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### Article

**Citation** (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

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**Turning that shawl into a cape: Older never married women in their  
own words – The “Spinsters”, the “Singletons”, and the  
“Superheroes”.**

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## **BIOGRAPHIES**

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Dr. Laura Soulsby is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology, University of Liverpool. Her research interests include adult developmental transitions and the psychosocial experience of growing older. Her work has a particular focus on the role of personal relationships, identity, and resilience in the experience of significant life events, including bereavement, marital status change, and chronic illness. She has co-authored a book entitled *Developmental Transitions: Exploring Stability and Change through the Lifespan* (Routledge, 2019).

## **ABSTRACT**

Unmarried and childless women are frequently portrayed negatively in society. Social storytelling often renders them discriminated against, or in extreme cases, outcast by their kin or clan. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with never married women to explore the concept of femininity, constructions of identity in daily-life, identity changes over time, marital status, and the interaction between having not married and womanhood. Data specifically relating to self-definitions of femininity and marital status concentrate on the speakers' constructions of themselves as both the *subject* (powerful) and the *object* (powerless) of their own reflective enquiry. Four key themes emerged through the analysis: 'Being Never Married'; 'Society's Perceptions'; 'Being Feminine'; and 'The Self & Transitions'. This study facilitates understanding of never married women's relationship with themselves, their gender identity, and marital status and is key to understanding how this population discusses their marginalisation in society.

**KEY WORDS:** Femininity, Identity, Marital Status, Never Married, Society

## INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a piece of lifecourse analysis research; a method predominantly used in psychology. It thus follows the principles of examining the experiences of a person over the course of their life, their key life-transitions, and the assessment of patterns over their lifetime which are all key factors of lifecourse research (see Silverio, 2018a; 2018b). The approach has tended to focus on normative lifecourses including young people transitioning to parenthood, marriage and divorce, later-life illness, widowhood, and end-of-life care-planning. Little available literature focusses on 'normal, but non-normative' lifecourses which include remaining childless/childfree (Gillespie, 1999; Shapiro, 2014), premature partner loss (DiGiulio, 1992), or, as in this paper, remaining unmarried. These lifecourses do not follow the so-called 'normative' life trajectory, which has been both commonplace, and become an expectation in Western culture and society (Kaufman, 2005; McDill et al., 2006). However, recent trends have shown the age of first marriage to have increased to the mid-thirties across England and Wales in contrast to previous decades (ONS, 2014). Further research must be carried out to comprehend the specific challenges faced by those who, by *choice* or by *circumstance*, have followed a non-normative lifecourse trajectory (Moller & Clarke, 2016). This can be done through close analysis of the language these groups use when documenting their lifecourse in studies such as the one presented here.

The aims of this study are twofold: to investigate how older never married women experience gender, documenting how their non-normative lifecourse may have contributed to challenging the societal norm; and to analyse how this population identify in private, public, and social spheres (as in Arnot et al., 2000). The data comprises interviews with twelve women and the analysis provides insight into how never married older women living in the UK assess their own identity over their

lifecourse. The following section sets out a brief review of the existing literature to help contextualise this research within wider lifecourse and gender identity research, and the analysis is subdivided into sections on 'Being Never Married', 'Society's Perceptions', 'Being Feminine', and 'The Self & Transitions'. The final section considers the implications of this research for other related work into wider societal norms.

## **BACKGROUND**

Remaining unmarried or prolonged singlehood has not traditionally been the focus of psychological research, and much of the existing explorations do not focus on the intersection of gender and marital status. Contemporary Western society continues to place value on the heteronormative, nuclear family ideal, sequentially performed through expected transitions of courtship, marriage, co-habitation, and childrearing (Gonick, 2004; Pickens & Braun, 2018). Deviations such as remaining unmarried or choosing not to have children, signals a disregard for societal norms, and is usually viewed negatively (O'Brien, 1991). Stigmatisation of non-normative lifecourses is not a new phenomenon. The older never married (or single) woman has repeatedly been portrayed undesirably in social-storytelling (King, 2015), with undertones of low fertility, sterility, or barrenness, whilst also appearing in folktales as vengeful and envious (Mangum, 1999). Even surviving Victorian-era print suggests never married women were subjected to lay-analyses and societal questioning, such as The London Journal's (1884, p.216) headline: "*Why Some Women Have Never Married.*" and opening line: "*Because nobody asked them, and so, whether they liked it or no, they were obliged to join the ranks of the old maids.*"

The culmination of these perceptions has meant older never married persons – particularly women – have been subjected to isolation from society and in severe cases, complete expulsion from family units and friendship groups (Ibrahim, 2016). Recent work has supported this perspective, suggesting remaining unmarried is a gendered phenomenon (Bokek-Cohen, 2016; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009; Pickens & Braun, 2018) and one which receives more critique and stigma than other forms of singlehood which have the same potential for longevity, such as widowhood, separation after marriage, or divorce (Cwikel et al., 2006; DiGiulio, 1992; Lahad, 2012; Rice, 1989). It is the gendered aspects of being never married which, when conflated with societal expectations of women's gender identity and roles, adds pressure and generates feelings of non-conformity (Connell, 1987; Paechter, 2006; Schippers, 2007).

