The "Problem" With Single Women: Choice, Accountability and Social Change
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The "Problem" With Single Women: Choice, Accountability and Social Change

Recently a newly imagined form of femininity has been the source of debate and deliberation within the study of gender and social change. This particular construction is defined by the values of independence, self-sufficiency and confidence. The 'empowered, autonomous woman' which this ideology references is noteworthy because she embraces and practices attributes conventionally associated with masculine subjectivity. Within the contexts of neoliberalism and postfeminism, this form of femininity is endorsed by some as evidence of feminist success as it seems to indicate that women now have increased options for living their lives outside of the constraints associated with conventional gender roles and norms. This article will examine how the exercise of liberated choice central to this construction does not fully apply, in practice, to women's personal lives which are governed by heteronormative gender norms that place the couple at the heart of the social order [1]. Despite increased acknowledgement of women's right to autonomy, choosing to remain single continues to be, as it has in the past, interpreted as a problem for women. The state of being unpartnered may be granted the status of a legitimate and empowering choice but it is ultimately time contingent. When women maintain independence beyond a specific period of the life course they are often subject to social stigma.

The analysis undertaken here explores sexuality and personal relationship status as sites where women are positioned within contemporary gender relations in such a way that their choices are subject to social expectations and constrained as a result. These dynamics reveal the contradictory nature of contemporary femininity and illustrate how choices pertaining to women's personal lives are not wholly autonomous but regulated and subject to accountability according to heteronormative gender norms which are being reconstituted against a backdrop of wider social change. The aim is to contribute to our critical understanding of the structure of

current gender relations and their impact on individual agency and the ordering of key social institutions such as the family and personal life. When choosing singleness is deemed irresponsible or a failure of self-management this reflects specific historical and structural circumstances governed by postfeminist and neoliberal rationalities.

Femininity, as a cultural construction, orients social action and sets expectations for conduct. It is important to question the role gender norms play in challenging or reproducing singlehood as an acceptable alternative to partnering. Therefore, a model of gender hegemony will be discussed in order to give critical insights into why choosing to be single may still constitute a 'problem' for women despite the intensification of messages which address women as autonomous, sexualised subjects (Budgeon, 2014; Schippers, 2007). Contemporary gender relations involve shifts in the meaning of both femininity and masculinity with multiple versions of each available (Carlson, 2011). 'Empowered femininity', as one particular ideal presented to women, and its relationship to the ideology of marriage and family, will be theorised here. This analysis contributes to the study of personal relationships by offering an explanation of how prescriptive gender norms structure singlehood as a possible way of life for women [2].

Gender Theory

Gender theory has established that masculinity and femininity are terms held together in a binary relation of complementarity. This binary organises social interactions as it structures the norms that, when followed by individuals, brings gender into being. Gender is not something someone 'is' but something one achieves through 'doing' (West and Zimmerman, 1987). It is not an ascribed status but 'an ongoing situated process' (West and Zimmerman, 2009:114). It 'involves the management of conduct by sexually categorized human beings who are accountable to local conceptions of appropriately gendered conduct' (Fenstermaker, West and Zimmerman, 2002:30).

Socially identifying oneself as either male or female through the outward performance of gendered appearance, behaviour, and attributes is done through an orientation to shared normative conceptions associated with those categories. Performances which are consistent with shared norms are perceived to be expressions of 'natural' gender natures. As West and Zimmerman (1987:136) write 'societal members orient to the fact that their activities are subject to comment. Actions are often designed with an eye to accountability, that is, how they might look and be characterised'. Furthermore,

> While it is individuals who do gender, the enterprise is fundamentally interactional and institutional in character, for accountability is a feature of social relationships and its idiom is drawn from the institutional arena in which those relationships are enacted (West and Zimmerman, 1987:136-37).

Gender binaries create and 'fix' femininity and masculinity as a relationship of difference. The constitution of the conventional relation of the terms associated with each gender has particularly significant consequences for personal life and familial structures. Gerson (2002) argues, for example, that industrial societies since the mid-20th century have been structured according to a traditional 'sexual division of moral labour' whereby it has been expected that women 'seek personal development by caring for others' while men care for others 'by sharing the rewards of independent achievement' (Gerson, 2002: 8). Traditionally a fundamental distinction organising most societies has been the presumption of men and women inhabiting different emotional cultures. Masculinity requires that one 'display courage, cool-headed rationality, and disciplined aggressiveness. Femininity on the other hand demands kindness, compassion, and cheerfulness' (Illouz, 2007:3). The gendered structuring of self/other relationality according to this definition underpins the traditional, male breadwinner model of family life which is characteristics of

western societies. The performance of gender roles within the institution of the family are defined by men and women having different capacities and roles differentiated by female other-oriented caring and male autonomous earning activity (Cherlin, 2004). This model may be conceptualised as an ideological code that organises and universalises personal relationships and the activities of individuals across multiple and various sites (Smith, 1993). For instance in North America the dominant model of family life is defined as:

> …a legally married couple sharing a household. The adult male is in paid employment; his earnings provide the economic basis of the family household. The adult female may also earn an income, but her primary responsibility is to the care of husband, household, and children (Smith, 1993:52)

Similarly DePaulo and Morris (2005) argue that an 'Ideology of Marriage and Family' prescribes marriage and parenthood as central to a happy and meaningful adult life. Feminists have argued the organisation of character and capacities according to a gender dichotomy is not an accurate description of feminine and masculine character but an ideological one which maintains social inequality by perpetuating the presumption that men and women are naturally suited to performing different social roles. This ideological arrangement underpins the social organisation of intimacy and personal relations.

> Women's traditional role in the family has been to surrender their self-interest so that their husbands and children can attain their autonomous subjectivity. The constitutive terms of liberal political discourse and practice – individual, autonomy, self-interest – fundamentally depend upon their implicit opposition to a subject and a set of activities marked "feminine", whilst effectively obscuring this dependence (Oksala, 2013:42).

The social construction of single women

The ideology of marriage and family has historically constrained and channelled the female life course making women's actions accountable to gender norms which have been taken as granted as expression of essential differences. Research has examined how, within social conditions which privilege heterosexual marriage and family life as a ubiquitous goal and marker of successful life course development, individuals who fall outside this category are marginalised and subject to harmful stereotyping, discrimination, economic disadvantage, interpersonal rejection and stigmatization. This negative sentiment, 'singlism', goes unrecognised and unchallenged because the favourable status enjoyed by marriage and family life is largely taken for granted as 'natural' (DePaulo and Morris, 2005; 2006; Sharp and Ganong, 2007, 2011). This rests upon a number of unquestioned assumptions: that most people desire a sexual relationship; that this particular relationship will take precedence over others; and that those who have this one truly significant relationship at the centre of their lives are more 'valuable, worthy, and important' (DePaulo and Morris, 2005:58). The stigma attached to those who cannot claim to belong to couple centred culture is remarkably resilient in spite of evidence which indicates that norms governing intimacy and personal life are becoming more varied. Even in the face of demographic data which reveals that the experience of singlehood is becoming more prevalent, the force of this ideology is maintained (Koropeckyj-Cox, 2005; Sharp and Ganong, 2011). Thus a 'cultural lag' is now a common feature of a variety of western 'pro-marriage' societies where 'cultural images, public policies, and personal attitudes elevate the status and value of heterosexual marriage relative to single life'(Byrne and Carr: 2005: 87).

The status of 'single' and, more specifically, its potential stigmatisation is contingent on numerous factors (Koropeckyj-Cox, 2005). Gender norms, in particular, are central to shaping how the status of singleness is interpreted. Compared with men, women experience greater

pressure to conform to the ideology of marriage and family because conventional constructions of gender emphasise caring and dependence as a central element of successfully performed femininity (De Paulo and Morris, 2005; Sharp and Ganong, 2011). Heterosexual romance and marriage have historically been central to the fulfilment of femininity and successful life course transitions whereas goals such as independence and autonomy have been seen as incongruous to the achievement of a complete feminine biography. The implication is that women would not *willingly choose* to remain unmarried, and this supposition in turn, contributes to 'cultural images of the unmarried woman as desperate and flawed' (Sandfield and Percy, 2003:476). Within the wider study of personal life there is now a body of research which focuses on the normative expectation that women's life course should, and will be, formed around the key milestones of partnering and parenting. This research reveals a number of patterns (Abbie and Brownlow, 2014:424). Empirical research has investigated how the status of singlehood impacts upon women's identity (Reynolds, 2006; Lewis and Moon, 1997; Sandfield and Percy, 2003; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Sharp and Ganong, 2011). Because performing femininity successfully according to dominant cultural norms means having a sexual connection to a man, single women confront the knowledge that their identities are 'tainted' by their unpartnered status. Furthermore, this 'deficit identity' becomes heightened at particular times of the life course (Reynolds and Taylor, 2007; Sharp and Ganong, 2011). Women who are deemed to be at an appropriately 'marriageable' age, ideally under 30 with an upper limit extending to around 35, are subject to the normalizing force of marriage ideology because finding a partner and building a committed relationship is normatively prescribed as a key goal for this stage of the life course (Kaiser and Kashy, 2005; Sharp and Ganong, 2007).

