The Experience of Singleness for Women Who Delay Marriage

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Author Note

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Abstract

The current research sought to narrow a gap in the literature related to the unique experiences of women who wish to ultimately marry, but for any reason have delayed that commitment. This was a replication of Jansen's (2019) study, *The Experience of Singleness for Males Who Delay Marriage*. This study qualitatively addressed two research questions. The first emphasis was directed toward discovering what is the lived experience of single women? The second area of research importance sought to identify participant's internal and external reasons for choosing to wait to get married. Participants consisted of six single, heterosexual, cisgender women (age 28 or older), who were financially independent, free of addiction, without children, not in a committed relationship, and who desired to one day be married. All participants were required to be born in the United States and were living in the Pacific Northwest region at the time of their interview. The current study was conducted utilizing an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). This approach is concerned with examining the detailed experience of each unique individual (idiography), establishing an account of the lived experience of single women (phenomenology), and delving into how participants attempt to make sense of their experiences (hermeneutics). Three main themes were identified as being meaningful and mutually exclusive: The Lived Experience of Singlehood, Rationale for Singlehood, and the Conceptualization of Self and Singlehood. The implications of these findings can help clinicians, church communities, and the general community at large understand the nuanced lived experiences of single women and create an environment that is more accepting and inclusive of this population.

Keywords: single women, interpretive phenomenological analysis, lived experience, singlehood, dating, marital timing

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The Experience of Singleness for Women Who Delay Marriage

Marriage is a concept found cross culturally and in virtually all societies. However, the institution and the family structures anchored to it are much more fluid. For instance, there have been distinct places and times in history when the rates of cohabitation, divorce, children born out of wedlock, and nonmarital sex have fluctuated significantly, constantly redefining the terms and norms of family (Coontz, 2004).

In the 21st century, discovering truly novel marriage practices is rare. Most practices related to childrearing, living arrangements, intimate interactions, or redistribution of resources have been tried by a global society at one point in time. However, in the United Sates these relational pillars have great diversity in how they are practiced and the comparative legitimacy conferred to them. The numerous variations of practices for these relational interactions have never been seen coexisting in a single society before (Coontz, 2004). For example, divorce and single parenthood have both been historical practices; however, it was rare they coincided with women's rights, allowing women to initiate divorce or the ability for them to support their families by themselves (Coontz, 2004). It is within this window of variation of social roles and the mutual relationships of marriage and singlehood to which the present study pertains.

Most adults are faced with an expectation they will get married (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). In fact, since the 1850s, the marriage rate for women in every birth cohort on record has exceeded 90% in the United States (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). It is not so much of a question of *if* someone will marry but *when* will they marry. The average age of marriage for both men and women has steadily been increasing over the

years. Due to the high marriage rate of Americans, research related to marriage is relevant to most people. Furthermore, research is relevant to clinicians, systems affected by marital unions, children, and single men and women who wish to marry.

Trends in Marriage

Increase of Age at First Marriage

The average age people are marrying and having children has been steadily increasing over the years. For instance, in 1970 the median age of marriage was roughly 21 years old for women and 23 years old for men in the United States, and by 1996 it had risen to 25 years old for women and 27 years old for men (Arnett, 2000). The U.S. Census Bureau stated, as of 2019, the median age at first marriage is 28 for women and 29.8 for men. Despite the increase in the average age at first marriage, Americans still perceive marriage as very important. For example, 80% of Americans endorsed being married and having a family is very important to them (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

In line with the marriage trends steadily increasing in age at first union, age of first childbirth reflected a similar pattern. Marrying early is almost always consistent with early childbearing (Bates et al., 2007). Due to marriage and parenthood being delayed until the mid or late 20s on average, it is no longer common for individuals in their late teens and early 20s to enter and settle into long-term adult roles (Arnett, 2000). According to Arnett's (2000) developmental theory on emerging adulthood, which encompasses individuals ages 18–25, self-exploration and preparing for professional and financial success should occur prior to finding a partner and becoming a parent (Bay-Cheng & Goodkind, 2016).

Cohabitation

An upcoming wave of cohabitation among unmarried couples in the United States started during the 1960s (Glick, 1988). The number of unmarried, opposite sex couples living together jumped from 50,000 in 1950 to 400,000 in 1960 (Glick, 1988). This jump is attributed to the 1960s being a period in time when many different types of established norms were being questioned, including those related to marriage (Glick, 1988). Since the 1960s, this trend has been on the rise. Although cohabitation is not a substitute to marriage altogether, it has to some degree become a relationship that serves as a substitute to an early marriage (Kuperberg, 2014). Individuals who might have been eager to marry prior to the acceptability of cohabitation would likely take more time to marry in contemporary society because they feel more societal approval about entering into a premarital cohabitating union. In cohabitating relationships, couples take on many of the roles associated with marriage, including running a household together (Kuperberg, 2014). Couples have the luxury of experiencing some of the elements of marriage without the associated commitment.

Cohabitation is now considered a routine first romantic union in the United States, with approximately three quarters of people between the ages of 15 and 44 having experienced cohabitation as their first union between 2006 and 2010 (Manning et al., 2014). Cohabitation rates increased more than 17 times from 1960 to 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). Research has suggested mothers who entered into marriage at an earlier age were more likely to have children who cohabited before age 24 (Thornton, 1991). In fact, data suggest children may replicate the timing of their mother's first union, typically marriage, by entering into their first union, typically cohabitation, at a similar age

(Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2018). Research has suggested marital expectations were of paramount importance in predicting transitions to marriage in cohabitating couples (Brown, 2000). Individuals, especially women who engage in cohabation, may be notably interested in transitioning to marriage (Huang et al., 2011). These expectations for marriage were more important than the couple's conflict resolution abilities or the amount of disagreement present in their relationship (Brown, 2000).

Research also has suggested cohabitation that starts when the individuals are young could place couples at a higher risk of divorce, even if statistically they are marrying at older ages (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2017). Premarital cohabitation has been associated with poorer communication quality during marriage, lower marital satisfaction, higher rates of domestic violence, and a greater likelihood of divorce in U.S. samples (Stanley et al., 2006). This well-noted association between premarital cohabitation and less successful marital outcomes is referred to as the "cohabitation effect" (Stanley et al., 2006). Couples who cohabitate prior to marriage often get married later, and they tend to experience poorer marital outcomes and a greater probability of divorce in the United States.

Length of Dating Period Prior to Marriage

Most millennial couples do not feel a sense of urgency to get married, as reflected by an increase in the length of dating prior to marriage. According to research sponsored by the online dating website, eHarmony, in the United States, couples ages 25 to 34 were acquainted for an average of 6.5 years prior to marriage, compared to an average of 5 years for all other age groups (Rabin, 2018). Karney, a social psychology professor at the University of California, proposed the postponement of marriage revolves around an

increase in how much people care about marriage, not the other way around (Rabin, 2018). A sentiment expressed among young people is that they are waiting to get married until their lives are more in order (Rabin, 2018). Having your life in order is relative; however, in the United States, there are many things of concern to emerging adults, such as obtaining a degree, exploring or advancing in different careers, moving out and possibly becoming homeowners, traveling, gaining more financial security, and transforming into a mentally and physically well-to-do person, to name a few. As education has become more of a necessity to be competitive in the U.S. labor market, many millennial students have accumulated a significant amount of student debt (Baum, 2017). The U.S. education debt currently is about $1.3 trillion (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2016). Roughly two thirds of students owe $25,000 or less (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2016). The housing market is also competitive, making homeownership an increasingly expensive investment. After witnessing the housing market crash of 2008, many young people worry about the high cost of housing and how they would afford to own their dream home with their future husband or wife. The serious attitude toward marriage as necessitating consideration of more factors than just love has become the norm for the substantial number of women who have joined the work force in recent decades (Rabin, 2018). Sociologist, Cherlin, is calling these "capstone marriages" because capstone refers to the last brick you place when building an arch (as cited in Rabin, 2018). Cherlin went on to explain how the order of developmental tasks has changed over time, saying, "Marriage used to be the first step into adulthood. Now it is often the last" (as cited in Rabin, 2018, para. 15). Young

couples desire now, more than ever, to know what they have will last when they walk down the aisle.

Financial Security

Financial security is one of the prerequisites many people desire prior to settling down and getting married. A study on financial barriers to getting married for couples who had children out of wedlock found four financial barrier categories participants endorsed. The first was financial stability and being able to consistently make ends meet (Gibson-Davis, 2005). The second was titled financial responsibility and described as using existing funds wisely (Gibson-Davis, 2005). The third was acquisition of assets, or the couple's perception of working together toward long-term financial goals (Gibson-Davis, 2005). The last category had to do with the practicalities of having enough savings to host a presentable wedding (Gibson-Davis, 2005). After surveying 25,000 couples married in the United States in 2019, it was concluded that the average cost of a wedding, which included a ceremony, reception, and engagement ring, was $33,900 (The Knot, 2019). Additionally, more than 70% of couples go on a honeymoon after their wedding, where they spend an average of $5,000 for their trip (The Knot, 2019). Financial security does not only seem to be a necessary ideal prior to marriage, but some participants remarked, if the couple had more money, there would be less arguing and frustration (Gibson-Davis, 2005).

Factors in Considering Marriage

Availability of Eligible Men

The baby boom caused changes in the age-sex distribution of the young population between 1951 and 1978. Mainly, there was a shortage of eligible men, which

created the "marriage squeeze" (Glick, 1988). During the 1950s the marriage squeeze for women was caused by a loss of eligible men during World War II (Anzo, 1985). In the 1960s, the marriage squeeze for women persisted because females began participating in the marriage market at an earlier age than men (Anzo, 1985). This had the effect of decreasing the average age of men at marriage by half a year and increased the age of women at marriage by half a year (Glick, 1988). This marriage squeeze may have contributed to the growth of the women's movement during the 1970s, where excess unmarried women acquired more education and employment (Glick, 1988). As of 2016, there were 88 unmarried men ages 18 and older for every 100 unmarried women among all racial groups in the United States, representing some sense of disproportionate odds in the eyes of young women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

Another shortage of eligible men is disproportionately occurring in the African American community. For every 100 Black women in the United States, there are only 83 Black men who are alive and also not currently in jail (Wolfers et al., 2015). This gap is driven most notably by incarceration and early deaths. This trend does not exist among White individuals, with only one White man missing for every 100 White women (Wolfers et al., 2015). This disparity has implications for marriages. In 2003, 70% of African American men ages 25–29 made less than $25,000 a year, and 28% of that group had no income at all (Johnson, 2019). African American women also outnumber African American men in college, with 15% compared to 13% of Black women and men, respectively, earning a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). In 2000, men in the total population compared to Black men were earning bachelor's degrees at a 2:1 ratio (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). A higher proportion of African American women compared

to African American men were also in management, professional, and related occupations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). With a lack of eligible Black men, and stigma surrounding dating outside of one's own race, the rate of never marrying was 55% for Black women, which was the highest percentage of all of the races in 2010 (CDC, 2012).

As mentioned earlier, there has been a decline in the number of young adults, especially males, who are homeowners (Glick, 1988). In 2011, the number of men ages 25-34 years old who were living at home was 18.6%, compared with 10% of women in this age range who were living at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b). Of the men who were living at home, 22% were unemployed and 52% had never attended college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b). Young African American and Latino men were affected disproportionately by the recession and are more likely to live at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b). Furthermore, New York, New Jersey, and Hawaii were the states with the highest proportion of young men who were living at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b). Economics and high cost of living plays an important role in decision making and living at home. The inability for men to become householders could influence the desirability of men to women who value financial independence.

Eligibility of prospective female partners is a concern for men as well. Researchers have found evidence to suggest fertility may play a role in marital prospects. In particular, women who have a child from a prior relationship may be more prone to delay marriage and men may view children prior to their relationship as a barrier to marriage (Qian et al., 2005). However, some pregnant youth feel an urgency to get married to "legitimize" the birth (Akerlof et al., 1996).

Fear of Being Single

Having a fear of remaining single can be a driving force in considering marriage. Research has suggested fear of being single is predictive of settling for less in a romantic relationship and having greater dependence in unsatisfying relationships (Spielmann et al., 2013). Spielmann et al. (2013) conducted a series of seven studies examining fear of being single in romantic relationships. These studies examined people's thoughts about being single and led to the development and validation of the Fear of Being Single Scale. This scale assessed for symptoms of settling for less in a romantic relationship such as greater dependence, less likelihood of dissolving an unsatisfying relationship, romantic interest in targets with varying degrees of responsiveness and physical attractiveness, and the fear of being single in a speed dating context (Spielmann et al., 2013). Researchers found fear of becoming single predicts a lower chance of initiating the disbandment of a less satisfying relationship (Spielmann et al., 2013). It also consistently predicted being less selective in expressing romantic interest and promoted romantic interest in less responsive and attractive dating targets (Spielmann et al., 2013). Results of Spielmann et al.'s study suggest fear of being single increases the likelihood of a person making decisions that prioritize relationship status over relationship quality.

Benefits of Marriage

The United States was found to have one of the highest marriage rates among developed countries (Glick, 1988). The majority of Americans believe people who are married are happier than people who remain single (Axinn & Thornton, 2000). There is a plethora of research that supports the many benefits associated with being married.

Live Longer

Married individuals were found to have much lower death rates than unmarried individuals in general, especially from heart disorders (Glick, 1988). Unmarried women had about a 50% higher mortality rate and unmarried men had about a 250% higher mortality rate compared to their married counterparts (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Unmarried individuals are also far more likely to die from one of the leading causes of death, such as stroke, pneumonia, many kinds of cancer, automobile accidents, murder, and suicide (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Being happily married is equal to being 1.5 years younger than their chronological age for men and half a year younger for women (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Married men were also significantly more likely than single men to report someone monitors their health (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Mental Health

Married individuals reported substantially fewer symptoms of depression compared to single adults (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Marital vows typically involve taking an oath that you will be there for someone in sickness or in health. Partners can help support one another in times of crisis and reduce isolation, which has been shown to be harmful to both mental and physical health. Together, a married couple creates a shared sense of social reality and a separate world. This communal sense of shared meaning can be a pivotal foundation for growing emotional health (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Marriage has also been found to be a protective factor against drug use (Sinha, 2018). The likelihood of substance use decreases for married couples who have a quality, close, and personal relationship (Sinha, 2018). Further evidence that marriage is

beneficial for mental health is that older individuals who never married also had very high rates of hospitalization for mental disorders (Glick, 1988).

Financial Advantages

Marriage has been shown to be associated with higher work productivity (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). For instance, men earn between 10%– 20% more than single men who have a similar education and job histories (Korenman & Neumark, 1991). Additionally, there is the potential to have more buying power in a couple when there are two incomes compared to the one income of a single person. In 2009, the average annual household income for unmarried baby boomers was $57,000, while the average annual income for married households was $106,000 (Lin & Brown, 2012). Married couples can also share expenses. For instance, they only need to pay rent or a mortgage for one household instead of two, allowing them to save money or use it toward other expenses. The poverty rate for separated parents is much higher compared to married parents. Mothers who are divorcing or separating are 2.83 times more likely to be below the poverty line than women who remain married (Mauldin & Mimura, 2007). Furthermore, the majority of children who grow up outside of a married family have experienced a minimum of 1 year of poverty (Rank & Hirschl, 1999). Economic losses pose a threat to the family's well-being and have been linked to increases in depression, lower emotional well-being, and higher mortality rates among adults (Hogendoorn et al., 2019). Additionally, the government is pro-marriage. From a financial standpoint, married individuals get a tax break compared to single individuals. In the compensation system of the U.S. Armed Forces, military members who are married or have dependents have more income and receive greater benefits than those who are single (Hogan & Seifert, 2010).

Environmental Factors Contributing to the Timing of Marriage

Family of Origin

Oftentimes children mimic their parents by either verbally repeating things they have heard them say or by physically mimicking their actions. This normative behavior helps children learn the basic behaviors necessary to survive. This principle can be applied to relationships and mimicking ways parents relate to and engage with one another in their marriage. The rationale behind the social learning theory is that children often mimic behaviors modeled to them. Therefore, what children witness as their parent's experience in marriage has the potential to become part of their own marital paradigms (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2017). In fact, the probability of White adults who were separated or divorced was 59% higher for those who were children of parents who divorced than for those who were still living with both parents when they were 16 years of age (Glick, 1988). A study that examined the effects of parental divorce on marital commitment and confidence found women whose parents divorced could potentially be at an increased risk for divorce themselves because they tend to enter marriage with comparatively less confidence in, and commitment to, the future of those marriages (Whitton et al., 2008). These women showed less confidence in their own ability to maintain a happy marriage with their spouse based on the negative outcome of their parents' marriage. This phenomenon is referred to as the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Whitton et al., 2008). Trauma experienced by one generation can be passed down to the next whether through the narratives that are told or epigenetic effects that change a person's biology due to environmental factors. Trauma often persists and is passed down to younger generations. Divorce, or the separating of a union between two

people, is traumatic, especially for children who oftentimes love both parents and want the family to stay together.

Quality and Timing of Parents' Marriage

Social learning theory suggests the age at which a mother first enters marriage could be a significant factor for when her offspring develops their own sense of marital timing (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2017). An earlier study in 1961 in Detroit found maternal marital age was significantly correlated with the degree that their youth would enter into marriage and cohabitation (Thornton, 1991). A more recent study by Uecker and Stokes (2008) found similar results, stating young maternal age at first marriage is a strong predictor of early marriage. Despite the children's own desires for marital timing, maternal marital timing was more predictive of the actual timing of the children's unions. However, the quality of their mother's marital experiences can influence whether they want to avoid or replicate a marriage like their mother's. If a child perceives their mother's marital experiences as a success, then they may be motivated to replicate that success by marrying at a similar age (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2017). Conversely, if they perceive their parents' marriage negatively, due to divorce or other circumstances, they might be more interested in delaying marriage by spending more time finding the right partner to avoid repeating their parents' divorce (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2017).

Research on general attitudes toward marriage has found children of a marriage that concluded in divorce had less positive attitudes about marriage as a whole (Axinn & Thornton, 1996). Furthermore, studies have found although many children of divorce are still open to marriage, they have lower desires to ever marry compared to their peers (Thornton, 1991). However, maternal remarriage can help children adopt a more positive

outlook on marriage after having gone through parental divorce (Axinn & Thornton, 1996).

Geographic Location

Geographic location can impact marital timing as well. Individuals living in the Northeast states tend to get married for the first time at a later age, but those in the south tend to get married younger than the average age (Lentz, 2019). Between 2010 and 2015, Utah had the lowest average marital age for both genders with 23.8 and 25.9 years of age for women and men respectively (Lentz, 2019). Meanwhile, the District of Columbia had the oldest average marital age for women at 30.2, and New York had the oldest average marital age for men at 30.6 (Lentz, 2019).

In addition to marital timing trends, the location of where people live has recently become more stable. Historically, once the means became available, people began traveling, thus expanding the range of places extended family lived. However, as of 2019, the percentage of Americans who are moving is the lowest amount since the government started tracking geographic mobility rates (Tavernise, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau). A lack of movement due to the economy and housing market has left Americans frozen in place, and potentially more likely to be influenced by the geographic marital timing trends in their local area.

<div align="center">Cultural Norms of Dating, Marriage, and Divorce</div>

Researchers are noticing generational differences in how people think about singleness, marriage, and relationships more generally in the United States. Historically, even up until the 1990s it was thought single women were relegated to living desolate and inadequate lives and that marriage was their exclusive chance for enrichment

(Spielmann et al., 2013). Spielmann et al. (2013) claimed it is a myth that single women yearn for a relationship or that they suffer or lack without it. A major shift in the recent cultural norms surrounding women is their dependence on men for protection, stability, and happiness. The culture in which one lives also influences the timing of marriage and whether there is a period of dating prior to marriage.

Dating Is a Western Phenomenon

Dating, or being in a nonmarital committed romantic relationship, tends to be associated with western culture, and other cultures have various courtship processes aside from dating prior to marriage. A significant difference between arranged marriages and marriages in western nations is that the person who wishes to be married has parents, relatives, friends, and matchmakers looking for a partner, rather than looking for a partner themselves (Batabyal, 2001). In large parts of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East a considerable proportion of marriages are arranged (Batabyal, 2001). For instance, although it is discouraged for Ultra-Orthodox Jewish individuals to have lengthy courtships, it is a common practice for a couple to be arranged by a matchmaker (Milevsky et al., 2011). In this culture, physical touch is forbidden prior to marriage and is seen as unhelpful to women's ability to make sound judgments about the suitability of a partner (Milevsky et al., 2011). The Orthodox Jewish participants interviewed in Milevsky et al.'s (2011) study reported dating for recreation was unnecessary. Additionally, they were very mindful of the goal of marriage when meeting with prospective partners. The average length of dating prior to committing to marriage in the Orthodox Jewish community is between 1 and 3 months (Milevsky et al., 2011). Many participants found that religiosity was very important in considering a marriage partner

and that there would be too many inconsistencies if they were not aligned in this regard (Milevsky et al., 2011).

In Eastern Indonesia, customary courtship in a woman's home is called *midang* (Bennett, 2002). The practice of *midang* typically takes place when a girl is 18 to 20 years of age (Bennett, 2002). Men are received in women's homes in a visiting room or on the front patio and are subject to politely conversing with the family, and in particular, her father (Bennett, 2002). Following the initial meeting, the couple may be given more privacy to talk, but family members remain within earshot (Bennett, 2002). They are expected to observe curfews, occupy primarily public domains, abstain from sexual relations and physical contact, and refrain from cohabitation, which is viewed as an indecent practice (Bennett, 2002). Parents are given the opportunity to observe the suitor and determine his general compatibility with their daughter and the family before things get potentially serious in the relationship (Bennett, 2002).

Religious Affiliation

Religious affiliation can create the context, traditions, and prescriptions for when and how to marry. A researcher who studied religion and early marriage in the United States found "significant variation in early marriage by religious tradition, religious service attendance, religious salience, belief in scriptural inerrancy, and religious context in high school" (Uecker, 2014, p. 392). This study found evidence to suggest Mormons and conservative Protestants tended to be the earliest to marry, followed by predominant Protestant and Catholic disciples, and lastly, those ranked with a later marital age were individuals of the Jewish faith and the religiously unaffiliated (Uecker, 2014). Particular religions can influence decisions about marriage by their doctrines or teachings

(Eggebeen & Dew, 2009). However, to be exposed to messages about marriage young adults must attend religious services (Eggebeen & Dew, 2009). In 2018, roughly 50% of Americans claimed membership in a church, synagogue, or mosque, which was down from 70% in 1999 (Jones, 2019). In particular, only 42% of millennials identified themselves as members of churches, and this generation is likely a major factor in the drop in overall church membership in the United States (Jones, 2019). The intersectionality of religious identity, attendance, and how salient or important religion was to individuals collectively made the greatest impact (Eggebeen & Dew, 2009). For instance, the impact religion had on future marriage is more powerful when an adolescent identifies themselves as a member of a church that has distinctive teachings about marriage, *and* they regularly attend church services, *and* they identify their religious beliefs as important to them (Eggebeen & Dew, 2009). Although it is helpful to know individual trends, for example, that those who are more devout and those who believe the Bible is to be followed in a strict sense tend to marry earlier, it is important to know how these three factors interplay (Uecker, 2014). Religious institutions, when accessed, provide frameworks with which individuals understand their life, relationships, and the larger world.

Emerging Adulthood

In 2000, Arnett proposed a new developmental theory on emerging adulthood, encompassing individuals ages 18–25 (Bay-Cheng & Goodkind, 2016). He believes there is enough evidence to support the idea that emerging adulthood is a distinct developmental period, differing from adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood is a time for identity exploration in many areas, including love.

Explorations in love for individuals in this timeframe often become more intimate and serious as compared to adolescent relationships, which tend to be briefer relationships and have a focus on companionship and recreation (Arnett, 2000). Relationships in emerging adulthood tend to involve exploring the potential for emotional and physical intimacy, and may include sexual intercourse and cohabitation (Arnett, 2000). A meta-analysis examined young adults who had an interest in casual sexual encounters. Researchers found some participants thought of these encounters as appealing, in part, because they wanted to feel the satisfaction and excitement of having sexual relationships, without being expected to be committed or accountable toward each other, and they did not feel an expectation to communicate about their relationship intentions (Rodrigue & Fernet, 2016). Although some of the goals of identity exploration in this phase of life are directly preparing individuals for adult roles, some of these explorations are exposing emerging adults to a broad range of life experiences before engaging with lifelong—and limiting—adult responsibilities (Arnett, 2000). The absence of continual role commitments in emerging adulthood makes experimentation and exploration possible, to some extent, that is likely not as feasible during the 30s and beyond (Arnett, 2000). This is the ripest time for individuals who are looking to have a variety of romantic and sexual experiences, because there is minimal parental surveillance, and there is significantly less pressure to enter into marriage (Arnett, 2000). An interest in having ample time to explore a variety of romantic experiences before settling down is one possible explanation for why women may be delaying marriage.

