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Citation

Reynolds, Jill and Wetherell, Margaret (2003). The discursive climate of singleness: the consequences for women's negotiation of a single identity. Feminism & Psychology, 13(4) pp. 489–510.

URL

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The Discursive Climate of Singleness: the Consequences for Women's Negotiation of a Single Identity

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Abstract

The privileging of marriage and long-term partnerships contributes to the marginalization of single women. This article explores the ways in which women defined as single work with the typical constructions of their identity available in the public arena. We view singleness as a discursively constructed social category. Using data from interviews with 30 women we examine the identity that women construct for themselves through their talk. We present the four main interpretative repertoires that women draw on, and look at two patterns of identity work commonly used to deal with the highly polarized repertoires. Singleness is a troubled category, and yet the positive and idealized repertoires available seem to make other aspects of women's lives and expectations pathological. We argue for a feminist psychology of singleness based on critical discursive psychology: the focus needs to be on the patterning of ideology rather than the supposed dysfunction of single women.

Key words:

critical discursive psychology, ideological dilemma, interpretative repertoire, single women, social categorization, social constructionism, subject position

Subject position

Introduction

A significant achievement of feminism has been to draw attention to what Adrienne Rich (1980) called 'compulsory heterosexuality'. What seems to be compulsory is not just heterosexuality as such but long-term partnerships with men within a marriage or similar situation (Rosa, 1994). Women's lives, their experiences and their relationships have evolved in the shadow of this powerful but often tacit set of regulations about appropriate forms of desire and intimate partnership. In this article we focus on a group of women who have been somewhat neglected in feminist research. These are women who are defined through compulsory heterosexuality: those seen by others and by themselves as 'single'. We report some empirical findings from an interview study and use critical discursive psychology (Billig, 1991; Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998) to develop a feminist perspective on 'singleness'.

One of the main ways in which normative prescriptions such as compulsory heterosexuality operate is through the construction and policing of various forms of 'otherness'. Those who lack 'rightness' help define what is 'right'. Some modes of living become accountable while others remain unexceptional and taken for granted. Our interest in women defined as single began with the commonplace observation that whereas married women or women in long-term partnerships with men are rarely asked to

explain themselves, single women do seem to have to engage in a lot of explaining (see also Adams, 1976). Women in long-term relationships do not tend to be asked (in a concerned tone of voice), for example, 'how did you end up married?' Apology and confession are not the dominant discursive genres for these accounts. The single woman, in contrast, is expected to have an explanation for her 'condition', preferably a story of 'circumstances' and 'missed opportunities' or one that blames herself for being 'unable to hold on to her man'.

Literature on Singleness

A number of studies have documented the marginalization of single women (Adams, 1976; Bickerton, 1983; Chandler, 1991; Chasteen, 1994; Holden, 1996; Jeffreys, 1985). Jeffreys, for example, in her historical research on lesbian women records the attacks on single women in the early part of the twentieth century. Chasteen describes how sexism is built into the single woman's everyday environment, while Adams has noted that conventional psychological theories often equate wellbeing with marriage. There has been little investigation, however, of the ways in which women defined as single respond to and work with the typical constructions of their identity available in the public arena. We will argue that singleness is best viewed as a discursively constructed social category. The discursive field organising 'singleness' marks the identity of single women through the subject positions (Davies and Harré, 1990) and interpretative repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) it offers for making sense of life patterns.

In line with the general marginalization of single women, academic research on singleness has largely assumed, if not quite pathology, at least that the psychology of the single woman will be shaped by 'difference' and, possibly, personal 'dysfunction'. The field as a whole is surprisingly sparse and under-developed with few sustained empirical investigations. One strand of research has applied models of the life course or life stages to understand the situation of singleness. Allen (1989) and Lewis and Moon (1997) have attempted to revise life course models (typically based around the stages of marriage and child rearing) for single people. Lewis and Moon, for example, offer a list of non-sequential developmental tasks that adult singles need to address. Thus the successful single woman will have prepared herself financially and emotionally for old age even though she may hope never to be old and single (p.130). Schwartzberg *et al*. (1995) have used life stages as a therapeutic tool that might help the single person understand and value their own life course. Such alternative routes through the life course nonetheless involve acknowledgement of the non-normative nature of the single track, and emphasize ways of coming to terms with the loss of the usual life trajectory.

Similarly, writing from a psychoanalytic perspective often traces any current difficulties experienced by a woman in finding a partner back to defences formed earlier, perhaps in early childhood (see for instance, Bickerton, 1983). Psychoanalysts taking an explicit feminist perspective (e.g. Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1987) have been critical of the patriarchal context in which women negotiate relationships. Eichenbaum and Orbach argue that normative assumptions about femininity necessarily require connection with a man. Such assumptions explain why women are propelled into relationships, rather than celebrating an identity as a separate, free standing and autonomous person. They remark that women often talk in therapy of how they stay on in unsatisfactory relationships for fear of a loss of self. Eichenbaum and Orbach suggest that women think of their identity

as being supplied through an intimate relationship, and therefore seek a relationship not just for connection, but driven by the need for identity. A criticism of this psychoanalytic literature is that what the model describes as normative – girls being brought up to provide supportive and caring relationships for others – is at the same time seen as pathological, in that therapists become involved in unravelling such expectations in their consulting rooms (McLeod, 1994). Single women, in particular, can be seen as having problems in forming intimate relationships and be targeted for therapeutic intervention (see Reynolds, 2002 for a review).

