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Childlessness at the end of life: evidence from rural Wales

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ABSTRACT
After the spouse, children are the most likely source of informal support for an older person when the frailties of advanced old age create the need for help. Childlessness may thus be seen as particularly a problem for older people. In general, to compensate for the lack of children, childless people develop closer relationships with available next-of-kin and non-kin. Despite this, in times of need they are likely to find themselves with inadequate informal support. Using data from the Bangor Longitudinal Study of Ageing, this article explores the consequences of childlessness among persons aged 85 years or more living in rural Wales. The results indicate that by the time they reach old age, childless people have adapted to their situation and developed expectations consistent with being childfree. They have closer relationships with collateral kin, friendships are important and a high value is placed on independence. Nevertheless, unless they die suddenly or after a short acute illness, almost all of them enter residential care or a long-stay hospital at the end of their lives. It is also shown that the situation of childless people varies greatly and depends on several factors, particularly marital status, gender, social and financial capital, and on the person's earlier investment in the strengthening of next-of-kin and non-kin networks.

KEY WORDS – childless, end of life, gender, inheritance, marital status, nephew, niece, siblings, social capital.

Introduction

After the spouse, adult children are the most important source of family support when the frailties of advanced old age result in the need for help and, in consequence, childlessness is generally regarded as a problematic state for older people. Those without children are seen as a socially vulnerable group (Wenger *et al.* 2007). The level of childlessness in the older population is even seen as an indicator of the need for formal services. The family networks of childless people are typically smaller than those of parents (Mugford and Kendig 1986; Wenger, Scott and Patterson 2000).

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Those without children are also less likely to be integrated into their neighbourhoods than parents (O'Bryant 1985; Choi 1994). However, the gerontological literature has consistently shown that childless people form primary links with available collateral kin and/or non-kin (Townsend 1957; Kivett and Learner 1980; Rubinstein *et al.* 1991; Chappell and Badger 1989; Dykstra 1995; Wenger 2001); other research has failed to show that they are social isolates (Connidis and McMullin 1992). Relationships with brothers and sisters are important (Wenger 2001), particularly among those who had never-married (Pickard 1995; Strain and Payne 1992). When siblings die, relationships with nephews or nieces often intensify (Wenger and Burholt 2001). Close relationships with nephews and nieces are not typically close among parents but childless people, on the other hand, develop close relationships with siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews over the life-course (Wenger *et al.* 2007).

Despite close relationships with collateral kin, in times of need of help, older adults without children can find themselves without adequate sources of informal help and support (Chapman 1989), and feel that there is no one who would look after them if they fall ill (Choi 1994). Research has shown that friends, neighbours and distant kin take on care in emergencies but that this care is less intense than that provided to parents by their children and is likely to be short term (Jerrome and Wenger 1999). Those without children are over-represented in residential care homes, but it is not clear whether this represents greater proportions of childless people entering such establishments or the fact that they move in at lower levels of dependency and thus spend longer in institutional care. In this paper, attention is given to the experiences of older people, aged 85 or more years, towards the end of their lives. What happens when health fails and what are the implications for formal services if the proportions of those in the population without children increase?

The data

The data used in this paper are from the Bangor Longitudinal Study of Ageing that was conducted in rural Wales from 1979 to 1999 by the author and colleagues at Bangor University, North Wales. The sample was drawn from a cross-section of community types including: a market town, a small seaside resort area, a nucleated village, a dispersed village, and adjoining scattered upland areas. The area has exceptionally attractive landscapes, with both mountains and rugged coastlines, and it includes the Snowdonia National Park and other officially designated 'Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty'. The region is a popular holiday destination, and much

favoured for second and retirement homes. The participants were randomly selected from the population aged 65 or more years in 1979 and were interviewed in-depth every four years. Thirty were studied intensively during 1983–87 with research visits two or three times a year. Three-fifths of the participants lived within 50 miles of where they had been born. Retirement migrants made up one-quarter of the sample, and included some returnees. Ages ranged from 65 to 99 years.