Liberal Attitudes Toward Sexuality

The younger generation tends to be more liberal and sex positive, which has historically not been the case. Sex-positive individuals tend to have a more open attitude toward sex and sexuality. Most young adults in the 21st century experience intimate and/or sexual interactions outside of devoted romantic relationships (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). In college populations, the prevalence rates of casual sexual relationship experiences (CSREs) are greater than 50% (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). Claxton and van Dulmen (2013) stated although some researchers such as Grello et al. (2006) and Owen and Fincham (2010), have found gender differences in the rates of CSREs, with men reporting engaging more often in these relationships than women, several studies have suggested the rates of CSREs do not significantly differ between genders (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013, 2006, 2011). However, perceptions of acceptability regarding CSREs may differ depending on gender.

Claxton and van Dulmen's (2013) research unearthed a number of various factors that serve as predictors of engagement in CSREs. For instance, they found having a high level of intimacy goals (desire for self-disclosure and mutual dependence), and a secure attachment style indicated by low levels of anxiety and avoidance, tends to be correlated with lower levels of CSRE engagement (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). Throughout their article, Claxton and van Dulmen described different types of CSREs they researched. They defined hooking-up behaviors in their article as friends with benefits relationships (repeat sexual encounters with friends that do not involve a dating relationship), one-night stands, or infrequent sexual encounters with an acquaintance or friend late at night.

Personal and religious values also play a role in CSRE involvement. Generally speaking, having personal values that rebuke premarital sex, as well as having distinct religious values, may decrease an individual's propensity toward engaging in CSREs (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). Highly religious individuals favored limiting sexual activity to marriage (Allison & Risman, 2014). Additionally, religiosity was related to fewer instances of hooking up for women but not men (Owen et al., 2010). Frequency and quantity of alcohol use has also been linked with higher numbers of sexual partners, risky sexual experiences, and feelings of regret after engaging in CSREs (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). Some gender differences in psychological outcomes related to CSREs were noted. Men tend to report more contentment and less repentance after engaging in CSREs, generally have more social and physical gratification benefits of engaging in CSREs, and are more comfortable with uncommitted sex than women (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013).

Researchers have argued engaging in CSREs hinders an individual's ability to develop necessary skills for navigating committed romantic relationships (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). For example, emerging adults who have engaged in friends with benefits relationships exhibit less considerate relationship decision-making processes compared to those who have not (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013).

According to college students, part of the appeal of CSREs is that they may be more straightforward, accessible, and are less time intensive compared to traditional romantic relationships (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). A meta-analysis by Rodrigue and Fernet (2016) cited participants across studies were interested in CSREs because they felt they were too young to be tied down, too busy, or did not feel they had enough time for a

romantic relationship. The implications of CSREs extend beyond hookup culture and likely impact acceptance of cohabitation, having children outside of marriage, and other factors linked with a delay in marriage as well.

An individual might wonder what emerging adults consider necessary to attain full adulthood. It might be difficult for young people to feel like they have reached adulthood until they have finished school, started a career, and found a stable residence. However, the research evidence supports that these transitions are not what emerging adults consider necessary to reach adulthood. In fact, finishing education, marriage, and parenthood are not considered very important criteria for attaining adulthood to emerging adults (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults believe adulthood is reached by becoming independent through finances and autonomous decision making as well as accepting responsibility for oneself (Arnett, 2000). These character qualities emphasize becoming a self-sufficient person.

Divorce

Trends in divorce have changed dramatically over time, as legislation and societal expectations have changed. In the late 1800s, the divorce rate was 1% because it was illegal, and even cases of extreme cruelty were permitted (Johnson, 2019). In the 1920s, reasons for divorce expanded to include emotional needs (Johnson, 2019). Forty years later, in WWII, marriages began to boom, followed by a subsequent surge of divorces, with the United States experiencing a 136% increase in divorce from 1960 to 1980 (Amato, 2010). This era created a divorce trend that steadily climbed over the next 3 decades, peaking in the 1980s (Clyde et al., 2020). Currently, 40%–50% of first

marriages in the United States result in divorce (Amato, 2010; Centers for Disease
Control and Prevention, 2017a).

The age at which an individual marries can be predictive of the outcome of their
union. For instance, those who marry at young ages, particularly as teenagers, are more
likely to have their marriages result in divorce than those who marry later (Arocho &
Kamp Dush, 2017). Arocho and Kamp Dush (2017) speculated young spouses may be
immature or lack the knowledge or skills to perform expected marital roles. Furthermore,
when spouses marry young, a large pool of alternative available partners still exists.
Young spouses may be inclined to abandon a moderately unhappy marriage because of
the many prospective options still available to them (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2017).

Due to the high percentage of marriages that result in a divorce in the United
States, individuals are cautious about entering into a union with someone with whom they
will spend the rest of their lives. Perhaps evidence of this trepidation is that couples are
dating for longer periods of time prior to marrying, and divorce rates have been on the
steady decline since the 1980s (National Marriage Project, 2019). Although on the
decline, divorce is a serious concern for many individuals who are religious, who are
children of parents who divorced, and for people who only want to be married once in
their lifetime.

Trends in Women That Contribute to Singlehood

Education Attainment

Women are increasingly becoming more educated and financially independent
than ever before in the history of the United States. During the 19th and 20th centuries,
the United States operated on a male breadwinner, female homemaker family model,

which arguably reached its peak in the decades following World War II (Cunningham, 2008). Male breadwinner and female homemaker dyads were actually contrary to the norm throughout most of history, which historically consisted of two-provider families (Coontz, 2004). In the 1960s and 1970s, women across the United States spearheaded a large social movement that strived to highlight inequities in the treatment of women in the labor market and the family (Cunningham, 2008). During the latter decades of the 20th century, this family model was challenged as a practice and an ideology, as the service economy expanded, and more women entered the paid labor market (Cunningham, 2008). Evidence has suggested that attitudes about gender-specialized marital roles influence factors like schooling, employment, and marital quality and that women's support for gender-specialized marital roles declined from the 1960s through the 1990s (Cunningham, 2008).

Studies have shown evidence to suggest that, in the United States, college-educated women marry later and are less likely to view marriage primarily as a means to financial security (Isen & Stevenson, 2010). College-educated women also tend to have fewer children, report being happier in their marriages and with their family life, and are less likely to divorce (Isen & Stevenson, 2010). In contrast, men have experienced fewer changes in marital timing by education (Isen & Stevenson, 2010). Isen and Stevenson (2010) reported the largest shift away from early marriage occurred between 1970 and 1980 for college-educated women in the United States.

Similar marital timing patterns are positively correlated with education in developing countries around the world. A study on women's education and timing of marriage in Bangladesh found education is an important determinant in delaying age at

first marriage (Bates et al., 2007). The research team also found maternal education level
was associated with age of first marriage for their daughters as well as a lower likelihood
their daughters would be married early (Bates et al., 2007). Additionally, the educational
level of their mother-in-law was correlated with the timing of first birth among their
daughter-in-law (Bates et al., 2007). They also found evidence to suggest that daughters'
education levels were inversely correlated with the likelihood of early marriage and that
the timing of leaving school and first marriage often coincide (Bates et al., 2007).
Additionally, in Kenya and Pakistan, highly educated women are also more likely to
delay marriage (Ikamari, 2005; Maitra & Gangadharan, 2001). Maitra and Gangadharan
(2001) reported an increase in the age at first marriage and at birthing their first child are
key features to social change and transition in any country.

Education is cited as a catalyst for adopting new attitudes and behaviors, and is
positively correlated with gender egalitarianism (Cunningham, 2008). In addition to
gender egalitarianism, schooling has also been correlated with fostering women's
empowerment through political tolerance, individualism, positive health outcomes, and
liberal attitudes toward sexuality (Bates et al., 2007; Cunningham, 2008). Women who
have less education and have a lower socioeconomic status are more likely to marry
young (Uecker & Stokes, 2008). In 2016, 42% of women in the United States held a
bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 11% in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of Labor
Statistics, 2017). Educational attainment has been steadily rising for women in the United
States. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013) published an article stating the
probability of a marriage concluding in divorce was lower for people with more
education, with about half of marriages ending in divorce being accounted for by

individuals who did not complete high school, compared to approximately 30%

accounted for by college graduates.

Career Focused and Financially Independent

In addition to strides in educational attainment, the percentage of women who

were getting paid for their labor dramatically increased from the 1960s to the 1990s

(Cunningham, 2008). In 2016, women working full time earned 82% of what men

earned, compared with 62% of men's earnings in 1979 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,

2017). Women are therefore more financially independent, allowing them flexibility to

stray away from the male breadwinner family model. Financial independence allowed

single women to be homeowners. In fact, most unmarried homeowners are women, and

they have consistently led single men in homeownership since 1986 (U.S. Census

Bureau, 2017).

Recent trends in contemporary women show they value the opportunity to work

for pay and encourage men's participation in household duties that may reduce the

overall workload (Cunningham, 2008). Data have suggested women's current

employment status is more influential to their gender-related attitudes of paid labor than

their accumulated employment histories (Cunningham, 2008). Based off of this

information, a researcher would be inclined to believe a single woman who is working

would be more interested in a prospective partner who devalues gender specialized

marital roles and encourages his female partner's career aspirations. This is quite a shift

from the 1980s, when men's income level was positively correlated with stable

marriages, and the opposite pattern was true for women (Glick, 1988). Additionally, this

is in contrast to a 1979 study that found chances for marital stability were higher if the wife's overall income was relatively small compared to her husband (Glick, 1988).

A dichotomy has emerged in young women's lives. On the one hand, establishing a committed relationship with a man who adheres to heteronormative norms of romantic love is regarded as a defining aspiration for young women (Bay-Cheng & Goodkind, 2016). On the other hand, undergraduate women in the United States increasingly appear to be admonishing these gender prescriptions and are deprioritizing romantic attachment (Bay-Cheng & Goodkind, 2016). The demotion of the importance of romantic attachment among young people in the United States is seen as a characteristic cultural shift within the period of emerging adulthood (Bay-Cheng & Goodkind, 2016).

Socioeconomic Status and Women's Perceptions of Singleness

Socioeconomic status (SES) of women can be a factor in their perception of singleness. A recent study conducted by Bay-Cheng and Goodkind (2016) surveyed 274 single women ages 18–22 years old who had various socioeconomic positions. One group that was surveyed consisted of affluent undergraduate students at a private university, another group comprised low SES undergraduates across New York State, and the third group was low SES women in western New York who were not in college (Bay-Cheng & Goodkind, 2016). Affluent undergraduate students tended to characterize being single as "positive and self-enhancing," the low-SES undergraduates saw it as a strategy for self-advancement, and the low-SES non-students framed being single in defensive, self-protective terms (Bay-Cheng & Goodkind, 2016). Another interesting statistic related to the intersection of race, education, and marriage is although the lifetime marriage rates for U.S. women as a whole have declined by 5%, these rates have declined 5 times more

for African Americans and 6 times more for women who did obtain a high school diploma (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). Although eventual marriage is the norm, many factors (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) can influence the timing of marriage.

Increases in Childbearing Age

Historically, in the United States, having children out of wedlock has been viewed as a scandal to be concealed. Women who have children out of wedlock have been associated with sexual promiscuity and accused of excessively using taxpayer money if they are on welfare. To avoid these stereotypes, and approach a parenting partnership, most women (about 60%) tend to wait until they are married to have children (CDC, 2017b). If the average age at which women are getting married has been steadily increasing over the years, researchers would expect to see similar trends in the average age women give birth to their first child, since the majority of women conceive their first child within marriage (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

Becoming a new mother used to be a milestone the majority of women went through in the same decade of their life; however, new analyses have revealed there are 4 decades of women's lives in which children are being born to first-time mothers (Bui & Miller, 2018). The age of first-time parents has increased in general. The average age of first-time mothers increased in every state from 2000-2014 (Mathews & Hamilton, 2016). The average age of first-time mothers increased from 21.4 years in 1970 to 26.3 years in 2014 (Mathews & Hamilton, 2009, 2016). The mean age at first birth varies by race in the United States as well. For instance, in 2014, Asian or Pacific Islander women had the highest mean of 29.5 years at the time of their first birth, and American Indian or Alaska Native women had the lowest mean of 23.1 years (Mathews & Hamilton, 2016). In 2018,

birth rates decreased for women who were 15-34 years of age and increased for women who are 35-44 years of age (CDC, 2019). In the United States, the average age of first birth for women increased dramatically in the 1970s, after the legalization of abortion (Myers, 2012). Additionally, there has been a considerable decline in teenage pregnancy, coupled with women's increased control over fertility through the widespread availability and use of birth control in the United States (Bui & Miller, 2018).

When women enter parenthood varies significantly by education and geography (Bui & Miller, 2018). First-time mothers tend to be older in big cities and on the coasts, and younger in the South and rural areas (Mathews & Hamilton, 2009). In 2006, the highest average age of first-time mothers was 27.7 in Massachusetts, and the lowest average age was 22.6 in Mississippi (Mathews & Hamilton, 2009).

One of the biggest differences impacting when women start families has to do with their level of education. Women with undergraduate degrees or higher usually have children on average 7 years later than women who have less education—and often they are using the extra years to complete school and build their careers (Bui & Miller, 2018). Rackin, a sociologist who studies fertility at Louisiana State University, reported people who have a higher SES have more opportunities to explore other ventures outside of becoming a parent (Bui & Miller, 2018). Rackin said people who have a lower socioeconomic status might not have as many opportunity costs. Additionally, motherhood could be a path to becoming an adult. Motherhood has the potential to bring emotional fulfillment and status in their community when education does not seem to be a viable option (Bui & Miller, 2018). The Bangladesh, Kenya, and Pakistan research studies on education and timing of marriage and of first birth in developing countries

suggest the timing of when women start families can be viewed as a symptom of a country's inequality (Bui & Miller, 2018). If going to college is out of some women's reach, having a family may be the most attainable source of meaning to them.

Increases in Children Out of Wedlock

As mentioned in the previous section, historically many women in the United States tend to wait until marriage to have children. Getting married and having children has long been a central part of the American Dream. However, as women become more financially independent and social norms change, they are increasingly given and taking the opportunity to have children out of wedlock and achieve their own version of the American dream. In this sense, they are putting motherhood before marriage, for a multitude of reasons. In the past, a woman might need a man for financial security to start and support a family; however, in today's world, it is likely she could have the opportunity to support herself and her child on her own. In addition to financial security, women no longer need to share a physical connection with a man to procreate. With invitro fertilization or intrauterine insemination women are able to use sperm to become pregnant, without a man being physically present. In 2015, the CDC estimated assisted reproductive technology, which includes all fertility treatments in which both eggs and embryos are handled, accounted for slightly less than 2% of all U.S. births. Although some women are choosing to put motherhood before marriage to satisfy their desire to have a child on their own timeline, having a child out of wedlock can have negative consequences on marriage marketability. Having a child could be viewed negatively in the eyes of a prospective partner, inhibiting a woman's ability to marry (Qian et al., 2005; South, 1991).

Approximately 40% of births are occurring outside of the context of marriage (CDC, 2017b). This is a steep increase since 1950 where less than 10% of births happened outside of marriage (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). African American women held the highest percentage of births to unwed mothers as of 2018, around 70% (CDC, 2019). African American nonmarital birth rates were followed by high rates among Native American and Latino women (CDC, 2019). This reflects a change in social norms surrounding what are acceptable practices outside of wedlock and a decrease in the sense of urgency to marry after having a child outside of a marriage bond.

Rates of single parenting and cohabitation were found to be negatively correlated with education (Cherlin, 2010). For instance, the more education someone had, the less likely they were to be a single parent or cohabit. Single mothers were disproportionately found to be more likely to need welfare assistance and to cohabit than other women (Qian et al., 2005). Although single mothers are disproportionately poor, bringing a new life into the world with a romantic love interest can be a way to reach for connection and find a sense of purpose for young people who experience little of either (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Edin and Kefalas (2005), authors of the *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*, stated pregnancies outside of marriage are largely influenced by economics, softened stigmas, and the lack of prospective male partners in low-income communities. Edin and Kefalas spent 5 years interviewing 162 single mothers in Philadelphia's urban core. All had earned poverty-level incomes in the past year, and nearly half of the mothers interviewed were high school dropouts (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). The researchers found these women held a lot of skepticism toward adult relationships in general and distrust in men specifically, rendering marriage as "just

another elusive American dream" (Latimer, 2005, p. 42). For the single mothers in this

study, being single was preferable to being cheated on by a partner, consuming drugs,

committing crimes, being the victim of domestic abuse, and experiencing financial

struggles, which were part of relationships they had known in the past (Edin & Kefalas,

2005). In this culture, motherhood is an accomplishment, an act of courage, and a

promise they feel they can keep, and divorce is considered to be more scandalous than

unwed pregnancy (Latimer, 2005).

One change from the past related to out-of-wedlock births is that women are

pregnant and unmarried are currently much less likely than in the past to marry the

fathers of their children (Qian et al., 2005). A study that examined why low-income

parents who say they are planning to be married at the time their child is born do not

follow through with that plan has to do with their perception of social and economic

barriers, parents' relationship quality, and trepidation of divorce (Gibson-Davis et al.,

2005). In particular, unmarried parents tend to have long lists of financial and

relationship goals they perceive as important to be met for them to proceed with a

wedding (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Despite couples reporting their chances of marriage

were good or almost certain, only 15% of couples had actually married by their child's

first birthday, and 21% had broken up (Carlson et al., 2004). Research has suggested

although most unmarried parents never marry each other, they will get married to

someone eventually (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Trying to make the original relationship

with the child's biological father work could be one reason why women who have

children out of wedlock tend to get married later on average. However, some men have

expressed a lack of desire and unwillingness to marry a woman who has children from a

prior relationship, placing single mothers at a "competitive disadvantage in the marriage market" (Qian et al., 2005, p. 474). Researchers are not questioning whether single mothers are willing to marry but instead wonder when they will marry and the quality of the mate selection available to them (Qian et al., 2005). Partners of unwed mothers are less likely to have college educations, are often older, and are less likely to have similar characteristics with their partners (Qian et al., 2005). As such, single mothers are not as likely to experience upward marriage mobility (Qian et al., 2005). Although children can be a beacon of hope in a single mother's life, adding a sense of purpose, connection, and serving as a gateway into becoming an adult, it can often postpone marriage by placing women at a competitive disadvantage in the dating world.

Low Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status impacts many of the factors that have been reviewed within this study. Higher education tends to be tightly connected to social class (McClendon et al., 2014). As a result, emerging adults who have a college degree are more appealing on the marriage market and therefore have a greater likelihood of finding a potential spouse with preferred characteristics, such as a college degree (McClendon et al., 2014). Low socioeconomic status and exposure to adversity are associated with decreased educational success (McLaughlin & Sheridan, 2016). Never-married mothers tend to have less education, lower household income, and are disproportionately poor (Casper & Bianchi, 2002; Qian et al., 2005). Less educated women are also more likely to give birth outside of marriage, with roughly 55% of women with a high school degree having had an out-of-wedlock birth in 2008 (CDC, 2017b). During the 17 years of childhood, roughly 81% of children in nonmarried households are impacted by poverty (Rank & Hirschl, 1999).

Cohabitation is also more common among individuals who have attained less education and have lower income levels (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). However, despite socioeconomic challenges, many individuals still support marriage as an institution and desire to marry one day. Researchers found 70% of welfare recipients say they expect to marry (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005).

Significance of the Study

Societal trends have been changing over the years, as norms have changed in regard to when women marry. The social roles and legitimacy accorded to marriage, divorce, and singlehood in the 21st century are distinctly different from anything that occurred in the past. Opportunities for single women are more plentiful now than ever. The highest ideal for some contemporary women may be education, a career, and self-exploration, among other things.

Previous research has examined trends and quantitatively addressed topics related to women and cohabitation, childbearing, education, and socioeconomic status. In the literature, there exist correlations between these various factors and the fact that women are delaying marriage, but it does not offer a definitive theory for why this is occurring. The research thus far has a qualitatively incomplete understanding of women's perspectives. Specifically, there is a gap in the literature related to the unique experiences of women who do wish to ultimately marry, but for any reason have delayed that commitment. Many research articles pertaining to single women focus on very specific subpopulations, such as low-income single mothers, or are outdated, having been published prior to the 21st century (Edin, 2000). A study that most resembles the current study, was conducted in 1997 by researchers Lewis and Moon. They conducted a

qualitative study that examined what it was like to be a single woman in the late 20th century in the United States. Their study focused on the experiences of single women and compared them to the experience of single women following a divorce. In the first phase of the study, the single women were asked open-ended questions, and, in the second phase, interview findings were used to guide the development of a structured questionnaire administered to an additional group of single women (Lewis & Moon, 1997). Lewis and Moon found their participants had unresolved or unidentified ambivalences about being single. Participants could list advantages and drawbacks to being single, they were content while simultaneously experiencing loss, and they were ambivalent about the reasons regarding their singleness (Lewis & Moon, 1997). Closing their research article, Lewis and Moon remarked on how uncharted the topic of single women is, and on the many avenues for future research suggested by this study. For instance, the researchers mentioned future studies could investigate the role of rituals in single women's lives, how they use free time, and approaching research from a phenomenological method to clarify single women's experiences (Lewis & Moon, 1997).

Although Lewis and Moon's (1997) study examined some components associated with being single, their study was conducted over 20 years ago, it used focus groups, and it compared single women who have remained single over the course of their life with women who became single after a divorce. The current study adds a contemporary update on the reasons and lived experiences of single women. The aim was to examine only the specific lived experiences of single women who desire to marry one day. It used a one-on-one interview approach to encourage original thinking and avoid groupthink.

Increasing the knowledge base in this area will aid mental health professionals in understanding and treating single female clients who desire to be married. Understanding the reasons why single women delay marriage can be helpful in understanding the identity, values, and worldview of female clients. The findings can help clinicians, especially marriage and family therapists, understand and respect the course of nontraditional relationships or singlehood. For instance, generational experiences or societal expectations can influence therapists to value and champion marriage as the ideal and pathologize singlehood. It could help add insight to any self-blame single women may be experiencing and help therapists to not participate in compounding potential guilt, or unnecessarily glamorizing the single life (Lewis & Moon, 1997). This research can help therapists promote the unique development of single women both as individuals and within the context of relationships. It is important that counselors who specialize in relationships be knowledgeable about the issues, ambivalences, and benefits and detriments of being single across the lifespan. Research findings can be helpful to pastoral counselors who are looking for a framework or understanding to draw from when counseling single, female clients who may be well past the average age of marriage in the context of their religious community. This research could broaden therapists' conceptualizations of relationships and singlehood, including desires and reasons to remain in both stages for a prolonged period of time prior to marriage. The outcome of the present study could help clinicians reconsider developmental milestones, such as marriage, as an appropriate marker for a client's age. This study might reveal ways in which single women are getting their intimacy needs met outside of marriage. The themes garnered from the interviews might be able to help therapists understand how

singleness impacts and interacts with relationship networks, such as friendships and family networks. The information generated from this study will allow mental health professionals to be privier to the concerns and lived experience of single women, illuminating the humanity and the relatable aspects of these clients.

The current research study also has the potential to help other women create more accurate depictions of the reasons why some women remain single for a prolonged period of time. For women who have married at or before the average age of 28 years of age, the information produced by this research could help them to be more willing to bring single women into the fold and not be considered "the Other" within their gender group. The results will help the general population not only understand how single women's lives are different, but it will also help them to understand how they are similar to married women's lives as well. This study also has the capability to evoke introspection and reflection in participants while examining their lived experience of being single women and their reasons for remaining single.

The present study can impact theory surrounding singleness, relationships, and decision making. For instance, this research could help substantiate or refute preexisting evidence suggesting that quality and timing of parents' marriage impacts a person's own marital timing or that premarital cohabitation delays marriage. Participant responses could improve the scientific communities' understanding of adult romantic relationship attachment. Additionally, participants' unique experiences and views could give insight into decision-making processes for single women as well as what characteristics are most relevant in prospective partners. Considering participants in this study wanted to be

married, the reasons they stated for remaining single could become target areas in future studies pertaining to women and marriage.

