INTRODUCTION

The personal is political… One of the first things we discover (in women's consciousness raising) groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution (Hanisch, 1970)[1].

Research is often motivated by experience that challenges orthodoxies or, to put it another way, "to challenge the lies (psychology) peddles about them" (Parker, 2002, p. 140). That is, the personal becomes of intense academic interest. This project was no different. Its impetus was personal experience of societal discrimination against the single woman or, rather, the sole individual. After being refused accommodation offers, a holiday service, and a pre-theatre dinner special because these were not available to single customers, and suffering by exclusion through two social events where I was the only unaccompanied guest, I began wondering about the impact of such systemic disadvantage on the well-being of the single woman. After all, social discrimination is associated with damaging affects for affected individuals (e.g., Baumeister, 1998; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Schooler, 2007) although my responses were more irritation and protest than acceptance of disadvantage.

1.1   Preliminaries

A preliminary search of psychological literature found little relating to the effect of systemic discrimination of the single woman. With few exceptions, what there was indicated her marital status was problematic, verging on the pathological. Clearly, a closer look at the experiences of the single woman, her place in the social hierarchy, and the issues to do with her marital status was indicated. The exceptions to the general approach taken in the literature offered a valuable paradigm in which to base this study: that is, the ideological framework that privileges romantic couples and disadvantages the romantically independent, through the prism of social constructionism.

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[1]   This paper may be found at www.carolhanisch.org/index.html

Social constructionists believe our worlds are made real through discursive practices that both express and suppress the boundaries of our knowledge. That is, they are interested in "the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live" (K. Gergen, 1985, p. 266). Social constructionists explicate the role of language with its shared meanings and understandings in constructing cultural "reality" (Burr, 1999). To examine the experience of single women, therefore, was to analyse the discourse that shapes that experience. This is because a problem, in this approach, lies not with individuals but in the space where relations are mediated between people through language (Kenwood, 1999).

My initial interest was in how single women manage the discursive environment in which they are positioned negatively. According to the literature, they should be weighed down by the consequences of their marital status but this was not apparent in the independent women I knew in my workplace, neighbourhood or social circle. From my preliminary reading, I became interested in the science that supported the negativity around single women and the contrast between that and the rich singles studies area which contests the negativity, observing that they seemed to inhabit parallel literatures. Certainly the work validating diversity in adult relational arrangements had made little impact on established theory about the impact of marital status on health and wellbeing. I found many comments such as "specialists generally attribute the stigma of singleness to a 'pervasive ideology of marriage and family' stubbornly residing in both popular consciousness and social science literature" (R. Bell & Yans, 2008, p. 1) that offered no systematic evidence of such pervasive ideology[2], a gap I thought should be filled. Consequently, the below objectives, with their inspirations acknowledged, were devised to guide my project.

1.2   Thesis Organisation

The project's objectives are to (i) contribute to a feminist psychology of singleness through critical discourse analysis (Reynolds, 2008; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003); (ii) examine the mechanisms by which cultural constructions shape the socio-psychological experience of women living single (DePaulo & Morris, 2004); and (iii)

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[2]   A notable exception is the work of DePaulo and Morris (2005) that comprehensively exposes the presence of ideological bias in science.

critique the role of psychological theory in legitimising cultural constructions (Burman, 1996; DePaulo, 2007a; Parker, 2002). To achieve these objectives, I will examine both public and private discourse, the sites of prescriptive (*should*) and descriptive (*experience*) norms (Castro & Batel, 2008), about single women.

In Chapter 2, I consider the function of ideology for social organisation, nominating *patriarchy* as the legitimiser of family and national structures instituted to create and protect masculine privilege. By patriarchy I mean social structure built on masculine values and ideals around power, hierarchy, asset accumulation and management, and their associated gendered privileges. I also discuss some of the mechanisms that enable ideological adaptation to potentially threatening change.

