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SINGULAR IDENTITIES:
MANAGING STIGMA, RESISTING VOICES
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This paper argues that single women are stigmatised in contemporary Irish society and that this is particularly evident in people's everyday interactions with single women. Stigmatising interactions are apparent in relation to singleness itself, marital status, the bearing of children and sexuality, indicating the pervasiveness of heterosexual, familistic ideologies in Irish society. The paper describes a set of stigma management strategies deployed by women in response to single stigma. Within these responses, emerging forms of resistance to dominant ideologies of womanhood are evident in women's explanations of 'why I am single'.

Introduction

To be single remains an unacceptable and discreditable social identity in contemporary Irish society.¹ This is not a viewpoint which remains hidden, but is present in others' routine interactions with single women. Single women are aware that singleness is a discreditable status and work to manage interaction in this context. The discreditable aspects of singleness are concerned with marital status, reproductive behaviour and sexuality, core attributes of female gender identity in a familistic society.² This paper examines a set of stigma management strategies deployed by women in response to single stigma.

The stigmatisation of singleness as a social identity for women endorses traditional gender relations and frames a strong ideological setting in which conceptions of womanhood as heterosexual, married and reproductive are favoured. This poses an onerous challenge for women 'who do otherwise'. Not being valued in the public space has consequences for everyday interaction with others and for claiming personhood and adulthood. Drawing on in-depth interviews with thirty single women on the topic of singleness, I provide evidence of the

stigmatising interactions of others and outline single women's responses.³ Stigma management strategies allow social interaction to proceed and are effective as a basis for individual action. Stigma management is not usually considered as a basis for a collective challenge to a dominant ideology (in this instance, familism), but resistance to patriarchal, gendered identities can be discerned in women's explanations of 'why I am single'. Paying attention to women's narrative accounts as they speak from the experience of a stigmatised location, reveals resistance at work.

Stigma

Groups of people are stigmatised on the basis that they share social or personal characteristics which cause others to exclude them from normal social interaction. The characteristics are regarded as problematic in that they disrupt the basis of expected behaviour. Though stigmatised persons may not have behaved in an offensive manner, nor usually transgressed major social norms, the mark of the stigma will dominate their relationships, with intimates, with acquaintances and those not known to them. The consequences of stigma for social interaction is key to Goffman's work. He observed that persons with a stigma have similar learning experiences and changes in self-concept, described as a 'moral career' in which the stigmatised person first learns the identity beliefs of normal society and then learns the consequences for themselves of being stigmatised. Stigma is an 'undesired differentness' from what is anticipated, it 'intrudes into interaction' causing others to avoid or turn away from persons with a stigmatising attribute.⁴ A person's acceptability is in doubt as is her adult status and in extreme instances an individual's humanness can be questioned. Understanding stigma shows up the significance of social identity for self-identity: the process of stigmatisation, individual feelings of stigma and the responses to being stigmatised are important in this regard.⁵

Goffman describes conversational encounters between 'normals' and 'stigmatised' as '... one of the primal scenes of sociology when the causes and effects of stigma must be directly confronted by both sides'.⁶ His concern with 'mixed contacts' illustrates the function of stigma in eliciting support for society and identity norms from those very people who are

excluded and not supported by normal society. He sought to demonstrate the extent to which stigmatised persons learned the process of stigma management, easing tensional interaction for 'normals'. Goffman differentiated between those whose stigma was obvious or known about (the discredited) and those whose stigma was as yet unknown or not visible (the discreditable). The latter group, he argued, in conversation with 'normals', were conscious of managing information about themselves which might reveal them as discredited persons. A person possessing a potentially discrediting attribute is 'situation conscious', aware of the consequences for acceptance of disclosure of information that may discredit her or him in the presence of others. Goffman's concern with 'mixed contacts' illustrates the function of stigma in eliciting support for identity norms from those very people who are excluded by 'normal' society. He sought to demonstrate the extent to which stigmatised persons learned the process of stigma management, easing tensional interaction for 'normals'. Goffman's account highlights the potency of the discreditable attribute in forming stereotypical representations of an individual, despite other attributes she/he may possess, thus constraining social interaction.

The strain of controlling information about one's identity and being constantly on guard for discreditable moments arguably affects one's relationship with others. Goffman shows that all of the adjustment in interaction falls to the stigmatised, while normals remain undisturbed in their identity beliefs. The stigmatised become most adept in social encounters, having learned the process of stigmatisation and being constantly exposed to the painful consequences of possessing stigmatising attributes. Managing information about the self (passing) and easing social interaction (covering) are two strategies identified by Goffman as aspects of stigma management. These strategies are utilised on a regular basis by women in the present study.

