

# **Ageing without children: challenging the hegemony of parenthood**

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Childless older people have traditionally been regarded as disadvantaged when compared to older people with children, especially in regard to care and support needs. More recently, there has been recognition that defining ageing without children as an inevitably disadvantaged experience is inappropriate. This paper reports on findings from an exploratory study using in-depth, biographical interviews with 30 older women and men aged between 60 and 90, which examined the contexts in which people aged without children and the potential implications for the participants. Using thematic analysis, findings highlight the diversity of contexts in which people age without children. Understanding those contexts provided insights into the resources that people may have to invest in developing support networks across the life course. Moreover, awareness of the context in which people age without children can provide insights into the potential implications of for example, involuntary childlessness. While participants did not feel personally disadvantaged as childless people, they did feel marginalised in a world dominated by the continued centrality of parenthood as an assumed adult role. Experiences included inappropriate assumptions made by others about their 'childless' state; exclusion from the social worlds of parents/grandparents; and recognition that old age care was underpinned by assumptions about family care. Participants tended to be concerned about issues associated with for example, the availability of support if they should lose decision-making capacity. This narrative was invariably accompanied by recognition that older people with children could not necessarily rely on the availability of support from children, or that adult children might not be the most appropriate representative for their parent. Although a small-scale study, the findings suggest implications for challenging the hegemony of parenthood in later life especially when considering policy and practice associated with older people and their potential and actual care and support needs.

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