

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

#### Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore the core marriage beliefs of single, midlife women and examine the ways in which those beliefs have changed over time. Through interviews with 10 women, 5 never-married and 5 once-married, I gained insight into the ways in which marriage beliefs are formed and take root, as well as acknowledging the dual effects of time and experience in transforming, and often uprooting, those deeply held beliefs.

The original intent of this study was not to compare how similar or different marriage beliefs were between never-married and once-married women, but to examine the ways in which the absence or experience of marriage **changes** the way women interpret those beliefs. Yet through this process I found it impossible **not** to compare the experiences of women who had married with those who had not. By applying life course and feminist perspectives to the critical examination of these women's lives, the dimensions of time, context, and process were explored in a meaningful way (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). Focusing on the diversity of women's lived experiences as well as acknowledging the social meaning assigned to marriage provided a way to understand the complex yet uniquely individual nature of core marriage beliefs.

The research questions that formed the basis of this study were:

- (1) What core beliefs regarding marriage, rooted in childhood, are held by single midlife women ?
- (2) How were those beliefs created and how do women perceive that they have changed over time, from decade to decade ?

- (3) How do women perceive that core marriage beliefs shape their life course  
(e.g., personal relationships, work careers, family relationships) ?
- (4) In what ways do women perceive that an experience of marriage alters or  
reinforces those beliefs ?

## Discussion

### Salient Findings

Through the research strategy of in-depth interviewing, three salient findings emerged: “Different but Similar,” “Ambivalent Lives,” and “Embeddedness of Marriage.” In a fashion similar to what previous qualitative researchers have done (Carolan, 1995; Farnsworth, 1994; Wilcox, 1997), the convergence of research questions, coding categories, and salient findings are depicted in Table 5.4. Elaboration of the final coding category, “Reflections on the Research Experience,” follows a discussion of the salient findings.

Table 5.4 Research Questions Keyed to Codes and Findings

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	CODING CATEGORIES *	SALIENT FINDINGS **
1. What are core marriage beliefs ?	100s 300s 400s	1 3
2. How formed and changed over time ?	100s 300s-500s 800s	1 2 3
3. How beliefs shape individual's life course ?	200s 500s-700s 900s	1 3
4. Does marital experience alter or reinforce beliefs ?	500s 700s 800s	1 2 3

\* 100s Mystique of Marriage  
 200s Realities for Single Women in Midlife  
 300s Childhood Memories  
 400s Family Messages  
 500s Perspectives from the Never-Married and Once-Married  
 600s Growing Up but not Necessarily Growing Older  
 700s Surviving Stigmas, Living with Loss, Coping with Loneliness  
 800s Letting Go of the Fantasy of Marriage, but Hanging onto the Dream  
 900s The Research Experience

\*\* 1 Different but Similar  
 2 Ambivalent Lives  
 3 Embeddedness of Marriage

Different but similar. Exploring core marriage beliefs of never-married and once-married women produced a strikingly similar snapshot of the ways in which beliefs were formed and then shaped across time. Yet there were diverse experiences within the context of these shared beliefs -- some highly personal and some individually unique. For these 10 women the theme of being the same, but different, was mirrored throughout this study.

Focusing on the experiences of women with different marital histories emphasized the heterogeneity and diversity of change across time (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). While both groups

of women shared similar core beliefs that “marriage was wonderful” and “marriage would solve every problem,” the way in which those beliefs changed across time differed. For those who were once-married, an experience of marriage often tempered a woman’s core beliefs or changed the way in which a woman viewed herself within the context of those beliefs. For women who never-married, an absence of marriage led to changes in marital beliefs through a combination of individual life experiences as well as observations of the marriages of those around them.

Within the context of midlife, fewer differences between once-married and never-married women emerged. One explanation for this could be that 8 of the 10 women did not consider themselves to be in midlife. Another could be that the construction of midlife is embedded within a series of life events (Baruch & Brooks-Gunn, 1984), many of which revolve around motherhood. Since all of these women are child-free the differences they shared were minimal. For nearly all of the women, the stage of life in which they located themselves was separate from the commonly defined stage of midlife, and their marital beliefs reflected that, both in the way they saw themselves as potential marriage candidates as well as in their perceptions of still being “young enough to marry.”

Ambivalent lives. As women spoke of their experiences as either lifelong single persons or formerly married women, the theme of ambivalence emerged. Evident in their discourse was a recognition of both the advantages as well as the disadvantages of being married or single, that is, their satisfaction with singlehood yet their desire for marriage. Gordon (1994) found that “a woman’s social and societal position is *ambivalent* if it is not mediated through some reference point besides herself” (p. 134). Because of their dubious status, single women hover just beyond the boundaries of the family: neither fully attached nor totally disconnected.