Singular Stigma

I asked participants if there are situations in which women feel uncomfortable or self-conscious about being single. All effortlessly describe a variety of encounters in family, work and public settings in which women feel singleness influences how others perceive and interact

with them. Women believe that being single excludes them from the rest of society, describing themselves as 'outsiders looking in'. Critically, irrespective of age, income, education, occupation, home-ownership, socio-economic status, presence or absence of a partner or network of friends, whether caring for a parent or other person, all talk about the presence and experience of single stigma in their lives. Three different groups of women participated in the study: career women, women caring for a dependent relative/adult and women who are actively seeking an intimate, sexual partner. All of the women could provide an account of feeling 'different', being excluded or being treated in a less advantageous manner compared to married people or men, because they are single. Women's social identities either as 'Career Women', 'Carers' or 'Partner-Seekers' looking for 'Mr Right' are not sufficient to overcome single stigma.

For Career Women, 'having an extraordinary career' and acting outside the married/reproductive role, though crucial in other respects, is not a sufficiently robust strategy to combat stigmatisation. Carers, though providing long-term, essential support to families, say they are continually reminded of their singleness and that caring does not off-set or neutralise the stigmatising consequences of singleness. Partner-Seekers are more aware of single stigma than others and are highly 'situation conscious', working to alter their stigmatised single status. Despite women's claimed social identities, the fact of not marrying, of not being heterosexually coupled, of not being in a relationship with a man remains consequential for women in contemporary Irish society. Favoured social identities for women continue to be based on heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood. These are identities based on womanhood in dependent relationship with others: they are not based on conceptions of womanhood as independent and autonomous, i.e. as a 'singular' woman.

The theme of feeling isolated and being excluded by couples is reiterated by single women who explain the reluctance of others to include them in social gatherings. Because they are not partnered, they do not 'fit in' or they lack shared interests with friends who are no longer single. Women's singleness is the problem. It is perceived by others as a problematic status and women are consequentially left out and leave themselves out of family and coupled gatherings. Trying to understand her exclusion and why she is not invited by couples to social gatherings, Susan says that,

couples are 'uncomfortable' with single people, rarely inviting a single woman to dinner or to a party, for example. She says, this is not because they don't like single women but it is because 'you don't fit in'. The consequence of imposing stereotypical identities is to exclude single women from normal social interaction. Cara told me about a conversation she had with a close, married friend who was planning invitations to a meal in her home and she needed two other people to make up the numbers. The conversation went as follows:

... and she said "I've asked Sean and Mary but they can't come, so I'll ask Brendan and Cathleen and if they can't come I'll ask you" and she said "I can be up front with you" and I said "You can of course, that is what it is all about". But it just hurt, a lot. But she doesn't even realise that, she is not conscious of isolating people because they are single ... (Cara, Career Woman, age 39)

This woman feels that she could not disclose her true feelings to her friend. The consequence of imposing and accepting stereotypical identities is to exclude single women from normal social interaction. The social stereotypical identity of the single women as independent, selfish, fussy, too choosy, not wanting relationships, having no ties or responsibilities, wealthy and enjoying a great social life informs how specific others perceive single women. Cara comments that because she is single, others assume that she prefers to be alone:

... people think that I am—I am probably responsible for this perception of their—people think that I am very confident that I don't need positive feedback, whereas I do. I need it desperately. So that causes me a lot of problems because I tend to get isolated, because people think that I don't need people. (Cara, Career Woman, age 39)

Women talked about family occasions, birthdays, weddings, Christmas day, dinner parties, social settings in which most people are coupled or tied by parent-child and intimate familial relationships as being particularly challenging for them and the least inviting. These are occasions of 'mixed contacts', to use Goffman's terminology, in which single women feel as if they themselves are intruders. For the most part women have learned to avoid these celebrations. Cara refuses all wedding invitations:

I went to the wedding and there were thirteen of us at the table and the particular crew are very into being couples ... they were so busy being with each other and I was just very, very alone and I thought to myself I am never going to a wedding again because I just couldn't get past this couple thing ... (Cara, Career Woman, age 39)

Similarly other women refuse all dinner invitations or work celebrations which emphasise their singleness. Coupled and family social events mark the single woman as an outsider, as different and are settings which provide opportunities for others to inquire why women remain single. These occasions are reminders that others perceive single women as different and expect women to account for this difference: these reminders are painful. What is apparent from women's accounts is that a stigmatised social identity informs how familiars and strangers and familiar others perceive single women in contemporary Irish society.