Women who become single again after a loss can also experience changes in social-relationships (Bennett, 2010; Trivedi et al., 2009) and can be subjected to a sexualisation narrative (Newton-Levinson et al., 2014). Illness can also affect a person's identity and in particular, a woman's self-perception of femininity (Tamborini, 2007; Tamdee et al., 2016) – the deleterious effect of which has been found to be amplified in never married or single women who lack social support (Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014; Davies, 1995). This scrutiny and evaluative comparison of women can render some perceiving themselves as not fitting the ever-changing feminine 'ideal'. Society perpetuates a conflicting and ever-changing discourse of how a woman should look, act, and be, as well as what they should do at key points in their life (Paoletti, 1998; Pickard, 2018). However, there is little research published on the life experiences of older never married women assessing the relationship between marital status and gender identity.

## METHODS

### Sample and Recruitment

Twelve participants were recruited via on-line and hard-copy poster advertising. All participants signed fully informed consent and each interview lasted approximately 1-hour. Ethical approvals were granted by the authors' institutional Research Ethics Committee (ref: IPHS-1516-93). Participants were born between 1938 and 1966 ( $M_{age}=58$ ; range=29 years) and were British residents with English as their first language. Most had further or higher education. One participant was co-habiting, and six participants had children. Participants were not asked about their sexuality, as the researchers were solely interested in the experiences of people who identified as women and who had never been married, and therefore their sexuality had no bearing on their eligibility for the study.

**Table 1** Participants

Pseudonym	Year of Birth	Ethnicity	In a relationship	Cohabiting	Would Get Married Now?	Number of Children
Anna	1964	White European	N	N	Probably would	0
Antonella	1960	White European	Y	Y	Probably would not	1
Constance	1953	White British	N	N	Yes	1
Florence	1962	White Scottish	N	N	No	2
Geraldine	1953	White British	Y	N	Undecided	0
Joanne	1949	White British	Y	N	Yes	1
Judith	1966	White English	N	N	Yes	0
Julie	1956	White British	N	N	Potentially	2
Linda	1965	English	Y	N	Yes	0
Lydia	1964	White British	N	N	Maybe	1
Sophie	1961	British	N	N	Undecided	0
Tina	1938	British	N	N	Probably would not	0

**N.B.** All responses are to open-ended questions, except for number of children which was volunteered information from all participants.

## **Data Collection**

Consenting participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview consisting of four sections: Demographics, where general background information was retrieved about each participant; Femininity/Womanhood, where participants were asked about their own identity and how they perceived societal constructions of these concepts; Marital Status, which investigated the experiences of having never married and whether this related to their identity as a woman both publicly and privately; and General Questions, where women were asked to reflect on different generations of women and share advice they had. The semi-structured nature of the interview schedule permitted the interviewer to follow-up on pertinent issues raised by participants, whilst also allowing for common themes to be compared between respondents. A conversational interview style allowed for probing of answers and a less rigid questioning.

## **Data Analysis**

We attempted to understand personal insights and reflections on gender identity and marital status, adopting the mantra: “We are the novices, and they are the experts” (see Silverio, 2018b). Verbatim transcriptions were produced for manual coding and close analysis. Participants were assigned pseudonyms. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was employed to identify key themes in the interviews, first by familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes and then searching for themes. The analysis focused on the central organising concept of speakers’ perceptions of both private, and public/societal discourse about never married status and femininity. To ensure a close analysis of these data, a feminist poststructuralist discourse analytical approach (Baxter, 2003; 2015) was drawn upon as a lens through

which to view the dataset. Using this as a lens we acknowledge that gender differentiation can powerfully discriminate between people and therefore create power dialectics amongst speakers; however, the poststructuralist angle of the lens enables speech to be transformative at a local level enabling small scale challenges to dominant heteronormative discourses (see also Epperlein & Anderson, 2016). Using this framework further allowed for the assessment of women's constructions of their own discourse as both the *subject* and the *object* of their own reflective analysis (Foucault, 1969/2002) and allowed us to fully explore the extent of this double voicing (Bakhtin, 1963/1984; Baxter, 2014) as both *powerful* and *powerless* (Fairclough, 2014). Double voicing is seen where speakers challenge their own powerful statements with diminishing ones, or likewise contest self-deprecating statements with empowering contradictions – therefore a speaker can concurrently, or sometimes simultaneously acknowledge their own societal positions of power, and powerlessness through speech. Transcripts were coded iteratively with codes being merged, collapsed, or split throughout the analytical process. The themes presented below were assigned an appropriate final name at the end of the analysis which most represented the codes and data which had been captured for each theme through the analysis.

