

# Life-long singlehood: intersections of the past and the present

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines life-long singlehood and its ramifications in old age among women and men in Ireland. During the life-time of the 26 research participants, Ireland shifted from the Western European marriage pattern, characterised by high rates of singlehood, late marriage and high fertility, to declining prevalence of singlehood, higher marriage rates and lower fertility. In-depth interviews were analysed with the help of narrative analysis and grounded theory methods. We identified two main pathways into singlehood that had a long-term impact on the participants' lives. The women and men who had *chosen* singlehood associated this status with independence, self-fulfilment and autonomy throughout their lifecourse, including in old age. In contrast, older adults who had been *constrained* in their choice of marital status due to poverty, care work, family roles and cultural norms, expressed regret and dissatisfaction with their single status. In the latter group, the ramifications of the inability to actualise the roles of a spouse, parent and grandparent were particularly apposite in later life when many felt the absence of close ties and expressed loneliness. For some of the older adults who had been constrained in their choice of marital status in earlier life, the possibility of entering into a romantic relationship seemed more feasible in later life. How older adults interpret their pathway into the single status in earlier life impacts on relationship formation and life satisfaction in older age.

**KEY WORDS**—never-married, lifecourse, single men/women, narrative analysis, grounded theory, Ireland.

## **Introduction**

Matrimony is a privileged status, legally and socially, and the single status of both men and women tends to be viewed as problematic. Caricatures and negative connotations of the never-married status persist, and societal expectations and normative evaluations of marriage as the ideal civil status impinge upon those who are single. DePaulo and Morris (2005) coin the term 'singlism' to refer to the widespread stigmatisation and stereotyping

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that single people encounter. They argue that social scientists have been complicit in the designation of singleness as a deficient and negative state by comparing married people with people who never married, and ascribing any differences between the two groups to individual rather than institutional or societal factors. Gubrium (1975) labelled single older people 'a distinct type of social personality' and 'lifelong isolates' who do not have to confront death in a manner analogous to their married peers; rather, they develop social and psychological resources that facilitate living alone. Single men have been characterised as psychologically deficient (*e.g.* Scheper-Hughes 2001). The single status has also been viewed as problematic for women because, as Byrne (2008: 29) argues, 'familistic ideologies positively support constructions of womanhood as married and mother, a context in which singlehood and the opposition between woman's identity and single identity are problematic'. Choi (1996) argues that older single men are more likely to be socially isolated than never-married women, and Barrett (1999) that the negative effects of the never-married status on social support increase with age. In contrast, Byrne (2008) and others (DePaulo and Morris 2005; Levy-Simon 1987; Reynolds and Wetherell 2003; Stein 1981) argue that singlehood brings with it autonomy, self-development and financial, emotional and mental independence. Rubinstein (1987) and colleagues (Rubinstein *et al.* 1991) highlighted the important (sometimes co-resident) relationships that single individuals nurture with kin and non-kin families, peers or younger individuals – and experiences of loss and bereavement that arise when these relationships end.

Much of the gerontology research on the never-married is quantitative and examines health, life satisfaction and support differentials between married and unmarried (a category that also includes divorced, separated and widowed) individuals (*e.g.* Barrett 1999; Murphy, Grundy and Kalogirou 2007; Waite and Gallagher 2001). Qualitative research exploring the experiences and perceptions of never-married older individuals is scant. The available qualitative research suggests that most never-married older adults do not construe lifelong singlehood in negative terms (Gubrium 1975). Rather, reasons for singlehood are related to political and economic circumstances (Allen and Pickett 1987; Baumbusch 2004), desire to focus on career (Baumbusch 2004; Dalton 1992), or personal and family circumstances (Baumbusch 2004; O'Brien 1991). With few exceptions (Rubinstein 1987), most studies focus on the experience of never-married women (Allen 1989; Allen and Pickett 1987; Baumbusch 2004; Dalton 1992; O'Brien 1991), neglecting never-married men. Never-married women construe their single status in mixed terms, referring to the autonomy and independence it grants them, and conversely the lack of companionship they experience (Baumbusch 2004). To the best of our knowledge, the paper at hand is

the first published qualitative study of older never-married individuals that accords equal attention to women and men, thereby enabling comparisons of the experience of older single men and women.

Little attention is given to perceptions of single status in older age and how this relates to circumstances and experiences in earlier life. In this respect, too, our paper makes a novel contribution to the literature. Cooney and Dunne (2001: 851) suggest that ‘[r]egardless of whether lifetime singlehood was chosen or was the result of factors beyond control (e.g. limited marriage market, family demands and poor health), individuals who do not marry likely adapt to the situation and establish strengths as single persons (e.g. self-sufficiency and reliable networks)’ (our emphasis). Family demands as a constraint on opportunities to marry featured prominently in the accounts of never-married older women in a working-class area in the United States of America, who had nonetheless gone on to forge meaningful and long-lasting relationships with wider kin (Allen 1989). In this paper, we engage with the issue of choice *versus* constraint in marital status, and trace some of the ensuing long-term outcomes that never-married older men and women relay, with the view to gaining a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of choice and constraint in marital status selection.