Single Stigma

Being questioned about remaining single or not marrying is a common experience for single women. Intimates and strangers alike comment on women's single status. Eleanor fends off the inevitable question from strangers by introducing herself as a single woman:

I suppose that the first thing I would say is that I am single ... because I find that is the second question you are always asked. "What is your name and do you have a boyfriend?" That is what I was always being asked ... So the first thing I would say is that I am single. (Eleanor, Career Woman, age 32)

Women routinely commented that their singleness is always a matter for discussion, curiosity and a basis for inquiry from others. Brenda said:

I don't think there is a good picture of that (single women in Irish society). I think generally it is expected of you to be married in the late twenties at the latest. And I still get remarks from people, even last night, people ask me. I met a particular guy I went out with ten years ago, and he was amazed that I wasn't married. I get those remarks all the time. (Brenda, Career Woman, age 31)

It is assumed that women in their thirties are married: if they are not, they are required to explain their single status. Kitty described how she felt

about saying 'No I am not married' in response to a query from an acquaintance:

Immediately, I felt kind of condemned. "Oh You should be married. You look like you should be married". Neighbours ask about "any sign of you getting married", friends inquire "are you doing any line" ... (I)t seems to be the in question. And I know I do it myself to single girls that I would know and meet up with occasionally. You would be wondering are they single or did they get married. Or it seems the natural thing to assume that everybody grows up and then gets married. It saddens me to have to answer no to it. No, I am not married. No, I haven't got anybody. That saddens and annoys me ... (Kitty, Partner-Seeker, age 31)

Marriage is still regarded as the preferred pathway to adult identity for women, one which single women do not take. As a result, both woman (gender) identity and adult identity are in question. A number of women felt that they are not treated with the same respect as married persons. Emer thought that:

... society doesn't take single people as seriously as married people ... society might be a little bit suspicious of people or write them off as a bit eccentric, you know, not married. (Emer, Career Woman, age 33)

The deprivation of full adult status or personhood is a recurrent theme in others' interactions with single women. One of the most poignant and telling remarks made in an interview was the comment 'single women are human beings too, you know'. Bridget, a thirty-two year old woman is still perceived as a 'girl' by her mother:

In the eyes of my mother ... I am still a girl and that comes across very strongly and I vehemently hate that. And also that it is not enough to be in a relationship, that until you have the baby, you are still a girl, no matter what age you are ... (Bridget, Partner-Seeker, age 32)

Emer tells of how her relationship with her family is affected by the fact of her remaining single:

... My mother gives me an awful hard time and my eldest sister gives me an awful hard time over being single. And I always have a feeling from both of them and probably from other folk as well that I am not complete when I am not married. (Emer, Career Woman, age 33)

Heterosexual Stigma

Women's private, intimate, sexual lives are regarded as permissible terrain for public discussion and inquiry. Single sexuality is regarded as a legitimate topic about which women can be questioned or teased. Celibacy, sexual activity and sexual orientation are the basis for inquiring comments from others. For example, women speak about spouses of married friends speaking to them with sexual innuendo, asking about their sexual availability and offering to have sex with them. Often this is done in a jocular manner and in the company of their wives who did not challenge what is being said or are seemingly unaware of the offensive nature of the remarks. Katie explains:

We might be out, a few of us, and maybe a husband would pick us up and drop me off and leave the door open and "I'll be in to you. I am spending the night with (you) tonight. Oh you will have a great night, you won't know yourself" ... several men friends often make remarks like that to me ... (Katie, Carer, age 45)

A woman tells me of her distress when a man approached her in a public setting and on establishing she is a single woman, asked her about her sexual activity:

... a stranger (asked me) when I last had sex and why it had been so long since I had sex and I like a fool answered him. You know I was so pissed with myself that I did answer him. I should have told him to mind his own fucking business. But it was like I had to prove myself in some way that I wasn't a frigid little virgin that never had a man in my bed and I was so mad with myself for answering him. (Kitty, Partner-Seeker, age 31)

Women talk about feeling unsafe in public settings as they are a 'target' for predatory men. Being perceived as sexually available and being approached for sex is a frequent occurrence for either women alone or when in the company of other single women.

Single women's heterosexuality is openly and publicly scrutinised by others: women are reminded about their lack of sexual relationship with a man in the constant comments and queries of family, friends and strangers. A woman's sexuality is scrutinised whether she is celibate or seeking a sexual relationship. Single women said they are perceived as either 'man-haters' or 'man-hunters'. Married women's perceptions of

single women as 'seductress' and as a threat to their own marital relationships in particular, is also spoken about.

Being on the single scene, looking for a partner is acceptable up to a certain age: a younger woman looking for 'Mr Right' fulfils gender expectations. Being on the scene as an older, sexually available single woman however, is not accepted, both by single women, as well as others. The problems of looking for a partner can no longer be talked about openly with friends or family, as older women do not want to be seen as 'looking for a man' or 'that desperate'.⁷

While almost a third of those interviewed have never been sexually active with another person, most of the older, single women interviewed are no longer sexually active, some having been celibate for ten years and more. While for some there has been little opportunity for sexual intimacy throughout their lives, a few have actively withdrawn from the pressures of heterosexual coupledness, either choosing celibate independence or lesbian partnership. In such decisions, resistance to dominant conceptions of womanhood are revealed. Being regarded as different, being on the outside can precipitate a greater self-awareness helping to build a more self-examined life and alternative identities for women.

