Choice and chance: negotiating agency in narratives of singleness

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Abstract

This article presents a discursive analysis of interview material in which single women reflect on their relationships and reasons for being single. Despite changing meanings of singleness, it remains a 'deficit identity' (Reynolds and Taylor, 2005) and the problem for a woman alone is to account positively for her single state. Our analysis challenges theorisations which would suggest autonomy and agency in how identity and self are constructed. It employs the methodological approaches developed in critical discursive psychology (for instance Wetherell, 1998) to look at the detailed identity work of speakers as part of the identity project proposed by Giddens (1992, 2005), Bauman (1998) and other writers associated with the 'reflexive modernisation' thesis (Adkins, 2002). By approaching 'choice' as one of the cultural resources available to speakers, we present a more complex view of the dilemmas around a speaker's identity work in her accounting for her relationships and the course her life has taken

Introduction

The social context of relationships has undergone many changes in recent years in the UK as in other countries in the West. Living arrangements and family forms have become more diverse, and there is an increase in cohabitation, separation, divorce, lone parenthood and people living on their own as well as more acknowledgement of same-sex relationships (Williams, 2004). The meaning of singleness has also changed in correspondence with these changes in living and relationship patterns. This is reflected in the replacement of the terms 'spinster' and 'bachelor' with 'single' in marriage registers and certificates in England and Wales (Gledhill, 2005). Definitions of who might be considered single have broadened out from 'never married' to include people with children and those who have been married or in partnerships but are not currently in cohabiting relationships (Anderson and Stewart, 1994; Gordon, 1994; Lewis, 2001). It is therefore no longer taken for granted that a single woman is 'husbandless and childless' (Smith,

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1952: vii), although it can be argued that singleness remains a deficit identity, defined by lack (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Reynolds and Taylor, 2005).

Sociological theorists associated with the 'reflexive modernisation' thesis (Adkins, 2002), such as Giddens (1992, 2005), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), and Bauman (1998), have emphasised the individualised nature of contemporary identities and the reflexive project through which each of us constructs a self-identity. Identity has been transformed from a 'given' to an individual task. There is no longer a need for people to work on fulfilling an ascribed social definition; instead they can construct flexible identities that are easy to rearrange (Bauman, 1998: 27). Part of this change is the detraditionalisation of relationships. For example, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) suggest that family interests have been replaced by individual interests as the primary drive for decision making. Giddens also suggests that 'the question 'Who am I' . . . comes to the surface with particular intensity' for women (1992: 30). These points have focused our attention on the identity issues confronting single women. In this article, we explore the reflexive project to construct a self-identity at the level of the 'identity work' which takes place in talk, including through the telling of a life narrative (see also Reynolds and Taylor, 2005). We employ methodological approaches developed in critical discursive social psychology (Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Wetherell, 1998; Edley, 2001) to analyse material from interviews with 'women alone'. Our approach investigates the cultural or discursive resources around singleness and the subject positions these make available.

As Walkerdine (2003) and Rose (1996, 1999) have suggested, the notion of the reflexive project of the self involves an emphasis on choice and agency (see also Taylor, 2005b). For example, Walkerdine (2003) explores some of the problems of a woman who interprets her workplace experience and opportunities in these terms. Our particular interest is in 'choice' understood in discursive terms, that is, as one cultural resource which is available to speakers for their identity work. Our analysis shows the complexity of this resource and the dilemmas and contradictions around choice and agency which speakers encounter in accounting for singleness. Our data show some important regularities and contradictions in the cultural resources available to women to account for their singleness. Alongside stories of autonomy and possibilities of intimacy that do not depend on just one committed relationship, were more traditional accounts of wanting to feel chosen, wanting a relationship and contingency as to whether or not this happened. We try to indicate some of the complexity for single women in portraying themselves as possessing agency and in charge of the general direction of their lives. By approaching choice in discursive terms, the article therefore problematises and complicates the notion of the identity project proposed by the reflexive modernist thesis, showing it to be constrained and dilemmatic.

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Singleness and choice

Previous research on singleness demonstrates two strong themes which are relevant to our concerns. The first, which we have already noted, is that while the meaning of the term 'single' has broadened to include men and women in a variety of living together or apart situations, singleness for women is still largely defined negatively and in terms of deficit or what is lacking (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Reynolds and Taylor, 2005). Alongside attributes of independence and autonomy, single women are often depicted as outside normal family life and ordinary intimate relationships, as well as experiencing a degree of stigma (Reilly, 1996; Clements, 1998; DePaulo and Morris, 2005; Byrne and Carr, 2005). Jamieson (1998) notes that a happy and conventional family arrangement remains an enduring image for popular culture in the West. Although marriage may no longer be the centrepiece of people's lives, single women negotiate their relationships in a social and cultural context that still carries strong patriarchal expectations for women of a continuing sexual relationship (Bickerton, 1983; Rosa, 1994; DePaulo and Morris, 2005) and heteronormative assumptions that this will be with a man (Walby, 1990). Women are caught between contrasting representations of intimate relationships as involving commitment to just one person or as more diffuse forms of intimacy woven into a variety of personal relations. However, what might be called the dominant cultural storylines (Andrews, 2002), of partnership, commitment and family life, continue to shape and influence the personal narratives of individuals. For example, Reynolds and Taylor discuss how single women structure their life stories in contrast to the stages of a 'dominant coupledom narrative' (2005: 209).

