

STILL SINGLE:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF HAVING-NEVER-MARRIED

by

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B.N., McGill University, 1967

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
(Department of Anthropology and Sociology)

We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

September, 1978

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## ABSTRACT

Singleness most commonly refers to a stage of early adult life which is temporary and which precedes marriage. Individuals who do not marry at the customary age are referred to as "still single". It is said that they have never married, which implies that their single status appears to be permanent.

In North America, marriage is a dominant and favored reality. The majority of men and women marry, produce children, and establish a lifestyle generated out of beliefs, values, and norms about family roles, responsibilities, and activities. That reality is assigned a definition by virtue of its institutional status and is further reinforced by the process of reification. Marriage and family life are considered representative of the natural and biological world.

Singleness is known and understood as the antithesis of marriage. As such, it is commonly thought of as an unnatural status and as a manifestation of cultural incompetence. Traditionally, sociologists and lay members alike have considered singleness to be a form of deviance and have sought to identify its significance in determining other social phenomena.

Since the 1960's, the trend has been to regard singleness not as a variable but as a phenomenon in its own right. What has been emphasized particularly is the image of the young adult who is unattached, free, relatively affluent, and highly sociable - the "single swinger". In the last five years,

emphasis has also been placed on singleness as a sound alternative to marriage, as a choice, and not as the result of some unfortunate act of Fate. To this end, the current academic and popular literature focuses particularly on the divorced, separated, and widowed. Essentially, its concern is with the loss of married life and the return to single life.

The focus of this thesis is on singleness as experienced by those who have never married. It regards having-never-married as a distinct social phenomenon and seeks to present the essential commonsense features by which that status is known and experienced by representatives of its membership. The data from which those characteristic features have been explicated are ethnographic. They were collected through the method of participant-observation in the social setting of discussions among never-married individuals arranged specifically for this study and to a lesser extent on a variety of occasions encountered in the course of carrying out the routine events of everyday life.

It is the social organization of and commonsense knowledge about the family that provide the interpretive schema whereby virtually all characteristic features of having-never-married exist, are made visible, and are assigned a rationality. First, that interpretive schema renders singleness an ill-defined and somewhat elusive phenomenon. This means that single people must establish their own definition of their status. And, even that is done by using criteria provided by the

institutional definitions of marriage and the family. Second, that interpretive schema questions the cultural competence of those who never marry. It demands that single people provide an account for having never married, and it defines the criteria by which that account is assessed. Thus, it judges the cultural competence of the never-married. Third, that interpretive schema forces those who have never married to the periphery of a "couples world" and requires that certain activities be enacted in a way that is exclusive to the single status, given that the majority of men and women perform those same activities with members of the nuclear family.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work arose out of a sensitivity about the overshadowing of the never-married status by the institutions of marriage and the family both in the academic worlds of sociology and psychology and in the world of everyday life. That sensitivity resulted in an interest in portraying the distinctive features of the never-married status as a social entity in its own right. To that end, I have met and talked with many individuals who have never married.

I owe thanks particularly to those men and women who have shared, in recorded conversation, their thoughts, their feelings, and their experiences about being single. To a considerable extent, it is their formulations that have made this work possible. In presenting those formulations, I have aimed to preserve the good humor and the uniqueness of their authors. It is my wish that they find I have accomplished that aim and that this work rightfully represents what they would claim to be at least some of the distinctive features of the single status and lifestyle.

I also owe an acknowledgement to those individuals - friends and relatives, married and unmarried - who may be taken aback when they discover that they have contributed unwittingly to this study. I have taken the liberty to include their "contributions" - not to expose personal opinions and isolated events - but rather because they have provided so clearly for a display of the commonsense knowledge we all share

regarding marital status and both the family and the single life.

I am also indebted to my advisor, Roy Turner. Professor Turner taught me much about the qualitative analysis of social phenomena and I am grateful for the many insights I have gained from his work in sociology and from his counsel during the development of this thesis. As well, I would like to thank the members of my committee, Elvi Whittaker and Kenneth Stoddart for their interest and support. Professor Whittaker's course "The Sociology of Knowledge" and Professor Stoddart's "The Sociology of Lifestyles" both provided pertinent background for the focus of this thesis.

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to the British Columbia Institute of Technology for granting me an educational leave for the academic year 1977 - 1978. That time and financial support provided me, not only with the opportunity to accomplish this portrayal of the single status and lifestyle, but also with access to a valuable educational experience.



## Chapter I

## INTRODUCTION

Singleness is most commonly known as a temporary phenomenon and as a stage of early adult life which precedes marriage. For the majority of individuals, that is precisely what singleness is. However, in every generation there are a small number of men and women who have never married and for whom singleness becomes an apparently permanent status. It is that form of singleness which is the essential concern of this study. To explicate the characteristic features of the social structure of the phenomenon of having-never-married is its central aim.

In all societies the large majority of men and women marry or couple in a relatively permanent and exclusive fashion, produce children, and establish a lifestyle which is generated out of culturally-determined beliefs, values, and norms about family roles, responsibilities, and activities. That is the paramount reality. Inherent in that reality is the essential defining feature of singleness - the fact of being uncoupled and childless, and pursuing a lifestyle that does not conform to that of the paramount reality.

As well as providing a framework for defining or locating singleness, the reality of the world of marriage and the nuclear family provides an interpretive schema by which singleness is qualified, evaluated, judged, and experienced. While the paramount reality tends to be seen as natural and favorable, the reality of having never married tends to be seen as unnatural,

unfavorable, and perplexing. Individuals who never marry are known and understood in stereotypical terms and are subjected to certain forms of discrimination. For example:

Ours is a family-oriented culture. And it so values family life that it treats unmarried adults at best as undeveloped, immature, and incomplete - and at worst as failures and willful renegades who cannot or will not take up a respectable and responsible family role... Singleness immediately raises questions about one's sense of responsibility and about one's desirability as a tenant, a neighbor, a customer, even a friend. The unattached man or woman, after all, may be cagily waiting for a chance to steal one's husband or wife. Common stereotypes see the bachelor as a self-indulgent hedonist, the unmarried woman as either promiscuous or frigid. (Bach and Deutsch, 1970:ix-x)

As this quotation indicates, singleness is commonly regarded as a deviant status. The individual who never marries is assessed - by married and never-married individuals alike - for manifestations of cultural incompetence. Sociologists, too, have accepted this commonsense interpretation of singleness. Traditionally, sociological research has considered singleness as a manifestation of deviance. As a variable its significance has been examined in studies of birth order, socioeconomic status, occupational achievement, emotional maturity, mental illness, and suicide.<sup>1</sup>

Recently, the trend has been to renounce the belief that singleness is a manifestation of cultural incompetence, and to regard it as a viable alternative to marriage and the nuclear

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See Bernard (1972:331-47) for a summary of such studies done in the United States; also Gilder (1974) who claims that singleness in the male is a pathological syndrome of psychological instability.

family. In the current lay and academic literature on single-ness, the common stereotypes and forms of discrimination are deplored and its attractiveness heralded. To put the focus of this study into perspective, I shall present a brief historical account of that trend.

In 1962, singles' advocate Helen Gurley Brown "pioneered" this trend with the publication of her book, "Sex and the Single Girl." On the cover of its paperback edition, this book was advertised as "The sensational best seller that torpedoed the myth that a girl must be married to enjoy a satisfying life" (Brown, 1962). This set the stage for the image of the "single swinger" - a man or woman between the ages of twenty and thirty living a life of fun and wild abandon. What followed was a move to institutionalize that image with the creation of social settings designed to accommodate these "swinging singles". Singles bars, singles clubs, vacations for singles, and apartment buildings with party rooms emerged in all major cities. The single individual became, among other things, a consumer, and businessmen moved quickly to meet their "needs".

But that image of the single individual has also been challenged. Reflections on the "glitter" of the single life from the vantage point of the 1970's suggest that the "single swinger" exists only as fiction and that it has been largely a creation of the media and the business community. If it is a reality at all it appears that it is so only temporarily, for people rapidly outgrow or tire of its supposed charm. The

"singles scene" is now being described as superficial, alienating, depressing, and exploitive; its participants as lethargic, unfeeling, uninvolved, pathetic, and lonely.<sup>2</sup>

Starr and Carns (1972), in a study of a community of single people in their early-to mid-twenties living in Chicago, support the notion that the image of the "swinging single" has been "spawned and nurtured by the media" and is "clearly false." On the basis of interviews with 70 single people, they conclude that:

They are people coping with the same problems we all face: finding a place to live, searching for satisfaction from their jobs and seeking friends, dates and ultimately mates in an environment for which they have been ill-prepared and which does not easily lend itself to the formation of stable human relationships. (Starr and Carns, 1972:48)

In the 1970's, a further trend has been to direct the attractiveness and desirability of singleness toward the older adult, toward men and women over the age of thirty who have never married, or who have separated or divorced, or are widowed, and for whom singleness appears to be a permanent status and, at least for some individuals, a choice. These individuals are typified as independent, free, self-sufficient, fulfilled, affluent, happy, and living full, stimulating lives. This image

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<sup>2</sup> A pointed article on single people and singles bars by Henry Fairlie (written for the Washington Post, and reprinted in the Vancouver Sun, December 10, 1977) is the source of many of these qualifying terms. An article in Macleans, June 12, 1978, titled "The Singles Myth" further explodes the appeal of the "singles scene". It states: "Things aren't working out quite the way the independent, 'liberated' singles had hoped. For one thing, there's all that loneliness."

of singleness has produced another type of consumer and another type of commodity designed exclusively for singles. For those individuals who are not convinced that singleness offers such possibilities as those listed above, psychologists and sociologists have offered their expertise and support. They have written a number of "how to" publications on the topic of singleness and, to augment the printed word, they conduct night courses and weekend workshops.<sup>3</sup>

In keeping with the trend to regard singleness not as a temporary antecedent to marriage, but as a viable alternative and as a phenomenon in its own right, Adams (1976:19) declares that it is not simply by chance or by default that many individuals never marry. She suggests that single people consistently and purposefully resist "succumbing to the intricately dependent system of marriage and the nuclear family." She notes that they are socially independent and possess a psychological quality which manifests itself in:

a very strong sense of psychological self-sufficiency and personal integrity, both of which are independent of external emotional confirmation and are not realized through long-term exclusive emotional commitments to a specific individual, whether a lover, wife, husband, or child.

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<sup>3</sup> Among such publications are The Challenge of Being Single (Edwards and Hoover, 1974) and Single: Living Your Own Way (Bradley et al., 1977). Workshops and courses on singleness have titles such as "Strategies for Successful Single Living" and "How to be Happily Unmarried." These are offered by universities, community colleges, and community centres. See the Fall 1977 Program, Centre for Continuing Education, the University of British Columbia, for course descriptions and objectives.

Adams (1976:15) further asserts that singleness as a social phenomenon: "...is complete in its own right and possesses its own intrinsic characteristics distinct from those that regulate the thinking and lives of people who are married." This study takes that assertion as its point of departure. It does not consider singleness as a variable, and it does not seek to qualify, evaluate, or judge the single individual or the single lifestyle. Nor does it seek to project or favor any particular image of singleness. What is of exclusive interest is the social organization of the phenomenon of having-never-married.

The theoretical and methodological perspective upon which this work is based maintains that all social phenomena be conceptualized as members' accomplishments and that any given collective enterprise is characterized by a fundamental order which programs in detail even its most minute features. That perspective further holds that these ordered accomplishments are routine, taken-for-granted, and commonsensical. Members are not cognizant of their production of those characteristic features or of the methods by which they construct a display of any given social setting or phenomenon.

That perspective claims the scientific study of social behavior. To this end, it is the sociologist's task to reconstruct any given collective enterprise from the perspective of the sense-making apparatus of its members. It treats data, not as evidence of some hypothesis, but as components of an organized

social structure. Its primary aim is to explicate and record only those components. That they exist, that they are manifest in the talk and actions of bona fide members of the enterprise in question is held as significant evidence that they are a reflection of an interpretive schema (including beliefs, values, and norms) which in turn generates them. That they exist is held as significant evidence that they constitute a display of that enterprise. It does not attempt to make predictions, determine statistical significance, influence social change, and the like.<sup>4</sup>

With the use of ethnographic data, this study seeks to portray those characteristic features that constitute a display of having-never-married. It seeks to locate the commonsense features of that phenomenon - the "facts" and "routine" events - which everyone knows and takes for granted in the day-to-day accomplishment of being-an-individual-who-has-never-married. It is concerned only with those features as they are a display of "individuals over the age of thirty who have never married and are not committed to a long-term sexual relationship". While other categories of single people - those in their teens and twenties, those in common-law relationships, the divorced, separated, and widowed - may also have legitimate claim to many

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<sup>4</sup>This approach to the study of social life is based on the writings of Schutz, 1971; Garfinkel, 1967; Sudnow, 1967; Cicourel, 1964; Zimmerman and Pollner, 1970. It was in Ken Stoddart's course, Sociology 220, that I began to see the appeal of ethnographic research and where I became motivated to develop an ethnography of having-never-married. Roy Turner helped me to do that in a way that might be called ethnomethodology.

of the features that will be discussed here, there are also obvious differences within each of these representative categories of singleness. What I particularly want to capture is the apparatus this society provides - for the never-married and the married - for the recognition, sense-making, and social production of the phenomenon of having-never-married.

What follows is an ethnography of having-never-married. In Chapter II, I shall discuss the general issue of the visibility of having-never-married and the means by which that phenomenon was made visible and accessible for the purpose of collecting data for this research project. Chapter III focuses on the construction of a definition of having-never-married. It illustrates how this is framed within the interpretive schema of commonsense knowledge about the family and examines some of the consequences of that. The construction of a knowledge of "why" one has never married and the process by which accounts are offered and received is the topic of Chapter IV. Chapter V considers having-never-married as an accomplishment. It identifies the most significant accomplishments characterizing the single lifestyle and discusses some of the methods by which these are enacted by the never-married.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Although demographic features are not crucial to this study, for the reader's interest I have included in Appendix I the percentage distribution of males and females in five-year age groups by marital status, in Canada, in 1976.



## Chapter II

## THE VISIBILITY OF HAVING-NEVER-MARRIED

In this chapter, I intend to discuss those features of the social organization of having-never-married by which that phenomenon is located and encountered. I shall explicate the methods by which it is displayed as a social phenomenon; or, in other words, when, where, and how an individual is visible as one-who-has-never-married. I shall also discuss how I utilized this commonsense knowledge of the visibility of having-never-married for the purpose of locating a display of that social entity for this study, and I shall describe the methods by which the ethnographic data on which it is based were acquired.

In the general routine of everyday life, the individual-who-has-never-married constitutes a somewhat covert phenomenon. By covert I mean that a knowledge of that status is not readily available to others. To illustrate: in such public settings as stores, restaurants, parks, offices, schools, theatres, airports, and the like, there are many social phenomenon the features of which are available for immediate recognition, e.g. sex, age group, or some core activity such as going to a movie, teaching, and so on. With regard to having-never-married, no characteristic features facilitate that kind of public recognition. While an individual may be identified as being alone or without a companion, without a wedding ring, friendly, preoccupied, working, eating dinner, et cetera, none of

these activities, of course, tells anything about marital status. Even in settings which are commonly known to cater to the singles community, e.g. singles bars and singles vacation spots, an individual's marital status is not automatically recognizable or knowable.

Singleness is most obviously known as the antithesis of marriage; hence, it is through certain features of the social structure of that institution that individuals are visible as individuals-who-have-never-married. One such feature is the newsworthiness of the occasion of marriage. Engagements and weddings are formally and personally announced. They are announced publicly and they are announced to relatives, friends, and selected acquaintances such as those seen regularly, e.g. co-workers, neighbors, club members, and the like. Among this circle of associates, the discovery through means other than a formal or personal announcement that a fellow associate has married would be seen as unusual, strange, insulting, et cetera. Among this same circle of relatives, friends, and acquaintances, it is available for all practical purposes to assume that those individuals for whom an announcement of marriage has never been made or received, have not simply neglected to announce their marriage but, rather, have never married. They are "still single".

As well as the occasion of marriage, marital status per se warrants personal and public announcement. In places of employment, educational institutions, social groups, and the like,

one's marital status is customarily declared.<sup>6</sup> It is also noted on legal documents such as insurance policies and wills, and on applications for employment, educational courses, club memberships, and credit cards. For women, marital status is also publicly announced with the use of the titles Mrs. or Miss. (Although there is some attempt to change the title of a woman to Ms., it is not widely used at this time.)

A second feature of the institution of marriage is that it is generally assumed that at least all healthy and culturally competent individuals will marry. Parents say to their children, "When you get married and have children of your own...", or, "Don't get married until you finish your education". But they do not advise them never to marry. Nor do they assume they never will. Good friends talk about the kind of person they would like to marry and what they would like to do before they "settle down" and when they would like to marry. Rarely, if ever, do people say they will never marry. In fact, given the expectation that most people will marry and given the lack of a specific time or official occasion to mark being "still single", the reality that that status is likely to be permanent tends to take the single individual by surprise. Many single people around 35 or 40 rather suddenly say to themselves and their close friends and relatives that it has just recently occurred to them that they may never marry and may never have children.

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<sup>6</sup>For example, in the University of British Columbia Faculty Directory information about faculty members includes marital status.