## **RESULTS**

Presented here is a critical analysis of how the four themes were constructed across the interviews and how these relate to how participants perceived both private, and public/societal discourse about never married status and femininity.

**Figure 1 Themes**

<b>Being Never Married</b>	<i>Participants' definitions and identification with 'never married' status.</i>
<b>Society's Perceptions</b>	<i>Participants' interpretations of the societal discourse surrounding being 'never married'.</i>
<b>Being Feminine</b>	<i>Participants' understanding and self-identification with 'being feminine' in today's society.</i>
<b>The Self and Transitions</b>	<i>Factors which affected participants' own descriptors of themselves, such as work, loss, and illness.</i>

### ***Being Never Married***

Being Never Married was spoken about at length and it was clear from the analysis that women often had conflicting and contrasting responses and self-representations of what it meant to be never married. The first way it was spoken about was in relation to the institution of marriage and how marriage was perceived as a societal obligation, by which these participants had not abided:

*Marriage to me means being in an institution... being told what to do... having a sort of different type of freedom. All sorts of negative things... (Florence)*

*I started going out with men because I felt that I ought to do because everyone else did. And a number of the ones I went out with, I was not particularly interested in. (Tina)*

*I've never thought I was 'never married'...when you're living with someone, as a partner, a piece of paper or a ring is really neither here nor there. (Julie)*

The sense of obligation to the institution of marriage and a normative lifecourse which included marriage was reiterated by participants. Here, Florence spoke of marriage being a something restrictive, and therefore unwanted, where Tina initially had 'gone along' with the societal norms due to 'everyone else' doing so, but not because it was something she particularly desired. Julie had not even considered marriage and cohabitation being any different. We can see marriage as something which these women thought of as constraining, and not something they desired. Participants

extended the notion of undesirability when talking of the complex nature of freedom and the potential lack of it if married:

*Having never been married, I now find the actual idea probably quite daunting and frightening because when you do get married, I think you might begin to lose a little bit of your independence [and] your individuality. (Antonella)*

*...marriage brings with it a whole new set of responsibilities which I'm not particularly interested. I don't feel like I want to belong to somebody that much that I want to be married to them. And I don't want somebody to belong to me that they have to be married to me. (Florence)*

When discussing marriage, participants constructed it in a particularly undesirable manner, and as something which evoked quite striking, negative emotive responses. Both participants here discuss losing themselves to someone else through marriage, with Antonella fearing a loss of individuality and Florence not wishing to experience ownership over, or by a partner. It was this perception that marriage would lead to a restricted freedom which some participants posited as a cause for an empowered, prolonged never married status:

*I did have a steady boyfriend from the time I was 15 to the time I was 18, and he thought it was a good idea to get married and I said: "No... it's a much better idea to go to university!" So that was that! (Geraldine)*

*I was brought up in a society where you learned that women couldn't manage on their own, they wouldn't have been able to earn enough money. Or be strong enough in society... I think I did realise when I got to retirement age that you can manage on your own if you don't meet the right person. (Tina)*

As well as freedom, analysis of this theme brought the concept of agency to the fore. Women such as Geraldine saw the choice to be made between marriage and

empowerment (through education and careers), and so chose to not marry, favouring an agentic lifestyle. Tina also raises the point that her experience was in direct contrast to the women of her era and proved that women who never married did not require marriage to survive and succeed in society. However, some women did have negative feelings about not marrying:

*I still feel embarrassed when people ask me... people say to me "you've done loads of stuff" and all that... It doesn't compensate for that. I feel like it's some sort of flaw in me, so I do feel embarrassed when people ask me... I always feel embarrassed if I say single. (Sophie)*

Here Sophie explains her embarrassment at not having married, despite stating she has led a fulfilled life, which is also repeatedly noted by her peers. Here the societal norm is constructed as an ideal and there is evidence of double voicing (Baxter, 2014), whereby Sophie appreciates the successes in her life but also downgrades her achievements because of her embarrassment at being never married, which she sees as a personal flaw. The fact that some participants felt their identity was affected by never marrying led to discussions of how they identified with words used to describe the status of being never married. The term 'spinster' was largely viewed negatively by participants:

*Never married is okay and probably fairly sensible in some ways, and spinster is, mmm, you know, it's got, kind got implications you know? (Linda)*

*... the thought of having that word on your grave... Or on your death certificate rather and you think 'Oh my God!'... it's not a fair representation of what you've actually done or how your life has been so no I think it's a ghastly word. (Sophie)*

Both Linda and Sophie discuss the implications of the term 'spinster' and state that it does not accurately describe a modern-day never married woman. Again, Sophie

provides evidence for double voicing by representing lifecourse success in a way apart from marriage and therefore challenging the negative value-base discussed in association with 'spinster'. The term itself seemed to reinforce societal views of marriage being of virtue to women, which was sharply contrasted with the male equivalent term 'bachelor' which was seen as socially positive:

