

# Developing a Sociological Model for Researching Women's Self and Social Identities

Anne Byrne

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, GALWAY

---

**ABSTRACT** This paper presents an empirical model for researching women's self and social identities. The model was devised as a theoretical and methodological framework to assist the author to recognize self-identity and social identity in single women's narratives of their lives. Self-identity is understood as our own sense of ourselves as persons while social identity is categorizations of us by others. For those interested in researching the consequences of strong ideologies (such as familism) on women's identities, or for recognizing resistance and understanding the development of new conceptions of womanhood, an empirical model which focuses our research attention on the self-identity of individual women is helpful.

**KEY WORDS** conceptions of womanhood ♦ familism ♦ self ♦ self-identity ♦ single women ♦ social identity

## INTRODUCTION

In Ireland, the story of the family is one of the 'great stories' inextricably bound up with the construction of national identity.<sup>1</sup> Familism is an ideology in which the marital family is treated as a social, cultural, political, economic and affective unit.<sup>2</sup> In familist societies, such as Ireland, womanhood has been historically attained and recognized through heterosexual attachment, marriage and reproduction.<sup>3</sup> This 'approved' concept of womanhood is based on sexual difference and being in a dependent relationship to others. Given the dominance of

marital and reproductive status in the construction of Irish national and cultural identity, it is remarkable that this ideology of heterosexual familism and its consequences for individual identity has received little critical, empirical attention from social scientists.<sup>4</sup> Individual agency, resistance and the potential for effecting change is thus rarely observed or analysed.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the fact that heterosexuality, marriage and parenthood were and are prime practices through which approved gender identities are constructed for women and men, the connections between ideologies legitimated by the State and our concepts of personhood remain underinvestigated. How do these practices contribute to processes of identity composition? What are the consequences for those 'who choose to do otherwise'? How do individual women respond to or resist the patriarchal ideologies that have shaped Irish identity at a collective level?<sup>6</sup>

A narrow definition of woman as heterosexual, married and mother excludes many other categories of women, such as lesbian women, nuns and single women. But ideologies of familism, historically at least, have also located single women as marginal but valued through their work as kin-keepers, family labourers and waged workers. In this context, examining single women's self and social identities reveals much about the relationship between ideologies, conceptions of womanhood and the capacity for individual accommodation or resistance to strong social identities. A common question asked by feminist scholars is why some women resist and others do not. The question should be: how can we recognize innovatory action or resistance, how can it be made known?

Without empirical investigation and effective conceptual tools, it is hard to detect the effect of ideological formations on individual identities. The effects of public ideologies on private lives, or social identities on self-identity, are notoriously hard to detail precisely. Responding to this theoretical and empirical challenge, an investigative, empirical model of self-identity and social identity is presented in this article, as part of a project to examine how single women compose their own self-identity, in the context of strong ideologies such as familism. The article is based on research that examined the consequences of familist ideologies for single women's self-identity and social identity in contemporary Irish society.<sup>7</sup>

My starting point is identity as composed in social, communicative interaction with others. Identity can be considered to have two aspects: self-identity and social identity, linked by the elusive concept of self.<sup>8</sup> While self-identity is composed in complex interaction with others and closely joined with social identity, it is a reference to the self, that sense of ourselves as unique and individual persons. The self is also implicated in social identity. 'Social identity' refers to our recognition of and response to others' categorizations of us in terms of personhood, gender, 'race', ethnicity, sexual orientation, class and marital status, for example. While

self-identity expresses individual values and preferences, specifying the uniqueness of the person, social identity captures what we hold in common, what we share in terms of experiences with other people of the same sex, 'race', ethnic group, class or marital status.<sup>9</sup> Social identities can also refer to roles, occupations, social positions or even stereotypes emphasizing real or imagined shared personal attributes, moral orientation or abilities which are believed to signify enduring features of a person's life (Fulcher and Scott, 2003).

While I wish to make the case for loosening self-identity from social identity for the purposes of empirical investigation, I recognize that it is difficult to extricate one from the other in the lived life. Some aspects of social identity can be understood as flexible, ever changing, while others are considered less subject to alteration. Hypothetically, in a plural, post-modern world, people can choose from a range of identities, recomposing biographical narratives of self and re-presenting themselves anew. In naming and claiming identities outside the traditional range, the possibility for new forms of social identities is created. The challenge is to understand the possibility for such transformation at the level of the individual. A focus on self-identity goes some way in responding to this challenge.