Until then, they had simply taken it for granted that there was plenty of time for that.

Thus, singleness, as a permanent phenomenon, becomes observable and reportable gradually and as it begins to appear to be a state that is not temporary and not an antecedent to marriage. Over time, then, singleness becomes visible as a phenomenon in its own right. However, unlike marriage, which is temporally locatable in terms of a specific date and hour, singleness is temporally locatable in terms of phases, and in relation to the non-occurrence of the event of marriage at that time in life when marriage "ought" to occur. First, given that the majority of men and women marry in their early twenties, it is assumed that the single individual between the ages of 25 and 30 will marry relatively soon.<sup>7</sup> One says to that individual, "Don't you think it's time you got married?" or "Have you met anyone who interests you lately?" That person is identified as being "still single". Then, after the single person reaches about 35, one tends to stop asking about his or her plans for marriage, and begins to assume that he or she may never marry. After the age of 35 or 40, the single individual is known as one who "has never married", and at 50 or 60, when the probability of marriage is even more remote, he or she is

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<sup>7</sup> In Canada in 1974 the average age (arithmetic mean) at marriage of persons never previously married was, for women: 22.4 years, and for men: 24.7 years. The median age (age above and below which half of the total marriages occurred) at marriage of persons never previously married in 1974 was, for women: 21.3 years, and for men: 23.5 years (Vital Statistics Volume II, Marriages and Divorces 1974, Statistics Canada, p. 5).

simply known as one who "never married".

With the appearance of singleness as an apparently permanent status, the phenomenon of having-never-married also becomes a newsworthy and reportable event. While not documented legally and announced formally like marriage, there are occasions on which the status of having-never-married will inevitably be reported. Like marriage, singleness is considered to be a significant biographical fact. As such it is announced in face-to-face interactions where personal information is shared, e.g. in the establishing of new friendships and acquaintanceships, and in interactions with professionals such as physicians, psychiatrists, nurses, members of the clergy, and lawyers.

The status of singleness (although not necessarily having-never-married) is also reportable on the occasion of social events to which invitations conventionally are issued to individuals and their spouses, e.g. informal and formal parties, receptions, banquets, weddings, diplomatic and governmental ceremonies, and the like. When single individuals receive such invitations they must inform their host or hostess of their singleness and notify him or her that they will attend unaccompanied, or seek permission to invite a guest and announce the name of that person.

As well as being rendered visible through its status as a newsworthy event, the phenomenon of having-never-married is made visible through verbal interaction which not only announces that status, but questions, qualifies, judges, and affirms it

as well. Having-never-married is a topic for conversation. That it is a mentionable occurrence is indicated in such statements as: "Two of our children are on their own"; "One of my uncles never married"; "There are lots of single people in my family"; "I'm the only single person in our department"; or "We don't know any single people. All of our friends are married".

That the single status is a curiosity is also attended to in conversation. Attempts are made to explain why specific individuals remain single and why single people as a social category do not marry. Single people are often asked why they have never married and in conversations among themselves and with married people, they search for the answer to that question. Manifestations of cultural incompetence and deviance are also identified and talked about. And if none are found, the perplexing and elusive nature of having-never-married is discussed.

Also, formulations about the characteristic features of the single status are made, and in particular, they are compared with the characteristic features of marriage and the nuclear family. The advantages and disadvantages of the consequent lifestyle of each status are weighed; the single person declares, "There is one thing I would not like to give up and that is my freedom" and the married person replies, "Yes, but doesn't it get awfully lonely?"

While more difficult to locate by the outside observer,

formulations that display the characteristic features of having-never-married are also made during the accomplishment of the affairs of everyday life and in virtually every social setting, e.g. in the work place, in restaurants and theatres, at family gatherings, and in the privacy of the home. They are often made in the form of thoughts and feelings, rather than verbalizations, and they are often made in isolation. They are made on occasions that provide for a display of having-never-married or being uncoupled particularly to the unmarried person herself/himself. Examples of such occasions are: receiving an invitation to a formal dance and being asked to bring a guest, being in the company of married people when they are talking about their spouses and children, and preparing dinner for one and eating it alone.

### The Data

As a researcher, it was those aforementioned commonsense methods for locating singleness that I used to locate individuals who might qualify to participate in this study. Within my own circle of friends and acquaintances and within my work and recreational settings, I knew without inquiring which individuals had never married. By virtue of the status of these relationships, this knowledge was commonsensically available to me and it was in fact taken for granted by myself and others that I had this knowledge. Upon my asking these individuals if they would be interested in participating in a study about the lifestyle of single people, none expressed surprise at my knowledge of their

singleness, or asked questions like, "How did you know I have never married?"

I also drew upon this commonsense knowledge to locate people I did not already know to participate in this study. Simply by asking my friends and acquaintances if they knew anyone who had never married and was over thirty, I was able to locate many other participants. As in the case of my own experience, these individuals commonsensically knew whether or not they were acquainted with single people and who those people were. No one said they did not know whether any of their associates were single or not, but rather replied immediately that they did or did not know any people over thirty who had never married.

Through this snowball technique for locating individuals who qualified for this study, between 1976 and 1978, arrangements were made for a total of fifty-five individuals who had never married - thirty-five women and twenty men - to participate in this study. Approximately 85 percent are in their thirties and 15 percent are in their forties and fifties. One participant is over seventy. All are considered to be in a state of good physical and mental health and leading full, productive lives. The majority are university educated and employed in professional occupations. All live in a large urban setting.

After identifying, approaching, and gaining the consent of those individuals who qualified for this study, I applied further commonsense knowledge about the visibility of having-never-married in order to locate its characteristic features. As



mentioned above, one way in which the phenomenon is made visible is through verbal interaction, i.e. through the formulation of its characteristic features in the company of one's friends, family, co-workers, and other associates. It was that commonsense knowledge I capitalized on in collecting much of the data for this study.

To facilitate the construction of formulations about the commonsense, taken-for-granted features of having-never-married, I arranged a series of group discussions among participants and a few individual interviews. These took place in my home or in the homes of the participants and occasionally in public places such as restaurants. The discussions and interviews were essentially unstructured, and the participants were encouraged to present any aspect of the topic they deemed relevant. My aim, in the role of facilitator and participant-observer, was to promote what might be called "normal" or "routine" conversation which would, as in everyday life, constitute a display of the distinctive features of singleness as they are formulated by individuals who have never married.

In all, twelve group discussions and five interviews were arranged. The number of participants in the discussion groups varied within the range of three to eight. Each group met once and each discussion extended over a period of two to three hours. A portion of all of these discussions and three of the interviews were audio-taped. The recorded conversation totals approximately thirty hours. It is that recorded conversation which constitutes the major resource material utilized in

creating this ethnography of singleness.

It may be suggested that the researcher-arranged settings, which generated the major portion of data for this study, are but a simulation of a phenomenon that is found in the world of everyday life and, as such, would not constitute an authentic display of having-never-married. To that suggestion, I would argue that these occasions are a display of having-never-married is inherent in the fact that they were produced by bona fide members of that social phenomenon who were asked specifically to meet and discuss the single lifestyle. That they are undoubtedly representative of settings in which single people normatively do engage in the practice of assigning a rationality to their status is supported in the following field-note:

On one occasion I asked two females in their early thirties who were friends if it seemed unusual to be asked to talk about the single lifestyle and about being single. One replied, "Oh no, we do this all the time."

The following interaction is a further illustration of the correspondence between the settings in question and those in which this type of formulating practice occurs in the world of everyday life:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Quoted materials, unless otherwise cited, are excerpts from the recorded conversation or from field-notes. The sex of the participant is indicated by the initial M or F. The number which follows it refers to the participant's age. My participation as researcher is indicated by the initial R.

- W: In a way this is kind of fun because it makes me think of lots of conversations - you know - like in a lounge somewhere over a few drinks and you start talking with someone. (M 31)
- V: So you do talk about this stuff? (R)
- W: Oh for sure - sure - just recently.
- V: With women?
- W: With women. Ha ha.
- V: Not with men then?
- W: Hardly ever - yeah - once in a great while - with certain really close friends....

As mentioned in the previous section, a display of singleness is also provided during the accomplishment of the affairs of everyday life, and formulations about that status are often made in the form of passing thoughts and feelings. As such, they are elusive and their visibility is not available to the public. They are certainly resistant to being captured by the sociologist. The following excerpts from the recorded conversations illustrate that experience:

- J: The thing that I find hardest to adjust to - sometimes at night when I go to bed I get this weird feeling and I think to myself, gosh, is it going to be like this forever? Am I always going to go to bed by myself? (F 32)

Later in the discussion in which this individual was a participant, I asked the following question:

- V: I was wondering when you notice it most that you're single? Like you can go through many days and months of your life doing what you do without sort of noticing that you are single. (R)

J: I notice it sometimes when I periodically sort of have 'nothing to do'. You know - and I'd like to do it with somebody. I don't have anybody...somebody to say, 'Let's go for a drive.'... Periodically you just feel basically lonely - on a rainy Sunday afternoon or something - you feel a bit alone. It doesn't happen very often - not enough to worry about it.

While the visibility to the self of having-never-married is probably most commonly made in the manner depicted in these statements, it is only through the telling of these incidents that they can be displayed to anyone else. Thus, the only way formulations about singleness are available for public display is through the medium of verbal interaction in settings such as places of work, family gatherings, restaurants, and informal get-togethers with friends. The occasions arranged for purposes of this study, even though facilitated for the purpose of sociological study, are a further example of such a setting.

A second form of ethnographic data from which this study has been developed consists of field-notes. These are based on observations made in the company of single people in such public settings as restaurants, parties, ski resorts, places of work, and the like. As I am a member of the social category in question, some of these notes are based, as well, on observations of personal experiences and conversations with relatives, friends, and other associates. These have occurred in the course of carrying out the routine events of everyday life and relate to my own singleness as that status has become a noteworthy event over the past ten or fifteen years.

## Chapter III

ASSIGNING A RATIONALITY TO  
HAVING-NEVER-MARRIED

There is no institutional definition of the phenomenon of having-never-married. As a social entity, singleness is known and understood essentially in terms of the institutional definition of marriage and the family, in other words, in terms of what it is not. As noted in the previous chapter, it is regarded as a somewhat perplexing and elusive phenomenon. The commonsense knowledge this society provides about singleness is not consistent. For example, when I told various people in the community I was conducting a study on singleness I received an array of conflicting replies and comments. One married woman replied, "You mean you're studying loneliness?" Other people expected I would be collecting data in settings such as singles bars and studying, essentially, the "single swinger". The participants referred to their lifestyle with terms such as terrible, rock-bottom, boring, unexciting, uncommitted, convenient, free, and uncomplicated, to name but a few. One individual said, "Why would anyone want to study a sordid lifestyle like mine?" Another noted, "At last someone is disclosing what a good thing we single people have got."

In contrast, the commonsense knowledge of marriage and the family is clearly defined and readily understood. In any given culture it is held as a universal resource which generates

a highly significant framework for defining and assessing the social world (Turner, 1977). To illustrate: terms such as "family outings", "going home for Christmas", and "just the family" are all given sense through that interpretive schema. This resource can then be utilized to make evaluations and judgments about family-oriented occurrences, for example: "They are a close family"; "They have a good marriage"; "His father married late"; "He is the black sheep of the family"; and "My parents are very conservative".

One belief that is generated out of commonsense knowledge of the family is that the state of being married represents the normal, natural, and biological world. As well as being a part of the paramount reality and the normative order, marriage is held to be a part of the natural order.<sup>9</sup> Singleness, it is held, is not a part of the natural order. The statement below might be considered as a classic illustration of the reification of marriage and the subsequent belief that having-never-married constitutes an abnormal and unnatural phenomenon:

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<sup>9</sup> This phenomenon is known as the reification of social reality. Berger and Luckmann (1966:89-90) define reification as: "...the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something else than human products - such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will." The institution of marriage, they note, "...may be reified as an imitation of divine acts of creativity, as a universal mandate of natural law, as the necessary consequence of biological or psychological forces, or, for that matter, as a functional imperative of the social system."

I think we were intended to live in pairs and I think that's the normal and proper way to do it. Those of us who don't mostly I think regret it - regret we didn't - haven't. I think it's normal to live that way. That's the way it was intended. Otherwise there would be one sex and not two. (M 60)<sup>10</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to present a definition of having-never-married from the perspective of the membership of that social category. As noted in the previous chapter, one method by which having-never-married is made visible as a distinct social entity is through the construction of formulations which interpret, qualify, evaluate, judge, and affirm that status. Through those formulations members assign a rationality to their status, and may be said to be constructing a definition of the

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<sup>10</sup> The reader will note that for each quotation cited I have identified the sex of its author. I would like to elucidate the tacit understandings about single men and women which explain my doing that. In North American society, it is commonly thought that singleness in the male, i.e. "bachelorhood", is an attractive and envious status and one that is assumed by choice. In contrast, singleness in the female, i.e. "spinsterhood", is commonly thought of as unattractive and unenvious - a status that is the result of rejection and, therefore, one which must be "coped" with. It is also commonly "understood" that women want to get married and men do not. For both men and women, sexuality is questioned in the individual who does not mate for the purpose of producing children. In the male, virility is associated with proven ability to impregnate a woman. The female who produces no offspring is referred to as "barren". Similarly (although men have been allowed more alternatives than women), masculinity is associated with the enactment of the role of provider for a wife and children, and femininity with the role of nurturer of children and husband and creator of a "home". For women particularly, not to assume this role has meant not to be fulfilled as a person.

The quotations cited throughout will allow the reader to make his or her own decisions about whether or not the data supports these traditional beliefs.

phenomenon of having-never-married. In what follows, I shall explicate the methods by which that definition is produced and identify the essential taken-for-granted, commonsensical features constituting that definition. Emphasis will be placed on the fact that the defining features of having-never-married are generated and given meaning through the interpretive schema of commonsense knowledge of the family, and the institutionalization and reification of that paramount reality.

The following excerpt of talk occurred within the context of a discussion among six women about the ways in which single people are different from married people. This individual took exception to literally every suggestion and finally made this assertion:

The whole point I'm trying to make is probably the most important thing to any individual is having a good relationship with another person. And as a single person that is the big thing that you are lacking. And, I mean we can talk about independence, we can talk about job security, interesting jobs, the whole thing. But because of the way we were created, the number one thing - and none of us have it right now - but that is the number one thing that you look for - a good relationship with another person.

...  
And I'm not saying you can't live a full life and that you can't be an unselfish person and have lots of things if you don't have that relationship. And that is what being single is all about - making your life as interesting and as full as you can without that relationship. (F 34)

This quotation is one member's formulation of what might be called the cardinal defining feature of the single status.

Utilizing commonsense knowledge about the family as a resource with which to locate and define singleness, it makes particular



reference to the relationship this society expects to exist between husband and wife and the crucial effect of that on the quality of everyday life. And, it defines singleness in terms of something that is "lacking". It also illustrates the belief that pairing is a feature of the natural order ("because of the way we were created...that is the number one thing that you look for - a good relationship with another person.").

Commonsense knowledge of the family also provides the sense-making apparatus by which many formulations about having-never-married may be understood in the first place. For example:

I find with myself being single, it's sort of like a ladder. I'll be on a rung for a while and I'm okay and then I'll get between the rungs and I feel like I'm in a vacuum. And so I muster all my forces together and I climb up the next rung. But it also seems as though each rung is an alternative to what I'd really like to be. I'm always sort of compensating. I think I'm always accomplishing something, but what I'm accomplishing is always the second choice to what I'd really like to be doing. (F 34)

I'm really fed up being single. I just don't see it as a very glamorous life - when you're home and nothing is there - that's the terrible part of being single. (M 36)

In the first quotation, it is taken for granted that this individual's "accomplishments" stand as second to marriage, the production of children, and the establishment of a lifestyle centered around the nuclear family. Similarly, in the second quotation it is commonsensically understood that "nothing" refers to the absence of a family to share this individual's home and, further, that "family" refers to a nuclear family that he would like to have established for himself, and not his family of origin, or someone else's family.

As well as providing for having-never-married to be located, defined, and made sense of, knowledge of the family generates the framework by which that status is qualified. In discussing the single lifestyle, it is a common practice for members to make assertions about the subjective meaning of their never-married status. (This may be seen in the three quotations cited above.) Structurally, formulations of this kind include evaluative criteria which are drawn from the resource of commonsense knowledge of the family and declarations about the relative merits of the presence or absence of those criteria in one's own life. Members talk of these as the "advantages and disadvantages" of being single. Of course, there is seldom unanimous consent on the merit of any one criterion. That lies largely in the eye of the beholder.

The positive features of single life, what members consider to be the advantages, turn out to be the negative features of family life. The following statements are some examples of formulations which interpret singleness positively. Again, it is the commonsense knowledge of the family that provides the framework by which they make sense.

My job is constant bombardment by people. I can't stand the impact of somebody else who happens to need something from me when I get home. (F 32)

One of the delights is that I don't have to do a damn thing. I can do whatever I please and not owe anybody my company. I treasure that feeling of complete independence. (M 36)

By not being married you don't get tied up with obligations to other people. If I want to go away for a week - which I just did - I can decide a few days ahead of time and I don't have to worry about kids, husband, and all the rest of it.

