

The Experience & Impact of Male Involuntary Childlessness

New Legacy Radio-Episode 5: Dr. Robin Hadley

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VoiceAmerica 00:05

Welcome to New Legacy Radio with Christine Erickson. Are you someone who doesn't have children by circumstance, choice or chance? This show is for our collective community? Are you someone who influences policy, DEI initiatives or media narratives? Learn how you can co-create inclusive, equitable policies and environments for people without children. Now, here's your host, Christine Erickson.

Christine Erickson 00:32

Hello, everyone, and welcome to New Legacy Radio. I'm Christine Erickson, and I'm your host. I'm also the founder of New Legacy Institute, which is intended to bring together our collective community, including gender inclusivity, and all of our experiences from our different journeys of childlessness, or being childfree. And today we have a very special guest with us. We are going to speak about male involuntary childlessness with Dr. Robin Hadley. Thank you for being here today. Robin.

Dr. Robin Hadley 01:06

Thank you for inviting me. It's such an honor.

Christine Erickson 01:09

And I'm just going to say a few words about your background, because we have so much to share today. Robin has done his degree focusing on involuntary childlessness in the lives of older men. It's really powerful work that you have in your book that I have read and your ongoing research and articles and we thank you for that contribution to the community as a whole. He's an international expert on male childlessness and aging. And his research has been widely published in international and national media. He also supports several infertility and voluntary, childless support groups. He's a founder member of the campaign group Ageing Without Children in the UK as well, which is another wonderful group. So thank you, again for being here, Robin.

Dr. Robin Hadley 01:57

Thank you. Thank you. That sounds really good. I didn't recognize myself.

Christine Erickson 02:00

You did some good things there. Do you want to start by telling us a little bit about your work focused on male childlessness? How that began? What inspired you and what that journey was like for you?

Dr. Robin Hadley 02:15

Okay, well, I'm 62. And way back in the early 2000s, in my fulltime job as a scientific and technical photographer, and it was obvious that was going to end. And so I was looking around for something else, and I decided to train as a counselor. And so I did a diploma in counseling, and then there was an MA, a master's element, I could take. And I took that because it was counseling. It had to be something you experienced. And I said to my supervisor, "you know, I was really broody in my 30s." And she said, "Well, I've never heard anything about that, do that." And that's when I found out really, there was nothing about men and the desire to become a father. In fact, there wasn't that much then about fatherhood. But you know, not being a father, was very little of the experience. I mean, there was stuff on infertility, and that sort of thing, but that was sort of medical technical stuff. So I interviewed ten men. And so the underlying question, really, was, was I the only man feeling terribly broody in my mid 30s? When all my peers seem to be having children, I married at 26, divorced at 29. And around about 35 or so, you know, they're having children, and I'm not. You know, what's happened? I'm out of sync was the feeling. And also, I couldn't tell anybody about that. That was all just locked in and making me angry and frustrated. And so flipping into my 40s and the early 2000s, I did my MA, found out that there wasn't much about it, decided to do an MSc looking at levels of broodiness. Because the assumption is women are broody and men aren't bothered. And this is a myth that comes through all the time; men aren't bothered, and they can have children at any time in their life. That's quite a dismissive way of dealing with men. And I found out that for men and women who weren't parents, then it was round about the same level of desire for parenthood. But one of the surprising things with that study was that men were more angry and more depressed and more jealous than the equivalent women. So there's an emotional side that really hadn't been touched on, I feel. I also asked about

biological urge for men and women, and it was there for men as well, and that's again, something you don't really associate with men, but could well be a driver for some behaviors. And then I applied for a PhD at Keele University, and that's where I started my work on older men, childless older men, and men who wanted to be dads and didn't get to. And as it was, it was 14 Men 49 to just to 82. And so we got the whole life story, then, and it was really interesting, I found. To look at those experiences along the way, and my experience sort of resonated there, as well. So that's why I became interested. I think one of the drivers was, why isn't there information on men? Because you know, it's an egg, and a sperm, it's 50/50. All this information of also sorts around women, and very little around men, so that's the why.

