study.
MEN'S EXPERIENCES OF CHILDLINESS

Summary

The summary below does not cover everything—mainly the key points. I've read through each of your transcripts many times, and could see themes developing which linked your different experiences. As you would expect, there are experiences that were similar and, of course, contradictions. But that is about who you are as individual men. Everyone experiences a phenomenon differently, and not producing offspring means something different to each of you.

Everyone experiences childlessness. Even though childlessness might not be a topic of interest or a non-event in your life, it still counts as an experience, and is a contribution to the whole range of experiences of what it is like not to have children. Even if you didn’t want to have children, over your lifetime, there are times when the subject of children comes up. That you have a range of experiences, significant or less so, shows the diversity of how men feel about not producing offspring.

There were a few men who were reluctant to participate [even though it is voluntary]. Some men thought they had nothing to contribute. But that in itself, is a contribution to the research.

- Why you have not produced offspring was not asked directly. However, your reasons became integrated with the way you talked about ‘being childless’. Your desire, choice and circumstances around not having children, has influenced your experience of childlessness.

- Reasons included—childhood experiences, poor relationship with fathers, how you observed the lives of other people who had children, infertility, unsuccessful reproductive treatments such as IVF, relationships/marriages ending, remaining single, compulsory requirement of celibacy for some religious leaders, didn’t want to ‘settle down & have kids’, with partners who already had children, partners who did not want children, the potential risk of having a child with impairments, or might inherit your personality, social barriers for single men and gay men to have children. Some of these reasons were also associated with low self-esteem. As some of you highlighted, reasons for not having children are complex, and interconnected with many other aspects of your life.

- In the present study, some of you were longing to be a father, and still wish you had the opportunity to ‘settle down and have kids’. The emotional turmoil of miscarriages, cycles of IVF, infertility, relationship breakdowns, remaining single, contributed to negative emotions about being childless. Some of you have had times of wondering what’s the point of it all’, what you are working towards, and questioning your purpose in life. Some are experiencing ongoing sadness, moments of anger and jealousy, depression and have had suicidal thoughts at different
times in your life. Mention was made of listening to people talk about their children, and now you're listening to them talk about their grandchildren. Some of you feel a gap in your life and have missed out.

- Others were more certain about not having children, or were nervous of having children, and ensured you didn't have children — eg. celibacy, partnered someone who didn't want children or already had children, partners who had a termination or took the morning after pill, or you moved from one relationship to the next, avoiding 'settling down and having kids'. A few of you made a decision early in life about not having children, and don't have any regrets.

- Everyone is placed differently along the continuum of regrets and satisfaction with life.

- Others didn't ever make a conscious decision about whether you did or didn't want to have children. Some 'drifted along', delayed having fertility tests, left decisions to partners, or 'thought it would happen one day'. A couple of you think it still might happen. Many of you felt life could have gone either way if circumstances were different — eg. successful IVF, stable relationship, different career (eg. Catholic priesthood), being with a partner who wanted children, or living in different times with different social values — whereby you may have chosen to have children.

- A few of you had not made any reproductive decisions until you were given an ultimatum of having to choose between forgoing biological fatherhood and staying with your life-long partner, or hope that you would find someone else to have children with. Although content, a couple of are still unsure of why your partner did not want children, a foreboding subject.

- Others are quite content not to have had children, relieved to have avoided the potential risks and negative consequences of having children — eg. Emotional consequences, financial consequences, risk of impairment and bad behaviour.

- For those who wanted children, or thought you would end up with children, having the 'right' partner was important to you.

- Others felt that having a partner and a stable relationship was more important than having children, while some were content with no partner and no children.

- In other words, how much you wanted children, had choices around having children, and circumstances around not having children, all impacted on how you experienced not having offspring.
Most of you, however, have wondered at some point in your life, ‘what it might have been like to have had children’ — but not always regretfully. These may have been fleeting thoughts or life-long ponderings.

Australian society, like most societies, emphasise the importance of having children. Therefore, some of you feel judged in some way for not having children, feeling as though you have to defend yourself — for example, saying that you are ‘odd’ for not wanting children, or an ‘empty shell’, ‘not normal’; perceiving the idea that you are ‘supposed’ to want children; that people feel sorry for you for not having children of your own; or assume that you didn’t want children; or defending against perceptions of paedophilia or that you haven’t grown up.

Perceived judgements and negative insinuations made you feel sad and/or angry, particularly because they didn’t understand why. For others, you didn’t mind what society thought. Most of you, however, expressed that it is nobody’s business.