...  
It has something to do with freedom of choice - being able to make your own decisions. (F 34)

I've seen myself as different all along - not as the little girl leaving high school and getting married.... Plus I didn't feel I was capable of carrying through a relationship. I wasn't mature enough. (F 31)

I wouldn't mind somebody taking me out but I'd be damned if I wanted to live with him. (F 58)

Similarly, what are considered to be the negative features of single life are seen as the positive features of family life. The following statements identify some of the negative aspects of having-never-married according to some representatives of the membership of that social category:

I think living alone is a poor substitute for sharing a life with somebody else who is compatible and stimulating. (M 60)

One thing about being single that I think is a burden is having to organize your whole life all by yourself. It just takes a lot of time....I would think that two people sharing that load would make life a lot simpler. (M 38)

I still think if I could choose, I'd rather be married. I'd rather not be single. Because I've always wanted to share. It's not only for myself - I like to give and I like to share. And sometimes when you're having a fabulous time or in a beautiful place - it's fine to have friends around you - but if there is someone you really care for - and if you share it with them, it means a hundred percent more. To me life is sharing. If you can really share a good relationship there's nothing better. (F 35)

Every so often (my mother and I) will have a heart to heart talk and I'll tell her how I feel about being single and that I'm not that pleased with it. It's not my preference. And it's not so much the sex - it's the loneliness and the lack of companionship and the fact that I don't have any kids and the fact that I like kids. I like kids - goddamn it - I'd like to have my own kids. (F 36)

I can't think of anything more devastating than reaching my

forties or fifties and not having anybody really close because I'm very close to my family. My mother is very ill right now and I think maybe that's why it is important to have children because they do replace your parents. You always need somebody that is sort of part of you. (F 31)

As the commonsense knowledge of the family and the reification of that institution defines having-never-married, so does it define many characteristic features of the psychological make-up of the never-married individual and many of the priorities that shape the single person's biography and lifestyle. In this society we tend to associate maturity in adults with marriage and parenthood, and we measure the milestones or developmental stages of adulthood in terms of family responsibilities and the developmental stages of one's offspring and spouse.<sup>11</sup> The establishment of a nuclear family is referred to as "settling down". That is the relatively permanent and most significant phase of the life span. "Marriage is the real way to be," said one individual in commenting on the value system of the society.

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<sup>11</sup> Adherence to a lifestyle based on marriage and the nuclear family is even integrated into the psychology of the adult. This is seen particularly in the fields of growth and development and mental health. For example Havighurst (1952:74-77) identifies such adult developmental tasks as (1) selecting a mate, (2) learning to live with a marriage partner, (3) starting a family, and (4) rearing children. About the first, he notes: "Until it is accomplished, the task of finding a marriage partner is at once the most interesting and the most disturbing of the tasks of early adulthood." Erikson (1963:263-8), in his eight stages of psychosocial development, identifies "intimacy" and "generativity" as the stages marking adult psychosocial maturation. Those individuals who do not achieve such heights of development, he claims, may have to cope with their opposites - "isolation" and "stagnation".

Family-related events are also the hall-mark of social achievement. When relatives and old friends get together or exchange news at Christmas, for example, what they share is most often family news - "We had another boy"; "A just graduated from high school"; "J retires this year"; and so on. Family news seems to cover the basics of life's events. It is the "official" news. The remaining events - travelling, work, education, leisure-time activities, material acquisitions, friendships, and the like are the extras. Which of those events one shares as news is more or less arbitrary.

One of the consequences these features of family life have on the single individual's biography and lifestyle is that they are rendered "invisible". The following anecdote illustrates that point:

One time when my cousin was in town visiting her elderly mother I remarked during a telephone conversation that I was sorry I had not visited her mother. She said, "Oh yes dear, I'm sure you're busy with your little life." I felt so insignificant. Here I was well-educated and had held several responsible jobs. Yet that didn't quite measure up. How do you communicate what your life is all about to someone who only knows of marriage and having children? (F 36)

Life experiences and developmental milestones of the single individual are much less distinguishable than those of his or her married counterparts. Many features of his or her biography are known only to passing acquaintances and a few close friends. Many are not recorded at all. There are no family pictures on birthdays and holidays to mark life's special events and the passing of time. As one participant

remarked:

There are no plateaus to be reached when you're single. I haven't done anything outstandingly different from one year to the next. So consequently, I don't really have a gauge to plot my age with. At times I find it difficult to realize how old I am and what it means. My life hasn't changed much since I was twenty. It's sort of a continuum. (M 35)

In the light of the status of family activities and family news, the single person is often left scrambling for something to say when news is exchanged - particularly with relatives and old friends. When someone makes a statement like "We celebrated our twenty-fifth anniversary this year", it is difficult for the single individual to respond with a parallel conversation topic. The news he or she shares tends to be chosen arbitrarily. Typically, it concerns work, travelling, moving to a new locale, leisure-time activities, material acquisitions, and the like. And, of course, for married people, even these activities or events are family-relevant. Many of them are shared with family members and told as family news (e.g. "We went south for Christmas"; "We have seasons tickets for the theatre, too"; and so on). Further to render "invisible" the single person's lifestyle and biography, many events significant to his or her personal history are often consciously omitted. Excluded particularly are sexual relationships or affairs which, of course, are often temporary and of passing relevance. (Furthermore, when these are revealed, they tend to initiate curiosity, anticipation, teasing, and disappointment - responses the single person would prefer

to avoid.)

A second effect of the lack of distinctive events to mark life's developmental phases is that the individual who never marries is thought of as youthful - by the individual himself or herself and by his or her married counterparts. Whether the single individual is 30 or 40 or 60 his or her lifestyle remains unchanged in many ways. This can result in the sudden awareness that one is getting older, that one is now 40, for example, and too old for the image and lifestyle of the "single swinger" and perhaps too old to consider starting a family. Women in their late thirties are often shocked when they realize that if they want children, they had better have them soon. Others face the abrupt discovery that it is already too late. For men of that age, of course, time is not so precious. I asked one male, age 48, what he would think of marrying a woman in her twenties and having children. He replied, "That would be ideal." Another concern, for both sexes, is that the major responsibility for child-rearing rests with women; and, many women are opting not to take on that responsibility. Said one male regretfully:

I can see that a large part of the responsibility rests with the woman. If I were to get married and have a family, I would like my wife to give attention to the children in their early years - but the girls today want their own careers, money, and freedom. A family completely throws that out the window. (M 33)

Single people do recognize and appreciate their freedom. They are fully aware of the positive features of their lifestyle vis-à-vis that of the nuclear family. The following quotation

expresses the dilemma of choosing one lifestyle over the other:

I'm not sure that I won't regret it - I'm not sure. Like I would love to have kids. I'd like to have had them when I was 25.... I'm scared of having kids in a way too because boy that'll disrupt your lifestyle in a hell of a hurry.... But I like kids. I think I'd be a good father. I think it would be fulfilling for me to be a father.... I might regret - that might be a good strong streak of regret when I'm 55 to 60 for not having been married. (M 38)

As the never-married are thought of as youthful, so are they thought of as being less mature and less responsible than their married counterparts. Some unmarried males in business are not offered senior positions, for example. One participant, age 31, said his boss frequently asks him about his plans for marriage. The following anecdotes tell of other examples:

One time I invited a 16 year old cousin to visit me for the summer holidays. My aunt said she didn't know if P was old enough to be without adult supervision. I was 29 at the time. Yet the year before she had visited my sister who is married and happens to be younger than I am. (F 36)

I used to coach a football team for 10 to 12 year olds. I didn't always agree with what their parents were doing. But interfering with parents about their children - it's a very touchy situation. "What does a single guy like you know about kids?" they'd say. (M 37)

A married friend of mine once said she would never take her children to a pediatrician who was not married. (F 38)

A psychiatrist I'm going out with said he was surprised at how stable I am for not being married. I told him I have lots of friends who are over 30, single, and stable. It was like a revelation to him. He was married for about fifteen years and is now separated. (F 36)

Also, regardless of how many years or decades singleness continues, there is a tendency to think of it as a temporary



phenomenon. That it is a temporary phase (not the "real" phase) of adult life may be seen in the living arrangements of single and married people. Traditionally, the buying of a house and the accumulation of furniture and household effects is associated with nest-building, i.e. marriage and preparation for children. This is sanctioned by the society in the tradition and ritual of giving gifts of furniture and household effects to couples on the occasion of their marriage and the birth of their children. Parents and grandparents put family heirlooms away and say, "This is for you when you get married". Consequently, most single people, at least in their twenties and early thirties, do not establish permanent living arrangements. They rent, share apartments or houses, live amidst unpacked boxes, and "make-do" with furniture from the Salvation Army and hand-me-down pots and pans. (On the prairies, this style of living is, or at least used to be, called "light housekeeping". It is also known as "baching".)

The single individual gradually moves into a more permanent style of living and characteristically, by the age of 35 or 40 begins to accumulate possessions of good quality and to establish a permanent home. For most single individuals, this takes time - partly for financial reasons, and partly because for many people there is still the feeling that establishing a permanent home for oneself is rather odd. That is something one does when he or she gets married. A male of about 60 said he has never invested in real estate because he felt that there was no point in having a house without a woman to look after it,

to be the homemaker.

Of course, in the 1970's, with the trend toward liberation from rigid role stereotypes, there are fewer limitations on what is appropriate behavior for men and women - married or single. As well, single people are likely to be more affluent and as such more independent in this decade than they would have been twenty or thirty years ago. Hence, more are buying their own houses or condominiums and establishing permanent homes for themselves at an earlier age than previous generations of singles. And yet:

People find it interesting that I live in a house - weird that I like plants around my house. They prefer to think of their bachelor friends as young swingers - and non-changing. It's as if you've stayed the same age. (M 35)

The other day I phoned to tell my sister and her family I was buying a condominium. She said, "What do you need a house for?" (F 38)

The temporary feature of singleness (or the uncertainty about whether one will marry or not) is also manifest in an ambiguity regarding one's life-goals and plans for the future. Women particularly, while they may have interesting jobs or the potential to develop stimulating careers, often are reluctant to put too much energy into that because they feel they should concentrate on their social lives - on finding a mate. Because this society places so much emphasis on sexual relationships, even women with full professional lives are left with the feeling that something is missing, that their lives are not as gratifying as they would be with that type of relationship to complement or

replace their position in the world of work.<sup>12</sup> One participant who works as a nurse and reluctantly broke off an engagement a few months before this statement was made noted:

I feel there's a change in the air somewhere, but I don't know what it is going to be yet. I'm not settled. I'm obviously not settled. (F 33)<sup>13</sup>

The belief that marriage and family life is the "natural" state and the subsequent institutionalization of that way of life has rendered the single life without institutionalization as a phenomenon in its own right (see Adams, 1976). As this discussion of the definition of having-never-married indicates, that is known and understood essentially in terms of what it is not. This lack of institutional definition leads to the notion that having-never-married is a situation that is a "challenge", that must be "coped with", "adjusted to", "compensated for", perhaps altered, and so on.<sup>14</sup> The following field-note

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<sup>12</sup>A friend of mine in her early forties who has never married recalls a conversation with one of her professors when she was 30 and had just completed an M.A. degree. Her professor suggested that she enter a doctoral program. She said no - that she wanted to get married. Three years later she did enter such a program. Now she speaks of more or less "wasting" those three years.

<sup>13</sup>That statement was made two and a half years ago. This woman has worked as a relief nurse for three years. She has not wanted a permanent position. She has wanted to get married. But neither has she become involved in a sexual relationship of any seriousness. Now, at 36, she is beginning to develop a life plan that is independent of marriage and children.

<sup>14</sup>These observations are supported by the book titles: The Challenge of Being Single (Edwards and Hoover, 1974) and Coping: A Survival Manual for Women Alone (Yates, 1976).

illustrates that concept:

M (female friend, never-married, 37) and I were reading a letter in the Vancouver Sun (April 1, 1978) about having never married. Its author states: "We prefer not to choose a partner than to choose one unwisely. However, to celebrate singleness is only to make a virtue of necessity." M remarked, "That is so true."

One woman, age 38, confessed that she has never adjusted to or accepted being single. Other participants (notably women) perceive of their status as being "hard work", as taking "a lot of energy". Frequently, reference is made to the "successful single" - the individual who presumably has "adjusted", can "cope", and is able "to make a virtue of necessity". To repeat an excerpt of a quotation cited earlier in this chapter, perhaps being a "successful single" is also "...making your life as interesting and as full as you can without that relationship".

Such characteristic responses to singleness are reinforced and interpreted by Adams (1976:50) in the statement below:

...in contrast to marriage or its counterpart of religious dedication, the life style of single people lacks institutional definition and support, imposing on individuals or the groups they have allied themselves with the obligation to develop their own stable and consistent guidelines for living. This lack of societal recognition creates a conflict about status that undercuts the sense of valid personal and social identity (Who are we single individuals? What is our appropriate social sphere?)....

The development of such "guidelines for living" seems to be a further method by which a definition of having-never-married is produced. In their talk about their status, members declare certain "truths", "rules", and "principles". These are formulated as affirmations which seem to do the work of

reinforcing the more objective and positive definitions of their status. For example:

Most single people...are single because that's the result of the life they've chosen. They haven't chosen the single life but they've chosen to do things that either require single status or have resulted in that status. It doesn't seem to be a deliberate thing like getting married. You don't sign a document to say you're single - you just are. I haven't heard people saying, "I'm going to stay single and I'm doing it for the following reasons." It's more the result than the goal. (M 37)

I think choosing to be single has got a lot to do with choosing the way you produce. It's a choice not to produce kids. You're producing work - or something else - papers, creativity, whatever you want. But something other than kids. (F 34)

I'd rather be single than unhappily married. (M 31 et al.)

I think single people value friendships more and are more sensitive to the "companionship needs" of others. I know this especially well as an only child. I'm particularly conscious of developing friends as family. (F 34)

These maxims are also formulated as offerings of advice by an older generation of never-married people to a younger generation, and from what might be called "adjusted", "successful", or "culturally competent" individuals to those who may be less so. The following statement was made near the end of a group discussion; it was offered as a word of advice to a member of the group twenty years this person's junior:

And you have to learn not to be ashamed because you're single. That's the one thing that you should never be. I mean a lot of people think you're second best. Even a lot of single people.... When you think of the things you have done and the things you're capable of doing why shouldn't you be proud of what you are?... When I see these young girls desperate to get married - their parents always asking when they're getting married.... There are things far worse than not being married. (F 58)

On a similar occasion, this maxim was stated to a group of men and women in their thirties:

The big thing is once you hit forty. You think, "Well, I'm not going to have children." Once you get over that point, it's great. (F 50)

The following field-note is a further illustration of the practice of transmitting advice from one generation to the next:

Today at work I was talking to M about my study and about being single myself. (She is 58 and has never married.) She said, "The thirties are the hardest. Now I don't even think about it. I just bash on."

The author of the following formulation describes how she evidently has "adjusted" to being unmarried, and the criteria by which she measures that adjustment. Her insight is offered as a rule which, she asserts, her peers must follow if they want to be "happy".

In the last three or four years I've been much happier being single.... When I was younger I really wanted to get married and yet just not to anyone - whereas now...I feel I can justify being single now. I try and accept people for what they are and enjoy them for what they are and I don't get big expectations about things. And that's one of my outlooks that has really changed. I just don't build things up. I try and accept people for what they are at the time and live for the moment because if you keep living for the future and in a semi-permanent state I don't think you'll ever be happy. If you're still single in your mid-thirties you have got to start thinking that it is a permanent state. I'm not saying that I want it to be a permanent state but unless you come to terms with it you'll never be happy. (F 37)

Another participant attributed his happiness to a wide circle of long-standing, good friends and a stimulating, satisfying career:

I am one of the fortunate ones. I have both of those things. And it's not as if on evenings and weekends I have to rush out and compensate for a dull, frustrating job. (M 48)

Advice is also offered in the form of the telling of advice given in the past by a significant third party, in the following cases, married family members:

My mother stressed that there are other things besides satisfying other people's needs at the expense of your own.... She said to use your brains and your skill and if you find somebody along the way - very nice, and if you don't - very nice.... Nobody is going to put a lot of pressure on you. The pressure is to do something you want to do - not necessarily to get married and have kids. (F 32)

My grandmother told me that even if I do get married I should think seriously about not having children because of my age and the commitment and adjustment bringing up children requires. (F 36)

As well as serving as criteria and as gauges by which the never-married individual might measure the degree to which he or she is a "successful single", these maxims and offerings of advice seem to do the work of clarifying and reinforcing the identity of the never-married. For example:

One participant (F 34), on reading an earlier version of this study, said, "I wish my mother could read this," implying that she can never fully explain to her mother what her life is all about.

C (F 33), after participating in one of the group discussions I arranged, remarked that she felt a lot better about being single after that experience.

In this chapter, I have illustrated how the psychological make-up and lifestyle of the never-married are located, defined, and qualified on the basis of commonsense knowledge of family

roles, responsibilities, and activities and the reification of the institution of the family. It was also discussed how such concepts of the family tend to render invisible certain features of the biography and lifestyle of the never-married. There is no institutional definition of having-never-married. This leads to the notion that it requires an adjustment. How to make that adjustment is affirmed through the identification of maxims about having-never-married and the offering of these in the form of advice. This reinforces the never-married identity and points toward a definition of singleness as a phenomenon in its own right.