The second major theme is that of choice. Writers on singleness have generally approached this as a factual issue, attempting to determine whether or not women have chosen to be single. Some writers have categorised single identities, using the binaries of stable or temporary and also of voluntary or involuntary. Stein (1981) suggests that 'voluntary temporary singles' including young people who have not yet married, and divorced people who are postponing remarriage (Stein, 1981: 10). 'Involuntary stable singles', in contrast, might include divorced, widowed and never-married people who wish to marry but have come to consider themselves as probably permanently single (Stein, 1981: 11). More polemical texts promote stories of singleness as independence and freedom (see for instance, Anderson and Stewart, 1994; Reilly, 1996; Clements, 1998). Such approaches to categorisation suggest singleness, with these different subdivisions, is a clearly discernible entity, with valid and unchanging distinctions on how people come to be members. More recent discussions (Gordon, 1994; Reilly, 1996) as well as our own data suggest much more fluidity about membership of the categories, and variability within individual responses to such membership.

Choice is also invoked with reference to offers of marriage. A well-known and familiar representation of women, with strong historical antecedents, and

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one reflected in some sources (for instance, Peterson, 1981) is that women have to wait to be asked. This, of course, implies that they have very limited agency and cannot freely choose the person they wish to marry. They can only choose to marry, or not, those who have presented themselves as available and willing. This invokes the question of whether women have really chosen to be single, and what kind of singleness they have chosen. Lewis and Moon (1997) argue that women in their study switched between internalising and externalising the blame for why they were single or had not remarried. They found very little consistency in responses from women about why they believed they were single and their feelings about being single. The responses to their question 'Are you single by choice?' were fairly evenly divided between 'yes' and 'no'. However, almost identical comments from women on their questionnaires amplified these different responses: ' "Yes, I am single by choice because I have not met anyone I want to marry." "No, I am not single by choice because I have not yet met anyone I want to marry." ' (Lewis and Moon, 1997: 125).

For Lewis and Moon these contradictory statements demonstrate ambivalence among single women. In contrast, we regard these contradictory explanations as providing a useful insight into how women can work with different meanings of 'choice'. Ambivalence is embedded in cultural representations of singleness, and it is at this level that it needs consideration. We view choice as a cultural resource, which may be drawn on, or countered, in their narratives and representations of singleness. It is a representation which forms part of the cultural context through which women come to understand and to work out their single state.

In talking of her choices, a woman is telling her story against a cultural backdrop that is often negative for women on their own. She will need to position herself in relation to strongly negative or strongly positive and idealised repertoires of singleness (see Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003). Rather than view choosing to be single as some internal process, a fact to be discovered about the self, we consider choosing or not choosing, and thereby taking responsibility or not for a choice, as an act (see Harré, 1995). This act, however, is not the choice as such, but an act that we might expect to be performed in people's accounts and narratives, where they may position themselves in contrasting ways according to the situational context. The act is carried out in the narration, and the choice is how a woman chooses to see herself at different moments of narration, rather than a recollection of one unchanging moment of past choice.

Analytic approach: a discursive perspective on narrative

The term 'narrative' has a wide reference in contemporary social research. Our interest is not in a structural analysis (Labov and Waletzky, 1967) or the dynamics of plot development (Gergen and Gergen, 1987; see also Elliott, 2005 for an overview of narrative approaches). We approach narrative from a

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discursive perspective (see Reynolds and Taylor, 2005; Taylor, 2005a; Taylor and Littleton, 2006). This has two main aspects. One is the investigation of the established or dominant narratives (cf. the 'canonical narratives' discussed by Bruner, 1987; 1991) which are one form of resource available to speakers. An example with a particular relevance for single identities is what Reynolds and Taylor refer to as the 'dominant coupledom narrative', discussed in the previous section. Speakers are limited in their identity work by cultural narratives which suggest what kind of stories can be told (Lawler, 2002). Similarly, Ricoeur (1992), in writing of connections between life and fiction, sees subjectivity as a narratively achieved identity that is accomplished within the relevant cultural traditions.