Christine Erickson 06:17

Yeah, well, that's a great 'why' and a lot of 'why'. Thank you so much for sharing all that. It's fascinating that you did that at those different stages, too. I think that's really important to have that insight. When you said, you know, 50/50, and all of this about women, it is really curious how that's driven, because so much of fertility conversation, reproductive, the onus is put on women, there's a, there's a drive to that as well. However, if we look at statistics, you know, what is it in the UK, one in five, or one in four women will reach the age of 45, without children. And I'm so curious about the landscape for men and other genders, because we don't see that measured. And so we're going by statistics by one gender, and that could just be scratching the surface, right, in terms of the numbers of our community?

Dr. Robin Hadley 07:12

You're absolutely right. Yeah. This gendered around women, centered on women, and I can't remember their name, but Russo, in 1974 said that the 'motherhood mandate' is all around women. And it still is today, if you look at adverts, often, nothing related, but a family will be there. And the new baby will be there. A vacuum cleaner, or something like that. And very much around women, and not so much about men. Yeah, one in five women, one in four men in the UK. And I think the Pew Center in America found that as well in 2010, 1 in 5 women, they didn't give a figure for men, but it's probably higher. It is everywhere around the world. Really, in effect, that there are more childless men than childless women, but you don't hear that. And that is, as you say, generally, because when

birth is registered, the mother's fertility history is taken, and has been happening for decades. So you've got this big data set around women. So it's very easy to say, well, the fertility rate is this. I think it's 1.9 in the UK at the moment, and the replacement rate is 2.1. I think is lower in America. It's been going down and down, hasn't it? 1.6 or something like that. So yeah. Because they don't take the father's fertility history, we don't know the equivalent. So really, the fertility rate is a women's fertility rate. No, the population's fertility rate.

Christine Erickson 08:59

Yeah. And so we're behind in that binary and then you look at, you know, what is today? We're not even talking about other genders yet. I mean, if we if we had all of these numbers, who would we be? What would that look like? And as we know, those census statistics, fertility data is what drives policy; who gets included and who gets what, right?

Dr. Robin Hadley 09:23

And where the money goes?

Christine Erickson 09:25

Yes. So it's a really important sort of cornerstone is starting with those statistics, you know. I say, well, numbers and laws don't change everything. They don't change the societal piece, you know, that I'm sure we'll touch on later. However, it's a start of showing that data. It's a start.

Dr. Robin Hadley 09:45

Yeah, well in the UK statistics authority, Office of National Statistics. I've written to them several times, and they're not bothered about collecting men's data. Oh, it costs too much. If cost is a factor, then you can save money by not collecting data on women. But I don't think that would go down well. But also, it's pretty short term. Because in the UK and I think in many places in the world in later life family takes an awful lot of the strain of caring for older, their older parents. And if you don't have a child, an adult child looking out for you, in whatever way, whether that's just a phone call a week, or just making sure the doctor comes around or whatever, then who does that? And what happens? Then

those care and health care facilities don't know that this hidden population, that's coming towards them.

Christine Erickson 10:50

Right? And with respect to that, what did you find in your study, when you did look at the lives of older men, and they know started at a lower age, but in terms of not having children to care for them? What do you see in that landscape?

Dr. Robin Hadley 11:07

Well, it was really interesting, because the older men really were concerned about that, particularly in the UK in the past couple of years being quite a few events of poor care of older people in residences and stuff like that. And so one guy said, "You know, I don't want to be going into one of those homes where they abuse you. I'd rather take my own life than suffer that humiliation." The younger man tended not to want to think about that. "I don't want to go there."

Christine Erickson 11:47

I get that.

Dr. Robin Hadley 11:48

Yeah. Yeah. So it was very emotional, the interviews. Quite often it's the first time they talked about it, even though they've been married; that inner feeling. And that says something else about how we're socialized to be and what social narratives are around. So there's a lot of social narratives around for women to occupy and are also thrown out there. Some are negative and some are positive. But for men, it's that sort of dismissal. You know, you're not interested, men don't care. And it's really interesting. If you look on social media, somebody who's got children; it's really interesting just to look at when they start saying, "my soldier, my little man", what age? Because sometimes it's, babies. But you don't get my "little woman", my "little soldierette". It tends to be my little princess. I know women will say, "Yes, and I'm still a princess, even though I'm now decades older, and I'm tired of being that."

