"I'm a Loser, I'm Not Married, Let's Just All Look at Me": Ever-Single Women's Perceptions of Their Social Environment
Elizabeth A. Sharp and Lawrence Ganong
Journal of Family Issues 2011 32: 956 originally published online 20 January 2011
DOI: 10.1177/0192513X10392537
The online version of this article can be found at: http://jfi.sagepub.com/content/32/7/956

Additional services and information for Journal of Family Issues can be found at:
Email Alerts: http://jfi.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://jfi.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Citations: http://jfi.sagepub.com/content/32/7/956.refs.html
“I’m a Loser, I’m Not Married, Let’s Just All Look at Me”: Ever-Single Women’s Perceptions of Their Social Environment

Elizabeth A. Sharp¹ and Lawrence Ganong²

Abstract

Despite growing numbers of singles, the idealization of marriage and child rearing remains strong, pervasive, and largely unquestioned. Guided by life course perspective, the purpose of this article was to examine familial and societal messages women receive when not married by their late 20s to mid-30s. Using descriptive phenomenological method, the authors conducted 32 interviews with 10 middle-class, ever-single women. Respondents’ social environments were characterized by pressure to confirm to the conventional life pathway. Pressure was manifested in women feeling both highly visible and invisible. Specifically, women’s social worlds included (a) awareness of the changing reality as they became older (e.g., changing pool of eligible men, pregnancy risks), (b) reminders that they were on a different life path (i.e., visibility) through others’ inquiries and “triggers” (e.g., weddings), and (c) displacement in their families of origin (i.e., invisibility). The authors discuss the visible/invisible paradox, which appeared to be pronounced at their life stage.

¹Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, USA
²University of Missouri–Columbia, Columbia, MO, USA

Corresponding Author:
Elizabeth A. Sharp, Human Development & Family Studies, Texas Tech University, Box 1230, Lubbock, TX 79409-1230, USA
Email: elizabeth.sharp@ttu.edu
Keywords

single women, social environment, SNAF ideology, life course, phenomenology

Compared with previous historical time periods in the United States, growing numbers of individuals are marrying later or not marrying at all. These trends, combined with high divorce rates, have resulted in a growing number of adults who will live a considerable portion of their adult lives as singles (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Americans now spend more years of their adult lives unmarried than married. Given such trends, it seems reasonable to speculate that stigma attached to being single would be minimal or nonexistent. Recent empirical investigations, however, suggest that this is not the case (e.g., Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2007).

In fact, DePaulo and Morris (2005) have argued that singles face a particular form of stigma and discrimination, termed singlism. Singlism reflects a pervasive ideology of marriage and family, manifested in everyday thoughts, interactions, laws, and social policies that favor couples over singles. The ideology of marriage and family has been described as the unquestioned belief that everyone wants to (and will) get married. Assumptions accompanying “singlism” are that a romantic, sexual partnership is the only way to achieve intimacy, and thus, individuals who have a partner are happier, more adjusted, and lead more fulfilling lives than do single people (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Other scholars also have drawn attention to the ideology of marriage and family through theoretical considerations based on social constructionism. Nelson (2006) has argued that “family”—the Standard North American Family (SNAF; first marriage nuclear family with children; Smith, 1993)—is a social artifact, much like “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 2002). That is, SNAF reflects a ubiquitous discourse, shaping and molding the ways in which individuals think about and enact kinship. The construction sets boundaries, creates divisions, and positions SNAF as natural (Nelson, 2006; Smith, 1993). Oswald, Blume, and Marks (2005) make a similar argument, adding to the complexity by considering distinct and intersecting ways in which gender, sexuality, and families are constructed, reinforced, and repeatedly performed.

Women, when compared with men, experience more pronounced pressure to confirm to the SNAF ideology (DePaulo & Morris, 2005) and this may be especially true after 9/11, when mainstream messages strongly promoted traditional ideologies of gender and families (Faludi, 2007). Accepted notions of femininity remain based on women having a connection with a man (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003) to protect and care for her. Such constructions reflect Rich’s (1980) argument that “compulsory heterosexuality” is a
controlling force in women’s lives. Compulsory heterosexuality positions the heterosexual romantic relationship within a patriarchal context as natural, normative, and the most desirable of all relationships. Furthermore, the dictate of motherhood and the coupling of marriage and motherhood further encourage women to enter into marriage (Hays, 2004).

Despite such ideologies, increasing proportions of women are single, with 41% of women aged 25 to 29 years and 24% of women aged 30 to 34 years having never married (U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2007). Herein lies the conflict: The demographic shifts in women’s marital and childbearing patterns suggest that individual life pathways are acceptable but, at the same time, women remain restricted (and face stigma and discrimination) in a society that promotes marriage and motherhood as central to women’s identities. The disconnection between actual behaviors (i.e., increased numbers of singles) and the SNAF ideology has been identified as a “cultural lag” (Byrne & Carr, 2005). Considering structural conditions, being married by age 25 is consistent with both (a) the normative pattern (i.e., more than 55% of women are married by age 25 and more than 75% of women have married by age 34) and (b) with SNAF ideology. As such, single women older than 25 years are likely to experience a “deficit” identity (defined by lack of being married; Reynolds & Taylor, 2005).