*And men aren't called spinsters are they... they're called bachelors, and it doesn't matter when they get married, you know they get married at seventy it's absolutely fine, it's not a stigma is it... there's almost a stigma if a woman's not married, but a man, it's fine! You can get married any time, you know, corr... he's having a whale of a time, isn't he!?* (Anna)

*I call myself a singleton after Bridget Jones! I just couldn't use spinster, I couldn't... but I quite like never married, I think it's quite a nice way of saying it, yeah! Certainly better than spinster... you still hear bachelor now, you know, confirmed bachelor... don't hear confirmed spinster!* (Judith)

Parallels were drawn by participants, such as Anna and Judith, whereby the association of 'male never married' was much more positive than that of 'female never married', suggesting the presence of semantic asymmetry through gender differentiation in speech. This goes some way to support the idea of semantic derogation (DeFrancisco & Palczewski's, 2007) whereby the masculine form of a never married lifecourse is idealised in comparison to the female form, which is derided. The disparagement of female never married was explained by participants in relation to how society usually portrays never married women (or 'spinsters') in terms of physical and visual appearance:

*I mean it's a true fact, that's what I am, but I think it's just those... sort of... old fashioned connotations of being a bit of a blue stocking... having, not something*

*wrong with you exactly, but being... I worry that people see it as, as a woman who's not able to have a relationship. (Linda)*

*...the connotation of spinster makes you think of someone really old sort of bitter, twisted sort of gnarled woman who hates men... or somebody who is so ugly that they could never be married, it's got all sort of a negative, sort of a term about women isn't it. (Florence)*

Both Florence and Linda highlight that never married connotes a step away from the 'feminine ideal', and state society perpetuates the narrative that never married is synonymous to unsuccessful in the sense of relationships. However, some participants embraced the term in an act of localised challenge to dominant heteronormative discourses through transformation of once negatively connoted words. In doing so, some participants reclaimed or attempted to rationalise why the term had been used and from where it had been derived:

*I think it's a great word! [Laughs]... I think it's a wonderful word! [laughs] Yeah, I'm proud to be a spinster! [laughs] At my wheel spinning [laughs] Yeah, it's great, it's like you know where you use you know pejorative language and turn it on its head... I think spinster is some sort of superhero, [laughs] superheroine of some wonder! Yeah, I think it's like, I like that kind of badge of honour type thing, you know well let her be a cranky old woman... (Lydia)*

*I don't think it really, in this day and age, summarises well, who unmarried women are really. I mean unmarried women these days, they're very, you know, very independent, they're very go getters they, you know. They're just not the old spinster in her black tights and shawl round her shoulders. (Anna)*

When discussing the term 'spinster', rationalisations and reclamations of the term could be interpreted as an attempt to regain control and assert a level of agency over

their never married lifecourse which society otherwise views as disempowering. This ultimately resulted in mixed opinions about how the term 'spinster' could be, and is, used in society. Whilst marriage was important to some, many disregarded it as a restrictive and institutionalised phenomenon which could happily be avoided. This shows how, whilst not viewing their never married status as societally powerful, they themselves could feel empowered by their lifecourse trajectory through "autonomy and self-sufficiency", something which Pickard (2018, p.34) suggests is a key marker of being able to navigate the male world in constructions and performances of late modern femininity.

### ***Society's Perceptions***

The women's never married status prompted a range of negative societal associations which participants recounted, including promiscuous lifestyles (as in Newton-Levinson et al., 2014):

*One of the things about my generation was, it was the time, so it was the late sixties... the pill had come out and you know 'free love' and that sort of thing... You weren't supposed to have any expectations of men. You weren't supposed to have any expectations of anything. And marriage was an outmoded concept. A lot of women I knew had abortions. (Joanne)*

*I should imagine... never married would be sort of a lady who enjoyed the pleasures of the night, or some sort of old gnarled... you'd be one or the other... a loose woman, or an unmarriageable woman! (Florence)*

Here we note that even women who followed a never married lifecourse, perpetuate the same negative discourses which surround women who do not marry, showing that narratives of non-normative lifecourses are pervasive and almost always negatively

cast. We can see female sexuality as still something which is heavily scrutinised by society, whereby anything other than virginity is disdained, especially if a woman is exerting agency over herself, her body, and her sexual experiences. Contrastingly, two participants did however, point-out, marriage does not always ensure monogamy:

*Everyone I know... some people are sort of very married, some people aren't very married, some people are sort of married and have extra-marital relationships... (Florence)*

*There were a lot of men on the prowl in their thirties. Looking round for another relationship because of the seven-year itch or whatever. But plenty of married men you could find an affair with. (Tina)*

