Starting "Real" Life: Women Negotiating a Successful Midlife Single Identity

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Abstract

Previous research has argued that despite the historically shifting meanings of singleness and family relationships, the "single woman" remains a "deficit identity." We wondered whether this is the case for women who are at a point in their lives when meeting the married-with-family standard is becoming less probable. Interviews were conducted with 12 women (ages 35–44) who lived in Western Canada and identified as "never married," "non-mother," and "midlife." Data were analysed using discourse analysis. Participants negotiated a space where being single is constructed as normal, while at the same time answering to normative discourses of womanhood. They resisted the deficit identity of singleness by drawing on the "transformative midlife" interpretative repertoire, which constructed midlife as a time of creating a secure, independent life. In doing so, they positioned themselves as "comfortably single at midlife women," an identity defined in terms of who the woman is. Our analysis offers a depiction of midlife as a continuous struggle to create and maintain this space.

The "ideology of marriage and family" (DePaulo & Morris, 2005, p. 57) remains an enduring and dominant cultural narrative, even though for the first time in Canadian history more women are living without a partner than with one (i.e., never-married, widowed, divorced, and non-cohabiting; Milan, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2014). Indeed, the growing number of singles has been a dramatic trend that has been building for decades (Milan, 2013). Dropping marriage rates in Canada have coincided with an increase in cohabitation (i.e., from 902 marriages per 100,000 people in 1972 reduced to 448 in 2008; Milan, Keown, & Urquijo, 2011). In addition, there has been a delay in first marriages (i.e., women's age at first marriage has increased from 23 years old in 1972 to 29.6 years old in 2008; Statistics Canada, 2006). As a consequence, and because women are continuing to live years longer than men (World Health Organization, 2003), women can expect to spend more of their adult years single.

However, despite the growing numbers of singles and despite the varied types of households and families now accepted in society, both the popular and social science literature on the lives of singles give marriage a central place along the normative life path, and it is assumed that heterosexual partnership is the most important peer relationship, leading to happiness and fulfilment (DePaulo, 2006; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Hewlett, 2002; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Consequently, singleness has been characterized as a "deficit identity," that is, not a state or circumstance in itself; rather, it is defined in terms of what it is *not*—marriage and family (Reynolds, 2008; Reynolds & Taylor, 2005). This positions

the single woman as a marginalised "other" (Reynolds, 2008), who must account for her singleness, whereas the civil status of others (e.g., heterosexual couples in married or other long-term relationships) is simply taken for granted (DePaulo, 2006; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). Furthermore, in the social science literature, the diversity among single women is often overlooked. Our study focuses on a specific configuration of single women, that is, women who have reached early midlife, have not cohabited with a romantic partner in the last 5 years, and are not mothers.

Psychological research on single women has focused primarily on marital status in relation to physical and psychological well-being, concluding that marriage has protective health effects (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Hahn, 1993; Horwitz, White, & Howell-White, 1996) and leads to happiness (Seligman, 2002). This conclusion, of course, implies that being single is a potential health problem, a dubious claim at best. Moreover, such research necessarily adopts common standards of comparison for married and single women (DePaulo & Morris, 2005), thereby assuming that marital status determines the quality of women's lives. In

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contrast, a small but growing number of studies has explored the everyday experience of singleness, the meaning that single women give to their single status, and how the ideology of marriage and family (DePaulo & Morris, 2005) impinges upon their lives (Anderson & Stewart, 1995; Budgeon, 2008; Byrne, 2000; Byrne & Carr, 2005; Chasteen, 1994; Lewis & Moon, 1997; Macvarish, 2006; Marks, 1996; Reynolds, 2008; Sandfield & Percy, 2003; Sharp & Ganong, 2011; Trimberger, 2005). These researchers have concluded that "women alone" understand singleness in varied and contradictory ways. For example, in one study, participants expressed an awareness of both the benefits and drawbacks associated with being single (e.g., greater individual freedom vs. worry over growing old alone) as well as feelings of loss and grief for the relationships that they did not have (Lewis & Moon, 1997). In another study, women either constructed their single status as a temporary stage, preparatory to marriage, or as a result of failing to maintain their prior romantic relationships (Sandfield & Percy, 2003). Furthermore, they constructed being single in their later years as a threat and described older single women as isolated and lonely. Thus, singleness has multiple meanings that either reflect or resist the emphasis on marriage and family so evident in Western societies, such as Canada and the United States.

Taken together, research suggests that, despite the changing nature of relationships in contemporary society and the instability of those relationships (i.e., people commonly move in and out of relationships), women are under pressure to marry or otherwise establish long-term, heterosexual partnerships. However, the social contexts in which specific meanings are taken up remain under-explored. Our study focuses on the meanings of singleness from the perspective of single women at midlife in relation to the cultural meanings available to them, thereby turning the research gaze on a particular context in which singleness is lived.

The Single Women "Problem"

A frequent understanding of the problem of the contemporary single woman is that she is stigmatized and marginalized through her failure to conform to the norms of womanhood by not becoming a wife and mother (Chasteen, 1994; DePaulo, 2006; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Sandfield & Percy, 2003). Indeed, much recent empirical literature has been concerned with challenging this marginalization by making it explicit and, therefore, open to critique (Macvarish, 2006; Reynolds, 2008). The understanding of marginality as necessarily a negative subject position that entails lack of power and exclusion can also be questioned. For example, Mayo (1982) offered "positive marginality" as an alternative that recognizes potential advantages of being outside the norm. In effect, she argued that being marginal allows one to combine the knowledge and insight of the insider with the critical attitude of the outsider. This enables the marginalized to both resist culturally dominant ways of understanding the world and imagine alternatives to the status quo (e.g., African American lesbians; Hall & Fine, 2005). Thus, there are multiple and conflicting discourses of marginality that complicate theorizing the problem of single women. Considering marginality as discourse, and recognizing that culturally dominant ideas are neither stable nor singular, underscores the importance of understanding single women's lives from their perspectives and of recognizing the problem of not being partnered at midlife (or any other age, for that matter) as unfixed.

Some have suggested the need to examine contemporary single womanhood in terms of cultural changes that have implications for the meanings of marriage and motherhood (Macvarish, 2006; Reynolds, 2008). These include the cultural shift away from the privileging of particular norms of private life toward individualization characterized by an increasing emphasis on individual autonomy, and an independence from traditions and institutions (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). This increasing emphasis on individual autonomy, self-fulfilment, and achievement has been associated with neoliberal ideology (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Giddens, 1992). These cultural changes in societies where neoliberalism has come to dominate, such as Canada and the United States, imply that being single ought to be a more privileged position than has been the case in previous times. Clearly, however, there is a contradiction between the personal freedom that individualism warrants, and the focus on monogamous partnership and traditional family life that the ideology of marriage and family reproduces.