Indeed, stigma single individuals face may vary based on their age. That is, at certain times in the life course, being single is more or less acceptable than at other times. Drawing on principles from life course perspective, consideration of ontological, generational, and historical time simultaneously is instructive (Elder, 1995). Because of the age-restricted time limits on bearing children (ontological time), and the social timetables of childbearing (e.g., the mean age of women having their first child is 25.2 years; Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2007—historical time), heightened pressure is likely to accompany the age period of the late 20s and early 30s for never-married women. White (1992), for example, found that single women who felt the most stigma were between the ages of 25 and 35 years; younger singles did not report the same level of stigma. For younger adults, being single is more normative because the majority of individuals are single before age 25. Furthermore, Morris, DePaulo, Hertel, and Taylor (2008) found that negative stereotypes were stronger for singles older than 40 years than they were for singles younger than 25 years, although negative stereotypes also were present for singles younger than 25 years.

Women older than 35 years tend to be content with singlehood (Allen, 1989; Dalton, 1992; Davies, 2003; Gordon, 1994) and do not express as much ambiguity and dissatisfaction as do single women in their 20s and 30s.
It is important to point out that many studies on ever-single women are retrospective, asking older women to reflect on their life courses (e.g., Allen, 1989; Dalton, 1992). Although Davies (2003) did not interview older women, the research was based on 30 individuals (15 men and 15 women) aged between 38 to 57 years. Findings indicated that the respondents had already gone through transitions and discussed their adjustment to singlehood. One participant reflecting back explained, “I think in your 30s, you’re still in that limbo—that you’re not settled” (Davies, 2003, p. 347). In the present study, we were interested in women experiencing the actual “limbo” time as it is lived. Consistent with Davies (2003), other research has indicated that women in their 20s and 30s appear to struggle with their single status (e.g., Byrne, 2003; Cole, 1999; Sharp & Ganong, 2007) and are more hopeful and open to marry than are women aged in their mid-30s and older (Ferguson, 2000; South, 1991; Tucker, 2000). Research on older women and divorced women suggest that they are better adjusted to their single status than are younger, never-married women (Lewis & Moon, 1997). Therefore, the focus of the present study was never-married women in their late 20s and early 30s—the “limbo” time.

Another important ontological and historical time consideration is childbearing. There is evidence that never-married, college-educated, White women may wait until their mid-30s to have a child outside of marriage (Bock, 2000). Bock investigated 26 single mothers by choice, all of whom were White and middle to upper class, and the majority were older than 35 years when they had children. The single mothers indicated that age played a prominent factor in their decision to have a baby. Sentiment expressed indicated that waiting until midlife . . . marks a woman as having paid her dues to some extent, both on the work front (having built a career and developed financial security) and on the social front (having held out for Mr. Right as long as possible). (Bock, 2000, p. 71)

Less is known, however, about never-married women’s social worlds, which would capture the interplay among historical, generational, and ontological time (Elder, 1995). It would be instructive to investigate messages young single women receive from others in their environments as well as societal/cultural messages in general and how such messages are linked to their adjustment. With exceptions (e.g., Byrne, 2003; Chasteen, 1994), the focus on single women’s perceptions of their social context has largely been neglected in the literature. Byrne (2003), using a sample of single women
living in Ireland, explored the interplay between self and social identities. Women’s social identities reflected being invisible in their families, less valued than their married siblings, and knowing that their parents preferred them to be married. Women with less supportive families had less contact with their family of origin than did women with families more supportive of their single status. Chasteen (1994) explored the physical environment of single women, finding that single women experienced economic disadvantages and frequently felt scared and threatened in public spaces and engaged in behaviors to reduce risk of attack (e.g., living in places with security systems). In the present study, we examined women living in a Midwestern town in the United States and did not limit our focus of the social environment to women’s physical environment.

One way to examine the distal and proximal social environment is to focus on the “life world context” through a descriptive phenomenological investigation (Porter, 1995). According to Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, lebenswelt (life world context) is critical to understanding an individual’s experience. The life world is the taken-for-granted assumptions, behaviors, and messages in an individual’s environment, involving interactions and relationships (Porter, 1995). Focusing on the life world context allows a focus on explicit messages/signals as well uncovering subtle, covert messages, both of which act as powerful forces in individuals’ lives. The research question we investigated in the present study was the following: What is the social environment like for single women who have “missed” the transition to marriage but are still likely to marry in the future (“limbo time”—aged 28-34 years)? In particular, we examined never-married women’s perceptions of their life world context (social environment).

Method

The present study was guided by descriptive phenomenology (Husserl, 1913/1962; Porter, 1998). The purpose of descriptive phenomenology is to capture the “essence” of individual’s experience germane to a particular phenomenon. In so doing, it is thought that the researcher is able to capture a participant’s consciousness of the phenomenon of interest (i.e., phenomena of being a never-married woman between 28 and 34 years). Methodological guidelines and analysis techniques of descriptive phenomenology developed by Porter (1998) produce two distinct aspects of the phenomena of interest, (a) lived experience and (b) life world context, which is the focus of the present study. Lived experience data reflect what the participant thinks about and “does” (intentions) with the experience. Lived experience findings have been
published elsewhere (Sharp & Ganong, 2007). Life world context refers to data reflecting participants’ perceptions of their social environment, including both micro and macro levels. For example, family members, friends, and coworkers’ comments, reactions, and behaviors as well as broader messages/assumptions in culture (e.g., media, holidays) about singlehood are all considered life world context data.

