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Researching One An-other

Anne Byrne

Introduction

This chapter details collaborative research practices in a research project on women’s self-identity. As the researcher, I am not a member of the participant group. Though I too am a woman, I do not share the characteristics which shape the collective identity of the participants and which define the research sample. An extensive number of research dilemmas are posed in utilising a feminist research paradigm; their resolution invites reflection and ultimately hard decisions. The issue of Othering is one of the most challenging. Given the social construction of woman as Other (see de Beauvoir [1949] 1993), as the oppressed relation, the challenge in a feminist research practice is to ‘interrupt Othering’ (Fine 1994) as much as is feasible. This chapter describes my attempts to develop a collaborative, non-oppressive, research design which builds on the researcher-researched relationship. Considering feminist theoretical concerns of Othering, I describe a ‘relational’ research design, developed for the study of single women’s identities in contemporary Ireland.

Self and Other

Many of the demands exacted in using a feminist research framework are brought together for me in and through the issue of Othering. Consideration of being Other or engaging in acts of Othering, invites decisions about participation, representation and interpretation, provoking keen self-reflection as well as critical examination of all interactions, all analyses, all acts of knowing, all texts produced in the research process. I wish to detail here my engagement with issues of the Other in researching single women’s identities.

Throughout my research the concept of Other includes Self-as-Other, the act of Othering and the experience of being Othered. I try to identify and represent the consequences of being Othered through the exclusion and marginalisation experienced by single women in contemporary Irish society. I listen to how single women have been represented as Others, as ‘outsiders’, as different to the mainstream and I learn about myself, I learn about those of us who do the Othering. I listen to single women speak about married women, about their mothers and fathers, their siblings, their friends, about work colleagues, about us. I know that the self cannot be composed without the Other; that Othering is deeply implicated in self-composition, in knowing boundaries, in relationship, in separating me from you. In Othering and being Othered, I know myself. But Othering is also a practice of domination and women are always Other.1 Female identities are commonly constructed as Other and I want to understand how we survive this.

And what of my own relationship to this research project, to this topic? Where has it come from? I am not a single woman. I have a partner and am mother to two children. I am also an academic, a sociologist, a researcher with the attendant status, power and distance that these labels confer. I am another Other at the level of self and social identity in relation to single women. The location and meaning of Other is also ambivalent; in one place, moment and relationship it can be conceptualised as a position of power and authority. In another place, time and social setting to be Other is to be weak, impotent, marginal. And in the same moment, same location, same setting, one can be aware of the power and the weakness of the Self-as-Other. Self and social identity are composed of often contradictory layers of Otherness, some of which become more significant, more sensitive, depending on the interactional context, on the social, ‘raced’, classed, gendered relationship between the individual and her society, for example.

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1 Some critics argue that the construction of women as other is ethnocentric, particularly in relation to de Beauvoir (1949). See Etshtin, 1981; Tong, 1993. Thank you to Ronit Lentin (1997) for these references.
An awareness of difference, an interest in feminist ideas as well as a concern with the treatment and perception of women in Irish society are intertwined in the development of the research topic. I have chosen this research topic, not in partnership or with the permission of single women. In so doing, I may be judged as not fulfilling the requirements of a model of participatory research, but I am motivated to do this work not only for intellectual reasons but also because I believe it exposes a previously invisible wrong and practices of injustice. I have also been supported to continue with the work through the responses of single women in workshops and from letters that women have written to me on learning about the research. I cannot absolutely say where this topic has come from, but only that it is connected to me. My interest in singleness reaches back to my childhood, peopled by three spinster grand-aunts, one of whom was adopted into the family.

As the eldest child in a family of nine children, with both parents in paid employment, my two sisters and I spent school holidays in the company of Nonie Byrne and her companion Maggie. This household was very different to the one in which we were growing up. Nonie was single, worked for the Department of Agriculture as a poultry instructress and managed her own farm. Maggie too was single, having been placed by her mother as a domestic servant in Nonie’s household at the age of 14, where she remained until Nonie died sixty years later. Both of these women were boundless in their affection and care for us. My other grand-aunt was Nonie Ba (Bastible) who lived all her life with her brother, a Catholic priest, moving from presbytery to presbytery. She was a National School teacher and a formidable, opinionated, deeply kind woman. Somewhere in my consciousness I became aware that not all women married and had children, that single women led interesting, varied, self-supporting, sometimes physically demanding lives, and this has made a difference and is part of the present story. All three of these women earned their own living, though there were distinct class divisions between Maggie and the two Nonies.

A similar thread was woven by my own mother who spent much of our growing years working outside the home as a teacher. She had to give up her permanent teaching post on marriage in 1955 because of the marriage bar, and spent the intervening years as a temporary teacher until the bar was eventually removed in July 1973.² Her constant message to the women in the family was ‘get your piece of paper; never depend on a man for money – earn your own living.’ So somehow, for me, singleness, educational qualifications, economic independence and difference became part of the fabric of growing up in Irish society in the 1960s and 1970s. I observed that singleness was regarded as a very poor second best to marriage, every young girl’s ambition. In stories and talk I learned that to be a single woman beyond a certain age was suspect; but I was suspicious of marriage and motherhood as the only possible future.