The second point of interest is in narratives as connections of sequence or consequence which are constructed in talk, for example, as part of a life narrative. We view the telling of a life narrative as a socially situated action and an identity performance that combines both form and content (Mishler, 1999). We suggest that there are patterns to the meanings that can be found in our participants' narratives, indicating the resources through which they construct an identity, or rather identities. We expect narratives and the structures employed in them to be organised by how people constitute themselves in the interaction (Abell *et al*., 2000). The interaction with other speakers means that the story can be worked up differently according to the construction of the conversation, and in this sense narratives are co-constructed (Schegloff, 1997). Thus, the construction of an account which does identity work is not simply an individual achievement, but is shaped by the social context of the telling, and the familiar meanings and associations that become resources for this speaker and her identity project.

As we have noted, the concept of a resource as a set of meanings that exist prior to an instance of talk and detectable within it is part of a critical discursive psychological analysis and is also common to a number of narrative analysts (see for instance Bruner, 1991; Plummer, 1995; Mishler, 1999; Lawler, 2002). In addition, our data analysis employs three linked analytic tools developed by critical discursive social psychologists (Wetherell and Potter, 1988; Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Wetherell and Edley, 1999).

The first is interpretative repertoires: these are systematically related sets of terms (Potter, 1996) that can be recognised in the familiar and well-worn images that are known and understood through shared cultural membership. Edley (2001) makes the point that when people talk or think they invariably use terms already provided by history. Conversations can be original, but they are usually made up of a patchwork of 'quotations' from various interpretative repertoires. Common interpretative repertoires drawn on by single women are highly polarised. At one extreme they involve images and accounts of personal deficit and social exclusion, at the other independence, choice, self-actualisation and achievement are invoked (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003). Women work with these very contradictory resources in their identity work.

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A second tool developed by Billig and colleagues is that of ideological dilemmas. These refer to the dilemmas of 'lived' ideology, composed of the beliefs, values and practices of a given society or culture (Billig *et al*., 1988). They are characterised by inconsistency, fragmentation and contradiction (Edley, 2001). The competing arguments and values which people draw on in making sense of their lives pose many dilemmas. Ideological dilemmas are linked with interpretative repertoires, since speakers work with the inconsistency in the repertoires they draw on and try to reconcile contradictory argumentative threads.

Subject positions are the third tool that we use: these are the different identities that are made available by different ways of talking (Edley, 2001). The concept of subject position is particularly apposite to an exploration of identity as performed in narratives, since it is the concept that connects wider notions of discourses and dominant cultural storylines to the social construction of particular selves (Edley, 2001). Edley (2001) quotes Hall's claim that identity is formed 'at the unstable point where the "unspeakable" stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of a culture' (Hall, 1988: 44). The speaker's identity is constructed by the different kinds of person, or subject positions that are implied by particular ways of telling one's narratives. A speaker may encounter trouble (Wetherell, 1998) in identity work by taking on, through the flow of discourse and its accompanying subject positions, an identity which in other contexts and in other discourses is negatively valued (see also Taylor and Littleton, 2006).

The various analytic tools offer ways of detecting patterns or features that recur in different instances of talk and the talk of different speakers. Our emphasis is on how our participants 'do narrative' (Elliott, 2005) and how the ensuing identity work is managed.

The project

Our data are from 30 women aged between 30 and 60 years, interviewed in a study conducted in 1998 and 1999. Participants were not living with a partner and had responded either to a personal request or to a poster advertising a wish to interview 'women alone'. Nineteen had never married and eleven were single again following divorce or death of a partner. Eight had a child living with them or adult children living in their own households. Most referred to heterosexual experience, one participant identified herself as lesbian and two referred to experience of sexual relationships with women. Two participants were of mixed race and the rest were white; all were British. There was, thus, a degree of homogeneity among participants but also some diversity. Given that the interviews were analysed as a body of data rather than as representing individual differences (see below), there is less interest in the details of 'sample' than there would be in a survey or other quantitative study.

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The interviews were mostly one-to-one, were all carried out by the same researcher and lasted between one and a half and two hours. They consisted of guided but informal conversation. Much of the data considered here emerged in response to a request that the participant talk about important relationships in her life and give her understanding of how she had got to where she was now. We have also included responses to other questions that evoked an account of relationships. A typical request was: 'I'm asking people about sort of relationships, intimate relationships over the course of the life and obviously that could be a huge area; I'm not asking for detailed accounts but just to get a sense of how you make sense really of the course your life's taken and where you find yourself now'.

The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. It is a feature of this approach that the transcripts were approached as a single body of data and searched for patterns within and across interviews. The analysis looks for patterns which may, of course, be exemplified in the tellings of particular speakers but are interpreted in terms of shared resources and common dilemmas rather than expressions of individual identity. The criteria for recognising a narrative were broad and did not require talk to be organised around a beginning, middle and end, or introduced and closed with entrance and exit talk (Riessman, 1993). Passages were looked for that had some kind of sequencing and movement from one event or relationship to another, that seemed to connect up with earlier or later references and that were explanatory rather than simply descriptive.