In addition to these lines of investigation (and see also work undertaken from a role theory perspective, Bankoff, 1994 and Chandler, 1991), a range of qualitative investigations has been conducted. These have mostly adopted thematic forms of analysis and, usually implicitly rather than explicitly, an experiential, humanistic or phenomenological psychological perspective. These studies often verge on the journalistic, and feature extended quotations or pen pictures of women who are single (for instance Peterson, 1981; Anderson and Stewart, 1994; Reilly, 1996; Clements, 1998). The findings tend to be organized into a framework of themes, and the authors may claim to give single women a voice (for instance, Gordon, 1994, p. 41). Clements (1998) in her study, for example, has commented on the degree to which single women have no collective sense of themselves. However, more commonly, these studies propose a politics of self-acceptance, self-transformation and self-actualization.

A Feminist Discursive Analysis of Singleness

In contrast to these lines of work we seek to develop a feminist discursive analysis of 'singleness'. In this section, we shall try to outline the theoretical commitments guiding our empirical research. These commitments consist of five linked claims about 'singleness' and follow variants of discursive psychology which work across both conversation analysis and post-structuralist discourse theories (see Wetherell, 1998, for a description and justification of this form of critical discursive psychology).

First, we suggest that the single state is best viewed as *socially constructed*. This notion brings into sharper relief than experiential, psychoanalytic or life course models the shifting patterns of meaning through which singleness has been understood historically as well as the changing pattern of social arrangements and social practices for regulating relationships. It is a reminder that singleness is not a natural fact or a natural social arrangement. It highlights the historically and culturally variable status of singleness. At an empirical level, this draws attention to the relativity of current relational forms. It raises questions about the other ways relationships might be constructed and why these particular modes and representations of the single state dominate social organization now.

Second, singleness is a *social category*. We understand categories and categorization, however, from a discursive rather than a cognitive perspective (Edwards, 1997; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). As Harvey Sacks (1992) has argued, categorization-in-use is revealing about social order. Categorization practices and the flexible resources these provide for constructing relationships and events at any given moment (wife versus mistress, mistress versus spinster, spinster versus bachelor, and so on) help provide an orderly and accountable framework in social life. The use of categories evokes an order for that moment. And, categories are wonderfully flexible devices. The category single can be

worked through many different category contrasts, and constructions of ‘otherness’ and ‘sameness’, ‘outsider status’ and ‘insider status’, to produce a wide range of accounts and evaluations (Hester and Eglin, 1997). Once more, the question arises, among all these possibilities, why are some repeated over and over?

Much of the existing literature again treats the categorization of singleness as a natural phenomenon. Thus much discussion concerns the correct definition of the term. Does the category just include the ‘never married’ (Allen, 1989; Peterson, 1981) or what some call the ‘ever single’ (Reilly, 1996). What about the divorced, the separated and the widowed, those who are ‘single again’? Are these people true members of the category? In contrast to these debates, our interest is in how the category is constituted at different historical moments and in different interactional contexts. We want to re-focus research, therefore, on ‘how’ the social category of singleness is constructed rather than ‘who’ really is a member. How do the methods of categorization work and what are the institutional and identity consequences and implications of different formulations?

Our third broad premise is that singleness should be studied not just as *socially constructed* and as a *social category* but also as a *discourse*. Singleness is a set of complex meanings and practices. The *discourse of singleness* produces knowledge, forms of truth and expertise (see Hall, 1997). To speak about singleness is to speak in relation to this discourse. Although Foucault (1980) rejected the term ideology, in our view it is also helpful to see singleness as an ‘ideological field’ following the definition of ideology suggested by Billig (1991, see also Wetherell and Potter, 1992). Both the terms ‘discourse’ and ‘ideological field’ stress that the shifting patterns of meaning which construct singleness are formed in relation to power. Indeed the notion of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ itself and the peculiar accountability associated with being single make this salient. Singleness is a discourse regulating conduct. We would expect to find that it is a discourse which naturalizes and pathologizes, creates patches of visibility and patches of invisibility and mystifies some forms of being while normalising other forms. In line with the work of Billig et al. (1988) and Wetherell and Potter, 1992, we anticipate that it is likely to be an ideological field organized through commonplaces, tropes and dilemmas, a highly variable and inconsistent patchwork of representation.

These formulations suggest a range of avenues for historians, social policy and cultural studies researchers to explore. It would be fascinating, for example, to examine shifting media representations of the ‘single woman’ from ‘spinster of this parish’ to ‘Bridget Jones’. Our interest, however, in this paper is more psychological than sociological. Our fourth proposal is that singleness needs to be studied as a set of *personal narratives and subject positions*. Social history, social practices and the ideological field around singleness construct a cultural slot and a set of identity possibilities. The process, however, of living in this slot and living with these possibilities (working with them, complying, resisting and transforming them) becomes a personal identity project for the individual single woman. In developing narratives and accounts of themselves, and in making sense of their lives and life choices, people work up the discursive resources available as identity. Indeed, narratives are a way of managing identity in a shifting, fragmented and complex ideological field. In this respect categorization practices and the discursive field of singleness produce a psychology and modes of subjectivity.