In being drawn to researching single identities, I notice that many research publications on single women are authored by single women. The works are often celebratory of their lives, demonstrating the strengths and survival skills of single women or strategies used to combat a marginalised and stigmatised status (see for example Adams, 1976; Allen, 1989; Peterson, 1981). Being a member of a marginalised group and writing about that experience may well be a powerful way of overcoming the stigma of being Other, of giving voice to those who have been silenced; it challenges the supposed objectivity of the researcher and the emphasis on maintaining distance from research subjects. Such writing is very much part of a sociology ‘for’ rather than ‘about’ women, but it also poses a number of theoretical and ethical dilemmas for feminist researchers. For example, there is a view that only ‘insiders’ or those who have direct experience of a topic should research that topic (see Spivak, 1988 and hooks, 1990): any other relation between researcher and topic is regarded as an act of oppression, continuing to displace the voices of those at the margins. This argument is derived from a feminist criticism of traditional research relationships in which it is presumed that the objective, expert researcher would have little in common with research participants and that this is desirable for the production of value-free, neutral, scientific research.

The construction of women as Other has long been a critical concern of feminist sociological theorising which variously has

² The marriage bar was imposed in 1935 as part of restrictive employment legislation whereby on marriage, women had to leave full-time permanent employment in the civil service, in banking and financial institutions and in teaching. Some women chose to remain working on a temporary basis, which subsequently affected pension entitlements.
sought to bring women from the margins into the centre of academic discourse or has recognised the radical strength of being an outsider, of being Other in disrupting, de-stabilising, changing the centre, challenging the discipline (see Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996). But, critically, attention to Otherness reflects theories of power and domination, of exploring the relationship between oppressor and oppressed, of undoing the construction of woman as inferior and silent and of revaluing women's experiences, voices and knowledges of the world. Also, a focus on representations of the powerful or theorising from the position of the Other offers the potential for both transformed and new understandings as well as more enlightened ways of knowing and 'undoing' the social. This is the basis of emancipatory research.

Othering is ultimately about relationship, generating a sharp awareness of processes of exclusion. Othering maintains positions of power and control, since the powerful regulate which representation is permissible and which is not; which voice has authority, which voice is deemed expert. Feminist researchers are acutely aware that research practices are scrutinised for any residue of Othering, any sign of acts of hegemony over other women. My choice of topic to investigate, my sampling procedure and my interpretation can exclude some and silence other research participants; my voice can displace the voices that speak the data; my account will transform what is said and my research act can be an act of colonisation. This is what I do not want to do. Neither do I want to abandon doing investigative social science as I believe that research writing can contribute to the alleviation of oppression and that other people's lives can be represented in written research (see Game, 1991; Stanley, 1996). Yet I realise that solutions to the problem of the Other are a compromise and are at best used to undo oppression. Social research is intrusive of people's lives, may be harmful and may not directly or immediately benefit research participants.\(^3\) Much of the advantage may accrue to the researcher.

\(^3\)This is not to deny the very many beneficial collective effects of research, manifest through policy or legislative change, for example. The point here concerns the research participant who has agreed to be interviewed; though many feminist accounts claim that women report satisfaction having been listened to with great attention by another person, I ask is this enough?

either in economic rewards, career promotion, expert status or academic qualifications.

There are always partial resolutions available to the problems of Othering. Some solutions will be rejected out of hand, depending on one's ideological stance. For example, Spivak (1988) and hooks (1990) are clear that Othering must stop, now.

I am waiting for them to stop talking about the 'Other'. ... It is not just important what we speak about, but how and why we speak. ... Often this speech about the 'Other' annihilates, erases: 'No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the coloniser, the speak subject, and you are now at the centre of my talk.' Stop (hooks, 1990: 151-152).

Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1996) review ways feminists have negotiated the problems of Othering: speaking only for ourselves; speaking of Otherness only to celebrate it; attempting to destabilise Otherness, and interrupting Othering (p. 10). In a criticism of speaking for oneself, they note that all representations and all theorisation of Others are not permitted; the powerful no more than the powerless are immune from the Other's point of view. Wilkinson and Kitzinger maintain that 'speaking only for ourselves' does not serve the interests of feminist theorising which seeks to disrupt the exclusion and silencing of women. They are equally critical of feminist work that concentrates on celebrating Otherness on the grounds that we tend to romanticise the resistance of Others, projecting our own political ideals onto oppressed women as we appropriate them to our cause. Strategies which seek to 'destabilise Otherness' in contrast, call into question the rigidity of identities, the construction of research participants as oppressed, of researchers as members of the dominant, powerful group. Post-modernist reflections on Othering illuminate the diverse locations, the contrary positions that we can occupy in the same moment. The category of Other is examined and is seen as ... 'constructed – by those who do the Othering, by those who reflect upon that Othering, and by the Others' own representations of themselves' (Wilkinson and
Kitzinger, 1996: 15). Presenting women’s accounts and voices ‘as they really are’ is regarded as problematic in this view, as the researcher has created, constructed, transformed voices, in producing the research narrative. Others’ voices do not speak for themselves; the implication here is that, in hiding my own voice I also misrepresent the voices of Others. Undoubtedly this is the case, as I choose quotes, themes, voices which fit or stand out from the work that I write.