People without children in rural Wales

At the start of the study, 209 (30 %) of the respondents had no children (Wenger 1984). Approximately one-half of these had never married, and there were similar proportions of men and women. Childlessness was related to age – from 22 per cent of those aged 65–69 years, to 39 per cent of those aged 85 or more years. Those without children in the older age groups included women who had lost young husbands and fiancés during the First World War. Their levels of childlessness were higher than those in urban areas of the United Kingdom. Those without children were more likely than parents to have lived in the same community for many years. More than three-quarters of the entire sample of those who lived with older relatives (usually siblings), and nearly one-half of those who lived alone, had no children. Those without children were twice as likely to live alone as parents.

At the start of the longitudinal study, more than one-half of those without children were in contact with a relative at least weekly, most of them daily. One-half of this group were in contact with a sibling, one-quarter with nieces or nephews, and in only one-in-10 of the cases was the contact not a family member. For most, however, family contacts were supplemented by contacts with friends and neighbours – in this regard, there was little difference between childless older people's and parents' contacts. Only a few of those without children were socially isolated or lonely, but twice the percentage of child-free respondents as parents was identified as 'very isolated'. Those who had never-married were most likely to be socially isolated. Overall, of those without children, those most likely to be lonely were childless widowed men. Single men without children were more likely to be lonely than single women without children. Even so, those identified as 'very lonely' in the total sample were less likely to be childless and tended to be either widows living with children or women caring for ailing husbands.

There were clear differences between those who had never-married and those who had married, and also between each gender-marital status

category. Most *single men* had been born on farms or in the smaller settlements, and most had remained in the parental home. By the start of the study, most were already living alone and a few with siblings, often single sisters who had kept house in the parental home. Even those who were living alone when recruited into the study had lived most of their lives in households where there was a woman keeping house for them: mother, sister, niece, housekeeper or landlady. Several of those living alone received regular help from female relatives with housekeeping tasks. Most of these men worked or had worked in farming, forestry or mining. Only 15 per cent had had professional occupations. More than one-half continued working after retirement age.

Most of the *single women* were living in their natal community and again most had remained in the parental home, but they were more likely than the single men to have lived and worked away for some time. Most were living alone. Most of them had worked in mainly domestic-service roles as housekeepers, dressmakers or cooks, and one-fifth had been self-employed. Several had taken time off paid work to care for parents or had worked all their lives as housekeepers in the parental home. Only three single women had never kept house for a parent or sibling. In contrast to the single men, 37 per cent had had professional occupations (predominantly as teachers or nurses), and most had had jobs that brought them into contact with various community members. Most retired at the official retirement age, but a few worked on to 70 years of age, and a handful took on new paid employment after retirement.

Turning to the *ever-married men*, more than one-half were born elsewhere, generally in more urban areas. Their average age at marriage was 34 years, and most had remained in the parental home until marriage – as was typical for the cohort. At baseline, most were living with their wife. One-half had been (or still were) farmers and one-half blue-collar or retail workers. None had been in a professional occupation. Most retired at 65 years of age. As for *ever-married women*, more than one-half had been born in the area in which they still lived. Their average age at marriage was 35 and, like the men, most had left home on marriage. Most did not remain employed after marriage but stayed home and kept house. None had been in a professional occupation. At the start of the study, most were widowed and living alone.

Relationships, activities and personalities

There were also marked differences in lifestyles between the men and women, and between those who had never-married and those who had

been spouses. The most important relationship in the lives of the *single men* seemed to be their mothers, who had acted as housekeepers. Siblings were also important, especially sisters, for those who had them. If sisters lived nearby, in many cases they were seen at least every week; if further away, they spoke on the telephone. Sisters were the most likely confidantes. Nieces and nephews, especially nieces, were also important and became more so with the passage of time and the death of siblings. Those who had no living siblings developed close relationships with nieces, nephews, cousins or other younger-generation kin. One-half said they had no close friends but most had good if not close relations with neighbours. Most regularly attended religious services, and a few were involved with voluntary organisations. Those few who were involved in the community tended to be parish councillors or chapel deacons. Activities were typically limited to gardening, walking or reading. Most of them were reserved, quiet, private people.