Identity is a negotiated performance. Our focus in this paper is on women’s narratives and

stories as they explore with an interviewer their history around singleness, and answer questions on their single identity. We are interested in the everyday ways in which women make sense of their situations in talk and conversation. In line with previous research in discursive psychology, we anticipate that these accounts will be highly variable, the identity positions developed will be distributed and multiple and the contradictions and inconsistencies will be informative about the constitution of the discursive field of singleness as a whole. We assume that identity is 'precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak' (Weedon, 1987, p. 33).

As well as mapping these fragmented patterns, and discussing their psychological implications, we also aim from a feminist perspective to critically evaluate the kinds of identity resources on offer to women to negotiate their identity projects. Our final guiding principle, therefore, is that singleness is not just *socially constructed*, *a social category*, *a discourse* and *a set of personal narratives and subject positions*, singleness should also be a *politics*. In other words, it is an arena in which feminists need to develop further strategies of resistance and develop a collective voice which might help women position themselves in much more enabling ways.

The Interviews

The research data consisted of interviews conducted with thirty women. The sample was recruited through 'snowballing' and through poster and handout advertisements. The first author (who conducted the interviews) contacted women known to her and then asked them to pass on an information handout to others. Handouts and posters were displayed in libraries, shops and other public places asking 'women alone' to participate in a study of meanings of 'singleness'. These notices explained that the researcher was herself single, and that she was interested in knowing 'what being single means to you now, what it has meant to you in the past, what kind of choices you have made, and your hopes for the future'. Twenty-one women were included in the study as a result of the snowballing process and nine women were included who made contact because they had seen a poster or received a handout. The typical demographic profile of the participants did not vary significantly across the two methods of recruiting.

The criteria for inclusion in the sample were that women had either remained single, or been divorced, separated or widowed for more than two years; were not living with anyone (male or female) in an intimate partnership at the time of making contact; and were aged between 30 and 60 years. Apart from these fairly broad parameters it was left to women to self-define themselves as single. For the theoretical reasons discussed above we did not wish to define 'who is single' according to strict criteria. Appendix 1 shows the sample by age grouping, occupation, parenting status and by their status as 'always single' or 'single again' (which refers to those who have been married previously). The majority of women interviewed were relatively homogenous in terms of social class, ethnicity and educational background (mainly middle-class, white British), with some variation in current employment and income. Eight of the sample had children, in four cases these were adults living in separate households at the time of the interview. Two participants had a mixed race background. Most referred to heterosexual experience, one person identified herself as lesbian and two had had relationships with women as well as men. The research was mainly carried out in London, another city in the Southwest of

England, and in rural areas of the Cotswolds. The aim was to work in depth and to develop a rich or 'thick' understanding of a relatively small sample with a broadly shared social position rather than conduct a questionnaire survey, for example, which would have allowed a 'thinner' exploration of a much more diverse sample.

It could be argued that the sample is diverse in terms of their marital status, that having always remained single and childless is very different to having been married, or having had children within or outside marriage. To treat all participants as members of the category 'single' may conceal important differences. Clearly there are differences in the kind of accounting and relationship history that women give, and we will be exploring these elsewhere. In this article we are looking at particular commonalities that appeared across the sample. Appendix 1 shows some of the variation in statuses and allows readers to see how we reached our conclusions in relation to the data that we discuss.

All of the interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis with the exception of one group discussion with four women. Interviews lasted between one and half and two hours and were usually conducted in participants' own homes. The researcher was able to interview with the status, to some extent, of an 'insider' (Adler and Adler, 1987). As noted, she identified herself as a single woman, and shared some features such as cultural and class background with many of the sample. We hoped that this shared culture would avoid reproducing the situation noted in the introduction where women who define themselves as single are constantly put on the spot to explain their 'oddity'. While we generally refer to those interviewed as 'participants', we recognize that the researcher was also a participant in the discussion and the resulting discourse was jointly constructed. A schedule of questions was prepared for use in what can be described as the 'guided but informal conversation' of the interview. Participants were provided with an outline of topic areas in advance, and were asked to complete a form relating to personal details. Interviews were taped and transcribed. The transcripts have been anonymized, with names changed and details which might lead to identification of the person removed. Participants were provided with a copy of their own transcript and offered the opportunity to correct or delete material.

The interview topics covered three broad areas. The first area also served as a general introduction. The researcher asked about the images participants held of singleness and how they perceived others' views of themselves. The second area focused on the participant's past and current relationships. The final questions aimed to revisit the participant's current feelings about her situation, and to elicit any political perspectives she might hold regarding the single state.

In this paper, we focus on discourse drawn mainly from the first area and in particular the sample's responses to three questions:

1. 'How do you prefer to describe yourself?' This question usually followed an initial question asking the participant to give a brief description of herself and picked up on whether singleness was mentioned and what words were used in that brief description.

2. 'What images of singleness do you recall having when younger?' This was commonly accompanied by a follow up question – 'what does singleness mean to you now?'