My methodology is detailed in Chapter 3. The overall project design was to interrogate public discourse about single women through mass media and academic texts (so to examine the mechanisms that shape their cultural construction, including psychology's role in that construction) and private discourse through women's narratives of their lived experience. This chapter explains the theoretical base of the project with specific reference to the methodological Foucauldian approach that is interested in the power relations that re/create social institutions, their evolution, and resist the subjectification of social members.

An integral component of critical discourse analysis is elucidation of the genealogy of the subject of interest. The discussion of ideology in Chapter 2 is continued in Chapter 4, in the context of the discursive genealogy of women's relational independence from the earliest artefactual records. In Chapter 5, the focus turns to the Australian experience since European settlement and concludes with contemporary demographic data profiling women's relational status.

Chapters 6 to 8 report the three studies that comprise this project. I identify the elements of public discourse that contain the social positions available to single women and describe the strategies undertaken by women to negotiate their positions in this discourse. I begin with the public discourse in generalist newspapers, sampling, through framing analysis, the years 1999 and 2009. More conventional discourse analytic techniques are used to identify the repertoires women used in

Chapter 7 to talk about their identity as single women and the ways in which they negotiate their positioning by public discourse. A similar technique is applied in Chapter 8 to texts constructed from content in academic textbooks, where I locate my critique of psychology's discursive construction of the single woman.

In Chapter 9, I hold myself accountable to the three objectives that guide my project before considering the millennia-long struggle of power relations around women's independence. I review my methodology and its limitations before nominating future research directions that are suggested by the project. Finally, I reflect on the course of this project, and its unexpected directions that shaped the narrative of this thesis. My concluding comments are about the implications of my findings for single women's identity construction, and for psychology's discourses of "truth".

1.3   Terminology

At this point, I will introduce a terminological innovation devised for this project to discursively neutralise ideological values weighting the power relations of women's marital status.

Married is the default position of adults in Western culture, idealised as the fundamental unit of social organisation, with those not so engaged described in a range of deviations from that norm, such as the categories used by government agencies for demographic data collection. *Single*, *divorced*, *separated* and *widowed* measure distance from the marital norm analogous with widowed at one standard deviation to single at three. Social classification is a political act (Beattie, 2007), creating divisions that become embodied in populations, weighted by values that situate demographic groups within the body politic. Discourse about the single, then, begins by their being labelled different and deficient (DePaulo, 2007a).

A category unlisted in official marital demographic data is that of *sexual orientation* so that gay, lesbian and transsexual people are classified only by normative heterosexual marital status. This means that always-lesbian and those whose homosexual relationships follow heterosexual practice are likely to be grouped into one of the deviations from the marital norm, in 2012 still not formally available to homosexual women, so formalising their marginalisation albeit obliquely. While homosexual women's experience would have been welcomed to this project,

volunteering participants in Study Two were all heterosexual. This, and the nature of much of the literature reviewed (e.g., wellbeing studies, adult human development psychology) and method (e.g., use of official demographic data collection categories as keywords to both capture data for analysis and link the resulting discussion) meant that the project's focus is on heterosexual women's experience.

The "single" of this thesis title encompasses marital categories of relational independence: the always-single and the single-again who are women who have been widowed, separated or divorced. While single people share the interdependencies common to navigating our social worlds, they generally have sole responsibility for their private arrangements, including for the day-to-day raising of dependents. Coupled people share a dyadic intimacy and an interdependent complementarity (Brehm, Miller, Perlman, & Campbell, 2002; Hazan & Zeifman, 1999; Snyder & Cantor, 1998) even though they may act independently in the public sphere, or live apart.

Accordingly, for the rest of the thesis, single and coupled women will be categorised as independent and interdependent, respectively, except where there is specific attention to a single category. When relational status *per se* is discussed, the term in/ter/dependence will be used. The rationale for this is both to introduce value-neutrality to identified relational status and to by-pass the terminological clumsiness of specifying categories of singleness throughout the text.