Alcoff (1994), cited in Wilkinson and Kitzinger, recommends four ‘interrogatory practices’ useful for evaluating why and how we speak for others in our research: analyse and perhaps resist the impulse to speak at all; interrogate the relevance of our autobiographies to what we say; maintain an openness to criticism and analyse the effects of speaking on the discursive and material context (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996: 16). Similarly, Fine (1994) has suggested ways of ‘interrupting Othering’ for feminist, qualitative research practice, through a focus on the relationship between self and Other, engaging in ‘... the contradictions that percolate at the Self-Other hyphen’ (Fine, 1994: 70). She describes the importance of looking at what is between self and Other, that blurred area at the boundaries of identities between ‘researchers and informants’. Her solution to Othering is ‘to work the hyphen’.

By working the hyphen, I mean to suggest that researchers probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations. I mean to invite researchers to see how those ‘relations between’ get us ‘better data’, limit what we feel free to say, expand our minds and constrict our mouths, engage us in intimacy and seduce us into complicity, make us quick to interpret and hesitant to write. Working the hyphen means creating occasions for researchers and informants to discuss what is, and what is not, ‘happening between’, within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told, why, to whom, with what interpretation, and whose story is being shadowed, why, for whom and with what consequence (Fine, 1994: 72, italics original).

Fine advises those engaged in doing qualitative work to first create and then continually negotiate with ‘communities of friendly, critical informants’ (p. 80) who can assist us in representational and analytical choices about whose voices and which location should be privileged throughout a text. Wilkinson and Kitzinger, acknowledging Fine’s contribution to their thinking, suggest the following ways of working the hyphen: checking the validity of our representations of Others with them; showing how Othering works by listening to others’ accounts of ‘us’; listening to powerful representations and constructions of Others and developing opportunities for dialogue between Others and us (see p. 16). Many of these suggestions can be applied during data collection and analysis and I have attempted to use these strategies in researching single women’s identities.

However, issues of representation, participation and interpretation come together in a textual form in the completed research text, which despite following ‘good’ feminist research guidelines remains a piece of academic, distant writing aimed at a limited, privileged audience and is not intended to be read by research participants. A case in point is research produced for a doctoral dissertation. How can I reduce Othering in and through the text that I produce for an academic qualification? Is it even possible? In following a feminist, qualitative, interpretative paradigm of emancipatory research, I am motivated to transform ideological aspirations into concrete opportunities to reduce the effects of being Othered in the research process for research participants, and to open myself to hearing criticism of the interpretations that I make.

Researching with women: creating a ‘relational’ research design

I consciously decided to use researcher-researched relationships as a foundation for my research design. Since I am not a single woman I have little sense of the personal and private meaning of singleness. I have not experienced insult, hurt, discrimination, exclusion nor am I the object of attention from curious strangers.

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1 Stein produced two versions of his research work on single people in the US. One is an academic account (1981), while the other (1976) is aimed at single and married people, sharing his sociological interpretation of singleness with a view to creating greater understanding of the choice and circumstances of living the single life.
because of my ‘marital’ status. In this sense I do not know what it is to be single, to be Other. But in consciously ‘working the hyphen’, developing the researcher-researched relationship to the fullest extent possible and permissible, the design of the research project and all research decisions can be altered so that Othering is ‘interrupted’. I detail the research practices which in their entirety contribute to what I call a relational model of research, one which gives primacy to the researcher-researched relationship.\footnote{I stay with convention in referring to the researcher-researched relationship (rather than researched-researcher relationship) as it is accurate; I am the person writing and reporting the account. I am the researcher and it is my point of view that is being expressed. While I did ask participants to write, comment and make observations about the various aspects of the research process, the feedback was more often in the context of how they experienced or felt or responded to various events such as the interview itself; the workshop, reading the summary report, meeting other single women. Establishing a good working relationship with participants leads to the development of a variety of research practices which contribute to an overall model of collaborative inquiry.}

A cautionary note, however. I do not pretend that by so doing, I have given research participants control over the final research product which, in this example, is a post-graduate dissertation. As the sole and final author I take responsibility for the interpretation. But there are other options available to me and to participants in the production of written texts; for example a few participants indicated that in the future they would be interested in co-authoring a work based on women’s accounts of singleness.

The research strategies that I used to build a collaborative, relational research design in the context and limits of a post-graduate, academic dissertation, were as follows:

- Devising interview schedule with participants
- Collaborative style of interviewing
- Using the voice-centred relational analytical method (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998) for analysis
- Sending a complete copy of the interview transcript to participants, inviting comments, corrections, deletions, additions
- Sending each participant a copy of a summary report of the main themes of the work and inviting a written evaluation
- Providing a workshop/seminar on my interpretation of the findings – an opportunity for participants to meet each other.

To discuss the work, provide their own interpretations and raise other issues:
- Inviting participants to read and comment on the complete draft account
- Co-producing a text.

I will now report briefly on various aspects of these strategies.