3. 'How do you think other people see singleness?' 'What images are common?' This

question was sometimes specified in relation to the images held by particular significant others such as parents and family.

We have also included material produced in response to two further questions:

4. ‘What kind of things do you like doing? Are there any activities that are either easier, or more difficult to take part in, because you are on your own?

5. ‘Are you actively looking for a partner or seeking long term commitment at the moment?’ This was usually asked towards the end of the interview.

Our focus on these questions reflects our research questions for this paper. How do women who define themselves as single respond to and work with the typical constructions of their status available in the public arena? How do those typical constructions constrain and influence the ways in which women manage a ‘single’ identity?

Analytic Concepts and Procedures

We worked with a corpus or data file derived from all the material produced in response to the questions above. We looked first for regularities and patterns in women’s talk about singleness in general and second at the identity management relating to these. Our aim in this paper is to report the main patterns across the sample rather than the detail of particular constructions or individual women’s identity work.

The search for pattern was guided by three analytic concepts characteristic of critical discursive psychology – ‘interpretative repertoire’ (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1988), ‘ideological dilemma’ (Billig *et al.*, 1988) and ‘subject position’ (Davies and Harré, 1990; Hollway, 1984; Wetherell, in press). (See Edley, 2001, for a discussion of all three concepts.) Interpretative repertoires are the recognisable routines of arguments, descriptions and evaluations found in people’s talk often distinguished by familiar clichés, anecdotes and tropes. They are the building blocks through which people develop accounts and versions of significant events and through which they perform social life. Interpretative repertoires consist of ‘what everyone knows’ about a topic. Indeed the collectively shared social consensus behind a repertoire is often so established and familiar that only a fragment of the argumentative chain needs to be formulated in talk to form an adequate basis for the participants to jointly recognize the version of the world that is developing.

A typical finding in research on interpretative repertoires (c.f. Wetherell and Potter, 1988) is that people’s discourse tends to be highly variable and inconsistent since different repertoires construct different versions and evaluations of participants and events according to the rhetorical demands of the immediate context. This variability allows for ideological dilemmas to arise as people argue and puzzle over the competing threads and work the inconsistencies between them. In terms of subject positions, Davies and Harré argue that who we can be is dependent on the positions made available through talk, in interaction and conversations (1990, p. 46). The story lines of everyday conversations provide us with a position to speak from and they allow the positioning of others as characters with roles and rights.

Analysis and Discussion

We present first the four main interpretative repertoires women drew upon to make sense of singleness.

- singleness as personal deficit
- singleness as social exclusion
- singleness as independence and choice
- singleness as self-actualization and achievement.

The first two of these repertoires were strongly denigrated in the talk of those interviewed, and the second two strongly idealized. We will go on to argue that these highly polarized and indeed inconsistent repertoires present single women with a problematic ideological package which has challenging consequences for their personal identity work.

Singleness as Personal Deficit

This repertoire usually emerged in women's descriptions of single women encountered when a child, impressions formed in early life, or in imagining the views of others.

Extract 1[i]

Jill: […] I'm wondering if you have any particular images about single women that (.) sort of going back, if you can remember, to what you might have thought as a child or a teenager or as a young woman, coming up to the present really. What it might have meant to you at different times?

Rachel: Mm, mm. Well I think growing up as a child, and as a teenager and as a young woman, um. I think the image that I had of single women was of women who were not able to have a relationship, or not able to find a relationship, or find a man. […]

Extract 2

Jill: […] I am interested in whether you've got any kind of memories of your images of singleness over time, what you might have thought as a child or a young woman growing up or at the point when you became divorced and, perhaps how you see it now.

Jay: I think my images when I was growing up were largely negative ones. Erm I've been trying to remember whether I had any spinster, maiden aunts or relatives in the family and I don't think I had any. I don't, so my images would have been the ones that have sort of filtered down through family perceptions and through obviously through the media and erm ones that come packaged for you rather than any direct experience. But certainly, or through literature I suppose, things like Jane Eyre and you know them, erm the sort of Victorian image of the spinster in the family who had to be supported somehow by the men in the family. And who was erm, not quite

a whole person in some way. So I suppose I grew up with those images, erm, and with an expectation that it wasn't me, it wasn't going to be me, I was heterosexual I was erm at some stage going to get married and have children which I duly did.

The notion of singleness as signalling a particular kind of personal deficit (inability to get a man) is positioned in Extract 2 in particular (and in general in the corpus) as the 'canonical view', in other words as part of the well-worn stories of one's culture. In effect, the participants are rehearsing here some of the most familiar (and negative) aspects of the general discourse of singleness. In the personal deficit repertoire the focus is on the personal characteristics of the single woman, and a strong link is made between these characteristics and membership of the category. The single woman constructed here is pitiable, pathetic and problematic as a character. The 'historical' flavour of this account suggests that it might have little relevance for women's representations of their current situation. We shall demonstrate later that, on the contrary, it powerfully shaped their management of their identities.

Singleness as Social Exclusion

An alternative repertoire involved a construction of singleness as social exclusion rather than personal deficit. This repertoire typically emerged in anecdotes and stories about other people's reactions to oneself involving reported speech and accounts of internal dialogue in response. It was presented through actual experiences rather than as the familiar story of culture and was thus more firmly 'owned'.