Ambivalence towards marital status was reflected in the following ways: “I like being by myself, but I also like to share,” “I wouldn’t mind a relationship, but I’m set in my ways,” and “I’m okay with being single, but I’d like to marry again.” Although women may experience positive feelings regarding their singlehood, they are often considered “off-time” and “out of sync” (Elder, 1985) in terms of their contemporaries. Women who do not marry still feel social pressure to explain their singlehood (Gordon, 1994) or as Florence noted “justify why I’m not out looking for a man.” This disparity between *what is* and *what should be* can be a source of tension and conflict leading to ambivalent feelings.

Because of the societal expectation to marry, singlehood is often considered a temporary state (O’Connor, 1992). Participants spoke of “being hopeful” of marriage despite the fact that they had no current romantic involvement. An exception to this was Betty, whose ambivalence was apparent in her identification as a single woman despite her six-year involvement with a man who resided in another town.

Embeddedness of marriage. As participants spoke of the ways in which their marriage beliefs were formed, it was apparent that these beliefs were deeply embedded in the strands of each woman’s life. These beliefs were not viewed as separate or outside the individual; rather they were internalized, helping to define who the individual was. For women, associations with marriage remained tied to self-worth and a sense of identity. When identity is linked to family affiliation (Brammer et al., 1982), failure to marry or failure to stay married results in a form of identity crisis. Comments such as, “What’s wrong with me ?” or “Why aren’t I like everyone else ?” reflect this reality.

Another example of the embeddedness of marriage was evident in the lives of Avery, Elsie and Sophie, three once-married women who wanted to remain married, despite unhappy

or unhealthy marital experiences. While marriage is considered a grounding to normal family life (Chandler, 1991) failure in marriage is often stigmatized. For two of these women, an experience of divorce was new to their immediate and extended families and “the hardest thing they ever had to do.”

The language of statuses was also tied to the embeddedness of marriage. Many of the women in the study articulated their feelings regarding the labels of “single,” “divorced,” and “never-married.” There were definite negative associations linked with the terms “divorced” and “never-married” and more favorable ones with the phrase “single.” The socially created meanings assigned to these labels demonstrated the connection between marital status and a woman’s sense of identity.

#### Reflections on the Research Experience

A valuable component of the research process was a journal in which I recorded my thoughts, feelings, observations, and impressions following each interview. It was through this process that I developed a deeper understanding and a greater appreciation for the relationship between researcher and researched (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). It was often when the tape recorder had been turned off that I learned the most from the women I interviewed. Our curiosity about each other’s lives was mutual. While the tape was turned on, it was I who wondered aloud, asking questions and seeking to gain knowledge and understanding about women whose lives’ were similar to, yet different from mine. Yet when the tape recorder stopped, it was I who answered the questions, revealing pieces of my life and sharing experiences from my own story as a once-married woman.

As I listened to each woman share personal and private aspects of her life, sensitive issues emerged. As I recorded my feelings and impressions, I struggled with this new-found

knowledge. Would I be able to present this information in a way that was both true to my data *and* respectful of the women who lived it ? What information was necessary to leave in ? What information should I leave out ?

As we engaged in the process of research together I became more and more cognizant of my responsibility to the women I studied. At various points in the interview process I would hear comments like, “I hope I’m not too different from the other women you’ve talked to, “ or “ You’ll probably think I’m crazy if I tell you this.” Through these statements it became apparent to me that many of the women were seeking validation, not only for their thoughts, but also for their lives. Several of the women wanted me to reassure them that they were “normal,” that their experiences were the experiences that other women lived and shared. I was careful to assure them that while their experiences were unique, the journey they traveled was shared by others. Through this reflexive exchange I was able to examine my own life, addressing my needs for validation while connecting with the women who shared theirs. I was as Collins (1991) describes, “an outsider within” (p. 35).

### Conclusions

Exploring the ways in which core marriage beliefs are formed and evolve over time provides a deeper understanding of the meaning and process of marriage and how individuals grow up learning to create and define it within their own terms (Scanzoni et al., 1989). Although marriage holds a variety of meanings, marriage in our society is intrinsically linked with many women’s sense of identity. This is apparent in the ambivalence women express regarding their singlehood status versus their desire to marry. Chandler (1991) noted that women “judge their lives in relation to partnerships” (p. 126), yet, in spite of this reality,

women harbor few misconceptions about the ease or difficulty of creating and maintaining a meaningful relationship.

