CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Overview of Research Design

A qualitative approach to research accommodates an exploration of meanings (e.g., marriage, singlehood), while also yielding descriptive data. Through the implementation of qualitative methodology, researchers are able to obtain first-hand knowledge of life as experienced by individual persons (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).   In addition, a qualitative research design allows individuals to define the situation in which they are living (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

In-depth interviewing is a key data collection technique of the qualitative process. In-depth interviews are much less formal than structured interviews and have been described as purposeful conversations (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Open-ended interviewing can provide a comprehensive description of the complex nature of relationships as well as of developmental transitions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Feminist and life course perspectives have been identified as useful and well-suited to qualitative analysis (Baber & Allen, 1992; Bengtson & Allen, 1993). Both theoretical orientations emphasize diversity and multiplicity of experience, aspects highlighted by qualitative methods. As the life course perspective is dynamic and processual (Elder, 1978; Hareven, 1987), qualitative methodology allows researchers flexibility in experiencing with the individual the meaning and importance of events over time (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

As Bogdan and Biklen (1992) noted, qualitative research begins with the self. Understanding the relationship between the researcher and the subject of research is

tantamount to the process (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The personal narrative that follows is included as a means of demonstrating that connection.

A Foot In Each Camp

I begin this study with my story - a few opening lines from an unfinished chapter of an unwritten book,

> I was 35 when I awoke. There was no shrill alarm or bright burst of sunlight to signal the end of my slumber, just the too-quiet sound of early morning slipping into dawn. Although I don't recall the precise moment when the fingers of my mind stretched open to release me from my dreams, I do know, that when I opened my eyes, nothing looked the same.

These words, mentally composed one sunny summer afternoon just prior to my 35th birthday, reflect my perceptions of what it was like to enter midlife as a divorced single woman without a child. It is from this vantage point that I begin.

It is difficult to say when my interest in singlehood began. I have always been intrigued by women whose lives have been constructed apart from a marriage to a man, whether those lives were fashioned by choice, chance, or circumstance. Growing up, my personal knowledge of single women was limited to a few great aunts and a couple of family acquaintances. Yet, each time there was an occasion to interact, I recall thinking to myself, "What are their lives like ?" "How do they spend their time; their days and nights ?" and "Why didn't they get married ?" It is this last question that forms the basis of this study and fuels the fire of my curiosity.

Reflecting on these women, it never occurred to me that my life might follow a parallel path. Back then, singlehood was not about being married and then unmarried, it was about being never-married. Today, things are different. Now the question I am asked is not, "Why

didn't you ever marry ?" but "Why haven't you remarried ?" For me, the answer continues to

be, "by choice." In my experience, singlehood is not a lifestyle I have consciously chosen. It is

the result of a lifestyle I have consciously *not* chosen, again: marriage. Despite this choice I

remain with one foot in either camp; acknowledging my singlehood status while still living my

life in anticipation of that perfect marital union.   It is this sense of ambivalence that compels

me to explore the nature of core beliefs surrounding marriage: how they are shaped, formed

and often transformed, in an individual's life over time. Although I believe that marriage is a

matter of personal choice, I acknowledge that my belief has been shaped, in part, by the reality

that I have been once-married, as well as by my privileged status as a white, educated, and

financially-independent woman whose position allows her to make choices. As I travel further

down the path of midlife and continue to confront the biological and social realities of aging, I

wonder in what ways will my beliefs about marriage change or endure ?

As I prepared to conduct this research, I recognized that this is a study about non-career

path women; not my story, although my story may add to it.   While I am a once-married,

child-free, midlife woman, my experience of singlehood has been advantaged by my ability to

choose, an option not available to all women. Because of the social stigma associated with not

being married, I was concerned that my questions regarding marriage and singlehood would

be viewed as intrusive, rather than investigative; exploitive, rather than informative. I hope

that by acknowledging my privileged status and locating myself within the sphere of inquiry,

these concerns will inform and not interfere with my study.

<div align="center">Sample Selection and Recruitment</div>

The sample consisted of 10 women, 5 never-married and 5 once-married, between the

ages of 35 and 55. Socioeconomic status was codetermined on the basis of occupation and

educational level, while diversity in race, ethnicity, culture, and sexual orientation was sought. Because having children is essential in shaping women's lives (Gordon, 1994) and pivotal in specifying what a woman is (Gordon, 1990), motherhood was a delimiting factor for inclusion in the study. With an emphasis on the marriage beliefs of single women, individuals who were presently partnered or currently involved in a cohabitating relationship were excluded from participation in this investigation.