Extract 3

Lyn: […] And I think that you don't get locked into a sort of social network if you're single, or I haven't, it hasn't been my experience. And when I was in my 30s a single friend said to me 'oh well couples won't invite us because they're scared of us; they think we're going to walk off with their men'. And I don't think of it the same way now but I think there are, there are, there is this sort of couple network thing. And they'll invite each other round to dinner and you'll sort of share it and swap it and make it equal and as a single person I have never felt included in that. […]

Extract 4

Josie: […] I was riding my bicycle to [place name] and I was thinking to myself, this is lovely, no car has disturbed my peace. It was a Sunday, […] and I was just coming down into the road leading to the lake and some car came up behind me and beeped me. And it made me jump out of my skin. My immediate reaction was aggression, and that is synonymous, that is symbolic of what I'm saying about being vulnerable. I'm more vulnerable on a bicycle than I am in a car. And she, this young girl, turned to just to her partner and smiled. And that made me so angry, that she did that to me and smiled at her partner because she'd doubly insulted me. She not only made me jump out of my skin but she was with a partner, so […]

In these extracts Lyn and Josie are responding to a question about what they find it easy or difficult to do as a woman on her own. The repertoire of social exclusion constructs a

strong contrast between singleness and coupledom. These are presented as in effect two quite divergent, almost unconnected, social worlds or social spaces. In general, this sense of a strong binary, a separated geography of two unrelated states, is a commonplace feature of the broader discourse of singleness. In this repertoire, typically, one of these spaces (coupledom) is constructed as privileged and the other (singleness) as excluded, lacking and disadvantaged.

The subject positions constructed in these two extracts vary. Thus the excluded single woman in Extract 4 is constructed as vulnerable, attacked and insulted. The impotence derived from the construction of exclusion is mitigated in Extract 3 by the construction of an alternative source of power – the power of the single woman to take other women's men and thus as a threat.

Singleness as Independence and Choice

In contrast to the first two repertoires, this and the next repertoire construct singleness as a highly positive condition. Singleness is idealized.

Extract 5

Jill: Are there other things you could pick out that you enjoy or the things that you find difficult?

Annie: Um, well, it's silly little things really. I suppose like being able to decorate the house exactly as you like there's no compromise in anything, you can do anything you want. I mean people can moan and say that's stupid and say well there's not a lot I wanted, you know, whereas when I was married you are forever sort of um toning down what you like, or what you want. I know that's a very selfish attitude but I do enjoy being able to have exactly my own way. Bad things, I don't think there's anything particularly bad about it, it's hard put to find any down side you know.

Extract 6

Susie: […] And I think I'm really fortunate I don't have to put up with all the negative things about relationships. And I think, I think overall they're quite difficult things. I don't think they're sort of romantic, sharing of the burden things at all. I think they are an additional burden and I think most of the time I'm grateful not to have to carry it. […]

In this repertoire, in contrast to the repertoire of social exclusion, the two states of singleness and coupledom become differently marked. Now it is singleness that is the privileged and celebrated space. Women position themselves as 'grateful' to belong in this freer space of independence and choice. Indeed, as in Extract 5, privilege has to be carefully managed, to acknowledge the possible negative consequence that those who occupy privileged spaces might be held to account as 'selfish'.

Singleness as Self-Development and Achievement

The final pattern we wish to draw attention to in the data can be described as a repertoire of singleness as self-development and achievement. It is more diverse than the repertoires described above and three extracts have been included to give a flavour of the range. The

first extract is drawn from the group discussion:

Extract 7

Jennifer: I think also we have more time to think than other people, to do what we want. And therefore we don't, we can actually take time off to get off the wheel, and so we have time to think about what we want to do and therefore we can develop ourselves more, maybe, sometimes.

Jane: We're like free spirits, we're not boxed into some little cage.

The suggestion is that women on their own have the time to develop themselves. In Extract 8, Val is talking of a time when she was adapting to a new job in San Francisco:

Extract 8

Val: I can remember thinking a lot of that time when it was difficult 'I'm really pleased I'm doing this on my own'. Because the whole equation about (.) because like I say I had this conversation with myself and this voice said, 'well just go home you don't have to stay here, you can go home now'. And this other voice would say, 'no, no'. So I really had to work out what was really important for *me*; absolutely for me and the terms on which I was there and at which point I would decide to give up and what difficulties I would decide were worth sticking with and overcoming. And it was totally on my terms. And if I'd had to take someone else into account, and weigh it all up with them and take their feelings into account as well, I don't think I could have done it. Well I know I couldn't. […]

As with the repertoire of choice and independence, the freedom to make decisions without having to think about a partner is emphasized. But also here there is a construction of challenge, and work on one's self in response to that challenge. Val constructs herself as achieving through adversity.

Extract 9

Milly: […] there are so many more professional women who don't want to put their careers aside while they have children and marriage is largely about having children, still. And so many women are choosing not only not to have children, but not to get married, and so they are single because they are career types and that to me is a positive image. […]

Milly, in her early 30s, relishes the subject position of the 'career women'. Singleness as self-development is a repertoire that formulates female ambition within both liberal feminist and humanistic psychological terms. Financial independence is presented as a goal as well as other more diffuse aims of self-fulfilment.