Inspired by Fuller-Iglesias, Smith and Antonucci’s (2009) call to integrate the *life-course perspective* (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe 2003), which focuses on the impact of macro influences, with the *lifespan perspective* (Baltes 1997; Baltes, Reese and Nesselroade 1988), which examines micro influences, this paper explores how older adults attribute meaning to their single status across their lives. The paper investigates the impact of individual and socio-historical-contextual processes on individuals’ understandings and perceptions of their single status in earlier and in later life. This approach allows us to explore the cultural and normative resources and constraints the participants encountered across their lifecourse, and to consider the possible systematic patterning of experiences and outcomes among the never-married.

### **The Irish context**

The research participants are members of the birth cohorts who were children in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s in Ireland. Free secondary school education, only introduced in 1967 in Ireland, had not been available for these cohorts. Early school leaving was very common. For example, in 1966, 58 per cent of people between the ages of 25 and 29 had left school before the age of 16 (Deeny 1971). The influence of the Catholic Church (and the conservative Church of Ireland, to which most Protestants in the country

belonged) was pervasive in youth and throughout most of the adult lives of our participants (Tovey and Share 2000). As young adults in the late 1950s, 1960s and in the 1970s, all participants had been socialised in a patriarchal society in which divorce and contraception were prohibited, and non-marital co-habitation and sexual relations were taboo. Employment options were restricted (Kennedy 1973), particularly for women as the so-called marriage bar prohibited the employment of married women in public service from 1932 to 1973 (Kennedy 1973; MacCurtain and ÓCorráin 1979). Gender roles were therefore highly differentiated both in the labour market and society at large, which in turn influenced the operation of the 'marriage market' in Ireland (Oppenheimer 1988). Reliance on agricultural employment persisted into the 1960s; half of all men in employment worked in agriculture in 1961 (Wheelan 1995). Many of our participants' contemporaries, especially those who were born in rural areas, had emigrated due to poor employment options in Ireland.

Largely due to poverty and social norms that were prohibitive of marriage for the poor, the average age of marriage and percentage of people who remained single remained comparatively high in Ireland until the 1950s (Brown 2004). However, Ireland witnessed a significant upward trend in marriage rates from the early 1960s, most notably an increase of 40 per cent between 1958 and 1970 (per 1,000 unmarried adults) (Brown 2004), making marriage the dominant civil status for individuals aged 30 years and above. The legacy of these marriage patterns is that 15 per cent of the current over-65 population of Ireland never married (Barrett *et al.* 2011), constituting a significant sub-group in the older population of Ireland. Understanding these older adults' pathways into singlehood, and their experience of being single in earlier and later life, is important if this population group is to be acknowledged and accommodated as older citizens and as (potential) users of supports and services for older adults. The nature, causes and patterning of their experiences is also of relevance for scientists studying ageing never-married adults in other contexts, especially in societies where the proportion of never-married middle-aged and older adults is increasing rapidly (Cooney and Dunne 2001; Lin and Brown 2012; Sessler 2010).

## Research design and method

As the objective of our study was to explore the interpretations and meanings that older adults attach to singlehood, a qualitative narrative approach was used (Phoenix, Smith and Sparkes 2010). In order to ensure a high degree of heterogeneity in the sample, we sought out participants using diverse

channels in a large geographic/administrative region adjacent to Dublin, comprising both urban and rural areas. Contact was made via face-to-face meetings and telephone conversations with over 20 non-profit older people's organisations and groups that work closely with older people. Flyers were produced and distributed to these organisations and presentations made by the second author to a number of older people's clubs and associations. In addition, advertisements were placed in two local newspapers and a number of local libraries inviting potential participants to contact the research team. A short article about the study was published in the newsletter of an older people's interest organisation which is distributed to over 1,000 people.

Inclusion criteria for the study were that participants had never been married, had no history of co-habitation with partner(s), but may be in a non-cohabitating relationship at the time of the interview. We did not exclude people who had had or were currently in non-cohabiting relationships, because excluding them would have been tantamount to suggesting that never-married older people are by definition celibate/disinterested in romantic relationships of any kind (assumptions that we did not wish to make). Furthermore, in the Irish context that was intolerant of non-heterosexual relationships until recently, we wished to remain open to the possibility that some never-married older people are lesbian, bisexual, gay or transgender, *i.e.* had sexual orientations that were difficult to express in their youth and perhaps still remain taboo in their family circles.

Recruitment for the study proved more difficult than initially envisaged. The difficulty in recruiting individuals appeared to relate to suspicion of research in general, disinclination to discuss what some potential participants considered to be their private life, or a perception that the research was of no relevance to them. In some group meetings a latent stigma towards singlehood was apparent among the married or widowed who evinced a pride in having married. Such an environment may have prohibited individuals from self-identifying as single. Despite these difficulties, we managed to recruit a broad and heterogeneous group of individuals with diverse life-stories. The difficulties experienced in recruiting participants meant that the authors were sensitised to possible stigma around singlehood, and were mindful of this during the interview stage (*e.g.* by using language that was not in any way suggestive of stigma, and by broaching matters pertaining to sexuality only when these were first brought up by the interviewee). Three men stated that they were motivated to participate in the study because they wished to correct what they believed to be common misconceptions about the never-married. Andrew (a priest), Michael (a gay man who had kept his sexuality hidden from all but his closest friends) and Ned (who had been a family carer for four decades) felt very strongly that their voice should be