By 'missing' the culturally expected transition to partnering, and thereby not orienting their identity to gendered life course norms, unpartnered women regularly face gender accountability which requires on their part the development of strategies for explaining their status. Norms associated with the ideology of marriage and family render single women both more, and less visible, because this dominant ideology positions them as outsiders who always, potentially don't fit into a specific setting. Empirical research by Sharp and Ganong (2011:974), for instance, highlights the heightening of women's visibility at particular 'trigger' moments when awareness of their non-normative status is sharply amplified and their sense of vulnerability intensified. Rituals associated with wedding ceremonies, such as the bouquet toss, are examples of social practices which differentiate single women in public settings from those who are partnered. These social interactions must be 'managed' in light of disrupted normative expectations (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 140). The violation of routinized gender norms interrupts the taken for granted ideology of family and marriage making single women accountable for their non-conformity. In other situations single women are made invisible by dominant patterns of relationality which centre upon the heterosexual couple and exclude the experiences of unpartnered women making their lives unintelligible. Simpson's (2006) research into spinsters' personal relationships, for example, shows that these women maintained significant connections and relations outside of the convention of heteronorms but that their relationships were often not accorded social significance by others and generally lacked cultural validation and institutional support. In cultures where ideologies of marriage and family are dominant heterosexual coupledom is privileged over other relationships and thus limits the possibility for organising intimacy along alternative lines including attaching value to non-sexual relationships and placing these at the centre of one's life (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). Sandfield and Percy(2003) note

that when navigating stigma women may construct their unmarried status as a temporary stage in their progress towards marriage to alleviate a sense of failure or they may concede their status as a sign of personal failure to find a partner or maintain a previous relationship. Other studies also show that the mark of 'failure' haunts women's negotiations leaving them feeling ambivalent and uncertain about their identity (Sharp and Ganong, 2007). Failure, as a recurring feature of these accounts, reveals a deep and constant heterosexism that privileges those lives best resembling a particular ideological model of love and intimacy- a lifestyle that in practice no longer solely represents the ways individuals are organising their identities (Jacques and Radtke, 2012).

Potential alternatives to a deficit identity do exist (Addie and Brownlow, 2014). For example research on interpretive repertoires which single women have available to them to account for their experiences reveals, that is the 'recognizable routines of arguments, descriptions and evaluations found in people's talk often distinguished by familiar clichés, anecdotes and tropes', encompass deficit, as well as, empowerment themes (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003:496). Although the discourses women drew upon included idealized values such as autonomy, in practice they did not have sufficient resources to securely occupy that position. Ultimately this research concluded there were relatively few stable discursive routes that would allow women to claim singleness as a positive choice.

Significance accorded to relationship status establishes what kinds of lives women should aspire to; which lives are granted more social recognition and value; what kinds of 'choices' are deemed more worthy than others; and which are to be materially rewarded by public policy. When women are held to be personally responsible for choosing or creating what is perceived by others as a deficit identity they receive far less social support (Lahad, 2013) [3]. The following

discussion considers claims that gender relations have been reordered by a shift in the norms which regulate femininity. An emerging form of femininity that is constituted by values of choice and empowerment is now present in popular culture, media representations and public discourse. Because the significance given to remaining unpartnered is mediated by gender it is important to consider whether new ideologies of womanhood impact upon the accountability unpartnered women are subject to.

Reconstructing Gender and Sexuality

Social theorists have charted how, during the latter part of the 20th century, structural changes in key sectors of society, including the family, education and work, and the legal system, impacted significantly upon norms which allocated different capacities and, therefore, roles to men and women. The traditional definition of femininity as an orientation to the care of for others, and masculinity as an orientation to autonomy, can no longer be taken for granted. llouz (2007) has argued that emotion and reason – traditionally polarised terms in a gendered binary mapped onto different social spheres - now mutually shape each other. Affect is now an essential aspect of economic behaviour while emotional life is shaped by the logic of economic relations and exchange (Illouz, 2007:4). This is evident in the way emotional skills are promoted as a form of capital within many workplace cultures thereby introducing qualities, modes of communication, experiences and models of selfhood, traditionally associated with the feminine/expressive, into guidelines for managing human relationships. In a parallel development, within the private sphere, instrumental rationalities have worked in tandem with the influence of second wave feminism to install the value of independence alongside nurture in women' self-identities. This challenge to woman's 'natural' passivity and dependence has constituted a key element in women's personal and political emancipation. Theorists of reflexive modernisation emphasise

the particularly transformative effects of the deinstitutionalisation of marriage and family on the structure of women's lives stating that 'what gender is, and how it should be expressed, has become a matter of multiple options' (Giddens, 1991:217). These theorists suggest that to some degree the female biography has been remade with new 'values of autonomy, independence, and personal space' accentuated to a much greater extent than ever before (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:102).

