

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

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

Whether on-time, delayed, repeated, or never-occurring, marriage leaves its indelible fingerprint on all women's lives. Although elusive in definition, the family defines not only the lives of those within it, but also the experiences of those outside it (Barrett & McIntosh, 1982). Despite a rise in the proportion of single persons in the United States since the 1950s (Gordon, 1994), singleness is still considered a "minority phenomenon" (O'Connor, 1992, p. 92). Women who relinquish the roles of wife and mother are often viewed as social anomalies (Gordon, 1994). Consequently, singlehood as a concept is inherently sown with the seeds of deviancy, while marriage, in turn, blossoms with the fruit of normality.

Given the strong social imperative towards marriage coupled with the negative associations of remaining single, it is not surprising that the experience of being single challenges the conventional construct of what a woman should be (Chandler, 1991; Chasteen, 1994; Peterson, 1981). As Burnley and Kurth (1992) suggested, midlife may be a time during which women without husbands and children either accept lifelong singlehood or actively seek marriage. Based on this assumption, the purpose of this study was to examine the central or core beliefs regarding marriage espoused by women who identify themselves as single and in midlife. Of particular interest was the ways in which these beliefs have evolved over time and the manner in which they played out in the life paths of never-married and once-married midlife women.

Rationale for the Study

Although single women represent one of the “fastest growing life-stage populations” (Lewis & Moon, 1997, p. 116), they “remain remarkable in their invisibility” (Chandler, 1991, p. 16). Singlehood, however permanent or temporary, is typically considered a stage; a metaphoric way station before marriage, between marriages, and after widowhood (Barkas, 1980; O’Connor, 1992). This context posits singlehood as the unavoidable route to the desired destination of marriage. Given that women’s identities are undeniably intertwined with wifehood and motherhood (Allen, 1989; Chandler, 1991), this dichotomy ignores the enduring reality that for all women, being single is less an issue of where they are, and more an issue of who they are. Normatively defined as a social location, singlehood is embodied as a form of personal identity.

The ideology of marriage shapes and molds the lives of women, not by “category but by degree” (Chandler, 1991, p. 2). Single women are often categorized by their type of non-marriage, and further defined in terms of their degree of connectedness to men. This delineation is apparent not only in the lives of women who never marry, but also in the lives of previously married women who carry a heritage of marriage (Barkas, 1980; Chandler, 1991). Proof of this heritage is evident in the way women’s life course decisions have been, and continue to be, centered around the presence of men, and how the legacy of former marriage follows women into new relationships or future partnerships (Chandler, 1991).

Proclaimed as the “latest life stage to be discovered” (Skolnick, 1991, p. 161) due to longer life spans and expectations of increased productivity throughout the middle years, society is just beginning to grasp the complexity of female midlife development (Apter, 1995). For women whose lives intersect at the point of singlehood and middle age, this complexity

takes on a unique meaning (Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Chandler, 1991; Gordon, 1994; Simon, 1987). Single women in their mid-30s to mid-50s must address the biological, psychological, and social issues relative to aging, but do so outside the parameters of marriage and the family (Schwartzberg, Berliner, & Jacob, 1995).

Overshadowed numerically by the married members of their cohort, single women may be less distinct, but nonetheless significant. Heterogeneous with respect to sexual identity, social class, race and ethnicity, single women command not only a voice, but a face (Buunk & van Driel, 1989). Attempts to understand and embrace the diverse and varied experiences of single women pushes the familial envelope by spotlighting singlehood as a viable and positive life path for women, throughout all or parts of their adult lives (Allen, 1989; Anderson & Stewart, 1994).

Theoretical Framing

In hopes of hearing individual voices and visualizing distinct faces of midlife single women, this study was fashioned from a feminist perspective. Referred to as a “mode of questioning, an orientation and set of commitments” (Young, 1997, p. 3), feminism directs attention to the effects of social institutions and ideologies on women which both oppress and disadvantage with movement towards the goal of emancipation and empowerment (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1991). A feminist perspective posits that women’s experiences are both valid and valuable; rich in complexity and depth; personal, yet embedded within the broader social landscape (Thompson, 1992).