heard in the study in order to highlight the diverse reasons why some men chose not to marry (Andrew and Michael) or could not marry (Ned).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 individuals between March and July 2012. Twelve interviews took place in the participants' own homes, 12 in hotels/coffee shops in the participant's home town/village and two were completed at the university campus in line with research participants' preferences. All interviews were audio-recorded with interviewee's consent. Duration of the interviews ranged from 40 to 120 minutes. To elicit participants' life stories we assumed the position of the active interviewer (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). The active interview repositions the role of the interviewer from that of a passive objective listener to one of an active interviewer who interjects, steers the dialogue, questions and prompts. Such a method helps participants to construct 'his or her experiential history as the interview unfolds, in collaboration with the active interviewer' (Holstein and Gubrium 1995: 32). The organising theme around the telling of the life-story was marital status. The interview questions sought to gain a better understanding of individuals' subjective opinions of how their single status impacted on their lives overall, including their later lives. Participants were invited to relay their life stories, with primacy being given to the reasons why they had remained single and their perceptions of singlehood across the lifecourse. A small number of participants (N=4) became emotional when relaying the death of a family member (a parent or a sibling). However, on conclusion of the interview, each of the four participants indicated that speaking about their lives had been a cathartic and positive experience.

### *Data analysis*

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Following Gee (1991) and Riessman (2008), transcripts were edited to preserve syntax, pauses and intonation in order to retain as much as possible the authenticity of the dialogue between participant and interviewer. Each transcript was analysed separately, recognising the importance of connectivity within each individual narrative. Unlike other forms of qualitative analysis which seek to identify thematic categories across interviews, narrative analysis seeks to explore the relationship between stories, events and structures within each narrative. To this end, we adopted a two-pronged approach to analysis: firstly, a structural analysis of the transcripts in which attention is placed on the syntax or structure of narrative, how the narrative is co-constructed and the importance of local and societal context for narrative; and secondly, an experience-centred approach which focused on the semantics of the narratives. We managed to take this two-pronged approach by making a

number of readings of the transcripts and adopting Gubrium and Holstein's (1997) methodology of 'analytic bracketing' which enabled us to focus, firstly, on how the story was being told and, secondly, on what was relayed within each story.

Each narrative was broken down into discreet stanza as defined by Gee (1991). Stanza formation was guided by changes in intonation, topic structure, patterning, words, phrases and pauses. Subsequently, stanzas were subsumed within broader units called 'strophes' (Gee 1991). Such an approach allows the analyst to explore how narratives are assembled and, according to Riessman (2008), can aid with thematic identification and data reduction. When exploring the semantics or meaning within the narratives we did not assume that stories/narratives would be ordered in a coherent chronological fashion. To this end, story structure and coherence was examined by exploring 'narrative linkages', 'narrative editing' (*e.g.* interviewee correcting what s/he said earlier) and how stories are assembled (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). We also sought to examine the presence of canonical narrative, that is, 'narratives of how life ought to be lived in the culture' (Phoenix 2008: 68), in particular the positioning of participants' marital status in a society where matrimony is privileged and marriage viewed as the ideal civil status.

The structure and content of narrative usually aligned in that narratives imbued with personal choices and indications of life satisfaction tended to be more ordered and more straightforwardly chronological. These narratives also contained less narrative editing than the structurally less ordered narratives, which also tended to relay a lesser sense of purpose, direction and contentment with life. The story (content of the narrative) and its structure were deployed as axes for the organisation and discussion of the material. Of note was the tendency of some participants to use the first-person singular (I, my, me), and of others to relay large parts of their narrative in the first-person plural (we, our, us); this was indicative of the extent to which participants saw themselves as members of a collective (*e.g.* farm labourers) or as individuals forging their singular path (*e.g.* as a former farm labourer who emigrated); this observation in turn was in many cases linked to the extent to which the interviewee had made choices that ran counter to expectations/norms *versus* confirmed expectations.

Our findings illustrate how the adoption of a narrative methodology is amenable to the integration of the lifecourse (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe 2003) and the lifespan theoretical perspectives (Baltes 1997; Baltes, Reese and Nesselroade 1988). By integrating both theoretical perspectives in our analysis (as called for by Fuller-Iglesias, Smith and Antonucci 2009), we have revealed the differential impact of individual (micro) and socio-historical (macro) variables on individuals' interpretations of singlehood across

the lifecourse. Using the definition of narrative inquiry as consisting of (a) a personal and social dimension, (b) a situated dimension (place), and (c) a temporal dimension (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) allowed us to integrate these two theoretical perspectives and to apply the lifecourse/lifespan conceptual model to analysing how older adults make sense of their present and past lives.

Like all methods, narrative analysis has strengths and weaknesses. As Riessman (2008: 53) outlines, 'narrative scholars keep a story "intact" by theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases'. However, this attention to the detail of each case is not directly conducive to identification of patterns and causal processes across cases; to this end, more integrative and thematic forms of qualitative data analysis have to be employed. We therefore performed additional analysis drawing on the grounded theory method of data analysis, *i.e.* open, axial and selective coding (LaRossa 2005). This enabled us to 'work up' the narrative analysis into analysis that comprises the entire dataset and is attuned to the patterning of experiences by gender and social class, and to the interlinkages between earlier and later life stages across the full sample.