The Stigma of Lesbianism

Women also report being identified as lesbians either because they are single, over thirty, because they socialise with other single women or they may have shown affection to another woman in public. Women show an awareness of lesbianism as a stigmatised social identity and are anxious to avoid being labelled as lesbians. The fear of being labelled lesbian illustrates the pressure to conform, a pressure to which single women are particularly subject. Homophobia and reproductive expectations intersect to stigmatise singleness. Kelly describes her perplexity:

... I had a very bad situation there, a couple of people said to me, they believed that I was a lesbian, not that I was very uncomfortable with—I have a very good friend who is a lesbian—and maybe that is how I was associated but that I felt very uncomfortable ... (Kelly, Career Woman, age 36)

A few women said that they now made an extra effort to show that they are sexually interested in men, to avoid further stigma by being labelled as a lesbian. Actively displaying her heterosexuality to others, displaying her support for the status quo becomes part of the armour employed by some single women in defence of the chronic stigma that is directed against those who never marry.

The Stigma of Childlessness

Women report that negative comments are levelled at them on the grounds that they do not have children. Family members might say that a woman is 'too selfish' to have a child, work colleagues would comment that a single woman could not possibly understand what is involved in the routine care of children or comprehend the emotional relationship between parent and child. This is despite the fact that many single women have regular contact with children (nieces/nephews) or have long experience of the routine care of an elderly, dependent relative. The fact that single women do not have children is used as a basis for requesting that they work longer hours or do anti-social shift work. That single woman may have other needs, responsibilities and interests is not taken into account by others.

Stigma Management

Understanding the process of identity composition is highly complex as self and social identities are deeply embedded, one within the other. Extricating them creates the impression of fixed, separate entities when in fact it is the perceived, felt, experienced consequences of identities that require attention. Those whose social identities are perceived as not supporting the dominant norms of society, are I argue, more likely to be aware of their sense of self (precisely because their identities are objects for public scrutiny and inquiry). Only those who are affected by the consequences of a stigmatised social identity will reflect on their situation and work to direct and 'ease' social interaction. Goffman's (1963) insights into stigma management demonstrate that a variety of strategies are involved in this process. For example, individuals can distance themselves from the social identity concerned, the salience of the stigmatised social identity can be refuted, individuals can seek to change the stereotypical

representations which make up the stigmatised social identity, they can seek a social identity which supports approved norms or they can compose a self-identity with which they are secure and which fits with their values and choices.

Single women have learned to be not only highly situation conscious but are also adept in managing social relationships. Women routinely invent excuses not to attend coupled functions. Susan dislikes having to do this, feeling trapped in a situation over which she has little control. She is angry that she has to turn down invitations and 'pretend' that she has another engagement. She feels 'stuck in the situation' and angry because she does not exclude others from parties or events.

Some women learn to avoid being discredited in work and social settings by concealing personal information about themselves, and by keeping their private life and work life separate. Other women deliberately mislead, pretending to be married, partnered or engaged for example, drawing attention away from their continuing singleness. A number of women mentioned that they quite frequently invented a boyfriend or persuaded a friend to pose as their fiancée to deter queries about their marital intentions from ever-anxious neighbours and relatives. Others wore engagement rings. Being alone in public places either in work or leisure-related settings are often occasions when women have to deal with the unwanted sexual attentions of 'predatory men' by mentioning that they had a boyfriend/partner/spouse. These strategies indicate that single women have learned to cope with, prepare for and respond to a stigmatised social identity. The protective/evasive strategies deter further inquiry and stigmatisation. Stigma effectively works to elicit support for dominant beliefs, practices and values, while controlling those who, for whatever reason, choose 'to do otherwise'.

Women have a repertoire of stories to explain their singleness to others which reduce the consequences of stigma in interaction. These stories are understood as responses to learning that one is a member of a stigmatised social category, that one has to cope with, prepare for and respond to the presence of a stigmatised social identity. Women's singleness has always to be explained and single women are adept at providing a variety of accounts to others of why they are single. The veracity of the account depends on the situation, who is asking the question, the sincerity of the

inquiry and the general mood of the woman herself. Depending on the context, women could advance several explanations at any one time or vary the explanation used from one situation to another.