\textit{Devising interview schedules with participants}

Concerned with contemporary women’s identities, and using a network of friends, I asked four single women to write about themselves, about being single, after which, if they wished, we could talk. I did not want to overly influence the potential form or shape of the content, except to say that I wanted to learn about the meaning and experience of being single and was attempting to set up a doctoral research study for this purpose. All four women wrote accounts varying in length from one to ten written pages, describing with elaborate, moving and intimate detail their reflections and thoughts on being single. One account was in the form of a letter to me with accompanying artwork representing her single self and her feeling of isolation from the rest of society. Another account followed the format of a brief life history, starting with childhood reminiscences and ending with thoughts on her future as a single woman. Another account begins with life as it is lived now, describing many strategies invoked to cope with the constant curiosity of others about her single status and the energy she has to devote to negotiating familial demands and expectations because she is not married. All the women retained a copy of their account for themselves as it was the first time that they had consciously put into writing feelings and thoughts about being single.

Asking for written accounts was an experimental technique aimed at assessing the range and type of information generated by this process of data collection. I knew that a written account was dependent on the ability and willingness of a woman to express thoughts about herself in writing. But what I did find was a rich and varied source of information about the meaning and experience of singleness. The women wrote about the significance of independence, the hurt of stigma, family reactions, the choice whether to be single or not, relationships with men, feelings of loss, childlessness, the search for intimacy, thoughts on marriage,
personal development, feelings of anger, social isolation and the lack of complexity and satisfaction that living alone invites. The written accounts provided a starting point from which to begin to understand what it is to be single in Irish society.

I interviewed two of the women who had written lengthy accounts of singleness, using a draft schedule which was in the process of composition, based on topic areas that had surfaced in all of the written accounts. In face-to-face talk with women about their experiences of singleness, I understood that there were many stories to be told and I felt women's strong emotions about being single. I learned that I needed to be with women when they were telling their stories, I needed to be able to listen to what was being told. I wanted to hear women's representations of themselves as single women. I wanted to know if and when singleness became an issue for women's sense of self, to talk about women's consciousness of their single identity and to learn how women managed their single status in everyday interactions. I wanted to hear the stories, events, and turning points which marked being single for women. I wished to be an insider, to abandon preconceptions as much as possible, to move beyond the single stereotypes and to sensitize myself to the significance of being single in the present moment. I wanted a lot.

I learned from these beginnings that singleness may be, but is not necessarily, problematic for single women, and that conceptualising it as such masked the complex composition of singleness. I also learned that singleness was implicated in how women viewed themselves and how others perceived and treated them. Issues of public and private perceptions of identity began to come to the fore. The interview guide itself was prepared in consultation with single women, based on issues women felt were important to talk about as relevant to their singleness; the guide also draws from themes and topics identified in the pilot interviews and written accounts. The intention in using a guide was to provide a focus for women as they related a multitude of experiences about living as a single woman. As the guide neared completion, I offered it to five single women for further comments, additions and clarifications. The interview guide begins with the question 'Who are you? Describe yourself to me', an invitation to tell a life story. The guide allowed women to speak about themselves, becoming/being single; the attitudes and perceptions of others; one's own ambitions on marriage and children; the meaning of home, work, religion; relationships with family and friends; thoughts on sexuality, intimacy, leisure, and on voluntary and political activities.

- Collaborative interviewing
In reflecting on interviewing, it is clear that there are several elements involved in the process: interviewing as a social relationship, as a method of gathering data, and as reflexive talk (see Oakley, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Birch, 1998). Following Chase (1995: 2), I regard qualitative in-depth interviews as '... occasions in which we ask for life stories' precisely because I also share the view that '... people make sense of experience and communicate meaning through narration'. My primary task as interviewer, Chase suggests, is to invite others to tell their life stories of experiences that are of 'deep and abiding interest' and that this invitation to tell life stories may need to be constantly re-iterated throughout the interview. The purpose of the life story is to acutely focus on the participants' own experiences in the first instance, rather than on the researcher's interests. The participant is regarded as a narrator rather than an informant/reporter. Chase asks what does it mean to invite the other's story and what is a good life story question?

Unlike sociological questions, questions that invite the other's story encourage a shift of responsibility for the import of the talk. Our task as interviewers is to provide the interactional and discursive conditions that will arouse her desire to embrace that responsibility. We are more likely to succeed when we orient our questions directly and simply to life experiences that the other seeks to make sense of and communicate ... (Chase, 1995: 12).

I take the view that the stories of a life told in a qualitative interview setting, stories of a person in relationship with others, is as much a process of self-exploration as a process of telling, of narration. In speaking about being single, women talked about themselves and who they were/are, in the past, present and future. For some, much of what was said was tentative, a trying on of words to describe the self, helping to bring the self into knowledge. Other women described a more firm, fixed view of themselves. I found that I did not have to listen very hard for evidence of reflection, self-reflection,
consciousness. What is evident from women’s stories of singleness as narrated in the interview setting is that most had thought about being single, were conscious and aware of the ongoing meaning and impact of singleness on their sense of self, and had much to tell about their own experiences of being single in contemporary Ireland. In the telling, in the talk, substantial identity work was going on.