Research Question

The current study aimed to gain understanding and awareness surrounding single women who delay marriage. The objectives of this study were twofold. The first emphasis was on answering the question: What is the lived experience of single women? I was interested in knowing how single women function in all domains of their life. Additionally, the line of inquiry was directed at understanding how being single has impacted the participant's identity. The second emphasis was on answering the question: What are specific reasons why women are choosing to wait to get married? It is of interest to identify participants' psychological and extrinsic reasons for choosing to wait to get married. Distinguishing what factors are important in delaying marriage and remaining single are helpful in understanding the viewpoints of single women.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Philosophical Worldview

The research design of this study was qualitative in nature and consisted of interviews. Qualitative research is primarily concerned with meaning, including, how individuals derive sense of their world, how they experience events, and the meaning they attribute to the experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Instead of reducing a phenomenon into numerical values, such as the case in quantitative research, qualitative research intends to present descriptive accounts of the subject being studied (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

The current study used an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) that explored the experiences and considerations of women who have delayed marriage past the current U.S. average of 28 years old (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b). IPA was chosen as the methodology for this study because it employs an inductive, bottom-up, highly idiographic approach (Kime, 2018; Smith & Osborn, 2015). Inductive reasoning works in the opposite way of top-down or deductive reasoning, by using observation to generate a theory or hypothesis about why a phenomenon exists. This study examined the experiences of singleness within a sample of contemporary women in 2020, who have chosen to delay marriage, by gathering detailed examinations of their personal lived experiences. Examining each individual's detailed experience prior to moving toward generalities is precisely how the IPA approach works (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Furthermore, IPA has been known to be a useful methodology for examining topics that are particularly "complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41), like the current topic of this study.

The primary goal of IPA research is to bring to light how individuals make sense of their experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA draws from three theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Phenomenology aims to identify the fundamental components of a phenomenon that make them particular and unique from others by focusing on how people perceive and relay information about objects and events (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This is quite different than describing a phenomenon based on a predetermined categorical system of criteria, and therefore involves "bracketing" a researcher's own preconceptions, allowing the phenomena to speak for itself (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Hermeneutics reflects a genuine effort to understand the mindset and what it is like to be in the participant's shoes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Using the IPA approach is a dynamic process because the researcher not only plays an active role in influencing the degree to which they are granted access into participants' experiences, but also how they interpret the experiences conveyed to them influences how they make sense of the subject's personal world (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The richness comes from not only obtaining how the participant makes meaning of their world and experiences, but also the double interpretation provided by the researcher who is making meaning of the participant's meaning (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Lastly, idiography refers to an in-depth inquiry of lone cases and analyzing individual perspectives of participants and their unique situations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This concept is contrasted with the nomothetic approach wherein groups are studied to establish probabilities. An idiographic approach focuses on the details rather than on the universal (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). A researcher who wants to study a group of individuals using the IPA methodology

generates important themes in the analysis and illuminates them with individual narratives, comparing and contrasting their accounts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Interview Questions

The focus of this study was dedicated to understanding not only what the experience of singleness is like for women who delay marriage, but also to understanding the reasons women report for their ongoing singleness. Responses were prompted through open-ended questions and follow-up questions. Participants began by filling out a brief demographic and eligibility questionnaire that inquired about the participant's age, race and ethnicity, marital/relationship status, number of offspring, and relevant background information such as college attendance, employment, and religiosity (see Appendix A). These questions were helpful in evaluating participants' eligibility in participating in the study and allowed for further contrast and comparisons among participants' experiences. After completing the questionnaire, I transitioned to the interview questions. To open the interview, I asked participants a phenomenological question, such as, "Tell me what it's like to be single." After discussing their perception and unique experience of being single, I asked a series of questions aimed at eliciting information about their dating history, and their expectations and desires to one day be married. The following questions were designed by Jansen, who completed his dissertation on the experience of singleness for males who delay marriage in 2019. Questions were kept the same for comparison purposes. Asking female participants the same questions male participants answered in Jansen's study revealed gender differences in the experience of singleness and their reasons for remaining single.

1.   How long have been single? Could you briefly describe your dating history?

- Describe your goal(s) for dating.

- Has your approach to dating changed over the years?

2. Do you see yourself being married some day?

- How would you get there?

- Are you actively looking for a spouse?

Next, participants were asked about their perceived insight regarding being single:

3. Could you describe some of the reasons you are single?

Following that, the next two questions inquired about how being single relates to participants' sense of identities:

4. Has being single impacted how you see yourself?

- What does being single mean to you?

- How has being single affected how you live your life or other parts of your life?

  - Free time

  - Vacation

  - Social activities

5. How do you think other people see being single?

After inquiring about how singleness impacts their sense of identity, participants were asked to describe the ways they believe being single affects their day-to-day activities.

6. How is your life as a single person similar to or different from someone in a long-term relationship?

The final question inquired about the quality of the participants' parents' relationship.

7. Are your parents married? What is/was their relationship like?

The nature of this interview was semistructured. Asking follow-up questions to the primary questions to further clarify and understand participants' experiences of being single was within the parameters of this type of interview. Although the primary questions listed previously were directed toward every participant, the follow-up questions varied from each participant depending on the continuity of the conversation and how useful the prompts were in eliciting meaningful responses.

Population and Sample

The IPA methodology favors small, homogenous populations because this approach is focused on in-depth understanding of phenomena, as opposed to emphasizing generalizability (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The research sample consisted of six participants. This sample size was based upon the standard practice of using 1 to 10 participants for phenomenological research (Kime, 2018; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The sample was recruited from the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Due to the fact that dating is largely a Western phenomenon, study participants were required to have been born in the United States and actively dating. Further information on eligibility criteria can be found in the Results section.

Research Design and Methodology

Measures

Promptly following each interview, field notes were recorded detailing personal feelings, concerns, and impressions. Some reflections on personal reactions and impressions pertained to the tone of the participant and potential incongruity between the content of what was being said and the tone that was being used to say it. Behavioral observations were made regarding the participant's affect, effort and cooperation, rapport

with me, attention, and particularities in speech and language expression immediately following the interview conclusion.

Data Collection Process and Procedures

Participants were recruited using word-of-mouth and snowball recruitment methods. This allowed for simple identification of individuals who meet the inclusion criteria but who were far enough removed from me, as the researcher, to discuss potentially sensitive information pertaining to being single. After interviewing participants, I asked whether they knew of anyone else who met the inclusion criteria and might be willing and interested in participating in the study. The snowball recruitment method was helpful in this study design in particular, because people tend to be friends with people who are similar to them, which would therefore be advantageous in acquiring a homogenous sample. I circulated information about the study to friends and colleagues to identify possible participants willing to engage in the interview process. The friends and colleagues were given an invitation to extend to each potential participant (see Appendix B). The invitation contained the following:

- The researcher's contact information

- A description of the research study

- Eligibility requirements

- An explanation of what is required of participants

- The potential costs and benefits associated with participation

- A note pertaining to the incentive for participation (a $20 Amazon gift card)

Participants who were interested in the study scheduled a time to speak privately with me. In accordance with research recommendations due to COVID-19 restrictions,

participants were interviewed remotely using the HIPAA-compliant, videoconferencing platform, Doxy.me. I audio recorded interviews on the my laptop for purposes of transcription at a later time. After the interview ended, I transmitted the audio recording on to a password-protected USB flash drive. The USB flash drive was stored in a locked filing cabinet. Prior to starting the interview process, I asked all participants to sign a consent form, informing them of their rights, including their ability to stop participating at any time with no repercussions (see Appendix C). Within this form, the potential risks and benefits of participating were highlighted, and participants were given opportunities to ask questions about the study prior to beginning.

Data Analysis Process

IPA methodology requires independent coding for each participant (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). A code in the context of qualitative research is usually a salient word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative and essence-capturing quality to a lengthier statement (Saldaña, 2015). I attributed an interpreted meaning to passages of the text for the purpose of detecting patterns, categorization, and capturing the content's primary essence (Saldaña, 2015). Consistent with this approach, I summarized section by section the meaning of what participants were explaining and then proceeded to look for themes within those summarizations for each transcript. Patterns in the codes could have been categorized by (a) things happening in a similar way, (b) things happening in predictably different ways, (c) the frequency happening seldom or often, (d) the sequence of things happening in a certain order, and (e) one appears to cause another (Saldaña, 2015). After completing this process for each transcript, I examined themes between transcripts and compared them for similarities and differences. To transition from codes

to themes, or categories, a consolidated meaning must be formed (Saldaña, 2015). A category or theme encompassed a subcategory, which subsumed codes. Themes were explicitly stated and supported with participants' direct quotes. This study was designed to identify the concerns and unique experiences of women who have delayed marriage, as well as highlight how they view their persistent single status despite wanting to be married.

Validity and Reliability

Member Checking

After coding, I emailed a copy of their corresponding transcript to participants and asked them to confirm the transcription was accurate and that the meaning I interpreted was in line with what they intended to convey. Consulting with participants is a process known as "member checking," and is enacted as a way to validate findings up to that point (Saldaña, 2015). This can be especially beneficial if the researcher is working as a solo ethnographer on a research study (Saldaña, 2015). This process also allows for participants to engage with and add to the interview after it has concluded.

Inter-Rater Reliability and Peer Debriefer

To ensure accurate coding, a fellow researcher in the PsyD program with experience doing qualitative research was asked to recode approximately 10%–20% of the transcripts to establish inter-rater reliability. Additionally, a psychologist and qualitative researcher audited one transcript to confirm accuracy in coding and that the themes I generated were substantiated in the transcripts. Each theme that was uncovered was supported with direct quotes from participants.

Bracketing and Limitations

I am a single female under the average age women in the United States typically marry. I am privy to many factors individuals in the population sample may experience as contributing to the delay of marriage. My parents have remained married over the course of my lifetime and provided a stable upbringing for their children. Observing a fulfilling marriage instilled perspectives that marriage is meaningful and beneficial. However, I recognize experiences and worldviews on marriage may vary greatly among participants, and I carefully considered how my biases, viewpoint, and background might have shaped my interpretation of the transcripts.

IPA methodology emphasizes depth at the expense of breadth. A limitation of the current study is that because the sample size was small, findings were not generalizable beyond this specific portion of the population. However, the advantage of the expansive nature of the IPA approach is that nuances of a phenomenon can be explored at length.

An additional limitation of this study is that a researcher cannot assign causal links between factors. For instance, if several participants share similar demographic information and have being single in common, a causal relationship between the demographic information and being single cannot be made. The IPA approach is to explore a phenomenon wholly from a curious standpoint. Another limitation is only cisgender, heterosexual women are included as participants in this study. Also, all participants are from the same region in the United States. Both of these research criteria narrow the representative population in this study, and therefore the generalizability.

Protection of Human Subjects

To protect the confidentiality of participants, their real names were not listed in the research study. Instead, they were given pseudonyms, which was chosen as the protection method to ensure reliability for the coders and to make the subjects more relatable to the reader. Specific quotes that could identify participants, for example, pertaining to descriptions of their job or unique family experiences, were omitted from any direct quotes used to delineate themes.

All materials and methods for this research study were submitted to and approved by Northwest University's Institutional Review Board prior to recruiting participants or carrying out the study in any way. Participants were informed of their prerogative to withdraw from the study at any time with no negative consequences.

Chapter 3: Findings

This chapter explores in depth the lived experiences and considerations of women who have delayed marriage past the current U.S. average of 28 years old, by using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b). IPA has three underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In the current study, this approach is concerned with examining the detailed experience of each unique individual (idiography), establishing an account of the lived experience of single women (phenomenology), and delving into how participants attempt to make sense of their experiences (hermeneutics; Smith & Osborn, 2015).

The qualitative analyses of the six semistructured interviews investigated single women's thoughts and lived experiences related to singlehood. The analysis explored broad themes and smaller subthemes related to how participants were experiencing singlehood, rationale for singlehood, as well as family influence on relationship status and perspectives related to marriage and singlehood. The purpose of this inquiry was to understand the lived experience of single women and reasons why they are choosing to wait to get married. This qualitative analysis was guided by two essential research questions that were answered using an IPA methodological approach. The first emphasis was directed toward discovering what is the lived experience of single women? A significant portion of the interviews were spent deeply noticing, attending, and discerning how single women function in all aspects of their life, including how being single has impacted participants' identities. Another segment of the interview was dedicated toward identifying participants' internal and external reasons for choosing to wait to get married.

Determining which factors were important in delaying marriage and remaining single assisted in understanding the important viewpoints of single women.

Participant Demographics

Participants comprised of six single women who were 28 years of age or older, all of whom consented to participant in the research study. All participants identified as cisgender heterosexual women. Their ages ranged from 30–47 ($M = 36.3$). The racial groups to which participants ascribed were Asian, White, and Middle Eastern. The ethnicities participants reported were White, Korean, Chinese American, and Iranian American. At the time of this study, all participants had never been married, were not currently in a committed relationship, and did not have any children. However, all participants expressed desire to be married one day. All six participants were self-reported to be employed, financially independent, and had some postsecondary education at the time of this study. All participants were born in the United States and resided in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Five of the six participants identified as having a Christian religious affiliation. One participant did not identify with having any religious affiliation. No participants endorsed having a chemical dependency or addiction at the time of their interview. Half of participants' parents were divorced, and the other half remained married at the time of this study. Instead of using participants' real names, participants were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. As shown in Table 1, the demographic characteristics gathered included: age, race, number of children, religious affiliation, employment, education, financial autonomy, and parental marital status.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Variables	Participants					
	Ali	Jen	Haley	Shahrzad	Bethany	Connie
Age (years)	31	30	33	32	47	45
Race	Asian	Asian	White	Middle Eastern	White	White
Children	None	None	None	None	None	None
Religious Affiliation	Christian	Christian	Christian	None	Christian	Christian
Current Employment	Health Care	Health Care	Public Service	Education/ Nonprofit	Accountant	Logistics Specialist
Highest Level of Education	Master's	Master's	Bachelor's	Master's	Master's	Bachelor's
Financial Autonomy[a]	90-95%	100%	100%	75-80%	100%	100%
Parents' Marital Status	Divorced	Married	Divorced	Married	Married	Divorced

Note. This table demonstrates participant demographic information provided at the time of each interview. Common characteristics include gender, marital status, number of children, high level of financial independence, and age of participants 28 years or older.

[a] For the variable of Financial Autonomy, 0% represents full dependence on others (e.g., parents, government support) and 100% represents all expenses being covered independently. Participants were asked to assign a percentage to define how financially independent they were at the time of the interview.

Descriptions of Participants

Ali

Ali is a 31-year-old single woman. Ali was born in the United States and identifies as Asian. The highest level of education Ali has obtained is a master's degree. She works in the health care field in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Ali expressed that she covers 90%–95% of her financial expenses independently. Ali identifies as a Christian. At the time of this interview, Ali had never been married and did not have any biological children. During the interview, Ali declared she did not have any experience with dating or being in a romantic, committed relationship. Compared to other participants, Ali seemed to have a lesser amount of knowledge and understanding of dating, as evinced by the following quotations: "I've never learned about dating or what it means to have a boyfriend or what marriage is and all of this. I've never spent any energy on doing any of it," and, "I didn't have really good examples growing up of what dating is like, and every time I asked about it nobody could really give me a direct answer on what it was and what it meant and how to use dating and that kind of stuff." Ali conveyed that her parents are divorced and discussed in depth their relationship and her perceived influence their marriage had on her. During the interview, Ali also referenced receiving a significant amount of pressure from her family and religious community to date and find a husband.

Jen

Jen is a 30-year-old single woman. Jen was born in the United States and identifies as Asian. The highest level of education Jen has obtained is a master's degree. Similar to Ali, Jen also works in the health care field in the Pacific Northwest region of

the United States. Jen self-reported she covers 100% of her financial expenses independently. She identifies as Christian. At the time of this interview, Jen had never been married and did not have any biological children. Jen's parents had an arranged marriage and were still married at the time of the interview. Throughout the interview, Jen expressed that she considers herself to be family oriented and values that in a partner. She also suggested a theme related to self-esteem and experiencing a gradual process of becoming comfortable in her singlehood. Freedom while simultaneously experiencing loneliness was indicated more than once in Jen's description of her experience of singlehood. Additionally, she described experiencing some pressure from her religious community to find a partner or face the potential consequence of being left behind.

Haley

Haley is a 33-year-old single woman. Haley was born in the United States and identifies as White. The highest level of education Haley has obtained is a bachelor's degree in social welfare with a minor in criminal justice. Haley works within the public service sector in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Haley self-reported she covers 100% of her financial expenses independently. She identifies as "loosely Christian" and reportedly does not regularly attend church. At the time of this interview, she had never been married and did not have any biological children. Haley conveyed her biological parents are divorced and have remarried. She discussed in depth their relationship and her perceived influence their marriage had on her. Haley is the only participant who has served in the military. Throughout the interview, Haley discussed being career oriented, educationally driven, and having a desire to be independent and

support herself, irrespective of a partner. Her narrative recounted more negative past relationship experiences than other participants did.

Shahrzad

Shahrzad is a 32-year-old single woman. Shahrzad was born in the United States and identifies as Middle Eastern. The highest level of education Shahrzad has obtained is a master's degree. Sharhzad works for a nonprofit company in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Shahrzad self-reported she covers 75-80% of her financial expenses independently. She reportedly does not have any religious affiliation. At the time of this interview, Shahrzad had never been married and did not have any biological children. Her parents remained married at the time of the interview. Shahrzad presented as the most guarded participant interviewed in the current research study, as indicated by responding to interview questions with questions and providing fairly brief explanations that required some follow-up. A unique perspective Shahrzad offered involved describing societal expectations that exist for women to meet certain milestones that signify accomplishment.

Bethany

Bethany is a 47-year-old single woman and the oldest participant interviewed in the current study. She expressed little dating experience. Bethany was born in the United States and identifies as White. The highest level of education Bethany has obtained is a master's degree. Bethany works as an accountant in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Bethany self-reported she covers 100% of her financial expenses independently. She identifies as Christian and reported her faith is an important aspect of her identity. At the time of this interview, Bethany had never been married and did not

have any biological children. She expressed her biological parents remained married at the time of the interview. A unique perspective Bethany offered involved describing a hopeful and satisfied stance toward singlehood. She appeared to be the most comfortable with this aspect of her identity. Bethany maintained she encourages other single women to embrace their singlehood as well and live a life worthy of living, regardless of relationship status.

Connie

Connie is a 45-year-old single woman. She expressed very little dating history and experience. Connie was born in the United States and identifies as White. The highest level of education Connie has obtained is a Bachelor of Science degree. Connie works for a distributor in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Connie self-reported she covers 100% of her financial expenses independently. She identifies as Christian and reported her faith is an important aspect of her identity. At the time of this interview, Connie had never been married and did not have any biological children. Her biological parents were divorced at the time of the interview. Throughout the interview, spirituality, religion, Christian values, and being a devout Christian came up often and appeared to be integral to Connie's identity and what she was looking for in a partner.

Data Analysis Procedures

Coding Process

In maintaining fidelity with the IPA methodology, independent coding for each participant was completed (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Each interview was transcribed and read in its entirety. Member checking was employed, and participants were asked to read the transcription of their interview as a method to increase validity. Initial coding or

open coding was the first cycle coding method used in the current study. Initial coding is an elemental method of first cycle coding, meaning it has a simple but focused lens for examining the data (Saldaña, 2009). Initial coding is open-ended, encourages the researcher to remain open to any theoretical indications, and is a particularly useful method for beginner qualitative research coders (Saldaña, 2009). Initial coding enables the use of in vivo coding, process coding, or other first cycle methods (Saldaña, 2009). In vivo coding involves creating codes that use verbatim quotes and honor participants' voices (Saldaña, 2009). Process coding exclusively uses gerunds (i.e., words ending in "-ing") to denote action in the data (e.g., reflecting, learning, engaging, asking; Saldaña, 2009). Emotion coding captures emotions explicitly experienced by participants, or the researcher's interpretation of participants' emotional experiences (Saldaña, 2009). In vivo coding, process coding, and emotion coding were all used in the current study as methods of initial coding within the first cycle of coding.

Following initial coding, the second cycle coding method, focused coding was employed. Focused coding involves analyzing codes and determining those that frequently or significantly occur to establish the most integral and encompassing categories within the data (Saldaña, 2009). I engaged in recursive coding, first transcript by transcript, and then by developing, revising, and integrating codes and themes into the coding system across all of the transcripts. During this recursive coding process, some codes were divided into separate codes or collapsed into one code. There were 381 codes after the first cycle coding. The 381 codes were collapsed into 187 unique codes after second cycle coding, and the remaining codes were distilled into 31 broad codes that encapsulated the most frequent or significant categories of content provided by

participants (see Appendix D). Themes were garnered from within each transcript independently of each other and compared across transcripts for similarities and differences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). There were some idiosyncratic themes that emerged within individual transcripts that were not consistently found among the other transcripts. Themes that occurred the most frequently across transcripts were retained.

To increase intelligibility, stammering and the use of extra words (e.g., "like," "um," or "you know") that do not add to or change the meaning of the quote will be retracted from direct quotes. To preserve and favor participants' authentic voices, these were the only permissible omissions. Although using these kinds of filler words or phrases happens instinctively and effortlessly, it can interfere with the audience's comprehension of the research findings.

Validity and Reliability Measures

Member Checking

After the interviews transpired, audio recordings were transcribed into written transcripts. A copy of the individual participant's transcript was emailed to that particular participant to confirm the transcript was accurate and the content encapsulated what they intended to say. Additionally, the clinician wanted to give participants the opportunity to change any of the information provided in the transcript. Most participants reviewed the transcript and confirmed the content was accurate; however, one participant did not respond, despite three attempts to contact her. After reviewing the transcript, one participant requested I change a specific location of where her father was born and wanted that location to be referenced as a general geographic region instead.

Peer Debriefing

To increase the credibility of my interpretations as worthy, true, reasonable, and genuine, a peer debriefer was enlisted to help validate my interpretations of participants' comments. The peer debriefer can be helpful in identifying any important topics missed by the researcher, ideas that may have been overemphasized, or any redundant points (Janesick, 2015). It is recommended a peer debriefer be a trustworthy, impartial professional who can offer an outside perspective (Spall, 1998). As the name implies, the peer debriefer should be a peer or colleague. To foster an honest and open dialogue, there should not be a power differential between the researcher and the debriefer. Additionally, the peer debriefer should have a general knowledge and understanding of the specific area of research, as well as a background in qualitative methodology (Spall, 1998).

A colleague and graduate from Northwest University's PsyD program was selected as the peer debriefer for the current research study. After completing a parallel research study in 2019, *The Experience of Singleness for Males Who Delay Marriage,* this colleague demonstrated he was overtly familiar with the specific research topic and with qualitative research methodology in general. Although he already has his doctorate, and this could create a power differential between us, I perceived him to be a peer because he engaged in clinical training with me in the past and attended the same graduate school, constituting a collegial and professional relationship with me.

Two separate meetings occurred to engage in peer debriefing. During the first 90-minute meeting, the peer debriefer dedicated time to reviewing the IPA research methodology and the three main underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Using this methodology, he explained initially I

should only be concerned with each transcript on an idiographic level. He begged the question: What is the story of each individual transcript? The peer debriefer advised that preliminary codes should be developed for each transcript and then conceptually grouped into roughly seven broad categories or themes for each individual transcript. Once this process had been completed for each transcript individually, then themes could be compared across transcripts to look for overlap and disagreement. He explained there would be themes that developed in one transcript, for one individual, that are not present in other transcripts. The peer debriefer encouraged me to emphasize the themes common to most participants. Furthermore, he prompted me to devote more time to thinking about how participants were making sense of their experiences (i.e., hermeneutics).

In between meetings, the peer debriefer and I created codes for 1 of the 6 transcripts and then grouped the codes into roughly seven distinct categories or themes. During the second 60-minute meeting, the peer debriefer and I compared themes constructed from 1 of the 6 transcripts. Several of the peer debriefer's themes were social awareness/exclusion and not fitting in, values, singleness as it reflects on her, and the model/advice and expectations for marriage. Meanwhile several of my themes were comparing self to others, reasons for singlehood, influence of other's relationships, and desires.

The peer debriefer asked me questions to stimulate alternative perspectives to reduce bias and help me understand my own unique perspective. A discussion ensued regarding subjectivity in qualitative research and the fact that IPA assumes the researcher is bringing their own biases into the research, as they are considered a tool. For instance, when the researcher makes meaning of participants' meaning making, there is an inherent

interpretive bias present. He advised grouping codes into themes for each individual

transcript and then comparing themes across the transcripts. Although the researcher is

primarily concerned with reporting the main themes present in the majority of transcripts,

it was suggested to also report any significant individual themes or differences.

Researcher Spall (1998) explained emerging themes must pass the debriefer's

inspection. The peer debriefer expressed although he and I conceptually arrived at

slightly different labels for the categories, the ideas were completely consistent with one

another, with only slight differences on emphasis. Furthermore, he found my coding and

conceiving of the themes to be appropriate, fair, and with fidelity to the transcripts.

Inter-Coder Agreement

Inter-coder agreement is the degree to which two or more separate coders agree

when applying codes to the same content, using the same coding scheme (Friese, 2019a).

