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Constructing the single woman in therapy

Jill Reynolds

Introduction

Singleness, like its counterpart marriage, is a social construction. It is hard to pin down its meaning in a changing society – who is single? Are divorced, widowed, those in relationships to be included with the never-married in this catch all category? The experiences of single women, at least in part, result from the ways in which singleness and partnership are understood socially. In spite of the degrees and varieties of partnerships and sexual orientations that exist, it is still not uncommon for singleness and marriage to be seen as binary alternatives: to be single is to be not married. Studies of single women suggest that there is a complex picture of both positive and negative effects of being single (Marks, 1996; Reilly, 1996). Therapists writing of their clinical practice and their research have noted the potential for single women of thinking of themselves as *necessarily* flawed because they are not married (Bickerton, 1983; Schwartzberg, *et al.*, 1995; Lewis and Moon, 1997). Women who have identified, for instance, low self-esteem, or longstanding difficulties in relationships as barriers to successful partnership, may then seek therapeutic help to remedy these troubles. Schwartzberg and colleagues remark how often therapists collude with such a view and allow development of the self in the service of finding a mate to stand as a legitimate goal of therapy.

This recognition that there is a cultural context to the single life is clearly an important one for therapists. It has parallels with and intersects with other challenges to therapists in working with difference and oppression (see for instance Kitzinger and Perkins, 1993; Lago and Thompson, 1996). Therapists are themselves subject to, as well as creators of, cultural contexts, whether the same or distinctive from that in which their clients operate. How can they use the therapeutic relationship to take on the cultural constraints or expectations with which their clients are faced?

In this article I explore some issues that are generally identified as salient for single women and consider the challenges they present to the therapist. I use the words ‘therapy’ and ‘therapist’ as broad terms to cover a range of therapeutic and counselling approaches. I draw on some of my own data in interviewing single women to suggest that a social constructionist perspective may offer an additional resource for therapists.

Constructing the single woman as client

What kind of stories do therapists hear when they meet a single woman in their consulting room and what frameworks for understanding do they bring to bear? Gergen and Kaye (1992), offering a social constructionist perspective on therapy, describe a process within the mental health professions generally of substituting the client’s narrative with a professional narrative. This professional narrative will be based on the therapist’s theories regarding underlying causes, the location of the cause within the client or their relationships, the means by which such problems can be diagnosed and the means by which the pathology can be eliminated (Gergen and Kaye, 1992, p.169). The theories that therapists use are not neutral, but part of current dominant ideological discourses (Seu, 2000 p. 245).

The frameworks for understanding singleness offered by the therapeutic literature tend to locate problems of singleness as personal ones requiring work on the self. There is a wider context of constructions of femininity that locates responsibility for maintaining emotional relationships with women and it is often women who come to therapy wanting to 'get it right next time'. Single women may, of course, wish to use therapeutic help for personal issues they are facing. Such issues may, or may not, centre on finding a partner, whether male or female. My concern here is how therapists can work in a way that also acknowledges the public issues that make up the world of the single woman, without inevitably pathologising these as personal. As ever, public and personal are closely interwoven, and may prove difficult to disentangle.

In the literature on singleness the following themes predominate:

- Unresolved or unrecognised ambivalence about being single
- Unresolved problems of childhood
- Difficulties with intimacy
- A different kind of life course.

I summarise here the main points made in relation to each theme in turn.

Single women have unresolved or unrecognised ambivalence about being single

The ambivalence of single women about their state is the main finding of Lewis and Moon's research (1997) and they draw attention to its high significance for therapists. While many of the women they interviewed described enjoyment of the freedom they found in singleness, they were aware of drawbacks too. These included the absence of being special to a man, absence of touch, absence of children, lack of ready companionship and sadness about growing old alone (p. 123). Lewis and Moon describe women as ambivalent also on their reasons for remaining alone. They switched between internalising and externalising the blame. By blaming herself a woman could find something specific to work on, such as weight or low self-esteem, and thus feel more in control.

Lewis and Moon found that many women (and the majority of those who had remained single) experienced loss and grief as a result of the absence of children and of a man. A further loss they note is that of loss of assurance about the future. They suggest that singleness is an ambiguous loss, since women never know for sure that they will not marry in the future. Without clarity they can never move on and 'there is no closure' (p. 126).

Unresolved problems of childhood

Writing of her therapeutic work with single women Bickerton (1983) draws attention to the origin in childhood of difficulties a woman may have in adulthood in feeling confident and separate. She suggests that a woman's lack of self-esteem is often best understood through looking at the relationship between mother and daughter. Daughters are brought up to care for others, but may feel that their own needs for mothering were never fully met.