Christine Erickson 13:12

But sometimes, fair enough.

Dr. Robin Hadley 13:17

But there is that difference, and it starts at a very early age, and it's very embedded in society. This detachment from the internal emotional landscape, and the social landscape, and pathways through it that you have, in terms of narrative, how you can say things, what you can say. It's really hard to say something if you can't find the words. So all the men I've spoken to, on this, whatever, degree or whatever, they all say something's missing. And that's really key. Something's missing. Something's missing inside, something's missing from my life. But also, there's something missing socially, in the social narrative. And we can also say, statistically, we're missing as well. As the structure overall, the mechanics of society, as well as the emotional side.

Christine Erickson 14:21

Yeah, it's heavy. It's deeply layered. It's deeply layered. Yes. And so, so with that, today, I mean, it is, it's hard heavy to talk about. With that today, how do you see you know, what is the social space for men around childlessness? I mean, I know that you have definitely contributed to this space and you've written and you've been on several podcasts, and I know of a few other men, you know, who are doing that, but even I don't know what that is...what that looks like in terms of community, or what do men want and need in this space? You know?

Dr. Robin Hadley 15:08

That's a really good question. I think part of it because there's so little around it, it's hard to know what men need and with that missing element of a social narrative. Now, one of the reasons I do things like this and indeed the press, and put my own story out there, is so that men can say, this is what I expect, a man to say would be, yeah, I can see that, but it's not me, my story is this. So they bounce off, of me doing this stuff, and the other guys doing this. It's important that it's out there. So men can bounce off something and claim an identity. Whereas, if it wasn't there, there would be nothing to say, I'm like this. This is different. This is my experience of it. So yeah, there are 'The Clan of Brothers'. But there's the group on Facebook, for childless, older, childless men. There are certainly

fertility based ones, specifically for men. But compared to the amount of data and support for women, it's very little. It is growing now, and I think there's a growing recognition of it, as well. So I think the future's sort of brighter. But there's always going to be resistance to that not being the ideal type, not being stoic, not being quiet, not just sucking it up, and keeping it in until that internal volcano explodes. It's much better if you can dissipate some of that internal energy and frustration at a lower level. And I think, yeah, the stuff happening, we need to get into policy and we need to get to politicians to make that acknowledged.

Christine Erickson 17:17

Yeah. As you're speaking, I'm curious about, yes, particularly in the childless space, regardless of gender and thinking, you know, the grief, the loss, the different experiences that we go through, of that, as you say that dissipation of you know, that anger, that frustration, grief, if we have to navigate that first or from a male perspective, I mean, of course, that shouldn't be navigated. But from a male perspective, if conversations about policy, and this end of it is easier, or more difficult. Is it still in that space of denial, or is it a more comfortable conversation, potentially, because it's not so personally focused?

Dr. Robin Hadley 18:00

I think it's more comfortable for me. But there again, I'm coming from a different angle to most men, but I think, most men don't show and see themselves as childless. It's just not happened to them. But there's this part of, again, that socialization, that, you know, parenthood is for women. It's the primary thing for them, and the men are on the outside; I'm on the outside, it would have been great if it happened. But it didn't. So I'll go on the goal, objective reason reaching trajectory that I've been socialized to be to live outside myself to be outside myself. So it's really interesting.

Christine Erickson 18:50

So that identification isn't even there to go in any those directions, really?

Dr. Robin Hadley 18:56

Yeah, absolutely. So, yeah, jumping in. It's really interesting, you know, sperms can only live for a given time outside the body, and men are sort of valued by what they do outside

the body. You know, protector, provider; it's all outside themselves. And you could say, women are judged by their internal production. So existentially are we judged, for women by those internal values and what they bring, and for men outside of them. More heavy stuff.

Christine Erickson 19:40

Yes, I think that's a chilling analogy, and very insightful and true. Yes, yeah, now I have so many questions.

Dr. Robin Hadley 20:02

I have a poem. Yeah. It's called 'Something Missing' and it's from my MA. It's about reflecting on what the guys had been saying to me. So it's called 'Something Missing'. I have stunned you. I could read you a poem now, if you want.

Christine Erickson 20:02

Do you have a poem?