## Chapter IV

## ACCOUNTING FOR BEING STILL SINGLE

1. The Demand for an Account

It is a basic premise that as a necessary condition for social life co-members share certain beliefs and values and adhere to certain social norms which dictate conduct and personal attributes. These beliefs, values, and norms are taught and their adherence sanctioned by a variety of methods which serve to reinforce them and to ensure conformity. Members who have been "properly" socialized demonstrate "appropriate" behaviors and are said to be culturally competent.<sup>15</sup>

However, it is also given that because of the infinite range of human variation there are individuals who, for a variety of reasons, do not or cannot conform to the expectations of a particular social group. In the event that an expression of non-conformity does occur, the normative order is threatened. In the interest of preserving that order the non-conformist, the culturally incompetent, or the deviant is taken to task.

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<sup>15</sup> Among ethnomethodologists, the term "competence" is used to refer to the display of commonsense knowledge of the social structures of any given collective enterprise that is provided by its bona fide members. This is based on Garfinkel's definition which states: "I use the term 'competence' to mean the claim that a collectivity member is entitled to exercise that he is capable of managing his everyday affairs without interference. That members can take such claim for granted I refer to by speaking of a person as a 'bona fide' collectivity member" (Garfinkel: 1967:57). It is this use of the term "competence" that is employed here.

Members of any given collective enterprise are held accountable for their actions; their co-members have the right to expect such accountability, and they have the right to ask for an account of inappropriate behavior.<sup>16</sup> Members also have the right to assess cultural competence on the basis of that account and do so by using criteria generated by a stock range of accounts that testify to competence. Thus the process of accounting is an interlocking one, i.e. accounts are expected and requested, delivered, and also heard, assessed, challenged, and accepted or rejected (see Turner, 1974).

In this culture, one of the most dominant, highly visible, and highly favored values is marriage. That all culturally

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<sup>16</sup>In view of the fact that this study claims an ethnomethodological framework, I would like to emphasize that it is not Garfinkel's definition of "accountability" that is employed in this chapter, but rather that of Scott and Lyman. In their paper, titled "Accounts" (1968:46-7), Scott and Lyman define an account as "... a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry. Such devices are a crucial element in the social order since they prevent conflicts from arising by verbally bridging the gap between action and expectation. Moreover, accounts are 'situated' according to the statuses of the interactants, and are standardized within cultures so that certain accounts are terminologically stabilized and routinely expected when activity falls outside the domain of expectations." The authors identify two types of accounts; excuses and justifications. "Justifications are accounts in which one accepts responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it.... Excuses are accounts in which one admits that the act in question is bad, wrong, or inappropriate but denies full responsibility."

competent individuals will marry is simply assumed. It is also assumed that they will marry by a certain age. In this culture that age is between 20 and 25 for women and between 25 and 30 for men.<sup>17</sup> Individuals who do not marry around that age experience considerable pressure about their unmarried status. When friends and relatives marry they say, "I can hardly wait until it's your turn"; or "You'll be next!". People ask anticipatively, "Who was that you were with at the party?" or "How are you and X getting along?" or "Have you met anyone lately?" That pressure also comes from within. Many single people themselves wonder if they really will "be next" - because in actual fact "no" they have not "met anyone lately" and "no" they are not "getting along with X". Often such individuals put considerable energy both into searching for a mate and dealing with the disappointment (their own and that of concerned relatives and friends) that a mate has not been found.

If an individual has not married between the ages of 25 and 30 this becomes observable and mentionable. Small children may be heard to ask the single woman, "Where is your daddy?" or

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<sup>17</sup> I recall a classmate who, at the age of 20 (in 1959), was concerned that she had not "even met anyone yet". "Do you realize that L (her older sister) was engaged by the time she was my age?" she said fretfully. Lest the reader think that young women do not think that way today, I am told particularly by friends who meet young women in business offices that many do. For example, I heard recently about a 19 year old who was not interested in learning any more than was absolutely necessary about her clerical job because she "just wanted to get married anyway".

"Don't you want to get married and have babies?" Nieces and nephews say they want some cousins. Parents delicately suggest, "Isn't it about time you settled down?" And they lament because they are not yet grandparents and note discreetly, "I guess we'll have to rely on our other children for that".<sup>18</sup> Then, when it looks as if there is no "hope", when singleness begins to look like a permanent status - people tend to stop asking. As one 35 year old male stated:

After a while even your mother gives up on you.

Once the single person reaches the age of about 30, the subject of marital status is approached with care and discretion. Politely, friends and relatives inquire about work and university courses, about trips to Tahiti and skiing in Aspen. Even the most daring of mothers would hesitate to ask if her daughter is "seeing anyone", or if her son has "any plans for the future". One participant noted that it is almost a "no no" to discuss the subject:

When my mother calls she never asks if I'm going out with any men. Even since I have told her about C she never asks about him or if I'm still seeing him - when she calls me. I guess it's kind of personal, but it also makes me think she doesn't care. (F 36)

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One friend of mine (who incidently married at 28), when she was about 24 overheard her mother telling friends that N had been a bridesmaid seven times. "At least the girls like her," sighed N's mother.

On the other hand:

One of my Aunts and Uncles called me today. When my uncle got on the phone, he said, "Hi you old maid - how are ya' doing?"

Regardless of the manner in which the never-married are responded to, the topic of their singleness is a delicate one. For individuals who are otherwise competent, their having never married is seen as unexpected, perplexing, odd, disappointing, sad, and the like. Individuals who have never married belong to a social category which potentially lies beyond the boundaries of cultural competence. Hence, it is demanded by the culture that such individuals account for their status. That means that in the course of conducting the affairs of everyday life the single individual is vulnerable in any number of social settings to being asked why he or she has never married. For example:

One time when I was telling a friend of mine about my family background and about my parents marital problems, she said, "Well, the obvious question is - is that why you never married?" (F 38)

Another participant, who is a counsellor in a junior college, spoke of a similar experience:

Just lately three or four of the students - who are upgrading their education and are between 20 and 25 - that I've had individual conversations with have stopped me and said, "J why aren't you married?" (M 38)

The necessity to account for one's having never married, i.e. to provide an answer to questions such as those above, may be identified as one of the demand characteristics of the single

status. It is the focus of this chapter to examine the process of providing and receiving such accounts as they occurred in conversation among the participants of this study. It includes an overview of the content that constitutes a rationale for not marrying, and it includes an analysis of some of the activities accomplished during the interactions in which that rationale was offered and received. It does not, of course, seek to explain literally the reasons why single people as a category or as individuals do not marry. Nor does it profess that there exists, in fact, a "real" reason.

But prior to that I would like to point out a significant feature of the occasions arranged for the purpose of this study. By virtue of merely attending these occasions, participants were providing for a public display of their having never married and thus, their potential cultural incompetence. Their very presence in these group discussions made it available for others to be cognizant of that potential and, in fact, to challenge and assess their competence. Furthermore, given that singleness has been labelled as a form of deviance, by participating in this study members risked being discredited and stigmatized (see Goffman, 1963). As the field-note below indicates, being the recipient of an invitation to participate in a study about the lifestyle of the never-married is a dubious honor:

Following the party (which I had for the participants of this study) one woman (age 38) told me she had the feeling she was going out to meet all the rejects. Another member (a male, age 36) admitted that, while he was impressed with all the people

he met, he had expected to meet a bunch of losers.<sup>19</sup>

While it may be argued, as well, that these occasions were social occasions much like many others one might attend in the world of everyday life, it is also significant to consider that unique to these occasions was the core activity of discussing having-never-married. Presumably, on most comparable social occasions, one's having never married, if it were visible at all, would not likely be the focus of attention. In fact, one might attend similar social events with a companion and therefore "pass" as a married couple or at least "cover" one's marital status. On other occasions, where one's marital status might be more visible and where one might place his or her integrity in jeopardy or risk being stigmatized, he or she might refrain from attending such an occasion altogether. In the settings arranged for this study, such strategies for managing one's having never married would not have been compatible with one's participation in them.<sup>20</sup>

The interaction below illustrates one participant's

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<sup>19</sup> Parallel situations might be receiving an invitation to a party one's psychiatrist might have for all the patients he or she had seen over a given year, or being invited to a social gathering for all the students who failed their final examination.

<sup>20</sup> See Goffman (1963:41-104) for a discussion of the methods by which discredited and discreditable persons manage the social implications of such attributes.

formulation of the potential risk inherent in participating in this study and his initial reaction to being asked to do so:

- V: I'm wondering how people reacted when I called about this, when I said I was doing a study about single people. I'm just sort of curious about how you responded or what you thought of. (R)
- C: I thought it was uh - it's the sort of invitation that you almost feel you should say no to, until you think about it for a moment. (M 35)
- N: Why would you think of saying no? (F 50)
- C: Well, you know, here is an intrusion on your privacy and someone is suddenly trying to put you under the light of inspection to examine why it is you're still in the state you are in. That's an inference you might take from it - as to why it is you are as you are.

In this interaction, C demonstrates the commonsense knowledge that accounts for having never married are expected and requested and, on the basis of this, makes the assumption that any study of singleness would "naturally" include a demand for an account of why one has never married and, as well, an assessment of that account.<sup>21</sup> To provide such an account is an activity that is generated simply by his categorical membership and one which, as C seems to be aware, he could be called upon to engage in on this particular occasion, and if so, must engage in - lest his competence be further jeopardized.

## 2. The Search for an Account

Accounts, i.e. statements of "why" or the "reason" certain

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<sup>21</sup>As Bruce Katz pointed out to me, this could also indicate this individual's familiarity with the goals and methods of traditional sociology.



people never marry, are formulated by members and non-members of the category in question - concerned mothers and fathers, curious neighbors, suspicious employers, co-workers, friends, rejected and rejecting lovers, and so on. They tend to begin with the suspicion of unmarriageability which is then followed by a search for manifestations which would confirm or deny that suspicion. Should such unmarriageability be determined, then an "adequate" and "understandable" account has been found. Examples of such accounts which would make not marrying "understandable" (although not necessarily essential) are references to gross physical unattractiveness, physical handicaps, chronic physical illnesses, psychotic behaviors, criminal behaviors, and the like.

However, not all never-married persons are able to offer such "understandable" accounts for their singleness. Many are found, at least on the surface, to be marriageable. Hence, more covert manifestations of their unmarriageability are looked for. People in this group are often thought of as "losers", "loners", or "social misfits". Their possible personal attributes are: "fear of emotional commitments", "immaturity", "lack of social skills", "selfishness", "too independent", "too domineering", "uneasiness with members of the opposite sex", "too idealistic", and so on. In the world of everyday life, these attributes are employed in such statements as: "What a temper! It's easy to see why she isn't married" or "He always was shy around women. I guess that's why he never married".

But even this degree of searching for unmarriedability or cultural incompetence does not always result in an "adequate" account for having never married. Most people, including those with the personal attributes cited in the preceding paragraphs, do marry. To have never married (or "lived with anyone") is a curiosity. In everyday life, the search for an "adequate" explanation continues with bewilderment and the assertion that there "must be a reason". Trading on criteria for assessing cultural competence and on commonsense knowledge of the family, members of this society might ask one who has never married: "You seem to have a lot to give - you're good-looking - stable - you like children - you have a sense of humor. How come you're not married? There must be some reason".

The data which follows takes the aforementioned accounting process as a point of departure. It will be recalled that the participants in this study were considered to be competent and "successful" members of this society. Except for having never married, they have met its demands, i.e. they are educated and employed, they are physically and mentally healthy, and they live relatively full, productive lives. In short, they are the types of people whose marital status any member of this society would question in the manner illustrated in the quotation cited above.

In conversations among the never-married about singleness, accounts for that status are offered spontaneously. Participants indicate the tacit understanding that explanations and justifications for having never married are a perfectly "normal" and

"natural" feature of the subject of singleness. Many people say that as they get older they seldom think about being single and that they certainly are not bothered by it. They themselves do not see it as a particularly delicate subject, or one that should make anyone uncomfortable, and they certainly do not think of it as a manifestation of incompetence. And yet, being asked, "How come you are not married?", they agree, seems like a reasonable question:

It's almost as if they [friends and relatives] are asking me to come to grips with it. And I do try to answer. It sounds like a reasonable question. I don't feel forced to answer but it sounds like a reasonable one. Well, why the hell aren't you married? (M 31)

### 3. Testifying to Cultural Competence

It was discussed in the introduction to this chapter that one of the most dominant, highly visible, and highly favored values in this culture is marriage. To share that value would be to display at least one important criterion attesting to cultural competence. While the never-married have obviously not provided for a display of their acceptance of that value by actually marrying, they do provide for such a display in their talk. It was mentioned in probably every conversation on singleness that never-married people do not necessarily have an aversion to marriage per se, nor do they make a conscious decision never to marry. In this section, I shall present a selection of accounts which indicate some of the methods by which the never-married provide for a display of competence in

their talk about having never married and the single lifestyle.

I've always had it in my mind to get married. The main reason why I'm still single is that I have been travelling and getting established in my work. (M 31)

I presume this individual is aware of the possible discrediting of his never-married status and of his vulnerability to being discredited on the occasion of this talk. In his account for being "still single" he clearly makes it available for his co-participants that he does indeed share the values of the culture. He implies that because he did not marry at an age when most men do marry, he certainly has no definite intention not to marry. He further testifies to competence by identifying other values which are undisputably compatible with cultural competence. In fact, by emphasizing the importance of travelling and establishing his career he will perhaps be seen by his peers as displaying not only an "adequate" account but, as well, an "admirable" account for having never married.

The quotation below introduces a second method by which competence may be demonstrated:

I'm sure everyone of us sitting here could have married if we'd wanted to. (M 37)

This declaration affirms that at least the never-married people present on this occasion are culturally competent. It is not because of some handicap or flaw that they have never married. Nor is it that they have all been rejected or are innocent victims of some terrible fate. Rather, they have chosen not to

marry. If they wanted to be married, they could be.

This widely-held assertion of competence may be further reinforced by personal anecdotes which indicate that there have been significant men or women in one's life - men or women one might have married. By this means competence is displayed by the fact that one was capable of establishing heterosexual relationships, did establish those relationships, and was perhaps considered, or considered another, as a potential mate.

I've met some men sure I've met some men in my life. I can't say that I've never had a man in my life. And I can honestly say that I've met some really nice men but I've met men that have never really - it's never been quite the right - for the two of us. (F 36)

This individual confirms that she is not a "reject", that she has had relationships with men - and, men who are "really nice". This serves to indicate to her listeners that the men she has met are not "rejects" either - that she is capable of attracting men who are equally competent. In her final utterance, she provides an additional display of competence. By saying the relationships were never "right" for both individuals, I take it she is supporting the cultural value that while marriage in its own right is certainly important it is even more important to have a "good" marriage. While she might have married any one of these men, perhaps because of timing, other priorities, incompatibilities, it was seen, in the interest of the values of the culture, as "better" not to.

In keeping with the assertion that people could marry if

they wanted to and that those who never do certainly have had the opportunity, it is a feature of the biographies of the never-married that they include accounts of the encounters with those persons one might have married. Below are some examples of those biographical accounts:

- M: Thinking back now - there was this fellow I knew when I was overseas. We could have made a go of it. Damn it. He got transferred down to Africa.... But we were so contented and happy with one another - we had a ball together. (F 58)
- R: You should have been smart and asked for a transfer to Africa too. (F 58)
- M: I was too bloody dumb.... I was too daft.... Why I didn't I'll never know.

You know there were a lot of fellows I'm sure I could have made something with, but I bungled a lot of situations.... There was a fellow at university when I was there but I never thought of it. He kept coming around...and I was so busy - and I had put all this money into going to university and I was so busy trying to pass...and he kept coming around and wanting to know where I was going for lunch and so on and I would say, "Oh I've got to study." And the next year when I finished I suddenly thought he was interested in me and I didn't even give him five minutes notice.

...  
And one time when I was working at the Vancouver General - this was when I was young and stupid and didn't know one bean from another - I said to this other nurse I'm going home for lunch now. And this interne said "Oh can I come with you?" And I said "You? All I'm having is a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of milk." And he would have been quite happy with that but I said "Oh no...." I could have been off for the afternoon with him... but I was too stupid. I didn't know anything about it! (F 53)

Such persons and experiences are not significant only for the individual directly involved. Their place in one's biography is also noted by one's friends and relatives:

- V: Do you ever feel that you missed out on something? (R)

M: That's something that J and E [married friends] have asked me.... J asked me about five years ago - did I ever regret not marrying so and so.

...

This person J was asking about - I think we really could have had a very good relationship but the time wasn't right for me - and along came somebody else who was much more available. (F 58)

The biographical significance of these persons and experiences is also displayed in the following anecdote:

One of my aunts never got married and I can remember now when I was a kid hearing about this guy Noel who came to the house with my aunt.... Why should I remember this guy's name? Obviously it must have been talked about a lot. I think everybody scared the hell out of Noel.... I think he was just an incidental beau and they say poor Noel got away.... Yet she lived a full professional life. I wonder who they'll match me up with when the time comes. (M 38)

These incidents suggest that friends and relatives also take the necessary measures to reinforce the competence of their never-married associates. In the first incident, it seems that J is saying to her friend, "I know you had the choice to marry - that you could have, had you wanted to". And, in the second it appears that members of this individual's family were displaying for each other that their unmarried member was also a competent person in that she had had a beau. Evidently, she was not unmarried because she was unattractive to men or had never been acquainted with them.

