ALWAYS A BRIDESMAID NEVER A BRIDE: EXAMINING THE

DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION OF MARRIAGE AND THE MODERN DAY SPINSTER

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to all those who supported me in this journey. To my participants, I thank you for your willingness and your candor. It has been both a privilege and an honor to be the voice of so many remarkable women.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the deinstitutionalization of marriage and the stigmatization of women who remain single past the expectant marital age. The goal of this research was to investigate the social identities of women who remain single past the age of twenty-five, and to gain an understanding of how gender-based stereotypes influence their lives by examining their personal experiences. In an effort to better understand the stigmatization of today's single woman, a qualitative method using focus groups was adopted for this study.

Twenty-five participants were selected using a purposive, inclusion/exclusion sampling technique. Three focus groups consisting of six participants each and one focus group consisting of seven participants comprised the sample for this study. Focus group participants were guided in a discussion geared toward establishing: (1) the current ideals surrounding the institution of marriage, (2) the implications associated with a single status, (3) the gendered differences that accompany said implications, and (4) how these implications influence their everyday lives.

Within the focus groups, the women discussed and shared personal stories of how they negotiate their status as a single woman in their everyday interactions with family, friends, co-workers, and other general acquaintances.

Analyzing the stigmatization of single women from a social constructionist perspective led to interesting findings regarding certain ideals women connected with

their single status. Social scientists posit that for women specifically, finding a husband

facilitates an adult identity that, generally speaking, lacks in the absence of a marriage.

The results of this study indicate that not only is this ideology socially constructed, it also

perpetuates the stigmatization of single women.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The term marriage refers to a social union between romantic partners that is both legally binding and contractual. Individuals enter into this matrimonious agreement for a variety of reasons. Some of those reasons may include love, dependence, financial security, adherence to religious beliefs, and general overall health contributions. The institution of marriage joins lives on emotional as well as economic levels and creates normative obligations that each partner adheres to. Goldstein and Kenney (2001) refer to marriage as a "rational arrangement between individuals who would be more productive (in a general sense) as a joint economic unit than they would be if they remained single" (p. 508). For many uttering the words "I do" awards a new identity (husband or wife) that signifies a certain mark of adulthood.

Getting married has long since been part of a socially constructed life progression that individuals cross culturally are bred to follow. Recent research however indicates that marriage is undergoing a vast transformation. In lieu of gaining the title of husband or wife, greater importance is being placed on individual achievement and fulfillment.

In reference to this modern day transformation, Bolick (2011) stated, "this strange state of affairs also presents an opportunity: as the economy evolves, it's time to embrace new ideas about romance and family and to acknowledge the end of traditional marriage as society's highest ideal" (p. 116). But despite attitudes like Bollick's, the negative stereotype attached to a single status continues to persist, specifically in regards to

women. Mounting societal pressure to marry continues to accelerate as a woman reaches her late twenties, and by her thirties she is categorized as a spinster, never having taken part in a marital union and thus never fully gaining her adult identity. Available research has explored the evolution of marriage as well as the motivations that drive marriage but minimal research has examined the stigmatization women of expectant marital age face when regardless of reason remain single.

A Historical Overview of Marriage

<u>The Roots of Marriage</u>

Evidence suggests that the institution of marriage has been in practice for more than four thousand years. As hunter-gatherer civilizations settled into agrarian communities, a certain sense of stability was desired, thus the creation of the family unit. The first recorded evidence of actual marriage ceremonies that joined one woman and one man dates back to 2350 B.C in Mesopotamia (Coontz, 2005). From here, over the next several hundred years, the institution was embraced by ancient Greeks, Romans, and Hebrews as a way of life.

Marital unions created a person's place within society both politically and economically. The institution itself had nothing to do with personal pleasure; it was about joining individuals for the construction of political alliances, and capital gain. For the upper class, marriage was a way to consolidate wealth and power. Unions of this caliber involved the exchange of a dowry or bride wealth that made the marriage a "major economic investment" (Coontz, 2004, p. 977). Middle class unions were established under the same motivation. Hunt (1996) states that " Marriage was the main means of

transferring property, occupational status, personal contacts, money, tools, livestock, and women across generations and kin groups" (p. 151). For the lower class population marriage served both economic and social functions. How would one's mate selection make her or him look within a given social structure? Coontz (2004) points out that, "For all socioeconomic groups, marriage was the most important marker of adulthood and responsibility" (p. 977). It was through marriage that adult identity was gained.

Man Shall Be That He Should Take a Wife

Another primary function of marriage was to bind women to men for the purpose of creating or producing legitimate offspring. Being married also provided assurance that the offspring produced were in fact the man's biological heirs. At this time, men were free, and even encouraged to take several wives to satisfy their sexual needs. Wives were expected to stay home and care for the household. If a wife failed to produce offspring, her husband had the right to return her to her family and marry someone else. During this time period, the institution of marriage was constructed for the purpose of reproduction and male satisfaction (Coontz, 2004; Coontz, 2005).

The eighteenth century integrated religion into the institution of marriage. As the Roman Catholic Church adopted power, so did the necessity of a church sanctioned union where the blessings of a priest were mandatory for the legal recognition of a marriage. It was during the proceedings of the ceremonial unification that the priest would condone the institution between a husband and wife by bestowing the blessings of God upon the union. Some would consider the integration of church sanctioning a progressive movement. Taking multiple wives for sexual practice was no longer deemed acceptable as church blessings demanded that men actually respect their wives by remaining

sexually faithful and forbade the dissolution of the union. Although the integration of religion invoked more consideration for women, the ownership within the institution was still given to men and women were still seen as objects of said ownership (Quale, 1988). Through marriage a wife became the property of her husband while the husband was distinguished as the head of the household.

<u>What's Love Got to Do With It?</u>

Although sanctioned by the church most marriages during this time were of an arranged nature. Families would come together and discuss assets out of practicality to see what potential benefits would result from a particular union. Often, feelings of love and devotion developed after a marriage was established but having these feelings as driving factors of motivation to initially enter the institution was never a consideration. Coontz (2005) posits that:

> Until the late eighteenth century, most societies around the world saw marriage as far too vital an economic and political institution to be left entirely to the free choice of the two individuals involved, especially if they were going to base their decision on something as unreasoning and transitory as love. (p. 5)

The idea of marrying for love is representative of a cultural ideal that during this time was deemed irrational.

Throughout history people have always fallen in love, but rarely was the emotion a considerable factor in the construction of a matrimonious union. Even after a couple was married, love was secondary to all other marital functions. "Couples were not to put their feelings for each other above more important commitments, such as their ties to parents, siblings, cousins, neighbors, or God" (Coontz, 2005, p. 16). Too much love between a husband and wife was presumed disruptive because it "encouraged the couple

to withdraw from the wider web of dependence that made society work" (Coontz, 2005, p.18). Kings and noblemen displayed courtly love for courtesans but not for the wives they married as part of a political and economic venture. Even though Queens and noblewomen had to act in a more discreet manner, they too looked outside of the marriage to satisfy feelings of love and affection. Although love was a desirable quality for a husband and wife, it was not seen as a practical quality and therefore was somewhat frowned upon. During this time in history, people believed that developing financial stability and achieving strong political gain would eventually produce love between a husband and wife.

During the eighteenth century, people began to adopt a new approach to marriage. This new approach classified love as a fundamental reason for marriage and gave individuals free reign to choose their partners based on a romantic affiliation. During this period in history, the institution of marriage was undergoing a reconstruction, revealing a new marriage system where love conquered all. However, from its very inception, this new marriage ideology showed signs of instability. Incorporating love and companionship as the basic goals of a union between a man and woman would no doubt increase satisfaction within a marriage but also "increase the tendency to undermine the stability of marriage as an institution" (Coontz, 2005, p. 5). This shift in tradition found societies struggling to find balance between the love within a marriage and the historical roles men and women would have to play if the marriage were to survive.