A great deal of feminist theorising and methodological writing has been concerned about the researcher–researched relationship, with a focus on reducing power differentials between researcher and researched, rejecting researcher objectivity and encouraging the active participation of interviewees in engaging in the interview process and in ongoing analysis. In this context, feminist researchers have written about the problems and benefits of using unstructured interview guides, sharing personal information about themselves, sharing written interpretations of other people’s lives with them, encouraging interviewees to initiate and structure the dialogue; about providing help, assistance, counselling and offering friendship to research participants (Oakley, 1981, 1992; Finch, 1984; Stanley, 1990; Reinharz, 1992). Acker et al (1991) acknowledge the benefits of using principles of feminist research in a project, but are more sceptical about the possibilities for erasing ‘the contradictions in the relation between researcher and researched’ (p. 150). Their particular difficulties concerned the effects of sharing written interpretations of women’s lives in which there was not only ‘lack of agreement on the meaning of experiences’ but the material was ‘potentially threatening and disruptive to the subject’s view of the world’ (p. 142); therefore they chose not to share with women whom they judged would be upset.

We have not solved this problem; we believe the solution lies in accepting the dilemmas and maintaining an awareness of when and why we are not able to make the research process a true dialogue, thus giving full legitimacy to the subjectivity of the other as well as our own. At least then we can articulate the difficult balance between granting respect to the other’s interpretation of her reality, while going beyond that interpretation to comprehend its underlying relation (Acker et al, 1991: 142).

In the development of the interview guide and in building a relationship with single women, issues of participation, represen-

tation and interpretation are brought together. I wanted to be as inclusive as possible, while also pursuing my own research interests. Building relationships began as I wrote to and spoke with women on the telephone. These relationships continued throughout the research process precisely because I invited women to participate in the ongoing interpretation of singleness in dialogue with me. While this is ideologically driven, I am also concerned with interview data as such and the meaning of accounts produced in the interview situation. I am aware of the many factors that can affect what occurs in an interview (see for example Fontana and Frey, 1994), but I am more concerned about making interpretations of people’s lives based on an intense two to three hour conversation with them. Interviews need to be followed up, checked not only for accuracy, but also to offer women an opportunity to add what may have been initially held back or deemed unimportant at the time, as well as to remove or clarify information which they now regard as incorrect or unsafe in some way.6 Another issue of which I was aware is the support a woman may need after the interview is over, particularly when the material is sensitive. I always mentioned to women participants that if they felt the need and if I was the most appropriate person to provide assistance, I was available and willing to give them listening support.

Within the setting of the interview, which was always held in locations of the women’s own choosing, where they felt most safe, comfortable and in charge of the process, I began with a lengthy explanation of my own view of interviewing.7 This was necessary as most people’s expectation of an ‘interview’ is to answer questions according to a particular order. Focusing on participants’

6 In a number of instances transcripts were added to for informational and clarification purposes. Only one woman asked that I do not include any of her interview material in publications as quotes; another needed extra assurance from me that anonymity would always be provided as she did not want people about whom she spoke to be identified.

7 Interviews took place in a variety of locations; in an interview room in the university which I set up as a ‘sitting room’ with comfortable armchairs, side-lighting and tea-making facilities; in my office; in women’s own work places and in women’s homes and on one occasion sitting outside on a warm, sunny afternoon.
experiences, exploring issues together, participants asking questions, inquiring into what the other thinks, as one often does in conversation with a friend or colleague, needs to be explained.

I made it clear that the participant had control over the time, duration, pace, responses, interaction, and topic order, and that I was essentially at her command. I wanted to communicate that women had some sense of ownership of the process. Thus many of the women specifically chose where they wished the interview to be held; requested a copy of the interview guide to hold and consult while speaking; chose which topics they wanted to explore in more detail; sometimes asked me to comment on what they were saying, sometimes asked for advice, guidance, affirmation; took breaks, asked me back, invited me to lunch, asked me to leave. On occasion women commented that I had not asked them a specific question or did not probe enough into a particular relationship and offered me an opportunity to do so. And I did. After that I always concluded the interview with the question, ‘Anything else I need to know? Is there anything I have not asked you about that you feel is important to tell me or that I need to know about?’ How I opened and closed the conversation was crucial to building dialogue. On completion of the interview I also talked with women about the possible personal effects of the interview in the days and weeks following. I mentioned that recalling past, painful events and provoking uncomfortable reflections about oneself could bring further distress. I said that I could be contacted at any time following the interview if women felt I could be of support to them. In the event, nobody did contact me for this specific reason.

• Transcript feedback
At the beginning of the interview I also explained that on completion I would ask the woman to sign a consent form, showing that she had agreed to be interviewed, was aware that the interview was being taped and that the material was being gathered for a PhD thesis, but that it might also be used in other publications and in other settings. Guarantees of anonymity were contained in the letter. I also gave the women a transcript agreement form which I signed, detailing that I would return the transcript of the interview to them for verification and accuracy. I also verbally promised to send women a written summary of the research findings. In due course verbatim transcripts were prepared for each interview, sent to all participants and returned, with some amendments. Five women amended their transcripts; amendments included deleting references to personal names or places, correcting misrepresentations, clarifying and adding information to the original transcript. Two of the five women substantially expanded on particular areas addressed in the interview, providing more detail, other relevant information.