The most important relationships in the lifecourse of *single women* had been with their parents, for whom they had kept house. Again, siblings were important, especially sisters. If they had more than one sister, they usually developed a close relationship with a particular one. Where there were surviving brothers and sisters, contact was much more frequent with sisters. Nieces and nephews were again important, and became more so with the passage of time. Subsequent close relationships were often with the child of the closest sister after her death. Friendships and contact with neighbours were both very important. They were *all* regular church-goers, and two-thirds were involved in voluntary groups. Their activities were mainly watching television or listening to the radio, gardening, knitting and other crafts. In contrast to the single men, most were independent, self-reliant and sociable.

The most important relationship over the lifecourse for *ever-married men* was with their wife. Most confided in their wives, and if widowed with siblings. Brothers were more important than sisters. Relationships with nephews were more important than with nieces, although if they lived nearby and there was frequent contact, this increased with advancing age. Visits and telephone calls with nieces and nephews became more frequent with the passage of time, widowhood and the men's increasing age. In some cases, when a brother had died young leaving young children, the childless uncle took a lifelong interest in them. More than one-half of this group reported real friends and most had good but not close relations with neighbours. Only a few were regular church-goers or involved in voluntary organisations. Their activities were similar to those of single people: watching television or listening to the radio, gardening, reading and walking. They tended to be independent of others but dependent on their wives.

The most important relationship for *ever-married women* was with their husband. Over the course of the study there were a few re-marriages of widowed respondents, and childless women seemed more inclined to remarry than parents but the number was small. Siblings again were important, especially sisters and sisters-in-law, although siblings were not as important as for single women. Close relationships between sisters-in-law tended to be sustained after widowhood. Nieces and nephews were important to a few, especially nephews to widows, but for most they were rarely seen. Friends and neighbours were very important. Most were regular church-goers and more than one-half were involved in voluntary groups. Most were very independent, but tended to keep themselves to themselves.

Towards the end of life

Over the 20 years of the study, the number of childless respondents shrank (from 209) to 15 by 1999, when the youngest was aged 85 years. From these participants we can learn something of what life is like for childless people at a very great age – the 'oldest old' during the last years of their lives. Gender and marital status variations were still important although most of those who had married were widowed by this time. Of the 15 survivors in 1999, seven were women who had never-married, six were widowed women, and there were only two childless men, of whom only one had been married. The data presented below refer primarily to the 1999 survivors, with additional qualitative data from those who survived to 1991 but had died before 1999.

At the end of life many *never-married men* had no surviving sibling. A very few had moved in with a niece or nephew, or a nephew or niece had moved in with them. This type of co-residence could usually be associated with an understanding about inheritance, with the niece or nephew being the designated (or implicit) beneficiary. Some expressed regrets at not having married and having a wife who could look after them. The following case biography reflects the experience of the only never-married man who survived throughout the study:

He had come to live in rural Wales at the age of 54, accompanied by his mother with whom he had lived all his life. He was an only child. He worked as a gamekeeper on the local estate. His mother died in 1964 and he retired in 1973. He lived alone after his mother died in a tied cottage. His only relative was a married younger male second cousin who lived in a small town not far away. He had infrequent contact with this cousin,

however, and in 1995, when he was aged 82 and his cousin 65, he seemed to resent the fact that they had so little contact and that his cousin did not offer him any help. By 1999 it was clear that there was no longer any contact between them.

From 1979 to 1987, he named a married couple aged in their forties as his friends. They telephoned him every day to make sure he was all right. He felt he could ask them for favours and that they would look after him if he were ill. One of them did his shopping and he had spent the previous Christmas with them. However, his special friend was his dog. By 1995 he named another couple as his only friends. They were in their eighties and he said he saw them once a week. Although he now appeared to rely more on this older couple, the younger couple were still actively involved in his life, had brought him Christmas dinner, and were mentioned as those he relied on most. He had no contact with neighbours. The dog had died and was much missed, but he had several cats. He said that he now wished that he had married.

At the end of the study, at 92 years of age, he was still living alone in a cold house and not in the best of health. His feet were swollen and painful. Two home-helps came to light the fire in the mornings, but by 10 o'clock when I visited, they had not yet been and it was very cold. There was no mention of the older couple, but the younger couple were seen two to three times a week and he said they would do what he wanted. The nearest neighbours were responsible for the care of their very dependent mother. He was clearly sick and lonely and moved into residential care before the next winter.