**Participants**

Ten women were included in the study, although smaller samples are considered adequate for phenomenological research (Porter, 1994). It is generally understood that there is an inverse relationship between the amount of data and number of participants in qualitative work (Morse, 1998). Demographic characteristics of participants are identified in Table 1. Participants were recruited through purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in a midsize (approximately 80,000 people), Midwestern college town.

Study criteria included women who were never married, aged 28 to 34 years, child free, held a bachelor’s degree (but not pursuing an advanced degree),

**Table 1. Summary of Participants’ Demographic Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (Years)</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Previous Relationship History</th>
<th>Parents’ Marital Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Recreational therapist</td>
<td>Engaged once</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Sales insurance agent</td>
<td>Serious relationship twice</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Administrative assistant</td>
<td>Engaged once</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Cohabited once</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Health education specialist</td>
<td>Serious relationship once</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Child care instructor</td>
<td>Cohabited once</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Cohabited once</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>Cohabited once</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Engaged once</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>No serious relationship</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
White, and were not currently cohabiting or in a serious relationship with a romantic partner. The sample was limited to ages 28 to 34 because this age frame is thought to be accompanied by pronounced stigma and women may have difficulty adjusting to their single status (White, 1992) and this may be especially the case for White women. For example, Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1998) argued that White women, when compared with African American women, may be more likely to attribute being unmarried to individual deficiency rather than a structural issue (e.g., sex ratios).

We selected women who held a bachelor’s degree only (i.e., did not have an advanced degree and/or were not working on an advanced degree) because research suggests that women in poverty, when compared with middle-class women, are less likely to marry (Haskins & Shawhill, 2007) and women’s enrollment in graduate or professional school is a predictor of marrying later (Thornton, Axinn, & Teachman, 1995). In addition to the statistical patterns, there is a common assumption that women pursuing an advanced degree are “frontloading” their careers and that they are especially serious about their careers. Such assumptions may be accompanied by a qualitatively different experience than for women who started their careers immediately following college. Furthermore, contemporary mainstream media messages about single women in their late 20s and 30s are frequently targeted to White, middle-class women (e.g., Sex in the City, Bridget Jones’ Diary). Thus, the social context of middle-class, college-educated women is theoretically a qualitatively different experience from other groups. Additionally, we opted to include women not currently cohabiting because cohabitation has been found to be predictor of marriage and many women cohabiters believe that cohabitation is a step toward marriage—that is, the thinking would be that they are “on the track” to marriage (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006). We were more interested in capturing the social environment of women who are not clearly “on the track” to be married.

Procedure. The first author conducted 32 interviews (i.e., three interviews with eight participants and four interviews with two participants) over 7 months. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Second and third interviews occurred within 4 weeks of the initial interview. Participants were compensated $10 for each interview.

During semistructured interviews, respondents were asked to describe their experiences of being never married. The first question was broad, asking respondents, “As a never-married woman at age X, please describe what it is like for you.” The interviewer then probed, frequently asking about daily living, dating, friends, work, and social interactions. Subsequent interviews begin with the question, “Has anything changed since the last time we spoke?”
Consistent with descriptive phenomenology, the interview guide contained few questions so that the participant had the opportunity to more fully share her experiences, thus minimizing the researcher “imposing” preconceived ideas/parameters on participants. Additionally, following this same line of thinking, the first author “bracketed” (i.e., set aside knowledge and experiences with the phenomena of interest; Porter, 1995). Probes and subsequent interviews from each participant were used to elicit further descriptions from participants (Redden-Reitz, 1999). Emergent finding were discussed with participants during the third and fourth interviews.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis began after the first interview. Each idea was a data analysis unit (Porter, 1994). The first author first read through interviews, broadly distinguishing among irrelevant data, life world context data, and lived experience data. Irrelevant data are data not germane to the experience of being never married and not analyzed. The life world context includes data about respondents’ *social environment*, including family members, friends, coworkers, societal messages, and norms. For example, “My grandpa calls me an old maid” was considered life-world context data because it is a message from someone in the participants’ social environment. Data about the lived experience captured a participant’s thoughts, actions, and intentions. For example, “I think something is wrong with me” was considered lived experience data. For the purpose of the present article, we examined life context data only; findings related to their lived experiences are reported elsewhere (Sharp & Ganong, 2007).

After the initial classification of data, we compared and contrasted life context data by applying the following categories: elements, descriptors, and features (Porter, 1995). An *element* is the most specific aspect of the life world context. Examples of several elements included “There is a decreasing number of eligible men to date,” “The pool of eligible now includes divorced men,” and “The pool of eligibles now includes men with children.” The next level, *descriptors*, was formed by combining several elements. We looked for similarities across elements, continually asking, “How are the elements similar?” and comparing and contrasting elements and then grouping them accordingly. The aforementioned three elements were integrated into a descriptor titled “Knowing that the pool of eligible men has changed.” Finally, we compared descriptors to group similar descriptors together to create three *features*. Features are considered the broadest level of the life world context. Descriptors of “Knowing that the pool of eligible has changed,” “Losing another one: Watching
friends and others marry,” and “Acknowledging the concerns and risks of later pregnancy” were combined to create the feature “Being acutely aware of the changing reality as they age.” The other two features, (a) Being Reminded They are on a Different (Deviant) Life Path and (b) Feeling Displaced in Family of Origin, were developed in the same manner.