Some explanations are used in response to queries about marital status from family, acquaintances and strangers. Short, pointed responses such as 'I am an independent woman', 'I don't want to be tied down', 'I haven't met Mr Right yet', 'It just happened this way', usually suffice as a brief, polite explanation to the query. Some queries can be more discourteous, asking about the frequency of women's sexual contact with others and questioning women's sexual orientation, for example. To offset any query about their single status, some women make it quite clear to others that they are single, that this is a matter of concern only to themselves and that they are not willing to discuss their personal life with every curious bystander, thus prohibiting any further public scrutiny of their private lives.

Eight kinds of explanations for being single can be discerned from the interview data. Explanations are very rarely voluntarily offered as women usually do not wish to draw attention to the fact that they are single. Some explanations are protective strategies, providing reasonable, comprehensible answers and hopefully deter further inquiry. Some of the explanations voluntarily reveal more about the speaker and her personal preferences. Women said that they prefer to be single now, valuing emotional, financial and social independence: that career development and educational aspirations have been prioritised over intimate relationships. While one of the most common explanations for being single is the absence of 'Mr Right', women also speak about their reluctance to engage in intimate relationships because of dissatisfaction with previous heterosexual relationships. A few point to their lack of interest in pursuing relationships with the opposite sex or say that their relationship skills are poor in general. Family obligations and caring responsibilities are used to explain prolonged singleness. Having to work to earn a living from an early age meant that marriage was not an option. The explanations are described below.

Being Emotionally Independent

In response to queries about their singleness, women speak about their attachment to their independence, their freedom and not wanting to be constrained by marital, intimate relationships. In this context, independence is most usually contraposed to marriage/partner relationships, prioritising the importance of individual, emotional freedom over other types of freedoms, such as economic or political independence. Emotional independence and marital type ties are presented as an either/or situation—one at the cost of another. Marriage is equated with dependency and having to submit oneself to the authority of the husband/partner. Being 'tied down', 'held back' or 'not one's own boss' are all to be avoided. Women speak about their lack of interest in or commitment to, investing time and energy in one-to-one, personal relationships. Men are perceived and presented as not liking independent women: hence the explanation for women's continuing singleness. This explanation is better understood as an answer to the question 'why I am single' rather than an answer to 'why I am not married'. Singleness as a preferred option and placing a significant value on independence is stressed.

The Importance of Work and/or Educational Ambition

Career development and the prioritising of training and education is frequently cited as a reason for singleness. A common response is to say that 'my career has always been more important', particularly for those women who perceive themselves in terms of their occupational identity. Career and education consume much of women's time and interests, particularly in their twenties, time, women explain, that otherwise may have been devoted to looking for a partner. Men are not willing to wait while women develop their careers or study to realise educational qualifications. Women perceive that a choice has to be made between paid work (particularly in setting up a new business or planning for a promotion) and fostering intimate relationships. Betty recounts that she:

... had a number of relationships, but I would have always thought, I will not be able to fulfil my own ambition now career wise if I settle down and have children ... I think that it has been difficult for any given partner along the line to accept that there must be a waiting period ... (Betty, Career Woman, age 42)

In many women's accounts of choosing between cultivating career or intimate relationships, there is evidence of holding, of delaying, of not wanting to be involved in dependency relationships with others. The presentation of these accounts is interesting as women juxtapose career identity with coupled identity as a rationale for their continuing singleness. Though career is important, none of the women cite 'economic independence' as a sole explanation for singleness.

The Right Man

Nearly every woman, whether speaking in general about other women or more specifically about themselves, say they just have not met the right man. 'Mr Right' clearly encompasses the ideal characteristics and personality of the perfect person with whom they could consider having a relationship. As an explanation, not having met Mr Right, serves very well, though charges of being 'too choosy' can also follow. This explanation has much potential as an identity account as being too choosy can also be read as 'not willing to settle for less'. Together with educational and career ambition, it calls up the necessity of scrutinising the concept of choice to understand the pathway to singleness in greater depth. Being particular about the personality and disposition of a potential partner can be indicative of the extent of attachment to the single status, as women speak about marrying, but only if their explicit conditions in relationship can be met.

Broken Romance

Almost all of the women had a story about a man in the past whom they might have married, were on the point of marrying, were engaged to or were involved with for a considerable period of time. But as the explanation reveals, the relationship ended, but the woman herself is not to blame. The man either left abruptly when the engagement/marriage plans became public, or the woman's family strongly disapproved of the woman's partner, or the man is discovered to be violent, mentally-ill, alcoholic, already married or engaged to another women. The experience of the broken romance left many women doubtful about involving themselves in future relationships, angry at the investment of time in a

relationship that had no future and the lengthy time period occupied with recovering from a broken romance. Celie said for example:

for years I was just broken up ... even if some man would come looking at me or touch me I would cringe ... what kind of an eejit was I? ... I wasted all those years. (Celie, Career Woman, age 36)

On the other hand, women themselves also ended relationships, broke engagements, knowing that this is not 'Mr Right' and that they are not really prepared to marry after all. The broken romance explanation again can be interpreted as stigma management and part of an identity account. As a stigma management strategy, it informs others that the woman is heterosexual, that she has attempted to form a partnership with another and that she is presenting herself as an adult, pursuing adult-type relationships. The fact that the attempt has failed has little relevance to others, but could be interpreted as crucial to negotiating the maintenance of single self-identities in a stigmatised setting.