There has been a proliferation of interest in studying the constitution of contemporary femininity and a level of scepticism regarding the claims made about the role choice plays in shaping women's agency (Baker, 2008, 2010; Budgeon, 2014; Carlson, 2011; Gill and Scharff, 2013; Gonick, 2004; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2009; Rich, 2005). This is a significant development within gender studies because the scholarship which interrogates the social construction and performance of masculinity has not been matched by research dedicated to questioning the structure of femininity. Yet such an endeavour is central to understanding how the social construction of gender regulates and shapes the lives of girls and women by orienting their actions, beliefs, and desires towards a culturally authorised norm reproduced by dynamics of social accountability (Budgeon, 2014). Recent research has traced alterations in the characteristics of gender norms over time to reveal that an intensified language of choice, strongly associated with liberal individualism, has come to constitute a form of idealized femininity decoupled from associations with social inequality (Baker, 2008; Braun, 2009; Gill, 2007; Harris, 2004; McRobbie 2009; Moran and Lee, 2013; Rich 2005; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011). This is a version of femininity unmoored from traditional associations with passivity and dependence in favour of themes which accentuate agency and self-empowerment.

Given that heterosexual relations are structured according to gender norms this reordering potentially has substantial relevance for the choices unpartnered women are able to exercise in their personal lives. The practice of sexuality has historically been conducted within the boundaries set by heterosexual love, romance and marriage and prescribed by normative gender roles. The dominant discourse of heterosexuality has dictated distinct, and opposite, positions for masculine and feminine desire that organise subsequent identities and practices according to a binary logic in which women are 'sexually passive, experience less desire, are less easily pleasured than men, and value relational aspects of sex over physical aspects' (Muise, 2011:415). Representations of masculine sexuality, on the other hand, emphasise active desire, the prioritisation of embodied pleasures over emotional closeness and an often essentialized 'natural' and unstoppable need for sexual activity (Allen, 2003). Studies of women's sexual identities have repeatedly noted what Fine (1988) perceived when researching school-based sex education programmes – an active and positive discourse of female desire was missing. In its place female sexuality was characteristically constructed through discourses of victimization, disease and morality (Gill, 2008a; Muise, 2011). Researchers have observed that 'women's lives, their experiences and their relationships have evolved in the shadow of this powerful but often tacit set of regulations about appropriate forms of desire and intimate partnership'(Reynolds and Wetherell 2003:489).

However, emerging constructions of female desire as active and even instrumental have been noted (Attwood, 2011) and depictions of empowered femininity increasingly incite women to take up a more assertive and expansive position within sexual relations (McRobbie, 2013: xix). More specifically, it could be expected that the restructuring of gender role expectations and heterosexual norms will affect the negative status attaching to singlehood. A more active and

autonomous femininity may enable women to orient their actions, attitudes, and identities towards a non-heteronormative ideal which does not place coupledom at the centre of social life but grants recognition to other personal relationships; potentially validates the choice to remain single; and endorses the pursuit of a life course not built around privileging a relationship to a man. Increased female sexual agency may in these ways affect the destabilisation of 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Furthermore, it may be the case that the norm of hetero-patriarchal coupling, which has tended to cast suspicion on women who 'fail' to secure a long term partnership, is losing the legitimacy it is almost always automatically granted. The evidence so far, however, reveals a more complicated picture. Gender norms continue to draw boundaries around acceptable expressions of female heterosexual agency in ways that both encourage greater instrumentality on the part of women but in the service of the reproduction, ultimately, of heterosexuality.

Media representations of women which incorporate sexualised imagery and an accompanying message that women are now sufficiently 'empowered' to practise a consciously active sexuality are structured in deeply contradictory ways (Gill 2008a). On the one hand these depictions challenge conventional representational codes which position women as the objects of male desire – a construction which tells women to experience their sexuality through the desire they elicit from men – by presenting women as fully sexual subjects whose choices centre upon self-satisfaction through acts of individual empowerment. On the other hand, however, these constructions place the responsibility for satisfactory intimate relationships squarely upon women, assuming that they are no longer socially or materially constrained and that traditional norms of gender and sexuality no longer apply. As such these representations are structured through the logic of a postfeminism (Taylor, 2012). A recent study of women's magazines