The dance of choice and chance

In this section we distinguish four interpretative repertoires which recurred across the data. All of them are linked to two broader resources, 'choice' and 'chance', which were drawn on by speakers to deal with ideological dilemmas around agency. As the analysis shows, each repertoire solved some problems for the speaker in the context of the immediate discussion, yet presented her with other quandaries. Similarly, the subject positions implied by the different repertoires created different kinds of trouble for the speakers. The analysis shows how speakers moved in their talk from one position to another in a kind of dance, in order to avoid trouble in their identity work.

'I want to feel chosen'

Although participants were not asked why they had not married, or had not stayed married, many of them responded as though they had been asked this. A question about relationships and the life course, and the context of participating in an interview focused on singleness, seemed to suggest a need for participants to do some accounting work. In Extract 1, Lyn,[1] in her early 50s and unmarried, talks of an assumption that the man has to choose her.

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Extract 1[2]

Lyn: [. . .] I think I'd lost my faith and another assumption that I grew up with, and that I found really hard to shake is the idea that the man has to choose me and I can't choose him; he has to tell me that I'm the one he wants and then I can say yes or no to that. And I think I'm still influenced by that idea; I don't have the confidence to think – oh if that's the man I want I can go and get him. I've never had the confidence and I'm aware that some women do have it. But it was very much the idea of a one way pursuit and that the man somehow had to observe in me something which he wanted and then I was either available or not available. [. . .]

In Extract 2 Milly, who is in her early 30s and also unmarried, talks of marriage and being chosen.

Extract 2

Milly: Yes, I'm the sort of woman who, you know, if there was a man I liked and I knew he was free, I wouldn't hesitate to ask him out for a drink, you know, if we were getting on really well and I thought it might be a good idea; I wouldn't just wait for him to ask me. But when it comes to marriage, I don't know, there's something ritualistic about it.

Jill: Oh right.

Milly: You have to wait to be chosen.

J: Yes, because there are a number of steps aren't there, between going out for a drink and thinking of marriage?

Milly: Oh yes.

Jill: But you think even when a lot of those have been gone through and it was pretty obvious to both of you that this was something pretty solid, you don't think you'd be the one to say, what about it?

Milly: Yeah, I would still wait for him because I want to feel chosen. Yeah, it's definitely that.

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In Extract 1, Lyn's notion of the man doing the choosing restricts her own choice to accepting or rejecting him. She recognises that this is a traditional idea that she is holding onto (line 3 'found really hard to shake'), and that there may be other women who would be more active ('I can go and get him', lines 9–10). She positions herself as dependent on male approbation. It is not clear that Lyn is talking only of decisions about marriage in this extract and her remarks appear to have more general application of referring to a desired relationship (line 9 'if that's the man I want').

Milly combines different positionings of herself in Extract 2. One is of an active modern woman, someone direct and outgoing, able to take the initiative in getting to know a man. But in relation to marriage, she says 'you have to wait to be chosen'. The position taken here is more passive, the woman becomes a 'Cinderella' passively awaiting the man's choice to marry her (see Peterson, 1981, and earlier discussion). She expands on this and comes to a firmer statement in lines 21 to 22, that she herself *wants* to feel chosen. This young woman, who earlier in the interview describes herself as a feminist, is drawing on the interpretative repertoire of singleness as a deficit identity (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Reynolds and Taylor, 2005). At first glance she appears to be using it in the classic way – women have to wait to be chosen by a man. Only this will validate them as women who have succeeded in the relationships business. However, Milly's choice of 'want' in line 22 gives a different twist to this repertoire. By framing her statement that she *wants* to feel chosen, she becomes less passive. To 'want' conveys that this itself is a choice she has made, emphasising her own version of femininity in a positive way.

In both these extracts, the speakers orient to a dominant heteronormative narrative or cultural storyline of men as the ones who choose, and women as those who wait to be chosen. Yet they also recognise that women 'can go and get' the man in the first place, Milly positioning herself as capable while Lyn positions herself as incapable of such initiatives. The storyline of women waiting to be chosen has a long tradition, while that of women who 'go and get' in a direct way is more recent. Nevertheless, both the positions these speakers take up seem to leave them with very little agency, in one case over forming lasting relationships with men, and in the other over marriage decisions.

This repertoire of singleness creates troubled subject positions. The speakers have little control over their prospects of marriage, and possibly even partnership more generally. There are few ways out. If men do the choosing in marriage, and perhaps in all relationships, then a woman who is unmarried and without a key relationship is positioned as not chosen and lacking (through the repertoire of singleness as personal deficit). Not surprisingly, speakers also drew on alternative repertoires that countered this positioning.