Moreover, singleness is commonly understood to be a gendered category, playing out differently for women than for men (Adams, 1976). Single women challenge patriarchal expectations and assumptions about femaleness and femininity (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Rosa, 1994; Trimberger, 2005), and therefore, detailing the discursive climate for single women is a legitimate task in itself. Recent research suggests that individualism has made possible new discourses regarding romantic relationships and their place in women's lives, as well as new ways of understanding their singleness (Barri & Morgan, 2011). Thus, the elucidation of multiple, conflicting discourses that potentially impact single women provides further justification for studies, like ours, that explore how single women negotiate this discursive terrain.

Discursive Psychology and Singleness

Given our interest in how cultural meanings are implicated in the understandings of single women at midlife, we adopted a critical discourse analytic framework that is informed by discursive psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This approach emphasizes how meanings circulating in a culture, in this case meanings of women's singleness, are taken up or rejected by women as they provide accounts of themselves and their lives. This opens up the possibility of identifying how those discourses constrain and enable certain kinds of

identities, how individuals negotiate among the varied and contradictory discourses available to them, and the implications of this process (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In short, the contradictory and shifting nature of singleness and midlife can be critically examined, not as fixed properties of the individual, but as socially constructed categories (Potter, 1996). Similarly, identity construction can be explored in terms of how it is shaped by the immediate, situational context and in relation to cultural discourses. Speakers use the discursive resources available to them in a flexible manner but are nevertheless constrained in their identity claims and narrations of events (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). In other words, cultural discourses make possible particular subject positions or identities and particular ways of telling the stories of one's life (Edley, 2001; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Nonetheless, some discourses become normalized or widely produced as common sense; whereas, in order to be heard, others may require extensive discursive work and artful negotiation. In the case of single women at midlife, we were particularly curious about the possibility of hearing alternatives to the deficit identity of singleness.

Our study drew inspiration from Reynolds' (2008) research, which is a relatively rare example of singleness being viewed through a discursive lens. In the late 1990s, Reynolds and her colleagues conducted interviews with 30 women, aged 30–60 years old, who were unmarried in diverse ways (i.e., never married, divorced, widowed). They identified a number of cultural resources that women used to construct and negotiate their single identities (Reynolds, 2008; Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2007), narrate their life stories (Reynolds, 2008; Reynolds & Taylor, 2005), and counter the denigrated repertoires of singleness (Reynolds, 2008; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). Their everyday talk featured polarized and contradictory discourses of singleness leading to difficulty in performing an empowered single identity and sense of self. On the one hand, they constructed versions of themselves as independent and free to choose their own paths in a manner that is not open to coupled women. When constructing singleness in this way, they positioned themselves as striving for self-actualization and achievement to the extent that there was little or no room in their lives for intimate heterosexual relationships. On the other hand, these women also worked up identities involving some personal deficiency and social exclusion from the world of heterosexual couples. Based on these results, Reynolds and colleagues emphasized the enduring nature of the deficit identity of singleness and the restricted ways in which women can respond to it. Thus, according to their research, single women's claims to agency are continually constrained by the normative cultural discourses within which they are positioned as failed or inadequate women.

Although Reynolds (2008) highlighted the complex regulatory meanings and practices that govern singlehood, her research explored discourses of singleness that applied broadly to a heterogeneous group of single women who varied widely in terms of age and relationship histories. In our study, we aimed to add to the discursive research on singleness by exploring more specific discursive worlds and offering an analysis of singleness under more localized conditions. Our study focused on the accounts and identities of never married, non-mother, and early midlife women. Defining the research topic of interest more narrowly (i.e., singleness as never married, not a mother, and early midlife age, as opposed to single women more generally) puts limits on the relevant discourses in particular ways. This approach allowed for a more fine-grained analysis of how discourses related to singleness, womanhood, and age intersect, enabling and constraining how single women understand their present lives and imagined futures. Thus, our study's design was informed by feminist scholarship on intersectionality, which highlights the simultaneous, multiple positioning of individuals (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989).

Singleness at Midlife

Although the placement of boundaries around any life phase can be debated, a life-stages approach to understanding adult development places 35- to 45-year-old women in the transition to middle age (Brooks-Gunn & Kirsh, 1984; Levinson, 1996). Commonly, women's midlife years are portrayed in a negative light (Banister, 1999; Trethewey, 2001; Woods & Mitchell, 1997); however, research on women's accounts of their lives across their 30s, 40s, and 50s has described the aging process as leading to a greater sense of well-being and empowerment (Stewart, Ostrove, & Helson, 2001; Trethewey, 2001; Woods & Mitchell, 1997). On the other hand, research focused on the "social clock"—that is, the notion that there are cultural- and generational-specific societal expectations regarding when one should accomplish certain milestones (e.g., marriage, children, and work/career; Neugarten, 1968, 1979)—has emphasized an association between being "not-on-time" and psychological distress (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1997; Rook, Catalano, & Dooley, 1989), including self-doubt, incompetence, and loneliness (Helson, 1992; Helson, Mitchell, & Moane, 1984). Clearly, women who remain single and are non-mothers at age 35 are positioned outside the normative boundaries for women generally. Consistent with our discursive framework, we argue that the meanings of midlife and all other developmental stages are socially constructed and are therefore sensitive to the specific socio-historical context (Gergen, 1990). Thus, the meanings of remaining single may be different for women who were young children during the second wave of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, namely the women who participated in our study, compared to those of earlier generations (Elder, 1974; Stewart & Healy, 1989; Twenge, 2002).

We specifically chose early midlife as the life stage of interest because, at least in Canada, single women at ages 35–45 are positioned as not-on-time in relation to the tasks that have been so closely tied with womanhood, that is, being

married-with-children. Our interest then was in how single women negotiate their identities and understand singleness while positioned in this multiplicity of "missingness."

Method

Participants

We recruited 12 women living in a large city in Western Canada. To be included, they had to be born between 1965 and 1975, not married or living with a romantic partner (male or female) in the previous 5 years, and had not yet become mothers. They ranged in age from 35 to 44 years ($M = 38.6$, $SD = 2.91$), and all of them self-identified as heterosexual. One woman self-identified as Métis (i.e., mixed European and Indigenous ancestry), and the others were White. The sample consisted of relatively well-educated women: all had completed at least a high school education; three held a 2-year college diploma, six had earned a 4-year bachelor's degree, and two had completed a master's degree. Six of the women reported owning their own homes. In terms of employment, six worked full-time at the following jobs: retail sales manager, pharmaceutical sales, special events coordinator, executive assistant, high school teacher, and letter carrier. Two had left full-time jobs to complete a bachelor's degree and combined their studies with part-time employment (tutor and receptionist). The remaining four women had also left full-time jobs to pursue further education (one bachelor, two masters, and one PhD) and were not employed. These women financed their education and supported themselves through a combination of personal funds (e.g., an inheritance), scholarships and teaching assistantships, and student loans. Half the women reported having had at least one previous long-term relationship lasting several years, including engagement and cohabitation with a romantic partner; two had dated; and four reported little dating history. At the time of the interview, two participants were in new relationships of fewer than 6 months.