Examining the intersection of the personal, situated and temporal dimension of participants' narratives (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), the remainder of this paper considers how narratives of the past and the present intersect to influence participants' interpretations of singlehood in later life. The analysis reveals how participants give meaning to singlehood across their lives and how individual differences and social and historical contexts differentially impact upon their interpretations.

### *Research participants*

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the sample by gender, age, socio-economic status (SES) and urban/rural residence. Twelve men and 14 women participated in the research. The participants ranged in age from 65 to 86 years. The 14 women and 12 men are approximately equally divided between sexagenarians, septuagenarians and octogenarians, a distribution that enables insights into both the younger and older cohorts of the never-married in Ireland. SES was determined on the basis of the participants' level of education and highest-status job when employed. Participants with low SES had been employed in manual jobs that were poorly remunerated. Some owned their own houses, but this was usually as a result of bequest, rather than having paid for the house. No participants designated as low SES had completed secondary schooling, and all came from backgrounds that were either poor or extremely poor (discerned on the basis of reported childhood deprivation and parents' employment). Most of the women from



TABLE 1. *Women and men in the sample, by age, socio-economic status (SES) and residence*

| Pseudonym     | Age (from youngest to oldest) | SES (main occupation when working), residence at time of interview |
|---------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Women (N=14): |                               |  |
| Lauren        | 65                            | Middle (office work), urban  |
| Deborah       | 66                            | Middle (secretarial, self-employed), urban                         |
| Anna          | 67                            | Middle (book-keeper), urban  |
| Angela        | 74                            | Middle (book-keeper), urban  |
| Molly         | 74                            | Low (home duties), rural   |
| Louise        | 75                            | Middle (credit controller), urban                                  |
| Jenny         | 75                            | Middle (administrative work), urban                                |
| Maureen       | 77                            | Low (housekeeping), urban  |
| Marie         | 77                            | Middle (sales), urban  |
| Bernie        | 77                            | Low (factory work, paid care work), urban                          |
| Katie         | 78                            | Middle (school teacher), rural                                     |
| Monica        | 83                            | Middle (administration), rural                                     |
| Noelle        | 83                            | Low (hospitality), rural   |
| Eileen        | 84                            | Low (housekeeping, paid care work), rural                          |
| Men (N=12):   |                               |  |
| Larry         | 65                            | Low (assorted manual work), urban                                  |
| Johnny        | 67                            | Middle (shopkeeper), urban   |
| Ned           | 68                            | Middle (shopkeeper), urban   |
| Philip        | 70                            | Low (industrial, security), urban                                  |
| Colm          | 72                            | Low (labouring), rural   |
| Andrew        | 73                            | Middle (priest), urban   |
| Michael       | 73                            | Middle (producer), urban   |
| Gerard        | 74                            | Middle (policing, security), rural                                 |
| James         | 76                            | Low (chauffeur), urban   |
| Tom           | 80                            | Low (farm labourer), rural   |
| Mark          | 81                            | Low (forestry, factory work), rural                                |
| Martin        | 86                            | Low (farm labourer), rural   |

middle-class families had either completed their secondary-level education or stayed in school long enough to qualify for courses in ‘typing, shorthand, and book-keeping’ that ‘sensible girls did while they were waiting for a husband’ (Deborah). Lauren and Michael were the only participants whose SES in late adulthood (middle) was different from their childhood SES (low). The continuity in SES throughout participants’ lives highlights the low levels of social mobility among the older cohorts in Ireland. There had also been continuity in urban/rural residential status throughout their adult lives for most participants, although Noelle had recently relocated from an urban area to a retirement home in a rural area. At the time of the interview ten of the participants lived in a rural, semi-rural or small town areas with a population under 5,000 (listed as ‘rural’ in Table 1) and the remainder in urban areas (listed as ‘urban’ in Table 1).

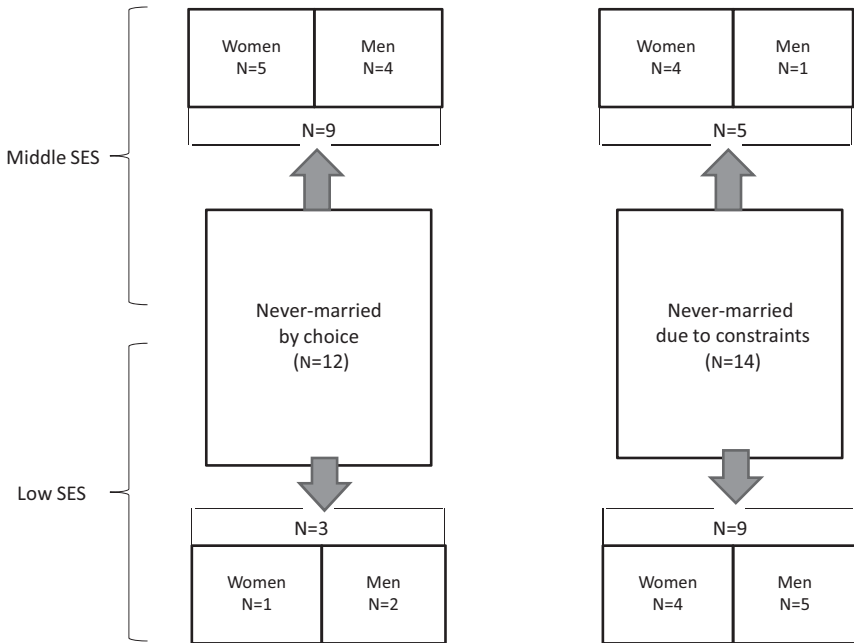


Figure 1. Breakdown of study sample by choice *versus* constraint, middle *versus* low socio-economic status (SES), and gender.