To testify to the competence of unmarried friends and relatives is perhaps to testify to one's own competence as well. As Goffman (1963) notes, one of the consequences of possessing attributes which are discrediting and stigmatizing is that the

persons those individuals associate with are also vulnerable to being discredited. Hence, by reinforcing the worth of never-married associates one is saying, "My associates are competent people; therefore, I am competent too". One effect of not crediting the never-married with such competence is described in the statement below:

My brother thinks there is something wrong with you [if you are not married].... To him it's a disgrace. Do you know that he is embarrassed when he has to introduce me as a maiden sister! (F 58)

A third method of displaying cultural competence through accounting for having never-married may be seen in this introspective comment:

I have some thoughts on my family...but I'm not so sure that's really what it is. (F 31)

Accounts in this category offer a stereotypical explanation for not marrying, i.e. a discreditable attribute or circumstance which could be a possible reason for singleness. Many are grounded in Freudian psychology and refer to an "unhappy" home-life or parents who had a "poor" marriage and a subsequent fear of having a comparable experience. Similarly, a number of accounts offered by women make reference to father-daughter relationships that were not "close", being an only child, or having no brothers and the possible negative effect of those experiences on the ability to establish adult heterosexual relationships. Characteristically, these accounts include, as



well, an expression of doubt about the validity of those explanations. The following account is one example:

My father was never like a friend - I was never close to him ever. He never gave me any love - I mean he was my father and perhaps in his own way he did, but to me it wasn't love and affection. I can never remember sitting on his lap or him giving me a hug or a kiss other than in a formal situation. I definitely don't have a close relationship with him. And I hated the way he treated my mother - I just hated it. And I tried to make my mother leave him. I could say well perhaps I'm not married because you know - my parents - if that's marriage, forget it!

...

But I don't know consciously if that's affecting me - I mean - I'm sure...I think you could put that as a barrier. I'm not saying there aren't reasons - and probably that I don't even know with my relationships with men that are affected by that. There must be. On the other hand you see people with really rough childhoods...and they get married and they are happy.  
(F 37)

While admitting to a childhood experience compatible with a common belief about why people never marry and acknowledging that it is a possible explanation, the essence of this account is that this individual questions the "real" significance of those factors. By noting that people with similar experiences do marry - and marry happily, she also offers proof of their invalidity as explanations for singleness. Thus, she reinforces her own worthiness and credibility as a member of the culture, and she suggests that she knows she is a marriageable person in spite of common cultural beliefs about why people never marry.

In a fourth type of accounting practice a cultural belief explaining singleness is acknowledged and then challenged in terms of its validity - not as a reason for having never married - but as a manifestation of incompetence, abnormality, or deviance.

This excerpt of talk both elucidates and challenges what is perhaps the most common of those stereotypical beliefs:

I've been accused of being rather distant with people who - you know - with girls with whom I've been fairly close - but no closer. They say, "You're afraid of a meaningful relationship." Well perhaps, but what's wrong with that? I'm protecting my freedom I guess. It's what I choose to do, so why is that abnormal? (M 35)

This individual refers to the widely-held assumption that people who do not marry have a "problem" with intimate relationships - that they are "afraid" of the commitment or are not "capable" of establishing a "meaningful" relationship. He criticizes the culture for not accepting personal choice as an "adequate" account for having never married - for looking at such an account with skepticism and searching for the "real" reason. While acknowledging the possibility that he is "afraid of a meaningful relationship", he also challenges the validity of that as a criterion of cultural incompetence. His argument is further reinforced by reference to his adherence to other values of the culture - freedom and choice, as if to suggest that surely in a culture such as ours no individual can be denied such basic rights as freedom and choice.

In the last type of account testifying to cultural competence that I have identified, traditional values, beliefs, and norms about male-female relationships are challenged - specifically in the accounts of female participants. Thus:

I've backed out of two situations and it was me because I really felt my perimeters were getting smaller and smaller and smaller.

And you know - I fight against that - I really do. I have to have a certain amount of independence.... And that seems to be really hard for fellows to deal with. I think that a lot of them still feel that they have to be the provider - they have to be everything - and they want you on their terms. (F 35)

You felt that the men who were after you wanted to take you over and you didn't want to lose your identity. You wanted to be an individual. I always felt I wanted to be something to myself. (F 58)

Both of these women point out that they have had relationships with men - that they were not "rejected" or "incapable" of establishing heterosexual relationships. By pointing this out, they also add credibility to the argument they are about to make. They cannot be accused of not knowing what they are talking about because of their lack of experiences with men. In the first account it is also made explicit that it was she who made the choice to be single - or at least to be independent. This further serves to indicate that she is not a "reject" - she is not single because men are not interested in her.

These accounts (like the one cited above) frame singleness within two highly-approved criteria of cultural competence - independence and individuality. And, while these have traditionally been applied more to men than women, they are attributes which would be hard to locate outside the boundaries of competence.

In the accounts cited in this section stereotypical explanations for having never married are raised and challenged. They are challenged in terms of their validity as accounts of the "real" reason for having never married and in terms of their validity as criteria of incompetence. This activity is described

by Goffman (1963:143-5) in his discussion of one group of deviants which he calls the "disaffiliates". He defines these as individuals

...who act irregularly and somewhat rebelliously in connection with our basic institutions - the family, the age-grade system, the stereotyped role-division between the sexes, legitimate full-time employment involving maintenance of a single governmentally ratified personal identity, and segregation by class and race.

In addition, he notes that "disaffiliates" or "social deviants":

...often feel that they are not merely equal to but better than normals, and that the life they lead is better than that lived by the persons they would be otherwise.

Thus, the accounts for having never married that members of that category themselves offer are based, not on assumptions of incompetence, but rather on criteria which might be said to testify to an exemplary degree of cultural competence. In sum:

I know why I'm single. I haven't wanted to compromise my ideal of what I want in a relationship. (M 48)

I would now like to present an account for having never married within its interactional context. The following excerpt of talk is from a light-hearted and lively conversation among a group of what Goffman would call "disaffiliates". The participants support the notion that the single life is indeed the "good life".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Symbols used in transcriptions are as follows: //indicates point at which talk is overlapped, [ indicates talk which begins simultaneously, capital letters indicate increased volume, words underlined indicate stress, ( ) indicates what was said is not transcribable.

S: Why - I'd like to ask a question - Why - Did people in this room remain single by choice or by chance or by default? - Or is that too tough a question? (F 32)

R: I have no idea. (M 36)

V: The books say by default ha ha ha (R)

S: Ha ha ha

V: The few//words that are written -

S: Or by conscious or unconscious choice. I'm not talking about like they plotted their lives to be single but like - that they - recognize in retrospect that there were many times that they could have got married and they somehow always managed not to do that.

B: Yeah there must be some little aversion to it somewhere along the line. (M 35)

S: That's my

J: [Un huh (M 35)

R: [Right

B: [THERE IS

S: [That's my theory. THAT'S MY THEORY.

B: Yeah because ah

V: Yeah mine too.

B: Yeah there's always that turning point where you've sort of

S: You've got a choice ha ha

B: Yeah you still have that choice.

R: I don't want to get into deep heavies

B: Mmm hmm

R: But yeah - because I have an aversion - a difficulty with really extremely close relationships (V: Mmm hmm) and marriage is a pretty close relationship. (V: Mmm hmm)

S: Or distant ha ha

R: And when I think of the times when I've come close - which is three - ah - yeah - it's interesting because it wasn't plotted (B: Mmm hmm) or planned as you're saying - it just suddenly - it ended.

B: Well there's a little inertia there too eh with everybody. I mean - it's just you know - it's easier to to stay single than to make another move in any - any direction.

V: Well except that most people don't though.

R: And the older you get the easier it gets.

B: Yeah right but uh

V: Only ten percent

B: You're sorta - if you're born single - like you're single.

S: Ha ha ha

.....Laughter.....

V: One girl the other day//

J: If the Lord meant you to be married you'd be born that way.

.....Laughter.....

S initiates the interaction by posing what could be heard as a rather personal question. It could also be heard that she has introduced a touchy subject. But by addressing her query to "the people in this room" she allows for the generalization of an answer, i.e. her co-participants are given the opportunity to offer accounts of why people in general remain single and not necessarily why they personally have done so. She also acknowledges (as if it is taken for granted) the cultural competence of her co-participants by making reference to the "many times that they could have got married...". R later reinforces that assumption by providing a personal account in

which he notes the number of times he has "come close" to marrying.

Through this exchange the participants develop a sense of camaraderie and a sense of co-membership in the social category of having-never-married. They present themselves as an in-group with a shared knowledge - a knowledge which is not necessarily available to non-members. For example, V notes ironically that the knowledge found in "the books" about singleness does not correspond with real life. Later, S adds a wisecrack ("or distant") in response to R's statement that "marriage is a pretty close relationship", which serves to put down marriage and reinforce the superiority of singleness. As well, there is unanimous agreement that people are single by choice and a concerted expression of confidence in that decision. It is also asserted that it is an "easy" decision to make, and that being single seems the "natural" and "normal" way to be.

#### 4. Assessing Cultural Competence

It was noted earlier that accounts are not merely provided or delivered. They are also listened to, assessed, challenged, queried, accepted/rejected, and so on. Given this interlocking feature of the process of accounting, should members wish to demonstrate their cultural competence they must adhere to at least three conditions. First, they must conform to the initial demand by providing such an account. Second, they must provide an account the content of which is within the boundaries of cultural beliefs and values. Third, they must do that in a

manner that utilizes culturally-approved methods of interaction. While it may be noted that these conditions are not mutually exclusive, the preceding section focused particularly on the second, i.e. how the participants' accounts for having never married were framed by culturally-approved values. Through those accounts, members express competence, a sense of worth, self-assurance, and confidence that the decision to remain single has been the "right" decision. They refer either to the choice not to marry or to extenuating circumstances whereby the "time" was not "right" or one did not meet (or has not met) the "right" person. In a sense, the single individual has not had a "real" or "suitable" opportunity to marry.

Of course, not all single people perceive their singleness in the jovial and confident manner depicted in the previous interaction. Some individuals, while they would not argue with the assertions noted above (that they have remained single because of choice, poor timing, or not having met the "right" person), are not content with the lifestyle those circumstances have necessitated. One male about 60 spoke of regretting that he never married. In a strained conversation (with what seemed like more silences than talk) we had the following exchange:

- V: Some people I've talked to say that uh they think they really didn't want to get married - that they steered away from the possibilities - that everytime they got close to making a commitment they got scared and ran the other way.
- C: Could be -- could be. (said curtly)
- V: I know some people who say definitely they don't want to marry.



C: They're just talking rubbish.

V: Well, I know one fellow who's about 36 or 37 - he spends a lot of time by himself - with his various interests and hobbies and he works long hours. He seems to make a point of staying alone. And he says he wants it that way.

C: Mmm hmm. Bully for him. He sounds like a nut. Um I think most people who talk in this vein are just uh covering up. They're just talking rubbish. I recall a few years ago a young lad who was then in his early twenties claiming that he was going to be a bachelor and he held me up as his prime example of of his uh model. And I said forget it. Uh he now is married and has two children.

On another occasion, a 36 year old woman expressed similar feelings of disappointment about being single. In a conversation which took place at a dinner party to which she invited two other female friends and me, we had a candid and emotionally-laden discussion (which lasted the entire evening) about the general features of the single lifestyle and the reasons why we as individuals and single people as a social category have never married. What follows is an excerpt from that conversation. It illustrates the interlocking feature of the process of accounting. In particular, it stands as one example of what occurs inter-actionally when an account for having never married is challenged and rejected.<sup>23</sup>

G: I feel that I'm really waning. I'm I feel like I'm almost a 16 year old. That's how stupid and naive I am. (F 36)

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<sup>23</sup>C, B, and G are good friends who see each other frequently. When I received G's invitation to dinner, knowing that this would be a group of single women, I asked for permission to tape the conversation. For the record, I would like to note that C was previously married and has been divorced for several years.

C: I guess you see// (F 30)

G: I'm not really naive or stupid at all. I just feel that I I've been so deprived (laughingly) I feel like I'm a 16 year old. That's exactly how I feel.

C: Do you feel like "the turning point in life - that you've been left out?

V: How do you explain that G.? (R)

G: Huh?

C: Do you feel like "The Turning Point" - like the movie last night?

G: I feel that I have hit my turning point and I feel that I have lacked in a relationship. And I feel that I haven't been able to - what really makes me upset is that I feel that I could give a lot to a relationship.

V: Then you're not using your potential.

G: No.

C: Yeah

G: But maybe I I purposely did that on my own. Who's to say?

V: Well one of the

G: You know we all have choices.

C: Yes.

V: Yeah. They say. One of the things I'm interested in looking at is how people explain to themselves why they're not married or why they're not in a relationship.

G: Well I can go by my knowledge of psychiatry and I can say that everybody has a choice and that you cannot blame anybody for your your whatever it is - your lot in life. That you've made your choice. But I can't say that it is totally that. I think it's partly also chance.

B: Oh definitely. (F 31)

C: No. I think choice has a lot to do with it.

G: Sure it has, but C. I haven't met anybody - goddamn - I've met a lot of assholes, but I haven't//

C: Yeah but have you gone out and searrccched for them?

G: I refuse to go out and search for them.

C: Have you stayed with your - okay but

B: Yeah but they're not going to knock on your door.

C: Have you stayed with your your little group of friends who are all married?

G: But C- I have gone through this whole business about going to singles bars - my God girl - I've gone through the whole lot.

B: But have you been receptive at singles bars?

G: I've met some men sure I've met some men in my life. I can't say that I've never had a man in my life. And I can honestly say that I've met some really nice men but I've met men that have never really - it's never been quite the right - for the two of us.

G sets off the interaction with some powerful, self-depreciating remarks about how she personally is feeling about not having married and about not having been involved recently in a sexual relationship. Contrary to the stance taken by most single people, these remarks could be heard as an admission of cultural incompetence - a confession that at least some of the derogatory stereotypes about single people are, in fact, true.

In face to face interaction, such an admission or confession has the effect of threatening the equilibrium of an exchange. In Goffman's terminology, it is a threat to face.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Goffman (1967:5-45) in his paper "On Face-work" defines "face" as "...the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes." The means by which people make their activities consistent with face, Goffman entitles "face-work". Such means, or "face-saving practices", consist of culturally-determined, tacit behaviors which operate to counteract incidents which are a potential threat to face. They are attended to in virtually every occasion of talk. The maintenance of face, notes Goffman, is a condition of interaction, not its objective.

In this interaction, G's remarks are seen as face-threatening. Had that threat remained unresolved, the integrity of the occasion would have been jeopardized. G's guests would have been placed in the position of attending to an admission of incompetence by their hostess, and the interaction would have taken quite a different turn. However, in the interest of face-saving G quickly picks up on that possibility and restores face by correcting her remarks (about "waning" and being "stupid and naive"). She also points to an extenuating circumstance - the fact that she has been "deprived" - to explain why she feels this way about herself, i.e. because she has been deprived of an intimate relationship those feelings are understandable. She also attempts to make light of the situation (perhaps to attenuate the depression she is displaying) by talking about her feelings laughingly.

G also affirms her competence in a more positive way by noting that she could "give a lot to a relationship." This indicates that she believes she is capable of establishing an intimate relationship and that she is a marriageable person. Face-savily, V acknowledges that G does have the potential for that and reinforces her claim of worth and competence.

Following that exchange, G employs what Goffman would call the aggressive use of face-work by stating "maybe I I purposely did that on my own." However, she later admits herself that she thinks "it's partly also chance." While she gets brief statements of agreement by V and B, what follows is a clear difference of opinion among the four friends. C takes

literally G's assertion that she may be unmarried by choice and states on two occasions that G has chosen her lot. G continues to assert that she is single "by chance" and angrily raises the extenuating circumstance that she has not "met anybody", i.e. met anybody who would be suitable as a mate.

C also continues to hold her line. While apparently taking it for granted that G is a marriageable person, she asks her accusingly if she has tried to meet ("searched for") a potential mate. When G attempts once more to affirm her competence by confirming that she has tried to meet potential mates, B then suggests that perhaps she has not done the "work" necessary to attract such persons ("but have you been receptive at singles bars?").<sup>25</sup>

The interactions above provide for a display of the assessment of accounts for having never married. The former offers an acceptance, and the latter two a rejection. The accounts themselves might be thought of as the two classic explanations for having never married: (1) that one chooses to be single, and (2) that one has not met the "right" person.

A second feature of the process of assessing accounts for having never married is that a second assessment is done. There is the notion of an underlying reason for one's choice to be single or for the extenuating circumstances that resulted in singleness. This generates a retrospective assessment of those accounts to determine whether they, in fact, offer the "real"

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<sup>25</sup>What constitutes that "work" will be discussed in Chapter V in the section "Meeting People".

reason for having never married. Attempts are made to explain why it is that certain people choose to be single, or why it is they never "meet anybody" or have not met the "right" person or the "time" has never been "right". Below is one participant's formulation of that notion:

J: I keep wondering if there are some things that I'm doing that I don't know about that are blocking me from possibly experiencing a wonderful married relationship... Somewhere there's that fear...that if I'm not living a full life because of something I'm doing and not just because of an accidental occurrence - I keep thinking - if that's true I want to know about it now!

...  
It's almost as though I do believe...that popular stereotype that people have of single people.

...  
that basically the reason why they're single is because they're not well adjusted and they have some interpersonal problems and - you know - it's a flaw. And so some of that I guess I accept or consider that they might be right.

(M 38)

N: They probably are. (M 31)

.....Laughter.....

Reflections on that notion (however serious or light-hearted) are formulated as exposés - as admissions of personal idiosyncrasies, values, short-comings, inhibitions, fears, and the like. In short, they are qualities which are considered to be incompatible with taking the initiative to marry. For example:

I'm an only child and I've thought that I should be more aggressive and part of my problem is that I do hold back.  
(F 35)

Maybe we're hesitant about the emotional commitment. (M 33)

Maybe I'm slow in development compared to other people.  
(F 30)

The thought of a bad marriage scares the hell out of me.  
(F 38)

I couldn't put up with this nonsense - this man-woman business - where they sort of were all over you. I wouldn't have made a nice wife. (F 58)

Interactionally, such formulations generate a self-examination - a kind of soul-searching for the distinctive features of the single personality and character. Members ask how they are different from people who marry, and then they ask whether those differences have motivated them not to marry or whether they are consequences of having not married. To conclude this chapter, I shall present four excerpts of talk in which several of those distinctive features (or consequences) are identified and examined.

The first interaction identifies a biographical fact that many single people speak of - that of a preoccupation with their education and careers:

J: Do you think people were busy getting an education or establishing themselves in their work? (F 38)

O: I wonder I wonder (M 33)

J: That you just don't ah

O: You don't lay the groundwork for meeting people.

...  
J: Well I often thought like I took nursing first and went to university after and I often thought gee I was really foolish. I I wish I had gone to university first sort of thing and taken nursing after because it seemed like I was always so busy and my main interest was uh I was motivated really to get what I wanted from university. Whereas other people had gone and done things the other way around. I

always thought that and maybe a lot of people - their prime concern was to establish themselves and then by the time you've established yourself so many of the people are off and married or gone...and there you are - well established ha ha...but where are all the people.

.....Laughter.....

Now I'm going to live!

O: By myself ha ha ha ha

.....Laughter.....

J: You go to the Blarney Stone or something and who do you find there - not the right ha ha sort of people ha ha.

V: Yeah I think that's right. A girl who was here a couple weeks ago was talking about a friend who has been going to university for years and years and she is about forty now. ...and she is very depressed because I think she thought that

.....Laughter.....

as you said that she'd get all her education and then get out and do it. But she forgot that she'd be middle-aged.

(R)

.....Laughter.....

This interaction depicts a common plight of the single person - that of ordering priorities and dealing with each one individually. What these people suggest is that such an approach to life planning leaves the single person out of step with other members of the community. Consequently, the single person, they suggest, perhaps does not develop certain social skills ("you don't lay the groundwork for meeting people."), or finds when he or she is "ready" to look for a mate that no one is available - everyone else has already "settled down".

A second widely-acclaimed feature of the single lifestyle is that of being active or busy. Many people note that they over-book themselves with commitments involving work, sports and other leisure-time activities, courses, and so on. Many



say they are seldom home. Thus:

O: I still wonder why we huh keep ourselves as busy as we do. (M 33)

L: Yeah it could be an escape - you know. (F 35)

O: Subconsciously

L: Yeah or you're afraid to be with yourself or something so you keep pushing yourself into activities and keep yourself going.

O: Mmm hmm

L: I don't feel that way but perhaps maybe subconsciously.

O: Yeah I'm thinking the same sort of thing. You because uh you mentioned where do you go to meet people - all of us could go out and meet people if we really put our minds to it. Well hhm go to the places we don't really want to go but people are there if you wanted to meet them. (L: Mmm hmm) And in your office et cetera and be more aggressive or that if you wanted to really go out and meet people. (L: Mmm hmm) But either we've we've adjusted to the point of view that we don't really want to go out or else we uh I don't know. I don't know. It would be an interesting th thing to see whether we don't want to or we want to but just haven't got the energy to do it or we just don't care anymore. (L: Mmm hmm) I I don't know.

V: I know I'm tired of a lot of failures. (F 36)  
.....Laughter.....

L: Yeah you get tired of all these rejects.

O: I think that's true I think that's very true. Yeah.

V: Well rejects - or whoever - on whoever's side, uh

O: That's right - yeah

V: I find that to - uh

O: It gets to be a bit of a drag after a while.

V: So you pursue things you know you are going to be successful at ha ha ha  
.....Laughter.....

In this rather complex interaction, a number of distinctive features of the single personality and lifestyle are displayed. First, there is the notion that there is a motive underlying the pace at which many single people manage their lives. While it is not confirmed, it is suggested that single people may not want to be alone, i.e. single, and so they avoid facing that reality by "keeping busy". Then a second motive is offered in O's lengthy, introspective statement about meeting people. He suggests that single people could meet people (i.e. meet someone to marry) "if we really put our minds to it." While he draws no conclusion about his initial query, he does suggest that perhaps single people really do not want to marry and so they "keep busy" to avoid situations which might lead to intimate involvements. A motive to explain why some single people do not actively establish social contacts in the interest of meeting a mate is also offered. That motive is based on an apparent series of "failures" in establishing intimate relationships and the subsequent reluctance to place one's self in a position of vulnerability once again.

The following interaction was preceded by a discussion about over-extending one's self during the week with job responsibilities and other commitments and not having the energy or the motivation to make plans for the weekends, in other words - to get out and "do things" and "meet people". This, too, is a widely-acclaimed feature of the personality and lifestyle of the never-married.

L: I just want to come home and close the door and take the phone off the hook and just be by myself. And not have to talk to anybody sometimes - I'm that tired. And Saturday I just want to putter and I don't want to be ah committed to anything unless I suddenly feel like it....  
(F 44)

S: I wonder whether we over-compensate you know - our careers for a relationship when we don't have one. Because I know I can do that. But you know when I'm going out with somebody who is interesting I always have the time. Ha ha So I feel you know I do over-compensate for that. (F 35)

L: Oh sure I I'm

S: So I feel you know I do over-compensate for that you know// when I don't have a relationship going.

L: Or if somebody phoned you and said would you like to do such and such you would probably suddenly be very alert and very anxious to go. But to sort of work up the energy to do it yourself maybe ah

S: That's right.

L: Yeah that's true.

S: And it's probably a bad habit that we all get into you know male and female. That you know we do get lazy maybe and don't want to sort of make the effort because it is an effort to sort of get out of our ruts. You get comfortable in them.

V: Yeah one evening somebody said you have to - it takes a lot of energy to be a successful single ha ha. (R)

S: Sure it does yes I think that's quite true.

As well as indicating the lack of energy and motivation to initiate social activities and make new social contacts, L introduces another distinctive feature of the single personality - that single people often prefer their own company, that there are many times when they choose to be alone. S responds by examining L's account of being tired and overworked for an

underlying motive. She suggests (like O and L in the first interaction cited in this section) that perhaps single people over-involve themselves in a career to fill a gap in their lives - a gap that is left when they "don't have a relationship going."

Single people are also idealistic about what they would want in a mate and the kind of relationship they would settle for. As one 36 year old woman stated: "I want it to be very special." In the last interaction in this section that idealism and its consequences are expressed:

V: I find I meet a lot of people who just don't seem to suit my values. (F 36)

L: I think I'm a little bit fussier now than when I was younger because I've got more definite ideas like in the person I want to marry. Whereas when I was younger I really didn't have that many ideas. And maybe that's my problem too like you V. I've got you know like you have you've got too many expectations of the kind of person you want to (marry). (F 35)

O: I think most of us have high expectations of a a spouse to be - and if we keep searching we may find one at ninety.... Maybe we're trapped by our own finickiness or - (M 33)

As a final comment on the topic of assessing accounts for having never married, I would like to point out that many of the qualities presented in these interactions could potentially have been heard as displays of incompetence or confessions that the derogatory stereotypes about single people are true. Interactionally, however, that was not the case. In each account of a personal idiosyncrasy, experience, or value, that quality was heard as a feature of the single personality, or

as a consequence of the single lifestyle. Through their collective self-examination of motives that might explain having never married, the establishment of affiliations among members, and the locating of consequential and distinctive features of that membership, the participants provide for a display of co-membership in the category of having-never-married.

To summarize, in this chapter I have identified the offering of an account for having never married as one of the demand characteristics of membership in that social category. An account is demanded on the basis of the never-married individual's potential incompetence in a society where marriage is the dominant and favored reality. Accounts for that status provide for a display of cultural competence by affirming a number of society's values and beliefs - including marriage - the value of which is supported at least in principle. Many people speak boldly of choosing not to marry, others speak of extenuating circumstances whereby they have never met the "right" person. There is a tendency to examine such accounts for underlying motives or more covert explanations for not marrying. These accounts provide for a display of the distinct features of the single personality and some of the consequences of the single lifestyle.

## Chapter V

## ACCOMPLISHING HAVING-NEVER-MARRIED

In introducing this chapter, I would like to return to the essential defining feature of having-never-married - the fact of being uncoupled and childless in a world where the majority of adult men and women marry, produce children, and establish a lifestyle based on family roles, obligations, and activities. That lifestyle is the dominant reality. The individual who has never married, of course, lives in a world peripheral to that reality. Put sentimentally:

The world is divided into couples, and so being single can feel like playing musical chairs and every time they stop the music, you're the one who's out. (Shain, 1973:125)

This chapter focuses on the actual experience of living a single life in a couple's world. It considers having-never-married as an accomplishment.

In the preceding pages, having-never-married has been examined in terms of commonsense knowledge which locates, defines, judges, and accounts for that status. As well, in Chapter IV the activity of accounting for having-never-married was identified as one of the demand characteristics of that social entity. This chapter continues that discussion of the demand characteristics of the phenomenon of having-never-married. Those I have identified as the most outstanding are: (1) "doing things alone", (2) "being on your own", and (3) "meeting

people". In discussing each I shall elucidate the specific activities for which those phrases are a gloss, present a selection of member's formulations about the necessity to comply with those demands, and explicate some of the methods by which they are accomplished.

### 1. Doing Things Alone

While there are many activities of everyday life that are performed by one's self, clearly they do not all belong in the category of activities constituting "doing things alone". To illustrate: activities such as shopping for clothes, driving to work, reading a book, and going on a business trip are usually performed alone. That they are performed alone, i.e. without the companionship of others, is commonsensical and taken for granted. It is not an observable and reportable fact. However, there is another category of activities the doing alone of which is an observable and reportable fact. Included in that category are: going to the theatre, a concert, or a movie; going to a party; going to a restaurant or a bar; going skiing; going on a vacation; eating alone; sleeping alone; and spending one's birthday or Christmas Day alone. Normatively, these activities are shared - either with family members, friends, or acquaintances. When they are not shared, when they are engaged in "alone", it is noticed, and there are consequences. One is the necessity to account for that activity. For example:

While I was having Sunday brunch with friends in a rather formal restaurant a fellow came in by himself and sat at the next table. When the waitress came to serve him, she said, "Is it just yourself?"

This encounter indicates the feature that engaging in such an activity "alone" is not a normative occurrence. It is both noticeable and mentionable. One would not hear a comparable statement addressed to more than one person in a similar setting; e.g. "Is it just the four of you?"

Another consequence of doing such activities "alone" is that such behavior may be seen as odd or unusual. Hence, one may be judged as someone who has no friends, has been rejected, is a recluse, and so on. It may be qualified as "too bad", "pathetic", "embarassing", "brave", et cetera. Being alone tends to make people - both those who are "alone" and those in their presence - feel uncomfortable. We try not to stare at the person "alone", but we do wonder.

The quotation below further provides for the meaning of "doing things alone". It is an excerpt from a Christmas letter (dated December, 1976) I received from a married friend of mine.

I'm also active in the Women's Guild at the school. Last Sat. we had our annual Holly Ball - a grand and lovely party. Only E got sick and I had to go alone! Can you imagine? Fortunately, I was with 2 other couples who were great company! I had to go as I was Treasurer of the event.

In analysing this account it is, of course, significant to note that my friend mentioned that she went to the ball alone. (The emphasis is hers.) She did not simply mention that she



went to a "grand and lovely party" over the holidays. The statement "Can you imagine!" stresses the impact of this situation on her (although one can only speculate on what her exact response was). She then made it available that her "going alone" was legitimate in that "E got sick". Had she not added this fact, it may have been seen that her "going alone" was an indication of a problem in their relationship - given the commonsense knowledge that married couples normally go to Christmas parties together. She also gave an account of why she "had to go" which serves to legitimate her going to such an event "alone" (and, incidentally, to ensure her competence as a wife in the light of the fact that she chose going to a party over staying home with her sick husband). It is another feature of "doing things alone" that one might in fact do them with other people. In my friend's account of going to a ball "alone" that actually happened ("I was with 2 other couples..."). Nevertheless, it still holds that she went "alone".

The experience of "doing things alone" is, of course, life as usual for the never-married. While the solo performance of activities such as those cited above may be noticeable and reportable, it is nevertheless a consequence of being single that some or all of those activities will be performed "alone" at certain times. It might be said that the never-married, at least on some occasions, have no choice in the matter. Furthermore, with regard to certain activities it

becomes the norm that single individuals will commonsensically do them "alone". That they "do things alone" becomes taken for granted. Hence, it would then be noticeable and reportable that they engaged in a certain activity "with someone" (as in, "Guess what - V was with someone at the Christmas party").

Formulations about "doing things alone" qualify the impact of that demand characteristic on the never-married individual. Typically, they note both positive and negative viewpoints. First, on eating "alone":

When I was at home dinner was always at 6:30. Now I eat at 7:30, I eat at 9:00, I eat at 6:00. It just depends - whenever the urge is there. (M 33)

When I'm eating at home I go through stages. Some nights it will be awful meals - soup and sandwiches - ugh - Other nights I think, "Well I'm really going to do it up right." I get out all my fancy stuff - as if I had company - flowers, candles, wine. And then it's back to soup and sandwiches. (F 35)

And, on sleeping "alone":

J: The thing that I find hardest to adjust to - sometimes at night when I go to bed I get this weird feeling and I think to myself, gosh, is it going to be like this forever? Am I always going to go to bed by myself - nobody to give me a hug// (F 32)

V: Oh great! (F 34)  
.....Laughter.....

Next, two opinions on going out "alone":

I can remember walking up and down in front of the club house of a sailing club I joined wringing my hands, sweating and saying, "Well I've got to go in. This is stupid. I've paid my fees just like everybody else. This is an open night for members and I'm going in damn it all." And when I got in it wasn't half as bad as I thought it would be. (F 42)

Oh yes. I much prefer to go to the theatre alone. If you invite someone they just spend the time coughing and sneezing and fidgeting. And they want to talk. It spoils the whole thing. (F 70's)

As these formulations indicate, there is no clear consensus on the subjective meaning of "doing things alone". For one individual the act of engaging in a particular activity "alone" will be perceived as negative, while for another the same activity will be seen as positive.

Another feature of "doing things alone" is that among the activities in that category there exists a hierarchy. By that I mean there exists a rationale which legitimates the doing of an activity "alone" despite its accountable status. In short, some activities may be more "acceptably" performed "alone" than others. Below is a display of that hierarchy and its concomitant legitimating rationale:

C: I think one thing that's hard is deciding that you do have to do things by yourself and you have to go places by yourself. That was one difficulty I had. I still have difficulty with that. I don't like doing things by myself or going places by myself. (F 34)

V: Like if you were invited to a party and somebody said bring someone along, would you go on your own? (R)

C: Oh I'd do something like that. But I wouldn't go to the theatre by myself.

V: Oh really.

R: Oh! (F 70's)

V: Oh I would.

V: Unh unh. Never. (F 38)

V: I think that's one of the safest things to do. (R)

V: I'd never go to the theatre by myself.

C: I have to really talk myself into going skiing by myself.

V: Oh I've done all of those things for years. (R)

C: Cause I just see all those things - like half of doing that is sharing it with somebody and I just still have quite a bit of difficulty with that.

L: I agree with you in that respect. I find it much more fun to go with someone and share it with but if you haven't anyone to share it with I'm not about to sit at home by myself and miss out on the opportunity to involve myself just because there wasn't anyone to go with. Mind you it took me a long time to come to that too. (F 42)

Clearly, no hard and fast rules emerge from this interaction which attempts to resolve the impact of "doing things by myself" (which I take to be synonymous with "doing things alone"). While it does display that there is indeed a rationale which legitimates "doing things alone", it does not provide for a consensus about what exactly that rationale is. It appears that it is up to each individual to develop his or her own system of determining which activities may and may not be performed "alone".

By examining the commonsense knowledge displayed in the interaction, I have explicated what appear to be at least part of the legitimating rationale for "doing things alone":

(a) The opportunity to involve oneself: I take it that this refers to leisure-time or social activities which might add interest and stimulation to one's life experiences. It is implied in L's statement that the consequences of doing an

activity "alone" are not as great as "missing out on opportunities to socialize."

(b) The opportunity to socialize and perhaps "meet new people": I have identified this point on the basis of C's willingness to go to a party alone, and on the basis of my own commonsense knowledge about the activities which occur at parties attended by single people. (What is a gloss for "meeting people" will be explicated later in this chapter.)

(c) Whether or not the primary activity is considered to be sharing: It is this point which C seems to be particularly concerned with. Obviously, she would not engage in any activity "by herself" that she considered to be one that is shared.

(d) Whether or not companionship is wanted: While this rationale is not clearly stated, I have identified it as significant on the basis of V's apparent surprise at C's statement about not going to the theatre by herself, and her comment about doing "all of those things (alone) for years". I suggest that her apparent willingness to engage in such activities indicates a choice and not that companionship is not available.

(e) The visibility of one's "aloneness": This point I have explicated on the basis of the statement about the "safety" of attending the theatre "alone". I assume that assertion is a reference to the fact that one's attendance at the theatre is not noticeable and reportable. It is a legitimate activity because at such an event one is not likely to have to account

for attending without a companion. (I have never heard the person selling tickets say, "Is it just yourself?" However, one would have to provide an account for attending "alone" should he or she meet an acquaintance - particularly if that person said, "Who are you with?", or if they displayed discomfort with the fact that one appeared to be "alone".) In opposition to the visibility of attending the theatre "alone" would be, for example, a dinner party to which five married couples and one single person were invited. It is at an event such as that where the single person's status would be most visible and most open to being accounted for. In the hierarchy of "acceptable" and "non-acceptable" activities one may do "alone", I suspect that occasions such as the latter would receive the least legitimacy or approval.

In sum, it would seem that single people weigh the negative consequences of "doing things by themselves" or "alone", i.e. the fact that they may have to account for their actions, or will be seen as a "reject", "lonely", or whatever, against its relative merits or positive consequences. They then must decide which has more significance in terms of their own value system, their interests, their goals, their self-image, and the like.

## 2. Being On Your Own

In one sense, the term "on your own" is used synonymously with the terms "doing things alone" or "by myself", or "going out alone" - as in "I went to the concert on my own", i.e. by

oneself or without a companion. In another sense, the term is used somewhat diffusely to refer to a state of being - to the state of being unpaired, either temporarily or permanently.

Although this is somewhat speculative, it seems that used this way the term is a euphemism for having-never-married. It is considered more polite and discreet to say, "She is on her own", rather than "She never married", or "She is still single". On the other hand, it also offers the notion of a burden - that all the responsibilities and challenges of living lie on the shoulders of one person, that one is "all alone", and perhaps (although not necessarily) lonely. As such, it has the effect of suggesting that "being on your own" is undesirable and unwelcome, and that it warrants sympathy or concern.

Another way in which the term is used is in reference to "going out" with companions, but not with companions of the opposite sex. For example:

A female friend (38, never-married) and I went to a concert together. During intermission she saw some people with whom she was acquainted. (I believe they were former students.) After speaking to them, she remarked, "Wouldn't you know I'd run into them when I'm on my own."

In this context, even though my friend was with a companion, she considered herself "on her own" - presumably because her companion was not a male. (Incidentally, this usage is also employed by married people, i.e. in situations where one spouse engages in some activity without the other, or where married

individuals of the same sex "do something" together, without their spouses.)

In what follows I shall use the term "on your own" in the sense that it refers to a state of being. I shall first discuss some of the consequences of that state and then examine "being on your own" as an accomplishment.

One consequence of "being on your own" arises from a feature of the commonsense knowledge provided by the society about the phenomenon of singleness. Given the fact that the permanent pairing of adults is the favored reality, it is "commonsensical" to assume that individuals who are not paired (1) would prefer to be paired, (2) are available to assume a paired status, and (3) are, in fact, at all times doing work to facilitate their taking part in that favored reality. As a consequence of being understood "commonsensically", the single individual is vulnerable to being paired unwillingly or unwittingly. This results in the experience of being paired by others when one would prefer to be "on his/her own", being paired with someone who was chosen by a third party, being approached by another person who does want to be paired (i.e. "hustled"), and being accused of attempting to "steal" the mate of another. In discussing the consequences of being single, one 58 year old woman who is a nurse mentioned that even now when an older, single male is admitted to her ward the younger nurses hint teasingly that there is an unattached man on the ward she should go and meet.



Probably the most negatively-charged and humorous experience resulting from this "commonsense knowledge" about singleness is that of blind dates. These arranged meetings are generally of two kinds: (1) where married friends "line up" or "match up" their single friends at dinner parties or other informal occasions in their homes, and (2) where single friends call up at the last minute and say, "How would you like to go out on a blind date? So and so has a friend in town." Just as every never-married person's biography includes a list of people he or she might have married, so does it include a list of blind dates - the worst, the nicest, the funniest, and so on.

When I was nursing in Toronto I went out with a blind date once and everybody was just elated...and he was absolutely a dud as far as I was concerned. (F 53)

Admittedly, some of these experiences do turn out to be enjoyable and are welcomed; some even lead to marriage. But for the most part such offers are not well thought of and most single people note with relief that their occurrence takes place in one's twenties and early thirties and not so much after age 35 or 40.

There's the expectation that one should be married. I remember blind dates and arrangements set up by my married sister and married friends. "You'll just love her," they'd say. So you go and you don't "just love her" and everybody feels uncomfortable. (M 38)

It seems that married people have a different perception of these arrangements, as the following field-note suggests:

N (married friend of mine) almost always invites an unattached man when she invites me to dinner. One time when she did not she told me later she had asked J but he was busy.

Interestingly, my friend on the occasion that she did not invite a single male provided an account to indicate that she had tried. That she deemed this necessary, I suggest, is based on the notion that married people have an obligation to their single friends at least to introduce them to any unattached men or women they know. (A second explanation for this is perhaps inherent in the nature of occasions such as dinner parties, in that guests tend to be invited in pairs, or in equal numbers of men and women.)

The field-note below illustrates the enactment of the three "commonsense" precepts about having-never-married noted above:

It was the first night of our vacation. The four of us women were the first of our group to arrive for dinner. The restaurant empty, we chose a table for eight and placed ourselves on alternate chairs. A good way to meet people we noted with laughter.

Next to arrive were several couples and two fellows, one appeared to be in his thirties and the other in his forties. Two of the couples jokingly remarked on the scene and pressured A, the older fellow, into sitting with us. Reluctantly, this conservative-looking, middle-aged man attempted to conform to the expectations of his married friends.

They sat at nearby tables and in "good fun" made periodic inquiries to see how A was making out with the four women. We didn't have much in common with A and I don't think he was very comfortable. Nor did he seem to enjoy the scene nearly as much as his companions.

In this situation, A was coerced into joining a group of single people - presumably because he too was single. The fact that they were strangers was incidental. In the eyes of his married

friends, the top priority for A was to "meet new people" while on vacation, and especially females. That he may have preferred to share dinner with his friends and travelling companions rather than a group of strangers was overlooked entirely by his married friends.

A second consequence of "being on your own" is the expectation that one is a "swinger" - that the stereotype is true - all single people love big parties, singles bars, and scenes like the one depicted above. To illustrate:

At a local ski resort I met a man of about 50 who was recently divorced. He talked of changing his image - by wearing his hair longer, growing a beard, and buying flashy clothes. He expressed surprise that my companions and I (five single women between the ages of 35 and 45) were not "out on the town" on a Saturday night.

While the never-married may go through a stage where their social lives do fit the stereotype, most admit that they soon tire of that feature of their lifestyle. The following is a formulation about the experience of being over thirty and going to a singles bar:

When I go back to those places, I think my God I was in this place ten or fifteen years ago! And things haven't changed. You're going back to it again and you feel as though you're not progressing or growing. You're on that same old treadmill.  
(F 36)

It is also assumed that single people like to be around a lot of other people - they do not enjoy being alone:

J: I was invited to a New Year's Eve party this year and I knew one person out of a hundred. And I do not meet people

easily. I spent a very miserable New Year's Eve to the point where at five to twelve I tried to sneak out the side door. And I got caught. (M 35)

R: You were going to stay and enjoy yourself even if it killed you. (M 36)

J: I do not enjoy being at parties like that. I resent being invited and then not being introduced to people. The only thing I was introduced to was the refrigerator and I made good use of it!

I would now like to discuss "being on your own" as an accomplishment. It was noted in Chapter I that singles' advocate Margaret Adams (1976) asserts that individuals who never marry (or those who were married for a short time only) possess a degree of social independence, personal integrity, and self-sufficiency that is independent of the need for the traditional support system of marriage and the nuclear family. They do not seek external support on a long-term basis and they resist opportunities to involve themselves in relationships which might lead to marriage. In the light of being understood in terms of the three "commonsense" precepts noted above, for the individual who prefers to be "on his/her own" that becomes a practical accomplishment. It is a demand characteristic of singleness to do work to display one's autonomy, i.e. to "do being on your own". This involves developing strategies to prevent one's involvement in situations such as that experienced by A in the field-note above. In the interaction below, the participants themselves explicate their own methods for accomplishing that task:

R: Do you suppose many people ah consciously or maybe subconsciously ah weave their ah work life and so on in order to avoid commitments of [an intimate] type?

...

purposely ah live away out of town so they don't have to join the usual after-work crowd for a beer or whatever happens?

...

You know, for example, I catch myself doing that at times - just avoiding a situation that that upon reflecting upon it later on I felt Jesus you know did I cop out of that simply because there are going to be people there I might you know get on with or whatever - simply because I wanted to ah go fishing or go skiing or do something else entirely different on my own.... And I catch myself...trying to identify my motives for not going to that party or not doing this or that - am I purposely screening out social contacts? (M 37)

J: Yeah that's a conscious level sometimes with me. Like if - I know sometimes I just don't want to get involved with anybody right now and so you stay away from th I stay away from that.

Lastly, I would like to discuss a second type of social setting where the single individual may be seen "commonsensically", i.e. social occasions where there are an equal number of men and women. The data on which the discussion is based arises from the occasion of a brunch, hosted by a married couple and to which two married couples, one single man, and myself were invited. At one point one of the married female guests asked me the question, "Are you from Winnipeg too?" In making sense of this statement, I made the commonsense assumptions that (a) the single male guest and I were identified as a couple, and (b) that he must be from Winnipeg. I simply replied face-savingsly that I was not and stated where I was from. I did not make any reference to the fact that he and I were not coupled or that I had attended the occasion "alone".

Had I done so would have resulted in consequences for the interaction, e.g. she most likely would have been embarrassed and apologetic for mistaking my identity, uncomfortable should the single male overhear our conversation, and so on.

Later, I did "work" to make the knowledge of my actual identity available. For example, I did not spend a lot of time talking to or being near the single man. When we did talk, I made a point of doing "getting acquainted" by introducing such topics as: "What part of town do you live in?", "Oh do you have a swimming pool in your building too?", and "How long did you work up north?". These were said at times when I knew I would be overheard. Also, although not for that specific reason (I don't think), I was the first to leave. And, of course, I left "by myself".

This setting could also be seen as a type of occasion whereby married friends attempt to "match up" their single friends. As such, it provides for a display of another method whereby single individuals may do "being on your own". This involves strategies which will inhibit or prevent either member of the twosome in question from succumbing to that possibility. While I am not suggesting that such was the intent of my married friends, I nevertheless did work to make it clear to all participants of the occasion that I was not "trying to meet someone". One method of displaying that was to not spend more time talking to the single male guest than any other guest. Another was to present the same affect to all guests. By that I mean I was not overly friendly or flirtatious with the

single male guest. A third method was to leave first, thus placing other priorities ahead of "getting to know him better". Had my intentions been otherwise I could, for example, have left when he did and suggested in private that "we should get together sometime".

### 3. Meeting People

While in apparent contrast to the previous topic, the task of "meeting people" is a further consequence of the single lifestyle. Before enlarging on that I would like briefly to note some of the uses of the term "meeting people" and the related terms "meeting new people", "meeting someone/anyone", and "meeting someone/anyone new". "Meeting people" can refer to introductions, encounters, establishing acquaintances, and establishing potential companionships. The notion of "meeting new people" implies the latter. Often, it is used in the context of meeting people who might add a new perspective or some kind of stimulation to one's life situation, to help an individual (or a couple) get out of a rut, alter his or her daily routine, or even lifestyle (e.g. "I need to get out and meet some new people"). To "meet anybody/anyone/someone" (as in "Have you met anyone lately?" or "Did you meet anybody at the party?") refers to meeting an individual of the opposite sex to whom one is attracted and who might become an intimate friend or mate. To "meet someone new" refers to meeting an individual in that same category. It is often used, as the term "meet new people", to imply the desire to add a new

perspective or stimulant to one's daily routine or lifestyle.

The quotations cited below indicate the various contexts in which these terms are used by the never-married:

Our Friday and Saturday nights are generally spent as relaxing nights. We're with ourselves rather than out and looking. Unless you really want to force yourself - to go where you come in contact - it's very difficult to meet people in the normal routine of our lives. (M 34)

Sometimes I get tired of making the effort of going out and meeting more people. I say Oh jeez why don't I just get married and forget about this rat race of being single. (F 34)

I pursue my own interests period. If you meet people - okay - that's great. And, if you don't - well - you enjoy yourself anyway. I don't feel that a whole weekend was a write-off if I went skiing and didn't meet anyone. (F 36)

One of the advantages of being single is that you meet so many different types of people and have the opportunity to do so many different things. (F 50)

In the context in which the term "meeting people" is used in these formulations it is a gloss for meeting other single people, particularly other single people who are available for companionship. In short, people with whom to share those social activities which when performed alone are noticeable and reportable. Also, it may refer to meeting people of the opposite sex who might be available for intimate friendships and sexual relations. And, it may refer to meeting people who might be considered as marriage partners.

The task of "meeting people" then is no small matter for the never-married. That it occupies such a prominent position as a characteristic feature of the single lifestyle seems to be explained by at least three factors. The first arises as a



consequence of a feature of marriage and the relationship between and among married couples. Since singleness is very much a temporary status for the majority of individuals, for those who remain single, companions are frequently "lost" through marriage or comparable intimate involvements and the concomitant differences in lifestyle. Below are some formulations of the experience of losing those companionships:

A big thing with single people is that married couples exclude their single friends - except for certain important or special times. Your very best friends can be married - but they don't think of inviting you to their activities. (F 50)

J: Over the years as each friend got married slowly but surely you found yourself not being invited to the parties. You heard about them afterwards. And they'd say, "Oh we didn't think you'd be interested because we're all old married couples." (M 34)

S: I used to feel hurt and then I discovered they were right. I wasn't interested. They were all old married couples. (F 32)

As these comments indicate, couples tend to "do things" with other couples. Thus, on most occasions considered for "couples only" the single person is excluded (although certainly single people do establish good friendships with some married people and at times do "do things" with them). As well, couples usually "do things" with each other. The single person does not have such a "built-in" companion and must continue to engage in the ongoing task of seeking new companions, i.e. "meeting people" - people to "do things" with and people with whom one might establish friendships that take the place of a spouse.

A second explanation of this task seems to lie in the

dating patterns of single people or in the patterns of their heterosexual relationships. Naturally, these relationships tend to be temporary. Hence, acquaintances made through those involvements tend to be temporary also. In the course of the single person's normal routine, with the exception of a few close friends, most people come and go. They do not become long-term associates.

Lastly, the task of "meeting people" seems to hold such prominence because of the desire of some individuals to establish intimate relationships - either in the form of affairs or marriage. Should one wish to meet such a mate it is necessary that he or she continue to circulate in social settings where such persons are available and, at all times, be open to opportunities to "meet new people" on the off-chance that one of them might turn out to be Mr. or Ms. "Right".

As a task, "meeting people" is of major significance in (a) structuring the social life of single people, (b) characterizing the talk about being single, and (c) assessing the competence of the single individual.

The field-note below illustrates the first of those points - the significance "meeting people" can claim in structuring the social life of the never-married. It is based on an observation made while I was on a skiing holiday with three other single women. It describes an actual occasion on which two single people "met someone".

On the way to the bar after skiing A, B, and C began discussing the local restaurants. We decided on one and it was established that the three of us would have dinner together that evening. (D had already met someone.) After being in the bar for an hour or so A, who had been talking to a fellow she had met, told B and C she was leaving and announced she was going to dinner with X. That left B and C to dine together.

Later, when we were all back at the Lodge, B approached C and said A's date had called and asked if she could arrange a blind date for his friend. B was invited. B and C discussed the dilemma, with B noting that the way things had been going with her lately she deserved and needed such a break. Both agreed that it was more important that B accept the invitation than to carry on with her previously-made plans to have dinner with C.

This account displays not the actual methodology by which A "met someone" but rather the method by which she capitalized on that fact and its significance for A, B, and C's previous arrangement. When A announced to B and C that she was going to dinner with X she did not offer an explanation. It was understood commonsensically and taken for granted by all three women that it is perfectly normal to cancel a previous arrangement with one's female friends should the opportunity to go out with a man arise. An explanation was not required. For B or C to have said something like, "What about our plans for the three of us to dine together?" would have been inappropriate. Later, when B had the opportunity to "meet someone", again that was given priority over the prior arrangement between B and C. It also took precedence over the fact that it would leave C "on her own" and could potentially require that she go out to dinner alone.

Meeting people is perhaps the most frequently recurring

of all topics of conversation about the single lifestyle.

"Where do you go to meet people?" they ask over and over again.