Procedure

The university's ethics review board approved the research protocol. Recruitment strategies included the Department of Psychology's participant pool ($n = 4$), the university's graduate student association newsletter ($n = 3$), and snowball sampling ($n = 5$). Those recruited from the participant pool received course credit; all other participants received a US$15 gift card. Our aim was to interview women who could be considered experts on being single at midlife.

The women were interviewed between October 2010 and March 2011, by the first author, and using a semi-structured interview schedule (provided in the Appendix). The interview schedule began with the open-ended question, "Can you tell me something about yourself as a single woman?" which allowed the participants to raise issues they deemed salient and to direct the conversation in ways that were meaningful to them. Other questions related to their employment, leisure activities, relationship experiences, expectations and desires, and feelings about their lives at the time of the interview, as well as their future aspirations and how others view them. In every interview, these topics were discussed and initiated either by the participant or by the interviewer asking a question. Topics were covered in whatever order made sense within the context of the individual interview.

At the start of the interview, the interviewer explained that she was single, also in early midlife (i.e., aged 40), and that she was interested in exploring the lives of women who are single at midlife to "get an understanding of how you make sense of the course your life has taken so far, where you find yourself now, and how you would like your life to be in the future." Introducing the study in this way created the possibility for participants to provide a retrospective account of their singleness, but also oriented them to the present moment—early midlife—and invited an account of the particularities of singleness associated with this period. In identifying herself as a single woman and sharing specific aspects of her background with the women in the sample (i.e., single status, age, and education), the interviewer positioned herself as an "insider" (i.e., sharing some common ground with her single midlife women participants). This approach made her an active participant in the discussion—a process that discursive psychology recognizes as inevitable and that we address in the analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). More specifically, the interviewer's talk is included in the analysis in terms of how her contributions enable and restrict participants' talk.

With permission from all participants, the interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and were audio-recorded. Each interview was transcribed, using conventions set out by Atkinson and Heritage (1984) and with sufficient detail to include the interactional nature of the interviews, including the features of talk (e.g., interview questions and prompts, conversational interaction, and pauses in speech; Potter & Hepburn, 2005, 2011; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). All identifying information (e.g., participants' names and place names) were removed from the transcripts to enhance confidentiality.

Our analysis followed the "synthetic" approach to discourse analysis proposed by Wetherell (1998; Seymour-Smith & Wetherell, 2006). This approach involved identifying the women's ways of talking about singleness and midlife; the regularity, variability, and contradictions of the women's talk; and how the women managed their identities. Based on this approach, we assumed that talk entails both a "top-down" process (i.e., talk is constrained by the discursive resources available to participants) and a "bottom-up" process (i.e., participants produce talk by selectively drawing on available discursive resources, and they revise and transform these resources to do the work needed in a particular conversational context). Thus, our analysis began in an idiographic fashion by examining each interview in terms of the constructive dimensions of the discourse (Edley, 2001).

Particular attention was paid to variability in ways of talking about singleness within an interview that signalled the deployment of different ways of constructing singleness (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Finally, we compared variability across the interviews in order to identify patterns, within and across the interviews, relevant to our research question.

The relevant constructive dimensions of the participants' accounts were the "interpretative repertoires" (IRs; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988) relating to singleness that participants employed, and how they employed them, within and across the 12 interviews. IRs are the "lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 138). They are also referred to as the versions of "objects," such as singleness, that individuals produce in their talk. In producing IRs in their talk about being single women at midlife, the participants drew on cultural discourses available to them, that is, ways of understanding themselves and their lives that are widely available and generally familiar to people who participate in a given culture. Hence, our analysis allowed us to draw some conclusions about the cultural discourses that constrained and enabled the women's accounts of themselves and their lives (the top-down process) as well as how the women took them up in talking about the particularities of their lives (the bottom-up process). Exploring these IRs is central for understanding the cultural context for the "doing" of singleness. Furthermore, each IR makes possible a particular subject position or version of single identity, that is, a "type" of single woman (Edley, 2001; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Consequently, our analysis also focused on the identities that the participants took up as they constructed particular versions of their lives.

We also were attentive to the possibility of "ideological dilemmas" (Billig et al., 1988), that is, "lived ideologies"—comprising common sense understandings—that compete as ways to make sense of one's life. For example, Reynolds (2008) identified an ideological dilemma involving two competing IRs used by single women to explain their being single: "single by choice" and "single by chance" (Reynolds, 2008). The women accounted for their singleness by drawing on these two IRs, utilizing one or the other depending on the conversational context and never offering a single, definitive reason for being single. Billig et al.'s (1988) point is that we can conceptualize the discursive world as composed of multiple discourses that are opposed to one another in an argumentative fashion. When single women explain that they are single by choice, they are—at least implicitly and sometimes explicitly—arguing that they are not single by chance, as logically both cannot be simultaneously correct (and vice versa). Exploring how these dilemmas are negotiated contributes to interpretation. Reynolds (2008) concluded from the never-ending back and forth between "choice" and "chance" that single women cannot escape the deficit identity, an identity that no one would choose. However, in explaining their singleness as due to chance, they positioned themselves as not responsible for their own lives, which put them at odds with neoliberal discourse and the assumption that all human beings are autonomous and self-realizing.

As our analysis proceeded, we identified any cases that challenged the developing analysis and reworked the analysis to include those cases. Researcher reflexivity was also an integral part of our approach and was incorporated by analyzing the interviewer's contributions in the interviews, including how she formulated questions and how she responded to the participants' accounts. In addition, the second author (who is older than the study participants, married, and a mother) actively participated in the analysis. Thus, the analysis is the product of both an insider and an outsider working toward a consensus regarding the participants' concerns about being single women at midlife.

Given that the purpose of our study was to explore women's understandings of their singleness and their identities within the unique context of early midlife, the setup of the project positioned the participants as single, non-mother, and midlife women. This was explicit in the recruitment criteria and in the interview guide. In constructing the interview questions, we aimed to remain open to the participants' expertise about being single and formulated questions around a variety of topics that seemed relevant based on previous research. Interview questions, however, necessarily position participants in particular ways, and our analysis focused on how they negotiated their positioning within the interview context in relation to how they were positioned by the interviewer and how they positioned themselves. We noted the cultural resources on which they drew, the subject positions they took up, and the subject positions they resisted or rejected. We also were mindful that the participants were multiply positioned and that their identities as women were not independent of their identities as single, midlife, non-mothers, friends, employees, students, and so on.