It should be noted that not all qualitative researchers welcome the use of ICA because

they feel it imposes them to adapt to standards considered to have originated in

quantitative research traditions (Friese, 2019b). Nevertheless, reliability helps determine

whether data were generated without bias, and, in regard to this study, that the codes

empirically mean the same thing to any researcher who uses them (Friese, 2019b).

The coefficient that is calculated infers reliability by measuring the extent of

agreement between different coders (Friese, 2019a). In essence, the coding scheme

should be as mutually exclusive as possible and mean the same thing to anyone who

reads and applies it. A fellow doctoral student who is familiar with qualitative research

and the ATLAS.ti data analytic software participated as the inter-coder. This colleague

met with me for an hour to discuss the clearly defined coding system I was given. The

codebook provided the inter-coder with the name of the subtheme, the code, the code definition, and an example of the code being used in a separate transcript. I was asked to code 1 of the 6 interview transcripts. Rather than asking the inter-coder to determine which pieces of the transcript should be coded, I instead indicated which relevant quotations of the transcript needed to be assigned a code.

Of the five different inter-coder statistics options offered by ATLAS.ti, Krippendorfff's Cuα was selected because it computes reliability for all of the selected semantic domains considered together and accounts for chance agreement between ratings (Friese, 2019a). Mutual exclusivity was necessary for Krippendorfff's Cuα to be calculated, meaning only one code within any specific semantic domain (i.e., subtheme) could be applied to any one quotation (Friese, 2019a). When $\alpha = 1.000$, there is 100% agreement between raters (Friese, 2019a). A semantic domain is considered to be reliable if $\alpha \geq 0.800$ (Friese, 2019a). Krippendorfff's Cuα for the current study yielded a high level of reliability, $\alpha = 0.845$. Table 2 shows the recursive data analysis process that took place to establish valid, reliable, and mutually exclusive themes.

Table 2

Stages of Data Analysis

Coding Process
1. Transcribe participant interviews
2. Member checking
3. First cycle – initial/open coding (in vivo, process, and emotion coding)
4. Revision of initial codes
5. Second cycle- Focused coding
6. Revision of focused codes
7. Grouping of initial codes into thematic categories
8. Peer debriefing
9. Revision of thematic categories
10. Inter-coder agreement

Note. Coding process was informed by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) and Saldaña (2009).

Findings and Emergence of Thematic Categories

There were some idiosyncratic themes that emerged within individual transcripts that were not consistently found among the other transcripts. Although the unique themes have striking stories to be told, this section prioritized the themes that were more prevalent between participants, placing less of an emphasis on themes solely found within individual transcripts. Three main ideas emerged as having enough evidence in the data to be considered significant themes: the lived experience of singlehood, rationale for singlehood, and the conceptualization of self and singlehood. The following sections go into detail explaining these themes through an IPA lens.

Theme 1: Lived Experience of Singlehood

The account of the lived experience of singlehood is a major component of phenomenology within this study. The single women in this study were eager to discuss their experiences of singlehood. Participants expressed many of the same positive aspects related to being single. They exhibited a range of different emotional experiences from feeling hopeful to fearful related to their singlehood. Participants employed many different approaches to dating and noted changes to their dating approach over time. Most participants asserted they were dating for a purpose, had some but varying amounts of exposure to online dating, and implied a speed at which they were searching for a partner. Participants detailed their social experiences as single women, describing friendships they had developed and maintained, social activities in which they had partaken, and neutral dating experiences they had had. Almost all participants suggested a sense of loneliness, feeling left behind by married peers, and questioning where they belonged within their friend groups as a single woman. Participants revealed some qualities they

were looking for in a partner and future-oriented plans. A link between a desire for

marriage and children was identified. Many participants referenced being subjected to

outside expectations, pressure, and perspectives from other people about their

relationship status. Lastly, cultural factors related to race, ethnicity, and religious

affiliation and the lived experiences of being a single woman were noted. Participants'

unique, individual experiences, the intersections of their identities, and the different ways

they made sense of their experiences are reflected in the following sections.

Perceived Advantages of Singlehood

Participants referenced a myriad of benefits or positive aspects related to their

experience of singlehood. The most commonly incited benefit was the freedom,

independence, and autonomous nature associated with singlehood. When asked what

does being single mean to you, Jen said, "I think independence and freedom are the first

words that come to mind, and those are really positive traits." The real world implications

of having freedom and independence ranged from having more free time, managing

resources/money alone, not focusing on a partner or coordinating schedule's with another

person, and the ability to travel and act autonomously. Shahrzad described freedom as

acting autonomously and not focusing on a partner:

> I value it a lot in terms of just being able to make decisions without having to take
>
> other people's wants and needs or desires into consideration. So, if I want to go
>
> on vacation somewhere, I get to choose where I want to go and do what I want to
>
> do or what I want to eat or what I want to cook.

Ali characterized independence as having maximum control over her free time and

schedule: "Free time. I get to do what I want to do. I don't have to consult with anyone or

coordinate schedules with anyone else, which is nice." One of the ways Haley expressed

freedom associated with singlehood was related to mobility:

> It's given me the mobility to travel to places that I may or may not have traveled
>
> with other people. I've been down to Key West and I've been up to Kodiak,
>
> Alaska. I've driven cross country and back. I've been able to go to a number of
>
> concerts by choice and do things like that.

Bethany had one of the more positive perspectives related to singlehood of the

interviewees. She said, "I kind of feel like I'm almost a rare one who appreciates the

singleness right now." Bethany stated she refuses to put her life "on hold" because of her

relationship status:

> I would say 90% of the time I am fine doing things by myself. I've traveled to
>
> Europe by myself. I bought a house by myself. I'm not. . . . I've refused to put my
>
> life on hold because of that.

Bethany said she encourages women to embrace doing activities by themselves, "and I

wish there was more said about just really appreciating who you are without having a

romantic partner in your life."

Emotional Experiences

All six participants explicitly labeled emotions related to their experience of

singlehood. I also made several inferences about how participants may have felt based on

the context and what they were expressing. Several emotions referenced by participants

were hope, content, irritation, fear, embarrassment, loneliness, frustration, suspiciousness,

and uncertainty. Although all participants indicated they enjoyed positive aspects related

with singlehood, such as freedom and independence, most participants also expressed

simultaneously experiencing loneliness as well. Haley communicated that dialectic with the following comment:

> It's nice in the aspect that there's freedom to do what I want, when I want. I have choices of how I manage my time and my money and my resources. . . . But, I mean, it can be lonely. There's an aspect of me that definitely wants companionship.

Jen also shared a similar sentiment, saying, "I think independence and freedom are the first words that come to mind, and those are really positive traits. But, I think on the flip side, loneliness also comes to mind." Connie said, "For me, I have the independence and freedom to do as I want. But, it also means I don't have companionship." Conversely, a single participant, Ali, said, "I feel like, in my opinion, being single doesn't mean that you're lonely. It just means that you're not in a committed relationship to get married." However, this was a more unique perspective, and individual difference in opinion from the majority of participants. Shahrzad disclosed it is not uncommon for other people to inquire as to why she is still single. She said being asked why she is single "does kind of just 'irk' me in the moment," and it is "more of an irritation." Shahrzad also indicated online dating provides what seems like an endless pool of potential partners, which can be frustrating, stating, "It does feel like the opportunity of choice makes it a bit more frustrating I'd say." Ali suggested she was hopeful and fearful about dating in the future, "I'm hoping to start dating at some point in the near future. . . . If I can find the courage to do so."

Approaches to Dating

Participants referenced a variety of different approaches to dating. These approaches were categorized as changes to their dating approach over time, dating for a purpose, methods of dating, and the speed at which they reported looking for a partner.

Changes Over Time. Participants indicated their approaches to dating have not remained stagnant but have instead changed over the years as they have learned and grown. Specific changes to their dating approach over time included increasing expectations of potential partners, maintaining better boundaries, trusting their intuition rather than a predetermined checklist, and the use of online dating. Connie reported her experience with religion has impacted her approach to dating by increasing her expectations of partners:

> It has changed what I would accept basically. If I felt a guy was the wrong path I'd be like nope, I can't go there. It's not good for me. So, I would say it has affected it at least in the fact that I will look at them and go yeah, no. They don't have their priorities straight.

Also noting a similar change in raising expectations of partners, Shahrzad said, "The way I interact and choose not to interact with people has changed." When asked if she was thinking of anything in particular, Shahrzad bluntly said, "Yeah, just not settling for shitty behavior." Haley suggested she had been tempted to romantically engage with a coworker in the past but decided to change her dating approach by implementing boundaries between her professional and romantic life. Relating to that change, she said:

Maybe this is a bad idea because we had clients in common and stuff. Just like

those boundaries that you have to have or should have. I try really hard to have

those concrete boundaries like, this is right, or this is wrong.

Jen previously employed an analytical strategy and approached dating with a checklist of

necessary characteristics in mind she felt compelled to find in a partner. In referencing a

blind date, Jen said:

This guy was the worst date I've ever gone on. But, in regard to my list, he

checked off every single one of them. And I think that helped me realize that

more than a list it is almost more of a feeling or intuition that I get when I'm with

the person. I think I've tried to make love logical in the past and that just hasn't

worked out for me.

Later Jen said, "Now I don't have so much of a checklist, and I just want to find someone

that I can see myself spending the rest of my life with."

Some participants suggested online dating was a promising way to find a partner,

and that this was also a change in their dating approach from when dating websites were

less popular and people were more ostracized for utilizing them. In regard to online

dating, Shahrzad said, "It's the new norm now, I think. For my generation anyway."

Shahrzad identified an important generational difference that researcher also found

evidence for between participants in the current research study. Participants who were in

their 30's tended to view online dating favorably, and as a very plausible way of meeting

their future partner, whereas participants who were in their 40s viewed online dating as

an unlikely, potentially dangerous way of finding a partner. More information related to

this difference can be found later in the section dedicated exclusively to online dating

usage.

Dating for a Purpose. All participants alluded to the fact they are intentional

with their approach to dating, and they are dating for the purpose of ultimately finding a

husband. This included when participants mentioned desires for a long-term commitment

or relationship. It appeared at this stage in participants' lives they are looking to invest in

an enduring, long-term relationship, as opposed to a short-term, temporary relationship.

Jen implied a short-term relationship was not worth the effort saying, "It's not to say that

the person I'm going to be in a relationship with next is going to be my future husband,

but if I don't even see that happening, I wouldn't even bother." Ali and Haley also stated

they were interested in lasting relationships. Ali said, "I like long-term commitments and

long-term relationships." Meanwhile, Haley suggested:

> Kids, they grow and go . . . they find a partner, find their career, and they do that.
>
> Kids will grow and go and then you're left with your partner, and I want to know
>
> that my partner and I will still want to be together, heading towards the long run.

When I asked Shahrzad if she was actively looking for a spouse she said, "I mean yeah,

to me that's what dating is."

Methods of Dating. Two methods emerged that participants primarily use for

finding potential partners. In the early 20th century, technology has become remarkably

intertwined with U.S. culture, and unsurprisingly has also been a mechanism of bringing

single people who are looking for a partner together. All participants recognized online

dating in some capacity during the interviews. A split was observed in participants by age

in preference and usage regarding online dating. Participants ages 30-39 years reported

regularly using online dating as a way of meeting single men. For instance, Haley said, "Online is more convenient or more likely to encounter somebody that way." While online dating platforms may be convenient and increase opportunities of meeting somebody, Haley went on to say, "I just don't find them to be very successful." Despite a perceived low online dating success rate, Haley said, "Online has kind of been the resource that I've used most." Jen echoed a similar experience. Although she has been on roughly 50 different dates through various online platforms over the years, "No one has really stuck." Shahrzad recognized a shift "Over the last 15 years or so from in person to online or using apps to meet people." Shahrzad expressed frustrations with online dating related to messaging back and forth without any-follow through or making plans to meet in person. She said, "I usually try to preface that I'm not really looking for a pen pal." Shahrzad also projected an opinion that online dating is "the new norm I think, for my generation anyway."

Participants ages 40–49 suggested they had negative experiences and impressions of online dating. Bethany described a date that left her wanting to give up on online dating altogether:

> I tried online dating for a brief period of time. Probably it was a full 3 months type situation. And there was one guy who we seemed to have a good connection over email, and we finally decided to meet in person. And honestly, I felt like that date went so bad that I just went home and deleted my online profiles and was just like nope, not worth it.

Connie projected a sense of fear related to online dating stating, "I have attempted a few sites and then very quickly ran away." She indicated suspicions surrounding how people portray themselves on online dating platforms:

> You're getting their stories. So, what, or how did they create this? What information, how truthful is it? You don't really have a way to know, whereas, at least in person you can, a lot of times kind of look at them and . . . you can watch what they're doing. And online it's all up to what they put on there. What picture did they use? Is it from 20 years ago? Or is it current?

Perhaps dating later in life may evoke a reaction to look for clues of deception in potential partners. There may be more of a risk of encountering an individual who is not who they portray themselves to be. There may also be a generational mindset related to the Internet not being identified as a valid, or safe venue for meeting genuine people. Additionally, generational differences may impact how participants view their level of susceptibility of encountering an imposter by gender. For instance, age may be a moderating factor for whether a single woman is weary of encountering a fraudulent or deceptive single man on the Internet.

In addition to online dating, four of the six participants also referenced using human aides to help them find a partner. This could entail enlisting friends or family to play as a matchmaker, or that friends or family may offer to play that role for them. Haley asked someone in her life if he knew anyone that would be a good match for her saying, "I've asked him to play matchmaker because he's got friends over here or family over here." Meanwhile, other people in Ali's life have offered to play that role for her saying, "There has been suggestions of, 'Oh do you want me to find you a guy?'"

However, willing and well-intentioned others have been in helping participants meet a potential partner, they are not always astute in their pairings. Jen remarked on this idea by stating her friends

> haven't been the best at setting me up with people. I'm not sure if I really trust them to set me up with people. It seems like, "Hey you're single, I know this single guy from work, so you guys should go on a date."

Overall, participants seemed interested in meeting new people through mutual acquaintances, although their idea of a good candidate may not always be the same as what participants have in mind for themselves.

Speed of Looking for a Partner. Participants gave some insight into how quickly or slowing they are looking for a partner. Some participants discussed wanting to be pursued, waiting for divine intervention, having a "hands off" stance, and some expressed how long they would want the courting period to be prior to marriage. Ali indicated one of the hurdles she has faced is finding partners willing to initiate and pursue her:

> If somebody wants to pursue me or is interested in dating, I'll consider it then, but no one ever dated or asked me out. And so, I just kind of put it on the back burner because nobody brought it up. Not to say that there aren't guys that have liked me and have wanted to date me. They just never asked me out.

Bethany shared this position stating, "I tend to be more of a person who wants the guy to ask me out. So, I've never asked a guy out." She went on to say she feels "like I'm fairly hands off" in regard to her dating approach. This slower speed approach to dating involves being at the mercy of a prospective partner's interest and romantic timeline.

Bethany and Connie made references to their religious beliefs as impacting their speed of looking for a partner. A desire for divine intervention was cited by Bethany when she said, "I feel like I talked to God once . . . God, you know my heart's desire, but you're almost going to have to present him to me on a silver platter or something. So, I've been fairly hands off in that regard." Connie leaned into her faith as well, mentioning, "I believe that God has shown me that he does have someone for me, it's just a matter of his timing versus my timing."

Haley and Jen were aligned in not wanting to rush marriage. Haley said, "I don't want to meet somebody and get hitched either. I want there to be a courting period." Jen expressed this sentiment by stating she would want to be "in a relationship with them [a partner] for a while to get to know them. I know things happen fast sometimes, but I think I would like to date them for more than a year." Furthermore, Jen said, "I don't want to marry someone when the chemicals (e.g., oxytocin, dopamine, norepinephrine) are still in my brain like that. I feel like it wouldn't be an informed decision." Overall, most participants suggested they proceed slowly and passively in their approach to dating.

Social Life

I was interested in understanding socially the lived experience of single women who delay marriage. Social experiences emerged and were categorized into the following domains: developing/maintaining friendships, engaging in social activities, neutral dating experiences, and feeling left behind and not belonging.

Developing and Maintaining Friendships

Participants placed an importance on developing and maintaining friendships with single and married friends. This domain refers to when participants mentioned friendship as an abstract concept, rather than discussing engaging in concrete activities related to friendship. Ali and Bethany projected the idea that dating opportunities do not always need to lead into a romantic relationship, but they could result in becoming friends with men and they offer the opportunity to teach them about relationships more generally. For instance, Ali reported, in learning about dating, "the experience will become invaluable in how I deal with the future relationships or how I grow as a person relationally." Bethany indicated, "I've learned how to be just friends with guys without thinking of them like, oh, is this a potential boyfriend or anything like that." Her main goal has been "seeking to be friends first," and to:

> Hit the point where you can go to a social event, be with mixed company and not automatically be looking at every guy as, you know, trying to size them up for dating potential, where you can just go and enjoy something.

Jen and Bethany voiced camaraderie and connection with other single women specifically. Jen said, "I almost feel like it's this instinct kind of bond when I meet other women that are single later in life, because right off the bat we have something in common." She went on to say, "Maybe we bond more over hobbies and things like that. Rather than family people probably bond a lot over kids and family matters more so than single people might." It appears Jen may have been speaking to the comfort, ease of connecting, and long-term sustainability typically inherent in relationships that consist of

more similarities than differences (e.g., birds of a feather stay together). Bethany also

indicated friendships with other single women as a source of joy and understanding:

> I get together with some women and we're all single and we all agree that we
>
> want to be married someday, but neither are we all just sitting around and
>
> bemoaning the fact that we're single and we're still enjoying each other's
>
> company. So, we still have that circle of a friendship to do things with.

Bethany also expressed empathy for other single women who may have a glum

perspective related to their relationship status:

> The way I try and cultivate my relationship with other single women is . . .
>
> especially ones that might feel discouraged about the fact that they are single, is to
>
> really try and encourage them to learn to love themselves for who they are,
>
> regardless of whether or not they are in a relationship. And just really becoming
>
> comfortable with that and learning to love themselves.

Throughout Bethany's interview, she wanted to encourage other single women to

embrace their relationship status and live a life worth living. As a single woman in her

40s, Bethany has achieved a level of acceptance within herself and acts as a beacon of

hope for single women.

Engaging in Social Activities

This domain refers to when participants mentioned participating in the concrete

act of socializing and engaging in activities with others. The single women in the current

research study reported both positive and negative aspects of engaging in social activities.

Jen stated her married friends include her on group trips, and she also travels across the

country on her own to visit friends. Haley and Connie indicated a service-oriented nature

in social activities they enjoy. Connie suggested she enjoys intertwining her religious

lifestyle with social activities:

> I try to make sure to give time to whether it's helping out at church, or through a
>
> church activity or something like that. I also devote time to growth groups to
>
> connect more with others in the community.

Connie specifically reported that, because she is single, she believes she has more time

and resources to devote toward mission trips and her community at large. Haley also

endorsed connecting her devotion to civic interests and causes with social engagement:

> I am affiliated with a number of veteran service organizations. And most recently,
>
> I am fond of those that are engaged with or partner with parks. So, getting to go
>
> out to the state and national parks and do service work is refreshing.

While volunteerism appears to be of interest to Haley, it also is an affordable way to

socialize. Haley viewed financial obligations as a hindrance to engaging in social

activities, stating, "Because I depend on me financially and I'm not independently

wealthy that it also has me at home quite a bit too, just because I don't want to incur costs

too much."

Shahrzad and Jen expressed some social scenarios can become awkward or less

fun as a single person. Jen reported, "I guess weddings can get awkward too when

everyone has a plus one and I don't bring one. But I haven't had a plus one in years and

I've been to a lot of weddings." Similarly, Shahrzad stated, "In terms of social functions

or community kinds of events it is a little different in terms of going to those with a

significant other." She went on to say it would be more fun to share large social events

with another person. Although it can be more uncomfortable attending large social

gatherings alone, it does not appear to keep participants from continuing to partake in social events.

Neutral Dating Experiences

Many participants referred to their neutral, nonnegative dating history and experiences. Ali reported she has never dated anyone, and Bethany and Connie have had brief dating encounters. Bethany described her longest dating relationship as having taken place 15 or more years ago, saying, "There was a guy who I think there was some mutual interest and we went out over a period of maybe 6 months, but it was really only a handful of times over that time." Connie depicted her brief dating history as follows:

> I mean, recently there's been nothing. In college, I did date some guys . . . even I guess when I was back living in a different area, I did date for a while, but it was never anything serious, just short-term relationships that at some point I realized, oh yeah, that's not going anywhere . . . or shouldn't go anywhere.

Connie explained the length of these short-term relationships was "on average 3 to 6 months." Shahrzad characterized her dating history as atypical and lacking relationship titles:

> I didn't have a stereotypical dating experience from high school through college. I didn't really like the difference between what's depicted on TV versus like reality. Yeah, it's mostly just been nebulous kind of friends, but more than friends kind of relationships with people over the past 10 years or so.

Shahrzad drew attention to differences between real life and media depictions, which other participants also relate to and make note of in other domains. An unwillingness to make a relationship exclusive by labeling the members could be related to a fear of

commitment or rejection. Although Jen ascribed a label to her relationships, she indicated she has mostly engaged in casual dating experiences thus far, saying, "Despite casually dating guys throughout high school and college, my only serious relationship was when I was 22–23, and since then it's been casual dating also." Jen and Haley shared the commonality of having a serious dating relationship in their dating history; however, Haley was the only participant who mentioned considering marriage with a previous partner:

> My senior year I thought I was going to marry my high-school sweetheart, and I wore a promise ring with that particular individual for another year. He joined the service, I joined the service. We spent a lot of time apart and I really enjoyed not having somebody around all of the time. When he came home, he was around all of the time, and it was too much. So, we broke up—I broke up with him.

Left Behind and Not Belonging

All participants expressed to varying degrees a sentiment of feeling left behind or not belonging with their peers as they couple off and get married. Some participants discussed distancing from friends as they get married, feeling like the 3rd/5th/10th wheel in social scenarios, feeling isolated, comparing themselves to their peers who are married, and experiencing mental barriers that prevent them from engaging in activities. Several participants noted an increase in these feelings toward the end of their 20s, when most women in the United States tend to get married on average. Bethany's testament echoes that observation:

> When I was in my late 20s and early 30s, a lot of my closest friends were getting married and starting to have families. The more I saw the relationships with those

friends diminish just because they're now in their new life, and I'm not there. . . .

You start to lose a connection with them. You start seeing the people who were

your best friends developing new friendships with other married couples or

families.

Jen and Haley described experiences of being an odd or extra person within a group of

couples. For instance, Haley said, "I don't want to be the third wheel or fifth wheel

sometimes, and sometimes I'm okay with it." Jen reported avoiding social situations if

she perceives they are family oriented:

I avoid going to social activities if I feel like it's a family affair. For example, my

work has this gala, and they're always like, "Oh yeah your partners and family are

invited." Things like that that aren't "family events," but I know socially that's

kind of what ends up happening, I just avoid going to.

Jen later described these as mental barriers that might inhibit her from engaging socially

with others. During Jen's interview she touched on feeling left behind by saying, "I feel

like almost behind in a sense," and feeling as if she does not belong with her married

peers by saying, "my friends that are married, they talk about furniture and kids and that

kind of stuff that I'm not really into yet. So, it can be a barrier." Based on participant

quotations, it appeared there was a disconnect between them and their married

counterparts, leaving them feeling a sense of loneliness and isolation.

Their Vision

All participants indicated future oriented plans and desires in regard to their

dating experiences and marital aspirations. Most participants stated they knew what they

did or did not want in their futures, as well as specific partner qualifications that were appealing to them.

Forward Thinking

Many participants referenced the future with a sense of curiosity and uncertainty. There was excitement about what a future relationship could look like, how it would change their lives, and what a romantic relationship would add to their lives. Bethany explained the value of friendship with her partner: "If I get married, I have the hope that he would be my best friend as well." Shahrzad shared this desire, explaining, "Ultimately, the goal would be to find companionship." In addition to friendship, Bethany went on to add, "I would want the relationship to be something where we can encourage each other in our lives and walk side by side through things." A couple of participants incited the idea that a partnership would require compromise. Bethany relayed a willingness to compromise:

> There are some aspects where I'd be willing to give up. I don't even know right now exactly what, but there might be something that I enjoy doing that maybe he really doesn't enjoy it. I'd be like, okay, that's not that big of a deal. And if we can find something else to enjoy together type situation.