The single women in this study made a clear distinction between the act of getting married and being married successfully. If marriage is a social imperative and women are cognizant that a successful marriage is rare, then how do women integrate a sense of self within the context of a marital relationship that is less than ideal or outside the context of a marital relationship that has yet to occur? Although the answer to this question is independently unique and complex based on personal experience, the process of redefining self through creating new family roles and rewriting life scripts to fit individual stories illustrated some of the ways that single women defined themselves apart from a marital relationship.

#### Limitations

A limitation of this study was also one of the difficulties I faced in conducting it: the challenge of gaining access to participants. Throughout the data collection process, I became dependent on others to “pave my way,” to afford me access to the lives and thoughts of the women I wished to interview. Yet, even with this segue, several potential respondents I contacted were both wary and apprehensive. They were suspicious of me and my interest in their lives. Being better able to bridge the social and educational gap that existed between myself and these women may have added to the overall richness and diversity of the sample.

Another drawback to the study was that 8 of the 10 participants shared a similar work background; they were all employees of a University located in southwest Virginia. I am uncertain what, if any, impact this had on the results of the study. Does working in a



University setting contribute to the alienation of workers in non-professional jobs ? Or, does working in this particular type of setting foster a sense of worth and self-appreciation ?

The absent or invisible sexual lives of many of the respondents may also have been a limitation to this study, but this dilemma of the missing discourse of sexuality has also been noted by other researchers studying never-married women (Allen, 1994; Simon, 1987; Taylor & Rupp, 1991). Central to this research was the focus on midlife women's core marriage beliefs. Because there is often disparity between what individuals say and what they do (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), gathering more detailed information regarding dating experiences, intimate relationships, and ways of expressing sexuality may provide an important critical dimension to the understanding of an individual's beliefs about marriage.

#### Considerations for Future Research

One of the challenges encountered in designing this research project was defining the parameters of the study and grappling with an understanding of the term "non-career path." For the purposes of this inquiry, non-career path single women were defined as those employed in non-managerial occupations with less than a 4 year college degree. A direction for future study might be to replicate this project with single women raised in working-class families who also occupy traditional working-class employment positions.

Another recommendation would be to follow up with the women in this original study on a periodic basis. This would allow for a greater level of rapport to develop between researcher and respondent as well as offer a valuable opportunity to explore further the process of how beliefs are transformed or reinforced across time. Additionally, the manner in which those beliefs "played out" in the context of an individual's life path could also be examined.

Intrinsic to the present research is the notion of diversity. A suggestion for future research would be to broaden both the size and the demographics of the sample to allow for a wider range of life experiences. Although this study focused on the marriage beliefs of single women, of additional interest might be a comparison of the marriage beliefs of single, divorced, widowed, and married women within the context of middle age. A further line of inquiry would be to examine the role of gender in the formation and transformation of marital beliefs by exploring the life experiences of single, midlife men.

#### Implications for Practice

An explicit intent of this study was to attend to the emancipation and empowerment of women's lives by conducting research **for** women (Smith, 1987). By focusing on single, midlife women there was a tendency to "separate out" the experiences of those, that on the surface, appeared different. Although this process was helpful in developing a clearer understanding of individual lives there was inherent danger that delineating between married and single women would emphasize difference in experience rather than diversity. This research was not designed to pathologize or glorify singlehood or marriage, but to understand and validate the connectedness that **all** women share to marriage, regardless of their life choices or life situations.

Whether once-married or never-married, women's marriage beliefs changed them through the ways they viewed themselves, their relationships, and their place in the world. Dealing with issues of singlehood requires a thoughtful understanding of the embeddedness of marriage as well as a deep appreciation for the "invisible strengths," e.g., coping, adapting and redefining, that single women demonstrate in their construction of meaningful lives. This

knowledge is useful not only for family practitioners intervening in the lives of single women but also for educators teaching about the multiplicity and diversity of family experience.

### Summary

Examining the core marriage beliefs of never-married and once-married single, midlife women provided insight and understanding into the process of how beliefs are formed and transformed across time. In spite of differences in marital histories, women shared similarities in the way their beliefs were created and shaped. Experiencing singlehood while being hopeful of marriage contributed to feelings of ambivalence regarding marital status. Despite this fact, the ideal of marriage remained strong, regardless of age or past experience. An important component of the research process was the reciprocal and reflexive relationship between researcher and participants. Out of this exchange emerged an increased understanding and sensitivity to the issues and life experiences of single women. This process, in turn, changed the researcher, in both perceptible as well as imperceptible ways.