The word "love" was not always used to describe feelings of affection and devotion between two individuals. At one point in history, before the ideological shift, the word "love" described feelings that were socially disapproved of. Wives were even

discouraged from using nicknames for their spouse as such terms of endearment devalued the husband's authority within the home and diminished the esteem the wife was supposed to uphold for her husband. This resulted in men and women relating publicly to one another with somewhat negative or condescending undertones in an effort to disguise any feelings of devotion or adoration that may have developed within the marriage. "A husband who demonstrated open affection for his wife, even at home, was seen as having a weak character" (Coontz, 2005, p. 21). Although unions were beginning to assimilate under pretenses of love and emotion, men were still very much the prominent authority figure within the union. Despite the fact that women now had somewhat of a say when it came to selecting a spouse, they were still seen as inferior to the husband.

The Roles We Were Born to Play

As the premise for marrying began to shift, so did the traditional household roles husband and wife played. Even though the reasons to marry had changed, the symbolic nature of the union had not. For centuries, most women and children shared the breadwinning role with the men. It was perfectly acceptable for women to work the field or raise animals to be taken to slaughter and sold at the market. Until the early 1950s, relying on the husband as the sole breadwinner was both unrealistic and rare (Coontz, 2005).

The new marriage progression displayed a series of stages: the student, the spouse, the parent, and finally the housewife (women) or breadwinner (men). Regardless of household role, getting married was still seen as the mark of adulthood that followed the presupposed natural life progression (Cherlin, 2004).

In the 1950s, with love-based marriage now a social norm, Western tradition adopted a new mindset that women were the homemakers, nurturers, caregivers, and subordinates to their husbands. In turn, men were the breadwinners, providers, superiors, and ultimately the head of the household. This natural division of gender roles was the corner stone of what now defined the traditional family (Coontz, 1992). A woman's identity was a derivative of her role as homemaker. Reflecting on the sex-type roles perpetuated by society at this time, Behar (2007) states that "Women, on the other hand, should be submissive, nurturing, gentle, better at language and the humanities, emotional, and desirous of nothing more than a happy family and a husband to provide for her, while she remains at home and tends to the house" (p. 119). At this time in history, there were no contradictory messages about household roles. Women were wives and mothers, the "moral guardians of civilization itself" and were content with their role. Men knew that their job was to protect and provide for the family. They were also seen as the "ultimate source of authority" within the home (Coontz, 1992, p. 43).

The socially constructed rules that governed the family were the same rules that established the marital union in the first place. As a system, the family operated under authoritarian notions rather than transitory emotions. Women were expected to be dependent on their husbands for both financial and emotional security. Men were expected to exhibit independent tendencies that further illustrated their masculinity and authority within the home.

Coontz (2005) discussed four factors that contributed to the sustainment of a marriage at this time. First was the idea that men and women were innately different in almost every way and that women possessed no sexual desire. The second was the

authority parents, relatives, neighbors, church officials, and government had to regulate a person's behavioral choices and resistance to nonconformity. More importance was beginning to be placed on an individual's educational credentials and financial stability than marital status. The third factor that preserved marriage was that fact that birth control was unreliable and having a child out of wedlock produced harsh penalties. The fourth contribution to marriage sustainment was dependence. Women depended on men for legal and economic support and men depended on women for domestic support.

In the 1960s, birth control became a reliable commodity that diminished the fear of unwanted pregnancy and the penalties for producing a child out of wedlock were overturned. Women made huge strides toward personal autonomy in the 1970s and 1980s, which awarded them more self-sufficiency. Men also began experiencing more self-sufficiency in regards to domestic matters within the home. "The proliferation of labor-saving consumer goods undercut men's dependence on women's housekeeping" (Coontz, 2005, p. 5). As the framework of household roles began to deteriorate, so did the ideal of "till death do us part." The once devoted love-based marriage supporters were now advocates for divorce should the love within the union die. Slowly the prototype that once marked adulthood began to change.

Coontz (2005) further states that "As the barriers to single living and personal autonomy gradually eroded, society's ability to pressure people into marrying, or keep them in a marriage against their wishes, was drastically curtailed" (p. 6). Luscombe (2010) reiterated that the changing roles of men and women within a marriage contributed largely to the metamorphosis of the institution. Traditional household roles

where men are the bread winners and women the homemakers were drastically reduced as greater importance was placed on individual education and economic status.

Today, the growing number of college-educated women entering the workplace has developed less from the need to contribute financially, and more from the idea that staying home is simply less appealing and fulfilling. Luciano (2001) posits that:

> Avid middle class pursuit of higher education, especially at graduate and professional levels, deterred growing numbers of young men and women from early marriage. At the same time, greater latitude for sexual experimentation made it less likely that women would marry just to legitimize sexual relations. An emphasis on the importance of self-fulfillment also undermined marriage as a priority for many young Americans. It was during the 1960's that the term "lifestyle" was first used in reference to being single: its significance lay in its suggestion of choice. Marriage was no longer expected but a matter of personal taste, as were alternatives, divorce and cohabitation which became ever more popular. (p. 6)

Statistics reported by the 2010 US Census Bureau show that in 1960, the average age of women at first marriage was 20.3 with a mean age of 26.1 in 2010. The statistics for men showed a similar increase where the mean age of first marriage in 1960 was 22.8 and 28.1 in 2010 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2010). This research indicates that individuals are reprioritizing their lives by putting education and career goals ahead of marriage vows, thus contributing to an older, higher educated, and financially stable population of men and women who in the end seek committed relationships to complement their lifestyles. At one extreme, marriage is seen as a social institution, and entering into such an institution signifies a mark of adulthood and obeys, honors, and cherishes social norms; the adverse of this extreme sees marriage in the historical sense, as a "rational choice" made by individuals when the benefits of the union are greater than the benefits of remaining single (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001, p. 508).

The Rise of the Individual

The new marriage revolution has inadvertently reconstructed how people negotiate all aspects of their personal, interpersonal, professional, and sexual lives. "It has liberated some people from restrictive, inherited roles in society, but it has also stripped others of traditional support systems and rules of behavior without establishing new ones" (Coontz, 2005, p. 6). Many people will establish gratifying marital unions under the new criteria but for some, constructing a life sans a marriage presents a more appealing alternative. The economic strides of women in the workforce have removed the proverbial dowry from the table and replaced it with a new found independence of men (Cherlin, 2010). The new marriage revolution has produced a wave of options for both men and women. For women specifically, reasons to marry no longer include economic growth and financial stability as these are accomplishments they are now able to achieve on their own in the absence of a finding a husband.

Cherlin (2010) examined what he refers to as the "marriage revolution" using two specific cultural models: the American cultural model of marriage and the cultural model of individualism. Cultural models can be described as habits or taken-for-granted ways of interpreting everyday life. In this instance, they are a set of tools individuals draw upon to create and construct meaning. The American cultural model of marriage defines marriage as the pinnacle of adulthood and the best way to live one's life. From this perspective, marriage is a permanent institution consisting of a loving relationship. In addition, the marriage should be sexually exclusive and monogamous. High value is placed on the union and therefore divorce is only acceptable in last resort situations. According to Hackstaff (1999), marriage is a given; it is an institution that everyone must enter into in

order to become an adult. Marriage should also be seen as a sacred institution, one held in high regard. Under the American cultural model, marriage is the brass ring, then end-all-be-all, the preferred way of adult life. Despite the argument made by many today that "marriage is fading away," it is not; it is just taking a backseat to the pursuit of other individual goals and achievements that are acting as the new signifiers of adulthood (Cherlin, 2010).