• Using the voice-centred relational analytical method for analysis
Qualitative data, based on women’s narrative accounts of their lives, is, I found, particularly challenging to analyse. Challenges are analytical, ideological and organisational, calling upon a vast repertoire of skills, none of which I was sure I possessed. Distinguishing between themes and sub-themes, finding categories that were essential and fruitful, identifying key words and phrases, connecting theoretical concepts written about in the literature with women’s own way of talking and experiencing single identities, developing and instituting participative, interpretative, feminist analytical frameworks and managing the hundreds of typewritten pages of talk is all potentially overwhelming and disabling. Qualitative analysis requires a huge investment of time and good data-management, as well as the development of a systematic and theoretically meaningful analytical method. For me this had to be based on a combination of my own understanding of gendered social relationships, women’s accounts of their own lives, social scientific models of the relationship between the self and the social – all woven to build either a mutual or a parallel interpretation of the meaning, making and organisation of singleness and women’s identities in Irish society.

Mauthner and Doucet (1998) note that writing about the activity of data analysis is still largely neglected in the qualitative literature. Reasons for the neglect, they write, may be due to fear of exposure and criticism; fear that we have not followed analytical procedures in the correct way; that in data analysis we are confronted with the subjective, interpretative nature of what we do and that this is difficult to articulate and may be uncomfortable, unsettling; and that the initial stages of analysis are ‘messy, confusing and uncertain’ (p. 122), as we intuitively reach for meaning, categories and themes
buried in a mass of words. Mauthner and Doucet outline their adaptation of a voice-centred relational approach to data analysis which involves four readings of interview transcripts, writing case studies and sharing qualitative interpretations with research peers in a group setting. The basis of the approach is relational, a view of individuals situated in a web of complex and social relationships:

The voice-centred relational method, and our version of it presented here, represents an attempt to translate this relational ontology into methodology and into concrete methods of data analysis by exploring individuals' narrative accounts in terms of their relationships to the people around them and their relationships to the broader, social, structural and cultural contexts within which they live (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998: 126).

Mauthner and Doucet describe the different emphases required in four readings of interview transcripts. The first reading concerns the overall story being told and the researchers' own intellectual and emotional response to the narrative. The second reading is for the 'I' voice, tracing how the respondent experiences, feels and speaks about herself. The third reading is devoted to listening for how participants speak about relationships, familiar and unfamiliar, while the fourth reading involves placing people within cultural contexts and social structures (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998: 126-33). The first reading, they claim, encourages reflexivity in the data analysis examining and documenting how theoretical interpretations of the participants' narratives are made. The second reading helps the researcher to listen to how the participant speaks about herself, before an interpretation is made. Attention is focused on when, where and how the participant uses the personal pronouns 'I', 'we', 'you' in talking about themselves. While Mauthner and Doucet pay less attention to reading for relationships and placing people within the social structure, I regard this reading as crucial to understanding the importance of interaction in the composition of self-identities, crucial to listening for connection to and separation from others. I found the overall approach attractive as it offered a way of listening to, hearing and paying attention to the various layers and elements involved in women's stories. It offered a partial resolution to the conflicts over voice and representation, though Mauthner and Doucet are as sceptical as others (see Acker et al, 1991) about a truly participative and equal research process.

I wanted to experiment with creating possibilities for a more collaborative approach to interpretation through dialogue and textual engagement with participants. While mindful of the experiences of other researchers concerning differences over meaning and status and power distances between researcher and researched (Fine, 1994), I remain interested in a method focused on emancipatory research outcomes and on providing a setting for sharing analyses beneficial to those who offered the information in the first instance. I used four strategies in order to involve participants in the overall analysis of data: assisting interviewee reflexivity in asking for explanations of their own or others' behaviours, relationships and interactions while the interview was going on; asking for written feedback on the interview transcript; asking for a written evaluation of a summary report of the main themes of the research; and setting up a seminar/workshop for all participants.

**Summary report**

A summary report of the main themes and issues identified in the research was sent to participants, together with an evaluation form. Eleven women returned written evaluations of the summary report, two adding two to three type-written pages to the evaluation form. The 17-page summary report consisted of the following:

- an overview of the research topic and a written explanation of the participatory model
- substantive quotes and commentary on the meaning of being single
- others' perceptions of the single status

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8 Mauthner and Doucet write that 'despite the attempts we might make to ensure that the voices of our respondents are heard and represented, and in the process trace our research journeys and make our own thinking and reasoning explicit, we must also recognise the impossibility of creating a research process in which the contradictions in power and consciousness are eliminated. ... We have to accept that the entire research process is most often one of unequals, and that as researchers, we retain power and control over conceiving, designing, administering and reporting the research' (Mauthner and Doucet 1998: 130). They also comment that the power differential is greater when we research private lives, as people have less authority to regulate research output compared to those in public, institutional positions.
- explanations women offered for their continued single status
- women's own typology of acceptable and unacceptable singles
- advantages and disadvantage of singleness
- relationships with working colleagues, friends, intimates, family members
- dealing with coupledom, living celibately, making decisions about childbearing/rearing with more attention paid to the lack of validation for the single lifestyle in familial relationships
- the connection between single social identities and the lack of ascription of adulthood
- a commentary on the importance of social support and of choosing significant relationships to enable independent living.