Ali grappled more with the idea of compromising, asking, "What am I willing to compromise and not compromise? Anything like that, I'm going to have to figure all of that out." These participants had awareness that once in a relationship, an element of compromise would be necessary to sustain a healthy relationship. Part of compromising may entail making sacrifices for a partner. Although most participants suggested they would give up some freedom and independence, it was viewed as a sacrifice, however,

one they would be willing to make for the right person. When Connie was asked whether giving up some of her independence would be considered a sacrifice, she said the following:

> It would be a sacrifice, but to have companionship, I think it's a worthy sacrifice. And it's not like, I'm not saying they're going to be the ones deciding, "Oh, are you going out? Oh, nope, not tonight." 'Cause it would be a mutual respect. But I mean, it would be a fair bit of sacrifice from where I'm at now that I don't even have to worry about it.

When asked the same question, Ali said, "I think it would be a sacrifice, yes. That's why I'd have to be willing to do it." In response to this question, Jen said giving up her freedom would be a big sacrifice to make to marry someone:

> Because since I was only in a relationship for a year, I've really been single for 29 years. On top of that, I'm an only child, so I'm very much used to having freedom and independence. That's something I would be willing to give up for the right person, but it's definitely a sacrifice for me.

Bethany indicated a fear related to relinquishing some of her independence for a partner. She said, "That's what I would fear losing with my independence is now, suddenly people think that oh my role is now to make his life easy or something along those lines." This fear correlates with Bethany's reverence for freedom, independence, and her personal perspective of enjoying life regardless of one's relationship status. In line with the same emotional expression, Haley recognized a fear of getting into an unsuccessful relationship in the future stating, "I think there's also a fear of getting into something that isn't what I want. I've dated guys with kids and watched how they parent or whatever,

and I'm like, 'Oh, I don't like that.'" Both of the fears responses expressed by Bethany and Haley parallel relationships they have witnessed during childhood.

Reflecting on Partner Qualifications

All participants indicated ideal attributes they expressed wanting in a future partner. Some of the qualifications were binary, for instance, being educated, having financial independence, being a person of color, being service oriented, or having certain physical attributes. Other qualifications would rely more on the participant's own intuition and subjectivity to determine whether they met that characteristic. For instance, whether the prospective partner challenged and encouraged them, or wholly accepted them, if there was an attraction, if they were an open minded individual, if they are family oriented, or if they had good communication skills. Some participants also indicated qualities they would not want in a partner. For instance, Ali stated, "I don't want anybody who's abusive or unhealthy in terms of relationships, who would hurt me over and over again." Bethany suggested she wanted to find a partner who shared similar interests:

> I would definitely want to find someone who enjoys many of the similar things I do. I enjoy traveling, so I'd want to date someone who also enjoys to travel, who has the same religious convictions that I do, and who challenges me to either think about things differently than what I do or encourages me to try and be a better person.

Several participants referenced religion during their interviews; however, Connie appeared to be the most devout Christian in the sample within this study and expressed wanting a religious devotion in her partner as well, saying, "First off, he needs to believe

in God and he needs to believe that God is a priority in his life, and that's my number one

goal. And basically, that we would keep each other centered on that principle."

Conversely, Shahrzad had a very different perspective on the presence of religious

convictions:

> Full transparency, if I see on a dating profile like a White man who puts on his
>
> profile that he's Christian. . . . It makes me nervous for some reason, because in
>
> my mind the association between a White male and Christian is typically a
>
> conservative person, in terms of how they view society and civil rights and things
>
> like that.

Jen and Shahrzad mentioned they are interested in dating a person of color. Shahrzad

said, "I typically date people of color. I think it lends itself to a different perspective of

the world." Although the partner qualifications outlined above are varied, having

similarities was commonly cited, whether that was done implicitly or explicitly.

Participants in this study also tended to convey and focus on more psychological or

emotional attributes, rather than physical attributes.

Marriage and Family as Primary Goal

Discussions surrounding dating typically could be linked to a deeper desire for

marriage and starting a family of their own. All participants showed a genuine interest

and hoped to become married at some point in the future. Dating is the instrument single

women in the United States use to find a spouse. Some participants displayed an

inclination to have children and start a family, despite having different timelines for when

they would like to do so.

Marriage and Children

Participants indicated a desire to be married one day. Ali stated, "It would be nice to be married and have somebody to share your life with, or at least whatever rest of life we have together." Bethany said, "I do still have that desire to be married one day." Haley reported her desire to be married has manifested in her sometimes wearing a silicone ring on her left ring finger:

Even though I'm not married, I've recently taken to wanting to wear a ring. Actually, not recently, I've taken to it probably the last couple of years. It's something that I've wanted very strongly to wear a ring and to have a partner.

She admitted talking about wearing the wedding ring was not something she did often, and suggested a fear of being scrutinized by others for doing so, saying I don't "know if that's weird, or . . ." This outward statement of wearing a ring on her left ring finger likely represents a deep desire to be partnered and could be an indication of wanting to fit in with peers who are married, or it may be viewed as a status symbol in U.S. society.

Jen talked about both a desire for marriage and children, stating, "I think at the end of the day, I do want to get married, and I do want to have kids." She created an arbitrary timeline of when she should attain these milestones:

I just always hear those rumors, that are like if you don't have kids by age 35 then the chances of your kid have this and this and this are higher. But then that's scary too because that's only 5 years away. But yeah, maybe by 35, I would love to get married by then, at least.

Ali suggested she is unsure of whether she would like to have children at this time, but she is aware of modern reproductive options such as oocyte cryopreservation, fertility

medications, and in vitro fertilization. She learned more about these options after a medically necessary surgery to remove one of her ovaries. Ali is also open to the idea of adoption, stating, "If I want to have kids, I probably need to get married earlier rather than later, but I'm also okay with not having my own children . . . the doctors have already talked to me about possibilities of freezing eggs." Bethany explicitly pointed out a connection some women, like Ali and Jen expressed, have between marriage and children when she said, "It seems like definitely for more of the women who are . . . have this deep desire to be a mother that they're often more aware of it, and have a much stronger desire I think to be in a relationship."

Conversely, Haley indicated she has "no worries or hurries to have my own children." She suggested an underlying fear of abandonment related to children:

> I don't want them right now, and I probably don't want them in the next 5 years. I don't want to get into a relationship with someone who wants kids, because I don't want to get knocked up and then have my career stuff get up on the back burner, because maybe it's a fear of abandonment and things could go wrong and then I have to take care of myself and this child, and I want to be able to do that. I want to be able to provide a better life than I had.

At this time, Haley appears to prioritize family planning in her relationship decisions. Haley also demonstrates the connection between obtaining a partner and having children, indicating she would not choose a partner who wants to have children in the immediate future.

Perspectives and Expectations From Others

It was very common for participants to mention they were aware of external perspectives and expectations related to their relationship status. Some participants expressed direct comments others have said to them, and other participants speculated how others may feel about their singlehood. These ideas could also be conveyed through messages participants receive from the media or society at large.

Expectations and Pressure From Others

Within this domain, participants referred to their parents telling them a socially created "order" to complete significant milestones in their lives (e.g., go to school, get a job, then date). Participants also reference others questioning why the participant was not dating anyone, feeling pressure from family members or professors to find a partner, and feeling an expectation to find a partner and please their families' vision of marriage.

Ali and Jen showed similarities in several ways within this domain. Both of their parents expressed an order in which significant milestones should take place. Ali reported, "Growing up, my mom was always telling me to graduate, get a good job, get a good house, become financially stable and *then* start dating." Similarly, Jen said, "I really want to get a dog and my dad always says a dog is something you get after you get married."

Both of these participants come from family oriented, Asian families. Within these collectivistic cultures, the opinions of family members, specifically elders typically are very important. This is highlighted in a quote from Jen, "I'm really close with my family, and I think that growing up Korean, we're very family oriented and what my parents think really mattered to me a lot of my life." Ali and Jen also reported receiving

pressure from family members about being single. Jen said, "When I go to weddings and family gatherings, one of the first things my relatives will say to me is, 'When are you going to get married?'" Ali stated, "I had just graduated undergrad, and my mom was really pressuring me to find somebody. The church was also. So, it was coming from both ends." Both women experienced a lack of acceptance regarding their singlehood in varying degrees.

Receiving Perspectives From Others

Participants speculated outside perspectives others may have related to singlehood and their relationship status. Some participants mentioned their friends indicated they were envious of their singlehood. Other perspectives did not offer an overt or explicit expectation to marry or pressure to do so in the near future. The commentary may have been subtler, but the subtext suggested being single past a certain age was not desirable. These messages were conveyed through the media and from interactions with people in their everyday life. Participants suggested they might receive messages from others indicating something is wrong with them for being single or that being single is off putting after a certain age. For instance, Bethany internalized societal ideals:

> There were definitely societal standards that affected me. I was always aware of a man in his 30s or 40s and he's single. . . . I'm very much aware that people are looking at him and saying, well, what's wrong with them? There's something wrong with him. And just kind of writing a man off pretty quick for that. I definitely couldn't help internalize it. I'm in my 30s and 40s, I'm still single, who's to say they're not looking at me saying, "Well there must be something wrong with her."

Bethany went on to say messages like this come through the media. She said:

> I hear comments, and even though those comments aren't directed at me, they
>
> might be directed at the movie star or stranger in the coffee shop . . . I would
>
> definitely internalize it and just be like, well, I'm no different.

Bethany clearly articulated the negative impact on self-esteem many women and men experience from media exposure and comparing themselves to characters on television.

Jen and Connie expressed others appear to enviously view singlehood. Connie reported, "If it's a married couple, they're probably kind of like, 'Oh, I wish I kind of had that kind of freedom,' but then they don't necessary think about, 'Oh, I have my spouse to spend time with and I have my children to love on.'" Connie summarized this sentiment by saying, "Most of us think the grass is always greener on the other side."

When Ali was asked how she thinks other people view singlehood, she said, "I feel like people don't like it." Jen echoed this statement by expressing that at church "I just felt like they talked about singleness like it was some sort of defect." Furthermore, Jen added she does not like "when people look at me with those eyes of pity at church, when I mention that I'm single." Shahrzad mentioned a similar sentiment conveyed in perhaps a more flattering manner when she said other people tell her, "I don't understand how you could be single," as if to say people as wonderful (or any other superlative) as you would have been chosen by a partner and would not be relegated to singlehood.

Cultural Factors

Through conversations, it became apparent cultural factors undoubtedly influenced participants' lived experiences of singlehood. Two major aspects of cultural identity participants frequently mentioned were race/ethnicity, and religion (specifically

Christianity). The intersectionality of single women, religion, and race/ethnicity is an important unique aspect of their lived experience to highlight.

Religion

Participants discussed the culture and stance surrounding marriage and marital timing within Christianity. Additionally, participants referenced religious pressure and expectations, or lack thereof, from their church. They also mentioned members from their religious community questioning their relationship status, and how religion influenced their dating approach or preferences in a partner. Ali considers herself to have suffered spiritual abuse at a previous church she attended and where she worked in the ministry. At that church, Ali stated other congregants continuously attempted to set her up with potential partners:

> And then I kept telling them no. One time they kept asking me why, and I was being attacked. It was not a good situation, and it came down to that. The conclusion was the reason why Ali doesn't want to date is because she doesn't love herself, and therefore, she's painting the image of God.

The lack of understanding and acceptance of Ali's relationship status within her church had a damaging effect and added to a host of reasons that ultimately led to Ali's resignation from the church. Jen also experienced negative experiences as a single woman within her church, saying, "I think society and Christian culture says there's something wrong with you if you aren't married by this certain age, which is probably like mid 20s in my environments." Jen added, "I think there's a lot of emphasis in the church. When I used to go to bible studies and things about marriage, even as a single person topics would still be on marriage, and I never really liked that." In Jen's

experience, it appeared few efforts were made to meet her where she was at and lift up and honor her relationship status. Instead, it felt as single women "our quote on quote calling is to get married, and I didn't like other people kind of pushing that agenda on me," Jen said. Jen also pointed out the impact and role religious cultures can have on the norms and expectations related to marital timing:

> Christians historically get married pretty young. When I was in college there was thing we called "ring by spring," because all of these folks would get engaged in the springtime, and that was like 10 years ago. A lot of those folks at my school, because I went to a religious school for a while, were getting married at like 19, 20, 21. So yeah . . . those people have kids now too, so I guess sometimes I do feel just a few life stages behind my peers.

Bethany has perceived a slightly different message from her church, with other congregants wholly believing she will be married someday:

> It's always a "you're going to get married," or you will. And not even from the, like, what we had talked about earlier about the women being subservient. Not from that type of point of view at all, not that old traditional, but just like . . . I don't know how else to say it other than that. There's the expectation that you're going to end up getting married at some point.

Bethany admitted if she were to say in a group that she really enjoys being single, "people might almost be like, 'Well, yeah, but you'd rather be dating someone, right?' I guess, kind of like you're not completely whole maybe if you're not married." However, she perceived these messages to be conveyed in a positive light, saying, "No one's looking at me and calling me an old maid."

Race and Ethnicity

Several participants referenced racial and ethnic perspectives related timing of marriage as well as family expectations and customs related to marriage within a specific ethnic group. Ali identified as a Chinese American woman. When she was asked if being single at her age was seen as unusual for her ethnic community and culture Ali said, "In the general Asian community and Asian culture, I feel like it is viewed as not good." She added a caveat though related to individuals who come from an Asian background, but grew up in American culture, saying, "It would be unusual, but I feel like with the generation of . . . American born Asians who grew up in the American culture and society, [they] are delaying marriage along with everyone else who's delaying marriage." Ali explained "people who are born in China, moving here, I don't think would have the same delay in marriage, so it would be unusual for them to be single at 30. But for children who are born here, they, like me, would probably be okay." With this understanding, there could potentially be differences in what a parent who immigrated to the United States from China thinks about marital timing, compared to what their child who was born and grew up in U.S. culture thinks is typical regarding marital timing. Ali made another comparison between how singlehood is viewed in Asian and White cultures within her (Christian) religious community. In regard to being a single 31-year-old single, Christian woman, Ali said, "If I'm more in the Asian [church] community, it's seen as more unusual. If I'm in a non-Asian [church] community, more of a White [church] community, it doesn't feel as unusual in that setting." Attending a church with a predominately Asian congregation left Ali feeling pressured to find a partner and get married.

Jen identified as a Korean woman who was born in the United States. Although she mentioned her mother who immigrated to the United States from Korea is outside of the norm, Jen's statement seems to be in line with Ali's ethnic experience:

> My mom has always been really pessimistic about marriage, which I think makes her a lot different than a lot of Korean moms that I know, that kind of pressure their kids to get married. But my mom, since I was in middle school has always told me, "You don't have to get married if you don't want to." But my dad, he's like, "You have to get married."

Jen's father also immigrated to the United States from Korea with her mother. Although her parents come from the same Korean culture, they have differing viewpoints on marriage, which could stem from the fact they had an arranged marriage and allegedly have very different personalities.

Shahrzad is biracial and identified as having a Middle Eastern ethnicity. Her father immigrated to the United States from the Middle East and married her mother who is White and was born in the United States. Shahrzad said the following about the beginning of her parent's marriage:

> When they were first married they had to adjust to the difference in expectations of family and how interconnected Middle Eastern families really are and what that means. . . . When they first got married and my grandparents came from the Middle East to visit my mom was like oh yeah they'll probably be here for a couple weeks and then I'll go home. When Middle Eastern people come it's a very long journey, so they stayed with my parents in their very tiny little house or apartment for 3 months also with my uncle, my dad's brother. So, like all of them

living in that space together and adjusting to new understandings of what family

means for the both of them. And my dad going and meeting my mom's family

which is very large, and my dad being the only person of color that was in that

space, so having to deal with some ignorance on that part from my family. I think

that lent itself fairly well to my parents because they were able to kind of create

their own traditions and values for how they were going to do what family means

because it's different from both sides of our family.

Shahrzad insightfully described how her parents took each of their individual cultures and

formed a blended family that incorporated values and traditions from both Middle

Eastern and U.S. cultures. Table 3 shows subthemes, codes, and two direct quotes from

participants for each code within the first broad theme: The Lived Experience of

Singlehood.

Table 3

Theme 1 – Lived Experience of Singlehood

Subtheme	Code	Participant Responses
Positives	Benefits	I love the independence right now that comes with being single. (Bethany)
		It's nice in the aspect that there's freedom to do what I want, when I want. I have choices of how I manage my time and my money and my resources. (Haley)
Emotions	Emotional experience	I mean, there's times that it can be lonely cause you don't have anybody else there with you at home. (Connie)
		I always imagined doing it [traveling alone], but I read those articles about women getting kidnapped and things like that and I got a little scared. (Jen)
Approaches to Dating	Changes over time	That helped me realize that more than a list, it is almost more of a feeling or intuition that I get when I'm with the person. I think I've tried to make love logical in the past and that just hasn't worked out for me. (Jen)
		I wasn't as solid in my [religious] belief before. And so, especially when I was in college my expectations were much lower. (Connie)

Table 3 continued

Theme 1 – Lived Experience of Singlehood

Subtheme	Code	Participant Responses
	Dating for a purpose	I didn't really want to date without a reason, without a purpose. (Ali)
		It's not to say that the person I'm going to be in a relationship with next is going to be my future husband, but if I don't even see that happening, I wouldn't even bother. (Jen)
	Methods -Online dating -Human aide	I am using a dating platform online, and my goal is to start conversations and to meet people. (Haley)
		I've asked different friends and family, anyone, you want to play matchmaker? (Haley)
	Speed of looking for a partner	I feel like I talked to God once… God, you know my heart's desire, but you're almost going to have to present him to me on a silver platter or something. So, I've been fairly hands off in that regard. (Bethany)
		The boundary that I had set for myself was that if no one asked me out, then I'm not going to be taking any initiative at this time in my life, because I don't have the energy or the time to figure that out. (Ali)
Social Life	Developing/ Maintaining friendships	I almost feel like it's this instinct kind of bond when I meet other women that are single later in life, because right off the bat we have something in common. (Jen)
		I get together with some women and we're all single and we all agree that we want to be married someday, but neither are we all just sitting around and bemoaning the fact that we're single and we're still enjoying each other's company. So, we still have that circle of a friendship to do things with. (Bethany)
	Engaging in social activities	I'll go see friends that live across the country on my own. (Jen)
		I try to make sure to give time to whether it's helping out at church, or through a church activity or something like that. I also devote time to growth groups to connect more with others in the community. (Connie)
	Neutral dating experiences	I didn't have a stereotypical dating experience from high school through college… It's mostly just been like nebulous kind of friends, but not friends kind of relationships with people over the past 10 years. (Shahrzad)
		I dated a few guys in high school. My parents had pretty strict rules on that, so I didn't date too many guys in high school, but I dated a few. (Haley)
	Left behind and not belonging	I think turning 30 now most of my friend group is married and they kind of branch off to do couple-ee things. So there are times when we go on group trips and I'm 10th wheeling. (Jen)
		In my late twenties it definitely was the first wave of all of my friends getting married and going on that part of the journey of their life. (Shahrzad)
Their Vision	Future oriented goals/ plans/fears	I would want the relationship to be something where we can encourage each other in our lives and walk side by side through things. (Bethany)
		I want to be able to support myself. I want to be in a relationship where I bring something to it. I don't' want to be taken care of. (Haley)

Table 3 continued

Theme 1 – Lived Experience of Singlehood

Subtheme	Code	Participant Responses
	Reflecting on partner qualifications	I think my top one is open communication and more specifically when you're having a conversation acknowledging the other person's feelings when they're talking about a particular thing, as opposed to trying to fix whatever it is right away. (Shahrzad)
		I realize what's really important to me in a partner is that we have an emotional connection, an intellectual connection and there's an attraction. If I don't have all three of those things it always feels like something is missing. (Jen)
Marriage/ Family as Primary Goal	Marriage	I do still have that desire to be married one day. (Bethany)
		I definitely do want to be coupled like others. (Haley)
	Children	I think at the end of the day, I do want to get married and I do want to have kids. (Jen)
		It seems like definitely for more of the women who are… have this deep desire to be a mother that they're often more aware of it, and have a much stronger desire I think to be in a relationship. (Bethany)
Perspectives / Expectations From Others	Expectations / pressure from others	All of my aunts and uncles are like, 'When is it your turn, Ali? When are you going to find a boyfriend? Where's your boyfriend?' (Ali)
		I really want to get a dog and my dad always says a dog is something you get after you get married. (Jen)
	External Perspectives	I don't feel that way [behind] but it does get challenging when you have people in your circle or people in your life or strangers feeling very comfortable talking to you about these things and asking why or why not certain things are happening in your life. (Shahrzad)
		There were definitely societal standards that affected me. I was always aware of a when a man is in his thirties or forties and he's single, I'm very much aware that people are looking at him and saying, well, what's wrong with them? (Bethany)
Cultural Factors	Religion	My former church talked a lot about that and questioned why I wouldn't date or tried to set me up with other people and tried to do it very indirectly. Got to a point where they were very, very, very, very concerned. (Ali)
		Our quote on quote calling is to get married, and I didn't like other people kind of pushing that agenda on me. (Jen)
	Race / Ethnicity	People who are born in China, moving here, I don't think would have the same delay in marriage. It would be unusual for them to be single at 30. But for children who are born here, like me, it would probably be okay. (Ali)
		In terms of my parents, my dad is originally from the Middle East and my mom is a wWhite American female and there's just differences…When they were first married the adjustments to the difference in expectations of family and how interconnected Middle Eastern families really are and what that means. (Shahrzad)

Theme 2: Rationale for Singlehood

One of the main inquiries in this research study was to ascertain an understanding of the potential rationale for why these women remain single past the average age women are married in the United States, despite participants desiring to one day be married. Family of origin is often one of the first places people learn about marriage and relationship dynamics. Participant accounts related to the positive or negative marital model provided to them directly impacted their views and hesitancy, toward marriage. Based on participant statements, they clearly learned from the relationships they observed around them. Participants also proposed other reasons, and I deduced suspected reasons for singlehood that were categorized into negative experiences, psychological, environmental, and pragmatic reasons for singlehood.

Family of Origin

The documented risk factors and predictive information that has emerged regarding family of origin can be observed in participants' narratives within this study, particularly in regard to the quality of parental marriage and the experiences of siblings' marriages and relationships of others.

Parent's Marriage and Influence. Half of participants' parents are divorced, and the other half remain married. Ali stated her parents divorced and described their relationship as

> not very good. My dad was emotionally and verbally abusive. My dad is the
> traditional Chinese father, who was the breadwinner in the house. Even though
> we had dual income. He worked on things that were outside of the house, like
> fixing the care, doing the lawn, maintaining the yard, the garage stuff, the

> driveway, getting us kids outside, things like that. My mom was the homemaker,
> and she would be at home taking care of and raising us five kids while also
> working. I don't even remember my parents sleeping in the same room. . . . My
> dad was the disciplinarian. My mom was the good cop, he was the bad cop. Not a
> very healthy relationship.

Ali illustrated very delineated gender roles to which her parents adhered within the home. Although her father maintained outdoor aspects of their home, Ali's mother focused her attention on raising the children. Ali's mother appeared to depart from stereotypical gender roles by working a job outside of the home as well. Ali's parents did not appear to work well together, creating a good cop, bad cop dynamic as she said.

Bethany's parents were both 24 years old when they got married. She also observed her parents modeling a traditional gender role specific relationship, while her mother simultaneously worked outside of the home:

> They might be a little more on that traditional scale where the man is the head of
> the household, the woman cooks and cleans. My mom did work outside of the
> house as well, but I don't know that she would ever say that she really had a
> career in that regard. As far as raising their kids, I would say . . . like my dad was
> the authoritarian, but my mom was the rule maker. So, my mom made the rules,
> but my dad enforced them.

Bethany's parents have reportedly been married for 54 years. She felt her parents have a good relationship and "complement each other well."

Connie's mother was 17 years old, and her father was 21 years old when they got married. They had allegedly been married for 46 years prior to divorcing. Connie

expressed both of her parents "came from divorced families." She characterized their relationship as follows:

> I would say they had to learn a lot about how to work well together. My dad's example was not necessarily a great example, and it was of also the, you know, your woman takes care of you. . . . They were very young when they got married, and so he had to learn that there was certain things that he needed to do to respect her as an individual, instead of just expecting, "Oh she cooks all the meals, does all the laundry," you know? She's not Susie Homemaker. . . . He had to learn that she had a mind, and she had her own thoughts, and so they really had to learn to work together more versus just fit the philosophy of say what maybe their parents had or the generation before them had.

Connie stated she observed more of a traditional marital model and her mother wanted more "mutual respect" and less gender expectations. Connie felt she was fortunate to be able to see a "committed marriage" over the 46 years they were married. Connie's parents reportedly gave she and her brother advice, because they "didn't want us to be in the wrong relationship because they had seen examples of what their parents had done." She went on to say, "If anything there was the message of 'Don't get married just to get married.' . . . It wasn't like 'Oh, just be single.' It was, 'Don't get in a relationship just to be in one.'" Based on this information, it appeared Connie's parents did not pressure her into feeling she needed to be in a relationship, but instead, placed more of an emphasis on being in high quality relationship.