In contrast, the cultural model of individualism depicts and supports a growing trend in Western Culture that embraces individualistic achievement. Under this model, greater importance is placed on the establishment of one's personal and professional life. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1996) discussed two distinct types of individualism: utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism. Utilitarian individualism emphasizes the individual as the "primary reality" (p. 334). This ontological perspective of individualism promotes working toward material success and the advancement of self-interests. Cherlin (2010) describes the utilitarian individualist as one who is self-reliant, independent and entrepreneurial, hot on the pursuit of material success.

Expressive individualism, derived from the late nineteenth century, is the ontological view that, according to Cherlin (2010), "emphasized the development of one's sense of self, the pursuit of emotional satisfaction, and the expression of one's feelings" (p. 29). The cultural model of individualism operates under the assumption that the self is the most important obligation even above a spouse or child. Romantic partnerships and intimacy are the choice of the individual and a variety of living

arrangements are acceptable. Under the guise of this individualistic model, relationship

dissolution and divorce are justified.

Even though the rise of the individual has brought about new ideals centered on

individual growth and fulfillment, the institution of marriage continues to hold its

eminent status as an important lifetime achievement. The only difference is now that

achievement is taking a backseat to other individual accomplishments and alternative

living arrangements that mirror a marriage are rising in popularity.

A Nation of Cohabitation

Indicative of the corrosion of kinship unions and sex-type gender roles, the

emergence of alternative lifestyles vastly illustrate the autonomy now embraced by

individuals. According to Freeman and Lyon (1983), the censure surrounding alternative

living arrangements such as cohabitation can be attributed to Western society's "limited

to narrow conceptualization of monogamous marriage and the nuclear family as the only

model for intimacy" (p. 44). Despite initial resistance, alternative lifestyles, specifically

cohabitation, have gained a tremendous amount of social acceptance over the past two

decades. The idea of a cohabitating union became popular because of the open

democratic nature it encompassed.

What is it that fuels the growing attraction individuals have to a cohabitating

lifestyle? Researchers hypothesize that a number of factors contribute to the popularity of

the faux-marital union, some of which include; a desire to postpone the assumed roles

that come with marriage, the rejection of state regulated unions that stand to impose legal

impediments and financial responsibilities, and the idea of using cohabitation as a pre-

marriage trial or a test drive of sorts before taking the proverbial plunge. By and large,

the rejection of the formal marriage sanctioned lifestyle is due in part to the reformation of the traditional household roles (Sassler & Miller, 2011). Traditional roles of the past commanded certain financial, political, and even emotional inequalities between men and women. Choosing cohabitation rather than marriage frees the individual of the aforementioned inequalities while still establishing a romantic partnership or union (Freeman & Lyon, 1983; Sassler & Miller, 2011). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are currently over four million cohabitating couples in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2010). This statistic is somewhat astonishing considering that in 1960 the number of those "living in sin" was only around four hundred thousand.

Cohabitating with a significant other does offer a sense of freedom from certain financial and legal obligations; however, it does open a whole new Pandora's Box in regards to the longevity of a relationship. Reinhold (2010) explained that when cohabitation first became popular in the United States it was mainly "a phenomenon of the less educated and economically disadvantaged" (p. 719). Since then, this alternative lifestyle has transcended social class to include all demographics. Theoretically speaking, cohabitation was once thought to have been a logical way of testing out the relationship before entering into a marriage. Teachman (2003) described cohabitation as a type of "screening device, allowing couples to choose a mate with whom they could form a successful marriage" (p. 445). Couples that cohabitate are still in the negotiation stage of their relationship. Although most cohabitating individuals see an engagement in their future, there are still considerable amounts who have no interest in getting married (Sassler & Miller, 2011).

The dividing line between being single and taking part in an unmarried cohabitating relationship is often branded obscure as the road leading to cohabitation is a gradual process rather than a weekend event. Although each cohabitating union is somewhat unique, the establishment process itself usually exhibits certain defining elements such as "regular sexual relations and a common residence" (Thorton, Axinn, & Xie, 2007, p. 79). Typically, cohabitating relationships are entered into with a lower level of commitment than those of unions resulting from a legalized marriage.

Having fewer strings attached provides individuals with an easy escape route should feelings within the union grow sour. According to research conducted by Thorton et al.(2007), "cohabitators have rates of separation that are nearly five times as high as those who are married" (p. 82). It's the easy come, easy go mentality that makes cohabitation such an unstable alternative to marriage.

<u>Single and Ready to…Stay Single?</u>

Trends in favor of individualization project a single status as a trajectory toward freedom. "Modern individuals want more and more control over their own lives. They want to define their own truth, choose their own morality, and take responsibility for their own identities" (Kaufmann, 2008, p. 135). Men who follow this trend are awarded a eulogized autonomy revered by other men, especially those men who have already said, "I do." The implications of a single status for women, however, are not as ostentatious.

For centuries, from one generation to the next, especially in American culture, women have been raised to believe that "their true and most important role in society was to get married and have children" (Mustard, 2000, p. 1). Although the de-institutionalization of marriage and the rise of the individual in some respects paved the

way for modern lifestyles, for women specifically, a single status disrupts the equilibrium

of the socially constructed natural order (Kaufmann, 2008). During the nineteenth

century, women who remained single past the expectant marital age were branded

spinsters. The term itself derived from the act of spinning cloth, a task rendered to

unmarried women as a way of letting them earn their keep. Due to their usually celibate

nature, these women posed a threat to the socially constructed natural order of things and

therefore earned themselves a negative stereotype. Haskell (1988) offered the following

depiction of the spinster:

> Like witch, spinster was a scare word, a stereotype that served to embrace and
> isolate a group of women of vastly different dispositions, talents, situations, but
> whose common bond, never becoming half of a pair, was enough to throw into
> question the rules and presumed priorities on which society was founded. (p. 2)

The classic stereotype of the spinster encompasses a barren, childless, shrew of a

woman, who is mousy in demeanor. The spinster was one who lived in violation of the

natural foundation of the very civilization she inhabited (Hill, 2001). The unmarried

woman was nothing without a man.

In order to gain acceptance, women who remained single despite circumstance

had to display exceptional abilities that illustrated complete self-sufficiency. Few women

were able to adequately allegorize the model of independence that had been constructed

for them, and those outliers who did achieve autonomy were still subordinate to men in

one way or another (Kaufmann, 2008). Now fast forward two centuries later to present

day, a time when women have overcome many of the inequality obstacles they once

faced. Much of the gendered oppression that once existed has been eradicated. "A smaller

portion of American women in their early thirties are married than at any point since the

1950s, if not earlier" (Bolick, 2011, p. 120). Women no longer need a husband to achieve

financial security, or to bear a child; however, despite the extraordinary advances women have displayed, and the deinstitutionalization that marriage has undergone, the spinster stereotype persists.

<u>Perception Is Reality</u>

The ideology of marriage has been described by researchers as a rational next step taken by individuals who adhere to the belief that entering into a marriage will result in a happier more fulfilling existence (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). The differences in perceptions surrounding married people and those who remain single are somewhat astounding. DePaulo and Morris (2006) found that married people were more likely to be described as, "mature, stable, honest, kind, and loving. Singles were more often called immature, in-secure, self-centered, unhappy, lonely, and ugly" (p. 251). For women, finding a husband facilitates an adult identity that, generally speaking, lacks in the absence of a marriage.

Conventional marital ideology perpetuates the notion that a woman does not have an adult identity except in relation to another. She must be a daughter, a wife, or a mother in order to exist. Men however are just men regardless of title or status. Sharp and Ganong (2011) stated that, "Accepted notions of femininity remain based on women having a connection with a man to protect and care for her" (p. 2). Current research shows that although singlehood has become increasingly more popular, Western culture values marriage so much that remaining single past the expectant marital age is still a stigmatizing condition, especially for women (Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2007).

Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) posit that:

> Women in long-term relationships do not tend to be asked (in a concerned tone of voice), for example, 'how did you end up married?' Apology and confession are not the dominant discursive genres for these accounts. The single woman, in contrast, is expected to have an explanation for her 'condition', preferably a story of 'circumstances' and 'missed opportunities' or one that blames herself for being 'unable to hold on to her man. (p. 490)

For a woman, embracing a single status in her late twenties and into her mid-thirties is like being in limbo (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Despite accomplishing education and career goals, or achieving financial security, a woman is not fully accomplished until she has said, "I do."

Theoretical Framework

The Social Constructivist Perspective

The claims made in the previous review of literature regarding the stigmatization of single women are both supported and complicated when examined from a social constructionist perspective. Social construction theorists posit that "meaning is created through countless interactions with the environment" (Aniciete & Soloski, 2011, p. 104). These theorists are interested in the creation of meaning through interaction not the objective reality. Social construction theorists argue that knowledge is derived and maintained through social interactions. Harris (2006) stated that, "Scholars increasingly recognize that human beings live in socially constructed realities – in worlds of objects whose meaning is indeterminate until ordered in social interaction" (p. 224). Even the most basic, taken for granted, common sense understandings of reality are the product of our interaction and conversation with others (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Social constructs are not inherent but rather dependent or contingent upon variables of our social

selves. Knowledge is not a fixed entity but an evolving process that occurs through the interactions that take place with others (Hoffman, 1990). Aniciete and Soloski (2011) noted that, "Dominant beliefs within society, and also ourselves, influence each individual's perception of what is real" (p. 104). The concept of marriage is a well-established construction of society. Despite its changes over the last several hundred years, marriage is still an institution that perpetuates the stigmatization of single women. Research indicates that certain dominant beliefs regarding women who remain single past the expectant marital age hold a negative connotation that women internalize and adopt as truth (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). This negative reality cultivates the inequality that bolsters the stereotypical beliefs surrounding single women.

Evans (1995) noted that, "Equality capability is now hidden by stereotypical beliefs held about women" (p. 13). Current societal views reflect a flawed perception of today's single woman. Whereas the new marital institution endorses individualism and personal achievement prior to marriage, conventional marital ideology maintains that if a woman has not achieved marital status by the expectant age, something is wrong with her. The tension between these old and new constructs is what deters her from gaining autonomy and ultimately the attainment of sameness. The constructivist perspective will examine how women "interpret indeterminate situations as putative examples" (Harris, 2006, p. 221). This perspective is not concerned with the cause and effect of women being single, rather the investigation of how women create the meaning that explains their single status. It is also important to note that from a social constructivist perspective, one interpretation does not hold more validity than another.

The Social Construction of the Modern Day Spinster

Current research denotes trends that illustrate the deinstitutionalization marriage has undergone (Cherlin, 2010; Coontz, 2005). Marriage has come a long way from its once arranged contractual nature. But despite this evident transformation, single individuals are consistently stigmatized. For women specifically, marriage is destiny. Women are born and bred to fulfill certain domestic roles. However, this notion is not inherent. Rather, it is an ideal that has been established as a dominant ideology through that adoption of traditional social constructs.

A contributing factor associated with the deinstitutionalization of marriage is economic transformation. As society increasingly becomes an individualistic entity and women continue to surpass men in career advancement and educational achievement (Coontz, 2005), more women are entering into marriage as established, educated, equal partners. The proverbial dowry with which women once entered a marriage still exists; the only difference is that under the new institution she earns the dowry herself.

This is of particular interest considering that single women are continually stigmatized for being single. Even though current trends favor individualization and personal achievement, dominant societal constructs brand single women as inferior and incomplete. A woman is not simply born a woman. She becomes a woman through her embodied situation within the world (Moi, 1999). Getting married puts women in the "embodied situation" deemed necessary by socially constructed standards.

Although the confinement of gender roles is fading, the societal view as a collective is still in a period of transition. A woman who remains single goes against the

traditional form and creates an uneasy feeling; thus, a negative stereotype (the spinster) is assigned in attempt to explain, rationalize, or excuse her single status.

<u>The Construct of Women as "Other"</u>

Research has explored the existence of a woman's identity in conjunction with her connection to a man (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Constructionist theorist posit that the socially constructed world must be continually negotiated by the individual in order for the individual to remain part if it (Berger & Kellner, 1964). Women negotiate and justify their existence by gaining a title (wife) that ties them to a man in order to avoid being classified as other. Berger and Kellner (1964) note that from a constructionist perspective, "The individual is given by his society certain decisive cornerstones for his everyday experience and conduct" (p. 221). These cornerstones are what define women. They are part of the constructed life order. "The ordering begins and is formed in the individual from the earliest stages of socialization on, then keeps on being enlarged and modified by himself throughout his biography" (Berger & Kellner, 1964, p. 221). This order is not chosen by women, rather it is discovered externally through countless interactions with others.

Because women are always defined and differentiated in reference to another, single women who do not follow the constructed order are left without an identity and therefore are given the collective stigmatized identity of spinster. Unwillingness to conform to the traditional framework of the family unit causes unwarranted stigmatization to occur.

Women who remain single are often seen as something other than whole (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Their existence is thought of as transitional, a waiting period before

they enter into a marriage and ultimately become complete. This stigmatization is of particular interest because most of the constructs that once justified it have since been diminished. Women today should be able to do anything a man can do. Beasley (2005) promulgated that, "women are not fundamentally different to men and yet are denied opportunities on the basis of their sex" (p. 53). Even though the playing field has become substantially more equal between women and men, single women past a certain age are still regarded as incomplete beings and are still required to justify their existence not only to the outside world, but also to themselves.

Although the literature surrounding marriage discusses the stigmatization of women who remain single, few studies have explored the tensions that occur as women attempt to negotiate these stereotypes within their everyday lives. Examining the gender roles that single women adopt would expand on the current literature and provide a deeper understanding of these roles from a communicative perspective.

RQ: How do single women of expectant marital age characterize and negotiate their identities given perceived expectations of gender roles and marriage?

CHAPTER TWO: METHOD

In an effort to better understand the stigmatization of today's single woman, a qualitative method using focus groups was adopted for this study. Qualitative research methodologies assume the researcher is the primary observer. By incorporating qualitative methodologies, the researcher becomes the instrument of data collection and ascertains an active, subjective role while maintaining a certain level of objectivity (Keyton, 2011). The goal of this research was to investigate the social identities of women who remain single past the age of twenty-five, and to gain an understanding of how gender-based stereotypes influence their lives by examining their personal experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Focus Group Methodology

Focus group methodology allows the researcher to observe interactions between participants central to the research topic. From a social constructionist perspective, it was important to have participants interact with each other in order to properly ascertain how the spinster stereotype is negotiated. Conducting one-on-one interviews would have compromised the richness of the data because this study was concerned with how women negotiate and make meaning of their single status through their daily interactions with others. Observing group interaction as opposed to individual interviews offers participants the opportunity to share their viewpoints while reflecting on the viewpoints of others (Keyton, 2011; Kleman, Everett, & Egbert, 2009). This type of methodology

produced a group understanding of the spinster stereotype based on the ideas generated during participant interaction.

Three focus groups consisting of six participants each and one focus group consisting of seven participants comprised the sample for this study. Groups consisting of less than five participants often experience difficulty generating adequate conversation, and more than ten participants in one group can make it difficult for the facilitator to control the group. Large groups also make it difficult for every participant to have the opportunity to speak (Keyton, 2011; Krueger & Casey, 2000). Focus group participants were guided in a discussion geared toward establishing: (1) the current ideals surrounding the institution of marriage, (2) the implications associated with a single status, (3) the gendered differences that accompany said implications, and (4) how these implications influence their everyday lives (See Appendix A). The goal of this semi-directed discourse was to discover common themes that emerged from the participants' points of view.

