

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Deborah K. van den Hoonaard, *By Himself: The Older Man's Experience of Widowhood*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010, 176 pp. \$45.00 hardcover (978-1-4426-4109-9)

Deborah van den Hoonaard seeks to close gaps in research on how widowers make sense of their situations, and how men “often ... attempt to highlight their masculine selves.” Despite the relative rarity of widowers and their general disinterest in interviews, van den Hoonaard managed to speak with twenty-six men aged 60 and over: seven located in urban retirement communities in Florida, and the majority — nineteen — in rural Atlantic Canada. The open-ended interviews ranged in duration from forty-five minutes to two hours, and some (in Florida) occurred over the phone.

While the mix of men from types of communities might be seen to be problematic, van den Hoonaard takes care to contextualize the interviews in their locales, and her discussions of the influences of differences of geography and culture is one of the strengths of this book. In Chapter 6, she shows that the Floridians were much more comfortable having women take initiative in relationships than were the Canadian widowers. Still, the fact that at least one-third were remarried or in committed relationships with women renders van den Hoonaard's conclusions about the experience of widowhood somewhat problematic. A more thorough exposition of her sample demographics (a table would have sufficed), in terms of present partner status, where they had worked, their age, their education, and the like would have been helpful in both better situating the men and clearing up confusion concerning how many men had repartnered (p. 22 says about one-third; p. 92 says one-half). These quibbles, however, do not detract from the book's contributions to literature on older widowers.

The author's deft use of a symbolic-interactionist approach gives readers a sense of the meanings that these widowers derived and created concerning the deaths of their wives. She effectively conveys the men's experiences of widowhood; but her accounts of their ties to masculinity were sometimes less persuasive. She adopts the “doing gender” framework, which posits gender ideals to which people are held accountable. The operation of such accountability needs to be shown, either by

men commenting explicitly on gender, masculinity, or their difference from women or femininity; or by comparing their actions, words, and the like to their female counterparts. In various places in the book, van den Hoonaard does compare her respondents to widows she had interviewed previously, or uses quotes that make clear that the widowers are contrasting themselves to women or to women's work. Many more such contrasts, in support of the book's assertions about masculinity, would be most welcome.

In many passages van den Hoonaard either assumes that behaviours are oriented toward masculinity, because her subjects are men, or she cites other studies (such as one on a small group of rural men in New Zealand) that make such claims. For example, assertions that men in Canada demonstrate their masculinity by showing they are locals who for instance, know the history of the area, does not show how this establishes *masculinity* (one would assume women could also be "locals" who can show familiarity with local history), and citation of the New Zealand study does not address the methodological question.

Van den Hoonaard discusses her respondents' ambivalence toward relations with women, a tension that some expressed between freedom and autonomy. Along these lines, she says that "A wife may inhibit a man's 'natural,' that is, essentialized masculine inclinations" (p. 86), but neither the preceding quotes nor those that follow demonstrate the widowers talking about their inclinations as being either "natural" or based in masculinity. The passage brought to mind Karlsson and Borell's research on "living apart together" relationships in Sweden that makes clear that this lifestyle has been attractive to women who seek control over intimate relations desire. Certainly, the roots of such desire may differ by gender. And to support an assertion that "widowers embraced the independence and self-reliance that are part of masculinity" (p. 146) by pointing to their desire to "keep busy," and their belief that doing so is an individual's responsibility, does not link these two assertions together. The data on display include no such claims; and extant research shows that women also seek to keep busy and see it as their responsibility to do so.

Cooking and housework is an area in which van den Hoonaard most successfully shows that men demonstrate their masculinity, by talking about "feminine household tasks in ways that protected their sense of masculinity and emphasized that they were still 'real' men" (p. 148). Taking care of one's self, as these men do, is not a sex-typed activity, but taking care of others is. Thus, cooking is not necessarily a feminized activity; in fact, when it is viewed as "skilled" (e.g., prominent chefs) it is often typed as masculine. But she demonstrates their orientation to

gender by alluding to such predominantly masculine activities (for this cohort) as war or competitive sports; though she also suggests that self-maintenance is highly gendered without demonstrating that.

In many places, the author clearly points to masculinity based on her respondents' assertions. Excellent examples are found on pp. 91–92 where she notes George's assertion concerning men's "slavery to testosterone" as well as the desire to partner with a woman based on her ability to perform sex-typed tasks. Similarly, she notes that one interviewee said that "'the average male becomes a female' (Jacob) when his wife dies," while another referred to other widowers as "old maids." Both men referred to widowers who had become passive or could not cope without wives, depictions which they contrasted to their self-depictions as active men (p. 26).

Finally, von den Hoonaard reminds us that these are *older* men; their age-based social location affects how they do widowerhood. I found myself wanting to know even more about how age shapes the enactment of masculinity among these men, just as I would have liked greater discussion about the differences between the Canadian and Floridian widowers, especially in the conclusion.

Van den Hoonaard's book is laudable for its description of widowers, and using their voices to convey what widowerhood meant for many of these men; scholars and students with an interest in this topic should certainly read it. As an analysis of masculinity it is sometimes less successful, but this does not detract from its overall value.

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