## Findings

### *Choice and constraint in the pathways to singlehood*

The findings are organised according to a choice–constraint bifurcation that our data analysis identified as highly significant in shaping the pathway into life-long singlehood, and the experience of singlehood throughout the life-course. The division into the ‘choice’ and ‘constraint’ groups is based on the participant’s construction of his/her marital status history at the time of the interview. It is possible that these constructions were different in the past, or have varied over time. However, we identified and labelled this bifurcation on the basis of the remarkable consistency in the participants’ accounts, as they tended to *either* talk of the constraints that they had experienced, *or* of the choices they had made, regarding their marital status *across their adult lives*.

Figure 1 presents the breakdown of the sample into participants who gave accounts of choosing singlehood and who relayed constraints as the reasons for remaining single. (The N value is specified for each cell, not because these represent putative prevalence in the population, but rather as

an indication of the basis of our argumentation regarding the patterning of processes in the lives of never-married older adults.) Analysis of the transcripts revealed that 12 interviewees had chosen singlehood, while the remaining participants (N=14) had been constrained in their choice of marital status. Similar proportions of men and women had chosen singlehood. It is important to note that middle-class participants predominated in the 'single by choice' group – only three of the 12 participants who stated that they had chosen to remain unmarried were from lower socio-economic groups. Conversely, among the participants who had not chosen singlehood, participants from lower socio-economic groups predominate. All but one working-class woman had been constrained in their choice regarding marital status. Middle-class women were divided between the 'choice' and 'constraint' groups.

We begin by discussing the accounts of the women and men who had chosen singlehood; then proceed to analysing the accounts of participants who had been constrained in their choice of marital status. The second half of the findings section discusses the ramifications of these two trajectories for the participants' lives at the time of the interview.

### *Single by choice*

Middle-class women for whom singlehood was a choice outlined their disinterest in and unsuitability for marriage, usually on the grounds of an independent mindset and interest in other pursuits, such as employment and travel. Reflecting life-long dispositions, Monica recounts her disinterest in marriage and determination, from a young age, to remain single, and Anna associates marriage directly with her dislike of children, an understandable linkage in a society where fertility within marriage was very high:

...no men, didn't want ... that's why I didn't get involved, wouldn't want to be, no, never ... I used to say [to my mother] you have three daughters ... one's married, one's a widow and the other is going to be an old maid. (Monica)

I didn't want anybody, I didn't want them around either, no ... I was never a maternal person, never had any time for children, still don't have any time, don't wish them any harm but just keep them at a safe distance away from me. (Anna)

For the middle-class women for whom singlehood had been a choice, care of ageing or disabled family members featured as a *consequence*, rather than a cause, of their single status. Importantly, family care had in no case posed a major obstacle to other pursuits in the lives of middle-class women in the 'choice' category, as their families were in a position to contract out (part of) the care work. Jenny explains that she was the 'natural choice' for

the role of a carer to her parents (alongside paid carers) due to her single status:

When I was in my late forties my father got a stroke and was blind and then my mother started to get Alzheimer's, and I was the only one who wasn't married and I mean [siblings] were all great but *when you are single it is so much easier to look after somebody*. (Our emphasis)

The only working-class woman who had chosen singlehood, Maureen, stressed that she 'had the choice of too many men', yet 'didn't love any of them'. The men who had chosen not to marry can be characterised as 'freedom-focused'. Like their female counterparts, both the working-class and middle-class men who had chosen singlehood emphasised the lack of constraints in their lives and the scope for autonomy that the single status afforded. Dissatisfied with the prospect of employment in the unskilled agricultural sector, Mark began forestry work at 18 and at 28 years of age migrated to the United Kingdom where work was plentiful and pay significantly better. In his youth Mark had no interest in marriage, viewing it as restrictive. His narrative suggests a somewhat cavalier attitude towards relationships. Mark creates a narrative which depicts him as a 'Don Juan' character:

I had plenty of girlfriends and plenty of offers, if you know what I mean.

I just blooming, just blooming threw them down more or less, let them down, I neglected them.

I used to go there [Dance Hall], girls you know, get girls, and take a girl home and I'd forget about her and get another one.

Mark was 'on the run' from women and appeared to be very proud of his conquests of women. His desire for freedom and autonomy precluded him from entering into long-standing relationships, 'I was always frightened of being tied down, and I thought I'd never stand that, somewhere I have to be and I have to stay, I couldn't you know, I couldn't face that'. In summary, the accounts offered by the research participants who had chosen singlehood are characterised by many similarities across the genders and social classes: they shared a distaste for what they believed to be the confines of married life, and expressed a strong preference for continuing to make choices regarding their lifestyle, consumption and socialising habits, something that singlehood enabled them to do.