Haley's parents became married when they were in their early 20s and divorced not too long after. Haley reported her father proposed to her stepmother, she denied his

proposal, and then married 7 years later. Haley's father and stepmother have been married for almost 30 years. Haley indicated the complexity of the intergenerational transmission of divorce by saying, "I'm a child of divorce and my parents are children of divorce." Although both of her parents remarried after they divorced, their second marriages have not completely transcended their first marital experience:

> Their relationship, my dad and stepmom, hasn't been perfect. Actually, my brothers and I talk about that quite often, and one of them said, "Well, you don't want to die lonely." . . . Their marriage isn't awful, but it's not great either. And then my mom remarried many years later and had my youngest brother, my half brother.

In reflecting on her parents' marriages Haley remarked:

> I definitely want to be in a partnership that I enjoy and not like . . . I don't sense that either set of my parents remarried are as happy as they could be. I don't want to get into a place where I'm unhappy in a relationship and I don't want to practice divorce either . . . I want to do it right the first time and be able to enjoy it for the life of it.

Similar to Connie, Haley is not afraid to wait for a higher quality relationship that will be long lasting. This preference appeared to be influenced by what she has learned from the dissolution of her parents' marriages.

Jen's mother was 23 years old, and her father was 30 years old when they married. Jen described how her parents, who are diametrically different, arrived at marriage:

> I think my dad loves my mom more than my mom loves my dad. So, they had an arranged marriage in Korea. That was something that was very common for the time. They would go on a couple of dates and then marry this complete stranger and then move to America. I think a lot of it was kind of survival mode, two people are better than one. And so, they are complete opposites. My dad is spontaneous and in tune with his emotions and musical and creative and then my mom has this engineering personality and she's very methodical. Complete opposites! They kind of function as roommates, which is kind of sad I think. So yeah, growing up I saw more cons of marriage, I think than pros, and it wasn't until my 20s that I saw healthier marriages.

Jen's parents' relationship seemed to play a significant role in her interest and viewpoint of marriage as a form of work. She had some insight into the impact:

> I wasn't a little girl that dreamed about getting married. I think because marriage to me was arguing and conflict and things like that, and relationships have always kind of felt like a lot of sacrifice and work to me.

Although her parents are not divorced, the impression they left on Jen appeared to have almost the same negative effect on her outlook on marriage as if they had divorced.

Shahrzad's mother was 24 years old, and her father was 22 years old when they married. Shahrzad's father immigrated to the United States from the Middle East, and met her mother, who is a White American woman. Shahrzad described her parents' relationship in the following way:

> They are very insular, I guess. They are each other's support and rock and person. Their social circle is very, very small, so they depend on each other for a lot,

which at times I think can be . . . just as an outsider looking in at it, it can be a

higher burden to place on another person. But yeah, they're very different. They

come from different ethnic, cultural backgrounds, so that's stuff that they've had

to work through, but, I think they love each other.

Based on the information gathered, Shahrzad presented a unique experience none of the

other participants had related to observing two cultures merging into one new, combined

culture, which was difficult to create. Directly witnessing a blended marriage reportedly

positively influenced whether Shahrzad would be willing to date someone outside of her

ethnic and cultural background. On that topic, Shahrzad said, "You're looking at the

person, not necessarily where they come from. It's just kind of keeping an open mind and

being attracted to lots of different kinds of people."

Learning From Siblings and Other Relationships. Participants indicated

learning from other relationships they observed in their communities, or from their

siblings' life choices and marriages. It was more common than not for a participant to

report having at least one sibling who has been married. Four participants had married

siblings, one participant had a single sibling, and one participant is an only child.

Shahrzad stated seeing her brother and sister-in-law's marriage "Influenced how I view

the dynamics of marriage for sure, and what I would want out of a partner . . . and maybe

what I wouldn't want." Haley explained, as the oldest of her siblings, she witnessed a few

of her siblings become "teen parents, and a few of them have been married and divorced.

I mean my one brother has been married and divorced twice now and he's substantially

younger than me." Haley's parents and grandparents had also gone through divorces.

These observances seemed to place a heavy burden on Haley, as evidenced by her

outward interest in wanting to choose a partner that would be conducive to a long-term relationship.

Ali and Jen mentioned they had seen healthier relationships outside of their families later in life. Ali said:

> One positive in my former church is that I got to see a variety of different relationships and came to realize that the reality of marriage and being in a committed relationship is that there's going to be ups and downs, and there's going to be a lot of conflicts that people don't anticipate, and *that* is something that I can learn to anticipate.

Furthermore, Ali indicated, "There have been healthy marriages that I've been influenced by and have been able to witness and see how they deal with conflicts." Although some participants may have watched their parents' marriages dissolve into divorce, they also may have had a corrective martial experience vicariously through community members' relationships. Those positive experiences could positively inform their outlook and schemas related to marriage.

Reasons for Singlehood

Reasons for singlehood were categorized into four domains: environmental reasons, negative experiences, psychological reasons, and pragmatic reasons. I made several inferences about the reasons why participants may be single, based on the context and what they were expressing, in addition to reasons participants explicitly stated as a rationale from their viewpoints.

Participants cited many environmental reasons for singlehood. Any concrete or tangible reason for singlehood that originated in the environment could be considered as

an environmental reason for singlehood. Examples of environmental reasons for singlehood include: COVID-19, lack of available partners, participants pursuing career and education, finances, health, location, teaching abroad, an abundance (too many) potential love interests, and participants being interested in a person who is already in a relationship. Bethany suggested there might not be enough available partners in her community, saying, "Being 47 right now, honestly, I see very few single men my age." Meanwhile, Shahrzad had the exact opposite experience, stating, "When you're on a dating app, it's like you could literally swipe ad infinitum and there's options there. So, it does feel like the opportunity of choice makes it a little bit more frustrating, I'd say." Whether Bethany and Shahrzad perceived there were too many or not enough available partners, both found that to be an obstacle to entering into a romantic relationship in different ways. Several participants referenced difficulties in trying to date during a pandemic like COVID-19. This historically unique dating challenge, has put a halt on many single women's pursuits, but not desires of partnering, as evinced by Haley's statement, "Your governor says, 'Stay home, stay healthy,' and you're still like, but I'm interested in this guy [who] I want to date."

Most participants who have a dating history expressed experiencing negative or traumatic relationships that put them off to the idea of dating. Haley described in detail a relationship that caused her doubt whether quality partners exist:

> I dated a guy that was everything my parents didn't want for me to be with. I was kind of a rebel and dated this guy who was just not even really. . . . In hindsight, not really even a good person. He already had a child, and he wouldn't spend time with that child unless encouraged by me. And he wasn't doing things to better his

life. He had problems with prescription drugs and wasn't a good guy. I

experienced a miscarriage with him and then I kind of hated men. Just kind of lost

faith in good guys being out there.

Haley continued on to say she previously had other relationships but appeared to be hung

up on some of the unsuccessful relationships. Shahrzad showed insight into the impact of

a traumatic experience on trust and intimacy by stating:

I have a history of sexual assault so trust is really hard to come by and I would say

having experience appreciating that kind of affection and love takes practice for

me and I'm not really good at it yet.

Both Haley and Shahrzad's narratives evoke difficulty with themes surrounding trust and

vulnerability.

Psychological reasons for singlehood were widely mentioned by participants.

Examples of psychological reasons for singlehood include body image issues,

internalizing beauty standards, being introverted, having a passive dating approach, being

uninterested in dating or afraid to initiate a romantic relationship, and having too high of

expectations. Bethany and Jen both mentioned how having a more quiet and introverted

disposition impedes their ability to get to know and make connections with prospective

partners. Jen said:

I'm also really introverted, so I kind of do my own thing. I just go to work and go

home and go see my married friends, who hang out with their married friends, so

it's not really opening up a pool of people.

A couple of participants explicitly mentioned how they internally felt less desirable and confident because of their appearance. Bethany suggested her appearance is why she remains single:

> The work that I've been doing over the last couple years is the whole diet culture thing where you have to look a certain standard, which I've never felt skinny my entire life. So being overweight or not the prettiest by society's standards definitely wore on me. I definitely felt like it was my fault almost that I was single. It was like well, here's the obvious reasons of why you're single, you're not pretty, you're overweight, and things like that where I saw my defects, or my perceived defects more than my positives.

Bethany's struggles with reconciling societal beauty standards with her own body image tend to anecdotally be a common experience for many American women.

Pragmatic reasons are the final category regarding the rationale for singlehood. These are the practical reasons participants stated as to why they believe they are still single. Examples of pragmatic reasons include participants stating they have never dated or have been single their whole life. Additionally, some participants say they need to learn more about dating, are settled in their ways and did not want to adapt to another person's schedule, or lacked time/energy to date. Roughly half of participants indicated they had never dated or been in a serious relationship. Bethany said, "I've never been in any kind of serious relationship," while Ali echoed a similar sentiment, stating, "I've never dated. I've been single my whole life." In the United States, dating tends to be the most prevalent route of becoming married. Therefore, without having any dating experience, it would be rare to be in a relationship or married. Haley suggested she did

not dedicate enough time toward a relationship, saying, "For a lot of my life, I haven't

made time to be partnered." Forming a relationship with another person involves a

necessary time commitment to invest in getting to know each other's interests,

preferences, families, and to make memories. Table 4 shows subthemes, codes, and two

direct quotes from participants for each code within the second broad theme: Rationale

for Singlehood.

Table 4

Theme 2 – Rationale for Singlehood

Subtheme	Code	Participant Responses
Family of Origin	Parent's marriage and influence	I didn't have really good examples growing up of what dating is like. (Ali)
		I don't want to face the same struggles that I saw my parents deal with. (Haley)
	Learning from siblings and other relationships	I think looking at the relationships that I see, like my parents or my brother and my sister-in-law, it has offered a window into what I do and don't want." (Shahrzad)
		I'm the oldest of my siblings, and I thought I was setting the right example about waiting to have kids. That didn't necessarily work because a few of my siblings ended up being teen parents, and a few of them have been married and divorced. (Haley)
Reasons for Singlehood	Environmental reasons	I'm in the wrong city. I think as a person of color, it's important to me, like I'm open to dating anyone, but I think Portland is the Whitest metropolitan city in the U.S. and I meet a lot of White men that fetishize Asian women. (Jen)
		Being 47 right now, honestly, I see very few single men my age. (Bethany)
	Negative experiences	I was kind of a rebel and dated this guy who was just not even really. . . . In hindsight, not really even a good person. . . . I experienced a miscarriage with him, and then I kind of hated men. (Haley)
		It wasn't a very healthy relationship . . . I don't think I ever grew up really daydreaming about marriage, or anything like that, but I would say even more so that kind of put my guard up and made me take a step back with the whole relationship thing. (Jen)
	Psychological reasons	I was like, okay, well, I guess I just won't deal with dating until later on. And looking back, I really didn't give myself the time or the permission to really open myself up to that. (Ali)
		Probably also single because I'm not super thin. But, I mean, that only affects my confidence. (Connie)
	Pragmatic reasons	I've never dated, I've been single my whole life. (Ali) For a lot of my life, I haven't made time to be partnered. (Haley)

Theme 3: Conceptualization of Self and Singlehood

Participants were transparent in discussing their views of themselves, as well as the gradual process of accepting their slightly ever-changing identities. Participants were asked to articulate how they believed their lives were similar to or different from individuals who are in committed, long-term relationships. Many participants expressed feeling their lives were in many ways similar to someone in a committed relationship. With little prompting, participants gravitated toward mentioning aspects of their gender as being important in terms of what society and their parents had taught them about marriage and relationships. Participants noted a shift toward less traditional societal expectations regarding gender stereotypes and norms. The conceptualization of self and singlehood theme particularly lent itself toward easily allowing me to make sense of how participants made sense of their experiences (e.g., hermeneutics).

Gender Stereotypes and Norms

Participants reference traditional and conservative viewpoints and values others have related to gender. Many of these themes occurred when participants talked about their own family structure and the gender roles and expectations they witnessed growing up and in society. Some of the gender roles observed growing up had a lasting impact on how participants viewed a man's and a woman's roles as distinct within a marriage. Bethany and Connie both received the message from their family dynamics growing up that a woman is supposed to support and take care of her husband. For instance, Connie said, "My dad's example was not necessarily a great example, and it was kind of also the, you know, your woman takes care of you." After explaining personal family dynamics related to gender, Bethany went on to add, "That's what I would fear losing with my

independence is now suddenly people think that oh, my role is now to make his life easy

or something along that lines," and be "subservient to the guy." Interestingly, Ali

received a similar message; however, was told she should find someone to take care of

her. Ali said, "What I was taught growing up, you find somebody to get married to so

they can take care of you. And that's not what I view marriage to be. I feel like that's also

idealized romanticism." Many participants received messages from their parents that

marriage has an element of taking care of someone else. Although there are times during

marriage that each partner may need more support and to be taken care of, in a sense,

participants in this study appear to think a husband and wife should be equals, and the

care of one should not be routinely prioritized above the other.

Participants identified some changes in gender roles within relationships they

have noticed. Bethany articulated this point well:

> I feel like people in my age range [47] . . . I'm seeing many examples of
>
> marriages where they do support each other, but it is more of a partnership type
>
> relationship and not a the man is the breadwinner, and the wife takes care of the
>
> house type situation. I'm not seeing that nearly as much in this generation. It
>
> would probably be pretty far and few between in relationships I'm seeing like that
>
> right now.

In line with a similar sentiment of abolishing the breadwinner marital model, Haley

described a comical reaction to how a man she had met through online dating told her

"something about how a woman could have been a stay at home mom if that's what she

wanted to be. And I was like, 'Oh that's the opposite of anything that I'd ever want.'" All

of the single women in this study are financially independent, and none of them overtly

reported an interest in leaving their careers to solely take care of the home. Participants seemed to express frustration with the breadwinner-homemaker model that emerged in the mid-19th century, in part, because it does not resonate with their lived experiences thus far as single women who are expected to support themselves. All participants in this study had jobs and a bachelor's- or master's-level education, allowing them to contribute to the workforce in ways women have historically been deterred or dissuaded from in the past.

Despite there being more of a female presence in the workforce, as well as, gender equality and feminism efforts and advancements, Shahrzad eloquently expressed a dissonant societal expectation related to what makes a woman successful and legitimate:

One of the things I've been thinking about recently is how for women, specifically heterosexual, cisgender women there are lots of expectations from when we grew up of where we're meant to be in terms of the milestones of our lives that signify accomplishment. Some of my single friends and I talk about how it feels like just because we aren't married or don't have kids at this point that we are somehow behind in society's eyes . . . like the value of who we are isn't measured the same.

Shahrzad highlights some of the unrelenting expectations that may have persisted from the patriarchal legacy upon which the United States was founded. When Shahrzad said, "The value of who we are isn't measured the same," she may mean, compared to a man who has otherwise the same accomplishments as she does on paper, she would be seen as less than or lacking more so, if neither he nor she were married. Furthermore, in that

statement, she might be comparing herself to other women who are viewed as more valuable solely because they are married or have children.

Conceptualizing Identity

Participants reported forming an idea of who they are, who they want to be, and how they define themselves. Many of these codes occurred in response to asking participants, "How does being single impact how you see yourself?" Participants expressed learning more about themselves and learning to be comfortable with who they are and their relationship status.

Several participants expressed being single was a minute aspect of how they conceptualize their identity. Ali suggested being single was a "small part, but not the whole thing" related to who she is and how she sees herself. Similarly, Bethany said, "I've gotten past where for myself looking at single as being my identity and it's now just an adjective pretty much for me." Additionally, she added, "I don't like having my identity wrapped up in an adjective like 'single.'" I'd much rather be known for my personality traits, or something along that line." Connie also mentioned, "I don't know that it [singlehood] fully defines me." These participants seem to be exemplifying the complexity of their identities, and that singlehood is one of many factors that inform the conceptualization of their identity.

Although being single may not be a defining feature of participants' identities, some participants indicated singlehood might negatively impact their sense of self. When Jen was asked if being single has impacted how she sees herself, she said the following:

> Yeah, I think sometimes that thought does come where it's like, "Huh . . . is it something about me which is why guys don't want to commit to me?" I was just

talking to my therapist about that last week. . . . So yeah, I think sometimes it does

hurt my self-esteem.

Although there are times participants reported feeling less than good enough

because of the their relationship status, the majority of women in this study illustrated a

high degree of comfort with this aspect of their identity, mentioning their acceptance

occurred as a gradual process over time. Bethany elucidated her personal process:

> For a while it was pretty hard because that's how I saw myself. I saw being single
>
> at that time as something that was wrong with me. . . . It took until just the last
>
> few years where I really started working on learning to love me for who I am that
>
> I really became comfortable and super comfortable with being single. I've been
>
> comfortable with being single for a while, but I think the feelings of why I was
>
> single definitely change. Now I'm okay with if I'm not skinny enough for a guy,
>
> then he's not for me. If I'm not flirtatious enough or whatever, then that's not for
>
> me type thing. But really learning to appreciate who I am and what I bring to any
>
> relationship, whether it's a romantic one or even just friendships.

Bethany clearly illuminated a process most participants also referenced going through, of

gaining acceptance surrounding their relationship status as they learn to love and embrace

themselves as they are, rather than waiting to love themselves when they enter a

relationship. Jen echoed increasing how comfortable she is with singlehood:

> Your twenties can be quite isolating if you don't learn to spend time with
>
> yourself. I go eat at nice restaurants by myself and I'm to the point where I don't
>
> even think . . . there can be couples all around me and I'm just having pasta and

wine by myself and I'm not thinking that I'm the only single person in there. I'll

go hiking by myself, and so, I think I'm more comfortable with solitude now.

This sentiment seems distinctly different from other comments participants mentioned

earlier, related to feeling like they do not belong.

Several participants indicated other people can and have influenced the

conceptualization and development of their identity. For instance, Shahrzad described

how in her late 20s the first wave of her friends started getting married, and, "It's hard

not to compare yourself to close people in your life around you, so yeah, it would cause

me to look at myself and reflect a little bit." Jen expressed differentiating herself and her

identity from her parents by stating, "I just kind of realized with career and what not that

it is my life to live. . . . Because it's me that is going to marry him, not my parents."

Bethany wanted to be a source of encouragement for other single women who may be

struggling with their identity:

> I think the way I try to cultivate my relationship with other single women is . . .
>
> especially ones that might feel discouraged about the fact they are single is to
>
> really try and encourage them to learn to love themselves for who they are,
>
> regardless of whether or not they are in a relationship. And just really becoming
>
> comfortable with that and learning to love themselves.

Based on participants' comments, conceptualization of identity can be created by

combining natural characteristics that may be static (e.g., race/ethnicity) or dynamic (e.g.,

age or relationship status) with the influence of relationships and the environment at

large.

Life Similarities and Differences

Participants were asked to think about the ways their lives are similar to or different from individuals who are married or in a long-term relationship. Some participants proposed ideas for how being single is different from being in a relationship, while others had difficulty doing so. There was a fair number of concrete differences that were cited. For instance, Ali said, "I feel like marriage relationships, there's a little bit more involvement than just friendship, especially when it comes to legalities." When asked what Ali meant by "legalities," she said, "Taxes . . . like you buy a house with somebody, co-owning bank accounts . . . wills and funerals, as you get to that point." Ali also referenced a key difference was the romantic or "the sexual side" of a committed relationship. Haley expressed, as a single person, "I don't have to worry about in-laws." Other participants mentioned relational differences in terms of not having to compromise with another person, or coordinate schedules and share time with another person. Jen and Haley reported their friends indicated envy, jealousy, and admiration toward them for having more independence, a private space, and time to themselves.

Despite noted differences, Ali, Bethany, and Haley all reported they view their lives as pretty similar to their married counterparts. Bethany explicitly stated, "I don't know how much my life is different than a married person's," and Ali said, "I don't see very much difference." Both Haley and Ali evoked a human aspect in their explanation of similarities. Ali said, "Similar in the sense that I am still an individual, I'm growing, I have my own profession. I'm developing as a human being. I have hurts and arguments and conflicts and everything else in between." Although there do seem to be many likely similarities between married individuals and single individuals, the information gleaned

from the transcripts and presented thus far paints a slightly different picture. In full

disclosure, the purpose of this study has been focusing on highlighting the unique

experiences of single women and delineating their experiences from other people's

experiences; however, participants may be trying to find as many similarities as possible

to decrease any dissonant feelings between the story they tell themselves (e.g., I am like

my peers) as opposed to the narratives they conveyed to me. Table 5 shows subthemes,

codes, and two direct quotes from participants for each code within the third broad

theme: Conceptualization of Self and Singlehood.

Table 5

Theme 3 – Conceptualization of Self and Singlehood

Subtheme	Code	Participant Responses
Gender Stereotypes	Reflecting on gender norms and stereotypes	It kind of seems like there's the expectation that the woman supports the husband and takes care of him and makes sure his life is as easy as possible. (Bethany)
		I had a gentleman tell me something about how a woman could have been a stay at home mom if that's what she wanted to be, and I was like, 'Oh, that's the opposite of anything that I'd ever want.'" (Haley)
Identity	Conceptualizing identity	That's the cool part about dating is, I've been learning a lot about myself. And going in I was very rigid, like I had a whole list, but the list has kind of been thrown out now and I realized that these are kind of my values. (Jen)
		It took until the last few years where I really started working on learning to love me for who I am, that I really became comfortable with being single. (Bethany)
Life Similarities/ Differences	Differentiating relationships	Different in that I don't always have one person to go to, to share with I guess, or coordinate with. (Ali)
		I think the way that they differ is in terms of a long-term relationship, you are learning and growing in tandem with another person. It provides extra input for reflection and growth. (Shahrzad)
	Recognizing similarities	Similar to in the fact that I carry responsibilities and I am employed, and I am a functioning, responsible part of society. That happens whether you're single or married. (Haley)
		It's similar in the sense that I don't think it stops me from a lot of things that people in relationships can do activity-wise. (Jen)

Field Notes and Behavioral Observations

Jen

This interview took place remotely, due to COVID-19. Jen's interview was the first interview that took place out of the six interviews. At the time of the interview, Jen was in her apartment in Oregon. She wore a hat and a ring during the interview. Jen appeared alert and focused on discussing her experience of singlehood. She also expanded on questions that were asked. Jen was introspective, cooperative, friendly, likeable, and humorous. She had an unremarkable tone throughout the interview, spoke at an even rate, and gave an appropriate level of eye contact. There were no noted incongruences between what she said and how she behaviorally appeared. Regarding affect, Jen appeared to be positive, happy, and receptive during the interview. She was observed to make air quotes with her hands a couple of times during the interview. From my perspective, there was a high level of rapport present between the participant and me throughout the interview. The participant and I both work within the mental health field, which likely fostered a connection and eased rapport building.

Jen seemed to be a participant who knew what she was looking for in a partner and was not willing to resign to anything less than that. Themes related to the importance of family were evident throughout the interview and seemed to originate from familial and cultural values. Jen was one of several interviews that emphasized receiving an expectation of marriage from her religious affiliations. This expectation appeared to be off putting to Jen, and she suggested wanting more acceptance of her relationship status within her religious community. Jen seemed to consistently compare herself to her peers and expressed feeling a life stage behind them. She mentioned it has been a gradual

process of becoming comfortable with being a single woman. I would not have been able to tell without Jen explaining that aspect of her experience, because she seemed very comfortable and confident in being a single, independent woman. Jen's value in independence was apparent and resulted in circling back to a loss of independence that would occur if she were to enter a romantic relationship throughout the conversation.

Haley

This interview took place remotely, due to COVID-19. Haley's interview was the second interview that took place out of the six interviews. At the time of the interview, Haley was in her bedroom in her home in Washington. Haley had her hair in a ponytail, was casually dressed, and was wearing a ring during the interview. Haley appeared distracted at times, as evinced by her gazing in the distance periodically. She maintained hydration by drinking water throughout the interview process. Haley presented as cooperative, transparent, genuine, and honest in answering my questions. She had a deeper voice comparatively. During the interview, Haley's affect appeared either neutral or sad. She became emotional and started crying when talking about wearing a wedding ring on her ring finger as a single person. I held space and validated Haley's feelings when she became emotional. There appeared to be some rapport with me during the interview. A fair amount of discussion surrounded Haley's veteran status and involvement and interest in this community. Immediately following the interview, I felt there was a theme of a fear of abandonment throughout Haley's conversation, and frequent references to past negative relationships. I also got the impression Haley was somewhat lonely.

