

CHOICE, CHANCE, OR CIRCUMSTANCE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY
OF NEVER-MARRIED AND ONCE-MARRIED WOMEN'S
MARRIAGE BELIEFS IN MIDLIFE

By

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(ABSTRACT)

Although previous research on singlehood has often focused on middle-class career women, little is known about the life experiences of non-career path single women. This study examined the core marriage beliefs of never-married and once-married child-free, midlife women and the ways in which those beliefs have evolved over time. The sample consisted of 10 women, 5-never married and 5 once-married, between the ages of 35 and 48. For the purposes of this inquiry, non-career path was codetermined on the basis of occupation and educational background.

The theoretical framework that guided this study combined a life course approach with a feminist perspective. Respondents were recruited through extensive networking and the sampling technique of snowballing. A qualitative methodology was employed utilizing the research strategy of in-depth interviewing. Data were analyzed on the basis of emergent themes and patterns.

This study produced 3 salient findings. First, the process of forming core marriage beliefs is similar between never-married and once-married women. Although an experience of

marrying (or an experience of **not** marrying) may change the way a woman views herself within the context of her marital beliefs, those core marital beliefs do not necessarily change. Second, whether never-married or once-married, single midlife women live ambivalent lives: acknowledging their singlehood status while simultaneously remaining hopeful of attaining a marital union. Finally, women made a clear distinction between getting married and marrying successfully. While most believed getting married was a **choice**, having a successful marriage was a result of **chance**. Despite this appraisal, the ideal of marriage remained pervasive, regardless of age or past experiences.

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