Operating in tandem with this perspective, a life course approach was also woven into the fabric of this study. Considered deviant and marginal (Chasteen, 1994; Gordon, 1994; Simon, 1987), single women are off-time (Elder, 1985) in terms of the normative female life

course. This rescheduling or postponement of life events has an enduring impact, not only on the future of individual transitions, but on the way family roles, identities, and expectations are shaped and modified, representing a form of social adjustment (Elder, 1985). Departing from the path of the normative female life course (Uhlenberg, 1974), single women travel a different road, one under a constant state of construction, with few recognizable signs or established landmarks.

Sensitizing Concepts

With respect to qualitative research, the process of sensitizing concepts provides a “general sense of reference” and “a direction along which to look” (Blumer, 1969, p. 148) in helping to give personal form and flavor to ideas subject to multiple interpretations. For the purposes of this study, the concepts that follow are defined in these ways.

Core beliefs refers to those ingrained ideas (e.g., hopes, dreams, messages) about marriage, rooted in childhood, which dictate to each woman how and what marriage should be. Application of the life course assumptions of social and cultural context (Baber & Allen, 1992; Elder & Rockwell, 1976; Uhlenberg, 1974) as well as social meaning (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965) to the concept of core beliefs, provides clarity in understanding the link between the life event of marriage (social institution) and the socially-created and interpreted meaning (social meaning) assigned to it by individuals and families.

Marriage is a multi-layered concept holding multiple meanings on a variety of levels. Marriage has been associated with romantic love, personal happiness, female fulfillment, mutual support, and intimacy (Chandler, 1991; Lopata, 1987). Marriage has also been deemed a rite of passage (Baber & Allen, 1992), a necessary step towards adulthood (Schwartzberg et al., 1995). As a social institution, marriage normatively regulates sexuality, procreation and

property, conferring “legitimacy on people and relationships” (Young, 1997, p. 103). In the context of this study, marriage is defined as a socially-sanctioned legal union between one man and one woman.

Never-married is used to represent woman who have not entered into a legal contract of marriage for a variety of reasons: lack of eligible partners, satisfaction with singlehood or dissatisfaction with marriage, careers that preclude marriage, physical or psychological impairments, and gay or lesbian lifestyles for which legal union is socially prohibited (Gordon, 1994; Stein, 1981).

Once-married is used to denote women who have been married only once. Barkas (1980) noted that despite endurance or brevity of marriage, “separated and divorced people will always be considered once-married” (p. 70). Departure from marriage does not remove all marital ties, but leaves women with a heritage of marriage, regardless if children were a product of the union (Chandler, 1991).

Although the boundaries of *midlife* vary, the chronological ages assigned to this life stage range from 30 to 65 (Long & Porter, 1984). In the context of this study, midlife was more narrowly defined as ages 35 to 55. Based on the assumption that age 30 represents a marital or transitional turning point for women (Donelson, 1977; Stein, 1981), adopting age 35 as a beginning point assumes women have had time to consider their singleness (Gordon, 1994) while also allowing for a greater accumulation of life experience relative to marriage. Research on midlife women has been problematic in that there are differing markers and life events within different disciplines used to delineate this developmental period; these multiple markers overlap “conceptually, methodologically and descriptively,” (Brooks-Gunn & Kirsh, 1984, p. 14), lending a subjective assessment of what midlife is (Lachman & James, 1997) . In

this study, midlife as a developmental stage is defined loosely and interpreted subjectively in the words of each participant.

In this inquiry, *non-career path* represents the intersection of occupation and education. Criteria for determination of non-career path status included non-managerial occupations (e.g., clerical, service, factory) and educational levels prior to completing a 4 year college degree.

Research Direction

Although most research that focuses on single women in midlife draws attention to women in the middle and upper classes, little is known about the experiences of non-career path single women. As Bird and West (1987) noted, women's lives appear to be dominated by two events; marriage and motherhood. If women's dreams, which focus on finding a special partner and maintaining a relationship dramatically shape the organization of their adult lives (Mercer, Nichols, & Doyle, 1988), then how have the hopes, dreams and messages surrounding marriage shaped the experiences of never-married and once-married midlife women? In other words, if marriage is showcased as the featured act on the life course stage, then how does singlehood play?

The following research questions guided this inquiry:

- (1) What are the core or central beliefs regarding marriage held by single midlife women, rooted in childhood?
- (2) How were those core beliefs created and how have they changed over time, from decade to decade?
- (3) How do core marriage beliefs shape an individual's life course (e.g., personal relationships, work careers, family relationship)?
- (4) In what ways does an experience of marriage alter or reinforce those beliefs?