Being told that you would have ‘made a great dad’ made some of you feel good, and some of you feel worse for not having the opportunity to do so.

Both heterosexual men and homosexual men recognised that social attitudes and laws for same-sex couples and family structure, are changing in terms of acknowledging gay men wanting and having children. For a few of you, concepts of homosexuality and reproduction are still at odds. Others suggested that homosexual men having children is ‘fashionable’. Homosexual men talked about the constraints of feeling that few people don’t seem to consider or understand, that they have their own thoughts and feelings on having or not having children.

There was also another assumption that reproduction is more relevant and more important to women. Some of you thought that talking about being childless relates more to women, or that not having children is more important to women. It can be just as important to men. The primary focus of social media and research has predominantly focused on women, which keeps male childlessness invisible.

You use the words, ‘caring’/‘nurturing’/‘being unfulfilled’, reluctantly, as you tend to be consider these words as female characteristics. However, you acknowledge that men do care and are able to nurture.

Because men have longer reproductive spans, the sense of urgency is less for men. As a result, some men are quite ‘relaxed’ about having children.

Even though many of you could still have children, some said that you are ‘too old’ now, while others felt pleased that it could still happen.
MEN’S EXPERIENCES OF CHILDLESSNESS

- A few of you felt that not producing offspring was a slur on your sense of manhood, feeling 'a bit less of a man'. Others felt it didn’t matter, and that you still feel like a man — ‘a man without kids’. Some compared yourself to the alpha male or hegemonic masculine traits, with a couple of you identifying with these traits, while others rejected these qualities. Men who did not compare themselves to others were more comfortable with who they are.

- Another point you mentioned was about who will look out for you in old age. A few of you expressed concern with who will be around when you are older, predominantly a comment from those of you who are single and wanted children.

- What ‘male childlessness’ means to you, is not as straightforward as it seems, not always appropriate. For many of you, the term ‘male childlessness’ is unfamiliar, and is considered to have negative connotations.

- A couple of you were not totally sure if there might be a child ‘out there’, but still identify with being childless, which is why you participated in the research. This lack of certainty can be an issue for men.

- Being childless doesn’t define who you are and although some of you feel childless, you don’t define yourself as a ‘childless man’.

- The term ‘having children’ and the question ‘do you have children?’ means different things to different men, but it is the phrase commonly used. For example, although you have not produced offspring, you ‘have children’, children that are adopted, fostered, or a ‘your’ stepchildren.

- For some of you, who have been successful in your working life and close to nieces and nephews, still feel a gap in your life with not ‘having children of your own’.

- Forming relationships was also important to most of you — with a partner, nephews and nieces, godchildren, your students and your pets. For those who are single, some thought life would be more satisfying if you were in a stable relationship. Others were quite content being single. Some of you have a wide social network, others a small circle of friends. For most of you, relationships and friendships are an important part of being human.

- Relationships with other children was often referred to as ‘social fathering’, ‘pseudo fathering’, ‘uncle’ or ‘parenting’. Men often talked about nephews and nieces, godchildren, mentored students in a similar way to how some parents talk about their children.
MEN’S EXPERIENCES OF CHILDLINESS

- All of you have negotiated life without offspring in different ways — for many of you, giving attention to your work has been your primary focus, and with different levels of satisfaction.

- Even though you have a connection with other children, some of you still feel very much childless because you do not ‘have children of your own’. For others, these kinds of relationships are enough.

- This might be because you ‘have children’ in other ways — not necessarily as a replacement, but in a symbolic way of caring, nurturing, imparting knowledge, making a positive difference on an other person, a project, fundraising.

- Cultural and religious backgrounds also had an impact on your experiences. For example, some men talked about cultures and religions putting pressure on couples to produce offspring. Some cultures remain homophobic and do not consider the reproductive thoughts and feelings of homosexual men. Other cultures put sexuality aside, and continue to put pressure on men, to produce offspring and carry on the family name, and tradition. Where again, there are cultures that are tolerant of different lifestyles.

- Meanings of being ‘reproductive’, however, can go beyond producing offspring, beyond biology, with a sense of continuation — ‘self replicating’ in other ways than producing offspring. At face value, meanings seem obvious, in terms of reproduction meaning to produce offspring, and productivity is related to work. Yet, these two terms are often interconnected, with meanings of being reproductive intersecting with meanings of being productive and via-versa — talking about ‘doing something that is worthwhile’, ‘looking back on what you’ve done’, ‘putting your self into something’, ‘creating something that can be carried off’. Some of you talked about passing things on, leaving a legacy, and sharing your wisdom/knowledge — eg. relationships with children, community projects, through your work, creative projects, fundraising, mentoring students, publishing, passing on a life-time business. A few were disappointed that you were not able to pass on your genes or your family name. Most of you, however, would like to be remembered in some way. A couple of you didn’t want to leave anything of yourselves, your self, behind.