**Results**

Our results identify ways in which pressure to conform to the SNAF were manifested in women’s social environments (see Table 2 for a summary of the results). In revealing such manifestations, we uncovered both heightened visibility and invisibility of their social statuses of being never married and childless/free at their ages. Although messages (and desires) to live a conventional life had been present throughout their lives, the pressure to conform to SNAF appeared to be intensified at the participants’ current ages.

Consistent with SNAF, participants had expected to attend college, marry in their mid-20s, and bear children by age 30. As little girls, three participants had engaged in pretend wedding ceremonies; one woman’s mother prayed nightly for her young daughter’s future (hypothetical) husband; and “thinking marriage and children were just around the corner,” most had selected their college majors to accommodate their future (hypothetical) family. Being in their late 20s and early 30s (ontological time), however, intensified the pressure to conform to the conventional SNAF ideology. Their age heightened their awareness of the changing social reality (historical time), which included

---

**Table 2. Summary of Findings: Features and Descriptors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time is ticking: Being acutely aware of the changing reality at their age</td>
<td>Realizing that the pool of eligible men is changing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Losing another one”—watching friends and coworkers marry</td>
<td>Acknowledging risks and concerns of later pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being reminded that they are on a different (deviant) life path</td>
<td>Experiencing others’ inquiries and unsolicited advice about their marital and parental status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encountering assumptions of SNAF</td>
<td>Encountering triggers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling displaced in their families of origin</td>
<td>Violating a “natural” pattern when younger siblings marry and/or have children first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing family members’ waning interest in their romantic lives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SNAF = standard North American family.
Time Is Ticking: Being Acutely Aware of the Changing Reality at Their Age

Their ontological age conditioned their perceptions of their social environment. A salient feature of the social environment was their acute awareness of the shrinking numbers of single people and their increasing concerns regarding later pregnancy. Descriptors capturing aging in relation to their social environments included (a) realizing that the pool of eligible men is changing, (b) losing another one—watching friends and coworkers marry, and (c) acknowledging risks and concerns accompanying later pregnancy. The decreasing number of single people in their environment indicated that others around them were enacting the conventional life pathway. Contrasting to their own lives, others’ behaviors illuminated their status of being single/childless, which served to fuel feeling both visible and invisible. Their “deviant” status was made more visible while their actual experiences were largely invisible.

Acknowledging that the pool of eligible men is changing. Women were cognizant of the dwindling numbers of eligible men in their social circles. They believed that they had more options and meeting men was easier when they were in their early and mid-20s. Additionally, they realized that the pool of eligible men now comprised growing numbers of divorced men and men with children. One woman explained the situation saying:

I think once you get to be a certain age, a lot of the men I would want to go out with are already married. I’m not assuming that they are happily married or that they didn’t get married too young but they are married. So your options are to find someone younger or wait for somebody to divorce. Or the other thing is to settle for the geeks that are not married.

The aforementioned sentiment suggests a sense of being resigned to a less-than-optimal set of choices, which, in turn, was put forth as an explanation for their current single status. Over time, in response to the pool of eligible
men, all participants became increasingly more willing to date younger men and men who were divorced and had children.

*Losing another one—Watching more friends and coworkers marry.* Women also observed an increasing number of friends and others around them marrying. One woman, for example, attended 12 weddings in the past year. Other woman mentioned that they were the only single person at work and, therefore, experienced heightened visibility of their single status. One woman poignantly described her reaction to the decreasing number of singles in her circle:

> Every time, it is almost heartbreaking when someone gets serious like we are “losing one” when someone is getting a real relationship. I don’t know, sometimes I find myself wishing that everyone would stay single. I don’t want to be the last single person on earth, but it would be nice if we could be our own people.

In this data excerpt, we draw attention to the woman’s perception of a “real relationship” (marriage), suggesting that relationships outside of marriage are somehow less real. Such a sentiment reflects the SNAF ideology and, in turn, singlism.

*Acknowledging risks and concerns accompanying later childbearing.* Women were aware of their increasing risk of infertility as they aged. Because all participants preferred to have children within a marriage, they had not yet had children. They were vigilant with birth control and one woman discussed her abortion. One woman commented that she knew her “eggs were dying slowly” (Sharp & Ganong, 2007, p.837). In addition, they were concerned about genetic complications associated with having children at older ages. Another concern was being an older parent; they worried about having reduced energy, and three were especially worried about the increasing age gap between their future children and themselves with each year that passed. Two women had health problems and were uncertain if they could bear children; perhaps for this reason their concerns about the timing of children seemed less pronounced than for the other eight women in the sample.