highlights how themes of empowerment are used to construct successful heterosexual relationships for their readers (Gill 2008a). Firstly, emphasis is placed upon an instrumental approach encouraging women to skilfully manage men and their relationship to them. Secondly, women were instructed on how to respond to men's needs as part of that strategic management and thirdly, they were advised to take responsibility for remaking their own interior lives in order to produce a more desirable subjectivity which would allow them to become more active and confident sexual agents. All of these directives communicate to women that they should take responsibility for changing themselves in order to become more effective sexual beings – a precursor to claiming a liberated and autonomous sexual identity. Women are told be more active and yet at the same time the definition of sexuality which they are being oriented towards, and held accountable for, is still narrowly prescriptive. Muise's (2011:416) research on women's sex blogs similarly indicates it is possible for women to take up a masculinized version of sexuality in writing about their sexual experiences and desires by 'rejecting traditional feminine language and behaviour, while pursuing individual pleasures'. The analysis of these writings, however, suggests that practicing a more masculine mode of sexuality does not destabilise conventional gendered constructions of normative heterosexual sexual desire organised in opposing terms of emotion/reason; passive/active; and relational/autonomous and, as such, there is no indication that a feminine sexual desire defined in autonomous terms results.

Many feminists call for a critical interrogation of these 'new' empowered femininities and offer sceptical analyses of the consequences they have for female identity (Gill and Scharff, 2013). The problem is 'this focus on autonomous choices….remains complicit with, rather than critical of, postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that see individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating' (Gill, 2008b:436). Individuals express their autonomous

identity through their choices and 'are not merely 'free to choose', but obliged to be free, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice (Rose, 1999:87). No longer limited to a political or economic rationality, neoliberalism has extended to the choices women make in their intimate lives but just because rational, 'masculine' values like instrumentality and self-sufficiency have entered into the lexicon of femininity, it is not the case that greater autonomy for women in everyday life follows. Two issues flow from this discussion. Firstly, that an socio-cultural emphasis on 'choice' does not equate to women having more agency per se as their choices within a postfeminist and neoliberal gender order are sites of intense scrutiny and that secondly, more choice does not necessarily equate with resistance to dominant hetero-gender norms (Carlson, 2011).

In practice 'modernized' empowered femininity is inherently contradictory and structured through various paradoxes. Femininity is presented as a site of individualized possibility, yet at the same time, this must be performed within specific parameters.

> …women are hailed through a discourse of "can-do" girl power, yet on the other their bodies are powerfully re-inscribed as sexual objects; on the one hand women are presented as active, desiring social subjects, yet on the other they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance that has no historical precedent….notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the "wrong" "choice" (Gill, 2008b: 442).

The choices women make about sexuality and relationships have become sites of gender accountability. Following the theoretical framework set out by West and Zimmerman (1987, 2009) gender is 'done' jointly in interactions where social actors orient their actions and interpretations to a shared set of expectations. Women are expected to act as 'choosing subjects'

(Budgeon, 2003) but in practice specific choices are regulated and circumscribed for women despite the emergence of this self-sufficient, self-governing, sexually unbound femininity. Baker (2008) for instance has found that there are indeed particular choices that young women in her research could not easily make without facing social sanctions. These included embracing a pro-feminist identity; declining delayed motherhood; or rejecting heterosexuality. Women's choices, organized through hegemonic gender relations, continue to be a site of regulation. Although an empowered, sexually agentic femininity now permeates postfeminist, neoliberal culture men are still granted more right to choose singlehood than women (Palmore, 1997).

Regulated choice

The ideology of marriage and family retains its influence on the structure of the female biography despite the transformations many social theorists suggest are allowing women greater independence. The rhetoric of 'choice' cannot easily be reconciled with an ideology of marriage and family that renders some choices appropriate while marginalising other lifestyles. The conditions under which women may construct singlehood as a legitimate choice requires investigation as it is possible that in some instances women may be able to occupy that status more comfortably than in others (Addie and Brownlow, 2014) [4]. For the purposes of the following analysis one specific area will be considered in order to assess how women are addressed by images of self-governing social subjects alongside judgements which carry clear messages regarding *suitable choices* for women entering into so called 'late singlehood' – that is, they have left the stage of the life course where being single is socially acceptable (Sharp and Ganong, 2011). Lahad's (2013) [5] analysis of various internet texts, such as online advice columns, reveals a significant amount of ambivalence surrounding the kinds of choices 'empowered' woman may make when it comes to their personal life. The message which

