Book Reviews

Van den Hoonaard, Deborah K. By Himself: The Older Man's Experience of Widowhood. University of Toronto Press. 2010. ISBN #978-1-4426-4109-9. 198 pp. $45.00 (Hardcover)

Deborah K. van den Hoonaard is a sociologist, professor and qualitative Research Chair at St. Thomas University in Canada. Her recent book, By Himself, provides a revealing look at the lived experience of widowhood for older adult men. The book is divided into four parts. Part One introduces the conceptual basis for van den Hoonaard's research, with Parts Two, Three and Four containing in-depth chapters that explore various aspects of widowhood for these men.

Part One orients the reader by describing the theoretical and methodological issues of van den Hoonaard's study. Chapter 1 situates her research within the wider body of literature on widowhood that is often based on the perspectives of women or younger widowed men. Van den Hoonaard's work is distinct in this area of research given its focus on older adult male widowers, a group that is relatively unknown in the literature. Grounding her study in a symbolic interactionism framework, van den Hoonaard interviewed older adult men living in rural Atlantic Canada and Florida retirement communities to explore how widowhood is conceptualized from their perspective. The author began recruiting for her study exclusively in rural Atlantic Canada. Yet she notes that "widowers were not easy to find" (van den Hoonaard 2010: 13), and expanded her recruitment to include widowers living in Florida. Although this geographic expansion of her research was not anticipated, the author felt the more diverse sample provided deeper analytical insights. In chapter 2, van den Hoonaard discusses how widowhood is inherently a gendered experience and consequently emerged as a key theoretical issue that she effectively integrates throughout subsequent chapters. She notes how the men never considered widowhood a possibility in their lives, operating under the assumption that their spouses would outlive them. When the men became widowers, they felt disoriented and "did not know where they belonged in the foreign country which they had entered when their wives died" (van den Hoonaard 2010: 21). Their sense of masculinity, already threatened by age, also became threatened by widowhood, a status that deprived these men of "visible heterosexuality" (van den Hoonaard 2010: 20).

Part Two focuses on the men's experiences coping with their wives' illnesses and deaths. In chapter 3, van den Hoonaard provides a compassionate account of the widowers' experiences interacting with and caring for their wives once they became ill. The author analyzed the widowers' discourse, which revealed speech patterns that "emphasize their masculinity" (van den Hoonaard 2010: 31). For example, when describing their caring presence at their wives bedside, the men's discourse revealed how they embodied the gendered role of the committed husband. The period immediately after their wives' deaths, the subject of chapter 4, brought a range of emotions from "shock" to stoicism (van den Hoonaard 2010: 49) for the widowers. The men described various forms of social support from friends, family and religious affiliations that provided a needed sense of comfort during this difficult time. The men also took comfort in how well their wives were thought of, symbolically represented in high number of funeral attendees. Yet the harsh realities of widowhood existed beyond these comforting social networks as some men had to settle financial affairs that included continuously furnishing death certificates, which acted as a stark reminder of their profound loss.

Part Three describes the widowers' various social relationships. Chapter 5 focuses on how the widowers interact with their children, and provides numerous ethnographic examples illustrating the multidimensionality of these relationships as well as boundary issues. Some of van den Hoonaard's findings about these relationships are not unexpected, such as daughters fulfilling some of their mother's gendered roles like cooking or maintaining traditional family events. Interestingly though, the author also discovered that some of the widowers used the interview as an opportunity to openly discuss their children's "flaws" and that "the men tended to blame their wives" for these issues (van den Hoonaard 2010: 76). Chapter 6 focuses on female companionship and begins with the author acknowledging that her data "reinforced the commonly held belief that finding a new woman is an intrinsic part of widowhood for men" (van den Hoonaard 2010: 84). Van den Hoonaard draws cultural contrasts between the men in Atlantic Canada and those in Florida regarding how each interprets their relationships with women. For instance, the Atlantic Canadian men describe a great sense of discomfort if women are too forceful when vying for their attention. Chapter 7 provides another viewpoint into the men's social networks through examining their friendships. The closing of one's social network after the death of a spouse is a common experience of many widowers, both male and female, according to the author. The men in van den Hoonaard's study

are no exception. For example, some of the men found that their widower status made them "the odd man out" (van den Hoonaard 2010: 109) when socializing with their married friends. Yet van den Hoonaard's method of qualitative inquiry reveals that the closing of one's social network is not experienced by all widowers. One of her participants, a widower living in a Florida retirement community, discussed how his friends rallied to his side after his wife's death and continued their friendships with him thereafter.

Part Four describes how the widowers conceptualize "everyday life" (van den Hoonaard 2010: 121), which includes "keeping busy" (van den Hoonaard 2010: 123), the focus of chapter 8. To stay busy, the men describe volunteering, doing "odd jobs" (van den Hoonaard 2010: 133) and informal socializing as opportunities for them to leave their home and engage in activities that reinforce their masculinity (such as fishing). Leaving the home is highly important for these men, as an empty home is a significant symbolic reminder of the loneliness associated with widowhood. Interestingly, van den Hoonaard notes that the men preferred spur-of-the-moment over pre-planned activities as it asserted their independence. Cleaning the home and cooking is the subject of chapter 9, and the men perceived these tasks traditionally female oriented. As a result, they had no desire to "to master" (van den Hoonaard 2010: 159) this domain; rather they preferred doing just enough cooking and cleaning to get by on a daily basis. When the widowers did clean or cook, they spoke about their experiences using very masculine language to justify engaging in these feminine tasks. In the following chapter, chapter 10, Van den Hoonaard concludes her book with an overview of key themes, and provides some insights for future inquiry.

Overall I found myself immediately engaged by van den Hoonaard's book that paints a poignant ethnographic picture of these men's lives as widowers. What makes this book so engaging is her ability to iterate detailed ethnographic examples with theory to provide a robust analysis of this experience, yet one that is firmly grounded in the men's experiences. This book showcases her skill as a qualitative researcher and storyteller, and provides a significant contribution to the gerontological theory on widowhood. This is a highly readable text that would be appropriate for both undergraduate and graduate courses in gerontology, sociology, anthropology and aging studies. Researchers interested in conducting qualitative studies with populations that are more difficult to access will also find this book a valuable resource. Van den Hoonaard includes her interview guide at the end of the text.

The views expressed in this review are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

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Feil, Naomi and de Klerk-Rubin, Vicki. The Validation Breakthrough: Simple Techniques for Communicating with People with Alzheimer's and Other Dementias. 3rd edition. Baltimore, MD: Health Profession Press. 2012. ISBN 978-1-932529-93-7, 304pp. $34.95 (paper).

Nearly five decades have passed since Naomi Feil originally developed Validation as a therapeutic tool and in this time, organizations and families throughout the world have experienced and attested to its benefits. In this most recent edition of The Validation Breakthrough (3rd ed.), Ms. Feil, along with co-author and master-teacher Vicki de Klerk-Rubin, continue to refine the terminology, concepts, theoretical underpinnings, and techniques of Validation. The authors have expanded the number of case studies and testimonials from certified Validation teachers, and updated resources for readers who seek additional training and information.

Stated simply, Validation is a method of empathetically communicating with and caring for disoriented older adults who have Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia. It is intended to benefit very old persons who are disoriented and who frequently exhibit challenging behaviors, as well as the persons caring for them. The authors contend that challenging behaviors often arise from a person's struggle to resolve unfinished business during their last stage of life. As the disoriented person progresses through phases of resolution, caregivers can employ the Validation techniques to connect with the person and assist them with expressing repressed emotions.

As with previous editions, the book