"There would be a lot less singles if there were more places to meet," they lament. Or they say that while they would like to "meet more people" they are not prepared to force themselves, i.e. put the same time and energy into it that they did in their twenties. They welcome companionship but for the most part they socialize with a few close friends. They do not have the motivation or the stamina to circulate and "meet new people" as an end in itself.

As a task, then, "meeting people" is not always as easy as it was for A and B on the occasion described above. Said one participant:

I wouldn't mind having another affair sometime. But who do I ever get to meet? (F 50)

Now of course in an urban setting the average person probably meets people he or she does not know almost everyday. What is particularly problematic is meeting the right kind of person:

Where do you go to find single men in their thirties that are sane?...I mean...they're either divorced or in the throes of divorce or they're quite happy and they don't want to get into any sort of lasting relationship. (F 35)

"Meeting people" is identified as a challenge. It is perceived as a task that is difficult and arduous. In the words of one participant:

V: I noticed you said you have to get out and meet people

continually. Do you think that's one of the problems of being single - that you're always on the move, always trying to meet people? (R)

S: It is one of the challenges I think. I think in some ways it's harder to be single. Like I mean in terms of - you've got to put out more energy to meet people and do things. Whereas I think if you were married you can get into a little comfortable thing where you've always got someone to do something with. You have to work hard at being a successful single. (F 34)

V: That's right.

"Meeting people" may also be regarded as a practical accomplishment. While the potential for "meeting people" is always present in the course of pursuing the activities of everyday life (from buying milk at the corner store to attending a party), it cannot be accomplished without doing a particular kind of work. In the following interaction, one type of that work is elucidated:

J: Or in a hospital and a single person comes along you know and somebody will end up going out with them but really as you say is one aggressive - does one even - it's quite easy to get into a conversation with people...but if you are very business-like and say good morning they don't know who you are or anything else. But people could really ah start conversations or this sort of thing. (F 38)

V: And some people do. (R)

O: I think that's your communications business. (M 33)

J: Yeah right it gets back to that.

O: Maybe we've we've forgotten how to communicate//on that basis.

J: Yeah right. And then you see somebody else and you say gee she's dating so and so and you say oh well he's kind of nice (laughingly).

V: Ha ha ha

O: Why aren't I?

J: Yeah why aren't I? But then you look back and you think well you aren't because you barely said hello, goodbye, or this sort of thing. He may have looked at you but you didn't say anything or do this and you're very business-like and that's why really.

This conversation makes "meeting people work" visible in its absence. It explicates one method by which the single person may do "not meeting people" (or "being on your own") and provides an illustration of how doing "a routine encounter at work" could have become doing "meeting someone".

Given that there are a variety of activities that can be described as "meeting people work", those activities can then be used as evaluative criteria on which to judge the actual performance of that work. It may be said that the competence of the individual as a single person may be assessed on the basis of his or her performance of "meeting people work". The terms of that assessment include (1) motivation - "All of us could meet people if we really put our minds to it"; (2) aptitude - "Maybe we've forgotten how to communicate on that basis"; (3) skill - "...is one aggressive?"; and (4) success - "...she's dating so and so".

The following interaction, an excerpt from a lengthy and animated conversation among three friends (see footnote 23), provides for an elaboration of that particular "work" which constitutes doing "meeting people". It also provides for a display of assessing the competence of the single individual on the basis of one's performance of that "work". Prior to

this dialogue G had attempted to account for her having never married by noting that she had not "met anybody" (see pp. (65-67), implying that for the last two or three years her social life has been such that she has not met any men to whom she is attracted or who are available to establish an intimate relationship. Her friends confronted her about the validity of her account and made the claim that the "real" reason she has not "met anybody" is because she has not done the appropriate "work". They conclude that that must have been G's choice. G objects. Some two hours later, that difference of opinion remains unresolved:

G: Okay what about the person who doesn't have a man and hasn't had a man for a couple years now? What do you think about that kind of person? (F 36)

B: Yeah but you see G I agree//with C. (F 31)

C: I think then you don't want one. (F 30)

B: Yeah I agree with C to the extent that you can't want one that badly because G I mean I've got to you've got to be really honest. You do not go out and meet them.

C: You don't.

G: That's right I don't go uh where do I - supposed to go?

B: Okay okay I don't like singles bars//any more than anybody else but I go.

C: There's all sorts of places.

G: All right you tell me where I'm supposed to go.

C: I've never been to a singles bar.

V: Where else besides singles bars? (R)

G: Okay tell me where.

- C: Oh take a trip by yourself.
- G: ( )
- C: Seriously.
- C: Go to a night school course.
- B: Have you gone skiing this winter?
- C: BUT NOT A COURSE THAT CONTAINS WOMEN.
- G: I have skied by myself there is no skiing.
- B: When was the last time you took a course at the university?  
I've met many//single persons at the university.
- C: By yourself.
- G: Okay but I okay I've gone//to taken all kinds of courses.
- V: Ha ha heh he
- C: Yeah but what kind - a course that will//have men in it?
- B: At UBC At UBC? You have not.
- G: No I haven't//
- C: Not a nursing course//a course that has men in it.
- G: Yes I did I took a course about China.
- B: Oh G not going to a seminar on China. Take a university  
heh ha course. You know a study course.
- C: Okay I met my husband on the train.//I met I met
- G: Okay but but bloody well why should I go and do something  
that I'm not//interested in doing?
- B: When was the last time you slipped a little paper under the  
doors of people in your apartment saying listen I'm having  
an open house come on up? There are single guys in this  
apartment. I travel up with them on the elevator.
- G: The guy next door is about 22 years old (V: Ha ha heh)  
the guy beyond that is about 18 years old.
- B: No but I'm just saying that there are ways that you can  
meet them you know there are ways.



- C: If you don't look - it's like I was saying the other night you have to//push guys.
- G: I had the guy next door come and lift my put my stack my uh
- B: Have you told your friends like M's husband that you'd//like to meet somebody - to introduce you to
- G: Sure I have sure I have sure sure. "We don't have any male friends. We don't know anybody single."
- C: They don't either. Married people don't.
- G: Sure I have but I'm not I refuse to take a course that I'm not interested in. I have taken sailing - I've done skiing, I've taken skiing lessons, I've taken skiing and I've skied.
- C: Yeah but then it's what you do on the ski slopes.
- G: Okay I've bloody well said to L I'm going single and I've gone up (the lift) by myself.
- C: But then have you knocked a guy over on the hill?
- G: Ah come on now//( )
- C: AH NO I'M SORRY MEN NEED PUSHING. I DON'T CARE//who they are they need a little pushing.
- G: Ah Jesus Christ.
- V: Ha ha ha
- C: They need to know that you care (G: Well I'm) that you're interested//they're not going to fall over you. They really aren't.
- G: I'M NOT SURE IF I'M INTERESTED OR NOT.

In the process of challenging and defending an account for having never married the participants of this interaction provide for a display of the activities which constitute the practical "work" by which "meeting people" is accomplished. In their determination to maintain their respective lines the members produce an exhaustive list of those specific

activities.<sup>26</sup> This commonsense knowledge thus provides an interpretive schema or an assessment tool by which the competence of the single individual to do "meeting people" may then be evaluated and judged.

The "work" by which "meeting people" is accomplished seems to be of two kinds. The first refers to the deliberate attending of social occasions or settings in which unattached men are likely to be present - bars, ski slopes, university courses (but not nursing courses), and so on. The second refers to getting acquainted activities whereby one at least catches the attention of those unattached men. In B and C's cross-examination of G to determine the actual cause of her "not meeting anybody" they exhaust the first type of "work" by listing virtually all the settings known in which to "meet someone". As a last resort, they look to the second kind of "meeting people work". "Yeah but it's what you do on the ski slopes...men need pushing...they need to know that you care," counsels C accusingly.

Although it is not specifically stated, I would suggest that this encounter also provides for a display of some of the actual activities implied in the "hard work" and "energy" that it takes to be a "successful single". What constitutes "hard

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<sup>26</sup> Probably the only method not covered is that of "meeting people" in the work setting. That possibility actually was mentioned later in the conversation, when G noted that there was not even anyone at work she could develop an intimate relationship with. She stated, "All the men in our department are younger than I am. And I'm talking about the goddamn staff-men - not the internes and residents."

work" and the output of "energy" is the maintaining of the motivation to participate in each and every one of the activities noted above and the constant necessity to apply the correct skills so as to capitalize on all possible opportunities to "meet someone".

It should be noted that this explication by members of their own methods for "meeting people" was constructed by women. The terms "energy", "hard work", and "successful single" were also coined by women. (I do not recall the use of any of these terms by men.) I would suggest that this difference is a reflection on the social structure of intimate male-female relationships. I am referring particularly to the social organization of dating and the established differences in power between the two sexes. Men have been allotted the active role, women the passive. Traditionally, men have had the power to make initial acquaintances and to initiate relationships actively by asking women out. They also have had the power to decide whether to continue a relationship or not by deciding whether or not to see a particular woman again. The outcome of initial encounters and the future of potential intimate relationships is seldom a mutual agreement by two equals. Often it is not discussed at all. Men say, "I'll call you" (whether they mean it or not). Women wonder if they did mean it and wait passively by their telephones to find out.

Or they resort to the indirect methods of attracting the attention of men that are cited in the above interaction. The "energy" and "hard work" that women speak of, I am arguing, is

an expression of their powerlessness and disappointment in heterosexual relationships. I suggest that G's response to the confrontation by B and C (in both the interaction above and the one cited on pp.65-67) - the swearing and the defensiveness, the self-depreciation, the angry claim that she has tried all those methods to "meet someone" are, at least in part, an expression of the futility of such efforts vis-à-vis the high investment women place in the achievement of intimate relationships.<sup>27</sup>

In this chapter, having-never-married has been regarded as an accomplishment. I have identified three of the most outstanding consequences of living a lifestyle that is peripheral to and not determined by one's membership in a nuclear family. Those consequences I have called the demand characteristics of having-never-married. In discussing each, I have presented a selection of formulations which describe the actual experiencing of those consequences, and I have explicated some of the methods by which the various tasks inherent in being-an-individual-who-has-never-married are accomplished.

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<sup>27</sup> Adams (1976:156), in discussing the passive role that falls to women in heterosexual relationships, notes that this powerlessness, reinforced by the emphasis women place on sexual achievement "deters women from complaining about these deficits and leaves a gradual accumulation of suppressed anger to build up, which, if not discharged, is converted into depressive self-criticism." She further notes that, "When [sexual relationships] do not work out successfully, as is their frequent wont, their failure is attributed to this powerlessness, and the breakup of the affair is experienced as a rejection of the passive by the active partner, rather than a mutual agreement between equals to go their separate ways. The end result is often a disproportionately acute sense of disappointment and loss."

## Chapter VI

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study is a display of the social organization of the phenomenon of having-never-married. It identifies the essential defining features of that phenomenon in this society and depicts these from the perspective of the commonsense knowledge of men and women over the age of thirty who have never married.

Singleness is recognized and made sense of as the antithesis of marriage. Marriage, the production of children, and the establishment of a lifestyle which is generated out of beliefs, values, and norms about family roles, responsibilities, and activities is the dominant and favored reality. An additional feature of that reality is that it is clearly defined through the process of institutionalization. In contrast, there is no institutional definition of singleness. The features which define that status are generated out of the interpretive schema which defines marriage and the nuclear family. Hence, singleness has been defined traditionally in terms of what it is not. Furthermore, it is that interpretive schema which provides the criteria whereby formulations about having-never-married are understood, and by which that social entity is located, assigned a rationality, accounted for, and experienced.

This report has focused on the visibility of the

phenomenon of having-never-married in the world of everyday life, the process by which members define or assign a rationality to their status, the methods by which members (and to some extent, non-members) account for their status and the values they project in doing that, and some of the most widely-acclaimed demand characteristics of the single lifestyle. Emphasis has been placed throughout on formulations which provide for a display of members' commonsense knowledge of these four topics. Notably, formulations about the various beliefs, values, and experiences relevant to these topics vary with age, sex, individual differences in personality, values, and life history. In the array of formulations presented, I have made an effort to present, where possible, both positive and negative viewpoints, an equal number of responses from men and women, and responses representing all age groups of the membership. Clearly, and as a reflection of the lack of institutional definition, there is no unanimous agreement on the characteristic features of the single lifestyle nor on the subjective meaning those features have for the individual who has never married.

This study also examines the possibility of defining the phenomenon of singleness as a social entity in its own right. To that end, I have attempted throughout to present those characteristic features and affirmations which might constitute a definition of that status independent of the institution of marriage and the family. Such features include: the independent nature of single individuals, the value they place on personal

freedom, their idealistic beliefs about permanent sexual relationships, the choice not to marry and not to seek companionship on an unconditional basis, the establishing of friendships that take the place of family support systems, the acknowledgement that their singleness may well be a permanent status, and the belief that their lifestyle is "better" than it would have been had they married on any one of those occasions when they had the opportunity. And yet, it is clear that even these defining features may be located and given meaning only through the interpretive schema of the institutional definition and the commonsense knowledge of marriage and family life. Indeed, were it not for these institutions, the phenomenon of having-never-married would not be a social reality at all.

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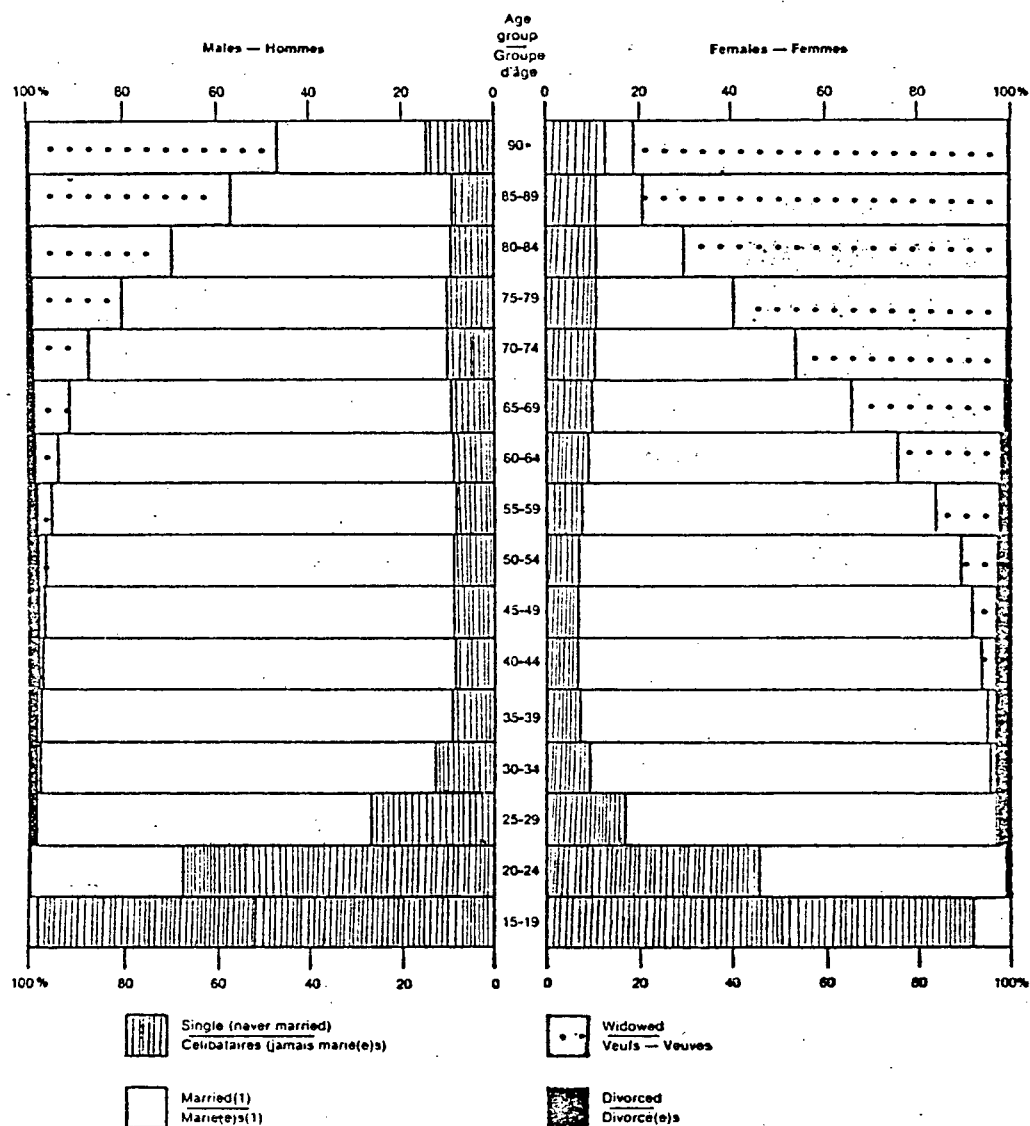
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## APPENDIX I

Percentage Distribution of Males and Females in Each Age Group  
by Marital Status, Canada, 1976

Répartition en pourcentage des hommes et des femmes de chaque groupe d'âge  
selon l'état matrimonial, Canada, 1976



(1) Includes separated. — Comprend les personnes séparées.

1976 CENSUS OF CANADA, POPULATION: DEMOGRAPHIC  
CHARACTERISTICS, Marital Status by Age Groups,  
Statistics Canada, Chart 3.