- Many of you thought that you would be remembered for a limited time. Thinking about continuation, led some of you to make religious or spiritual references.

- Although you are not necessarily thinking of ‘being reproductive’ consciously in these specific terms, many of you feel reproductive in other ways.
MEN’S EXPERIENCES OF CHILDLINESS

- In listening to you, there was a sense of the phrase, “it takes a village to raise a child”. By ‘child’, I not only mean the children in your life, I also refer to child in a symbolic way — through your sense of creation, and being productive in your immediate and the greater community. Your input and influence is valuable, and which might otherwise be different to that of a parent. Everyone has something to contribute.

- We are not always aware of the ripple effect of how we contribute to society... and this includes your contributions, as participant members of this research.

Can I give you a one-sentence summary of what it is like not have children? The answer is no. The way in which human beings experience life events, is not as simple and straightforward as it might appear. Like all human experiences, childlessness is complex, interweaving many other aspects of your life.

One of the aims of the study is to show the diversity amongst men who don’t have children/have not produced offspring. It is not a quantitative study of statistics. Rather, a qualitative study such as this needs to show how everyone experiences childlessness— the similarities and the contradictions—and what it means to each of you.

From what you have told me, my impression is that you would like people to respect and accept that you have not produced offspring, for whatever reason. It is clearly evident that every man’s experience of being ‘childless’ is different. Sweeping assumptions about your experiences cannot be made, and therefore generalisations cannot be made to other ‘childless’ men. All of you recognised and respected this of each other, even though you share the same phenomenon of ‘childlessness’.

As members of the research study, I would like to thank each of you for participating in this research study about ‘male childlessness’. As far as I am aware there are only a handful of studies in Australia that have specifically explored the experiences of male childlessness. I thought you might like to know that there were other men who also wanted to participate. However, I had to draw a line, as this is considered a relatively big study of this kind and there are also constraints of time. This indicates to me that there is a need for this topic to be raised and that men do matter in discussions within the reproductive sphere, whether you have produced offspring or not.

This study has allowed you the opportunity to talk about a topic, that for many of you, it was the first time. It can be difficult to sort out what you are thinking and feeling about this aspect of our life. Therefore, it can be difficult to articulate your experiences. But let me assure you, each of your contributions to the study was valuable, and on my part appreciated. I thank you for your honesty and your time.
These are general findings of the study, and I hope that attempting to capture some of your experiences of being ‘childless’ to be informative. If you would like to send a response, you would need to do so by the end of May.

Please let me know if there is anything you need clarifying.

I thank you again, and I hope to hear from you.

Regards,

Joanne Lawrence Bourne

Email: jlawrence-bourne@csu.edu.au

Mobile: +61 [0]409 008 112
APPENDIX H: Feedback of responses to the Participant Summary Letter

(in alphabetical order)

> Hi Joanne. I am sorry I haven't replied earlier but I have read the summary and yes, I am all good with that. I might like to read the full report some time later if that’s ok. I don't think that I have changed my mind about anything in the mean time or as a result of reading the summary.
>> Nothing in the report that has upset me but I can give you another personal insight but it would require us to meet in private and in the strictest confidence only.
>> have a great weekend cheers (Adam)

I did pick up some of my comments and also read with interest some of your elucidates that covered what constitutes ‘an experience’ within the subject matter of your study. (Alastair)

Most interesting especially ‘it takes a village to raise a child’.
I keep thinking how humans through cooperation have survived and civilised over thousands of years. There must be an evolutionary advantage in there being childless men.
One other thing that set me thinking was ‘The Money’ an ABC RN program. I only heard a snippet while washing the dishes. The subject was the pet industry in Australia. Someone mentioned ‘fur babies’. I was wondering how many childless men have ‘fur babies’ as a substitute for children? Not me. [his sister died just recently, one of his siblings with whom his mother wasn’t sure was hers] It was in the turmoil of finding some kind of reasoned balance, examining what’s true, allegiances – the lot, that I have to say at nearly 70, I don’t really know myself. And it was during this I remembered I wrote a short story years ago, imagining life with a daughter. It’s in a rough form. I had forgotten all about it. I know you haven’t got time to read it but I attached it at the top anyway. (Andrew)
Hi Joanne,