emerges is that women who inhabit late singlehood have misused their freedom and, as a result, are living in a state of 'failed' femininity. As noted above, neoliberalism promotes the ideals of enterprise, self-responsibility and self-determination. Lahad (2013) notes that these ideals are equally applicable in the workplace as they are in the realm of personal life thus echoing Illouz's (2007) argument that we have witnessed values once associated with the organisation of separate social spheres operating across an increasingly blurred boundary. Single women are expected to manage various components of their life course including educational attainment, career progression, developing social networks, and forming sexual relationships. For women who are still normatively single, that is at the stage of life when they 'should' be pursuing education and career advancement, the demonstration of selectiveness is consistent with postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of skilfully managed choice, however, it is a 'short-lived privilege' dependent upon age. Once the time of normative singlehood – a time in which women are encouraged to approach their work and intimate lives instrumentally to ensure 'good choices' - 'has passed', they are likely to be held to account for being overly selective or 'too choosy'. The implication is that they have mishandled their freedom and squandered their chances for a happy personal life which endorses the conventional prejudice that views single women as unfulfilled and incomplete. The contingency of 'empowered' singleness shifts away from an 'asset identity' towards a one marked by deficit. The assumption that women are indeed empowered makes their choices a site of accountability communicated through the circulation of neoliberal themes of self-responsibility. Here we see how 'the discourse on selective single women, like the discourse on self-governance and enterprise culture, reflects the myriad contradictions and paradoxes embedded in the current regime of the self' (Lahad, 2013:25).

Successfully performed empowered femininity, therefore, does not imply unbridled freedom to choose. The message is that single women should avoid being excessively 'choosy' in favour of responsible self-management. A failure to exercise choice wisely implies the need for self-rehabilitation to ultimately rid or cure oneself of this 'selectivity malfunction' and maximise one's potential for a happy and fulfilled life. Lahad argues (2013:24), 'postfeminist, neoliberal and therapeutic presuppositions formulate selectiveness as an indication of emotional deficiencies and accordingly prescribe remedies to eliminate selectiveness and place the single women back on the maternal heteronormative life track'. Advice given to women in these texts reveals how heteronorms are protected and reproduced, and the extent to which women's autonomy is curtailed in the process.

Hegemonic femininity

The discussion presented in this article highlights how gendered binaries, built upon separate qualities and capacities, have been reformulated in the past couple of decades. Increasingly women are encouraged to think of themselves as autonomous individuals and to expect to be able to exercise choice in their sexual relationships but choosing to be single is granted legitimacy on a time contingent basis. How can women be incited through neoliberal and postfeminist discourse to assume autonomy, exercise self-control and pursue self-fulfilment, as men have conventionally been encouraged to do, only to find themselves subject to gender accountability as expressed through the judgement that they have misused their freedom? To understand these dynamics it is useful to apply a theory of gender hegemony which enables us to understand how gender difference is structured relationally (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Schippers, 2007). I have argued elsewhere (Budgeon, 2014) that a *re-ordering* of the terms constituting gender binarism does not necessarily effect the *hierarchical* structuring of

contemporary gender relations which define the boundaries of socially recognised gender performance and maintain structures of privilege. Definitions of femininity and masculinity have adjusted to be consistent with contemporary regimes of neoliberal selfhood, however, the association of conventional male attributes such as self-assertiveness and independence with femininity does not imply that the regulatory structuring of gender relations and the heteronorms which tie masculinity and femininity together have been invalidated.

As West and Zimmerman (2009:114) argue gender is an accomplishment achieved when 'done' according to 'current cultural conceptions of conduct becoming to – or compatible with the "essential natures" of – a woman or a man'. Gender is a managed property of conduct performed 'with respect to the fact that others will judge and respond to us in particular ways' (West and Zimmerman, 1987:140). Accountability is a feature of social interactions and institutions. Expectations which are expressed when individuals are made accountable for norm violation are not grounded by a static or fixed set of specifications pertaining to either gender and, therefore, performances of gender may exhibit a fluid character over time. However, it would be mistaken to see these instances as an 'undoing' of gender which implies the abandonment of gender and as something to which we are no longer held accountable for. As stated by West and Zimmerman (2009:117) the oppressive character of gender rests not just upon constructed difference 'but the inferences from and the consequences of those differences' which are 'linked to and supported by historical and structural circumstances'. Changes to these circumstances can affect the terms of gender accountability and challenge the grounds for male hegemony thus the potential for change. The example of late singlehood demonstrates how the redrawing of boundaries of gender accountability represents a 're-doing' of gender but a doing nevertheless which is consistent with a normative system that 'cannot be regarded as "free floating"' (West and Zimmerman,

2009:118). It has been argued here that when choosing singleness is deemed irresponsible or a failure of self-management this reflects a gender order organised by historical and structural circumstances shaped by postfeminist and neoliberal rationalities.