Incapable of Forming Long-Term Relationships

Another explanation offered for singleness includes women's stated lack of interest in or little talent for pursuing a sexual partner. A number of women speak about their personalities, personal preferences, socialising patterns in the past and assume that the reason for their singleness could be found in their internal makeup. They blame themselves for being single. Women speak about their lack of capacity or ability to enter and sustain long-term relationships, casting self doubt on their maturity and adult status. Women say that they know now that they lack the ability to be sexually close to others for a long period, an aspect of themselves they say which is painful to present for scrutiny. Women say they are wary of forming new attachments, because of previous broken relationships, hence their continuing singleness. This explanation can also be interpreted both as a stigma management strategy in terms of easing social interaction but it is also a potent identity account in the context of composing a self-identity. It appears to be a risky explanation as it presents the self as deficient but it can evoke reassurance and validation for other personal attributes and achievements from those that hear the account.⁸ Women explain that once a relationship starts to demand a greater commitment

from them (e.g. agreeing to spending more time with a partner, agreeing to give up other activities, agreeing to sexual intimacy), they withdraw. This is interpreted as '... just basically I was quite incapable of forming relationships'. Eleanor described a friend who:

... just cannot make a commitment ... once she starts getting close to a man, she gets so upset by the intimacy, she just has to leave the relationship. She just cannot handle it ... (Eleanor, Career Woman, age 32)

The explanation justifies the continuing singleness (personal deficiency) and allows interaction to take place. Presenting oneself as a person who cannot sustain intimate sexual relationships, removes oneself from the necessity of further involvement. This could be interpreted as a stated preference for non-involvement in sexual ties, a stated preference for being alone.

Traumatic Familial Experiences

Women consider whether traumatic familial events are possible, personal explanations for remaining single and speak about the death/suicide of a parent/sibling/relative: having to live with alcoholic parents/siblings; witnessing poor marital relationships of parents/relatives; being separated from parents or having to assume adult responsibilities at an early age. Women speak about wanting to live a life that was not their mother's, having grown-up in a household with many other siblings whose parents constantly quarrelled, whose mother was utterly dependent on her husband for food, clothing and shelter which on occasion were withheld. Some women pointed to the liberalism of the 1960s offering alternative, independent female role models, acting as a counter-point to being married in pre-divorce Ireland, a fact which impelled one woman to consider that perhaps women are single because of the absence of a legal release from matrimony (pre-1996). '...this is Ireland and you just cannot get a divorce anyway, so I wonder if this singleness is peculiar to Irish women?' Singleness as strong resistance to marriage and motherhood is evident in these personal/political explanations.

Something That Just Happens

Being single by chance rather than choice or personal characteristics is also mentioned as an explanation. Fate takes over and destiny determines whether one is single or not. Women say that they have not really thought about why they are single, it 'just happened' this way. Women citing this explanation feel that they, unlike others, have little control over the development, shape and future of their lives. They do not perceive or position themselves as active agents, shaping and deciding on their futures or life plans, but are the casualties of a 'mapped' life, a life not selected for themselves. For example Emer said:

I don't know if it is something you opt to be single or is it something that happens? ... Unless you make a conscious decision to be single, I think it just happens...maybe some people consciously set out to be single, I don't know. It certainly wouldn't be something that I would have done, I think it is just the way my life has fallen, I think your life is mapped in some sort of way and that you don't have control of some things that you should do. (Emer, Career Woman, age 33)

It is assumed that most other single women would prefer not to be single. In talking about her friends Celie said:

Anybody that I know, it is not that they want to be single, they don't mind it, but it would not be their choice. If they said twenty years ago, "you will be single when you are thirty-five", they would have said, "hopefully not". It is certainly not my wish either. (Celie, Career Woman, age 36)

Such women acknowledge that other single women may choose to embrace the single lifestyle, but emphasise that they are not part of that category. 'Not choosing' singleness eases social interaction and demonstrates women's distance from the stigmatised social identity. While 'something that just happens' can be interpreted as adopting a fatalistic stance, arguably, it could also be interpreted as an attempt to move away from a failed identity and to build a new self-identity that is not based on marital status. 'Something that just happens' is a response to 'why I am not married'.

