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Book Review: The Single Woman: A Discursive Investigation

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The Single Woman: A Discursive Investigation.

2008. Jill Reynolds. London: Routledge Press. 192 pp. Appendices. \$26.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Katherine Lehman¹

In both Great Britain and the United States, single women are a sizeable and rapidly growing demographic. In 2005 some 39 percent of British women ages 18-49 had never married, a sharp increase from 25 years earlier (8). Yet in traditional scholarship, "single women as a category in their own right were invisible," writes British scholar Jill Reynolds. "I was drawn to the idea of 'giving voice' to women's experience, and framing more positive accounts of the richness and variety of women's lives" (4). In her book *The Single Woman: A Discursive Investigation*, Reynolds uses unmarried women's own words to establish new frameworks for understanding singleness.

Single women factor prominently in popular culture in international texts such as *Bridget Jones* and *Sex and the City*, both based on popular books. Unmarried women have long been the target audience for self-help books with titles such as *Live Alone and Like It* (1936) and *Single and Loving It* (2000). Yet Reynolds argues many of these books and media texts suggest that single women are merely compensating for the lack of companionship and status that marriage provides, and she notes that they promote heterosexual partnership as the primary goal.

While academic studies provide more affirmative frameworks than the self-help genre, Reynolds argues that many scholars rely on "life-cycle" models that privilege marriage and parenthood and attach normative ages to these stages. Single women who deviate from these models may still experience them as "a dominant cultural storyline, or master narrative that shapes their lives, as it may be the course they and others have expected their lives to take" (29).

In contrast, Reynolds aims to define single women on their own terms and to analyze how language itself conveys complex and often contradictory understandings of single womanhood. Her study is based on research interviews with 30 women, ages 30 to 60, who agreed to be interviewed as a "woman alone" (2). Reynolds writes that she is less concerned with establishing a working definition of singleness than examining the fluidity and contradiction in unmarried women's self-definitions. "The meaning of singleness is elusive," she writes, alternately connoting a woman who is celibate, solitary, independent, desperate or powerful. "Singleness is thus open to constant rereading and interpretation" (13).

Reynolds, a senior lecturer in social work and health at The Open University, utilizes critical discursive psychology, which combines insights from ethnography and discourse analysis. Her book provides compelling snippets from participant interviews, followed by a skilled and detailed analysis. "I examine the identities that women construct themselves through their talk," Reynolds explains. "My participants drew on highly polarized constructions of singleness as a state that was both deeply problematic and at the same time full of rewards and potential" (51). Her close attention to

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participants' attitudes and language choice is complemented by choice quotations from authors such as Helen Fielding and Candace Bushnell that open each chapter.

In her chapter "Working With a 'Single' Identity," Reynolds notes that single women alternately define singleness as a personal deficit or social stigma or perceive it as a source of independence and choice – sometimes in the same conversation. These binary constructions also pose personal dilemmas for Reynolds' participants. "Either they can choose to construct singleness very positively ... and then it becomes difficult to talk about any move out of the category. Or women can talk unashamedly about their desire for a relationship, and risk being constructed as deficient and 'desperate,' and marked by their failure to already have a man." (73).

In the following chapters on life narratives and "Choice and Chance in Relationships," single women relate their personal histories, often relying on traditional life-cycle models, yet also presenting more progressive frameworks that center on "inner growth and change" (91). Reynolds offers a compelling analysis of how participants explain their marital status. Women who claim to be single by choice present themselves as having agency; yet, they risk assuming full responsibility for failed and abusive relationships. Those who blamed chance – i.e., bad timing or lack of dating partners – for their single status risked coming across as passive and desperate in their desire for a relationship (110).

In "The Everyday Politics of Singleness" chapter, Reynolds examines her own role as interviewer, as when she asked participants if they were romantically partnered. She argues that her hesitance to raise the topic and attempts to soften the question reveal that in everyday conversation "to be single is a social identity that requires explanation" and "not having a partner is not an approved social attribute" (140, 146). Throughout her analysis, Reynolds is attentive to how her role as a researcher may influence responses. She defines herself as single, and ponders whether her study on "women alone" might inspire interview subjects to present a more confident front than in everyday conversation. Additionally, in the detailed appendix on research methods, Reynolds notes that she adjusted her research approach to enable women to discuss same-sex relationships and desires.

Reynolds argues that single women's struggles for self-definition are important to feminism. Whether single or married, women may feel pressured to define their identities in terms of relationships, or may struggle to balance independence with their need for connection. Likewise, the fact that many self-help books have focused more on individual singles' failings than the social structures that stigmatize unmarried women underscores the need for feminist activism. As most women will experience singleness at some point in their adult lives, Reynolds' insights may well apply to divorced, separated and widowed women as well as those who have never married.

Reynolds' work is suitable for upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses, and could serve as a useful example of feminist research methods in practice. It also is a welcome contribution to the growing academic field of single women studies. In recent years, Rutgers University sponsored a historical, cross-cultural research project on single women; authors such as E. Kay Trimberger have published studies refuting stereotypes and assumptions about unmarried women; and an online Scholars of Single Women network has formed to connect academics in disparate fields and locations. Although Reynolds' ample literature review examines the social-science works on single women,

she might also consider how humanities scholars are bridging disciplines and proposing new frameworks for understanding singleness.

As the author conducted her study using a snowball sampling method, she states in her appendix that she did not seek a demographically representative sample. Nevertheless, her sample was somewhat diverse, including women of color, women with disabilities, lesbian and bisexual women, and women of diverse ages. Participants also included never married and newly single women. While each woman's profession, age, marriage and parenting status are included in the appendix, she is identified in the text primarily by first name. Reynolds' study might have highlighted participants' differences throughout this work, which would enable her to explore how differences in race, age, and socio-economic status affect how women perceive their unmarried status. Similarly, although I appreciated Reynolds' acknowledgement of lesbian singles and her efforts to counter heteronormativity in the questions she used, I desired to know how her lesbian and bisexual participants understood their relationships and social status differently than straight participants.

Throughout her book, Reynolds proposes a "politics of singleness," which she emphasizes is not necessarily an active social movement comprised of single people but rather broader societal attention to language and categorization. A 2005 British law that removed the designations "spinster" and "bachelor" from marriage and civil partnership certificates in favor of the gender-neutral term "single" is a promising step. However, Reynolds' study suggests the problems that single women face require rethinking the ways societies privilege heterosexual partnerships in all realms of life, and thus mark single women as deviant and deficient by default.