Thanks for sending the summary through - it was very interesting read - you've done a great job! Best of luck (Colin)

Hi Joanne,

Thanks for sending through the summary letter. It was interesting reading.
Regards, (Craig)

Thanks. I have read the summary letter. There was nothing to upset me - perhaps I am too uncomplicated. Regards (David)

Hi Joanne,

I've had a quick read of your letter and will read more carefully in the next day or two. My initial reaction is that you may be overthinking some of this somewhat, but I should reserve judgment until I have read carefully and deliberated on it.

On the other hand, I have some good news. Totally unexpectedly, and against the odds, we are 13 weeks pregnant and so far all's going well. If you are moving on to a study of older first-time fathers, please keep me in mind!

Kind regards and thanks (Felix)

Hi Joanne, I've re-read your summary and again found it absorbing and interesting

It is curious how some of the biggest decisions about the course of one's life are often made casually, often thoughtlessly. A casual decision, a decision of convenience, often changes the course of our employment, the place where we live, or our personal life, in a permanent way that we don't appreciate the significance of till much later.

That's how it was with me (deceased wife). In hindsight, when she called a temporary halt to our relationship, she gave me the opportunity to go and start a new life with someone else, but I didn't take it. I must have been happy with her. And she never showed any outward interest in whether I wanted to have kids or not; it was her decision as long as we were together. 'The woman controls the fertility', was her refrain.
MEN’S EXPERIENCES OF CHILDLESSNESS

I think you have broached a subject that has had little exposure and deserves some.
Wanting but not having children has always been thought a concern only for women, and men are not considered in that discussion. Some probably suffer in silence.
Not me, I’m happy to add. As I told you, I could have gone either way and I don't have serious regrets.   (Harry)

I read your summary. It’s an important subject … It may not be necessarily be research the participants may want to read. The results can be confronting. (Luke)

Thanks for your summary Joanne.
I didn’t understand what you meant by the opening sentence of the 2nd paragraph in the summary -"Everyone experiences childlessness."
When you stated that you could not give a one-sentence summary you continued
"Sweeping assumptions about your experiences cannot be made, and therefore generalisations cannot be made ....."
necessitating the use of the qualifiers couple, few, some, many, most, all, others - which indicates that your target group is simply a subgroup of Homo sapiens in all its variations.
Good luck   (Mick)

Hi Joanne, all fine with me.   Kind Regards   (Noel)

Thank you for remembering to forward the research outcomes summary.
To be honest, I forgot all about this till I saw your email yesterday and finally made some time to read it through tonight.
I recall feeling a sad after the interview. On reflection, the interview focussed my attention on something about myself I had never consciously thought about previously. Clearly I was aware of the issue but never really consciously focussed and thought about it.
I saw a bit of myself in the summary report and recall some of the points I made.
Thank you for the feedback and best wishes with the research.
Do you intend to publish? And if so, I'd love to know about that.   (Peter)
MEN’S EXPERIENCES OF CHILDLESSNESS

You've done well with a lot of varied information. 
Good luck  (Robert)

I have now read your report in depth. I can see myself in there.
The one thing I would add is that not having children can restrict your social life because either you're not seeing other people with children at (for example) school sporting events etc so in turn you tend to get left out of some social events. This could also be because I never remarried.
The way I get around this is making sure I stay in touch regularly with my friends and having my own dinner parties or organizing to catch up with them.
I hope all goes well finalizing the study because as you have indicated it's really not an area that has been looked at.  Cheers  (Russell)
MEN’S EXPERIENCES OF CHILDLESSNESS

APPENDIX I: Example of field notes

29 Dec 2016. Meeting time
Location
Expectation unclear

Island life - rural community + tourists
Small, knows most people
Traditional expectations - family £ male role

Impact on experiences? Process,
interruptions, finding ways to fit in without children
Consistent with social expectations

Did he want to have children? - buried, abandoned
Due to circumstances (ex social partner),<br>creative, open

Gentle, creative
Sensitive, not interested in cars/football
Intelligent
Struggling to purpose in life, career achievements
Structural relationships, wife - strong for his wife - assertive, gender

Family hx - born in another country,
has to make extra effort to have children
Life more expensive in mainland - time cost
Feels alone with the emotions thought
no one has faced him this, if he had
try to support his wife’s emotions