By the end of the study, the surviving *never-married women* were either living alone or in residential care. None had moved in with younger relatives. Only one had a sister still alive. The death of a close married sibling often resulted in the woman caring for the widowed brother- or sister-in-law. More than one-third had no niece or nephew with whom they were in contact, but most had such contacts. Usually, one niece or one nephew provided the most important relationship. For many, a close relationship with an unmarried niece had developed. Close relationships with nieces were usually with the child of the sister with whom the single woman had been closest. These relationships were stronger when the two people lived nearby. Relationships with nieces tended to be emotionally stronger; nephews typically helped with financial management from a distance. Close relationships tended to be linked to planned inheritance. More than one-half of the women had contact with cousins, and these relationships were more common if there was no sibling nearby. Most of the never-married women continued to live active and

socially-involved lives but, with increasing age, contacts became fewer and some of the women became housebound. They tried to hold onto their independence and used formal services (statutory or privately-paid) as necessary. The following biography was typical of the surviving women who had never married.

The woman was born in 1912 in rural Wales and had never married. She worked away from the area but moved back to a small seaside resort in 1975 when she retired from teaching, to be near her sisters and other relatives. Her mother had died young and she had been brought up by an aunt and uncle. At the start of the study, she had been living alone for 32 years, since her aunt had died. She was the youngest of seven children but three had already died. She saw one of her two surviving sisters every week and the other two to three times a month. She saw nephews weekly but was closest to two nieces. She helped out nephews and nieces in times of family crises.

She nominated the same four real friends up to 1987, one of whom was her confidante, but by 1995 only one was alive – they went to chapel together. In 1999, however, she appeared to have made new friends whom she saw two to three times a week. She also maintained friendly relationships with neighbours throughout the study; although over the years some had died and others had moved away, she had developed good relationships with their successors. She enjoyed reciprocal helping relationships with her neighbours and at every successive interview reported talking with neighbours.

By 1987, her brother had died and her younger sister sometimes needed her care. She was in regular contact with three nieces, one of whom she described as a friend. By 1991, one of her sisters was in residential care, and by 1995 she was the sole survivor. She continued to be in regular contact with nieces and nephews but with less frequent contacts. By 1999 at the age of 88 years, however, she saw one niece at least weekly and kept in telephone contact with other nieces and went to stay with them regularly. She remained in good health, still attended meetings of local voluntary associations, and had recently taken a trip to Durham in the north of England.

By 1999, hardly any of the *never-married women* was in a bad situation in the community and only one was still living in residential care, a woman who was older and not in good health. She had been close to one sister since birth. They had shared a bedroom as children, and after her sister married they had lived next door to each other. Her sister died suddenly and she was devastated. Her sister's son inherited the sister's

house and visited often with his family. At the end of her life, he and his wife drove 100 miles nearly every week to visit her in a nursing home. In other cases, never-married women remained at home and relied on formal services until their health made residential care necessary. Mobility, hearing, sight or cognitive function deteriorated, and friends died or moved away. In many cases, neighbours kept an eye on them, but a few became increasingly reclusive and refused to answer the door to the interviewer.

At the end of the study, none of the *ever-married childless men* had a surviving sibling. They lived either at home with a wife or in residential care. Contact with nephews and nieces increased with age. Most maintained an independent lifestyle and, as long as the wife survived, they had a close marital relationship. The following biography of a male informant exemplifies their circumstances in advanced old age.

He was born in 1913 and in 1954 married a local woman, when he was more than 40 years of age and she was 32. He worked on the same remote farm all his life. They had no children and his wife died after 20 years of marriage. He had been one of eight children, and five others were still alive at the start of the study. Two brothers had emigrated to Canada. His youngest brother lived within five miles and he saw him at least once a week. At the start of the study the informant seemed lonely, but by 1987 he felt well supported by friends and neighbours. He relied on one couple in particular; they looked after him if he was ill, ran his farm when he was in hospital, gave him lifts, did shopping and helped in the garden. By 1995, when aged 80, he had Sunday dinner with them every week and spent whole days with the husband. He had Christmas dinner with them throughout the period of the study. He also saw two single women daily and felt quite close to both of them.