Dr. Robin Hadley 20:14

Something Missing by Robin Hadley

*A conversation before it began
Scattering thoughts of cuda, shuda, wuda,
dada
The latent maelstrom of the none man.
There's something missing,
Holding a life-wide gap,
Breathing wallpaper,
I am whole and incomplete.
There is something missing,
first to be left behind,
first to be sent in,
this line is not complete...*

"I'm sorry, to all the poets out there, who are going..."

Christine Erickson 20:43

No, that was beautiful. Thank you for sharing it with us. No, I just when you're talking about, you know, the internal and the external. This is a quick diversion. But it's making me think too about in the childless space I think so often about what is visible is valued. And what is not visible just remains on scene or unspoken-those missing conversations, missing experiences being acknowledged. And that visibility quotient, culturally, how we can accept or not people's experiences based on not only how we can identify with them personally, as a as a status quo. But how seen it is like, it's like you're proving the experience. So if you don't have a child, or if you wanted a child, and don't, we still have in that space of how is it that you're grieving something that didn't exist? Those kinds of conversations and yeah, we'll come back to that outside of the show at some point, but that was a really powerful analogy that you gave about, you know, the focus on women internally, and men externally. Wow. So we said that and you shared your poem, and I know it's time to take a breath now. Yeah, very powerful stuff. I'm curious what your interaction is with other men, like when you engage in these conversations? Is it one on one? Is it genuinely in groups? Is it you know, more of the space of webinars and sharing your experience? Or what does that look like for you?

Dr. Robin Hadley 22:35

Well, a bit like, my relationship to my childlessness, it changes over time, and in space and in context. So I guess with my two closest buddies, let's put it that way, we go for a beer, and they've both they both got children one is now a granddad. And I'm not lost in the conversations, I'm on the side of some of the conversations, in that, one of the guys said, "Oh, well, we've all experienced this", about being a parent. Well, I haven't actually. Bit of a silence, and then we got another beer and moved on. They know my research; they've got copies of a book. It's something about the natural being of being a parent. That's your world. And that's a world that I can see from the outside, and I have some empathy with it. But I guess I'm on the outside of it, but it's also that part of me that's lost, that's not inside me on that one. But yes, I do this sort of thing. And whatever I can, I think, because I think it's important people know that men feel the loss. And men want to be dads. And if you're feeling something and thinking something, but it's a bit like cars; it's like so if you've got the engine running, you put it in gear, but you're going nowhere. That's a lot

of energy. That's being contained. And that can be very frustrating. Particularly, let's go on a freeway or a motorway. If you're on the hard shoulder, on the breakdown lane, whatever it is called in America, and people are whizzing past you. And you're thinking if only I could just get it in. If only I can just catch up, if only I can be there. And again with that freeway thing you know, look either side people are whizzing past your you're going faster than others, I guess is another thing, but there is a difference. I think I'm rabbiting on there, I'm not quite sure if my...

Christine Erickson 24:59

No, no, I like that I was thinking more with within the childless space, with other childless men. But I love that too; I love what you shared because that assumption is always in the room. I remember, several years ago, I was sitting in a cafe. And I was just writing working on something. And there was a group of women next to me, who were in, they were clearly in a book club. And they were to be discussing this book, they were right next to me, and they were loud, I was not trying to eavesdrop. But the whole discussion, they never got to the book, it was all about their children and grandchildren. And I remember just thinking, like, not only was I sitting separate from them by myself, but they were in this circle. And I thought, oh, my gosh, like, I will never be in that kind of circle. You know, it was like a physical representation of what I was thinking or what that reality is, but the assumption first of children. I understand, you know, our status quo culture and you want to feel safe, you check out do other people, are they the same as you? What do we share in common? You know, people go down these lists. Are you married? Do you have children? You know, what's your job? What do you do? And I've always, even before I knew I wouldn't have children, I found those questions, so invasive. I thought, you know, when you allow someone to share what they want to share with you, there's a real connection. You know, it's not this checklist of sort of who this person is, because it doesn't really tell you anything about who they are anyway. It just tells you a status.