Being Needed by Others/Caring for Others

Being single as a consequence of caring for elderly parents for a long number of years is a commonly used explanation, as many single women have had caring responsibilities. As noted above, being single can identify a woman in a family as the most likely candidate to care for parents/relatives and single women speak of their obligation and willingness to care. One woman equates her mother's need for her care and protection and her own unquestioning fulfilment of that need as being similar to '...a family situation, of being married, that I was needed, I was part of that'. But a history of caring is also cited as the reason why women are currently single. Women say that they had no choice but to remain single during the care period, explaining that caring reduced their chances to meet potential partners as leisure time and opportunities for socialising were limited. Caring identities and single identities are interwoven. It is clear that caring is a labour-intensive and relationship-exclusive activity. Being an active carer is also presented as a deterrent to any man who might be interested in a relationship. Women in long-term caring situations comment that they could not choose between caring for a parent and a partner and they would not expect a man to share a home with them while they were caring for an elderly dependent. Sadhb reflected a gendered view of caring, implying that a potential male partner could not be expected to care for her relatives or be involved in caring work. She asked:

how could I have somebody else here? ... How would you expect them to, how would you expect any man to, he would have to play a role in minding. It wouldn't be fair ... (Sadhb, Carer, age 33)

In the following two quotes at least nine reasons why women in general stay single are mused upon:

For a number of reasons, I suppose really. Some of them would be, bad experiences in relationships, others would be very independent and could not get on with anybody, ultimately wanting to be the boss all the time. Perhaps being very selective and not discounting the idea that maybe if it happens, it happens, but I am not just going to break my neck to make it happen. (Betty, Career Woman, age 42)

I know that a lot of them, that marriage does not appeal to them, they value their independence, they don't particularly want to mother ... but for probably most of them, they just don't want to get into that situation, of family, home, children, whatever, and I suppose some of them don't like the idea of being tied down in a materialistic way, like owning a house ... they like moving from country to country ... (Nancy, Career Woman, age 36)

Another woman talked about independence for single women as being very 'positive' and a possibility only recently realised for women in Ireland. In Margaret's explanation, in addition to the benefits of singleness, the possibility of singleness as an alternative option to marriage is indicated:

(Most women stay single) because most of them can. They are able to achieve now what they couldn't achieve long ago without a husband. They couldn't have a home. They can get their own home. They have their job, they have their independence. They don't want to let go of these things ... They can go away and can go on holidays every year. (Margaret, Carer, age 56)

In women's explanations of 'why I am single', a variety of representations of pathways into singleness can be discerned: singleness as a necessity, singleness as situational, singleness as preferred, singleness as temporary, singleness as permanent, singleness as an outcome of social constraints and personal preferences. Women use whichever explanation is most appropriate to the context, audience and own preference for truth telling. Critically however, women attempt to use the explanation that is most effective in managing information about themselves which would shield them from further stigmatisation. The existence and ease with which women use the explanations suggest that they are devised and serve as stigma management strategies at a personal and individual level.

I suggest that the explanations also bear closer scrutiny. The explanations can reveal biographical details about the speaker, explaining not only 'why I am single' but also 'who I am and where do I fit'. As such the explanations are identity accounts, tied to women's self-identity. I suggest that an interpretation of the single stories as narratives of the self can reveal the emergence of resistance to dominant social identities for women in Irish society. Each explanation highlights dissatisfaction with traditional conceptions of how to be a woman. In terms of the stigmatised social identity, most women would describe themselves as 'involuntary

singles': education, career, caring for others being prioritised over intimate relationships or singleness as a consequence of dissatisfaction with inegalitarian relations between women and men. At one level, arguably this is a rational response to stigma, seeking to distance oneself from any responsibility for one's single status. But women's very commitment to career, education, caring or seeking the 'pure relationship' and crucially, the concomitant valuing of emotional and financial independence, present an alternative though tensional identity, based on preference for the single lifestyle and its possibilities.⁹ A new, critical identity for women emerges, caught between the traditional, gendered, social identity of womanhood and autonomous single self-identity. This critical identity seeks to counterpoise independence with the desire for intimacy, in the context of exercising choice in one's relationships with others - a balance not easily achieved. However, women's resisting voices can be heard in the narrative accounts of 'why I am single'!

Concluding Comment

Single stigma operates on a deep level in contemporary Irish culture: it is evident in the routine interactions between single women and their friends, families, acquaintances and strangers, all of whom focus critical comment on women's marital status, childlessness and sexuality. It is evident from women's accounts of interactions with others that a gendered, stigmatised social identity continues to inform and intrude into social interactions with single women, underpinning a conception of womanhood tied to heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood. In response, single women utilise a repertoire of stigma management strategies: these are effective in managing face-to-face interactions. Stigma management strategies are not generally regarded as having the potential to fundamentally challenge conceptions of how to be a woman, for example. Despite this, evidence of the valuing of single self-identity and resistance to dominant woman identities are clearly evident in the narrative accounts women use to explain 'why I am single'. It is in these resisting voices that the possibilities for expanding women's identities in contemporary Ireland lie.