Linking back to the theme of 'Being Never Married', data in this theme show these participants were critical in their appraisals of both marriage and never marriage – and did not discuss marriage as the ultimate ideal, but as a gradient aspect of some people's lives, with set rules to which only some people adhered, further complicating society's perception of what it means to be married. Similarly, Joanne commented that monogamy and marriage had not always been the expectation – especially during eras where freedom was prioritised ahead of responsibility to another:

*...it was a time when, if you were cool... you adopted as a stance... you didn't expect marriage, you didn't talk about marriage, you didn't want marriage, you didn't want children, you wouldn't think twice about an abortion, you'd sleep with anybody you fancied... (Joanne)*

This further strengthens the argument that the feminine ideal of what it means to achieve womanhood is subject to change according to epochs of time and patriarchal wishes – if men desired marriage, women should marry; though if men did not desire it, women who requested it were seen to be outmoded. Society's Perceptions were

articulated by participants as having returned to ones of their parents' generation, where women were seen to have certain expectations about how they should transition through their life trajectories:

*...that's what you're put on the Earth for, you grow-up, you get married and you have children, your jobs done... That's what the woman's role in society is.*

(Judith)

*I don't feel as though I've missed out, but I am conscious that when I was younger – there's that horrible expression 'child bearing age' – when I was younger, I'm really conscious that some women... didn't find this a very comfortable thing. (Geraldine)*

*No! I think having a relationship with somebody might enhance my life, but I don't need it like I used to. (Constance)*

Whilst Judith and Geraldine both lay out quite a futile and foredoomed passage through life, their understandings reflect underlying discourses that women are expected 'to marry', 'to carry', 'to bear', and 'to care', though for some, like Constance, the necessity of marriage has faded. Furthermore, the expectation of a typical family life was also a dominant feature:

*People still assume that you're married, or you will get married or some point...*

*I think a lot of girls, young girls, still wanna get married... (Anna)*

*...people assume that you're married... and that you've got a husband... because people, the institutions sort of like rely on the family, you know as a nuclear family, like schools, you know, school is probably, the main one...*

(Florence)

The essence of these quotations was that the nuclear family still reigns supreme in society and should be idolised, causing problematic cognitive dissonance for those

who do not follow normative lifecourses including marriage and children. It was also this perception that a woman's life would include marriage(s) and family which culminated in some women feeling judged and excluded from society:

*People who don't know me very much, they would probably think that I'm maybe a bit odd. I think there was a time when people looked at single women and thought they were an object of pity... you don't fit into society and if you're paying your own bills you haven't worked the system properly!* (Tina)

Participants did suggest ways they negotiated these expectations and situations, and in doing so overcame Society's Perceptions of their marital status:

*...depending on who I'm speaking to I will say my 'husband', instead of my 'partner', but again, that's just for... not a silly reason... but because to them maybe it might sound a bit more official.* (Antonella)

*...to be quite honest I think I actually lied, I think I said I was divorced, I think because I felt really embarrassed...* (Sophie)

*It does help when you've got the word Doctor in front of your name! The: "Is it Mrs. or Miss.?" I used to find deeply irritating. I mean you wanted to shout out: "What's my marital status got to do with me buying a cooker?" ...I would never say yeah, I only got a PhD, so I stopped being asked: "Is it Mrs. or Miss.?", but actually it does help!* (Geraldine)

Though not always helpful, due to the need to present a different form of one's self in different circumstances (such as in the case of both Antonella and Sophie), the examples given by participants, demonstrate the extent of the mental processes which they employ to navigate society as never married older women. Sometimes, the circumstances themselves enabled these different presentations to become a reality or a permanent masquerade of their marital status, such as Geraldine who had a PhD

and therefore an ungendered title. Across the interviews there was a consensus that times were changing, however, as marriage is now less expected by society and coupling and co-habitation is more widely accepted.

These data clearly detail how women thought they were being viewed and judged as never married older women in society. Across the interviews it was clear to see the narrative of family-life as normative, and therefore the participants considered themselves as going against the norm. Some women had developed ways of overcoming Society's Perceptions, but also acknowledged how times and expectations of women had changed. However, the way society perceives a never married status continue to have a profound effect of these participants' identities, and whilst singlehood had provided many with the opportunities and freedom to achieve what they wanted (and so positioned these participants as powerful subjects as their own lifecourse narratives), feelings of embarrassment and 'not fitting in' were not uncommon (creating a powerless, object of circumstance-type discourse).