Dr. Robin Hadley 26:50

Yeah, absolutely. And I'm sure everybody who's childless has had this when somebody says, you know, how many children have you got? I haven't got any. And then, the screens come down, the blinds come down. And I've had people just turn and walk away, and I'm sure other people have. It's like, well, I've got nothing with you then.

Christine Erickson 27:11

Yeah. Where I go with this?

Dr. Robin Hadley 27:13

Yeah. Well, you don't exist now. Yeah. Yeah. And so with childless men, all the guys I interviewed for my PhD., on the very initial contact, they all said, "Do you have children?" And when I said, "No, I don't." So, well you'll know what it's like then.

Christine Erickson 27:32

Wow. Yeah. Even just that. Yeah.

Dr. Robin Hadley 27:35

Yeah. You'll know what it's like then. And it's like, this very, like a gas of a group, really, because it's very widespread, and with all gaps between, but we have got a shared experience. I think I said before, or most of the guys said that I've never talked to anybody about this. Again, so there's something around, not being able to communicate, not having the words, not having the social narrative.

Christine Erickson 28:11

Well, and it's so powerful that you could bring that space of invitation and trust through your research, based on your own experience. I mean, I'm very much an advocate of research and expressions and books done by people who have had that experience or survivors of things. I think we need so much more of that in so many spaces in life, you know? Yeah. Well, thank you. This has been a really wonderful conversation so far. And I really appreciate you being here and sharing so openly. We're going to continue this conversation after a very short break, with Dr. Robin Hadley.

VoiceAmerica 29:05

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Christine Erickson 30:33

Welcome back, everybody. We are having a wonderful discussion with Dr. Robin Hadley today, about male childlessness. And Robin, last week I spoke with Laura Carroll about—we came to this point of speaking about "two camps", sort of in the people without children, community, the collective community, where there are childless people and childfree people. And the inference is by choice and not by choice. And I know we both know there are a lot of gray areas and layers to how, how we either stay in or move toward those identifications. But it has sort of become this binary, if you will. We've gone through a lot of renditions of identifying names and hashtags and that and so our conversation was about, you know, those two camps coming together. And I'm curious about how that plays out with men in terms of childfree men and childless men identifying in that way and what that collective or separate conversation is, or what that looks like.

Dr. Robin Hadley 31:48

That's a really good question. I've not really interviewed any childfree men, but I've had chats with them, and from the literature, I've read the shared experience for the involuntary and childfree or childless by choice. That's another conversation again, who calls themselves what and how people self-define and what that means to them. So we're including everybody, we just can't go through the list of every term. If you are listening, and we're not using your term, just insert how you identify yourself, and maybe let Christine know your terms. So we all can be included. And but that's the shared experience or stigmatization, of not having a narrative, of being different, of

disenfranchisement from society and grief. So that's the sort of one shared identity that goes. Both involuntary or circumstantial childlessness, childless by choice, sometimes say something like, you know, "I'm having problems with that, particularly we're going down the testing route", even though they're not, because that's an acceptable cover to pass by. Oh, that's rather being faced with, "Well, why aren't you having children?" "Why are you being greedy?", and all those sorts of negative things. For women, and I guess, I don't think for men, but for certainly for women, you know, "You're just career focused." So yeah, sure, I think men and women have that same societal hurdle to get over, and how they do that is possibly a bit easier for men, because there's not that volume, a mass around reproduction, that there is for women, and you can occupy that space, with "Well, you know, I can have children at any time." So that always with these things, you can use them, if you want to say, well, you can say I'm not found the right one. Certainly the two gay men, I spoke to, the older men... "And so I was 15. I knew I was gay. But I also knew I wasn't going to get married or wasn't going to have children." Because in those days to be married, was the way to have children, not right having children outside management, it was absolute taboo. And there was an element for those two guys, that is a bit of jealousy of the younger gay men who now have an opportunity certainly in the UK with the equality laws, and also with technology, with IVF and surrogacy being available, which wasn't really available then. So there's a slight air of jealousy that they've missed out.

Christine Erickson 35:04

Yeah, it's heartbreaking.

Dr. Robin Hadley 35:05

You know, those two guys were both types of grandparents. One had been asked by some kids at school to be their surrogate grandfather. And another one had worked where he'd been an unofficial grandfather and unrecognized as well, when he bought the kids presents, babysat them all that so I think he got a lot from it. But he just wasn't acknowledged. That's what he was doing. He wasn't called "Grandpa Jack".