### *Single by constraint*

Two main structural constraints limited the working-class women's ability to marry. First, their availability to undertake extensive care of family members was taken for granted, and such care work was a major obstacle to paid

employment, socialising and meeting potential partners. Eileen's account makes clear that she did not choose singlehood but rather had no choice but to remain single because she 'wanted' and 'had' to look after her parents:

*I didn't decide I didn't want to get married but ... I had to [look after my parents], there was no, there was no, you know my mother wasn't able and my father had to work so ... there was no other option.* (Our emphases)

Second, opportunities for socialising and seeking a partner had been severely limited by the nature and demands of working-class women's employment. Noelle hints that her work in the hotel industry was looked down upon by others – a perception that discouraged her from socialising:

You know when you're, you have to be sort of in some sort of a job if you want to socialise, you know the way long ago [people would be asking] where do you work and this sort of thing.

Among the working-class men who had been constrained in their choice of marital status, Larry harbours the gravest regrets about never having married. His opportunities to socialise in early and middle adulthood had been curtailed by a domineering mother whose preferences and, later, care needs took precedence:

My father died when I was 20, and my mother then totally put her whole dependence on me, I couldn't, if I went out, 'where are you going' 'what time will you be home at' ... I was the only one she had, she was afraid, I could never go with a girl, never, wouldn't dream of getting married ... it just wasn't possible ... I couldn't have left her on her own ... I couldn't even mention a girl, *there was no way I could have gotten married.* (Our emphasis)

In his narrative Larry outlines familial and societal expectations placed on his generation in youth, 'we'd be terrified to do anything in case anybody would see us doing something ... we just didn't do what we wanted to do ... we were much more respectful [of our parents]'. In these sentences he is referring to the pervasiveness of a culture of obedience, obligation and duty to parents that negated his wish to marry.

The only middle-class man in our sample who had been denied the opportunity to seek out marriage was Ned who recounted a 40-year history of intensive care duties towards his sisters who had suffered from particularly severe, terminal disabilities. Ned's elder brother had married and 'gone off to make his own life'. In the absence of any help from the state, Ned saw no alternative to caring for his sisters, which in turn constituted a barrier to getting married:

I didn't have time [to socialise] because [care work] was full-time ... it was 24 hours ... apart from the odd respite care break ... I didn't really bother to

socialise, *I didn't see the point because I wasn't prepared to walk away* you know, and that's why I suppose, you know, *I did miss out* . . . the only reason I'm putting forward all this is because people think that when people don't marry that maybe they're gay or they are losers in life or something like that, but you know, I sort of feel that there are people who haven't married in life for reasonably good reasons . . . I never put myself in the way that I could become involved or attached. (Our emphases)

Among the middle-class women who had not chosen singlehood, failed searches for a partner, disappointment in romantic relationships and (in later life) emotional loneliness featured prominently. These women had hoped for marriage but had gradually abandoned thoughts of marriage due to 'broken hearts' or perceived unsuitability of their romantic relationships for marriage. Lauren had sought partnership intermittently, especially at times when she had been bereaved of close relatives, and had concluded that she was 'unlucky in love':

I fell in love with guys who didn't fall in love with me, guys fell in love with me that I didn't fall in love with, I never managed to make the match.

Lauren makes sense of her singlehood against the backdrop of the Irish cultural context, where marriage called for adherence to strict gender roles for both men and women, norms that she felt uncomfortable with and that constituted the cultural constraint on her meeting the 'right' man and getting married. The cultural constraints that she outlines at length, with evident frustration, stand in contrast to the determination not to marry among the women who had chosen singlehood:

. . .the idea of putting in rollers [to curl hair], it just put years on me I would much rather be out walking, and yet I mean there were guys I'm sure that would have gone along with that but, I think, this expectation was as much put upon them as it was upon us, you know that they expected us to behave in a certain way because they were told that's how women behave and this is how men behave and, you know . . . I just didn't fit into that mould . . . didn't meet somebody who made me want to [fit into the mould] enough . . . which was a shame.

We now turn to examining the ramifications of singlehood in old age. These findings are also organised by whether singlehood was a choice, or resulted from constraints, as this division was the most powerful influence on the extent to which the participants' accounts evinced satisfaction with their marital status and in other domains.