Following his wife's death, neighbours cooked for him. By 1987, following a heart attack, he had a privately-paid household helper two mornings a week. She did general cleaning, ironing and some cooking. She was still working for him 12 years later at the end of the study. He was a chapel deacon; the other deacons and the minister called on him regularly. He went for a drink at the pub most evenings, but did not belong to any voluntary organisations. As he aged, he continued to live alone on the farm but, by 1995, the son of his nearby brother was working on the farm with him. They had developed a close relationship. By 1999, his nephew was a full partner in the farm and would inherit it. At 86 years-of-age he continued in fairly good health. He continued to see the couple that he relied on most and talked with them everyday. He attended chapel only occasionally but was still driving his car.

It was believed that this man would be able to remain at home with continued support. In other cases, two very frail old people ended up struggling to look after each other. An interviewer reported the case of an 86-year-old man who was caring for his disabled wife: 'Throughout it all he has retained his old-world charm, his sense of humour and his lively intellect. This indomitable independence has been the stumbling block and if care and services had been allowed in they might not now be the blind leading the blind … The wife shuffles with a zimmer (walker) frame and he walks with great difficulty and slowly so as not to fall over'. Such situations can have extreme consequences. Another couple aged in the late seventies who had retired to the area lived in a squalid cottage near a farm. They and their home smelt strongly of urine. They had no close contact with anyone. As their health deteriorated, they refused to allow social services entry. Finally, during a cold winter, entry was forced and the old woman was found barely conscious in bed with a dead dog. The old man was suffering from dementia. They were admitted to a residential home.

Nearly all the *ever-married women* were widowed before the study ended. Many commented that not having children had made the marriage much closer, which they valued. One-half were living alone and most others were in residential care. As their health deteriorated, several expressed regret at not having had children. Most contact with siblings was limited to telephone calls. Although nieces and nephews had not been important when they were younger, in a few cases closer relationships developed as the aunt aged. These relationships were often with a nephew who assumed legal and financial responsibility. The following brief biography is of a woman who survived to the end of the study.

Born in 1909, this woman had married the local butcher in 1940. She was still known as the butcher's wife although her husband had died. She missed her husband very much and was very lonely. During her married life, she never missed having children but, once a widow, she did. She dreaded ending up in a residential home. Both she and her husband were only children but in 1995 she talked about a nephew of her husband (possibly the son of a cousin) who had a holiday home in the area. He visited with his wife and grown-up children and took her out for meals. She was going to leave all her antique furniture to this nephew, and her house to his two daughters. By 1999, she said her only relative was an equally elderly cousin whom she had not seen in years.

At the start of the study she had several friends whom she saw daily. They and her neighbours had been very supportive during the illness and after the death of her husband. A friend who had been her bridesmaid came to stay with her as soon as she heard that the husband had died. By

1991 she saw friends regularly, but not as often as in 1979. By 1999, she still had regular contact and received a lot of support from friends and neighbours. Two of her friends were also neighbours and she saw them daily. A male friend who lived across the street kept a key to her house for emergencies. At that time she had paid help/care in the house and the carer had become a friend and had a house key. She depended on her carer. At the age of 90 years, she fell, could not get up, was taken to hospital and then stayed in the local authority old people's home for some weeks. She was able to return to her own home, but caring for her then became full-time for her carer. She still received a lot of additional support and care from friends and neighbours, and they took care of her well.

These events and circumstances are an interesting case of the woman's 'social capital' raising the availability of heirs and helpers, although being of local origin and a likeable person no doubt also helped. Another widow was less fortunate. She and her husband had retired to the area, but she was not forthcoming with neighbours and had not developed local friendships. She had family living in distant parts of the country but only occasional telephone contacts. She had no contact with any neighbour but spent a lot of time sitting in the window watching them. At 92 years-of-age, her independence, lack of trust and low involvement with the local community seemed to be behind her growing isolation. It was then thought that if her health failed, she would probably enter residential care. As with the women who never married, most of the ever-married women continued to have good friendship and neighbour relations throughout the period of the study. They remained at home with some informal or paid help, and when no longer able to manage they entered residential care.