Christine Erickson 35:39

Right. Right.

Dr. Robin Hadley 35:42

Yeah. So it is interesting. I think the childfree and involuntarily childless, I think it's the common ground. But also people change as they go through their life. So you may be childless by choice, but then hook up with somebody who's got children. And then that may change later on. So it's difficult just to go, there's this, childless by choice men. Some are very activist based, so this is an identity and I want to promote this, and they're in groups and stuff like that. I think the same for women and others are passing. They don't mention it. It's their choice.

Christine Erickson 36:38

Yeah. Passing is a good way of saying it.

Dr. Robin Hadley 36:41

Again, that's from the LGBTQI community; when they are passing as heterosexual. In the days when it was illegal to be homosexual, to be gay. So yeah, you'd pass at work, whatever, and then have another life.

Christine Erickson 37:04

Yeah, I've spoken with women who are partnered with women who say, "Well, of course, we didn't think we'd have children were gay." Yeah, you know how those narratives get so embedded, and yes, technology has changed, and things have changed, thank goodness. But it's part of that status quo narrative of this means this, and this means this, and you can do this, and you can't do this. And, you know, preposterous of you to think you could. And yes, some things have changed in so many have stayed the same. Unfortunately, in this othering, or defining what anyone's lifestyle means or doesn't mean is, you know, we still have a long, a long way to go, absolutely. In my curiosity, you know, it's because I want to know, but it's also driven by the, you know, the work of the Institute, New Legacy Institute, it is truly intended to be inclusive, not only of all of our journeys, but gender-wise. And I think bringing those narratives, and everything you shared today, bringing different voices together, the other layers, the other intersections that people live, make that extremely difficult to just come into one space, you know, whether you're looking at from the male perspective as you are, or race, economic status, you layer things, people's reproductive experiences, or lack of freedom thereof. You, you layer all

of those things, and it looks like we're just talking about this one thing, but we have to address all of these things, you know, and starting with the conversation we're having with you today, and I know you've said it in other spaces, it's not the first time but in the sense of, "Well, what does that look like, you know?" Why are men here? Why are people vocal and not? And what allows that? And so my curiosity is always how do we center different voices and differently center voices to make these changes, you know. We have to look at and consider all of those layers from as you said, the time a male child is born, you know, my little soldier, it's really from that point forward, whatever those life realities are; so I'm looking at it from the other end of this. How do we have the conversation over here, you know, and there are so many layers to peel back.

Dr. Robin Hadley 39:50

I definitely think you look for the commonalities. Okay. My experience is one to 10 years is minus 4 to 5, but there's an area where you tell me about your experience, I'll tell you about mine and when you get the commonalities, but we can see the difference. And we can appreciate the difference. Yeah. And we can work with the difference. So a shared difference, as well as the shared commonalities, I guess, would be a part of that of having a broader view and building appreciation. And maybe that's just not rushing into judge.

Christine Erickson 40:40

And sometimes at least in the childless space, I think, I'll say, in my experience, so often, it's, there's just a missing acknowledgement. There's also a missing narrative, but just the acknowledgement of things. And that's in people's layered life experiences as well. But certainly in the childless space, it's people's skirt around it, as you said, someone walked away. Families don't talk about it, you know, people's families, friends, it's, you know, you might be accepted or not, but it's still the conversation is avoided. And so, to open up the space, as you did with your research, saying, no, this is my experience, you know, this is a safe space, a psychologically safe space in that way. That's what we're working toward with the Institute, because we mean it, you know, and we, and we want all of our voices, we want that representation. It isn't anything without that, you know, so we invite more of that conversation, for sure.

Dr. Robin Hadley 41:50

Sure. And as you're speaking, think about Maslow's Hierarchy and growth, and fulfillment, and hearing other people's stories, having empathy with their experience, so you understand their experience is growth, and it's a two-way street in that element. Somebody gets to share their experience, and are listened to and are acknowledged.