A moderator possessing similar characteristics to those of the participants facilitated the group discussion while the researcher observed and made field notes. Using a focus group outline, the moderator facilitated a semi-structured discussion for the duration of approximately 90 minutes. This time frame adequately allowed an introduction, meaningful discussion, and conclusion for each group conducted. The group discussions were audio taped so that the sessions could later be reviewed, transcribed, and analyzed. Each of the four discussion session transcripts were examined alongside field notes that described issues apparently most salient to the participants as well as topics or issues that were avoided by the group (Keyton, 2011).

Participants

Twenty-five participants were selected using a purposive, inclusion/exclusion sampling technique. These forms of nonprobability sampling were important in order to handpick respondents who met the needs of the study. Selecting cases that were typical of the population of interest generated the most relevant results considering the study's aim (see Keyton, 2011). Participants selected were never married, heterosexual, single women, between the ages of twenty-five and forty. This age range was determined using current research surrounding the stereotype attached to single women today. According to current research, women are expected to marry by the time they reach their mid-twenties and women who remain single past age forty are no longer considered viable marriage prospects (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Sharp & Ganong, 2011).

In addition to possessing characteristics indicative of the selection criteria, participants were also strangers, having never been acquainted with one another while still possessing homogeneous backgrounds (Keyton, 2011). Incorporating non-acquainted participants allowed for variation and contrasting opinions within the group (Keyton, 2011; Krueger & Casey, 2000). Participants were also selected based on their interest in the study as well as their ability to provide rich data pertaining to the research topic (See Appendix B).

Data Analysis

Keyton (2011) suggested that although data analysis and data interpretation are in some ways synonymous, it is important for the researcher to regard the two as individual steps in the study. Analysis is described as the process of breaking down the information collected to identify patterns and themes that exist within the dataset. Interpretation

occurs when the researcher assigns meaning to the patterns or themes identified during the data analysis.

The audiotaped data collected from the four focus groups were transcribed word for word and compared to the field notes taken during each group discussion. Upon transcription completion, the coding process began. Coding or labeling the identified pattern operationally defines or describes the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998). I used open, axial, and selective coding to analyze the data. Open coding, or the initial unrestricted pass through the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Keyton, 2011) was used during the first phase of analysis. During this phase, phrases such as "fear of being alone," "fear of doing it all alone," "not having someone to turn to in stressful situations," "not having someone to celebrate good times with," "feeling family pressure," "not a whole person," "envy toward others who are married," "jealousy towards married friends," "getting too old to have a baby," "fear of being a single mother," "tired of dating," and "coming home to an empty house" all emerged from the dataset. At this stage in the analysis, I was not concerned with specific categories; rather, the phrases retrieved made up the initial concepts that emerged from the dataset.

Once the open coding phase was complete, I began the process of axial coding. This phase allowed me to link the phrases that emerged during the open coding phase together and apply them to the dataset to see what categories begin to emerge (see Corbin & Strauss, 1990). I took the phrases retrieved during the open coding phase and began linking them together in a meaningful way. The axial coding process produced categories that encompassed ideas surrounding the need to meet societal expectations, having

children, motherhood, loneliness, companionship, love, fitting in, the biological clock, financial stress, supporting a family, and family pressure.

Lastly, the data were selectively coded to establish interrelationships among the categories that emerged during the axial coding process (see Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The selective coding process helped me identify interrelated categories such as having a child and motherhood; fear of being alone, loneliness, and companionship; financial support, financial stress, and financial advantages; emotional support/stability and love.

Once the interrelated categories were established, I began the process of interpreting the occurrence of each episode. Using thematic analysis to interpret the categorized data, I was able to identify reoccurring themes. Formally thematic analysis is defined as, "A method of qualitative analysis based on participants' conceptions of actual communication episodes; a theme is identified based on recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness" (Keyton, 2011, p. 313). This method of analysis was deemed most conducive to this particular study because the participants' viewpoints regarding the stigmatization of their single status and the influence the stigmatization presented in their lives were the primary considerations guiding this thesis.

CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS

The opportunity to observe and participate in discussions centered on single women's reported identities was both enlightening and empowering. As a researcher, I was amazed at the willingness and openness the women displayed as they discussed, with complete strangers, their feelings associated with the stigmatization of a single status. Within the focus groups, the women discussed and shared personal stories of how they negotiate their status as a single woman in their everyday interactions with family, friends, co-workers, and other general acquaintances.

Analyzing the stigmatization of single women from a social constructionist perspective led to interesting findings regarding certain ideals women connected with their single status. From the focus group data, four themes were identified: 1) Companionship, love, and intimacy; 2) Reproductive needs and concerns; 3) Economic and financial stability; and 4) Feeling incomplete and inadequate. The first theme was composed of the categories that addressed concerns of loneliness, companionship, and love. The second theme consisted of the categories that addressed having children, motherhood, and the biological clock. The third theme included categories that expressed ideas of financial stress, supporting a family, financial gains resulting from marriage, and partnership. The fourth and final theme emerged from categories that addressed the need to meet certain societal expectations. These four themes accounted for most of the focus group data and will be discussed in the following section.

The Desire to Belong: Companionship and Intimacy

This theme centered on the need participants had to be connected to a man. The women in the focus groups expressed a strong desire to become part of a union and to have an intimate connection with a partner while at the same time remaining independent and autonomous. This revealed a contradiction women were experiencing as they began to rationalize what they felt they should want, according to societal expectations, versus what they actually want according to their internal expectations.

During the focus group discussions, many of the participants expressed a desire for companionship, but also expressed a strong desire to maintain a sense of individuality. Sally stated, "It would be nice to have someone to come home to at the end of the day, but right now my focus is on my education and career." Jennifer added, "I always feel like my co-workers who are married feel sorry for me because I'm single and I live alone. I definitely want to get married and have someone to share my life with, but it just hasn't happened yet." Participants also shared feelings of frustration when discussing societal expectations surrounding companionship. Josie stated:

> It's not like I'm glad I'm single or that I want to be alone. I would love to be in a stable relationship where I was happily married, but I'm also not going to settle for the first man who shows interest. I'm fine with who I am [single]; it's everyone else that seems to have a problem with my single status.

Reflecting on societal expectations, Anna shared this story:

> I dated the wrong man for five years and I was miserable, but I stayed in it because I was afraid of being alone. The thought of being single was actually more terrifying than getting out of my five-year abusive relationship. When I finally did end the relationship, everyone around me was shocked and almost worried that I was now on my own.

The women in the focus groups consistently expressed a desire for companionship; however, there was a general consensus that this desire was fueled by societal pressure.

Many of the participants also expressed a desire for intimacy in conjunction with their desire for companionship. Lori stated:

> It's one thing to have someone just for the sake of not being alone, but it's another thing to have someone you really connect with. I've dated a lot of guys that I'm sure I would have been fine settling down with, but the intimate connection just wasn't there. When I finally decide to get married I want there to be that strong intimate connection between me and my husband.

Allison lamented on the importance of intimacy when she shared this:

> I was engaged and just weeks away from my actual wedding, and then I woke up one day and realized that I wasn't marrying the right person. Looking back, I think that I was just going along with what everyone else [family and friends] wanted for me, and I was so afraid of shattering their expectations that I almost went through with it. My fiancé was a great guy, but there was never really any true intimacy. On paper things were perfect; I just know that eventually things would have ended badly. After we called things off, everyone was so devastated for me. You would have thought I had just been diagnosed with some kind of terminal illness because I was still going to be single.

Although companionship was of great importance to the participants, having companionship without intimacy seemed not worth having at all. Obtaining a close intimate companion was also something that many of the participants viewed as a vital component regarding sexual practice. Helen stated, "Sex is something that everyone needs and wants, but I'm not about to satisfy the urge with some guy I meet at a bar." Amy added, "If a guy goes out and has a one night stand, his buddies are high-fiving him the next day, but if a girl has a one night stand, she's just a slut." It was evident again from the group discussions that societal expectations greatly influenced the expectations the women held for themselves. Brittney stated, "I had a one night stand once after I had just gotten out of a two-year relationship. For some reason I thought it would be good to just put myself out there, but instead I felt horrible."