### ***Being Feminine***

The way in which these women were perceived in society extended to how they felt about their own gender identity, of which marriage and having children was seen to be a predominant factor when it came to wider womanhood and femininity:

*I did struggle a lot with other people's perceptions of me as a woman, their appraisals, judgements... how people see you as a woman... but once I became a mother I seems to, it was like an anchor for me... so those other appraisals of me as a woman... they have faded away. (Lydia)*

*I went through a period where I didn't feel I could... fulfil that role. Because I couldn't have children... (Sophie)*

Both Sophie and Lydia recall not having children problematised their singlehood, giving them yet another factor which did not allow them to imitate the behaviours of their married peers and their nuclear families. For Lydia this feeling was somewhat alleviated at the birth of her child, which was not the case for Sophie who felt she had left the role of motherhood unfilled. Femininity and the idea of what it means to be feminine was also linked to actions as well as lifecourse events, namely how women were expected to act in society and how people react to them as women:

*...now women are expected to be everything... they're expected to be feminine, to be mothers, to have careers... and that all plays on your self-sense... it's a lot of stress. (Lydia)*

The idea of femininity over the lifecourse was further explained by participants when asked when they had felt most feminine. Participants responded in many ways. Often these were self-reflections of each participant in relation to societal norms:

*...my parents decided because I was always getting on the wrong bus that I should have contact lenses! ...Suddenly there's this quite glamorous, quite grown-up looking young woman, with nice long dark hair, and nicely made-up, lovely clothes and I actually thought: Wow, I'm alright you know? (Geraldine)*  
*I think I feel the most feminine now, the older I get. I feel like the wiser I get... You feel more comfortable with yourself as you get older. (Lydia)*

Contrastingly, Geraldine remarks on her most feminine days being when she was a “glamorous, quite grown-up looking young woman” appealing to the feminine ideal of her youth and the expectation of courtship and marriage, compared to Lydia who stated it was more recently, and with age, she had felt “most feminine” and in becoming so, also “more comfortable”. What was striking here was the relationship to the ‘Male Gaze’ (see Mulvey, 1975), whilst preferring different periods in their lifecourses,

Geraldine externalises her femininity to society, whereas Lydia's more recent feeling of femininity came from within, and so disregards the patriarchal lens through which she may be viewed. Participants did also note connotations associated with the term femininity, and femininity itself, with some discussing wider societal implications of it as a concept:

*...there's some people who probably look down on femininity as being something that is unintelligent... a lot of women I know, my age, look at femininity as sort of a degrading term. (Florence)*

*It seems to have become a dirty word. Also, it's a word that my mother would never have used... I think she might have got quite cross if I'd said, 'what do you think of femininity?'* (Joanne)

Others took personal issue with it:

*I don't know if I have a slight problem with the word femininity... and so I'd use the language being a woman rather than femininity, I think, [because] to me that's like a construct. (Lydia)*

*Sense of identity as a woman is everything! It's a component of being a person. I'm not saying femininity because, for me, femininity is a woman's magazine word, trinket. And I just can't get into that, I never have. (Tina)*

Heteronormativity (heterosexual coupling, children raised by opposite-sex parents, and general heterosexuality; see Masters et al., 1994) was acknowledged by most participants as prevailing in current society; with the gender hegemony, particularly in Western society, forcing the construction of gender as a binary, male-and-female only concept (Bem, 1974; Budgeon, 2015; Fausto-Sterling, 2012). Despite participants earlier affirming that marriage was an essential part of the societal recognition of womanhood, and womanhood being associated with femininity, there was a

recognition of the negative connotations associated with it and a personal disdain for what the word had come to mean, when framed within a patriarchal, gender-binary, and heteronormative society. However, Florence acknowledged a spectrum of femininities in society, much like the earlier assertion of the spectrum of 'how married' people in supposedly monogamous marital relationships actually are:

*I fall down in the middle somewhere I think, because I'm neither a hard and fast feminist and I'm not feminine... as well as defending not wanting to wear sort of high heeled shoes and trot round with lipstick on... you have to... simultaneously defend not wanting to have your head shaved... they're just the extremes of being a woman, aren't they? ...I don't want to be either of those things, I'm quite happy just wobbling along in the middle... 'feminine' can sort of encompass anything can't it? Women who are big activists on the feminist-end of the spectrum... their argument is that they are feminine... the ultimate Mother Earth type characters, whereas somebody who's trotting round in pink furry mules is feminine as well! (Florence)*

Here Florence asserts that femininity can come in many different forms, and yet the image she conjures of what she states society would consider most feminine is almost a caricature of mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century domestic housewife, head-to-toe in pink, which contrasts starkly with the other "extremes of being a woman" – the independent activist. Being Feminine was a uniquely individualised part of the experience of being a woman for these participants and could often be related to their never married status (as in Simpson, 2016). What was clear from the analysis was that maintaining a feminine gender identity could be a powerful tool for success:

*...using your femininity in arguments overtly because you've got power as a woman... It's the converse of what has gone before. And I would just say to young women there's nothing wrong with being feminine! (Joanne)*

Nevertheless, the concept of femininity itself was incredibly fragile, with the requirements for a 'feminine identity' being subject to societal change and evaluation, rendering women feeling like a pastiche of the 'feminine ideal'. However, one notable consequence of ageing was some women accepting their identity for how it had been individually constructed regardless of societal expectations and demands (Paoletti, 1998).