Results

Our results demonstrate how, as social categories, single and midlife have multiple meanings that call forth competing identities. We identified two IRs of midlife ("standard" and "transformative") that made possible three subject positions ("traditional midlife woman," singleness as deficit identity, and "comfortably single midlife woman"). Throughout their interviews, and in response to the conversational context, the participants moved back and forth between the two versions of midlife, as well as among the three identities. These patterns were evident across the entire sample.

The "standard midlife" IR characterized midlife as being about marriage, having children, owning a house, and having an economically and socially stable life. We labelled the accompanying subject position traditional midlife woman. However, participants ascribed this identity to other midlife women (e.g., participants' friends and relatives who had partners and children). Thus, in drawing on this IR our

participants positioned themselves as aspiring to such a midlife identity but as living outside "ordinary" intimate relationships and family life; that is, as having a deficit identity, defined in terms of lack or what a single woman is *not*.

Participants also resisted the standard midlife IR and its accompanying deficit identity through their construction of an alternative version of midlife, the "transformative midlife" IR. This characterised midlife as a time of transition when—following a period of critical self-examination, re-evaluation, and action-taking—one aims to create a stable, economically secure, and satisfying life as a single woman. We labelled the accompanying subject position comfortably single midlife woman because this identity centred on accepting singleness as a viable way of life. In this way, our participants were resourceful in drawing on discourses, such as individualism and notions of the "ideal life," in order to redefine midlife in a manner that afforded them a positive identity (i.e., not a deficit identity) as single women at midlife.

Our analysis highlights the constraints of cultural discourses that cannot be escaped and must be addressed, as the women remained accountable to norms of heterosexuality, femininity, marriage, and motherhood. The power of the discourses of womanhood and motherhood was evident in the women, without exception, holding open a space for a possible future partner and children. In the following section, we illustrate the two IRs of midlife and the accompanying subject positions. We also show how the broad cultural discourses of singleness, womanhood, motherhood, and midlife featured in the individual single women's accounts, and how the women flexibly used the IRs to construct versions of midlife and identities as single women.

Standard Midlife IR

Participants constructed the standard midlife IR in a variety of conversational contexts, but, for obvious reasons, could not position themselves as traditional midlife women, an identity ascribed to married women with children. For the single women at midlife, this construction of midlife enabled a deficit identity. The following example occurred near the beginning of the interview. In this case, as for all the interviews, the first question was open-ended and positioned the participant as single: "Can you tell me a little about yourself as a single woman?" In this excerpt, the interviewer took up a topic that Cecilia had raised in her response to this opening question.

Excerpt 1

Interviewer:	You just said you saw yourself as following a-, not a traditional
Cecilia:	Path.
Interviewer:	path since "teenagehood." So, what is the "traditional path"?
Cecilia:	Uhm, well, I'm from rural [province] (laugh).

Interviewer:	Oh!
Cecilia:	Where the traditional path is marriage by 22, 23. You know, right-. I-, if you go to university, it's right after undergrad. You meet your spouse in under-, in undergrad.
Interviewer:	Yeah.
Cecilia:	Uhm, you get married, you start having children by 26, 28, 30.

In defining the "traditional path," Cecilia employed a "life cycle" narrative frame (Reynolds, 2008; Reynolds & Taylor, 2005), presenting human development as a series of naturally progressing transitions from higher education to courtship, marriage, and birth of children. She noted the timing of particular life events and the corresponding ages when they normally occur. Qualifying her reference to "traditional" as applying to a rural context, Cecilia left open the possibility that it might be different elsewhere. However, in the rural setting in which she grew up, by age 30 and thus by midlife, women are married with children (i.e., positioned as traditional midlife women). In working up this version of traditional, Cecilia positioned herself as a non-traditional woman who does not adhere to this version of womanhood. Her identity was worked up in terms of "who I am not," rather than "who I am," that is, as a deficit identity (Reynolds, 2008).

In the following excerpt, also from the beginning of the interview, Marina responded to being positioned as a single woman by the interviewer. She explained and justified her singleness in relation to the traditional midlife woman subject position.

Excerpt 2

Interviewer:	So can you just tell me, uhm, something about, you know, you as a single woman? Right now? Do you have any initial thoughts? And I can clarify if that doesn't make sense (laugh).
Marina:	Right (laugh). Uhm. Yeah, it, it's, it's kinda, uhm, I don't know if I'd be atypical or not, uhm, but, ah, for me, I've, I've never, I've never even had a boyfriend. So
Interviewer:	Oh, yeah?
Marina:	for me, I've never had a partner. So I've always had a life as a single woman. And, uhm, I consider even, even as a young teenager, I was, I was always much more mature. And so, and much, and very independent. So, uhm, I certainly don't see it as a hindrance. I, ah, kinda just go about my daily life and it's not, it's not an issue for me as, per se, that I'm thinking, like, "Oh, God, I'm single." I would love to have somebody in my life, but it's not a make or break for me.

At the outset, Marina and the interviewer negotiated her specific single identity. With the opening question, the researcher positioned Marina as a generic single woman but

also limited the question to "now," that is, at midlife. Marina positioned herself as a particular kind of single woman, who may be atypical, and she emphasized her difference from other single women in "never even" having a boyfriend. Her talk here was tentative with repeated words and "uhms," indicating some difficulty in positioning herself as a single woman with no experience of heterosexual relationships—of course, there is no readily available label, at least no complimentary one, for someone in her situation. Thus, she oriented to the standard midlife IR in identifying having, or as once having, a partner as something that was typical of women her age. She then went on to explain and justify her singleness by, in effect, answering the unstated question, "Why am I a single woman?" She described herself as "much more mature" and "very independent," emphasizing both her difference from other women and her superiority ("even as a young teenager"). Thus, she claimed that her positive qualities are, in fact, responsible for her singleness. Nevertheless, she moved back and forth between the "comfortably single at midlife" subject position and a deficit identity. First, she positioned herself as "comfortably single," claiming that being single is neither "a hindrance" nor "an issue." Then, she oriented to the standard midlife IR and took up a deficit identity, declaring that she "would love" a partner. Finally, she repositioned herself as comfortably single ("not a make or break for me").

This dynamic and contradictory identity work is consistent with the ideological dilemma of choice and chance—IRs previously described in Reynolds' research (Reynolds, 2008; Reynolds et al., 2007). That is, when women attribute their singleness to choice, as Marina did by emphasizing personal qualities that might be incompatible with being partnered, their feminine identities and normality as women (in this case the traditional midlife woman subject position) may be called into question. Anticipating this threat, they orient to chance, as Marina did in declaring her openness to having a partner, which implied a lack of opportunity and positioned her as having a deficit identity. However, women positioned in this way may be called to account for their "bad" choices and lack of success. Again possibly anticipating this criticism, like Marina, they may reposition themselves in line with chance. Hence, Marina's final positioning as comfortably single makes sense as an attempt to resolve the dilemma of choice and chance. It also underscores the argument made in previous research that the single woman identity is a "troubled identity" that cannot simply be spoken about in terms of what it is, but must also answer to what it is not (Wetherell, 1998). Consistent with this earlier research, in our study a comfortably single at midlife woman subject position competed with a deficit identity (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005).

