

REVIEW

## How is a Man Supposed to Be a Man? Male Childlessness – A Life Disrupted

**Robin A. Hadley, Berghahn Books, New York, 2021, 394 pp., hbk £107, ISBN 13: 978-1-80073-187-5**

Miranda Leontowitsch 

Goethe-University Frankfurt, Germany

This book provides gerontologists with much needed insights into the lived experiences of male childlessness from a lifecourse perspective embedded in critical theoretical approaches on normative lifecourse expectations, ageing and gender, as well as family and social relations. The book draws on the qualitative work the author undertook in 2012 with the aim of answering four research questions:

- (1) What are men's attitudes and behaviours in relation to their experiences of involuntary childlessness?
- (2) How do men describe the influence of involuntary childlessness on their quality of life and relationships with close, familial and wider social networks?
- (3) What are involuntary childless men's expectations of their future?
- (4) What are the policy and service implications of the findings in relation to the above?

Childlessness in later life is an important topic to gerontology and policy at large, as there are direct links between childlessness and impact on wellbeing, social connectedness and access to informal care. Despite changing family patterns and a plurality of lifestyles in later life, social, material and physical support in later life are more likely to be provided by kin than other social ties. By examining involuntary childlessness among men in later life, the book contributes to closing a gap in literature and research on the impact of reproduction on ageing, which have located issues of fertility, family planning and social networks largely with women.

The book is divided into eight chapters and an epilogue. The first two chapters examine the literature on childlessness and ageing, with Chapter One defining terminology and thereby showing the many different ways of looking at childlessness and the varying meanings attached to it across the lifecourse. Chapter Two locates the research in sociological and critical gerontological work on gender, masculinities, and family and social relations. In Chapter Three, Hadley sets out his methodological approach and stages of the fieldwork. The subsequent four chapters present the findings by describing the main themes that developed from the 14

life-stories collected from men aged 49–82: ‘Pathways into Involuntary Childlessness’, ‘Negotiating Fatherhood’, ‘Relationships and Social Networks’ and ‘Ageing Without Children’. All four chapters provide insights into the men’s notion of time, uncertainty, relationality, agency and negotiation of fatherhood ideals against a backdrop of social, bodily and economic factors, as well as normative perceptions of lifestage accomplishments. The final chapter discusses the findings in light of the literature set out in Chapters One and Two and considers the contribution the study has made to childlessness in later life. At 40 pages, it is the longest chapter and carries the hallmarks of a doctoral dissertation. The author rises to the challenge, however, of weaving the numerous themes of the research into a whole that contributes to knowledge on the different factors that influence reproductive decisions and how they pan out across the lifecourse and impact on health and wellbeing. In addition, the study provides evidence that, contrary to popular knowledge, ‘men are actively concerned about their reproductive status, as highlighted by their sense of loss over not experiencing the father–child relationship’ (p. 246).

Robin Hadley’s work is both critical and reflexive. He locates his theoretical work within feminist scholarship and acknowledges his position within the field of research by examining his own biography and social position and what that means when conducting interviews with men who describe themselves as involuntarily childless. This insider–outsider approach underscores the author’s diligence in undertaking good qualitative research on a sensitive topic, at the same time as remaining aware of gendered positions of power.

This book will be of interest to researchers in the fields of ageing and gender, family and social relations, ageing and health, and critical approaches to lifecourse development. It is also of relevance to practitioners and policy makers working with demographic trends, changed social networks in later life, and an increasing number of people growing old without children and/or a partner. Additionally, given the author’s detailed and transparent approach to developing and conducting his research, the book provides excellent material for those teaching qualitative research methods. The methods chapter can be added to reading lists for postgraduate students and the pen portraits of each of the interviewees (in Appendix 1) are a rare and valuable source for learning about qualitative research and reflexivity.

For all who have been patiently awaiting this book, it has been worth the wait. Robin Hadley’s thorough theoretical work, careful and truthful methodological approach, as well as his reflective style pay tribute to slow research and slow writing, and the quality it can produce. In times of ever-increasing requirements, stringent deadlines and the impact they have on publication output, this book shows what is possible when the trend is resisted.

doi:10.1017/S0144686X22000472