'I haven't felt the need'

One way for a woman to counter the negative positioning is to say that marriage was not what she really wanted. Extracts 3 and 4 are examples of this.

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Extract 3

1	Jill	Well in the context of that, women often
2		find it quite hard to say whether they
3		think they've chosen to be single and
4		perhaps most don't think they have and yet
5		when it comes down to it there are, I
6		mean, do you see choices in what you've
7		just been describing?
8	Milly	Yes, I mean when I think about it, if I
9		had really, really wanted to get married
10		then I would have done I'm sure. I think
11		it's just been that I haven't wanted to
12		that much. You know, I've been happy
13		living with someone or being on my own. I
14		haven't felt the need and part of that is
15		driven I suspect because I don't, I'm not
16		desperate to have children. I mean I'm
17		not ruling out the possibility that I
18		might one day have a child but, you know,
19		I haven't got that much time left and when
20		you sort of get to 33 and you've had no
21		overwhelming maternal instincts, I'm just
22		not that bothered! I think quite often
23		it's wanting children that makes a woman
24		look for marriage and, you know, that
25		hasn't been a driving factor for me at
26		all. So, you know, I've not been that
27		bothered about it really. I'm sure though
28		that if I really, really wanted to, then I
29		could and I would have done by now.

In Extract 4 Lucy, married and divorced in her twenties, and now in her late forties, also responds to a question about the extent to which she has made choices.

Extract 4

1	Lucy	I think I have, I'm not always the sort of
2		person perhaps, rightly or wrongly I don't
3		always think things through consciously,
4		um, but I do believe that if I'd wanted to
5		be married, if I'd wanted to remarry I
6		would have done. You know, I don't think
7		there's anything about me that would make
8		that, impossible (ha).

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In this second interpretative repertoire of not needing marriage, the speakers therefore draw on 'choice' differently. Instead of being the man's choice, for which they might still be waiting, it becomes a choice that they themselves made, because if they had *really* wanted to be married they would have done so by now.

In Extract 3, from a much later point in the interview than Extract 2, Milly represents herself as having made a choice, and capable of having chosen otherwise had she wished. J's question draws attention to the possibility of agency and the two speakers co-construct the possibility of choice in remaining single. Milly is swift to take up the position of active agent that she has been offered. She uses 'when I think about it', in line 8, as a bridge to cross the contradiction of the passive subject position she had previously inhabited, wanting to be chosen for marriage; her positioning here as someone who *could* have chosen to get married. While 'I want to feel chosen' is a recognisable and acceptable state for a young woman, 'not having been chosen' and without agency in the matter would seem to be a troubled subject position. Lucy, in Extract 4, positions herself as marriageable and potentially attractive and loveable. Both speakers frame their choice as one which was not made knowingly, at the time: Milly prefaces her account with 'when I think about it' (line 8, Extract 3); Lucy says 'I don't always think things through consciously' (lines 2–3 Extract 4). However, both extracts suggest it is more comfortable to assign oneself some responsibility in having *chosen* not to get married.

In explaining her choice, Milly (Extract 3) draws on another membership category (Sacks, 1992), as a woman who has not had a child. Marriage is seen as distinctive in having a purpose mainly for those who want to have children. The contrasting categories to marriage presented in line 13 are 'living with someone or being on my own', and referring to both experiences does important work for Milly in positioning her as someone with options, both of which she finds fulfilling, rather than as someone who has been overlooked by potential marriage partners. With some rhetorical work in regard to having children, Milly defends herself from a potentially troubled position by saying she is 'not desperate', line 16 and 'not that bothered' lines 22 and 27.

Accounting for not marrying through a story of indifference to the enterprise might appear to be work that only heterosexual women feel required to do. However, Extracts 5 and 6 are from women who have had relationships with other women or who identify as lesbian. Maggie is in her late forties and Sue her early forties. They also draw on a repertoire of 'I haven't felt the need', although in these extracts it is inflected differently.

Extract 5

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1     Maggie     [. . .] I don't think I've had a very strong
2                urge to go into a very close, you know
3                emotional and sexual partnership with
4                another person, the drive to do that
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doesn't seem to be very strong in me, while there's things that being in a partnership I would really like, and would love the companionship and to have somebody who thought I was okay no matter what, so to have some kind of family background, and not sort of have to work at defining everything all the time, a lot of those things are not necessarily things that are provided by having a live-in one-to-one relationship they're all things that can be got from something else, so I don't know about that really.