The names of potential respondents were identified through a variety of means including personal and professional networking, announcements (see Appendix A) posted in various University campus and community locations, as well as through the process of snowballing (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984) in which current respondents identified the names of other eligible participants. Willingness to engage in the project was determined via telephone contact (Appendix B).

The 10 participants were recruited through extensive networking or from snowballing. I began the recruitment process with the names of 10 women I secured through personal and professional associations. I contacted each woman by telephone to ascertain willingness to participate as well as determine eligibility for inclusion in the study. Of the original 10 names, 5 women were excluded: four on the basis of occupation or educational levels, and one who was twice married. Two women met all the criteria for inclusion but declined involvement. The remaining three women agreed to be interviewed. Following each interview, respondents were asked to recommend the name or names of other potential participants. Through this snowballing process, four additional women were identified. Of these four women, three expressed a desire to engage in the research but did not fit the study parameters. The final woman contacted met the criteria for inclusion, but was not interested in participation.

Based on this outcome, I returned to my network of personal and professional contacts and obtained another list of seven names. Through persistence, repeated telephone calls, and snowballing, I was able to identify and interview six additional women. During this interview process I encountered a never-married woman who identified herself as single, but was actually involved in a six-year non-cohabitating relationship. Following her interview, I discussed this finding with my advisor and decided that the ambiguity present between her self-definition as single and obvious relationship involvement was important information to include.

The final interview for this study took two weeks to obtain. After an initial telephone contact, the interview was scheduled and canceled three times. The first cancellation was an oversight on the part of the respondent who forgot the meeting time. The second and third cancellations were due to a family emergency and inclement weather, respectively. In addition, one woman did respond to a posted advertisement but was deemed ineligible based on her educational level. In total, 37 women were contacted for participation in this research project.

Gaining access to the lives of the study participants was often a challenge. Most telephone contacts I made followed an initial contact by a friend or coworker who "briefed" the respondent regarding the purpose of the study. While many women were intrigued by the research topic, several were hesitant about the type of questions I would ask. During the telephone contacts I responded to questions and concerns each women posed and offered my assurance that their anonymity and confidentiality would be preserved.

Sample Description

The sample consisted of 10 women who ranged in age from 35 to 48. The 5 never-married women were aged 39 to 48, with an average age of 45. Table 3.1 contains a list of their pseudonyms and ages. The 5 once-married women were aged 35 to 43, with an average age of 39. Table 3.2 contains their pseudonyms, ages, years married, years since divorce, and age at marriage. The average age of the overall sample was 42.

Table 3.1   Marital Status and Age

PSEUDONYM	MARITAL STATUS	AGE
Helen	Never Married	48
Rose	Never Married	47
Ellen	Never Married	39
Florence	Never Married	46
Betty	Never Married	43

Table 3.2   Marital Status, Age, Years Married, Years Since Divorce, Age at Marriage

PSEUDONYM	MARITAL STATUS	AGE	YEARS MARRIED	YEARS SINCE DIVORCE	AGE AT MARRIAGE
Lydia	once married	36	1	16	19
Avery	once married	43	13	11	19
Elsie	once married	38	5	12	21
Sophie	once married	41	10	13	18
Kim	once married	35	1	9	25

Although concerted effort was made to secure individuals from outside the campus community, 8 of the 10 participants were employees of a University located in southwest Virginia. Whereas 6 of the 10 women were native to the geographic region, the remaining 4 women had lived in the area a minimum of 15 years. The occupations of the women included a variety of unskilled and semi-skilled labor. The educational background of the sample ranged from high school graduate to three years of college. Table 3.3 contains a listing of participants by occupation and educational level. To protect anonymity, certain occupations have been altered, substituting a similar occupation.

Table 3.3   Marital Status, Occupation, Education

MARITAL STATUS	PSEUDONYM	OCCUPATION	EDUCATION
NM	Helen	bookkeeping, clerical	some college courses
NM	Rose	bookkeeping, clerical	2 years college
NM	Ellen	animal care	associate degree
NM	Florence	secretarial, clerical	2 years college
NM	Betty	animal care	associate degree
OM	Lydia	custodial	high school diploma
OM	Avery	bookkeeping, clerical	1 year college
OM	Elsie	hospital admissions	3 years college
OM	Sophie	bank teller; retail	some college courses
OM	Kim	bookkeeping, clerical	associate degree

With respect to race, 9 of the 10 respondents were Caucasian and 1 was African-American. Although the issue of sexual identity was not specifically addressed in the Interview Guide, one woman did identify herself as a lesbian. The sexual identities of the remaining participants were undetermined.