Discussion

This study was conducted in a rural area of small towns, villages and extensive areas of low-density settlement. It can therefore be characterised as more 'traditional' than British urban areas. In the smaller communities and local neighbourhoods, most people were known to many if not all others, and those without children were more likely than parents to have lived in the area for most of their lives and to be related to others nearby. Yet a high proportion of those without children lived alone; privacy was respected, although neighbours tended to remain aware of their presence. Help in crises was usually forthcoming if other people got to know, but independence was cherished and undiscovered crises occured. The experience of most childless people in this rural area is consistent with reports in the

research literature on older childless people. Sibling relationships were more important than for parents. Sisters were more important to single men and to all women; brothers seemed to be more important to childless married men. The closest relationships were commonly with one sibling, often one of the same sex and the nearest in age. By the end of the study, however, few of the participants (then aged 85 or more years) had any living siblings.

Single men and women tended to have closer relationships with nieces and nephews than parents. Often those to whom they were closest were the child or children of the most proximate sibling. As time went on, women and single men tended to develop a close relationship with and rely on one niece, or less frequently one nephew. Nieces typically offered support and instrumental help, while nephews gave financial advice and management.

For some, the closest relationship changed with the passage of time. Sometimes, relationships with nieces or nephews became closer when the *parent* of the younger generation died. As the aunt or uncle became more frail and dependent, nieces and nephews were more inclined to visit, but such visits were infrequent, typically once a year unless they lived in the same community, although telephone contacts were more common. A few had neither niece nor nephew. Some took a special interest in unrelated young people. Single farmers often had young people who came to help on the farm and they taught them, for example, country lore and how to fish. Single women who had worked as teachers continued to take an interest in the lives of the children they had taught in the local school; those who had been community nurses kept in touch with families they had had close dealings with; and, similarly, midwives with the mothers they had attended and the children they had delivered.

Some of these relationships were developed intentionally to compensate for their childlessness. Social capital and financial capital were also important in the maintenance of relationships: it is difficult to separate the two. Of course, some were better off than others, and some had little to bequeath although many owned their own homes. Close and sustained relationships with nieces and nephews or other young people were often underpinned by a long-standing interest or support from the childless person. The childless women tended to help out in motherly or other caring roles. The interviews for the longitudinal study revealed many examples. Four cases are briefly described:

One woman and her husband took a special interest in young people who seemed to need support, including those working away from home for the first time. When she reached her nineties, many of these people visited her in residential care.

Another woman consciously decided to make herself 'everybody's favourite aunt' and available to help out in school holidays and at times of sickness,

confinements, weddings and baptisms. When in her nineties, she had close relationships with nieces and nephews and with their children and grandchildren. When she was admitted to residential care, they travelled long distances to visit her.

One woman devoted herself to helping a niece who was a single mother, and paid private boarding-school fees and helped out over holidays.

A single woman, who had many siblings living nearby, helped all of them and their children, as well as local families with chronically sick and terminally ill members. She said, 'there's many round here's died in my arms'. She in turn received a wide range of help and remained at home until she fell seriously ill, was taken to hospital and died.

Childless men, on the other hand, tended to help unrelated older men or widows. By and large, these contacts developed after retirement rather than reflecting life-long adaptation and interactions as with the women. While their health remained good, the men made themselves available to undertake or help with tasks on farms, household maintenance and gardening. Their help to frailer widows without children living nearby was particularly appreciated, although there appeared to remain constraints on spending time in the homes of women living alone.

Financial capital was also important. As the study progressed, it became clear that close relationships with nieces and nephews were often related to intended inheritance. In some cases this intention was made clear to interviewers or became clear with the passage of time. In other cases, nieces or nephews who had not been mentioned during the early interviews emerged as visitors or supporters as the older person's health declined. There were several cases of jostling for position, as for example:

One single woman had a close relationship early in the study with two nieces, unmarried sisters, who lived together and visited her once or twice a year. Later five nieces and her one married nephew visited two to four times a year. Four years later she was in regular telephone contact with one married niece and her one nephew. When aged 96 years, she decided to enter residential care after a fall at home. Her nephew's wife came to help her move and subsequently to sell the house. The participant noted that her nieces could not visit often because 'they were elderly'. No details of her final bequests were disclosed.

A bachelor farmer was cared for by a niece and her family whose land adjoined theirs, on the assumption and realisation of inheritance.

As mentioned earlier, a nephew became a partner on his never-married uncle's farm as the uncle began to fail. Plans were made for the nephew's family to move to the farm and for the uncle to move to their cottage in the village.