Christine Erickson 42:20

Yeah. And I do think, I don't know how you feel about it from the men's perspective, but as a gross generalization in the childless community, and I know, as with Childless Week, which is inclusive, I do think that we, as a community, we are a lot more becoming more visible through our stories in that way. And do you still see that more heavily dominated from a female perspective still, or do you see men coming into those spaces more easily? Either as you know, themselves, or as a couple, or what does that look like you know, in percentages? Or you don't have to come up with a percentage. I don't know why I said that. Like, oh, just give me the number professor.

Dr. Robin Hadley 42:21

Yeah, absolutely. Not just switch on the flux capacitor, and it will generate a number straightaway.

Christine Erickson 43:20

Who needs the census?

Dr. Robin Hadley 43:24

Okay. That funny bit has thrown me off.

Christine Erickson 43:31

I was just looking the participation for example, in Childless Week, and sharing stories, and men.

Dr. Robin Hadley 43:37

I'm back in the room. In the Guardian newspaper in the UK, just recently, there's been a couple of stories around childlessness and male desire to father and stuff like that. So I

think it's coming in. I think a lot of it's to do with infertility, though. So they're not recognizing people like me. I've never been to an infertility clinic. I've never given a sample or anything like that. And there's an awful lot of us who are like that, who are childless by circumstance. For me, it's economic, and also not being great at forming relationships. I did some research with John Berry and Chloe Newby and found out anxious attachment in childhood, predicts childlessness. So anxious attachment means the time with generally your mother, you're not quite sure what's going to happen and that becomes an inner working model for you. So you think, well you don't think, you feel actually, how is this going to work for me? And for me, in my late teenage years and 20s how I ever got married when I did is unbelievable, but she's still with me. It would be, you know, should I approach, Christine? But I might get rejected. And if I get rejected, it's going to be devastating.

Christine Erickson 45:09

Yeah, what you make that mean.

Dr. Robin Hadley 45:12

Yeah, what you make it mean, because at some point, my inner working model has made a bit of an anxiety around what's going to happen. And it could be negative, and that goes on through life. So as you get older, older people sometimes are just assumed to be wise, assumed to be confident, when in fact, they can be anxious, and struggle and be shy. Shyness would be a term that would also guide this, and I was very shy. So I was behind my peer group, in getting into a relationship and forming a relationship, and all that sort of thing. So there's that element, as well.

Christine Erickson 45:58

Yeah, it's back to those internal things, right? Those unseen things. And I think, yeah, fertility even, you know, and this is another topic for another day, but even in companies, you know, we're looking at changing policy and having equitable benefits, we're seeing some companies slowly move into the fertility services, benefits space. And, again, I think it's, and that's a whole other conversation, because you can't do that without speaking about childlessness, because the outcome of fertility treatments. But looking at that, I think that companies are taking that as a starting point, both is a financial step, because

it saves money overall from their perspective. Again, another conversation, however, I see that is because again, it's a more tactile, tangible, physical thing, right? You are going to have a baby, and this is the way that you can do it, and you can do it later. Whereas when you're talking about shyness, and types of attachment from childhood, and all of the things that shape our lives, you know, that's not what we're looking at, when someone walks away from you, when you say I don't have children, they're not thinking, oh, he must, he must have had anxious attachment, or maybe he was shy, or maybe it's challenged by relationships. They're just like, oh, well, that, that doesn't fit in my narrative. I don't know what to do with that, you know. But fertility is still that word is still in a possibility. And people know what the outcome is, which is, again, something physical. So I think it's that visibility, scale, that of acceptance. Even in in that space like that. They're starting there. It's so curious to me, and I'm probably not expressing it as well as I want to, but it's just a very curious space to me that, that visibility acceptance, physical space.

Dr. Robin Hadley 47:57

Yeah. And I think that there's a difference between people going through infertility treatment, and maybe getting a diagnosis of infertility, and people like me, who hasn't. There's a narrative around infertility and people know how to react to it. "It's a shame."

Christine Erickson 48:16

Yes, yes.

