

# Single stories

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We often use stories to help people to get to know us and to explain ourselves. It's a way of telling people what sort of person we are, and these stories help build up and perform our identity. Each person's story will be different and distinctive, and yet there are some common expectations of what makes a good story, and what kind of stories might be told.

How do we tell stories of singleness? For women in particular, the story of romance, relationships and family life is still very strong in Western cultures. It's not unusual for couples in the early stages of a relationship to be asked how they got together. The story, a celebration of coupledness, can be fun both to tell and to hear. The opportunities to reveal personal information and tell one's story may be more limited for people who are not in a couple relationship. For a single woman to be asked why she never married or remarried is stigmatizing, as well as implying it's never going to happen now. I find that while people are very willing to ask whether I have children (another question that is hard to give a 'no' to in a positive manner) they tend to wait for information to emerge about a partner or marriage, perhaps in deference to a sensitive area.

So what are single stories and are there any similarities between them? In my interviews with 30 mid-life single women I decided to ask that 'unspeakable' question and see what kind of stories I was given. I invited women to tell me about how they made sense of the course their life had taken and to talk about relationships over the course of their life. Gergen (1994) argues that the structure of a good story leads it towards a valued end-point, and stories tend to be either progressive or regressive, with a stability theme a third possibility. Yet the hold that the dominant cultural storyline of women as wives and mothers has in our collective imagination is so strong that we may feel called upon to explain, perhaps even apologise, if it isn't our story. I found my participants' narratives were more variable, not

simply progressive in one direction building up positively to the achievement of goals, or regressive, working through sad events to a negative end-point of failure and loss. For most of us, there is not just one story anyway, waiting to be drawn out by an interviewer's question, and proceeding seamlessly from start to a known end-point. The story is capable of taking different directions, depending on the way the conversation goes.

There is an issue for a woman who isn't in a couple relationship of how to have an empowered self-image that she can convey in her talk about herself. While I didn't hear many stories that I could slot into a clear-cut 'progressive' or 'regressive' category, progression in this context was often depicted as a story of inner growth and change. So rather than depict herself as having failed at relationships, a participant would bring forward ways in which she was succeeding at other goals, or improving psychologically and emotionally. One participant (who I'll call Lyn) describing a relationship she engaged in just before she was 50, recounted her pride that when she realized that the man wasn't willing to negotiate about how the relationship would be, she was able to say 'In that case I don't want this relationship'. Sarah, in her fifties, while recognizing that she didn't know what the future held, referred to a current relationship as different, and herself as much more balanced and calm than in her younger days, more centred in herself.

This kind of framing of life as involving a story of self-improvement offers women on their own a way of avoiding a discredited identity and negative subject positions of powerlessness in relationships or of failure to establish a central and continuing intimate relationship.

Another way of framing the story was to draw on ideas of the life cycle and seeing the life to date as made up of stages. But where traditional family life cycle models see key transitional points such as courtship, marriage, birth of children and children leaving home, a single woman (especially if she is also without children) lacks these kind of stages to make sense with. Sarah talked in blocks of ten years, her twenties, her thirties, her forties and her fifties. In her thirties, she started going out with people for longer, but there were some people she wasn't ready for: 'there was one person I met in my thirties who was probably the only person I would have actually married; I mean marriage has never been particularly an issue

... it didn't work out; we were in different places really'. Although Sarah says marriage wasn't an issue, she nonetheless conveys the importance of a relationship that didn't work out, and the possibility of an alternative life cycle stage that she didn't take.

Another explanatory frame that my participants drew on is that of life events: the idea that unpleasant events can throw a life off its planned course. Some of the events referred to as life-changing and affecting subsequent relationships included the death of a brother, the ending of an important relationship, an early sterilization, going to boarding school, and acquiring a mental illness label. While these events clearly had a disturbing impact on those who recounted them, a story of real or potential relationships disrupted and influenced by an earlier life event is a resource that provides the single women with an easily recognizable justification for her current state.

Whatever way women on their own find to present their story, it seems they still have to do rhetorical work that deals with the dominant cultural storyline of marital and family relationships. The life cycle frame, for instance, naturalizes the account in a way that has an apparent logic to it. It draws on the dominant cultural storyline and a woman may want to contrast her own life, positioning herself differently; this also provides a resource that a woman can shape to her own ends.

Literature on singleness often looks at whether women have chosen to be single, as though 'choice' were a factual issue that it is possible to determine. What I found was a great deal of fluidity around membership of the category 'single' (after all, it's not a fixed and unchanging status in anyone's life) and that in their stories of singleness women could work with different meanings of 'choice'. Rather than thinking of choosing to be single as some internal process and a fact to be revealed about the self, I consider choosing, or not choosing, as an *act*. The act is performed in people's accounts and stories, where they position themselves in contrasting ways according to the situational context. Positioning yourself as 'choosing' to be single enables you to assert some agency and control over events. The alternative to 'choice' often seemed to be 'chance', which could tend to remove agency. Some typical ways of talking, or interpretative repertoires, emerged in the different stories I heard. Among these

were responses that I grouped together under headings of 'I want to feel chosen', 'I haven't felt the need', 'I want to be in a relationship' and 'It just hasn't happened'. But these were not mutually exclusive ways of talking and, perhaps surprisingly, Milly, in her thirties, drew on each of the first three of these repertoires in her stories about her relationships to date. She represented herself in turn as capable of asking a man out, as wanting to wait for a man to make the choice in relation to marriage, as already having chosen not to marry, and ultimately as wanting to marry. Rather than assume Milly was revealing some deep-seated ambivalence, it is important to consider the social context for singleness. Contradictory ways of speaking and ambivalence about singleness are embedded in the discursive and cultural climate, where singleness as denigration co-exists with singleness as independence. These polarized repertoires make it difficult for a woman to express a wish for a committed relationship at the same time as expressing satisfaction with her single state.

Ideas about how singleness is seen and talked about all have an impact on the kind of stories people feel able to tell about their lives and loves, and as these ideas change and catch up with the twenty-first century, no doubt the stories will change and develop too. What about your story or stories? Do you have a personal narrative that you like to tell, do you slant it according to your audience and what kind of response do your stories get?

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