Women responded to the material in the report, offering additional insights, asking further questions, communicating interest and support for the work.

I am struck by the commitment the women showed to the study and the time they gave in response to my requests. For example, the report evaluations focused on issues that interested women most, aspects of the report with which they agreed or disagreed and how they felt after reading the report. The women shared the view that to be single remained unacceptable. As one women wrote, ‘Being single in the West of Ireland is a stigma and women still need to be approved of by marrying somebody.’ A number identified with the quotes used in the report, one woman writing ‘as if I said them myself’. Another commented that she agreed with the presentation of singlehood as ‘undervalued, pitied, taken-for-granted when it is useful to a family, but also misunderstood and invisible; that social structures are lamentably disinterested in supporting single women in anything other than the marriage goal’. Women wrote that they were pleased that someone else felt ‘this was a subject worthwhile studying’ and ‘that I am not alone in my perceptions of how I feel about my status and in the way society as a whole see and judge me, e.g., odd, different, not having our views and ideas taken on board at work or by family’. Similarly, another woman said she was ‘relieved’ on reading the report ‘as others feel the same and are treated in the same manner as myself’, because they are single’. All of the women who responded to the report mentioned that their singleness was not accepted by others and that it was a matter of some consequence. Despite this, two women said that the report had provoked reflection: ‘... it made me think about my situation and ask would I change. My answer was no. I am happy with my lot.’

The women supported the focus on the importance of relationships to single women and identified with the pain that can result because of the lack of reciprocity in familial relationships. One woman described the many hurtful things said to her by family members. ‘After my father’s funeral one sister, in full earshot of loads of people, commented, “Catherine, you are the only one of us not married; can you not find yourself a man?”’ and later that evening, “You don’t have any children, and at the age you are now, you f——— bitch, you won’t have any either.” Some women wanted to learn more about coping with the ‘attitudes of couple society’ and overcoming the ‘power of socialisation, convincing most of us that marriage is our destiny ... and the difficulties of dealing with the failure to meet that expectation’. Others were interested that women would actively choose to be single and wanted to understand that viewpoint more. A woman wrote, ‘I see that (choosing to be single) as requiring a strength that I simply don’t have, as well as cutting off a source of happiness which I hope for – many friends whom I respect very much are married and have got married recently as mature adults – and so on this I rest my belief that I am not foolish for even thinking of getting married.’ Another woman feels frustrated by women’s unequal status and wondered how much further she has to go to show that there are other ways of being a woman, besides marrying and having children, in contemporary Ireland. She feels ‘annoyed that I ever implicitly lied or apologised for having the courage to be different’. She asked a number of questions about the isolation of single women from society, ‘Is it self-imposed, necessary or useful? Do we have to be tough, self-protective as we get older? How can we convey to the world at large that it is none of people’s business whether we’re married or not?’

Two women had difficulty with the perception that singleness impacted on working relationships with colleagues, impeded career advancement, or resulted in being asked to work longer hours and
holiday periods. Another woman found ‘it hard to stomach women blaming themselves for not being married. ... It is sad that now as free adults they must still suffer in society.’ One woman used the opportunity in the evaluation form to tell me that ‘I am a much happier person than I was when I did the interview with you. I am clear that I want love in my life; to have someone to love and be loved by in return, and I am working on myself to achieve this goal. The result may come as a man or a child or both. I am not desperately seeking a man like I used to. I am quite content to take whatever is in store for me.’

The summary report of the themes and issues around which I was writing my account of single identities, a copy of which I provided to women participants, was not only an opportunity to share my interpretation of women’s lives with them, but also a potent medium for dialogue and a beginning point for our discussions in the workshop.

• Single women study workshop

All of the women who received a copy of the summary report were invited to participate in the single women study workshop. I made the decision to introduce a facilitator into the setting as I was aware that the material shared contained deep emotions and long-held feelings and I needed a skilled person present to care for all of the women in a collective setting. The workshop was designed in collaboration with the facilitator to meet a number of research requirements. It would provide more detailed information to participants on the main themes and issues from which the research was developed. The workshop was an opportunity to discuss my representation of singleness with women and for women to reflect back on the representations being made. Women would also meet and speak with each other, a desire expressed to me by some women. Finally the workshop would provide a collective setting in which the participation of the single women in the study could be negotiated and formally closed.9

I believe it is important in involving others in the research process that the invitation is made on a formal, explicit and clear basis—likewise the act of participation must be bounded and ended at a particular moment within the life of the research project. If boundaries are not drawn, if beginnings and endings are not marked, then it is no longer clear whether immediate obligations to participants have been fulfilled or not. The workshop marked the ending of my face-to-face relationship with the participants as a group and was personally significant in helping me to separate from them. I also wanted the evening to be a celebration of women’s participation and to appreciate their interest in and attention to the work. Six women attended the workshop which was of five hours duration. I was pleased that the women had chosen to attend and were willing to engage further with the study, with each other and with me.