Extract 6

Sue	I see myself as always having lived my life alone with romantic attachments along the way and I've never, I mean I've never, um, bought a house with anybody or, um, yeah, I've never become that kind of knitted in with somebody really.
Jill	Yes. And so how do you make sense of that? Do you feel that's a choice that you've made or do you think?
Sue	Um, well I suppose (.) I feel as if I've had a slow start because of, um, (.) I feel I've had a slow start in a way because of my sexual orientation and my sort of, um (.) difficulties I suppose in coming to terms with that really, or, yeah (.) yes. And also I feel that, um, it's taken me until (.) I don't know how to put it really cos it's taken my a long time to sort of even have a sense of, a positive sense of being with somebody and how that could be good and how I want to communicate and how I want to be (.) and to sort of enjoy intimacy in a sort of wider sense of the word and I'm not actually sure that you have to be in (.) I mean I don't think you have to be necessarily in a partnership to experience that really either.

In these extracts the speakers are accounting not for *never having married (or remarried)*, but for *not having a partner*. However, for both of them their accounting takes in the degree to which they have engaged in partnership-type

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relationships in the past, and seems to us in some ways comparable with the accounting work done in relation to marriage. Sue, in Extract 6 is responding to the question quoted at the end of the last section, about intimate relationships and how she makes sense of the course her life has taken. Maggie in Extract 5 is responding to a question about what she thinks images of singleness are and how other people see singleness. Both speakers give quite lengthy responses that contain apologies for difficulty in answering the question. Immediately before the extract quoted, Sue says 'that doesn't really answer your question very well or perhaps sounds a bit vague', while Maggie prefaces the passage quoted from her with 'I'm just finding it really hard to focus on this sort of thing'.

As well as drawing on a repertoire of 'I haven't felt the need' the speakers are also making use of the notion that intimacy and being the primary character in someone's life do not have to be the same thing (see Reilly, 1996). A contrast is set up between living together one-to-one partnerships and other kinds of relationships. These speakers position themselves as independent: not looking to one primary relationship to provide their sense of identity. Support, companionship and even intimacy, 'in the wider sense of the word', can be got by other means. There is some struggle to articulate this counter-proposal to the powerful cultural storyline that being in a committed partnership is the ideal that all aim for.

Assertions of 'I haven't felt the need' work to defend the speaker from appearing unsuccessful at a commonly shared goal. However, the very degree to which this particular goal is shared makes this a hard subject position to maintain consistently, and herein lies an ideological dilemma. The speaker may find that through her use of this repertoire she has given the appearance of not having ordinary wants and desires. Too strong a reliance on a repertoire of 'I haven't felt the need' can place the speaker in an equally troubled subject position, for instance as asexual spinster. Alternatively, she may not be believed and have to face accusations that she is rationalising, and in reality is just 'making the best of a bad job' (Adams, 1976: 57). In the main participants moved quite quickly to draw on contradictory repertoires and a different positioning. The repertoire of 'I haven't felt the need' does some useful work for women in defending them from apparent failure at marriage or the relationships game, since they can argue that they have chosen not to pursue these goals. However, holding on to a position of lack of interest in a partnership may bring other dilemmas.

'I want to be in a relationship'

The repertoire 'I want to be in a relationship' was almost always taken up in contradiction to a previous positioning, or in amplification of what had been said earlier. Sometimes it followed an assertion of 'I haven't felt the need'. It seemed difficult for participants to present the desire for a relationship in a straightforward way. Extracts 7 and 8 illuminate this by showing how participants moved between other positions and this one:

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Extract 7

Rachel [. . .] Somebody said to me the other day when I was moaning on about being on my own, they said 'you're good at relationships'; um, and I think, I think I probably am. I think I'm good at them and I like them and (.) when they're going well of course, and I think, yeah, it's something that I hope for much more than saying I hope for (.) becoming more comfortable with being single, which would be another way, you know, I could be saying well I, you know, hope I get my act together on that and just stop whining about it; and I don't think I whine particularly, um, but, no, I still seem to be, still seem to have slid back into this image of what I want is a close, intimate relationship.

Extract 8

Jill [. . .] 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.

Rachel, in Extract 7, is responding to a question from Jill about her hopes for the future. Rachel is in her early fifties and single after a long-term cohabitation ended. Her tone is apologetic. She sets up a contrast between her hopes for a relationship and the possibility of becoming more comfortable with being single. In lines 15 and 16 she depicts her move as having 'slid back into this image' of wanting a close, intimate relationship. In Extract 8, in apparent contradiction of her other self-positionings shown earlier in this article (Extracts 2 and 3), Milly here presents her search for a husband and hope to get married as a 'confession'. Her interjection 'if I'm honest' (lines 13–14) suggests this is a troubled position.

The apologetic tone of both speakers may be occasioned by the context of the interview with Jill. Rachel, and to a lesser extent Milly, appear to be

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positioning Jill as someone who believes in the repertoires of independence and achievement for single women. It is not an unreasonable assumption to expect a person who is doing research on women alone to be interested in a positive image for singleness.