Ali

This interview took place remotely, due to COVID-19. Ali's interview was the third interview that took place out of the six interviews. At the time of the interview, Ali was in her bedroom in her home in Washington. Ali wore glasses at the time of the interview. She was giddy and frequently laughed during the interview, perhaps because she was mildly uncomfortable discussing her limited dating experience. Otherwise, Ali's affect was appropriate and unremarkable over the course of the interview. She also looked away from the camera a lot when she was formulating her thoughts. Ali seemed to have a lot of insight into her experience of being a single woman. Throughout the interview, she was cooperative and thoughtfully applied effort into her responses. Ali accidentally used her real name several times during the interview. I switched her real name with her given pseudonym during the transcription process. A level of comfort and rapport appeared to be present between Ali and me. When Ali was recollecting negative church experiences in regard to pressuring her to date, or comments her mother, aunts, and uncles would say, an agitation arose, and she seemed to be mildly irritated.

Shahrzad

This interview took place remotely, due to COVID-19. Shahrzad's interview was the fourth interview that took place out of the six interviews. At the time of the interview, Shahrzad was in her apartment in Washington. Shahrzad wore glasses during the interview. She appeared moderately tired and did not seem very interested in participating, although she appeared to not know she would be compensated for her time either. Shahrzad was eating during the demographic questionnaire at the start of the interview. From my perspective, it was challenging to get Shahrzad to talk openly about

her experiences. She seemed guarded in her responses, as evinced by mostly brief

responses that had little elaboration. She also frequently responded to my questions by

asking a question back. During the interview, Shahrzad mentioned being vulnerable is

difficult for her. Shahrzad was seen to look away from the camera when she was thinking

about her responses. She remarked at one point in time that she wished she had been

given the questions ahead of time to be able to reflect more about her responses.

Shahrzad and I connected over the fact we both identify as biracial, both have one parent

who immigrated to the United States, and our parents are both the same ethnicities.

Shahrzad was the only participant who, when asked what pseudonym she would like,

explicitly said "anything, but a White sounding name." Shahrzad was the only participant

who expressed an interest in knowing more about the research study, and at the end of the

interview, she asked me about any potential hypotheses, or what I was anticipating. I

explained this type of qualitative research was exploratory and there were not concrete

hypotheses established prior to data collection.

Connie

This interview took place remotely, due to COVID-19. Connie's interview was

the fifth interview that took place. At the time of the interview, Connie was in her home

in Washington. Connie wore glasses during the interview and appeared to have an

amblyopia; however, the participant did not confirm this. Connie did not look into the

camera or the screen very often during the interview. Outwardly, Connie was overweight

and seemed to lack self-confidence, as evinced by the way she carried herself during the

interaction and referenced body image struggles. She engaged in sighing throughout the

interview and had some lengthy pauses when she was thinking of her responses. Connie

expressed specifics of what she wanted and expectations she had for a future partner. For instance, religion was deemed to be very important, and she indicated it would be necessary for her partner to believe God is a priority in his life. Connie appeared to be somewhat disheartened and woeful at times when talking. She tended to use repetitive speech such as repeatedly saying, "you know," "it is," and "there's," sometimes to the point of making her difficult to follow. Connie also was heard stuttering several times in her speech. Verbally expressing herself when discussing the interview questions seemed to be challenging for Connie. Despite the challenge, Connie was engaged, cooperative, and openly participated.

Bethany

This interview took place remotely, due to COVID-19. Bethany's interview was the sixth and final interview that took place. At the time of the interview, Bethany was in her home in Washington. Bethany wore glasses during the interview. She appeared to be overweight and referenced psychological challenges she has faced overcoming body image issues during her interview. There were times during the interview that Bethany had difficulty hearing and experienced some connectivity issues. Bethany was very candid, kind natured, and had a gentle way about her. She was heard releasing bouts of friendly giggles throughout the interview. I enjoyed talking with Bethany and felt rapport was high during the interview. She appeared to be the most optimistic participant interviewed. Bethany embraced and accepted singlehood and reported trying to encourage other single women to enjoy their lives as single women as well and to not be limited in how they engage with the world. She took thoughtful pauses to reflect on her responses. Bethany was observed maintaining an appropriate level of eye contact

throughout the interview. A theme in Bethany's responses was a fear of what she would

lose if she were to enter into a relationship.

Chapter 4: Discussion

At the onset of this research study there was a lack of qualitative understanding of modern, single women's perspectives as it pertained to their lived experience and reasons for delaying marriage. This study sought to narrow the gap that exists in the research literature related to the particular experiences of women who ultimately desire to be married, but for a number of reasons have delayed that commitment. Although this is a unique study that offers new understandings surrounding single women's experiences who delay marriage, the foundations of this study were informed by the previous and related body of literature.

Relationship Between Current Findings and Previous Literature

Single Women Experiences Then and Now

Lewis and Moon (1997) published a similar study to the current research in the late 20th century, where they examined the experiences of single women and compared them to the experiences of single women who had become single again following a divorce. Lewis and Moon found the single women in their study had unresolved ambivalences about being single. For instance, their participants could recount an inventory of positives and negatives related to being single. They were satisfied and simultaneously were experiencing loss, and they were ambivalent about the rationale behind their singleness (Lewis & Moon, 1997). Over 20 years later, the current study found evidence to support this finding. No participants were confined to black-and-white thinking regarding their experiences or reasons for singlehood. Participants within this study indicated many double-edge experiences and ambivalences. For instance, between independence and loneliness, between feeling similar to their peers and socially included

to feeling different from their peers and as if they were left behind and do not belong. Some participants described oscillating between feeling confident and self-assured in their identity to feeling uncomfortable in their own skin and questioning whether they possess a character flaw that has led them to remain single against their will. It would appear that over 20 years has not changed single women's opinions about their experiences neither being completely positive and whole, nor dreadful and tragic.

In the current research study, the environment or context seemed to illuminate certain experiences to be felt as more positively or negatively. For instance, when participants mentioned their friends had married and moved on to the next stage of their lives, or when they attended social functions geared toward families and couples, the single women became more inherently aware of their singlehood and found deficits in their comparisons to other people. However, when they were thinking about a negative parental marriage they had witnessed, or when they received input from friends that they admire the amount of personal space and free time the single women possessed, they appeared to feel more content with their relationship status.

The current research study added a modernized update to the reasons and lived experiences of single women, using a one-on-one interview approach. This approach likely limited groupthink that could have taken place in Lewis and Moon's 1997 study. The findings that emerged in the current research are likely more valid because each participant had to individually reference a particular phenomenon for it to emerge as a theme or an area of significance.

Suggested Reasons for Singlehood

The average age when women are entering into their first marriage has been steadily increasing over time. Rabin (2018) mentioned a sentiment expressed among individuals in their 20s was that they are postponing marriage until their lives are in order. Several women in the current study expressed they prioritized pursuing an education and financial security over marriage, in accordance with advice their parents had given them. Messages were conveyed to these participants that indeed there was a socially prescribed order of experiencing life events.

Previous research has alluded to the fact that, in the United States, women who are college educated tend to marry at a later age and are less likely to perceive marriage as the main mechanism to financial security (Isen & Stevenson, 2010). All participants in the current research study have a bachelor's-level education or higher, and they all work full-time positions at their places of work. It is unclear as to whether these participants are less eager to find a mate because they are educated and have financial security, or if they marry later because they are fulfilling the socially ascribed order of completing postsecondary education prior to marriage.

Similarly, Spielmann et al. (2013) indicated historically and up until the 1990s, single women were thought to live desolate lives and that marriage would be their only opportunity for enrichment, stability, and protection. As participants' transcripts indicated, this mythical belief is in many ways false. Although many participants were interested in a romantic relationship and the companionship it would offer, they also were not "bemoaning" the fact they are single, as Bethany put it. A perceived generational shift away from women's dependence on men was noted. Spielmann et al.'s study introduced

the idea that the fear of being single increases the likelihood of accepting a lower quality relationship to be in any relationship at all. The single women in the current study have been single for some time and did not fear their relationship status to the extent they were willing to partner with anyone.

Geographic location was presumed to be a factor that impacts marital timing as well. Individuals in this study predominately live in urban, liberal locations that tend to increase the national average age at marriage (Lentz, 2019). Furthermore, Americans are living in the same geographic region for longer periods of time, as rates of moving is at an all-time low (Tavernise, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a). Additionally, some single women view there to be a lack of eligible partners, considering as of 2016, there were 12 more unmarried women aged 18 and older for every 100 unmarried men across all racial groups in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Some participants in the current study also voiced geographic location to be exacerbating their difficulties in finding suitable partners due to a perceived lack of available or quality partners in their area.

Arnett proposed emerging adulthood (e.g., individuals ages 18–25) should be considered to be a distinct developmental period (Bay-Cheng & Goodkind, 2016). Emerging adulthood was characterized as a time for exploring many aspects of life, including identity and relationships (Arnett, 2000). Although all participants in this study are passed this developmental period, they described going through a gradual process of accepting their relationship status, learning about themselves and others, and conceptualizing their identities. Some participants indicated they either never dated or had very little dating experience, which is likely a pragmatic reason for being single. However, some participants stated they had previous relationships during this

developmental period, some of which left a lasting, bitter taste in their mouths. This was determined to be another reason why participants may remain single, because they began to struggle with trust, vulnerability, and intimacy with romantic partners after being hurt in a past relationship.

Participants did not have to directly be involved in a negative romantic relationship for it to have an impact on participants' hesitancy and interest to enter into a relationship. Arocho and Kamp Dush (2017) found what children observe as their parent's marital experience has the potential to influence their own marital paradigms. Many participants referenced observing their parent's marriage growing up and the positive or negative effect it had on them. Jen in particular expressed her parents' marriage caused her to think of marriage in general as something that is more work and sacrifice than anything else. Additionally, research demonstrated there is a 59% higher chance White adults will separate or divorce if their parents were divorced during the first 16 years of their lives (Glick, 1988). Thinking back to the social learning theory, it is possible these individuals saw their parents divorce and learned it could be a more viable option when marriage becomes difficult. This phenomenon is referred to as the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Whitton et al., 2008). Half of participants in the current study are children of parents who have divorced. Currently, 40%–50% of first marriages in the United States conclude in divorce (Amato, 2010; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017a). Although divorce has slowly been declining in the United States, the high percentage of divorce causes many people to question the legitimacy of marriage and take more time to consider if their partner will be marriage material, especially for individuals whose parents are divorced. Many participants also

received direct advice from their parents to wait for the right partner and to not just be in a relationship for the sake of being in one.

Uecker and Stokes (2008) found maternal age at first marriage is a strong predictor of an adult child's age when they desire to marry. However, this was only true when their mother's marital experience was viewed as a success (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2017). If they perceive their parent's marriage negatively, there is a higher likelihood the adult child will be interested in delaying marriage in an effort to avoid replicating negative aspects of their parent's marriage (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2017). Although half of participants' parents are divorced, more than half viewed their parent's marriage negatively. In particular, lots of participants referenced how their mothers had to push back against gender narratives that a woman's role is to take care of her husband first and foremost.

A Shift in Gender Roles and Overall Dependence

Spielmann et al. (2013) stated historically women's lives were viewed as incomplete and inadequate without marriage or a husband. As a modern single woman, Shahrzad suggested:

> [For] heterosexual, cisgender women there are lots of expectations from when we grew up of where we're meant to be in terms of the milestones of our lives that signify accomplishment. Some of my single friends and I talk about how it feels like just because we aren't married or don't have kids at this point that we are somehow behind in society's eyes . . . like the value of who we are isn't measured the same.

In that statement she might be comparing herself to other women who are viewed as more valuable solely because they are married or have children. This idea may have an evolutionary basis and be linked to how members of U.S. society assign value to women. Although many participants indicated they still receive that message from society or specific religious affiliations or groups, in general, there did not seem to be evidence to substantiate that the lived experience of single women is inadequate without a husband in the current study. Participants expressed many ways they stay connected to their families, friends, and communities. They have discovered ways of meeting their social-emotional needs without a dependence on a romantic partner.

All participants were educated, financially independent, and career focused. Cunningham (2008) cited education specifically as being correlated with gender-egalitarianism. With women maintaining space in the workforce, they are more financially independent, and thus are able to stray away from the male breadwinner family model. Although some participants explained their families operated from the male breadwinner family model, many indicated their mother's generation was one of the first to push back against this model. Many participants' mothers held jobs outside of the home. Although all participants in the current study were employed, some, particularly Haley, remarked she would despise being expected to uphold this family model and that she valued her own ability to financially support herself. This is a definite shift from a 1979 study that found marital stability was higher if the wife's income was relatively small compared to her husband (Glick, 1988). In addition to financial security, women have increased access to reproductive technologies that allow them to become pregnant without a man being physically present. Assisted reproductive technology and adoption

also allows women to postpone childrearing, which tends to put less pressure on a woman to find a partner if she is also interested in having children. Participants in the current study tended to link marriage and having children when they discussed these topics.

The Lived Experience of Single Men

As previously mentioned, the current study is a replication of Dr. Tyler Jansen's research study in 2019, *The Experience of Singleness for Males Who Delay Marriage*. Both research studies used a semi-structured interview, and asked the same structured questions, allowing for many gender comparisons between men and women's experience of and reasons for singlehood. Participants from both studies indicated freedom and independence were favorable aspects of the single experience, and although they enjoyed being single, there were themes of loneliness and a desire for companionship. Participants in both studies mentioned wondering what they are doing wrong, or if there is an enduring characteristic that makes them unattractive to potential partners, and this tended to hurt their self-esteem. Participants across studies suggested their appearance could play a role in why they remain single, specifically weight was discussed in both studies; however, the male participants seemed to perseverate more on environmental characteristics of desirability, and the female participants had other concerns related to internal characteristics. Items related to desirability that male participants mentioned that female participants did not were hair loss and job loss, whereas female participants only mentioned potentially asking too many questions about events that would not happen until far into the future, being introverted, having high expectations, and internalizing societal beauty standards.

Participants from both studies indicated they receive social judgment and pressure from those around them surrounding their relationship status. Both men and women echoed an idea they had heard, that if they are not married by a certain, arbitrary age, then something must be wrong with them. Participants from both studies suggested there is more pressure to marry in their church communities than in secular society. A male participant expressed feeling pressure to marry from the family of an ex-girlfriend, and another male participant stated they had been asked if they were gay because they remained single. This type of pressure was not noted with the female participants. Although they experienced some pressure, overall, male participants cited perceiving less pressure from those around them to marry, for example when one participant, David, seemed surprised by the question, and Joseph stated an absence of judgment (Jansen, 2019).

Across both studies, participants expressed needing to make some social adjustments as a result of their singlehood. Female participants seemed to be more willing to be a third or fifth wheel in a social scenario with other couples, whereas men reported their married friends tend to be more unavailable and they have become friends with younger men who are also single. The women in the current study did not indicate their friends are younger than they are; however, they did mention more solidarity when engaging with other single women who were perceived as being more relatable to the women in this study.

Career focus and education attainment was cited in both studies as proposed reasons for singlehood. Chance or luck was a proposed reason for singlehood only male participants mentioned; however, several participants in each study stated they are single

in part because of God's timing. Discussions about marriage and religion came up often in both studies, indicating a relationship or link between the two. Male participants endorsed a general hesitancy surrounding commitment that was absent from female participant's transcripts. Although female participants suggested they are not afraid of commitment, they also indicated being married or in a relationship would feel like a sacrifice in some ways. Male and female participants also recalled the negative impact of past hurts, although all of the male participants had been involved in at least one, long-term relationship, which was not the case for the female participants. Roughly half of the female participants made a point of noting they had never dated or had limited engagement in short-term relationships only. Minimal dating experiences are likely a pragmatic reason why some of the female participants remain single.

In terms of approaches to dating, male and female participants both discussed a passive dating approach, where they would be open to dating someone, but may not actively be looking, or they are waiting for the opposite sex to initiate. Generally, online dating and the use of human matchmakers were the top methods participants in both studies used to approach dating. The male participants appeared to find online dating to be more discouraging in general, and found those dates to be "a waste of both time and money" (Jansen, 2019, p. 55). Most women seemed to value online dating enough to continue to use it, although there were noted downsides to using it, and female participants in their forties particularly were noted to express a strong dislike for online dating. For instance, Jen discussed having gone on at least 50 different dates initiated through online dating platforms. This trend seems to be in line with anecdotal stories that online dating tends to be more favorable and geared towards women. Women are said to

have more options than men do in online dating, and there seems to be an unspoken

expectation that the man would pay for some aspect of the first date for their prospective

female partner. The female participants did not indicate they had ever cohabitated with a

previous partner, while at least one of the male participants endorsed cohabitation with a

previous girlfriend. Female participants tended to have a general fear surrounding low

quality relationships that was not as significantly present in the narratives of male

participants. For example, female participants reported using checklists and boundaries

that could help with quality control, and they discussed standards for prospective partners

more often. Some similarities were noted between what participants were looking for in a

prospective partner across groups. For instance, a partner who would complement their

life, improve their life, and be accepting of them was noted in both studies. Male

participants also referenced wanting to have fun with a prospective partner and an interest

in sex. Although this also might be the case for women, these aspects were not cited by

any of the female participants.

There was some overlap between participants in both studies regarding a

pessimistic view of marriage. This trend seemed to be more present with male

participants than female participants because some female participants did not have a

negative view toward marriage, while evidently nearly all of the male participants held

such a view. Research would suggest this could be because the majority of participants in

both studies were either children of parents who had divorced, or they believed their

parents were not in a healthy relationship with each other (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2017).

Participants in both studies identified the ways their parent's marriage negatively

impacted their childhood and tainted their view of marriage. Many expressed a strong

desire to choose the right partner and indicated they had learned a lot from observing their parent's marriage. Male participants suggested a theme that marriage is viewed as permanent, whereas female participants did not place any special emphasis on this idea.

One significant difference between the two studies was the presence of a discussion of gender within the narratives of female participants, but not male participants. This emerged in various ways; for instance, when female participants discussed the gender role model used in their household growing up, or when participants expressed reservations about dating and marriage because they had a preconceived notion of the roles they would be expected to inhabit because of their gender. In this way, perhaps societal expectations have negatively impacted interest and action toward marriage for women. This is a sad irony because the male breadwinner and female homemaker family structure was contrary to the norm throughout most of history, although following WWII this shift became much more accepted and prevalent (Coontz, 2004). One female participant expressed she had been sexually assaulted in the past, and this experience likely negatively impacted her ability to be vulnerable, accept affection, and trust others. Therefore, sexual assault could be a contributing factor for singlehood for both genders but was specifically noted by female participants. Female participants also seemed to be more impacted by societal beauty standards and the belief that women are not fully actualized and are viewed as less valuable until they are married and have children. The male participants appeared to suggest they were subject to gender pressure in regard to paying for dates and the importance of having a job seemed higher for men in regard to their own perception of their desirability to female partners. However, as a whole, women seemed to receive more external input from their environments or be more

sensitive to or affected by other peoples' expectations, pressure, and unsolicited opinions regarding their relationship status.

Liberal Sexual Attitudes

Most adults in the 21st-century experience intimate and/or sexual interactions outside of devoted romantic relationships (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). At least 50% of college attendees are engaging in casual sexual relationship experiences (CSREs; Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). Given this information, it was striking that only a couple participants in the current study made any mention of sexual encounters. One participant stated she had a miscarriage with a previous partner, and another participant indicated she was sexually assaulted. Arnett (2000) proposed emerging adulthood is a time for exploration, including the potential for emotional and physical intimacy, and sexual intercourse and cohabitation. Additionally, Arnett expressed there is less pressure to enter into marriage during emerging adulthood. One reason participants in this study might not have spent time discussing sexuality or sexual encounters could have to do with their age and life stage. Arnett described emerging adulthood as a developmental period that includes individuals up to 25 years old. The youngest participant in the current study was 30 years of age, and the oldest was 47 years old. Age could impact behaviors and developmental tasks. Based off of participant narratives, they have entered into a phase in their lives where there is arguably more pressure to enter into marriage, and CSREs might interfere with that goal. Additionally, perceptions of acceptability regarding CSREs may differ depending on gender. Personal and religious values also play a role in CSRE involvement. Generally speaking, having personal values that rebuke premarital sex, as well as, having distinct religious values may decrease an individual's propensity

toward engaging in CSREs (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). Highly religious individuals favored limiting sexual activity to marriage (Allison & Risman, 2014). Five of the six participants in the current study identified themselves as having a Christian religious affiliation, and several described Christianity as being an integral aspect of their lives. Comfort level with the interviewer and the interview process could have also influenced whether participants felt open to discussing sexual experiences.

Influence of Participants' Multicultural Factors

Although it is inaccurate to say participants' multicultural factors caused them to perceive singleness a certain way, it is worth noting aspects of their cultural identities that could have informed how they responded to questions or conceptualized singleness. In regard to race and ethnicity, half of participants identified as White and a third identified as Asian, specifically, Chinese American and Korean American. All participants who did not characterize themselves as White indicated one or both of their parents had immigrated to the United States. One participant reported her parents had an arranged marriage, and another participant stated her parents are bicultural, and suggested their blend had a profound influence on her family's dynamics and her cultural understanding in childhood and adolescence. Literature related to family of origin illustrates family dynamics witnessed in a person's youth influence consecutive relationships with romantic partners and their marriages (Chen & Busby, 2019). It is plausible these participants' parents imbued foreign understandings of singlehood, marriage, and marital timing that differ from traditional American approaches and conceptualization of romantic relationships.

All participants except for one endorsed an affiliation with Christianity. Several participants also reported having attended Christian universities for their educations. Christians tend to honor marriage as a place to engage in sexual intimacy and build a family. Marriage is viewed as an agreement before God, and it is taught that God created marriage to be a lifelong union. Although Christians are encouraged to pursue marriage, and in the United States that tends to occur through dating, some individuals who have witnessed parental divorce or marital discord may feel conflicted about seeking out romantic relationships and delay marriage. It was also commonly expressed that many participants' Christian peers tended to marry prior to the average age most American men and women marry, potentially leading them to feel out of place within their religious communities.

Other relevant multicultural factors all participants possessed that may be unique from other sectors of the population included being able bodied, female, heterosexual, identifying with the gender they were assigned at birth, living in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States, having a middle socioeconomic status or higher, and a bachelor's level of education or higher. One participant also endorsed having served in the U.S. military. It is unknown how these specific multicultural identities influenced how participants responded to questions in the current study, although these characteristics likely do influence their experiences, how participants view the world, and therefore the way they conceptualize singlehood.

Implications of the Research Findings

Clinical Significance

Findings in this research study can inform clinicians who come in contact with women who remain single past the national average of 28 years of age and desire to one day be married. It would be helpful for clinicians to recognize there are nuances within the broader category of single women, for instance, women who are newly single after a divorce, as opposed to single women who are mothers or single women who have never been married or had children. Although there may be some overarching themes, for instance, that the women had unresolved ambivalences about being single, the intersection of these women's identities are viewed differently by society and within their own self-perceptions (Lewis & Moon, 1997).

Clinicians are encouraged to be open and understanding of nontraditional paths of engaging in romantic relationships, for example in women who delay marriage. For instance, despite mentioning they would like to be married, many single women employ a passive dating approach. Age should only be one of many markers considered in terms of developmental readiness to engage in a romantic relationship. Other factors to be examined could be career and education aspirations, level of dating experience, or the degree to which clients express interest in future goals, plans, or fears related to marriage. Clinicians should be mindful of the context and specific location they are operating in to provide information regarding norms for marriage in their area. For instance, more rural and conservative areas tend to marry earlier, and more urban and liberal locations tend to marry later (Lentz, 2019). There may also be subtle generational differences between single women who are in their late 20s, 30s, 40s, and beyond. For instance, participants in

the current study who were 40 years or older expressed a dislike and lack of use related to online dating. They also indicated they were more set in their ways, believed in a divine plan, and possibly felt they would be making a significant sacrifice, but would do so for the right person. A clinician should focus on learning more about the experience of single women across the lifespan. Race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and other intersections of individuals' identities could also impact marital timing. Participants indicated within Christianity and their church community it was more common to marry early.

Clinicians are cautioned to neither over glamorize nor pathologize singlehood. It is more helpful to validate their client's perceived reality. Some single female clients may need help in magnifying the positive features of being single, while others might need permission to recognize their grief and disappointment (Lewis & Moon, 1997). Being present in the client's reality involves utilizing the knowledge of single women's ambivalences regarding their relationship status, attuning to the client, and meeting them at an appropriate level of engagement in change. Ambivalence can be associated with motivational interviewing. From this approach, therapists are encouraged to pay special attention to sustain talk, or an argument against change, and change talk, an argument for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Participants demonstrated ambivalences between independence and loneliness, between feeling similar to their peers and socially included to feeling different from their peers and as if they were left behind and do not belong. Even if a client were to express they are not content as a single person, the solution may not be to encourage them to enter into a relationship. The more preparatory change talk the participant is engaging in, the more indication they are interested in mobilizing resources to take action toward a goal of being in a relationship (Miller & Rollnick,

2013). At that point, clinicians can help their clients to move away from more passive

approaches to taking action and having a greater internal locus of control. If a client is

expressing more sustain talk, helping clients to accept the ambiguity and their

relationship status can ease some of the discomfort that ambiguity causes (Lewis, 1994).