**Being Reminded They Are on a Different (Deviant) Life Path**

Women’s heightened sense of ontological time appeared to be intensified by the ways in people in their lives and society in general emphasized age-appropriate timing of marital entry and childbearing. Women identified this as pressure to conform to the conventional pathway; the pressure was especially apparent in the attention (visibility) given to their single status. They
received messages about how they should have already married or be planning to marry in the near future and such messages suggested a “deficit identity” (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005). Salient (and frequent) messages included (a) experiencing others’ inquiries and unsolicited advice about their marital and parental statuses, (b) encountering assumptions of the ideology of marriage and family, and (c) encountering triggers.

**Experiencing inquiries and unsolicited advice.** Respondents were asked about their marital status by friends, family members, and coworkers, which served to draw explicit attention to their single status. They felt they had to explain and justify being never married at their ages. One woman described her typical encounters with others saying to her:

> You are 28, you don’t have any kids, you are not married? You are so cute and you have such a great job and you got so much going for you, I can’t understand why you can’t find someone. And I’m like, “Do you have any suggestions for me?”

Another woman explained that she received inquires about her single status:

> A lot . . . mostly men because I work with a lot of men . . . it seems like they are always wanting to know, “aren’t you married yet? Why don’t you have a man?” and stuff like that.

Again, the need to explain her current marital status is evident. Because such inquiries happened so frequently, one woman told new people—“I’m not married, I used to be engaged . . . It comes out automatically [to demonstrate that] I am not a total loser, I used to be engaged so someone used to like me.” In this way, she offered prepared, defensive remarks to counter possible negative perceptions that accompany a never-married status at her age and to avoid further questions. The felt need for such remarks is indicative of the pervasiveness of the questions/comments and the negative valence with women’s social interactions with others.

Although there were instances when respondents sought advice from friends and family, they frequently were given unsolicited directives. All the women were told (mostly by their close friends and mothers) that they were too picky in terms of the men they found attractive. They also were advised that they should relax when dating, not to try too hard to find a partner, and that they will find someone when they least expect it. One respondent was given advice by her grandmother on how to have a baby and a committed father:
My grandmother said, “Why don’t you just get married and have a baby and then you can get divorced?” I’m like, you don’t have to get married to have a kid. If I want to have a kid, if I am financially capable, I’ll just do it. That is my theory. Of course, my family doesn’t think that is the way to go. They want me to get married and then get divorced just so I could do it. I have numerous family members—cousins—that have children that weren’t married. It is bizarre the way they think.

They heard encouraging messages about their single status, as well. One woman was told by her married friends that she was “so lucky to be single” and that the participant did not “know how lucky” she has it. In some cases, women were viewed as strong. One woman told us, “Among my women friends, they picture me as this strong women, which is always a surprise, . . . I’ve been respected for it [being single].” In this data excerpt, internalized SNAF sensibility is evident in that she is always “surprised” when she learns that others perceive her being single as a symbol of strength. Other women were considered wise by some of their friends who were in unhappy marriages or who were divorced. One woman told us,

A lot of them (friends) . . . because they wish they were single and they only remember the good parts of being single. So they are like—don’t worry, don’t rush . . . so it [being single] can be a good thing.

Again, SNAF ideology may be driving the sentiment that singlehood can be positive. These data suggest that the possibility of singlehood being positive exists but it is not the default conceptualization.

*Encountering SNAF assumptions.* In addition to the explicit questions, women also experienced widely held assumptions by others that marriage is inevitable and that marriage is equated with happiness.

I think all parents . . . raise them [children] to assume that they are going to get married, I’m not sure that is a good thing or a bad thing. . . . Like I heard a mother talk about “when my daughter gets married” and makes it sound like it’s a given. Nowadays in society I am not sure what percentage of a given it would be. . . . I think sometimes people make comments “I can’t believe they are not married yet” . . . so people don’t realize they are saying that. . . . People just assume you are going to be happier when you get married. They want the best for their kids so they assume that you would be happier if you are married. But, I think,
hopewfuly what motivates them [parents] is what makes you happy. And I assume they realize that you can be happy without being married.

Additionally, one woman explained how her financial advisor did not know how to respond to her because she was single and did not have children. She told us,

When I go to my financial planner, they don’t know how to approach that or that seems a little different too because they always assume [SNAF, by asking]: What are your goals? Are you planning for your children and college and all that stuff? It seems like my person, doesn’t know how to relate.

Although often not explicitly expressed, there seemed be a tacit assumption that women’s parents wanted their daughters to be married and have children. One woman said, “I know deep down they would love for me to have children and get married.” They described less pressure for grandchildren when they had siblings who had children. However, if they were the only daughters \((n = 2)\), there might be a distinct significance attached to grandchildren. One woman surmised that her mother probably really wanted her to have a child even though her mother already had several grandchildren. She said, “Being the only daughter, the mother–daughter relationship would just be different.”

Other people sometimes assumed that the women were married and had children (thus, making their actual experience invisible). Respondents were either explicitly told or they surmised that others thought they were married and had children because of their age. These age-related assumptions were described as annoying. One woman explained her frustration with such assumptions:

Because they are insinuating that there is something wrong with you, you can tell by the tone of their voice or they act surprised, “Like I can’t believe you have never been married before.” I don’t know if I should be flattered because they are so intrigued because they say I am so attractive, but you still kind of feel like I’m a loser because I have never been married.