The interpretative repertoire of wanting a relationship is difficult to reconcile with feeling good about oneself in an unequal marketplace of intimate relationships; it creates another dilemma. Rachel struggles with the notion that she should be strong and independent and rise above feelings of need. Both speakers are dealing with some contradiction with their previous positionings as independent women, which explains why the repertoire is drawn on apologetically. The apologetic tone is warding off a different form of trouble, that of maintaining some credibility in relation to inconsistent identities (see Wetherell and Edley, 1998).

The relationships depicted by both speakers are consonant with Giddens' (1992) notion of a 'pure relationship' that is 'entered into for its own sake' and characterised by sexual and emotional equality (p. 58). Speakers refer to being 'good at relationships', wanting a 'close, intimate relationship', wanting 'someone to belong to and someone to belong to me'. However, no one has the power and control to be able simply to make such a relationship happen. It appears to be difficult to express positive feelings about being single alongside the desire for a relationship.

How should the apparently contradictory statements from Milly in Extracts 1, 3 and 8 be understood? Lewis and Moon (1997) might suggest such statements demonstrate Milly's ambivalence. In our terms, she has drawn on different interpretative repertoires and represented herself in turn as capable of asking a man out, as wanting to wait for a man to make the choice in relation to marriage, as already having chosen not to marry, and ultimately as wanting to marry. Each contradictory subject position has been taken up with the appearance of conviction. However, rather than understanding this as ambivalence on the part of the individual, we need to consider the social context for singleness, and the ideological dilemmas with which women are faced. The polarised repertoires of singleness as denigration and independence (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003) make it difficult for women to express a wish for a committed relationship while at the same time expressing satisfaction with their single state.

The speaker can draw on 'choice' as a resource within the repertoire of wanting to be in a relationship. She does this by stating her wish for a relationship. However, the more agency a person assigns herself, the more she is at risk of failure, if the desired relationship does not happen. Wanting a relationship was usually presented as a current desire, and therefore there could be as yet no outcome. When participants spoke of earlier points in their lives and their disappointed hopes and expectations of meeting someone for a lasting relationship, they avoided failure by emphasising the part played by the other major resource available, that of 'chance'.

'It just hasn't happened'

The interpretative repertoire that 'it just hasn't happened' was used as a more measured piece of accounting that emphasises chance and contingency rather

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than choice in relation to the shape of the narratives and relationships to date. Extracts 9 and 10 are examples from interviews with Sarah, in her early fifties and Polly in her late fifties. Neither has ever been married.

Extract 9

1	Jill	Yes. Have you found any answers that you
2		feel good about when people say 'how come
3		you're not married?'
4	Sarah	Um (.) I think I feel much more
5		comfortable about it now. Um (.) I mean
6		what I tend to say if it does happen now,
7		I just say 'well some things just don't
8		happen really. It's a bit like having kids'
9		I suppose I would say that about more than
10		anything because probably if I have a
11		sadness it's to do with not having children
12		so I feel quite comfy these days about
13		saying, well you know that's something I
14		would have liked but it doesn't happen, and
15		the compensations for not having them.
16		
29	Jill	So you'd say it along the same sort of
30		lines would you about – it just hasn't
31		happened – in terms of a partner? A
32		committed long-term one?
33	Sarah	Yes, I mean I think in terms of, you know,
34		for one reason or another it just hasn't
35		happened and, er, I feel quite comfy with
36		that really, because that for me says I
37		have made choices. You know it hasn't just
38		been that I've been a victim to other
39		people's decisions. Yeah.

Extract 10

1	Jill	Someone else I was talking to was saying
2		how she felt about, I forget quite how she
3		said it but it was about 'not being
4		chosen' and that even though she would see
5		herself as a feminist, independent, and so
6		on, that something about marriage is about
7		the man choosing the woman still. Is that
8		what people mean when they say 'how come
9		you're not married?'

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10      Polly      I think so. You see I would definitely
11                 not say I was a feminist and I'd hate to
12                 be put into that category. I mean
13                 occasionally if I'm asked why I'm not
14                 married I say 'it's lack of co-ordination;
15                 that either I loved or I was loved but I
16                 never managed to co-ordinate the two', and
17                 I think that would be the ultimate
18                 honesty; that I've never managed to get it
19                 quite right; either I've been adored or
20                 I've adored.
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In Extract 9, Jill's initial question clearly requires a positive response. Sarah is given an opportunity to present an untroubled identity, and it is hard to imagine how she could decline it. The proper thing to do when asked to suggest 'answers that you feel good about' is to present a positive example. The approach in drawing on this repertoire 'It just hasn't happened' is to present chance and contingency as driving events. The desire for marriage or a long-term relationship is not played down, but there is a resigned and stoical acceptance that this has not taken place.