Single women have a unique experience and conceptualization of singlehood and

relationships. They tend to express desires and reasons to remain in both stages. Some of

the benefits of remaining single are a high amount of freedom and autonomy in

determining how the individual spends her time, not having to coordinate schedules with

anyone, and traveling to destinations that are personally interesting to the individual.

Difficulties surrounding remaining single include loneliness, and constantly receiving

outside expectations, pressure and perspectives regarding their relationships status.

Lewis (1994) proposed eight nonlinear developmental tasks that contribute to a

single woman's fulfillment in adulthood. The developmental tasks are grounding,

friendships, basic needs, sexual feelings, making decisions about children, grieving,

making peace with parents and teaching them to treat the woman as an adult, and old age

(Lewis, 1994). The developmental task related to old age encompasses having a positive

image of themselves as single as they age, preparing financially, maintaining friendships,

and considering living options related to old age (Lewis, 1994). These tasks provide some

guidance for therapists regarding areas of importance to discuss, and could be a way of

validating the establishment of a fulfilling life.

It is important for a clinician to try to genuinely understand the values,

worldview, and identity of their client as a single woman. Many participants indicated

being single was a small aspect of their larger identities; however, some participants

stated being single negatively impacted their self-esteem for a variety of reasons. For instance, they may feel they are a life stage behind their peers. Additionally, they may feel like they have done something to warrant singlehood or that something is wrong with them for being single. Self-blame and other cognitions could be areas to focus on in treatment and help the client to develop a healthy conceptualization of their identity. In Lewis and Moon's (1997) study, women initially responded in terms of self-blame when asked why they remained single; however, through a focus group discussion they came to a more nuanced and comprehensive explanation. In an effort to prevent a perpetuation of self-blame, if a client expresses a lack of available, quality men, therapists should legitimize their client's complaints (Lewis, 1994).

Many participants referenced receiving external expectations, pressure, and unsolicited opinions about their relationship status that likely have varying degrees of impact on the individual's self-concept. Some participants indicated the media was one place they received messages about norms for marital timing, beauty standards, and perhaps a lack of representation of characters resembling themselves. Other participants explained feeling pressure and expectations from their families or church communities, suggesting singlehood was perceived as a defect. Asking about external pressure and expectations can help a clinician to understand ways in which the environment contributes to the client's identity development and potential stress levels. Some participants noted experiencing a gradual level of acceptance of being single and comfort level in doing activities by themselves. This could be an aspect of identity development to monitor and encourage as self-acceptance grows. A discussion surrounding what gives meaning to a client's life could be fruitful (Lewis & Moon, 1997). Additionally, Gottman

and Silver (2015) encourage couples to engage in rituals of connection, or a structured routine each person enjoys. Although Gottman and Silver were applying rituals in the context of a couple, rituals tend to provide a framework and validation for a person's life (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Therapists can help single women to establish their own rituals, such as, having a regular holiday vacation with friends, or celebrating birthdays and other special milestones (Lewis & Moon, 1997). Rituals can also be used to enhance mealtimes, bedtime, weekend evenings, the transition between work and home, and they can be incorporated into a client's weekly routine (Gottman & Silver, 2015).

Previous research has suggested exploring the client's family of origin, specifically their parent's marital timing, and relationship satisfaction can be helpful to clinicians to understand some of the client's views, expectations, and potential reasons for delaying marriage (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2017). Vast amounts of research in the body of literature on family of origin suggest family dynamics witnessed when growing up influence succeeding relationships with romantic partners and their marriages (Chen & Busby, 2019). For example, parental divorce places their children at risk for divorce as adults (Amato,1996; Feng et al., 1999). If parental marital discord is present, it tends to be predictive of their children's own marital discord later in life (Amato & Booth, 2001). Reenacting violence witnessed in the family of origin is also problematic in future romantic relationships in which adult children engage (Mihalic & Elliot, 1997). The quality of the their parent's marriage can impact single women's decision-making related to marital timing. Providing psychoeducation to clients about the influence of family of origin and prompting a dialogue about what their marital model was like growing up can provide clients with insight into their own relational tendencies and patterns.

Additionally, negative past relationships can have a lasting impact on clients. For clients who desire to engage in a romantic relationship, but feel hesitant to do so because of personally experienced hurts or observed relationship struggles, it may be helpful for the clinician to address topics related to trust, intimacy, safety, how to have appropriate boundaries, and how to effectively communicate within a partnership.

It is also important for clinician's to remember single women are embedded in relationship networks. Participants noted the ability to get some of their intimacy needs met in friendships and with through their families. They referenced other single women tended to be more relatable to them. A group therapist could consider running a single women's group to offer an environment that fosters discussions surrounding this unique experience, and encourages women to engage in satisfying social relationships with other women who are like them. Participants indicated they still engage in many social activities either by themselves, with other single people, or with married couples. Sometimes singleness impacts relationship networks by creating an odd number of individuals in a group, while other times it allows for more opportunities to connect and engage with other people without restrictions.

Pastoral Counseling

Participants referenced how their singleness was viewed and talked about within their church community. Many participants referenced Christians tend to marry at a young age, which can cause them to feel a few life stages behind their peers. Additionally, some participants felt there was a lack of understanding and acceptance surrounding singlehood. Instead of understanding and acceptance, some participants felt pressure from other congregants and church leaders to date. They reported feeling a

strong emphasis on marriage and dating within church, including during bible studies for single individuals. Jen indicated it felt like her church was pushing an agenda on her and that a woman's calling is to get married. Additionally, she felt as if singleness was viewed as a defect within Christianity. Jen stated she did not like that, and Ali reported the incessant pressure to date within her church community led her to stop coming to church all together. Bethany reported her church made her feel like she was lacking in some way by being single, and assumed she and other single individuals would be much happier if they were in a relationship. Bethany indicated she would have liked more acceptance and wished more was said about enjoying life as a single woman. These perspectives can help guide pastoral counselors and individuals in leadership positions at their churches. The stories of these women indicate they wanted to engage with their faith communities; however, they felt excluded and different from other congregants. More of an emphasis could be placed on valuing, accepting, and seeking to understand the experiences of single women within their church. Creating bible study groups or other social groups geared toward single people that include discussions around other domains of individuals' lives may be beneficial to single women. Perhaps championing and discussing women in the bible who remained single and provide a representation of someone like them could help keep these participants engaged. Acknowledging these perspectives, and asking single women in the church how they would feel more inclusive in their church communities would be very helpful. Lastly, if pastoral counselors used this research study to understand the plight of single women in the Christian community, and provide an accepting, loving space to be exactly who they are in that moment, the women may appreciate that stance. Approaching all people, and particularly single

women who are sometimes made to feel they are incomplete, from a framework that God does not make mistakes, and that he created them to be exactly as they are could be helpful and healing to these women.

Community Significance

The findings from this study have the potential to help other people understand the lived experience of singlehood for women who delay marriage and to create more accurate depictions of the reasons why some women remain single for a prolonged period of time. Participants reported singlehood was only a small part of their identity. Findings also suggest women who remain single past the average age of marriage consider themselves to lead similar lives to their married peers. Some participants expressed they felt disconnected from their friends when they became married; however, they still indicated an interest in maintaining those relationships. Women who have married at or before the average age of 28 years of age, are encouraged to be more willing to bring single women into the fold and include them in their social circles.

A large portion of Americans hold the perception that people who are married are happier than people who remain single (Axinn & Thornton, 2000). The narratives, experiences, and opinions elicited from participants in this study indicate happiness is not that black and white. It was not uncommon for participants to suggest they and their friends both sometimes feel the grass is greener on the other side. The information produced by this research has the ability to change negative perceptions or stigma that surrounds single women. The six participants in this research demonstrate single women can be happy, feel fulfilled, support themselves independently, and lead lives worth living.

Findings in this study can also inform dating and relationships. Some participants indicated a desire for men to initiate romantic interactions. Participants stated the following characteristics were desirable in a partner: being family oriented, having good communication skills, being open minded, being able to accept their partner fully for who they are, being financially independent, being service oriented, having similarities with their partner, having a spark or attraction, and someone who can challenge and encourage their partner to be the best versions of themselves. Having an understanding of a single woman's dating experiences can be helpful, for instance if she is inexperienced she may act more passively, or if she has been hurt in a relationship before she may not be quick to trust others. Knowing about a partner's family of origin and parent's marriage can also be helpful in understanding preferences for marital timing, and hesitancy toward marriage.

Limitations

There are several important limitations of this study that need to be addressed. The sample size and homogeneity of participants within this study does not allow the findings to generalize to all single women who desire to one day be married. Another reason why this study is not generalizable is all participants in this study live in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Results may have varied if single women were interviewed from another region in the United States, or from another country. Findings from this study were developed in western culture and should not be used to explain phenomena in another culture.

Another limitation is the heavy reliance on the researcher as a tool within the IPA approach. Personal characteristics of the researcher such as gender, age, social status, and

marital status impact the rapport with the interviewee. Additionally, this was my first time conducting qualitative research. My interview skills likely could have been improved, for instance, trying to frame questions more often as open-ended questions to imbue as little bias as possible, while inviting the participant to express whatever organically came to mind. Using a word of mouth recruitment method may have caused participants to withhold some of their genuine thoughts and feelings, knowing they have a mutual acquaintance who might read the results of the study. There was some subjectivity in the data analysis. For instance, I chose which quotations to highlight in the transcripts on their own accord and created codes using a coding method rather than using a predetermined coding scheme. This relies on the researcher's life experiences and interpretations. Although there was some subjectivity, the use of a peer debriefer, member checking, and an inter-coder helped to indicate findings were valid and reliable.

Lastly, the current research study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 is unknown, although it could have skewed participants' responses to focus on certain aspects of their experience, for instance feeling lonely. Due to COVID-19, interviews were all conducted in a virtual format to maintain physical distancing regulations and to avoid any unnecessary risk to participants' health. In a virtual format, it is harder to read behavioral cues; however, it also might have made it easier for participants to open up to me since they were talking me through an artificial barrier of the screen.

Future Research Directions

Although the current research study elucidated the single women's experience for women who are past the average age of marriage in the Pacific Northwest region of the

United States, this study could be replicated with other similar women with slightly

different demographics. For instance, this study could be replicated with women who live

in the Midwest, or the South. It could be replicated with different racial groups, with

women who are less educated, or who may have other religious affiliations beside

Christianity. A longitudinal study of single women's experiences over time, as they age,

and as American culture changes could provide insights into relationship status, interest

in marriage, and marital timing.

The literature reports correlations between childbearing, cohabitation, education,

and socioeconomic status, and the fact that women are delaying marriage; however, it

does not offer a definitive theory for why this is occurring. The current research study

was exploratory in nature and wanted to discover phenomenological aspects of single

women's lives and how they make sense of those experiences. Future researchers could

use the current research and others like it (e.g., Lewis and Moon, 1997) to formulate an

empirically supported theory for why women are delaying marriage. A meta-analysis

could be conducted to compare different types of single women's experiences (e.g.,

single mothers, single women who have been divorced, and single women who delay

marriage) highlighting the nuances and similarities among this larger population.

This research study shed light on to the lived experiences of single women who

desire to one day be married and are past the United States average age women typically

get married. Although some of the experiences and viewpoints expressed were unique

and idiographic, many of these experiences were shared by other single women in this

study, and by other single men from Jansen's 2019 research study. Some experiences

were distinctly different from married individuals' experiences; however, participants

felt, in many ways, their lives are similar to their married peers. The impact of singlehood can be felt in many domains of an individual's life, and yet, participants indicated singlehood was only a small part of their larger identity. Reasons for remaining single ranged from originating within the family influence, past negative relationships, and some reasons were also environmental, psychological, or pragmatic in nature. Despite a desire for companionship and to be married, participants in this study are a testament to how single women are independently thriving in U.S. culture. The implications of this study have the potential to help single women feel more connected to their peers, included in their faith communities, and to be understood at a deeper level as relatable human beings.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Adapted from Dr. Jansen (2019)

Demographic and Eligibility Questionnaire
1. How old are you?
2. How do you prefer to describe your race and ethnicity?
3. What is your marital status?
4. Are you currently in a committed relationship?
5. Do you have any children?
6. Are you employed? If so, what field/industry are you employed in?
7. What, if any, is your religious affiliation?

Financial Independence Scale
Please assign a percentage to define how financially independent you are at this time. In this scale, 0% represents full dependence on others (e.g., parents, government support) and 100% represents all expenses being covered independently.

Interview Questions

1. Tell me what it's like to be single.
2. How long have you been single? Could you briefly describe your dating history?
   o Describe your goal(s) for dating.
   o Has your approach to dating changed over the years?
3. Could you describe some of the reasons you are single?
4. Has being single impacted how you see yourself?
   o What does being single mean to you?
   o How has being single affected how you live your life or other parts of your life?
      ▪ Free time
      ▪ Vacation
      ▪ Social activities
   o Does being single relate to who you are or how you see yourself?
      ▪ How?
5. How do you think other people see being single?
6. How is your life as a single person similar to or different from someone in a long-term relationship?
7. Do you see yourself being married some day?
   o How would you get there?
   o Are you actively looking for a spouse?
8. Are your parents married? What is/was their relationship like?

Appendix B

Invitation to Participate

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Deanna Zarei, and I am a student in the PsyD program at Northwest University. I would like to cordially invite you to participate in my research study that I am conducting as part of my doctoral dissertation.

I am hoping to examine the unique experiences of people who desire to be married someday but have not done so yet. You are eligible to participate if you meet the following criteria:

- Are 28 years of age or older
- Do not have children
- Have never been married
- Desire to be married someday
- Are financially independent and/or are a full time student
- Free of addiction
- Not currently in a long-term or committed relationship
- Were born in the United States
- Identify as cisgender and heterosexual
- Living in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States

Why participate?

Participation in research studies helps researchers to understand the world around us and enriches our awareness of how different phenomena occur. The information from this study will help me and other mental health professionals in their clinical work with clients who identify as single. In an effort to provide informed consent, there are minimal risks associated with this study; however it is a possibility that our conversation could bring up uncomfortable emotions. I understand that engaging in this process requires participation from you. All participants will receive a $20 gift card to Amazon as a sign of my appreciation and for helping in my research.

What's involved?

To actively participate in this study I would send you a link inviting you to remotely meet with me using the HIPAA compliant, Telehealth video platform, Doxy.me. I will have arranged some interview questions ahead of time to keep the conversation centered on several related topics; however, the structure of the interview allows for deviations from strictly discussing only these questions. Depending on variances in the interview process, I anticipate the interview taking between 60-90 minutes. Your participation is voluntary. If at any point during the interview you would like to stop, the interviewer will discontinue the questions and erase the audio recording. Your answers to the interview questions will remain confidential.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me by phone, text message or email. Thank you!

Deanna Zarei | (XXX) XXX-XXXX | xxxxx@northwestu.edu

Appendix C

Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by a doctoral student in the counseling psychology program at Northwest University. The study is being conducted as a program requirement for the Doctoral Dissertation. The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experience of single women and reasons why they are choosing to wait to get married.

To be eligible to participate, you must be a single, heterosexual, cisgender woman (age 28 or older), who is either a full time student or financially independent, and is free of addiction, without children, not in a committed relationship, and desires to one day be married. You must also have been born in the United States and currently are living in the Pacific Northwest region.

If you agree to participate in the study you will be asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire and an engage in a semi-structured interview. To actively participate in this study, you will receive a link inviting you to remotely meet with me using the HIPAA-compliant, Telehealth video platform, Doxy.me. While we are not meeting publicly, I ask that you remain in a private location where you feel comfortable to talk about your experience of being single. The interview and questionnaire are anticipated to take between 60-90 minutes to complete.

Additionally, I would like to audio record our meeting. I will ask you not to use your name or any personal information that could identify you to protect your privacy. The recording will be kept safely in a locked location. Sometime after our meeting, I would like to show you a transcript (that is, a write-up) of your interview to make sure I heard your responses and understood them. We can do this via videoconference, or email—whichever works best for you.

There are minimal risks associated with participation. Some individuals may be uncomfortable answering personal questions. Direct quotes may be used in the research; however, your identity and all of your responses will be kept confidential. Additionally, while this interview will be conducted via a secure, live, face-to-face video conferencing, there are risks associated with conducting research in this manner. Video calls are subject to connectivity issues, and there is an increased risk of a breach of privacy.

A benefit of taking part in this study is the opportunity to participate in the research process as a research subject. Other benefits include receiving a $20 gift card to Amazon, as a sign of my appreciation and for helping in my research.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate in this study at any time and for any reason. There will not be any negative consequences for you if you refuse to participate. You may refuse to answer any questions asked. All responses will remain confidential. I encourage participants to print and keep a copy of this consent form for their records.

If you feel concern or worry while we are talking, feel free to let me know or choose not to answer any of my questions. If you have concerns after we are done meeting, you may call the Volunteers of America Crisis Line at 1-800-584-3578 or visit the website at https://www.crisisconnections.org/24-hour-crisis-line/. Additionally, NUHope is a local counseling clinic in Kirkland, Washington. I am also available to help you find a counselor if you would like.

The results from this study will be disseminated, and may also be published in a professional journal at some point in the future. Dissemination may include publication, presentation of a paper at a professional conference, a formal report of results to a clinic or entity evaluated, or an approved planned speaking engagement. No identifying information about participants will be divulged during dissemination. After I have the audio recordings transcribed, they will be erased on or before August 1, 2021. Identifying information such as your name, email address, and phone number and the master list linking it with your responses will also be erased at this time.

If you have any questions about this study or rights afforded to participants, or if you wish to express a concern, you may contact: the principal researcher, Deanna Zarei, PsyD student, (XXX) XXX-XXXX, Email: xxxxx@northwestu.edu. If you have further questions, please contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Leihua Edstrom, (425) 889-5367, Email: leihua.edstrom@northwestu.edu. You may also contact the Chair of the Northwest University Institutional Review Board, Dr. Cherri Seese, 425-985-7070, Email: cherri.seese@northwestu.edu.

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Deanna Zarei	Leihua Edstrom, PhD, ABSNP
Doctoral Student in Counseling Psychology	Professor
College of Social and Behavioral Sciences	College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
xxxxx@northwestu.edu	leihua.edstrom@northwestu.edu
	(425) 889-5367

If you are 18 years of age or older, understand the statements above, and freely consent to participate in the study sign and date below to begin the interview process.

Participant: _____ Date: _____

Researcher: _____ Date _____

Appendix D

Codebook

<u>Theme 1: Lived Experience of Singlehood</u>

Subtheme: Positives
- Code: Benefits
  - o Code Definition: Participants reference the positive aspects of being single, for instance, freedom, independence, and acting autonomously.

Subtheme: Emotions
- Code: Emotional experience
  - o Code Definition: Participants talk about their emotional experiences. Some of the emotions that are referenced are loneliness, irritation, uncertainty, hope, frustration, embarrassment, and fearful.

Subtheme: Approaches to Dating
- Code: Changes over time
  - o Code Definition: Participants describe how their approach to dating has changed over time, as well as any generational shifts in dating, marriage, and marital roles.
- Code: Dating for a purpose
  - o Code Definition: Participants describe being intentional in their dating and express wanting a "long-term" relationship.
- Code: Methods
  - o Code Definition: Associations or platforms that participants try to use to find a partner. The two categories within this code are online dating and human aide.
- Subcode of Method 1- Online Dating
  - o Sub ode definition: Participants reference online dating (e.g., going on dates that were facilitated through a dating website, which platforms they use, frustrations and fears related to online dating, etc.)
- Subcode of Method 2- Human Aide
  - o Subcode definition: Participants reference enlisting friends or family to play "matchmaker," or that friends and family offer to play that role for them. Another example is friends setting participants up on blind dates.
- Code: Speed of looking for a partner
  - o Code definition: How quickly or slowly the participant references looking for a partner. Examples include waiting for divine intervention, participants wanting to be pursued, being "hands off," and how long the participants state that they want to date someone prior to marriage.

Subtheme: Social Life
- Code: Developing/maintaining friendships
  - o Code Definition: Referring to when participants mention the abstract concept of friendships.
- Code: Engaging in social activities
  - o Code Definition: Concrete act of socializing and engaging in activities with others.
- Code: Neutral dating experiences
  - o Code Definition: Participants refer to their past, non-negative dating history and experiences.
- Code: Left behind and not belonging
  - o Code Definition: Participants discuss distancing from friends as they get married, feeling like the 3rd/5th/10th wheel in social scenarios, feeling isolated, comparing

themselves to their peers who are married, and experiencing mental barriers that prevent them from engaging in activities.

Subtheme: Their Vision

- Code: Future oriented goals/plans/fears
  - o Code Definition: Participants describe their goals for dating, fears and sacrifices, and other future oriented partner plans.
- Code: Reflecting on partner qualifications
  - o Code Definition: Ideal attributes that participants express wanting in a partner.

Subtheme: Marriage/Family as a Primary Goal

- Code: Marriage
  - o Code Definition: Participants state that they would like or desire to be married someday. Usually in response to asking the participant if they desire to one day be married.
- Code: Children
  - o Code Definition: Participants reference either desiring or not desiring children.

Subtheme: Outside Perspectives/Expectations

- Code: Outside expectations/pressure
  - o Code Definition: Participants refer to their parents telling them the order to do things in life (e.g., go to school, get a job, then date). Other examples participants mentioned: Others questioning why the participant was not dating anyone, feeling pressure from family members or professors to find a partner, feeling an expectation to find a partner and please their families' vision of marriage.
- Code: Outside perspectives
  - o Code Definition: Participants speculate outside perspectives that others have related to singlehood and relationship status. An example is when a participant stated other people look at a person in their thirties and wonder what is wrong with them.

Subtheme: Cultural Factors

- Code: Religion
  - o Code Definition: The culture and stance surrounding marriage and marriage timing within Christianity. Participants discuss religious pressure and expectations, or lack thereof from their church. They also mention members from their religious community questioning their relationship status. Others mention how religion influenced their dating approach or preferences in a partner.
- Code: Race/ethnicity
  - o Code Definition: Racial and ethnic perspectives related timing of marriage, as well as, family expectations and customs of a specific ethnic group.

Theme 2: Rationale for Singlehood

Subtheme: Family of Origin

- Code: Parent's marriage and influence
  - o Code Definition: Participants reference parental marital examples they had growing up and parental influence on dating. This includes references to participants' parents being divorced.
- Code: Learning from siblings and other relationships
  - o Code Definition: Participants express learning from other relationships they observed in their communities, or from their siblings' life choices and marriages. This could be as simple as a participant sating that their sibling is married.

Subtheme: Reasons for Singlehood

- Code: Environmental reasons

- o Code Definition: A concrete or tangible reason for singlehood that originated in the environment. Examples include: COVID-19, lack of available partners, participant pursuing career and education, finances, health, location, teaching abroad, an abundance (too many) potential love interests, being interested in a person who is already in a relationship, etc.
- Code: Negative experiences
  - o Code Definition: Participants discuss previous dating experiences that were negative or traumatic. Involves themes of trust and vulnerability, history of sexual assault, and negative dating experiences. This code is similar to another code, Neutral Dating Experiences, however, different based on the quality of the experience.
- Code: Psychological reasons
  - o Code Definition: A mental or emotional reason why the participants believe they are still single. Examples include body image issues, internalizing beauty standards, being introverted, having a passive dating approach, being uninterested in dating or afraid to initiate a romantic relationship, and having high expectations.
- Code: Pragmatic reasons
  - o Code Definition: Practical reasons participants state as why they believe they are still single. Examples include participants stating they have never dated or have been single their whole life. Some participants say they need to learn more about dating and that they lacked time/energy to date.

Theme 3: Conceptualization of Self and Singlehood
Subtheme: Gender Stereotypes
- Code: Reflecting on gender norms and stereotypes
  - o Code Definition: Participants reference traditional/conservative viewpoints and values that others have related to gender. Many of these codes occurred when participants talked about their own family structure and gender roles and expectations.
Subtheme: Identity
- Code: Conceptualizing identity
  - o Code Definition: Participants report forming an idea of who they are and want to be. Many of these codes occurred in response to asking the participants, "How does being single impact how you see yourself?" Participants expressed learning more about themselves and learning to be comfortable with who they are and their relationship status.
Subtheme: Life Similarities/Differences
- Code: Differentiating relationships
  - o Code Definition: Participants proposed ideas for how being single is different from being in a relationship.
- Code: Recognizing similarities
  - o Code Definition: Participants proposed ideas for how being single is similar to those in a relationship.