Another participant told us about how her brother made fun of her for not being married and not having a history of dating people. The participant’s
niece had asked her when she was getting married. The father (participant’s brother) interjected and said sarcastically, “That’ll be the day.”

Such inquiries and assumptions tended to prompt women to think about how others view them. Women who were frequently asked about their single status (high visibility) seemed more preoccupied with what others thought about them than were women who were less often asked about their marital status.

In addition, all women experienced others “setting them up” (i.e., arranging blind dates) with men. Respondents believed that others assumed that they would be happier with a partner than without. Most (seven of the participants) preferred not to be set up because they had bad experiences in the past; they felt pathetic dating this way and/or they worried that they might create tension with their friends if they did not like the men. Unlike most women, however, one woman (age 34, settled in her career, and previously engaged) was eager to be set up. She was the most expressive in her desire to get married in the near future. In fact, when asked if she would be willing to be contacted in the future for more interviews, she indicated that she would be married by then. All the other women expressed more hesitancy and ambiguity about marriage and the probability that they would be married in the next few years.

In many cases, married people did not understand what it was like to be single at their ages, which, in turn, fostered a sense of invisibility of their actual experiences. Their single friends, however, were able to understand them. For example,

“It’s like New Year’s Eve and sometimes at night when I got to bed and wish someone was there, those little times when I wish someone was there . . . and I can tell her [single friend of same age] and she won’t take it to mean that I am desperate for a relationship. If I were to say that to some of my married friends, they would be like “Well, you need to find a man” but that is not it. Just because I have these little feelings of loneliness does not mean that I want to go out and grab the first guy that looks at me, you know. So . . . I can tell her that kind of stuff and she won’t make it into this other thing, she will take it at face value.

**Encountering triggers.** Another frequent reminder of their deviant life paths were triggers—events that reminded them they were out of synchrony with SNAF. Women described seemingly continuous reminders of relationships, marriage, and children. These reminders included couple-oriented
holidays such as New Year’s Eve and Valentine’s Day (as three women explained, Valentine’s Day was conceptualized as “Singles’ Awareness Day;”—high visibility) and family-oriented holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas. Holidays reminded them of their single status, encouraging thoughts about their romantic lives, and increasing the likelihood of experiencing sadness. In addition, weddings and childbirths of friends, coworkers, and family members served as triggers. One woman described her experience as follows:

For a while there I was worried, I think things trigger that though. Like when my brother had his first baby, when he got married and had his first baby. Those are kinda triggers like panic. Like “when is my turn?” and those kind of things.

Other women described participating in the bouquet-toss at weddings. Being older, they preferred not to participate but other people encouraged them to do so. One woman explained her feelings of being part of the bouquet-toss ritual, “You feel like a reject, like ‘I am a loser, I’m not married, let’s just all look at me.’” Feeling visible is especially pronounced in this data excerpt.

For several women, the experience of seeing a young child (regardless if they knew the parent) elicited thoughts about desires for children. As one woman described:

Here lately, I’ll see a cute kid go by and I’ll be like “ahhhh.” And I did not used to be like that at all. I never used to be a big kid person. But here lately I wonder if that will ever happen to me?

**Feeling Displaced in Their Families of Origin**

Messages about being on a different (deviant) life path were especially strong within their families of origin. Birth order in their families and family members’ decreasing interest in their romantic lives over time were described as aspects of their social relationships within their families. They felt as if they were violating a “natural” pattern when younger siblings married and had children before they did. Women interpreted family members’ decreased inquiries about romances as an indicator that their families had given up hope they would marry and have children. Such waning interest and doubts about women getting married seemed to create a sense of invisibility within their families.
For women with younger siblings, the timing of their siblings’ marriages and children affected them and, in turn, their family members’ perceptions of them. Women expressed concern when younger siblings married before them. Cindy told us,

I have a brother (he is 3 years younger) and he has a family so that is discouraging.

Q: Because he is your younger brother?
Cindy: Yeah, because it seems like I should have done it first. . . . I don’t know, it is like I am behind. The only reason I said that I should have done it first only because I am older. . . . I don’t begrudge him or anything. I wouldn’t call it jealously. It is more like just a twinge of regret that I didn’t have the grandkids yet for my parents. [She began tearing up as she said this.]

She went on to say that it does not feel “natural” that he should marry and have children before her. Another woman explained her younger sister’s reaction about marrying before her:

My sister felt bad about getting married before me. I found it funny that she felt that way because I don’t care, I am not dating anyone, she will be waiting forever. I guess because I am the oldest. I did feel a little weird, like what is wrong with me?

Three women told us about pressure they felt from family members when they dated someone. One woman, in particular, grew frustrated with the eagerness to which her family members hinted at how much they wanted her to marry her boyfriend. After she broke up with him, family members stayed in touch with him and tried to talk her into getting back together with him.

Another way that women felt displaced or uncertain about their place in the family was when family members seemed to stop asking about their romantic lives and stopped saying anything to them about having children. For women who were 34 (the upper age frame of the study), family members’ inquiries, comments, and messages about marriage and children decreased as they got older. They explained that it seemed as if their family members were growing resigned to the fact that they would not marry. For women who were not 34 yet, family members still had hope. One woman (age 28) explained that later scenario: “This summer we were sitting around outside and someone mentioned that we were our parents’ last hope or something
like they are all waiting for us [to get married]—we are the last ones that refused to get married.”

Two participants (one was 28, the other 34) reported that their mothers had recently told them that they (the participants) were not the “marrying kind.” Another respondent explained that “My parents say nothing except I think one time recently mom made a sarcastic remark about me never having kids.” Often, grandparents expressed concern that their granddaughter would be an “old maid.” One woman’s grandmother, however, did not encourage marriage because her grandmother “equates marriage with misery.”

**Discussion**

The present study further extends the limited but growing literature on singles in the field of family studies. Research on singles is especially important because, despite the rapidly growing number of single people, singles are disproportionately understudied, which may be related to the SNAF ideology present among social scientists. Of the work that has been done, it has largely focused on the psychological aspects of single women, whereas the present study focused on social relationships and environment. Our findings provide support for “singlism” (DePaulo & Morris, 2005), in terms of single women dealing with public scrutiny about their status and feeling displaced in their social worlds. We also add to the dialogue on “doing family,” bringing into focus the powerful influence of the SNAF ideology. In so doing, we unveiled the visible/invisible paradox accompanying a “deficit” social identity, especially pronounced at participants’ age (late 20s to mid-30s). Although other researchers have discussed visibility (e.g., DePaulo & Morris, 2005) and invisibility (e.g., Byrne, 2003), the extant research examined each phenomenon separately; no known study has explored the relationship between them. The focus on visible/invisible paradox underscores the complexity of being never married past the median age of marriage in contemporary society, raises new questions, and offers an enhanced understanding regarding singleness and SNAF ideology.

Visibility/invisibility is a useful way to frame participants’ perceptions and experiences with their social worlds because of the broader context of women’s lives. Scholars have long recognized the ways in which women’s bodies are visible and objectified in contemporary culture (e.g., male gaze), while suppression of women’s voices and accounts of their experiences (i.e., personhood/subjectivity) have largely rendered women’s lives invisible (Osmond & Thorne, 1993). Using never-married women in their late 20s and early 30s as a cite of analysis, the visible/invisible dialectic illuminates the
precariousness of the social identity never-married women may experience and points to the strength of SNAF ideology. Our data indicated that considerable attention was directed at participants because of the intersection of their age and single status. Life course principles of the multiple layers of time (i.e., ontological, generational, historical) help situate findings of the present study. Below, we delineate the visible/invisible paradox and then make explicit the links between levels of time and our findings.

**Visibility and Invisibility**

Heightened visibility indicated feeling exposed in ways that were perceived as largely out of women’s control. This was especially likely when triggering events occurred (e.g., bouquet-toss at weddings; respondent’s thoughts: “I’m a loser, I’m not married, let’s all just look at me”) and through unwanted, intrusive questions about their lives. Vulnerability accompanied such exposure. Attention was perceived as frustrating, annoying, and fueled doubts about something being wrong with them, especially because the women interpreted that people’s inquiries/statements insinuated that they were unable to get a man. Intrusive inquiries fit with Reynolds and Taylor’s (2005) interpretation that a deficit identity creates conditions whereby others believe they have a right to violate normative guidelines for privacy in public, social interactions.

At the same time, a sense of invisibility also was present. Invisibleness was especially likely when others assumed they were married and had children, when others did not understand their experiences, and when they experienced feelings of insecurity in their roles in their families. Feeling increasing invisible in family of origin is similar to the single women’s experiences in Ireland (Byrne, 2003). Invisibleness of their actual life experiences also manifested when participants felt like they had to justify their single status (visible). Because participants were not following the culturally prescribed life course (i.e., the marked, visible status), others demanded an explanation. Without a readily available cultural narrative, women were carving out their own pathways. In this way, women’s *actual* experiences were largely invisible.

**Ontological Time**

Age was a key factor in the visibility/invisibility paradox. The mid-20s through the mid-30s appear to be a time of intense contemplation for never-married women regarding their future family trajectories, as previous research has indicated (Cole, 1999; Davies, 2003; Sharp & Ganong, 2007). According to respondents, their social environment during this life stage was accompanied by
seamless pressure from friends, family members, coworkers, and society in
general. Participants’ narratives indicated messages endorsing the SNAF
ideology, bolstering the notion that the women would be happier if they
were married. Reminders that women were on “a different path” was equated
with deviance.

**Historical Time—SNAF Ideology**

Arguably, the broader current social context endorses SNAF. Mainstream
media, for example, serves to reinstate rather than question SNAF ideology.
Two of the most popular media depictions of contemporary never-married
women include *Sex in the City* and *Bridge Jones’ Diary*. Both, ultimately,
reinforced SNAF by having female main characters hyperfocused on finding
a man and ending with lead female characters marrying. A similar plot line
is evidenced in more recent films such as *Baby’s Moma* and *He’s Just Not
Into You* as well as the majority of Hollywood media.