### ***The Self & Transitions***

Identity as a woman and as a member society was discussed in relation to how certain life-transitions affected The Self. Transitions included work-life and ending work, health and experiencing the menopause, and loss in various forms. These experiences were discussed in relation to participants' non-normative lifecourses and compared to perceptions of other married women, men, and society more generally. The experience of work challenged some participants' identity of womanhood:

*I think women bosses are much harder to work for than men bosses, because they... feel like they have something to prove. (Anna)*

*There is a glass ceiling. And as a woman, you... I had one of my bosses, very chauvinistic... the way he used to speak to you was terrible! (Judith)*

Examples about women in the workplace further demonstrate the heteronormativity of the society in which these participants live and work. The fact that Anna raised that women bosses might "have something to prove", shows that women who pursue careers are still viewed as having to make choices between work and marriage/family-

life; something which the women in this study were less affected by due to their never married status. Workplace relationships were important for augmenting or altering one's sense of self, but they did not affect identity as strongly as parental relationships, and the loss of them:

*I lost my father recently and I was very very close to him... What I realised when he was gone, was that there was a definite gap in my life in terms of having a significant male. So... my desire now, to, fill that gap is really quite strong.*  
(Linda)

*...losing my mum was a big thing... you know... life changing....* (Anna)

Both Linda and Anna talk of the profound effect which parental loss had on them and the void it left with Anna stating it was a “life changing” moment and Linda remarking that there was a “definite gap” to fill by another “significant male”. Parental loss for participants in this study often meant the shrinking of the family unit – especially if they did not have children – and also the changing of one's status. The status change was such that, especially for those who did not have children, their significant familial role they held was as someone's child, as they were not a ‘mother’ or a ‘wife’. The loss of a parent meant this role became obsolete in society often rendering their societal role confused. Loss was also reported in relation to the sense of self and was exemplified by how illness caused a sense of self-loss. Cancer diagnoses were raised by Geraldine and Sophie who similarly spoke of the post-treatment effects to the body being especially defeminising and socially isolating, best articulated by the following quotation from Sophie:

*The hardest I suppose, I've had a lot of ill health and I suppose that's had quite an impact on how I see myself... I've had radiotherapy which damaged my arm and then I've had chemo, so I wasn't able to have children, and that sort of*

*really damaged me a lot, for a long time. I think I've only really just come to terms with that, in my 50s actually. It's taken me that long, but it doesn't... I really didn't feel feminine at all actually... I did get pregnant by mistake, so I had to have a termination and that all went horribly wrong... When I got it back again I went straight into the menopause with the chemo... I was on steroids, so I ballooned out... I just felt very unattractive and lost all your hair and all that.*

(Sophie)

Both Geraldine and Sophie discussed the effects cancer and the subsequent treatments had on their feminine identities and their identities as women (as in Tamdee et al., 2016). Sophie's description of how her treatment propelled her into the menopause, suggests the distress which she felt at the prospect of leaving one stage of her life behind, and entering a new one, where she was unable to have children, and was left with a poor relationship with herself (see Davies, 1995). Linking to the concepts of losing the ability to assume the identity and role of a mother, was the motherhood role being lost because a child left home. This was discussed regarding the transitional nature of relationships around the time of retirement by Joanne:

*I wouldn't advise anyone to have a child at 40. Not because it's bad then, I think the knock-on is later because when I was 60 and retiring, she was 20 and therefore had just left home. (Joanne)*

Retiring was seen as a key marker in the lifecourse of never married women, especially where participants had no children:

*Living as a single person who's never married, you haven't got these life-markers that other people have; marrying, giving birth to children, children growing up, grandchildren. All that marks out for you how old you ought to feel. Whereas if you don't have all those things, the only big marker is retirement*

*age and ageing isn't marked out by what happens with other people, it's more to do with changes in your health and appearance as you get older. (Tina)*

Both Joanne and Tina articulate the transition from worker to retiree, and for Joanne this loss of societal status once held through having a job, was compounded by her daughter leaving home at the same time. The idea that life is time-marked by distinct transitions that – as Tina states – women should proceed through is demonstrative of a wider societal narrative to which women are expected to adhere and is inclusive of marriage and children, yet when a woman does not pass through these milestones, retirement, as Tina explains, was the only point at which she, as a woman, knew how old to feel. A key time-marker which affected participant's identities as women was the menopause. Changes to the body linked to the menopause caused internal conflict with some participants over whether these changes were disempowering or indeed significantly liberating:

*...when it comes to an end, you feel a bit... I wouldn't say exactly defeminised, because it's also liberating but it's just... almost like an old friend in a way – oh that sounds weird – but it's a bit like somethings gone out of your life... it was a bit of an excuse every month to feel a bit sorry for yourself. (Linda)*