Motherhood was an important topic, given its association with the standard midlife IR. Sometimes, the interviewer raised it (the interview guide included a relevant question) and, at other times, participants did so. The following excerpt is typical of participants' identity work in relation to being a mother.

Excerpt 3

Interviewer:	Do you plan not to have children?
Denise:	No. I'm not interested in, in having kids.
Interviewer:	Yeah?
Denise:	No. Don't have, don't feel the maternal instinct. Although, I am, as, as you know, my friends will attest, I'm fabulous with kids. I love kids. I'm great with teenagers, toddlers, babies. Well, they're, they're a lot better when you don't have to change 'em (laugh).
Interviewer:	Yeah, yeah, yeah (laugh).
Denise:	Stinky babies, yeah. Uhm, but yes, I, I, I enjoy being with them.
Interviewer:	Yeah.
Denise:	Well, not 24-7, and not, and not my own. I do, I do, uhm, much, I'm much better with other people's kids than probably I would with my own because I don't have the patience or whatnot. And right now I don't have the energy.
Interviewer:	Mm hm.
Denise:	You know, even if I did find somebody, etcetera. No, I'm, I sh-. I'm not going to say never ever.
Interviewer:	Yeah.
Denise:	Because you never know.

Denise first oriented to the "motherhood mandate" IR (Hays, 1996; Russo, 1976) and challenged the construction of all women as meant to be mothers and naturally inclined toward motherhood ("I'm not interested"; "don't feel the maternal instinct"). However, she immediately defended herself against any potential criticisms by orienting to the qualities of nurturance and care that are core features of contemporary versions of femininity and provided evidence of her "mothering abilities." She emphasized her positive feelings toward children and her adeptness at interacting and relating to them: she "loves" kids and is "fabulous" and "great" with children of all ages. She also claimed this to be a matter of consensus ("my friends will attest"), and thus positioned herself as a "normal" woman while resisting motherhood. Her claim then was that she lacked the desire to become a mother even though she possessed the qualities associated with mothers. Artfully identifying some of the less pleasant aspects of caring for children that many people would agree are unpleasant ("they're a lot better when you don't have to change 'em"; "stinky babies"), while still maintaining her love of children of all ages ("I, I, I enjoy being with them"), she bolstered her resistance to the motherhood mandate. She drew on the "intensive mothering" IR, that is, the extreme version of mothering characterized by around-the-clock care ("24-7"), among other labour- and time-intensive practices (Hays, 1996). She used maximizing language to resist this version of mothering that has been well documented in the broader literature.

Again, however, she was careful to limit her deviance: "I'm much better with other people's kids than probably I would be with my own," and "right now." Like the motherhood mandate IR, the intensive mothering IR was not simply rejected. Instead, Denise justified her resistance and defended her character. Speaking as single women at midlife, the participants, exemplified by Denise, positioned themselves as rebels in relation to mothering—critiquing common sense notions of women's fitness and roles as mothers while still claiming an ability to nurture and care. Thus, although "free" of mothering responsibilities, they remained constrained by discourses of femininity.

The dilemma of choice and chance (Reynolds, 2008) was also evident in how Denise accounted for not being mother, lending further support for our conclusions about the constraints of discourses of femininity. Initially, Denise drew on the choice IR, in claiming that she has chosen not to be a mother for reasons that did not include the lack of a partner. Here, then, she positioned herself as comfortably single at midlife. Notably, Denise accounted for not being a mother in an unapologetic manner that was not articulated in terms of longing, sorrow, or loss. When positioned as a voluntary non-mother in this way, however, she risked being positioned as a non-feminine woman, that is, as someone who lacks the qualities of care and nurturance. Consistent with our interpretation that she faced a dilemma, she then emphasized her ability to relate to children and drew on the chance IR to suggest that unforeseen circumstances might lead to a relationship that could include becoming a mother: "I'm not going to say never ever … because you never know." Thus, she did not go so far as to reject motherhood outright. Like singleness, not wanting or needing to be a mother appears to be a troubled identity (Wetherell, 1998) for some early midlife women, and they carefully negotiated the competing IRs when positioning themselves in this way.

In summary, all participants drew on the standard midlife IR, positioning themselves as falling outside the norms for similarly aged women and explaining who they are not (i.e., taking up a deficit identity; Reynolds, 2008). The ideological dilemma of choice and chance as competing IRs for being single at midlife and non-mothers highlighted the "troublesome" aspects of these two identities. That is, the women positioned themselves in contradictory ways: (a) as having a deficit identity and being comfortably single at midlife and (b) as being potential mothers and content non-mothers. In other words, one could characterize singleness at midlife as requiring a continuous struggle to uphold one's normality while defending a way of life that rejects the constraints of marriage and motherhood. A key component of this struggle was a second version of midlife that centred on being single, the transformative midlife IR, outlined in the next section.

Transformative Midlife IR

This alternative version of midlife articulated a shifting attitude toward being single and movement toward creating a secure and comfortable life. For example, Penelope stated: "I'm starting to like it now," and "It doesn't really bother me now. It used to." The following excerpt from Janet's interview provides another example:

Excerpt 4

Janet:	But, uhm, does it bother me? Ah, not so much, anymore.
Interviewer:	Mm hm.
Janet:	Uhm, probably in my late twenties, early thirties, it was, it would get to me? But, uhm-. Yeah, I'm, I'm feelin' comfortable where I'm at right now, like-.
Interviewer:	Mm.
Janet:	So. No. I don't have an answer. I'm like (snaps fingers), pft! That's just the way it is (laugh).

Prior to this point in the interview, Janet had been asked how she responds to strangers' questions about the reason for her single status: "Do you have an answer that's comfortable for you to say? Or, how have you answered?" She responded by asking her own question, "Does it bother me?" which she answered with a "before and after" story of how her feelings have shifted as she has aged from her 20s into her 40s. Her initial response positioned her as having a deficit identity, albeit not a strong one ("not so much, anymore"). In the past, however, singleness "would get to" her but she now accepts it ("feelin' comfortable where I'm at right now"), positioning herself as comfortably single at midlife. She then justified not having an answer for those inquiring about her singleness ("just the way it is"), thereby sidestepping the dilemma of choice and chance. Finally, she underscored the insignificance of being single by snapping her fingers and uttering, "pft!" signalling the insignificance of her single status. In this short exchange, Janet positioned herself as shifting from a deficit identity to a comfortably single at midlife identity. As we show in the following excerpts, this alternative subject position was enabled by the transformative midlife IR.

The transformative midlife IR, which associates singleness with taking stock of one's life and making changes, was clearly constructed in opposition to the "traditional midlife" IR. At the same time, however, the two IRs involved a similar construction of the ideal life, that is, owning a house and being economically and socially stable (excepting the husband and children). In some cases, it also involved making career changes, either for financial reasons or in search of greater fulfilment. After the interviewer asked Alison, "What is it like to be single at your age, do you think?," she replied that she wanted to own a house now that she's reached midlife and explained: "I don't know if I want to say it's more difficult as I get older or I just s-, want different things." In the following excerpt, she elaborated further.

Excerpt 5

Alison:	When you, when you have a partner
Interviewer:	Mm hm.

Alison: you have that help

Interviewer: Yup.

Alison: and, and things like that, whereas, when you're sin-
               gle and you just have the one income.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Alison: I've pretty much, I think, peaked at my job, which is,
               again, why I'm in school to do something more, you
               know, something different and more interesting, but-.
               And I just feel that, at least in [city], anyway, it's
               not a reality. I don't believe that I could afford the

Interviewer: Right.

Alison: house that I would want.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Alison: And things like that. So (clears throat), so, as I get
               older those kind of things-. I never thought about
               them. I never even thought of buying a house 10
               years ago. I wouldn't-. I, I actually probably thought,
               "Why would I?"

Interviewer: Mm hm.

Alison: But now, you know, ten years later, it's like, God! I
               really want a house.

Alison began by clarifying the difficulty of being single. In so doing, she oriented to the standard midlife IR by contrasting having a partner with being single and living on just one income. Here, she constructed a deficit identity. She went on, however, to describe two changes in her life. First, she talked about her return to school after having "peaked" at her job and her aim of obtaining a job that is "something different and more interesting." In justifying what is likely a risky undertaking on the basis of having achieved all she can at her current job and her desire for personal fulfilment, she put this need ahead of more material desires—in this case, home ownership. She described this desire as something she never thought about before, and asked the rhetorical question, "Why would I?" Of course, 10 years ago, as a single woman, no one would have expected her to own her own home because that would come with marriage and family. She summed up the other material comforts of standard midlife as "those kinds of things" and "things like that," but she constructed them as out of reach at the moment for a single woman such as herself ("not a reality"). Thus, the second change she described was in her thoughts about having these material comforts. Alison serves as a good example of how participants drew on the transformative midlife IR and positioned themselves as comfortably single at midlife in accepting their identities as single women and wanting certain things for themselves (e.g., an interesting job and a house).

Other participants talked about having made changes to secure their financial futures. For example, Cecilia, who also had returned to school, justified her decision to complete a PhD as follows: "Like, I pursued a professional degree, which, then I have options. I'm no longer reliant on anybody

else." She constructed midlife as a time of "transformation" and positioned herself as comfortably single, striving for financial independence. Like Alison, Cecilia constructed her account as a before and after story ("then I have options"; "no longer reliant"), which involved moving toward greater choice and independence. Implicitly, Cecilia rejected a life shaped by the standard midlife IR, and even criticized the financial security achieved through dependence.

The following excerpt from Melissa's interview showed a similar pattern of comparing herself to some standard, that is, "where I should be" and working to "catch up."

Excerpt 6

Melissa: I was not mature. I was not where I should be, you
               know? When I'm thirty-four, you think I would, you
               know, have some goals or, or something, you know?
               So, yeah, so it's-. It is. It's like a race to catch up. I'm
               trying to, trying to do everything at once, and I'm trying
               to achieve all these things that I should have, and-. Yeah,
               like, right now I just, you know, I wanna finish school.
               But I wanna get, you know, three jobs so I can just work,
               work, work, put money away, money away, money
               away. You know, pay off my loan, and- (laugh). You
               know? So, I just, I just wanna do it all! Right now!
               (laugh)

Melissa told this before and after story following a discussion of how she "matured a lot later" in life compared with her same-age peers. Five years earlier, at age 34, she was "not mature." She oriented to the standard midlife IR in describing where she needs to catch up, that is, finishing school, working, and earning enough money to eliminate debt. In not mentioning the need for a partner and children, she positioned herself as comfortably single at midlife. She created a sense of urgency in her story, using words like "race," maximizing language like "do everything at once," and repeated words and phrases "work, work, work" and "put money away, money away, money away." Thus, Melissa's account focused on transformation at midlife by moving toward the comforts of the ideal life as quickly as possible.

All participants positioned themselves as comfortably single at midlife and drew on the transformative midlife IR in talking about making life good for themselves in the present as well as in the future. For example, Carole: "I've learned to do things even though I'm, like- (.) I'm not gonna wait 'til I'm, I've found a husband to start travelling. If I have to travel alone, I will. There's things to do before I die. So, whether or not it's with somebody-. With or without." Carole's account is in the past tense ("I've learned"), positioning herself as a changed woman, who, as in the other examples above, emphasized being independent and no longer waiting for a partner. Like Melissa, Carole created a sense of urgency ("There's things to do before I die"). Again, however, the comfortably single at midlife subject position rested

alongside her openness to a partner ("whether or not it's with somebody") and a deficit identity.

A final quote from Diana provides one further example of the alternative version of midlife and its accompanying subject position. Diana was responding to the interviewer positioning her as a woman at midlife: "But it is interesting to hear you say that at 42 you kinda feel more open."

Excerpt 7

Diana:	I am no longer waiting for the special occasion with people around me. I go home at the end of a really long day, or week, or whatever it is
Interviewer:	Yeah
Diana:	And I have the things I like. A couple of nice cheeses, and a glass of wine because.
Interviewer:	Yeah.
Diana:	And it doesn't have to be-. I mean, that is such a cool thing.
Interviewer:	Yeah.
Diana:	And I actually didn't start doing that alco-, alcohol or no alcohol, 'til I moved here and I thought, "What the hell am I waiting for?"
Interviewer:	Yeah.
Diana:	When, when does real life start? This is it!
Interviewer:	Yeah.
Diana:	So.
Interviewer:	Yeah.
Diana:	Pleasure! That's what it is!

Diana described herself as "no longer waiting." She can enjoy herself alone ("a couple of nice cheeses and a glass of wine"). Again, there is a before and after story. Her next statement ("And it doesn't have to be-. I mean, that is such a cool thing") drew on the "independence and choice" IR, which idealizes singleness as affording freedom and self-reliance (Reynolds, 2008; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). In positioning herself as choosing this new way of living, Diana challenged the standard midlife IR. With the rhetorical questions, "What the hell am I waiting for?" and "When does real life start?" followed by the declaration, "This is it!" she positioned herself as comfortably single at midlife, a subject position made possible by the transformative midlife IR. With the two versions of midlife, Diana, like the other participants, constructed a before and after story that involved making changes to her life. She used the standard midlife and transformative midlife IRs to contrast living a satisfying life as a single woman with "waiting" to have other people around before having the things she likes. Thus, while drawing on the transformative midlife IR, Diana positioned herself as comfortably single at midlife, that is, a woman defined by who she is and partaking of the pleasures that she enjoys.

Discussion

The goal of our study was to contribute to the understanding of singleness for midlife women. In limiting our study to women who identified as never married, non-mothers, and at early midlife, and who were at a culturally meaningful moment (i.e., between 35 and 45 years of age), we aimed to explore singleness in a somewhat narrow social location. Consequently, we were able to analyze, in detail, the cultural resources accessible to women who are so positioned and how these resources intersect in shaping women's identities and accounts. Our results contribute to an understanding of women's singleness in showing how midlife single women negotiate the various discourses available to them and, in particular, how they create a positive discursive space for themselves using the comfortably single at midlife subject position.

Despite evidence that our participants resisted being positioned as outside the norm, we argue that the single woman remains a deviant social category. From our analysis, we conclude that the discursive world for single women at midlife, at least those living in Western Canada, includes resources that were available a decade ago when Reynolds completed her interviews in the United Kingdom (Reynolds, 2008). Indeed, although we did not consciously look for the IRs identified by Reynolds (2008), our participants clearly utilized them, particularly the choice and chance IRs. In addition, our participants also took up a deficit identity at times (Reynolds, 2008), defining their identities in terms of what they are not (e.g., not traditional midlife women) and demonstrating that the available cultural discourses that support the marriage and family narrative continue to place constraints on how single women at midlife understand themselves and their lives (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005).

In topicalizing midlife and aging within our study, we have built on Reynolds' (2008) work in identifying an IR that competed with the narrative of marriage and family as a resource for understanding singleness at midlife and into the future. All of our participants positioned themselves at some point in the interview as comfortably single at midlife and described their everyday lives as aimed at creating the conditions for a satisfying life as a single woman. Specifically, our participants emphasized taking actions that were aimed at establishing financially secure lives. In some cases, this involved women furthering their education and, in others, making career changes or owning homes. This alternative, the transformative midlife IR, is consistent with the "self-development and achievement" and "independence and choice" IRs identified in Reynolds' research (Reynolds, 2008; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003), but, we argue, should not be conflated with them because it is grounded in the particularities of the lives of women who take up a specific intersectional identity as never married, non-mothers, and midlife. Attention to these specifics enabled our analysis and our conclusion that single women are not doomed to define themselves in terms of what they lack.

Viewing singleness through an intersectional lens (Cole, 2009; Collins, 2000; Shields, 2008) also allowed us to identify the three troubled identities (Wetherell, 1998) that our participants routinely negotiated. It also revealed how normative discourses of gender (i.e., notions of what constitutes acceptable femininity and womanhood), and age (i.e., notions of at what point in one's life one is supposed to have achieved certain objectives), were implicated in the ideology of marriage and family, which normalizes heterosexual coupledom as the only desirable form of family life (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Throughout the interviews, our participants negotiated between the alternative midlife IRs and the two single identities (the deficit identity and comfortably single at midlife), demonstrating that they were continually called to account for what they did not yet have at early midlife—husbands and children—even when the interviewer did not critique or question their singleness. Moreover, the topic of motherhood received considerable attention even though it was, from our perspective, only one of a long list of possible topics for discussion during the interviews. Our participants, however, linked it to the standard midlife IR as a requirement of womanhood (Kelly, 2009), but also resisted that requirement through arguments drawing on well-studied discourses of motherhood (e.g., intensive mothering; Hays, 1996). The single woman is not a coherent social category, nor does singleness at midlife have a unitary meaning. Rather, there are multiple identities available to single women and, at any point in time, the identity taken up will be shaped by the specific intersection of subject positions by which a particular individual is located. Our analysis aimed to illustrate this complexity. Importantly, it is within this complexity that radical alternatives and resistance may be realized.

Just as our results challenge the notion that there is "a" single woman, they also call into question standard accounts of midlife that cast women's experience at midlife as either a time of reappraisal and goal attainment (Etaugh, 2008; Trethewey, 2001; Woods & Mitchell, 1997), or as a period of decline and developing awareness that one has reached the midpoint in life when the problems associated with aging are beginning (e.g., isolation; Trethewey, 2001; the loss of beauty, youth, sexuality, health; Banister, 1999; Woods & Mitchell, 1997). Our participants continually negotiated their identities as midlife women in relation to the two midlife IRs, displaying flexible use of these resources rather than adopting a fixed meaning of midlife. If anything, our participants constructed early midlife as a time to build—marriage and family (when drawing on the standard midlife IR) and a comfortable, secure, independent life (when drawing on the transformative midlife IR). They did not construct early midlife as the beginning of decline even though the questions in the interview guide were deliberately open and the interviewer did not discourage relevant topics. Possibly, "new" discourses of aging, such as "positive aging" (Gergen & Gergen, 2005) and "the third age" (Laslett, 1991), which produce a discursive world for older adults that emphasizes a continuation of adulthood in terms of self-determination and achievement, offer alternative resources for constructing early midlife and enable resistance to the discourse of decline.

It is important to reflect on how the constructions of our research participants, and the IRs and subject positions we identified in our analysis, connect with discourses at the cultural level. We have already discussed discourses of femininity, womanhood, marriage and family, and aging. There is another cultural discourse, however, that is evident in the alternatives they created. Specifically, the transformative midlife IR bears the mark of neoliberal discourse, which constructs individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational and self-regulating (McRobbie, 2009). We can see this influence operating in the construction of midlife as a time to embrace the possibilities open to single women and to work toward a secure and independent future. The women in our study described this process as involving a reasoned appraisal of their lives up to the present, as well as a rational consideration of how they might achieve the future life that they envisioned. Furthermore, their accounts focused on themselves as individuals who had decided what needed to be done and who would achieve that future single-handedly. Indeed, the subject position comfortably single at midlife exemplifies this independent, autonomous spirit. Although neoliberal discourse may be seen as useful in that it enabled the possibility of constructing an alternative to the standard midlife IR and an identity rooted in what a woman is (the comfortably single at midlife subject position), it also positioned single-at-midlife women as lone actors individually responsible for their lives, including their successes and failures. This constitutes a radical departure from the marriage and family narrative that ties a woman's happiness and success to her interdependence (if not dependence) with others. Indeed, some participants argued against their prospects of success without the financial contributions of a partner, whereas others criticized married women for relinquishing their independence for the sake of financial security. Positioning oneself as completely self-sufficient carries new risks, including being blamed for not achieving a "good life" and being blind to the possibilities that relationships of various kinds may afford.

Notably, our participants constructed being single or partnered as the only two alternatives in a woman's life. The comfortably single midlife woman identity was the only alternative to the traditional midlife woman identity and the deficit identity of singleness. Historically, alternatives to marriage and family have always been available (e.g., the sisterhood of the convent), but alternatives that have been identified in the literature, such as friendship or intentional communities, were missing in our participants' talk (Bellotti, 2008; Hughes & Stone, 2006; Jamieson et al., 2006; Pahl & Spencer, 2004; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). Friends and family were discussed during the interviews but never in the context of the transformative midlife IR. Instead, our participants positioned themselves as singularly responsible for their

midlife projects. One might argue that this could be a consequence of the interview context where the focus is continuously on the participant. Although this creates an excellent context in which to explore questions of identity, it may discourage participants from exploring the layers of interdependence in their lives. However, the interview guide included questions about friends and other relationships, which arguably should have topicalized interdependence. Thus, it seems that Reynolds (2008) had a point in arguing that there are limited resources for single women to draw upon when envisioning life as a single woman. As we have suggested here, however, the problem may not necessarily be the lack of alternative discourses to marriage and family but may instead be that the alternatives are not readily available. In other words, they have yet to become part of the "common sense" that can be counted on to make credible claims.

Finally, a brief word about marginality: our analysis does not support the claim that single women are simply marginal, as others have suggested (DePaulo, 2006; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Sandfield & Percy, 2003). During the interviews, the participants navigated a complex discursive world, selectively drawing on available cultural resources to address their singleness and create a discursive space in which they are defined by who they are and in which their lives can be constructed as meaningful. On the other hand, like all of us, they could not escape the constraints of that discursive world. Within some IRs, they are positioned as other, defined by what they are not, but, as we have shown, this positioning is unstable and may be resisted. Thus, at most, single women at midlife may be considered as marginal on some occasions. On other occasions, they actively struggle against the possibility of marginalization.

Limitations and Future Directions

As we have emphasized, we chose to explore singleness with women who were positioned at a particular intersection within the social world (i.e., as women, at early midlife, never married, never mothers, urban dwellers living in Western Canada). Due to our recruiting methods (i.e., snowball sampling), it turned out that our participants, half of whom were university students, were also positioned as White, middle class, educated, and heterosexual. Although these social locations likely shaped their talk about midlife being a period of transformation (i.e., transformative midlife IR), this pattern was not restricted to the university students in our sample and was consistent across all the women, including those working in full-time employment. Thus, these patterns likely are relevant to other women who may be similarly placed.

Although we regard the women's positionings as flexible and not always relevant, our study suggests that future research, which adopts a similar approach of narrowing the researcher's focus to specific social locations, may well identify additional "counter" discourses that expand our understanding of being single and may be useful to single women seeking to forge a different path. The list of possibilities includes women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered, and who participate in various cultures, live in different geographical locations, and constitute different generations. Furthermore, participants' talk is always occasioned and therefore in the research context is always limited in some way by the researchers' talk. Although we endeavoured to create an open and supportive context for our participants where they could raise their concerns about being single, it is nevertheless possible that certain topics were not explored as fully as possible. Possible reasons include not asking the "right" questions or simply the finite nature of research interviews (e.g., the conversation must be limited to ethical time constraints). We suggest then that future research that explicitly explores missing topics (e.g., friendship, community connections, sexuality, and old age) may also contribute to a general project of making possibilities for contesting the hegemony of marriage and family and the deficit identity of the single woman.

Practice Implications

Our research draws attention to the different discursive patterns (i.e., meanings) employed by single women living in a Western society to make sense of their lives and who they are. The strength of discursive research lies, in part, in its critical stance; our results challenge the portrayal of singleness as a problem of individual women. In contrast to the literature on singleness that focuses on the internal and external personal changes that single women should be encouraged to make as individuals, we argue that attention should be focused on the shared meanings that constitute singleness and, in particular, the limited ways in which singleness is normally understood. We identify problematic meanings as those that hold single women accountable for their lack of fit with normative expectations. Furthermore, our results point to an alternative identity for single women at midlife that creates new possibilities for single women, and suggests different directions for developing a politics of singleness (Reynolds, 2008). Educational and therapeutic interventions with single women at midlife can challenge normative constructions of singleness as a deficit identity by recognizing the alternative, comfortably single at midlife identity, thereby providing single women with a subject position from which to resist normative discourses of womanhood that emphasize marriage and family (Taylor, 2001). Nevertheless, it is also important to encourage single women to question the individualism associated with the transformative midlife IR. Simply reproducing the good life of their married acquaintances as lone individuals may not be the only viable option.

As a theoretical approach, discursive psychology offers a basis for rethinking the assumptions of lifespan studies (Brooks-Gunn & Kirsh, 1984; Levinson, 1996). These studies have tended to centre on women's reproductive capacities at

midlife (e.g., childbirth, child-rearing, empty nest; Gergen, 1990). In contrast, our results highlight the diversity of meanings of aging for women (Gergen, 1990), and they point to aging as a cultural and social phenomenon.

Conclusion

The single women who participated in our study continually negotiated the meaning of midlife and their identities as midlife single women, moving back and forth between, on the one hand, the standard midlife IR and the deficit identity of singleness and, on the other hand, the transformative midlife IR and the comfortably single at midlife identity. Thus, these women's lives could be described as an ongoing struggle to create and maintain a space where being single constitutes normalcy, while at the same time having to answer to normative discourses of womanhood. In creatively drawing on neoliberal discourse to shape the alternative, they at least temporarily free themselves from the constraints of the narrative of marriage and family, but also position themselves as lone women and solely accountable for their lives.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

- Can you tell me a little about yourself as a single woman? For example, what's it like to be single at your age? Have you always been single?
- Can you tell me about what sort of job you have? (Follow-up questions: What do you like about your job? What don't you like about your job? What are your future aspirations with regard to job/career? How does being single impact your job? Or does it?)
- What are you doing when you're not working? What kinds of things do you like doing? How does being single impact what you do when you're not working? Or does it?
- Can you describe the relationships that have been most significant or important to you in your life? Tell me about them.
- What do you like about your life? What would you like to change in your life?
- How many single friends do you have? How do their lives compare to yours?
- What are your friends and family saying to you about being single at this stage of your life? How do you respond to them? Have you found any answers to the question, "How come you're not married?"
- Are you dating anyone now? Can you tell me about that relationship? (e.g., How did you meet?, etc.). What do you hope/expect will happen with that relationship?
- Generally, how would you describe your ideal future in terms of a long-term partner? (Follow-up question: If you're looking for a long-term relationship with someone, what are you hoping to find in a partner?)

- Generally, how would you describe your ideal future in terms of being a mother? (Follow-up questions: Has this been a life goal in the past? Present?)
- Generally, what do you see as your ideal future? (Follow-up question: What do you want to do that you still haven't done?

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