### **Ramifications of singlehood in old age**

#### *Single by choice*

In later life, the women who had chosen to remain unmarried harboured no regrets about this choice. As Katie states, she '*never* felt a lack of

[marriage/partner]', and 'still [doesn't] feel the lack of it' (our emphases). Deborah was the only woman who had a living-apart-together (LAT) relationship (Levin 2004) at the time of the interview. All middle-class women, including Deborah (quoted below), were vocal on the multiple advantages that the choice of single status had afforded them throughout their lives, and was still yielding:

*I'm very glad I never married, yes, because I think I've had a chance to do much more than I would have when I see my sister who is the classic married lady, she's still running home to get [husband's dinner] at half past five and if she's not there, there'll be uproar and I really would never have coped with that . . . I know she has the companionship of him but you can't have too much bloody companionship, I'd like more peace on my own . . . my money I can fiddle around and nobody telling me I can't buy new curtains . . . so the independence is just wonderful, I'd hate to sell it, I mean it is priceless, in fact I can't see any advantage to being married. (Our emphases)*

Three of the six men who had chosen not to marry were in non-cohabiting relationships at the time of the interview: Philip in a casual on-off relationship, Johnny intermittently spending time with a woman who lives abroad, and Michael had a (non-cohabiting) boyfriend. Johnny had been co-resident with his mother until her death, acting as a carer for her in the last three years. Unlike Ned and Larry, Johnny states that he chose to care for his mother and harbours no regrets or resentments in relation to this role, stating that he was happy to reciprocate the lifelong love and security provided to him by his mother. Across his life and now in later life, Johnny is unperturbed by his single status, stating that he has always been happy in his own company. Singlehood offered him the chance to engage in his hobbies, most notably writing:

From the perspective of being a writer, yes, there's an awful lot of positives, because if you were married, depending on your wife . . . if you were married and you had a wife who wasn't supportive of your writing and spending so much time at it, there would be big problems . . . so from the perspective of having written, I do believe that I wasn't married was a big help.

Johnny's residence in an urban location close to Dublin city is also related to his satisfaction with the single status. Johnny contrasts his financially secure childhood, his ability to pursue a secondary education and his ability to follow his interests to the lives of his peers in rural Ireland, 'if I had ended up in the West of Ireland, if I hadn't gotten married, that probably would have left a big scar . . . and the isolation, that's a different ballgame, I didn't have that problem'. Across Johnny's lifetime, residence in an urban area was central to his sense of contentment and his negotiation of singlehood. His only concern at the time of the interview was an awareness of his declining health. For him the only possible disadvantage of not marrying is that he

does not have any family who may look after him if his health deteriorates, ‘the only thing a fella would, in later years, a fella would miss a woman alright, in the perspective that, you know, he’d have somebody there if something went wrong with him’. At the time of the interview, Johnny had entered into a long-distance romantic relationship with a friend from his youth, the first such relationship he had had in 40 years.

Mark, the ‘Don Juan’ character discussed above, harbours a slight regret in later life at not marrying or having children. However, adopting the humorous and light-hearted approach that characterises his narrative, he suggests that even in later life his desire for freedom still persists, echoing the sentiments of the women for whom singlehood had been a choice: ‘I wanted to be free, I wanted to be like I am now, free to do anything’. For Mark, singlehood was a chosen way of life; it is not his single status but rather health decline that leads him to reappraise his current situation. His interpretation of singlehood in later life is closely aligned with the ageing process and declining health. Somewhat similarly, the only working-class woman who stated that she chose to remain single (Maureen) was vocal in outlining the disadvantages of being single in old age, ranging from the lack of economies of scale in the household to presumptuous relatives ‘after the inheritance’. Despite (and because of) these disadvantages, Maureen (in her late seventies) had redoubled her efforts to remain self-sufficient by, among other things, persisting in using a chainsaw to maintain her garden.

### *Single by constraint*

Similar to the women who had chosen singlehood, the working-class women in the ‘constrained’ group also did not seek a relationship and expressed few regrets in this regard. However, a commonly expressed regret among this group was the lack of children (especially daughters) who could have supported them in old age. This might be due to the fact that the working-class women in our sample were older than their middle-class counterparts, and had been raised in very traditional, socially conservative families. In contrast, the search for a relationship featured prominently among the middle-class women for whom singlehood was not a choice. Angela had had a LAT relationship for approximately five years until the untimely death of her partner. Marie expresses her wish for a LAT relationship:

I’d like a sort of live-out companion, whom I could go on holiday with, or go to the . . . theatre, that kind of thing . . . you do miss having a partner, you miss having somebody for holidays and outings.

Since her sister’s death Lauren (discussed above) has felt that there is a vacuum in her life. In later life she has become acutely aware of the



disintegration of the close-knit supportive family to which she once belonged. As a result of the weakening of collateral ties following deaths in her family of origin, Lauren's own childless status, and lack of grandchildren, has become more significant, and she expresses the sense of a void in her life:

I think it [being single] can be very, very lonely, and I feel lonely sometimes when, when it comes to something where you just want to have somebody who's special to yourself, you know, who's just yours, and I wasn't as aware of that while [sister] was there . . . [sister's] family was automatically my family, it was like, you could come in to harbour to [sister] and sort of tie up your boat and rest for a while, be with her people and then go off again, and then that harbour wasn't there . . . I look at my sister and brothers and my friends . . . I envy them having grandchildren . . . because as I said I grew up in a very happy family, a very secure family, and I miss that, yes, I do miss that.

The wish for a romantic relationship was not confined to the middle-class women who had been constrained or disappointed in their earlier search for a partner. Larry (low SES) had limited his social world to the care of his mother in the home. Her death caused enormous emotional upset, 'ah, the loneliness, because she was my whole life . . . I was there all the time for her, and I couldn't believe how lonely . . . the house was just empty, nobody came anymore, I found that very difficult'. Larry is not resentful towards his mother, nor regretful of the sacrifices he made for her. Nonetheless, he closely associates his current unhappiness and lack of confidence with the carer role in his middle-adulthood. He grapples with feelings of low self-esteem and confidence, 'I'm getting very bad, I don't go anywhere, I never go outside the door, I find to go into a pub or something, very difficult'. Larry is deeply unhappy with his life and harbours feelings of regret for not having married:

I regret it anyway, I wouldn't recommend anyone staying on their own . . . because it is lonely, just to have somebody with you, you know, somebody to go places or whatever . . . what I would love to do is go for a weekend away, to know somebody to go for a weekend away or for a week's holiday . . . I wouldn't go on my own . . . I'd like to meet somebody, have a little bit of life at the end of my life.

Two other working-class men (Colm and Ned) who had not chosen the single status were also hopeful of developing relationships with women from within their social circles at the time of the interview. In contrast to the 'single by choice' group, seeking a romantic relationship was therefore common among the group who had been variously constrained in their earlier choices. For working-class men, the constraint in their earlier life had typically been low earning power, migratory history and precarious employment. As these constraints were removed or eased in later life, as a result of, for instance, the entitlement to the state pension and subsidised housing,

the wish to find a partner re-emerged and became more realistic to fulfil than in earlier life. This contrasts with the working-class women in our sample whose lack of interest in romantic relationships in later life might be due to increasing focus on deteriorating health and different expectations regarding lifestyle in old age (they expected less leisure, travel and companionship than middle-class women).

## Conclusions

It is important to highlight the fact that singlehood was a conscious choice for many older people in their youth, and *continues to be their unequivocal preference* in later life. In other words, life-long singlehood can be a status that the single person has actively chosen, and enjoys throughout his/her life. It is equally important to acknowledge that many members of the older cohorts were powerfully constrained in their choice of marital status by socio-economic and cultural-normative factors. In contrast to the suggestion that singlehood has 'different meanings . . . for an individual never-married woman, depending on her perspective in any given point in time' (Dalton 1992: 62), we found that the 'choice' or 'constraint' narratives of the participants were remarkably consistent as they outlined the experience of singlehood at different stages of their lives. However, we acknowledge that only longitudinal research designs can tap into such dynamics/consistency over time.

The degree of choice or constraint was patterned first and foremost by SES, but cohort differences played a central role too, whereby the oldest working-class participants had experienced the starkest socio-economic and cultural constraints. By comparison, gender did not feature as prominently with regard to choice/constraint, although it interacts with class so that middle-class men were much less concerned about cultural-normative constraints than middle-class women who perceived marriage as extremely restrictive. Neither class nor gender operated in simple and fixed ways, and we acknowledge that we have only been able to scratch the surface of other potentially important factors such as personality.

It is important to note that our understanding of choice in this context differs from earlier research (Gubrium 1975) where the choice to remain single or the selection out of marriage was argued to be primarily brought about by the tendency towards isolation. Here, we have highlighted the desire for autonomy as the primary driver of the choice of singlehood. Choices and constraints in marital status reflect deep-rooted inequalities between men and women, and social classes, and the influence of

cultural norms and economic structures in perpetuating these. The cultural expectation that financial independence precedes and accompanies the married status is well documented and theorised in the literature (Gibson-Davis and McBride Murry 2009; Oppenheimer 1988). In the past, SES operated differently among men and women, as men's SES exerted more influence on their 'marriageability' than women's status (Bernard 1982). Our data illustrate not only how SES enables or obstructs marriage on economic grounds (ability to 'afford' marriage), but also its more subtle effects and significance in shaping pathways and attitudes towards singlehood, and how these vary between older men and women.

Understanding reasons for singlehood is also important because the participants' experiences of later life were influenced by the degree of choice they felt they had exercised with regard to their marital status in earlier life. Those who had deliberately and contentedly chosen the single status were more satisfied with their lives and harboured no major regrets regarding their lifecourse. They had no interest in marrying in later life, and were in most cases occupied with hobbies, voluntary work, and socialising with friends and relatives. In contrast, the majority of those who had not chosen singlehood harboured regrets about their marital status, aspired to find a partner in later life, felt the lack of intimate ties, and/or speculated about the support that would be forthcoming from a spouse/partner, children and grandchildren in their old age. Our findings therefore suggest that individuals' interpretation and experience of the single status in later life is closely aligned to the negotiation and reconciliation of marital status in their earlier life.

Today's Ireland is very different from the Ireland of our participants' youth. The possibility of entering into a romantic relationship, for some, seemed more feasible in later than in earlier life. For those who had been barred from marriage in earlier life due to poverty and care obligations, the guaranteed state pension, absence of care obligations, and changed social and gender norms have opened up the possibility of entering into a romantic relationship in later life, that is at a time when Irish society and their personal circumstances have been fundamentally transformed. Consequently, we also wish to highlight the role of welfare state structures and cultural norms that shift very slowly in shaping the constraints on marriage and partnering that some adults face. We hope that our findings are of interest and relevance for researchers studying the (young and older) never-married populations in other societies. Our main arguments – that singlehood is the chosen status for some and the result of forces beyond their control for others, that it exerts a life-long influence yet may also motivate important changes in later life (*e.g.* finding a partner for the first time) – are also important for various professionals working with older adults.

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