Our data offer concrete evidence of assumptions and inquires participants
encountered, which were largely consistent with SNAF ideology. For the most
part, others did not question the assumption that marriage equates to happi-
ness and is the best way to structure one’s life. Although countermessages
existed, these were rare and did offer a strong disruption to the SNAF ideology.
Overall, based on participants’ perceptions, we conclude that their social
environments tended to reinforce essentialist rather constructionist perspec-
tive of marriage and family (Oswald et al., 2005; Smith, 1993).

**Generational Time—(Dis)placement in Families of Origin**

Essentialist messages from their social worlds seemed to interfere with
enjoying their lives. Their thoughts were often directed by their social
environments—holidays, others’ lives, coworkers, family members’ com-
ments, and assumptions. In some ways, messages from family members were
especially powerful. The data excerpt from one woman trying to make sense
of her young sister’s feeling badly for marrying first is illustrative. The par-
ticipant explained how she reconsidered her initial thoughts of not thinking
much about her younger sister marrying. When attention (visibility) was
brought to the situation and her sister expressed concern, the participant then
began questioning her identity as being deviant (invisible). Being the older
sibling not married prior to a younger sibling was accompanied with a sense
of displacement. Women shared interpretations, consistent with SNAF, that
the “natural” order of things was violated when younger siblings married and
had children first. Cross-cultural comparisons would suggest such a sentiment is even greater in more traditional societies, with older siblings bringing disgrace and shame to their families.

The order of familial patterns and conceptualizations of generational time was also relevant in issues related to the sequencing of marriage and children. One directive from a family member bought attention to the complex considerations of planning an individualized life path and, at the same time, reflected a commitment to conventional family ideologies. Recall the grandmother telling her granddaughter, “Why don’t you just get married and have a baby and then you can get divorced?” To which, the granddaughter responded, “I’m like you don’t have to get married to have a kid.”

It can be argued that the grandmother and granddaughter are both promoting and resisting SNAF ideology. The grandmother seems to be tied to conventional notions that children should be born within marriage and that marriage should precede children. At the same time, the suggestion of planning for divorce (before marriage) seems to indicate that marriage functions solely as a way to have a child in a socially sanctioned way. What happens after the child has been born within marriage is another matter. The grandmother seems to be encouraging (some level of) reliance on a man, perhaps believing that a divorced father is more likely to remain involved in his child’s life than would an unmarried father.

The granddaughter, on the other hand, was not convinced marriage was a precondition for her to have a child. She indicated that she would have a child outside of marriage when she felt ready and was financially secure. Such a declaration appears to be one of resistance to the ideology of marriage; however, the extent of the resistance remains to be seen. As Hertz (2002) found, the middle-class mothers who chose to have children outside of marriage (and without a partner) “ultimately reaffirmed” SNAF rather than challenged it by contextualizing the sperm donors and constructing positive, active images of “dads” for their children. Additionally, specifically analyzing the granddaughter’s desire to have her own biological baby (with or without a man) appears to reinstate the conventional ideology of motherhood.

Also of note is the women’s preparation for having children. Participants “protected a space” for their future (unknown) husband and children similar to the women in Nelson’s (2006, p. 783) analysis of the single mothers holding a “space” for involvement of the father. In the case of our respondents, however, their space holding was based on an imaginary individual. For example, one woman avoided advancement in her job to maintain a 40-hour work week so that she could be there for her future (unknown) husband and children. Women took intentional action not to have children (e.g., abortions,
consistent birth control), waiting for their future husbands to appear first. Similar to prior research, women in our sample were still waiting to make this decision—it seemed that they needed to wait until the last possible time to “hold out” for a husband before they would pursue children through another avenue (Bock, 2000).

**Limitations and Future Research**

Limitations of the present investigation include not recruiting participants who intentionally resisted the SNAF ideology. The flier seeking participation stated that we were studying “marriage in single women’s lives” (Sharp & Ganong, 2007). Additionally, because of the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology recommend the researcher allow participants to describe their experiences with minimal imposition from the interviewer, we did not specifically ask questions about discrimination. As a result, we can neither support nor refute the claim that “singlism” includes behavioral discrimination, including, for example, pay discrimination and single people being asked to work later (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). We recommend other scholars directly examine such claims as well as investigate heterosexual, middle-class women who actively resist the SNAF ideology. Such pursuits would add understanding to how women negotiate the “cultural lag” (Byrne & Carr, 2005) pronounced in individuals’ life course trajectories currently.

We also recommend prospective longitudinal studies. Given the glimpses of changing messages in participants’ environment (e.g., decreasing interest in their romantic lives, family members recently saying they are not “the marrying kind”) and previous literature suggesting that older never-married women are better adjusted than younger women, it would be instructive to follow women over time to gain a clearer, more nuanced sense of the changing messages. That is, do the messages from the social environment change as women age and/or do women themselves consciously decide they are happy with their life courses, growing more confident in their decisions for their lives? Or perhaps even the reduced frequency of scrutiny (less visibility) in their lives allows for older, never-married women to feel well-adjusted and/or perhaps women grow accustomed to the changed pool of eligible men, the risks of later pregnancy, and the fact that most friends will be married and have children? Such questions warrant further exploration.

**Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Drs. Anisa Zvonkovic and Don Lavigne and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.
Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

References