The Desire to Reproduce: The Biological Clock

This theme illustrated the participant's need to follow a socially constructed life progression. Prior research revealed that producing offspring has been a primary function of marital unions since the 18th century (Coontz, 2004; Coontz, 2005; Quale, 1988). Research indicates that having children is part of a natural life order.

In this study, the participants indicated that they felt pressure to get married because of their need and desire to have children. For example, Lacey said, "I worry all the time about whether I'll have kids or not. I've always wanted to have a family, but now that I'm in my late thirties and still single, I'm not so sure I will get the chance [to have children]." Teresa stated, "I know you don't have to have a husband to have children, but who grows up thinking, you know, one day I'm going to make a really great single mom." Lacey added, "I've been groomed to be a mother since I was a little girl. I remember playing with my dolls as a child and my mother telling me that one day I would have real babies of my own." This theme was consistent throughout all of the focus group discussions.

Participants expressed feelings of anguish as they discussed the socially constructed natural order they felt they should follow. Jasmine stated, "I think that I've never got direct pressure but when I'm out with my family, I see my sister who is married with kids and I just feel like she has it more together than I do."

When talking about her life plan, Belinda shared, "I never imagined my life this way. I thought by now I would be happily married with at least three kids, but I'm almost forty and not even in a serious relationship." Jane expressed, with tears in her eyes:

I have four nephews and three nieces and I love them so much, but sometimes when I'm with them I just get so sad. They remind me that I don't have a family of my own and that is something that I should have by now, it's something that I've always wanted. I look at my siblings who are all married and who all have kids and I'm jealous of their lives.

Many of the participants talked about this particular theme with a sense of frustration and sadness. The participants attributed much of the stigmatization they experience as single women to the fact that they do not follow the expected, natural order of things: getting married and having a family. Samantha shared that she felt she no longer fit in with her circle of friends because she is not married and does not have children:

I have a group of five girlfriends that I've been friends with since college. Out of the five of us, I'm the only one who is single and childless. Whenever we all get together I feel like I have nothing to contribute [to the conversation] because I don't have kids. Also, sometimes it almost seems like my girlfriends feel sorry for me because I don't have what they have.

Many of the participants also referenced an "unfair advantage" that men have regarding reproduction. Mary stated, "Men can reproduce until the day they die but I only have a certain number of eggs and a certain number of years that I will be able to carry a baby." This sentiment was also shared by Jennifer, "Now that I'm approaching forty, I worry a lot about my fertility." For many of the participants, the most prevalent concern regarding reproduction was that they were not following the socially constructed natural order of life progression. Ashley stated, "It's just what you're supposed to do. You meet a man, fall in love, get married, and start a family." Rhonda agreed when she said, "… if you don't do all these things then something must be wrong with you. People never ask me about my education or my career, but they always want to know why I haven't settled down and had a family."

The consensus among the focus group participants regarding reproductive desires and needs both reaffirmed and contradicted the claims expressed in the existing literature. Current empirical research shows that women are seeking individualistic autonomy; however, this study indicates that they feel bad for wanting education and careers before having a family.

The Desire for Economic Stability: From Bread Maker to Bread Winner

For most of the participants, achieving a married status was a vital precursor to reproduction because of the economic stability a marital union can provide. This theme developed from the desire expressed by participants to gain economic stability and equality with their married peers. Stability and equality seemed to be the most emphasized factors. Economic stability was important because of the participant's single status. Participants explained that if they were to have children on their own, they wanted to be financially stable enough to provide for the child. Economic equality was important for the attainment of sameness. Many of the participants felt that they were at a disadvantage [in a financial sense] because they are single.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that the average middle-income family with one child can expect to spend roughly $235,000 for food, shelter, and other necessities just to raise the child to the age of eighteen (Doering, 2012). However, Holly lamented, "At this point in my life, I'm okay with having children without a husband. What I'm not okay with is the financial stress that comes along with being a single parent." With the current cost of child care increasing dramatically since the USDA first reported on it 51 years ago (Doering, 2012), Holly continued:

If I decide to have a baby on my own, I am also deciding to take on all the responsibility; there is no option of a joint family income. I won't have anyone else to rely on. My married friends have the option of being stay-at-home moms while their husbands go to work. I would be going into this knowing that I have to work full-time, which means time away from my baby and day care costs. It's just an added layer of financial stress that I would have that my married friends don't just because I'm single.

 Regardless of relational status, women tend to be primary caregivers within the home; as a result, they often end up working lower paying jobs that offer more flexibility when it comes to hours and sick leave. Marisa reflected on her own childhood experience being raised by a single mom, "I saw firsthand how hard it is to be a single mom. My dad was never in the picture, and my mom worked full-time and then some to make sure my sister and I were taken care of." Although the need and desire to reproduce is strong, it was a general consensus among participants that entering into parenthood is less desirable from a financial standpoint without a husband. Mary added:

I am fully prepared to become a parent on my own if I don't get married in the next three years, but the thing I really worry about is carrying the sole financial burden. It's a lot to know that I will only have myself to depend on financially, and that I will be providing for my kid(s) all by myself.

Further perpetuating the stigmatization of single women is the significant difference in earning potential. It is widely reported that men on average have higher earning potential than women. In 1967, women earned approximately 58 percent of what men earned. In 1997, the wage gap narrowed to approximately 73 percent (Doering, 2012). Given statistics like these, women are placed at a financial disadvantage. Many participants reinforced the research findings of Goldstein and Kenney (2001) that individuals were deemed more productive financially as a joint economic unit. Allison stated, "I have a good job, make a decent living, but I always compare myself to my married co-workers who have nicer homes and drive nicer cars all because they have

husbands who add to the checking account." The desire to become part of a joint

economic unit was explicitly expressed by the majority of participants. Sally stated:

> Society today just caters to married people. If you're married you get better insurance rates, and better tax breaks. It's like they design these programs to screw over singles and it's ten times worse if you're a girl. Every year when I go to get my taxes done they automatically ask for my husband's information. It's embarrassing when I'm like, oh, no husband, it's just me.

Sheila shared in this sentiment when she said:

> The same thing happens to me all the time. People just always assume that I have a husband and then when I correct them, it's like they feel bad that I don't and then I feel bad. I just don't understand why it can't just be me.

Once again the women illustrate the tensions they are negotiating. They know that

they are doing fine on their own but they are also aware that they could be doing better

[financially] if they were part of a joint economic unit. Gaining the financial stability that

accompanies a joint family income continues to be a highly prevalent factor that creates

more pressure for women to enter into a marriage. This societal pressure furthers the

stigmatization of the single woman, adding to her perceptions of inadequacy and

incompleteness.

The Desire to Be Complete: Feeling Inadequate and Incomplete

The fourth and final theme was based on the need participants expressed to be

seen as complete beings who had achieved adult status. Reflective of current research,

women are not complete until they have entered into a marital union (Morris et al., 2007;

Sharp & Ganong, 2011). However, the stigmatization of the unmarried woman transcends

modern empirical research. Amazon.com currently lists over 43,000 books geared toward

helping women find a husband (Amazon.com). Even biblical references reinforce the

idea of a woman existing from a man. Genesis 2:23 of The Bible reads:

> Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman', for she was taken out of man.

Despite the tremendous strides women have made regarding autonomy and self-sufficiency, the spinster stereotype remains. There is a socially constructed life order that individuals are expected to follow if they are to be considered "normal" (Cherlin, 2010; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Sylvia shared her experience of what she was taught to be "normal" when she was growing up:

> There was always just a certain order that things were supposed to follow. I was supposed to graduate high school and go to college to not only get a degree but to also find a husband. That's just how it was supposed to be. It didn't work out that way for me and now I feel like I'm stuck and I can't move on to other things.