Theorising the dynamic drawing, and redrawing, of symbolic boundaries which demarcate the normative constructions of femininity and masculinity helps to explain how choices women are able to make in their personal lives are regulated. In the research conducted by Lahad (2013) for example, 'labelling the single woman as overly selective functions as a classificatory mechanism that designates clear guidelines for discerning the normal from the excessive, the successful from the unsuccessful, and the emotionally competent from the incompetent'. Firstly, gender is constituted by shared norms, associated with the performance of femininity and masculinity. Secondly, these meanings are organised as a binary relation of complementarity. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of the heterosexual matrix Schippers (2007) argues that the construction of gender difference is naturalized by the normative definition of appropriate sexual desire as the desire for difference. This 'does the hegemonic work of fusing masculinity and femininity together as complementary opposites' (Schippers, 2007: 90). Thirdly, to sustain hegemonic relations masculinity and femininity must also be fixed as *hierarchical.* Heterosexuality is normatively constituted as a naturalized relation of male *active* dominance and female *passive* receptivity (Jackson, 1999; Richardson, 2000). Because this model establishes the specific structure of relationality it can be deployed to assess the extent to which various performances of femininity align with this normative definition, and therefore, it becomes possible to assess their role in sustaining hegemonic gender relations. Unlike Connell's (1995) original theory of hegemonic masculinity which conceptualised femininity as uniformly subordinate to masculinity, this model considers femininity in the plural and seeks to account for the role

19

different forms play in maintaining male dominant gender relations. In this revised model 'hegemonic femininity' is defined as the expression of feminine characteristics which 'establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (Schippers, 2007: 94). Any performance of femininity which breaches the authorized practice of hegemonic gender relationality is accorded the status of 'pariah femininity' and placed outside the realm of legitimate gender performance. Refusals to complement hegemonic masculinity such as exhibiting sexual desire for other women, openly promiscuous behaviour, sexual inaccessibility or overtly aggressive conduct are often branded as being excessive and outside the norms of propriety (Schippers, 2007: 95). It has been argued here that late or non-normative singlehood can be added to this list because it is an excessive (mis)use of choice which threatens to destabilise heteronormativity. The limited positive status associated with female singlehood highlighted in the work of Lahad (2013) and others can be understood using this model. Remaining single beyond the stage of acceptability, particularly when perceived as an 'active choice' that women knowingly exercise, violates the norms of gender complementarity secured by the heteronormative ideology of marriage and family as a compulsory order.

Discussion: The 'management' of gender and change

This discussion illustrates how femininity is no longer strictly defined in the conventional terms that have been central to the structuring of women's sexuality and personal relationships. However, the re-ordering of gender binaries hasn't been fully accompanied by the dissolution of the regulatory effects of gender within many key areas of social life. The complex negotiations involved in 're-doing' gender are exemplified by the identity work women undertake when accounting for their sexual relationships. Studies of late singlehood show, repeatedly, that

women who are not normatively partnered are required to account for their deficit identity. They often struggle to present themselves as 'empowered' or 'liberated' at these moments despite such a position being more widely available. Women are increasingly 'free' yet called upon to monitor their choices so they are consistent with the heteronormative ideology of marriage and family. The ideological dilemmas which women encounter are illustrated well by the analysis of the contrasting sets of cultural meaning which attach to singlehood and are available to women when called to account for their single status.

Statuses associated with personal deficit and idealised ones which emphasise independence and self-development circulate in wider culture (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003:501) but studies indicate that single women rarely, if ever, *fully* attach a positive narrative to their self-identity. The choices they are offered do not permit contradictions, therefore, embracing a positive single identity cannot allow simultaneously for the complexity or ambivalence that constitute contemporary femininity.

> Singleness is a troubled category…on the one hand they [women] can choose to construct singleness very positively through repertoires of choice and independence and self-development and achievement and then it becomes difficult to talk about any move out of the category. On the other hand, women can talk unashamedly about their desire for a relationship and risk being constructed as deficient and "desperate", and marked by their failure to already have a man (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003:506).

What is striking in many of the studies of single women is the highly individualised nature of their identity work conducted in accordance with gender accountability (Lahad, 2013; Reynolds et. al., 2007; Sandfield and Percy, 2003). The process of self-management might be different if

alternative norms were available to women that allowed for celebrating a single identity but in a postfeminist climate women are encouraged to pursue their goals *as individuals* which obscures the collective character of the dilemmas they face as women situated in a culture which privileges the couple as the primary social unit (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). If the social nature of their positioning was more fully evident it may be easier to resist the implication that their status is the result of personal failure. For singlehood to be coded as a positive choice for women further research needs to investigate the contingent nature of 'empowered femininity' in order to more fully understand who the women are who have sufficient cultural resources to lay claim to a positive, unpartnered identity (Reynolds, 2006). When does choosing to be single become labelled as an excessive expression of empowerment and when is it deemed 'normal' and 'natural'?