The Repertoires in Combination

These four interpretative repertoires were the prevalent patterns of sense-making in relation to our interview questions about images of singleness. They constitute a large part of the discursive terrain of singleness for this sample. Most women drew on all four repertoires; a few drew only on the second two, none drew solely on the first two. These

repertoires in part construct the kinds of conversations, dialogues and internal monologues that are possible around singleness. They tend to form rhetorical point and counter-point and provide a discursive package creating a powerful set of ideological dilemmas without easy resolution. The idealized third and fourth repertoires of independence and self-development, for example, can be a response and contrast to the first and second repertoires of personal deficit and social exclusion. And the reverse was also commonplace in the discourse of the women interviewed. The positive repertoires of choice and self-development were often undermined and shadowed by the first and second repertoires of deficit and exclusion. The subject positions offered to women across the repertoires vary widely from 'strong and independent' to 'pitiful and problematic' and from 'fulfilled' to 'attacked and excluded'.

As noted, the repertoires are highly polarized – two involve denigration and two involve idealization. But what are the consequences of this polarization for single women's constructions of their identity? How do women inhabit this discursive space and formulate a self within it? How is this complex mix of idealized and denigrated subject positions managed?

We suspect it may be unusual to have to draw on a discursive and ideological space that is so polarized, where the ideological dilemmas raised by the contradictions between the repertoires are so closely linked to the possibilities for who one can be as a person. Membership of other marginalized social categories based on ethnicity, class, sexuality and disability perhaps also involves managing both denigrated and idealized categorizations simultaneously. Yet what may be different for single women is the lack of a social movement or identity politics around singleness and thus the absence of co-ordinated and collective efforts to deal with denigration. Possibly, without this, it is more difficult to unequivocally inhabit the positive, and distance self from the denigrated constructions. In the remainder of this analysis we want to focus on two pervasive negative ways in which this pattern of repertoires seemed to shape the identity work of the women in our sample. From a feminist perspective, these modes of management suggest to us the need for a more elaborated and positive politics of singleness.

Constructing the Self as not a Typical Member

One consequence of the mix of both highly positive and very negative constructions is that it leads to delicate footwork over the ways in which one 'belongs' to the category, and indeed how the category is defined in the first place. Consider Extract 10 below in which Val argues that although she fits within the category 'woman living by herself', she doesn't fit within the category 'single', as she has a boyfriend.

Extract 10

Jill: Mm, yeah, absolutely fine. I think when we spoke on the phone you didn't tend to think of yourself as single and I didn't hear you say that just then; just that you're quite happy living on your own.

Val: Yes. I suppose when we were talking on the phone. I, um, I think what I said was 'I think of myself firstly as financially independent'. I don't think of myself as a loner, as alone at all. I do have a boyfriend, um, I don't think of him as a partner, probably 'cos we don't live together and our lives

don't join up so much that I have to take him into account an awful lot. I've rarely not had a boyfriend actually. In fact sometimes they overlap, which can be difficult. So I've never been short of a boyfriend and always had, um, plenty of friends and two or three close friends, women friends. So 'single' sounds awfully alone and I don't think of myself as being alone, except when I come back to this house I suppose, but then again, yes, I think the first thing is financial independence. I choose how to spend my money and it's not really a big issue until I see how other people don't have that. I just take it for granted.

Val draws strongly here on the personal deficit repertoire in constructing her reading of the category 'single'. 'Single' becomes constructed as a noxious identity. It is defined as being a 'loner', 'awfully alone' and being 'short of a boyfriend'. These identities are firmly disavowed in Val's case in favour of being 'financially independent', 'never short of a boyfriend' and having 'plenty of friends'. It is instructive to witness the kind of work which becomes necessary to manage the disavowal of membership in a troubled (c.f. Wetherell, 1998) category membership.

Could women just side-step these problems through defining the category 'single' entirely through the positive and idealized repertoires of choice and independence and self-development and achievement? It might then not be necessary to distance oneself from the category. Very few of the women interviewed followed this discursive strategy. The power of the repertoire of singleness as personal deficit seems to be such that it is 'around' as a potential reading of one's character even when the interviewer is also single. Its availability, and possible applicability to oneself, needs to be addressed in some way and warded off. Women developed several ways of achieving this. The next two extracts from Polly exemplify three common strategies. First, Polly finds another category outside 'single' that can hold the negative meanings of personal deficit, leaving 'single' to hold more positive connotations. Second, she reviews her own credentials to show why she doesn't herself qualify in the more negative personal deficit interpretation of the category. Finally, she contrasts herself positively with someone who does seem to have all the negative attributes.

Extract 11

Jill: Is it [single] a word that you would apply to yourself generally and are there any others that you might use instead?

Polly: No, I do say I'm single. I dislike intensely the word 'spinster'. I mean bachelor does not have a sinister, pathetic or even unpleasant ring to it, but spinster does have a very unpleasant ring to it. Um, I would say from choice I would like to have been married. Um, but I'm not married. And as I said I was engaged three times; I had three options of marriage, maybe that's a clearer picture of myself. I had three options of marriage. And it was me that turned down the engagements because I didn't love enough, um, and I suppose I've always looked for the ultimate love and maybe that doesn't exist.

Polly does place herself within the category 'single'. She goes on, however, to differentiate it from 'spinster'. She then constructs a picture of herself as having had the

chance to become a non-member of the category ‘single’ by getting married, and therefore as someone to whom attributions of personal deficit are not relevant.

Extract 12

Polly: I think I’ve only got one friend that is a spinster, as I am. And I do think she is a spinster with her trundle basket. And I’m afraid to say, I was going to say her cat as well. And she does fall into what I feel is that spinster category; ’cos I mean she’s still in the same job I met her in 30 years ago and she hasn’t moved on. She’ll be there until retirement and she hasn’t moved on whereas, as I say, most of my collection of friends are actors, drunks, or Jewish, or Irish funnily enough. I mean I have a sort of, I suppose, an eccentric selection of friends; I don’t think any of my friends would be categorized as the norm; and I’ve got a lot of gay friends.

Here, in contrast to the previous extract, Polly does include herself in the category ‘spinster’ but works to establish that she is not a ‘proper’ member of the category. She does not take on its negative features. She draws a distinction between herself and a friend who is a more typical member and ‘does fall into what I feel is that spinster category’. Markers of ‘typical spinster’ include the trundle basket and the cat. Polly then contrasts the majority of her friends – eccentrics, not the norm – which has the effect of further distancing her from the category of spinster. The link that Polly makes between her friend who ‘hasn’t moved on’ and her other friends is a non sequitur, unless it is considered that actors, drunks and so on have by definition ‘moved on’. The contrast to be made is more with Polly herself. By implication, in having unusual friends, Polly herself becomes unusual, and less like a spinster.

Our last example of the power of the personal deficit repertoire in defining singleness initially presented a puzzle.

Extract 13

Jill: Well, that’s very good, thank you very much, that gives me a very helpful introduction

Mary: I’ve got lots of friends, lots of friends and supportive relatives, so my social life is good.

This sequence comes after Mary has given a brief description of herself. Why does Mary go on to comment on her friends at this point? It appears as an afterthought to her introductory account of herself, in which she mentioned her divorce, another long-term relationship and discusses in more detail her career as a nurse. It is not a response to any question. It may be a response to the interviewer’s comment that she has been given ‘a very helpful introduction’ – a conversational act that attempts to close off what has been said so far preparatory to further exploration. If so, we can read Mary’s response as an effort to fill out the portrait that she has given of herself, finding that it is incomplete in some important way. But there is a defensive quality to this interjection as though she is warding off some unspoken accusation. The unspoken accusation, we suggest, arises from the personal deficit repertoire of singleness. Single women in effect stand always accused. Women have to establish that they are not ‘one of those’ in order to formulate more positive senses of self.

Troubled Desire

The second prevalent area of trouble among women in the sample arose in relation to the interview question concerning wishes around future relationships or future marriages. It was striking how often women appeared to be apologising for acknowledging a desire for commitment with a partner.

Extract 14

Jill: […] These are just some final things; um, sort of summary things really, like, I think you've partly answered this but, I mean, let's just try you again. Do you feel that you're actively looking now for a long-term relationship, possibly?

Milly: Yes I think I am really. I've never been the party animal type; I've never been the one to want lots of dates. You know, I tend to be a one-man woman I suppose. And while it was never a big issue when I was younger, now I do appreciate the companionship side of things. I value that far more highly than perhaps I did before and I want someone to belong to and someone to belong to me. And I suppose, if I'm honest, yes I'm looking for a husband. Yes. I have to be specific. I don't think I want to go into another one of these, five or six year living together type situations; I don't really want that. I want to be married I suppose. But, you know, I'm not feverish about it! I'm just hoping that it will happen in the near future.

Milly gives an account of her pursuit of a long-term relationship that is positive, so why does she frame the statement that she is looking for a husband with: 'if I'm honest'? This and similar phrases such as 'I must admit', 'I can't deny', 'I wouldn't rule out …' occurred very frequently when women addressed the issue of future relationships. Why does this discursive pattern occur? Why do women confess to the desire for a relationship and present it as a 'truth'? Specifically, a truth 'underneath' what now becomes re-positioned as the 'rhetoric' of desirable independence. In many ways this is surprising in light of the pattern highlighted in the previous section. There we suggested that women have a difficult task in relation to being single. They have to acknowledge their membership of the social category, distance themselves from the imputation of personal deficit, and build a positive account of themselves. Superficially, one might expect that the subject position of 'looking for a husband' would help to ward off the position of personal deficit. Yet it seems to create more trouble.

Trouble may now be arising from the highly idealized repertoires of singleness and the relative lack of discursive routes available to women to celebrate their single identity. If one avows a strongly positive view of singleness then this makes the desire to move out of the category troublesome to express. What seems difficult to hold together in the current discursive climate is a positive construction of the category 'single' with the desire for relationship. One seems to obviate the other. The positive constructions of the idealized repertoires seem to render the desire for relationship difficult to admit.

Milly also disclaims 'being desperate' – 'I'm not feverish about it', she states. We suggest that given the ideological dilemmas generated by the available interpretative resources, the very best identity allowed to the single woman is to embrace independence, autonomy and self-development without remainder. And, the very worst and most shameful identity

(as evidenced in what is warded off and avoided in the talk) is to express strong needs for others and to pitifully fail to have them met. Personal deficit is marked by failure 'to get a man' or, as one participant noted, through the failure 'to be chosen by anyone'. Such failures elicit the personal deficit and social exclusion repertoires while single successes are constructed narrowly within the two idealized repertoires. Women in fact literally can't win here with this combination of repertoires. One aspect of their lives and experiences becomes mystified and pathologized. The next extract demonstrates how this discursive and ideological tension consistently became read in psychological terms as splits and tensions within the self.

Extract 15

Marion: […] You know, I think if, if I had a choice, and you know I could have a perfect person to be with, I'd much rather have that than to be on my own. I can't deny that (laughs). I was trying to, I was trying to work out why I didn't want that to happen but, because I know I want to be, in my head I am perfectly happy and content, but in my heart I am not really.

Marion also frames her preference as an admission: 'I can't deny that'. To deal with the dilemmas contained within the discourse of singleness she constructs a split or divided self with head and heart going in different directions. Splits within the available discursive resources become re-located as contradictions within women themselves. The talk of a 'perfect person' also does some complex work to sustain positive constructions of the single self. Marion effectively formulates her want as a serious choice and something potentially out of normal reach. Singleness is so desirable; a potential relationship has to be very good indeed.

Conclusion

We have used data from interviews with women to examine how they work with the patterns and contradictions contained within the current polarized discursive climate around singleness. We have tried to demonstrate the negative consequences for women of the way the 'logic' of this ideological field is typically organized. We are not suggesting that single women cannot think and speak in other and more diverse ways about their situation, but rather given the homogeneity and ubiquity of these discursive resources, the identity work of most of the women interviewed seemed to take them into account in some way. They form an uncomfortable discursive climate and one of the goals of feminist politics must be to contribute to a more comfortable climate.

It is not for us to prescribe how this might be done. There are some difficulties in building an identity politics around a category that includes quite diverse experience. It is also a category that individual women do not necessarily see themselves as inhabiting forever. The women's movement's use of consciousness-raising groups in the 1970s and later has been critiqued for making assumptions about universality of experiences. It lost some force through its late attention to the different experiences of, for instance, black, lesbian, or working-class women (see discussion in Connell, 1987, pp. 270–274). We hope that papers such as this one can contribute to recognition of the dilemmas of self-representation that women on their own have to deal with, and stimulate further thinking on this subject.

Singleness is a troubled category (difficult to align oneself with) and yet, in a double bind, the positive and idealized interpretative resources that are available seem to make other aspects of women's lives and expectations pathological. Women are faced with a difficult set of dilemmas. Either, they can choose to construct singleness very positively through the repertoires of choice and independence and self-development and achievement and then it becomes difficult to talk about any move out of the category. Or, women can talk unashamedly about their desire for a relationship and risk being constructed as deficient and 'desperate', and marked by their failure to already have a man. There seem to be few satisfactory ways out of these dilemmas given the contemporary politics of relationships. The only positive strategy used by a small number of women interviewed was to develop a reflexive account and talk about the dilemmas *per se* rather than alternating between each side of them as experiential truths. There is clearly work here for feminism to do. A feminist psychology of singleness based on critical discursive psychology will we hope aid this political project through focusing attention firmly on the patterning of ideology, as we have attempted to do here, rather than the supposed dysfunction of single women.

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[i] The transcription symbols used are […] to indicate that there is an omission of text, [text] to show a clarification of text inserted by the authors, and (.) to indicate an untimed pause in the talk. The punctuation used is for convenience of reading rather than to signify changes in tone.

APPENDIX

Table of participants showing occupation, age bands, marital status and parenting status

Name	Occupation	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-60
Shelley	Secretary			AS			
Val	Computer programmer				SA[c]		
Sarah	Therapist					AS	
Milly	IT Trainer	AS					
Josie	Teacher					SA[c]	
Polly	Receptionist						AS
Thari	Teacher		AS[c]				
Sue	Counsellor			AS			
Susie	Probation officer				SA		
Lucy	Lecturer				SA		
Mary	Nurse				SA		
Ruth	Student		AS				
Annie	Secretary				SA		
Margaret	Shop assistant				AS[c]		
Marion	Mental Health User consultant				SA		
Lyn	Lecturer					AS	
Pat	Lecturer						AS[c]
Patsy	Management consultant			AS			
Rachel	Social work					AS	

	trainer				
Pauline	Lecturer				AS
Maggie	Information work/research		AS		
Mya	Racial equality officer		AS[c]		
Jay	Housing manager			SA[c]	
Alix	Lecturer	SA			
Claire	Therapist			SA	
Grace	Lecturer				AS
Molly	Social worker		AS		
Margot	Unemployed/trainer				SA[c]
Jane	Student	AS			
Jennifer	Student	AS			

AS = 'Always single' includes all those who have never married

SA = 'Single again' includes all those who are divorced or widowed

[C] = Has a child or adult children

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