Many of the participants described their single status as a waiting period. Although they had achieved many goals of adulthood such as education and career, they still viewed themselves as incomplete because of their single status.

Focus group participants agreed with the ideas expressed by Jane who stated:

> I feel like I can't move on with my life until after I get married which is crazy because I've done all the other adult things. I graduated college, I went to grad school, I own a house, but I still feel like I'm not a real grown up.

Some of the participants seemed to internalize the feelings of inadequacy projected by their single status more than others. Marcia stated, "I'm not in any rush to get married. I'm only twenty-five years old, but I do feel pressure from my family and some of my friends to settle down, it's like they're in a rush for me." However, for the most part, participants expressed some degree of anxiety regarding their single status like Cindy did when she said, "…sometimes in certain situations like work functions or family gatherings, I'm embarrassed that I'm still single."

Many of the participants attributed their feelings of inadequacy to societal pressures that they have come to internalize as their own. Susie shared this thought concerning her feelings of inadequacy:

> I was at a baby shower not too long ago and the older ladies kept asking me when I was going to have a baby. Then one lady announced to the group that they needed to get me married off first. I was so embarrassed. I guess I never fully realized how people really see me, now these thoughts are constantly in the back of my mind and I'm constantly comparing myself to my friends who are married and who do have kids.

Many of the participants felt that their single status discredited many of their major life achievements. Norma said, "Family gatherings, especially during the holidays, are the absolute worst. Everyone always wants to know what's going on in my love life, and if I'm dating anyone. No one ever asks me about my education or career." Patti echoed this sentiment when she stated, "I feel the same way. It makes me feel bad that me being single overshadows everything else I've accomplished in my life." Participants agreed that the pressure they feel from others concerning their single status has now become a pressure they apply to themselves. Kristen lamented:

> Last summer I attended my 20 year high school reunion and at the last minute I decided to wear a fake wedding ring just so I could avoid having to explain that I'm not married yet. I'm not sure why I felt that I needed to wear the ring, but somehow I just felt more secure going in.

These sentiments aligned with those expressed in current research. Women construct their realities within the context of their perceived expectations. They feel as though something is wrong with them if they are not able to achieve a married status (Mustard, 2000). Although the word "spinster" is an antiquated term, the concept is still very much alive, and women are still struggling to justify their single status to themselves and to those around them.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align and also complicate the claims made in previous research regarding the stigmatization single women of expectant marital age experience. Prior research describes marriage as a rational next step taken by individuals who adhere to the belief that entering into a marriage will result in a happier and more productive, fulfilling existence (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Past research also indicates that married people are often deemed happier and more successful than those who are single. According to Dush and Amato (2005), "Happy, contented partnerships lead to greater well-being than unhappy ones do, of course; nevertheless, most people feel more fulfilled even in an unhappy relationship than they do when they're completely alone" (p. 611). Researchers posit that for women specifically, finding a husband facilitates an adult identity that, generally speaking, lacks in the absence of a marriage. The results of this study however indicate that not only is this ideology socially constructed, it also perpetuates the stigmatization of single women. Embracing a social constructionist perspective was useful for revealing the tensions inherent in negotiating the reified understandings of how women feel they should be versus how they actually want to be.

Conventional marital ideology adopts the notion that single women are incomplete beings in the absence of another (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Participants of this study discussed at great length the feelings they associate with their status as single women and how most of those feelings hold a

negative connotation. Many of the participants talked a lot about companionship and their need to belong to another. Theorists Baumeister and Leary (1995) posit that individuals need frequent interaction with intimate partners in conjunction with long-term, caring relationships in order to function normally.

These results mirrored the claims made in prior research which explored a woman's existence in conjunction with her connection to a man (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Prior research indicates that women gain their adult identity through their connection to a man which generally manifests itself in the form of marriage (Kaufmann, 2008; Morris et al.,2007; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). The results of this study show that women who remain single are in fact able to gain an adult identity without a marriage, but that without a husband they feel that adult identity lacks certain credibility. These results also confirm claims made by theorists who claim that the perception today's single women is misconstrued. This skewed perception stigmatizes women who remain single past the expectant marital age, and perpetuates their need to belong to another.

However, this study further supports the dialectical notion of autonomy and connectedness (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Many of the women talked about how they enjoyed the independent nature of their single status, but that the pressure they felt to get married from outside sources, such as family, friends, and coworkers, seemed to diminish the sense of pride that accompanied their independence. This tension was particularly interesting given current research indicating that marriage is secondary to individual goals and achievements. Even the participants who had achieved education goals and career success felt that many of their lifetime achievements were overshadowed

by their single status. Despite their accomplishments, the women still expressed feelings of failure that seemed directly related to their single status. This sense of failure seemed to stem from societal expectations that the women both consciously and subconsciously adopted as their own.

Another theme that emerged from this study was single women's concern with reproduction. This theme was of particular interest because it was not largely discussed in the existing research surrounding marriage and single women. The majority of participants in this study indicated that much of the marital pressure they experienced came from an internal need to reproduce. It is also noteworthy to mention that this internal pressure seemed to stem from external societal pressure that the women experienced. Many of the participants talked about how they felt capable of having and raising a child on their own, but were wary of the ramifications that could accompany such an obvious violation of societal expectations. Prior research posits that producing offspring has traditionally been seen as a primary function of marital unions (Coontz, 2004; Coontz, 2005; Quale, 1988); however, the research did not see reproduction as a societal pressure that would push individuals toward marriage. Age was also a prevalent concern underlining this theme. Many of the participants mentioned that reaching advanced maternal age added additional pressure and further perpetuated their need to enter into a marital union.

The need to reproduce children and have a family was closely linked to a third theme regarding economic stability. This discussion was centered on the financial disadvantage the women felt they would face if they raised a child on their own. Prior research indicates that women tend to be the primary caregivers within the average

American home (Doering 2012; Goldstein & Kenney, 2001), and as a result often work in lower-paying jobs that offer more flexibility regarding scheduling hours. Participants in this study reinforced these ideas and lamented on the challenges that single parents face. They further mentioned that society as a whole, especially Western culture, is not constructed to cater to the single parent. This idea closely mirrors findings in prior research concerning gender roles. These claims state that once love-based marriage became the social norm within Western culture, the roles of women were those of homemakers and caregivers, whereas men were thought of as superiors and providers (Cherlin, 2004; Coontz, 2005). Although participants in this study found these ideas outdated in theory, the majority found that they were still influenced by this mindset.

It was particularly interesting to discover that, for the most part, the women seemed to be at odds with their simultaneous need to follow new constructs that favor individual autonomy and their desire to conform to the outdated ideals of the past. As previously mentioned, many of the participants had achieved great accomplishments regarding their education and careers. However, the majority of the participants still expressed feelings of inadequacy and incompleteness because of their single status. There was a general consensus determined among participants that these feelings of inadequacy and incompleteness contributed greatly to the stigmatization they experienced as single women. It was frequently mentioned that being single was similar to being in a sort of limbo or transitory phase. These ideals reinforced prior research that depicted marriage as the ultimate marker of adulthood. Prior research also defined marriage as a way individuals gain their adult identity (Cherlin, 2010; Coontz, 2005; Goldstein & Kenny, 2001; Hackstaff, 1999). Results from this indicate that single women are able to gain an

adult identity, but they believe the identity is not validated without a marriage. These results illustrate the ongoing occurrence of the stigmatization women experience for remaining single.

Conclusion

Although marriage and singlehood have been widely studied, few studies have explored the stigmatization single women experience once they have reached the expectant marital age. This is pertinent given the tremendous strides women have made and are continuing to make regarding education and career. This study provides an in-depth account of how women feel about their single status as well as how they negotiate that status in their communication and interaction with others.