When woman take on an individualised responsibility to account for, and resolve contradictions at the level of self-identity, they are managing wider paradoxes associated with a neoliberal gender reordering. As Gill (2008b:442) argues women are hailed through discourses which position them as active and desiring subjects who can exercise choice in the pursuit of self-development. These constructions sit, however, alongside practices of historically unprecedented levels of surveillance and scrutiny which ensure that women make 'good' choices. McRobbie (2007) suggests that the 'new sexual contract' which structures women's lives is underpinned by the injunction that women must remain 'reassuringly feminine' in the face of new forms of social power accruing to women on the basis of their economic capacity lest this power undermine or compromise their positioning within heterosexual economies of sexual desirability. It has been argued here, based upon a theory of gender hegemony, that continuity in the performance of some aspects of femininity are key to the reproduction of gender complementarity and hierarchy.

In this context, performing conventional femininity as defined by the ideology of marriage family allows women to avoid stigmatisation. This performance reproduces heteronorms and reinforces distinctions between 'normal' femininity and 'pariah' femininity – a division that is central to labelling some women as irresponsible in how they conduct their intimate relationships. McRobbie argues that in light of this tension some women may perform traditional femininity as a type of masquerade to avoid stigma – 'a highly styled disguise of womanliness now adopted as a matter of choice' which ultimately works to take the 'edge' off of female empowerment and reinstate heteronormativity while stabilising the heterosexual matrix (2007:725).

Various cultural texts combine narratives of empowerment with the reassertion of natural sexual difference grounded in the heteronormative ideas about gender complementarity (Gill, 2009). Sexual agency is presented to women increasingly as an essential component of empowered femininity but the terms within which this is constructed are thoroughly heteronormative and not an open ended choice. Choice is contained through self-management while empowerment is used as a means to accepting individual responsibility for the quality of one's sexual relationships and undertaking whatever remedial measures are necessary to make a 'good' relationship with a man work. There appears to be a lack of alternatives presented to women either through non-normative heterosexualities, same-sex sexualities, bi-sexualities, queer sexualities or celibacy. To embody hegemonic femininity, that is a socially legitimated and privileged performance which does not destabilise heteronorms, one must learn to direct new found sexual freedoms 'responsibly'. The hidden influence of the ideology of marriage and family facilitates the resolution of contradictions which the language of 'choice' has introduced to the women's

identity, naturalises particular social arrangements, reproduces heteronormative privilege, and

ultimately contains women's potential.

Endnotes

1 This analysis is limited to Western liberal capitalist contexts where it has been argued that patterns of change to gender relations exhibit similar tendencies. The category of 'woman' is used throughout this article but does not assume a universal subject. Women are positioned differentially within stratified social relations thus they do not share the same set of material conditions or experiences. They are, however, subject to idealised hegemonic gender norms despite varying in their capacity to perform those ideals. This reflects differential access to power.

2 This statement does not presume all women are positioned within gender discourses in the same way due to other forms of social divisions including sexuality, ethnicity, age and class. This includes a differential positioning with regards to being unpartnered. Experiences will vary by context. However, hegemonic gender relations influence all conditions of singlehood. That is the basis for their hegemonic nature. The most highly visible ideal which tends to circulate within postfeminist culture is narrowly representative of actual women. This figure is a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman. In popular culture the most visible single woman is presented in these terms, as well as, being predominantly in their 20s and 30s, and without children (Taylor, 2012:31). Although single women are heterogeneous and cannot be defined as a monolithic group there is little diversity in the representations which circulate. These narrow constructions provide the basis for shared social understandings of what constitutes appropriate gendered conduct in personal life and, therefore, inform how gendered conduct is made accountable.

3 Women who are single because widowed are not subject to the same judgment as women who are seen to have control over their situation.

4 Singlehood status is potentially affected by other factors but the present discussion is located within the question of time and the gendered life course. Other factors may impact when and how women transition into adulthood and what the key markers are. Despite variations in timing of when it is deemed socially accepted to remain single it is a general expectation in the majority of western cultures that women will partner. See Berg-Cross et.al. (2004) for a cross national review of a particularly privileged demographic – unpartnered, elite, highly educated, professional women. They note that there is diversity within cultures and across cultures as to the acceptability of being a single professional woman, as well as, patterns of commonality. The factors which influence positive identifications with singlehood are a significant area for future research in order to understand how specific changes to gender constructions impact on the contingent status given to singlehood as either positive or negative.

5 This research focuses on the Israeli context but Lahad (2103) argues similar dynamics apply to other contexts. The analysis she offers has wider applications. The findings resonate widely with studies on the regulation of new forms of femininity. See Gill (2008b); Budgeon (2011, 2013, 2014); McRobbie (2007, 2009).

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