*I used to feel obliged to have to tell people, especially men, that I can't have children... And I don't feel like that anymore, because, well for one I'm 50 and you're not meant to have children anyway, I suppose that's made a difference. But also, the fact that I just feel like I don't have to make excuses for myself anymore, and I think because of that I feel more feminine. (Sophie)*

Both women here present the menopause in the wider heteronormative frame of society, and although conflicted about the benefits and the potential downfalls of experiencing it, both Sophie and Linda use the idea that it was a point at which they

could no longer fulfil one aspect of their life, interpreted as having a child. Work, illness, ageing, and loss were experienced by all participants and had a significant effect on how they transitioned over the lifecourse uniquely in the absence of a partner, in comparison to the societal norm, whereby most women of a similar age to these participants would be in a marriage or longstanding relationship.

## **DISCUSSION**

Women in this study commented on how they defined 'Being Never Married', and the consequences of following this 'normal, but non-normative' lifecourse trajectory. There was some evidence to suggest they had negotiated their own 'normal, but non-normative' marital status in society as both the *powerful*, and the *powerless* (Fairclough, 2014), constantly constructing and dismantling their own privilege as the *subject*, scrutinising themselves as the *object* (Baxter, 2003) of their lifecourse. They were positive about the sense of freedom they felt being never married had helped them to acquire, but there were also negative feelings associated with being socially ostracised due to having not ever married. Factors leading to their never married status were not purely down to *choice*, with many participants suggesting it was simply *circumstance* which caused them to remain unmarried. Whilst most women objected to outmoded vernacular such as the word 'spinster', some found power in claiming and embodying the common stereotypes whilst others had adopted more neutral language (i.e. singleton) with which to describe themselves. In terms of Society's Perceptions, participants positioned themselves as outsiders to the 'norm', whilst some acknowledged the benefits of not entering the 'institution of marriage'. However, the judgements and evaluations of others and an absence of a significant other with whom to share one's life had the potential to disempower the women in this study,

supporting previous findings from literature documenting the importance of (later-life) partnership (see DiGiulio, 1992; Ibrahim, 2016; Simpson, 2016).

Finally, women in this study spoke of how their identity could be affected by transitional events over their lifecourse and how these were navigated and negotiated in the absence of a spouse. Here it was evident that work, illness, and loss of various forms had the potential to dramatically affect how participants identified, often associated with a latent powerlessness which lingered long after the event. Illness narratives are common in older persons (Rutagumirwa & Bailey, 2017) and in society more generally (Vickers, 2017), and in this study illness was mentioned as physically and psychologically disempowering and especially isolating given the women in this study's never married status. Other health-related transitions, such as the menopause, were spoken about as physically weakening, but also with the potential to empower participants. This empowerment came from the liberating effect of not being beholden to one's bodily functionality, but also being free from societal expectations of childbearing, which is often synonymous with marriage and seen as an expectation when one transitions from not married to married in status. The outcomes of losing someone close were discussed in terms of having to re-evaluate one's sense of identity, requiring some participants to be reactive, and renew their sense of self, so as not to remain disempowered by a person's (particularly a parent's) death. In all, through work, illness, or after loss, the women in this study showed varying levels of resilience against societal judgement and expectation which supports similar findings from lifecourse studies of cross-cultural womanhood (Paradise, 1993). Whilst these twelve never married women followed 'normal, but non-normative' lifecourses, their trajectories had been marked by much feeling of difference and struggles with identity as women of society, but their stories of negotiation and how they navigated self-

scrutinization and societal critique positioned them as powerful subjects of their own narratives.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study provides a new insight to an under-researched population to understand never married women's life experiences in relation to gender identity, using a lifecourse approach and drawing on feminist poststructuralist analytic principles. The findings inform us that never marriage is problematised in society, and heavily alters the way in which women who have never married accept their lifecourse and marital status, the choices they have made, or circumstances in which they have found themselves. Employing a qualitative thematic analytic method informed by feminist poststructuralism has enabled a close analysis of the power dialectics evident in these women's discourses, using gender differentiation as a major marker on which to compare married and never married status between the women in this study, and their perceptions of both married and never married women and men in society more widely. Perhaps most interesting, was the evidence for an intersectional relationship between how women spoke about their marital status and their gender identity and how this was influenced by wider societal discourses which had the potential to damage or augment how these participants positioned themselves in the world.

What we can conclude in terms of never marriage, is that for women in particular, adopting or assuming this normal, but non-normative status continues to be problematised by society, and in some cases even those who have themselves remained unmarried.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors would first like to thank all the participants who took part in this study without whom this research would not have been possible. Also, to Dr. K. Kinloch, for her initial encouragement of this analysis, and finally to the members of the Discourses of Marriage Research Group and the editors of this special issue, whose advice and guidance have been invaluable to the preparation of this manuscript.

## **DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

Nothing to declare.

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