To share more of the research findings with participants, I designed ‘posters’ on themes which best informed aspects of single identity in which I am interested and which underpinned themes of the research: exploring the relationship between self-identity and social-identity; examining single self-identity; and the relevance of women’s dominant social identities for single women in contemporary Ireland. The poster themes were chosen to complement themes already referred to in the summary report so that participants could engage with the material in greater depth. Each poster carried extensive commentary from me and quotes from participants on stigma, choice, independence, home, childlessness, marriage, sexuality, and sociological categorising of singleness. The use of posters was one way of making my representation of singleness visible and accessible to women. Participants spent the first hour of the workshop moving through the exhibition, meeting with each other, chatting and taking some food and refreshments.10

The facilitator’s observation of this stage of the workshop was: ‘The categories of singleness generated quite a bit of debate and

9 I met with the facilitator for three two-hour periods in which we clarified intentions and outcomes in the workshop. The facilitator was familiar with feminist, participative research methodologies and had read the draft methodology chapter for the thesis on single identities. In addition to helping me prepare and run the workshop, she also wrote a detailed report of her observations of the workshop.

10 The posters were placed on both sides of large storyboards and suspended from the ceiling of the room, above head height, in a spiral from one corner of the room to another. Women moved between the posters, reading, talking and reflecting on the material. It was easy to strike up a conversation and this setting did help women to feel more comfortable and involved in the workshop.
response. The whole area of home also seemed particularly charged. The next stage of the workshop involved discussing with women participants the labels/categories sociologists (myself included) had devised in studying single identities. The use of categories to fix identities is an analytical practice which I was deeply ambivalent about, marking the power of the researcher to name others without consultation – a practice which seems inimical to collaborative interpretation. I resolved the issue to some extent by presenting and talking about the categories I had devised to the women in the workshop: single women as rejectors, acceptors, resistors, and rebels. I also talked about my ambivalence in using the categories. The women present neither rejected nor accepted the categories; rather they worked them for their own purposes. We used the categories to generate discussion on single identity. Using crayons, women also drew their interpretation of the categories, and drew themselves, using words and brightly coloured images to represent themselves, choosing their own location between, in, and beside categories.

The discussions and play around the category work was followed by a body/mind focusing exercise. The facilitator’s intention was: to give an opportunity for participants to become quiet and reflective; to sense what are the most significant issues for them being represented in the study. Also to focus on what is important for them to hear, have heard and be witnessed. Participants were invited to share issues that immediately came up. These included isolation in the form of being stigmatised and stereotyped, e.g. going to a wedding and having your sexual practices questioned by your nephew, who is being naturally curious. Relationships with mothers came up in this, also homelessness and bereavements ...

(extract from facilitator’s report).

This was followed by a collaborative sharing of symbols of valued aspects of singleness for all of us involved in the study. Each woman shared what she valued most about her singleness, using a symbol to do so. The themes of independence, freedom, mobility, achievement of ambition in a career, being self-reliant, having experienced a loving relationship, caring for another, having time for reflection

and creative expression and the influence of role-models were symbolically represented in a photograph of carer and cared for, in car-keys, a driving license, house and work keys, a comb and writing set, a silver locket, a glass peach. The last stage comprised workshop participants working in pairs, talking with each other about meaningful aspects of being single, then bringing the essence of this shared experience back to the group. The facilitator introduced this exercise in response to an expressed need in the group to talk with each other. We finished with a closing circle, marking the deliberate closure of the workshop. Each woman stood inside the circle ‘... and was held there until she was ready to let go’. The facilitator decided ‘... to use this formalised ending, because of my felt sense of the deep intimacy and bonding with the researcher and with the other participants in the research. This was a time of marking the ending of this relationship and allowing the story of each woman’s intimate lived experience to become public knowledge ...’ (extract from facilitator’s report). She observed that there was a reluctance in the group to finish, that there was a strong, mutual connection among the women, which was collectively recognised.

Concluding comment

The workshop affirmed for me the suitability of the themes I had chosen to represent single identity and provoked me to re-examine the usefulness of identity categorisations. I was impressed with the women’s engagement with the material that I presented and their commitment to exploring single self-identity in the workshop. As part of a participatory model for data analysis, working with materials such as quotes from interview transcripts, the summary report, and written evaluations in the workshop setting, not only provided an opportunity for participants to engage in dialogue with the researcher on the material, but was also an opportunity to witness the impact of the representation of singleness on and with other single women. One woman wrote on her evaluation form prior to the workshop that she was ‘fascinated by other women’s responses to being single and that she was looking forward to meeting with the other women in the workshop’. Women began to build relationships with each other during the workshop and afterwards a few exchanged names

11 The use of the symbol was suggested by the facilitator to help women speak about the significant aspects of singleness for them. It seemed to work well in that the symbol provided a focus for the discussion.
and addresses. One woman asked if anybody was interested in setting up a Single Women’s Support Group. There was a strong sense of bonding in the group, women asking when we can see each other again. For my part, I told them I would write to each of them on completion of the work. Finally, the completion of the workshop was also important for me. I felt that I could now separate from the women as my promises to them had been fulfilled. In the context of this study, the researcher-researched relationship could now be ended.

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