Instrumentation

 Based on the results of the pilot interviews, a Background Guide (see Appendix C) was constructed as a means of gathering essential demographic information while further establishing rapport between researcher and respondent. As a tool in conducting in-depth interviews, an Interview Guide (see Appendix D), derived from aspects of the life course perspective, the literature review, and the research questions, was designed and later refined through the pilot study process.

For the purposes of this study, an Interview Guide was designed, composed of open-ended questions in a semi-structured format. This Interview Guide addressed the respondents' current assessment of self while moving towards inquiry regarding core marriage beliefs, close relationships, and self-assessment of singlehood and midlife statuses, with emphasis on the temporal and processual dimensions of the life course. To ensure depth and validity of responses as well as to maintain conversational flow, interview questions were followed by prepared probes designed to encourage topic follow-up, elucidation of details and clarity in respondents words (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Pilot Study

In an attempt not to exhaust the pool of available sample respondents, the pilot interviews were conducted with two single women, one never-married and one once-married, between the ages of 30 and 35. Following the initial interview and during the process of data

transcription, I determined that the Interview Guide was too structured. After revision of the guide, a second interview was conducted and transcribed verbatim. Written reflections (see Appendix E) following the second interview proved both informative and helpful in understanding the reflexive relationship between researcher and respondent, as well as for determining inclusion of written reflections as a component of the research process.

Data Collection

The primary means of data collection was through face-to-face interviews. Initial contact with the respondent took place by telephone to assess willingness to participate, eligibility for inclusion in the study and to establish rapport. During the telephone contact I briefed the respondent on the general topic of inquiry and asked each participant to choose an interview site most conducive to her.   Of the 10 interviews, 2 occurred in the participants' home, 6 took place in my office, and the remaining 2 were conducted after hours at the participants' places of business. The interviews were conducted in two phases.

Upon meeting, I discussed the Human Subjects Form (Appendix F) with the respondent and obtained her informed consent (Appendix G) to be interviewed. I then proceeded with questions from the Background Guide to gather demographic information and to build rapport further. Following that process, I conducted a semi-structured in-depth interview which ranged in length from 40 to 90 minutes and lasted an average of one hour. At the end of each interview, I asked the respondent if she wanted to review a copy of her transcript for accuracy. All the participants declined this offer but several expressed an interest in reading the final results of the study. I recorded my researcher impressions and reflections following each interview and later condensed these notes to reveal salient themes.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. To assure anonymity of respondents, I assigned code numbers to each tape prior to transcription. Four of the 10 tapes were transcribed by a paid transcriptionist, and I transcribed the remaining 6 tapes.   After reviewing the typed interviews against the tapes for accuracy I made a copy of each transcription on computer disk.

Based on five separate readings of the data, I established response categories and applied codes to the transcripts (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Coinciding with Taylor and Bogdan's (1984) concept of emerging themes, I used response frequencies to descriptively analyze data in lieu of statistical testing.

Data analysis occurred when all interviews were completed and was guided by feminist and life course perspectives. In an effort to immerse myself in the data set, I read through each transcript twice before taking any notes. On the third reading, I began recording major themes and patterns I saw emerging from the data. I examined the transcripts a final time and compiled a list of dominant themes and recurrent motifs. This preliminary coding scheme included 86 coding categories grouped under 13 coding families. The coding families and categories represented major themes and subthemes present within the data.

Upon review of the preliminary coding scheme with my advisor, I revisited the transcripts, this time looking for ways in which to combine themes and ideas. My advisor also read a copy of the transcripts and participated in conversations with me regarding the data and the coding scheme. This process led to a revised coding scheme of 8 coding families and 30 coding categories. After further discussions, an additional coding family was added and three coding categories were collapsed, resulting in a final coding scheme of 26 coding categories

grouped by 9 coding families. Based on this final scheme, I returned to the data and recorded code numbers in the right hand margin of each transcript.

After all the transcripts were coded, I made a photocopy of each document made back up. I then took the originals of each transcript and grouped the pages according to code numbers. If more than one code appeared on a page, I made the requisite number of photocopies and separated them accordingly. This final document was 224 pages in length. Following Allen (1989), I then extracted quotations from the interviews which illustrated response categories. Categories in which substantiation of interview data were prominent are included in the data analysis.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the relevance of qualitative methodology utilized in sample selection, data collection, and data analysis. The sample was selected through networking, posted announcements, and the technique of snowballing (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). A pilot study was conducted to evaluate the Interview Guide and refine my interviewing technique. Based on the results, I modified the Interview Guide. The data were collected from in-depth interviews and analyzed on the basis of emergent themes and patterns. Supplementary data derived from the Background Guide and researcher's reflections were also part of the analysis process.