However, chance is not the only element in these responses. Sarah is also able to draw on a sense of agency. She rehearses projected future speech events, adding that it 'says I have made choices' (lines 36 and 37). It is not clear quite how she makes this connection. She may be referring to earlier parts of her self-narrative when she described ending an unsatisfactory relationship. Alternatively, she may be seeing the neutral tone of 'it just hasn't happened' as the reverse of having been rejected by others. If this is the argument, then in the process of it not happening, she depicts herself as having made choices not to marry unsuitable partners, rather like Lewis and Moon's (1997) respondents who said they were single by choice because they had not met anyone they wanted to marry.

In Extract 10 Polly also assigns herself some agency. Having described a more neutral 'lack of co-ordination' (line 14), she goes on to say that she 'never managed' to co-ordinate and to 'get it quite right' (lines 18 and 19). These later phrases imply the taking of responsibility for a degree of personal failure. If you don't manage something the notion is left hanging that 'managing' was what you were supposed to do.

Agency poses a key ideological dilemma in relation to this repertoire. In general, if things just don't happen, there should be no blame to deal with. Things not happening cannot be your fault. Yet things not happening can also leave the speaker a victim of circumstance, carried along by fate. This is a less positive position to take up which may explain why in both extracts the speakers claim some agency. Portraying questions of partnership and marriage as matters of chance allows a person to provide a measured account of decisions and events. It can also make them appear less powerful, less in control of their lives than they might wish. Potentially they continue to be personally accountable through some failure of the self for why it did not happen to them.

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Conclusion: changing positions in the dance of choice and chance

Giddens (2005) suggests that the reflexive project of the self requires a narrative of a self less anchored in traditional structures. There is still relatively little empirical work that demonstrates how such changes are incorporated in identity at an individual level. Our analysis shows something of how agency is performed on the ground and, in particular, the issues around choice and agency in the identity project when these are approached as cultural resources.

Our data also suggest the complexity of working with changing cultural expectations. For example, we found that while participants worked with new resources that allowed them to appear active and empowered, they continued to draw on older discursive resources of a woman wanting a relationship or waiting for a man.

Polarised interpretative repertoires of singleness imply contrasting subject positions: not all of which are equally attractive or comfortable as some carry negative cultural associations. For example, the interpretative repertoire of singleness as involving personal deficit might suggest a subject position of lonely spinster, while in contrast a repertoire of independence and choice might offer a position of having chosen to be single (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003).

There are, as Bauman (1998) argues, virtues in flexibility of identities, yet there is a continuing cultural imperative to present oneself as having some agency, power and control. This raises an ideological dilemma as to how to negotiate this agentic self while dealing with trouble in the form of inconsistency or discomfort in the different subject positions taken up.

The repertoires used by participants offered a variety of possibilities for dealing with dilemmas that arise. Participants represented themselves as having made a *choice* – having just one intimate relationship hadn't been their goal, so they hadn't failed to achieve it, it just wasn't that important. There were a number of ways of downgrading the importance of a loving partnership or marriage as the central focus of life. In contrast, when participants represented themselves as 'wanting a relationship' they had to deal with the risk of failure as well as how this want might be construed as in some way not being independent enough to be happy and content to be single. So some kind of apology was often offered alongside the goal of a close relationship.

The notion of 'choice' in relation to enduring relationships or marriage offers single women a very flexible resource in their situated and ongoing conversational acts, which can include the act of taking responsibility as well as a more passive, negative set of choices, and can still allow for other desires. When participants drew on resources that emphasised *chance* they attributed far less agency to themselves or to others in their lives. It was just the way that things fell out, simply bad timing, not meeting the right person at the time when they were ready for each other. While this resource could absolve her of responsibility for not having found a partner, it did not allow the speaker to

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give an account that portrayed her as strong and in charge of the direction of her life.

If single women are in the vanguard of changes in intimate relationships, our data suggest that they are also developing some delicate footwork in positioning themselves in their narratives. Each of the repertoires discussed here solved some problems while also presenting quandaries for participants in offering an account of how they come to be single. Dealing with the dilemma of representing oneself as a powerful woman with agency and control in her intimate relationships involved participants in a complicated dance as they drew on different repertoires and took up contrasting positions to help them with this task.

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Notes

1 Speakers chose or were given pseudonyms and identifying details have been removed from extracts.
2 The transcription notation in these extracts is a very simplified version of that developed by Gail Jefferson (see Atkinson and Heritage, 1984 for a fuller account).

[. . .]	Material deliberately omitted
(laughs)	Hearable laughter from the speaker
(.)	Short untimed pause
text	Speaker emphasis

Punctuation is given for ease of reading rather than to indicate speech patterns.

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