Notes

- ¹ Considering the centrality of the family to Irish culture, there has been little contemporary sociological research on single people. The few published works include: a study of rural Irish bachelors, Chris Curtin and Tony Varley. 1987. 'Marginal Men? Bachelor Farmers in a West of Ireland Community', in Curtin, C. Jackson, P. and O'Connor, B., (eds) *Gender in Irish Society*, Galway; my own work on the sociological/historical marginalisation of single women, Anne Byrne. 1997. 'Single Women in Ireland: A Re-examination of the Sociological Evidence', in Byrne, A, and Leonard, M, (eds) *Women and Irish Society: A Sociological Reader*, Belfast, and a comparative report on the socio-economic situation of single women in the European Community, Jane Millar. 1991. *The Socio-Economic Situation of Solo Women in Europe*, Commission of the European Communities: Brussels. An Irish report was prepared for the European study, Anne Byrne. 1989. *The Socio-Economic Situation of Single Women in Ireland, 1989*, National Report, UCG. Two recent postgraduate theses are concerned with singleness among women: Mairead Flynn. 1992. *Self-Actualisation: A Study of Married and Single Women in the Dublin Area*, Unpublished M.Phil. in Women's Studies, Trinity College, and Breeda Duggan. 1993. *Single Women*, MA in Women's Studies, UCC.
- ² The term familism is used by Michelle Barret and Mary McIntosh. 1982. *The Anti-Social Family*. Verso: UK, as 'the propagation of politically pro-family ideas' while familisation refers to 'the strengthening of families themselves' (Barret and Macintosh, p. 26). Familism, based on biological essentialism and appeals to nature (i.e. inequality and difference as natural therefore inevitable), is they argue, an ideology which seeks to justify and legitimate social and gender inequalities.
- ³ From 1995-1999, I engaged in a collaborative study with thirty single (never-married), non-cohabiting, childless women, over the age of thirty, in the West of Ireland, about the meaning of singleness and single identity. This study, *Single Women's Identities in Contemporary Irish Society* is my Ph.D. research, Dept of Government and Society, University of Limerick, February 2000.
- ⁴ Erving Goffman. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Penguin: UK, p. 15.
- ⁵ My understanding of self and social identities is inspired by the work of George Herbert Mead. 1934. *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviourist* (ed. CW Morris). University of Chicago Press: Chicago, and feminist philosophical theoretical work which positions identity as constructed in relationship with others (see Marilyn Friedman. 1997. 'Autonomy and Social Relationships: Rethinking the Feminist Critique', in Meyers, Diana Tietjens, (ed) *Feminist Rethink the Self*, Westview Press: USA and Diana Tietjens Meyers. 1989. *Self, Society and Personal Choice*, Columbia University Press: New York. Judith Howard. 1991. notes that the self is considered to be implicated in identity, based not on the proof or otherwise of the existence or validity of self, but in the human tendency to believe that individuals possess a sense of self and that this has social consequences, Judith Howard. 1991. 'The Self-Society Dynamic', in Howard, Judith and Callero, Peter, *The Self-Society Dynamic: Cognition, Emotion, Action*, Cambridge

University Press. I argue that it is in the *consequences* that the meaning of identity is revealed. Both self and social identity are implicated in the human maturation process and in the recognition of the attainment of adulthood and personhood by the individual, in one's community of others. Self-identity is a distinct formulation of the individual, while social identity is an institutionalised, collective expression which can apply to individuals *and* groups. Gender is deeply embedded in both aspects of identity.

⁶ Goffman, *op cit.*, p. 24.

⁷ The distribution of women interviewed in each age range is: age 30-39, 16 women; age 40-49, 11 women; age 50+, 3 women.

⁸ In an interview with Gay Byrne, the host of an Irish TV chat-show, the novelist and journalist, Nuala O Faolain, talked about living alone as a single woman. In a personally reflective and public moment, she said that she was alone because she supposed she was 'incapable of forming a relationship' and that she questioned the 'meaningfulness of her life' compared to other people who were married and had children. She in contrast had 'nobody to go home to'. The immediate response from Byrne was '... but you have a wonderful job, you are talented and smart', to which she positively and enthusiastically responded, though the portrait of herself that she first cast, lingered (*The Late-Late Show*, RTE 1, October 1996).

⁹ See Anthony Giddens. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Polity Press: UK, for a discussion on the components of the 'pure relationship'.