The picture here follows the psychodynamic approach mapped out by Eichenbaum and Orbach (1987) as the focus for feminist therapy. They point to mothering as a key feature of femininity. Little girls are brought up to be women who will have an awareness of the

needs of others and will provide emotional services to others, anticipating their needs. At the same time that a mother conveys to her daughter that she should play co-operatively and pay attention to other children's wants, she also conveys that the daughter should develop the facility to contain her own neediness.

Alongside motherhood as a determining feature of woman's social role, is the idea that a woman has only reached adulthood when she has connected herself with a man (Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1987, p.53). The loneliness and loss that a daughter may feel in her unfulfilled relationship with her mother may lead to a yearning for a sexual relationship that can fill the gap (Friday, 1979, p. 342). The rejection in the past can leave the adult daughter still feeling dependent and deprived, and unable to regard her state of aloneness with confidence (Bickerton, 1983, p. 161).

This version of adult single women struggling in adulthood to feel separate is the one commonly drawn in the therapeutic literature on singleness. Other kinds of feminism and feminist therapy that deconstruct and contest this reification of the mother-child bond (see for instance Seu and Heenan, 1998) are not referred to.

Difficulties with intimacy

Bickerton points out that other reasons also located in the past may make intimacy difficult. Defences formed as the key to survival as a child may continue to operate in adulthood and act as a barrier to intimacy (Bickerton, 1983). This may be related to the increased vulnerability involved in entering a sexual relationship, or feelings of resentment and bitterness about earlier sexual relationships that proved unsatisfactory. Women may fear their own negative and hostile reactions and fantasise about the devastating effect these may have on others. In order to become acceptable a woman may be driven to perfect herself, to become more attractive, to achieve more. The effect may be rather to drive others away.

A different kind of life course

Here the literature follows the family life cycle framework of a series of stages – courtship, marriage, child-rearing and so on (Carter and McGoldrick, 1980) but recognises that these rites of passage do not have salience for single women, particularly if they are childless (Allen, 1989). The issue is the resulting invisibility of the ordinary life course of the single woman, and the consequent battle that she has to live her life in a way apparently deviant from the norms of society.

Various adaptations to the life course model for single people have been proposed as a way of helping women in therapy to recognise their achievements as measured against a different set of developmental stages or tasks (Schwartzberg, *et al.*, 1995; Lewis and Moon, 1997).

Implications for therapists

The work referred to here is largely sympathetic and sensitive to the issues faced by single women but it does contain a double message. Therapists are warned not to collude with single women and participate in their self-blame, treating them as the problem. Yet despite efforts from authors to point to the complexity and variation in single women's lives, an overwhelming picture in the therapeutic literature is of problems in the woman's internal world that constitute work for the therapist.

While there might be different therapeutic approaches to this work, the broad tasks

indicated by this literature for therapist and patient are:

- Work to resolve ambivalence about being single
- Exploration of the past and unravelling of how it is working on the present
- Measuring progression through a series of developmental tasks or stages appropriate for single people.

These may be helpful tasks for some women. However the identity being constructed here pathologises *all* single women. The construction is of a person inevitably in need of therapeutic help as a result of her single state. How can the wider cultural context of singleness be acknowledged in a way that therapists can make use of?

The cultural contexts of singleness

The alternative model of identity that I would like to develop here focuses on the dominant discourses of singleness, and the resulting work that single women do to position themselves against these discourses. My approach is to treat issues of ambivalence, unresolved problems from the past, difficulties of intimacy, and the single life course as aspects of the ideological and cultural context. This context creates an identity niche for single women which they will in turn work with in creating their own identity project (Connell, 1987). A single woman weaves her way through a set of contradictory social practices and understandings and works with this material to produce her personal way of living her singleness. People work with the cultural material that is available to them and use it to construct their positioning of themselves (Walkerdine, 1997).

In turning to the cultural contexts of singleness I draw on my own qualitative data. This was gained from interviewing thirty women who were not living with anyone in an intimate partnership at the time of the interview (my working definition of singleness). The women were aged between 30 and 60 years, and included women who had been married and those who had not, women with and without children, and women of different sexual orientation and racial backgrounds. The data is not based on clinical experience nor was it collected with therapeutic purposes in mind. Nevertheless I hope it can offer some different ways of thinking about singleness that are of relevance to therapists.

Personal or cultural ambivalence?

Ambivalence is constructed as a problem in the literature I have referred to earlier. I suggest that an awareness of advantages and drawbacks can also be seen more positively as a resource to women on their own. As with other studies, the women I interviewed were able to point to advantages and disadvantages, while most of them affirmed that on the whole they were content with being single. My understanding of this is that they indeed had some contradictory feelings about this, and that this also reflects ambivalence in the cultural context in which we live. What they said was also designed for a purpose, to fit into the kind of communication that our conversation, an interview, involved.

The concept of *ideological dilemmas* provides us with a social structural context to understanding ways of talking and thinking, by seeing these as characterised by contradiction (Billig *et al.*, 1988). People have access to a range of conflicting ideologies. When they make statements that contain value judgements they are likely to be rehearsing

some of these contradictory arguments. Ideologies contain internal ambivalence. Moreover, people carry in their heads the heritage of past ideologies, which continue to influence their ways of thinking. For example, the women I talked to were able to draw on images of the 'lonely spinster' quite easily. They might rebut these images as irrelevant to their current context, but they never the less made an entrance, if only to be denied importance.

This relationship between individuals, their lived ideologies and their rehearsal of these through their talk gives us another way of thinking about the world of single women. The notion of 'ideological dilemmas' explains the inconsistencies apparent in people's talk, as people try to hold on to several different ways of thinking about themselves and the world.

For instance, in this brief stretch of talk between Mary and myself, she draws on different ideological resources that constitute the fundamental dilemma referred to as ambivalence in the literature:

Jill Mm. So what does singleness mean to you now then?

Mary Well it means (.) well there are advantages and disadvantages. I like the independent aspect of it. I like not having to compromise, I like the freedom and I like not having to clear up someone else's mess. But I don't like not having anyone to come home to or not having anyone who makes me special

Jill Mm

Mary I don't like not having anyone I can go out with, socially, dancing for example

Jill Mm

Mary Because I wouldn't go on my own.

On the one hand is an ideological valuing of independence and freedom, set against alternatives of compromise and expectations that a woman will take on a man's chores. On the other, an ideological imperative for close companionship, possibly an ideal relationship as in someone 'who makes me special'. These ideological themes are in conflict with each other – the desirability of independence and freedom does not apparently extend as far as the dance floor or other similar social excursions. Mary is not simply weighing up her likes and dislikes, she is drawing on key ideological themes that permeate our society. Both independence and close companionship are highly valued – Mary is trying to work out how she can have as much as possible of each.

Mary is also able to draw on an emerging cultural context that provides her with an image of singleness as an increasingly prevalent condition:

Mary I think the other thing is that there are so many, wherever we go there are lots of single women and single men

Jill Mm

Mary It's not, it's an acceptable social state to be in, (.) that's the only thing I wanted to add.

The hesitancy with which Mary chooses her words in her second statement here, moving from the negative to a more positive 'acceptable social state' suggests a defensive quality to her speech. However I am reinterpreting 'defensive' in this context to use it not as a

psychodynamic term, but to focus on the discursive work that Mary is doing to position herself in relation to cultural images of singleness (Davies and Harré, 1990). The canonical images of singleness depicted by participants in my study were highly polarised. Strongly denigrated images of ‘singleness as deficit’ and ‘singleness as social exclusion’ were countered by highly idealised images of ‘singleness as choice and independence’ and ‘singleness as achievement and self-actualisation’. These form major interpretative repertoires (Wetherell and Potter, 1988) available to women alone, and most of the participants drew on all of them. The combination of such polarised repertoires meant that participants were often actively seeking to counter in their talk the dominant negative images, as Mary does here.

When Mary and others reflect on their experience of singleness, they are not solely articulating their personal feelings, they are literally reflecting social attitudes in all their complexity and contradictoriness. The response from Sue, who is lesbian, to my assumption that marriage was not an aspiration of hers perhaps makes this point more strongly:

Sue: [...] I mean sometimes I do think to myself that it might be nice to be married, but not in a sense that, I’m never going to get married, but I mean in the sense that nice if I was a different person, if I was a different person it would be nice to be like Cathy at work who’s got a young husband, they love each other and they’ve got the barbecue in the garden, another baby on the way and everything’s really happy and they go to the Mall and do their shopping and, you know, everything’s just so easy really; it seems to me.

Sue then goes on to say that she sees marriage as discriminatory to gay people, and something ‘alien’ to her. Women work with the attitudes around them to find a way of living with and adapting the identity niche provided by this wider cultural context. If therapists can raise their gaze from the ambivalent internal world of their clients to acknowledge the ambivalent cultural context within which they are operating, this may be helpful.

Normal inadequacy?

The issue of unresolved problems from childhood and difficulties with intimacy present a different kind of focus but again some haziness about the relationship between cultural patterns and individual adaptation. At its crudest the argument runs that the ability to make long-term, close, lasting relationships is a sign of a healthy personality and emotional maturity. Women who have not demonstrated this ability through marriage or another long-term relationship may be judged socially as deficient in their psychological make-up (Adams, 1976). The logic is circular: ‘Psychological health is demonstrated by long-term relationships. She doesn’t have one so she must have psychological problems. How do we know she has problems? Because she is doesn’t have a long-term relationship.’

Orbach and Eichenbaum point to the psychological and social pressures that propel women in general to seek a male partner. They portray women as normatively likely to feel inadequate, to suffer low self-esteem, and to be driven by social expectations that maturity involves connection to a man. All this is depicted as the result of social-role expectations, passed on through psychodynamic processes particularly involving the relationship between mother and daughter. This potentially shifts the spotlight onto marriage as a place that may shelter unmet dependency needs in a way that is not always

healthy.

While the recognition of the social context is welcome, there appear to be difficulties for therapists in using this recognition without pathologising individuals (Dobash and Dobash, 1992; McLeod, 1994). Bickerton's analysis proposes these psychodynamic processes of complex histories between mother and daughter as *causes* for some individual women remaining single, the past apparently preventing them from forming intimate heterosexual relationships. How can judgements be made about such matters? Is the issue of having or not having a long-term relationship relevant to the need to work on earlier pain? If all women suffer low self-esteem, would all benefit from psychotherapeutic help? A woman who has found her single status problematic and has had difficulty in establishing a long-term relationship may assume that she was doing something wrong, or needs to work on understanding the past. If she then goes on to form a satisfactory sexual relationship, does this spell success, and mean she has stopped doing something wrong, or was her earlier distress simply a normal reaction to her cultural conditioning that she needs to connect with a man?

Defence against intimacy or defence of one's rights?

Bickerton (1983) suggests that difficulties in the past, defences created in childhood or resentment about earlier unsatisfactory sexual relationships may act in the present to make intimacy difficult. My data does not permit me to make judgements about hidden aspects of participants' inner worlds. However, I would like to remind therapists of the extent to which women on their own are battling with an environment that is often hostile to them as women. Problems include acquiring housing, dealing with economic disadvantage, anxieties about safety in transportation and in public places, being the only single person at a gathering of couples (Chasteen, 1994).

In response to a question on what activities she found were problematic for her Jackie talks of going to a local pub on her own, an activity that could leave her feeling threatened, and has taken practice: 'you have to make yourself do things that are uncomfortable sometimes'. She then comments on how she acted at a time when she felt 'odd' meeting with friends in the pub who were all couples:

Jackie [...] I did, and maybe still do sometimes [...] create a weird kind of defence mechanism where I kind of cut myself off from other people, even though I probably need them more because I'm on my own. And I think that's part of vulnerability, of feeling vulnerable; not just odd, but vulnerable, and so what I've done is created a sort of, you know, in nature's terms, a defence mechanism, which is to become even more spiky, you know, like a hedgehog rather than an armadillo or a tortoise; I actually get quite, you know, prickly with people

Jackie's description of herself as 'prickly' draws on a widespread image of the prickly older single woman, and she uses psychological terms to indicate a process. While constructing herself as independent and brave, she also constructs herself as uncomfortable and odd. Rather than assume that Jackie's use of a psychological vocabulary expresses a 'reality' about inner processes, it can be seen as a cultural resource that is available to her as a way of making sense of her behaviour in a context that is not always comfortable for a single woman.

A different perspective on prickly behaviour is to consider it not as a psychological defence but as a more literal defence 'of one's rights in a competitive world that gives no

quarter' (Adams, 1976 p. 78). Adams comments that behaviour that passes as normal self-assertion when displayed by men is labelled as aggressiveness when shown by women. She also suggests that in order to preserve the precious psychological autonomy that is the hallmark of singleness, women may be reserved in personal contacts, or flamboyantly assertive, either serving to hold off unwanted overtures.

Measuring the achievement of life tasks

The area that I find most promising in the literature on using a modified life course model is the acknowledgement that therapist and client are constantly needing to position themselves in reaction to the dominant discourse regarding singleness, and to struggle with their own internalisation of this cultural message (Schwartzberg, *et al.*, 1995). Swimming against the cultural stream is no easy task, but I suggest that developing skills in recognising dominant discourses and helping clients decide which ones they want to make use of and which they seek to resist is of critical importance for therapists.

The difficulties in the modified approach are very much those that have been identified for more conventional life course or family life cycle approaches. The development of a schema of stages through which people progress in the course of their lives is steeped in cultural expectations. Such models are intended to be descriptive, but there is always a danger that they are experienced as prescriptive (Dallos, 1996). Attainment of different stages or achievement of tasks carry with them assumptions of 'should' and 'ought'. While the family life cycle model is based on an ideal type of family life that has never existed in reality, adaptations for single people may similarly be presenting a set of goals that are rarely if ever achieved.

Therapists are advised to help women assess how they fare with developmental tasks for adult singles and validate how well they are doing in establishing a fulfilling life without a man (Lewis and Moon, 1997). While a celebratory recognition of accomplishments is an appealing usage, there is a risk that more often scrutiny of tasks or stages may be experienced by the single woman in therapy as a criticism of her failure to adjust to the stages of adulthood and to pass through them correctly. Even without explicit criticism, women may use the set of tasks as something to measure themselves against, and find themselves wanting.

The uncertainty of singleness and its trajectory is a further difficulty. Women are urged to develop a positive image of the single self in old age – even though they may hope never to be old and single (Lewis and Moon, 1997, p. 130). Although this may be good advice for all of us, for some it will be hard to follow, and may be experienced as advice to give up hope (Reilly, 1996).

People do experience themselves and their practice in terms of a life trajectory, a personal past and a personal future. But history is not *actually* cyclical, and a personal history is not unfolding. The life trajectory is instead something that is made, a construction (Connell, 1987). The individual's own hopes and aspirations are central as she constructs an identity that draws together coherence and liveability of her social relationships through time. For some women, it may be difficult, yet very important to acknowledge that a close long-term relationship is an aspiration. Rachel's comments suggest that she would prefer to maintain this hope rather than to learn to accept that she may remain alone:

Jill Do you want to say anything more about hopes for the future?

Rachel [...] Somebody said to me the other day when I was moaning on about being on my own, they said 'you're good at relationships'; um, and I think, I think I probably am. I think I'm good at them and I like them and (.) when they're going well of course, and I think, yeah, it's something that I hope for much more than saying I hope for (.) becoming more comfortable with being single, which would be another way, you know, I could be saying well I, you know, hope I get my act together on that and just stop whining about it; and I don't think I whine particularly, um, but, no, I still seem to be, still seem to have slid back into this image of what I want is a close, intimate relationship. So I think that's my hopes.

Negotiating meanings of singleness

If therapists working with single women concentrate on psychological explanations and remedies for a situation that is primarily social, they risk undermining the client. At the same time it is important not to see each single woman's concerns as simply a reflection of the position of single women in society and thereby construct her as a victim (Seu, 2000). Gergen and Kaye (1992) suggest that instead of offering their own narrative as a way forward for the client, therapists should think about identity as something to be worked at, and a process that emerges in the communication between therapist and client. The commitment they call for is that the therapeutic encounter be viewed as a milieu for the creative generation of meaning. Perhaps therapists might think of themselves as negotiating meanings of singleness with their clients that have a relevance for different purposes and different contexts.

Instead, for instance, of seeking some resolution over the ambivalence of independence versus intimacy, it might be acknowledged that these work differently in different contexts. In that way, some narratives might be put on one side, not because they are inaccurate but because they are dysfunctional in particular circumstances. So it may help women who are feeling inadequate to rehearse the narrative that depicts them as 'independent and self reliant'. But what is important is not that therapist and client negotiate a form of self-understanding that works between them. It is the effects of the narrative in different contexts. Its performance can 'create, sustain or alter worlds of social relationships' (Gergen and Kaye, 1992, p. 178). How does the narrative of 'independent and self reliant' play with parents or when meeting married friends in the pub? What forms of action does the story invite in different situations?

As Gergen and Kaye point out, to believe one is successful is as debilitating in its way as believing oneself a failure. Either belief is only one way of constructing the personal story, and each may work well in some contexts rather than others. If one version is held onto to the exclusion of others, this limits the range of contexts and relationships in which it will be useful.

Conclusion

Although therapeutic literature is sensitive to the nuances of the single life, the frameworks for understanding that are commonly used seem likely to draw therapists back to approaches that locate problems in the internal world of the single woman. I have argued that a social constructionist approach to thinking about the cultural context in which single women live may be useful to therapists. Therapists need to become skilled in identifying the complex and contradictory ideologies available to women on their own,

how these act on them, and how they can engage with them constructively. Therapeutic encounters are opportunities to open up and explore multiple perspectives on the single life. Clients may be able to find a range of narratives that offer different meanings for their life and see how these can be used effectively in different kinds of circumstances.

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