Dr. Robin Hadley 48:19

But for me, "Well, why aren't you?" Well, you know, I was a bit shy. Economics at the time and economics play a big factor in fertility decisions. And that's not often really appreciated, and for men, quite often. So I got into a cab once, and I was just starting my research and the guy asked me what I was doing. And then he said, we're childless because I used to work, I was in the army, and then it was in drilling and mining and oil. I was always away. I've been married 40 odd years, and he was 70 odd years. And it wouldn't have been fair. Because the work was precarious. You never knew when it was going to end, and you can start a job and then get fired, or it could go on for years. But he was always on short-term contracts, sort of thing. "And it wouldn't have been fair on my

wife to be left with the kids, and not knowing when I was coming back", and stuff like that.

Christine Erickson 49:18

Yeah, I think that conscientiousness it's, and it's structural and systemic, though the reasons you're talking about, and also the consciousness of so many people who do not have children, however they identify, is often left out of the overall narrative. No one gives you a reward, you know, for not bringing a child into situation X. You know, no one is going to say well, good job for not doing that. Right? It's curious to me, too.

Dr. Robin Hadley 49:46

I think also, you know, in that thing of people walking away when you say I'm childless, it could well be a reflection of, actually, I can't face that that existential threat of being and not being, really wanting kids is a nice deflector. You know, you're alive because they are right in front of you. So I like to think of you know, if we're aircraft, you know there are transponders going, where are you? Where are you? When we're raised in our social narratives, the ideal type is what we're told to aim for, which in my case, my parents are, I'm from a working-class family of eight, where, you know, get a very steady job with a good pension, because they'd been in precarious jobs without a good pension, as had their parents, and you know, get married and have kids. And then, you know, when I'm 35, divorced, and I'm in a steady job, but where's the other bit? So my trajectory, compared to the arc of life, the ideal arc of life, there's a gap. And my ping to know where I am, is getting longer and longer. And in that silence, I fall. Well, if you have children, you know you're alive, because they are there in front of you all the time, and also you suspend yourself, for your child.

Christine Erickson 51:12

Yeah, yes. Yeah. It's absolutely an existential fear response. For sure. I appreciate that. And then once you have a child, systemically, everything feeds into that. Not in the sense that, you know, in the US, of course, we do not have great parental leave, and all of those things, we still need that and child care, so I'm not saying that we're doing it in a great way. But from language to social responses to policy, there is consideration there. How well it's done is again, another conversation

Dr. Robin Hadley 51:50

From the male point of view, for males, and I don't represent all men, I appreciate I should have said that at the top. I feel like if you become a dad there's a social narrative you can occupy, about being a provider, you know. A recognized work status of working because "I've got to provide", and also the social narrative of "well, he's got to provide", so he gets a promotion. That happens. I guess it's the same for women, in a different context.

Christine Erickson 52:25

Yeah, you can exist in this lens, so to speak that is not questioned.

Dr. Robin Hadley 52:32

And that becomes a shared identity. You know, so if you're new but a grandparent or a parent, then you've got things to talk about. Strollers, nappies, all that.

Christine Erickson 52:46

Yeah. It's a very powerful social narrative that holds that space. Yeah, absolutely. We'll be before we go. I would like to give you an opportunity to speak about your book, I think I may have forgotten to mention that the beginning. We did talk about your research, which was wonderful. And where people can find your book and reach you.

Dr. Robin Hadley 53:08

Okay, my, my book is called, 'How is a man supposed to be a man?' He said, looking behind him so he could read the title. It's on the shelf, 'Male Childless, a Life Course Disrupted', and it's published by Berghahn Books. So you can look for that. Or you can find it on my website, which is robinhadley.co.uk, or I'm on Twitter, and on Instagram, but honestly, I have no idea what's going on there, so.

Christine Erickson 53:37

We have another shared narrative. All right, well, thank you so much. And we'll be posting your contacts details on our page along with the recording of our episode, which will be available soon. And please, we invite listeners, whether you're listening live or later, to continue this conversation with us on Twitter, on the website, email us questions at

radio@newlegacyinstitute.com. We'd love to hear your thoughts and questions. Thank you for being with us today. And yeah, thank you for engaging both in the Institute and in these conversations. We appreciate it. Take care.

VoiceAmerica 54:19

Thank you for listening to New Legacy Radio. We hope Christine and her guests have given you the context and insight to connect with our community in new ways. What personal or professional change might you consider to acknowledge and include our diverse community of people without children? Until we speak again, we invite you to engage with us on any of our platforms.