In an unusual situation, a never-married woman sold the farm where she had lived all her life, formerly with her parents, and moved into a small cottage. With the released capital she made loans to local farmers at favourable rates. There was

no running water in the cottage but the farmers kept her supplied with water and brought her shopping to her.

Owning property was clearly advantageous. Most of the childless people had a home of their own, but social and financial capital was not the only reason that nieces or nephews kept in touch. Family obligations, a sense of responsibility and reciprocity seem also to have been contributory factors. For example, one never-married man maintained contact with a disabled sister who lived in London with her son. They were his only living relatives. They kept in regular touch by telephone although they did not expect ever to see each other again. After his sister died, his nephew, then aged 66 years, and the nephew's two daughters came to Wales once a year to visit him. They took him out in his wheelchair every day. He lived in local authority sheltered housing and had no obvious assets. He had no telephone but went to a pay-phone every week to call his nephew.

Conclusions

The situations of the childless participants in the Bangor longitudinal study at the end of life depended on several factors. We have seen that marital status and gender were both important, and that the level of support was connected with social and financial capital. Much support reciprocated help and support that had been provided by the older person earlier in their life. In other cases, expectations of inheritance were clearly associated with support. Most of the childless people continued to maintain relationships and, in comparison with parents, a high proportion were church attendees while in good health. By the later stages of the study, a few childless people had little contact with others; they had withdrawn as the years passed or had always been loners. Some refused to open the door to callers and were later found to be suffering from dementia or paranoia.

While the childless participants continued in good health, typically they maintained independent lifestyles. Those living alone were more likely to receive help from social services and community nursing, which were provided at lower levels of dependency than to same-age parents with nearby children. Unless they died suddenly or after only a short acute illness, nearly all of the never-married or widowed people without children entered residential care or long-stay hospitals at the end of their lives. By the time they reached old age, they had adapted to their childless situation and adapted their expectations. Both the never-married and ever-married women had no expectations of family care. Childless married men expected to be cared for by their wives at the end of life, and in most cases the expectations were fulfilled.

Those who had not married expected to go into residential care at the end of life when they could no longer manage alone at home. Some selected a home before they needed care. Over the course of their lives, the never-married men had relied on mothers or sisters and expected to be looked after in residential care, where they adapted comparatively well. Never-married women, on the other hand, had developed self-reliance and independence over the lifecourse and expected to make their own decisions about their lives. Although accepting residential care, some did not adapt well because of the little control that they then had over their lives.

Those who had married were inclined to cling to their homes despite growing infirmity and impairment, particularly while both spouses lived. In several cases this resulted in two very impaired people struggling to support each other until a crisis occurred. Widows accepted that if their health failed they would eventually be admitted to residential care but sought to postpone the decision for as long as possible. There were no expectations for family care.

The study has demonstrated that those without children adapt their lives to the absence of children. They have closer relationships with collateral kin and, particularly for women, friendships are important. Even amongst those who live to a great old age, most continue to place a high value on independence, but at the end-of-life most have to turn to formal residential care. The literature on childlessness in old age provides no indication of substantial differences between rural and urban residents. The older people in this study were childless through life circumstances rather than choice. In future cohorts, in which being child-free may be a lifestyle decision, it might be expected that many of them will plan throughout their lives for their care in old age. Having avoided the high costs of parenthood, many will have the wherewithal to provide for a comfortable retirement and care at the end-of-life.

Their need for end-of-life care should not be seen as a potential drain on the public purse. Over their life span, they will have made no demands on the health-care system for obstetric or paediatric care, on the public education system, or on the social-security fund for family allowances. Childless older women in the future will have had less interrupted employment histories than mothers and grandmothers, and will have paid taxes more consistently. However, childless men and women will have paid higher taxes without receiving marriage and child tax allowances, for they cannot off-set taxes by filing jointly or by putting capital into a partner's name. In addition, those currently choosing not to have children are more likely to be the highly educated and to pay higher taxes. While the manifestos of political parties compete in promises to support 'the

family', the economics of childlessness for national budgets remains poorly understood. Statistical modelling of the impact of different levels of childlessness in the population over the lifecourse and its impact on national economies needs to address these questions.

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