This research helps increase the understanding of how single women view their position within society, expands the minimal work done concerning the spinster stereotype and its prevalence within Western culture today, and brings to light the dialectic tensions women experience based on their single status. The analysis of the dialectic tensions is an important contribution to current research; this is the reality single women are living today.

Beyond the benefits to scholarly work, having more information about the stigmatization single women experience promotes general awareness and provides women the opportunity to establish a communicative connection to one another.

Implications and Limitations

For this study, three focus groups consisting of six participants and one focus group consisting of seven participants was included. All twenty-five participants were

female and between ages twenty-five and forty. Although the sample provided adequate representation of age, occupation, and education level, it was limited in racial and ethnic diversity, geographic diversity, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation.

It is important to recognize that this study was limited geographically, as it was conducted solely in Boise, Idaho. It would be of particular interest to see how single women of different demographics interpret their status and also to investigate whether the stigmatization is as prevalent. Racial diversity was also a significant limitation in this study. Twenty-four of the participants were Caucasian American and one participant was Asian American. It would be interesting to see how similarly situated women from varying racial backgrounds feel about being single and also how they negotiate their status.

Given that this study focused strictly on heterosexual women, future research may find it useful to include homosexual women in the sample. It would be beneficial to know if same-sex oriented women experience similar stigmatization regarding a single status past the expectant marital age, given that they are not legally granted the right to marry. Another significant limitation is religious affiliation. Although it was discussed in the research regarding the history of marriage, it was not factored into the research surrounding single women and the spinster stereotype.

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APENDIX A

Focus Group Interview Protocol

Focus Group Protocol Outline

These questions are intended to initiate conversation among volunteer focus group participants as share their experiences as they pertain to the stigmatization of single women over age twenty-five. This series of opening questions will start the initial group conversation and ensure that all desired topics are explored. Opening questions are broadly based to encourage free discussion among participants. As participants become more comfortable with one another the moderator will move to incorporate more structured discussion questions (Keyton, 2011). Each participant will have the opportunity to reflect on the questions.

Introduction/Ice breaker:

Thank you all for agreeing to participate in this focus group. One of the things I am especially interested in is your status as a single woman over the age of twenty-five.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does it mean to be single?

2. Why are you single?

3. Do family and friends ever ask you why you are still single?

    a. Describe when this question is most often asked?

    b. Are there specific occasions when you are asked this question?

4. How do you talk about being single?

    a. Do you ever feel that you have to provide justifications for your single status?

b. Describe the association you have with this term (i.e. negative, positive, or both).

5. Have you ever felt that you were incomplete because you do not have a husband?

a. Can you describe these feelings?

b. When do these feelings of incompleteness most often occur?

6. Do you ever feel that the expectations of other (i.e. friends, family members, etc…) make you feel incomplete because you are not married?

a. Describe these feelings.

b. When do these feelings most often occur?

7. Do you ever feel judged for being a single woman?

a. What factors contribute to this feeling (i.e. internal/external)?

8. Are you fulfilled with your life as a single woman?

a. If you were married would your life be more fulfilling (more complete)?

b. Do you feel incomplete because you are single?

c. Are you stereotyped for being single?

9. Do you feel that women should, "have it all," or is it acceptable to choose between a education/career and a relationship/marriage?

APPENDIX B

Interview Request

Focus Group Participant Request Email

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by a graduate student in the Department of Communication at Boise State University. The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the stigmatization associated with women who remain single past the age of twenty-five. This is an opportunity for you to share and discuss your views on the subject.

Participants will be never married, single women, between the ages of twenty-five and forty. You have been selected because you fit the selection criteria. Research will be conducted via a focus group where you will be asked to share your experience with five other participants who also fit the selection criteria. Estimated time to complete the focus group will be 90 minutes. The group discussion will be conducted and audio taped on the Boise State University campus in room C-138 of the Communication building. Parking passes will be provided the day of the focus group session.

Risks associated with participating in this study include loss of confidentiality and feeling emotional stress as you discuss the stigmatization that accompanies your status as a single woman. Although these risks may occur, you may also experience benefits such as relief and comfort as you discuss and share your views with participants who are similarly situated. The information you provide will also help facilitate a better understanding of why the stereotype of single women persists. Information gathered will be transcribed and analyzed for publication, but will be kept confidential by excluding any identifying information about you.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may discontinue participation in the focus group discussion at any time. If you have any questions about the study, please contact the researcher involved. Contact information is provided below.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Your input is valued and appreciated. If you are willing to participate in this study and are a never married, single woman between the ages of twenty-five and forty please reply to this email.

Kasha Glynn, BSU Graduate Student kashaglynn@u.boisestate.edu (208) 230-8671

APPENDIX C

Consent to Be a Research Participant

Consent to Be a Research Participant

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Kasha Glynn in the Department of Communication at Boise State University is conducting a research study entitled "I Don't: Examining the Deinstitutionalization of Marriage and the Stereotype of the Modern Day Spinster." The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how single women past a certain age negotiate and communicate their relationship status. Specifically this study will address the stigmatization these single women experience. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a never married, single woman between the ages of twenty-five and forty.

B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to take part in the study the following will occur:

1. You will participate in a focus group consisting of five other women who fit the participant criteria (never married, single women, between the ages of twenty-five and forty). The focus group will be conducted by a moderator selected by the researcher, Kasha Glynn. Questions which may be asked include: How would you describe your experience as a single woman? How would you describe your perception of society's view of single women? As a single woman, how do you communicate and negotiate your status with others? Questions about what you found helpful or unhelpful may also be asked.

2. Hand written notes taken by the researcher and audio tape will be used to record the focus group discussion.

3. The focus group discussion will take approximately 90 minutes.

Focus groups will be conducted at Boise State University in room C-138 of the Communication building.

C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

Some feelings of emotional discomfort or inadequacy may occur as the group discusses their experience of the stereotype associated with adopting a single status. You are free to discontinue participation in the focus group discussion at any time if you feel uncomfortable.

1. I will be asking some demographic information in this study including age, socioeconomic status, and education level. Due to the make-up of Idaho's population, the combined details in your focus group may make an individual person identifiable. The researcher will make every effort to protect your privacy and confidentiality. However, if you are uncomfortable participating in any portion of the discussion you may decline participation at any time.

3. Participation in research may involve a loss of privacy; however, information you provide during the focus group discussion will be handled as confidentially as possible. Only Kasha Glynn and her supervising professor will have access to the group discussion notes and videotape. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications which may result from this study.

D. BENEFITS

As a participant in this study, you will have the opportunity to share your experience in the focus group discussion process. Even though the topic may be

uncomfortable to discuss in some instances, you may also experience certain benefits such as reassurance and comfort as you compare your experiences with other participants who are similarly situated. The information you provide will also help facilitate a better understanding of the stigmatization single women experience today.

E. COSTS

There will be no cost to you as a result if taking part in this study, other than the time taken to participate.

F. PAYMENT

You will not receive any reimbursement for participating in this study. Participation is strictly voluntary.

G. QUESTIONS

If you have any questions or concerns about participating in this study you should first contact the researcher [Kasha Glynn, Phone: (208) 230-8617, Email: kashaglynn@u.boisestate.edu]. If for some reason you do not wish to contact the researcher, you may contact the Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You can reach the board office between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, by calling (208) 426-5401 or by writing : Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Compliance, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1138.

H. CONSENT

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline participation in this study, or to withdraw participation at any point.

I give my consent to participate in this study:

_____ _____

Signature of Study Participant   Date

I give my consent to be audio taped in this study:

_____ _____

Signature of Study Participant   Date

_____ _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date

THE BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD HAS REVIEWED THIS PROJECT FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH.