

You are kindly invited to the public defense to obtain the degree of

DOCTOR OF ADULT EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

of **Ms. Hannelore Stegen**

which will take place on Tuesday 15 October 2024, 17:00
Promotiezaal (Building D, room D.2.01) – VUB Main Campus Brussels
Pleinlaan 2 – 1050 Brussels

BEYOND THE USUAL PATH:

EXPLORING CHILDLESSNESS AND LONELINESS IN LATER LIFE

JURY

INTERN:

Prof. Dr. Koen Lombaerts (Chair)
(Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

Prof. Dr. Sarah Dury
(Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

Dr. Julie Nekkebroeck
(Vrije Universiteit Brussel – UZ
Brussel)

EXTERN:

Prof. Dr. Tine Van Regenmortel (KU Leuven)

Dr. Eric Schoenmakers (Fontys Hogescholen)

PROMOTORS

Prof. Dr. Liesbeth De Donder
(Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

Prof. Dr. Eva Dierckx
(Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

Coming by car? Please register your licence plate in advance [here](#) to have access to the campus.

You are also invited to the reception afterwards.

Please confirm your attendance the latest on 9 October 2024 via [the following link](#).

How to reach the VUB? Click for guidelines in [Dutch](#) or [English](#).

SUMMARY

This doctoral dissertation uses a multi-method approach, integrating existing literature, survey data, and life story interviews to comprehensively explore the concepts of childlessness and loneliness in later life, as well as their interrelationship. A systematic review and meta-analysis identifies a pooled prevalence of loneliness among community-dwelling older adults of 31.6%, and shows the impact of measurement instrument used, mode of data collection and country. Furthermore, it identifies several reasons for voluntary childlessness, including career-related choices, critical views on society, partner dynamics, and life course circumstances. Importantly, the heterogeneity of the childless population is highlighted, distinguished by diverse personal and social characteristics. Childlessness itself does not inherently lead to increased loneliness in later life; rather, loneliness levels among childless older adults may vary significantly based on the reasons for their childlessness. Themes from the life stories of these individuals—such as making space for other pursuits and acceptance—further explain why childless older adults are not lonelier compared to older adults who have children. By focusing on these complexities, the dissertation shows that not childlessness as such impacts loneliness in later life and throughout the life course, but the surrounding context and other life events, such as reasons for childlessness, play a more decisive role in the experience of loneliness.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Hannelore obtained her degree of Master in Adult Educational Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) in 2019, where she wrote her master's thesis on voluntarily childless older adults. It was at this point that her interest in the topic of childlessness in later life was triggered, and after working as scientific staff within the Society and Ageing Research Lab (SARLab) for one year, she started her PhD in 2020 in the same research group, funded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO).

During her PhD trajectory, Hannelore published her research in several academic journals (*Journal of Family Issues*, *International Psychogeriatrics*), was able to present her work on several conferences in and outside Europe (26NKG in Odense (DK), BSG2023 in Norwich (UK), GSA2023 in Tampa (USA), 27NKG in Stockholm (SE)), translate her research results to the broader public (Radio 1, EOS, Gert Late Night, Goed Gevoel) and was connected to the Bachelor's and Master's programme of Agogische Wetenschappen at the VUB.