Empirically, gender is regarded as involved in the primary ordering of social identities: it is a collective categorization, marking boundaries of difference between female and male, stressing similarity within these social categories, but also emphasizing difference within hierarchies of males and females. Gender also refers to the individual's private sense of herself as a female person. Gender, like identity, is simultaneously internal and external to the person. It is deeply implicated in the composition of self-identity, affecting personal conceptions of social identities of womanhood or manhood.

My initial interest in women's identities highlighted the narrow social repertoire of permissible identities. I then searched for women whose social identities were not of the mainstream. If one's social identity is outside the approved hierarchy of demonstrable heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood, what are the consequences for women's self-identity? I discussed identity issues, over a period of three years (1995–1998), with three groups of single women over the age of thirty: carers, career women and partner-seekers.<sup>10</sup> Most of the women were born in the 1950s and 1960s (the period in which I too 'grew up'). I invited them into the study precisely because they were not married, were not living with a sexual partner of the opposite sex and did not have children: they do not conform to dominant social identities for women in Ireland.<sup>11</sup> I chose these three groupings for the possibilities that mediating identities might offer single women in the context of a familistic society. Performing much needed caring work, pursuing a career or demonstrating interest in

becoming coupled could arguably offset any stigma accruing from the social identity of 'single woman'.

Many studies of single women present singleness as a deviant identity to marriage while demonstrating that women can be satisfied with the single life-style (Blanchard, 1985; Bonds-White, 1987; Duggan, 1993; Hartz-Karp, 1981). Gordon (1994) noted that most single women reflect on their status and that 'marriage continues to cast a long shadow' (p. 195). In the absence of role models, age 30 seems a turning point as women are reminded of their failure to meet conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood (Adams, 1976; Burnley, 1979; Peterson, 1981; Stein, 1981). In exploratory talks with women I learned that singleness may be, but is not necessarily, problematic for single women. Conceptualizing it as such masked women's own interpretations of singleness as a valued personal identity (self-identity). I learned that singleness was implicated in how women viewed themselves and how others perceived and treated them.

I sought to know how single women experience, feel about and speak of singleness. I wanted to understand how single women represent themselves to themselves and others, how they construct a sense of self, and how they manage their single identity in daily interaction and in relationship with others. Other research suggests that single women not involved in intimate relationships develop a strong sense of self and pay considerable attention to self-development and self-identity (Bonds-White, 1987; Enoch, 1987). Knowledge of how women situate themselves as single women in the context of modern Irish society would reveal much about contemporary conceptions of womanhood.

In the interviews I began with the questions 'Who are you? How would you describe yourself?' Women spoke about single identity in becoming/being single, in others' and their own attitudes to singleness, in thoughts on marriage, children, home, work, religion, holidays, relationships with family and friends, in sexuality, intimacy, leisure, and in voluntary and political activities. But gradually a problem emerged. Was there any merit in distinguishing self-identity from social identity and how could it be done? At the narrative level, how would I recognize women's variable, varying self-identities and social identities in the stories of their lives? At the theoretical level, how could I move from abstract, theoretical selves and identities to empirical, tangible self-identity and social identity which could be observed and interpreted? In response to these difficulties, I chose to devise an investigative model to guide my research on self-identity and social identity.

---

**OBSERVING SELF-IDENTITY AND SOCIAL IDENTITY:  
PRESENTING THE MODEL**

In devising the model, I was drawn to theorists who grounded the self, identity and conceptions of personhood in the realm of the social, and who saw individuals as neither 'wholly autonomous nor wholly enslaved' (Sawicki, 1991: 104). Seeking a middle ground between unstable and stable conceptions of identity offered by postmodernism and modernism (cf. Foucault, 1988a, 1998b; Giddens, 1991; Mead, 1934), I was interested in the human capacity for choice and agency, and the role of self-identity in facilitating this capacity. I also sought theorizations of self, personhood and identity that included or could be re-worked through the prism of gender. Finally I sought those who were interested in pursuing the question 'Who am I and where do I fit?' Thus the theoretical work of Mead (1934), Giddens (1991), Taylor (1985) and Foucault (1988a, 1988b) in particular informed the constituent elements of the model of identity presented here.<sup>12</sup>

My intention in this article is to focus on the self-identity of single women, 'loosening' it from social identity to reveal self-identity as a possible locus of change. Reflecting the internal-external dynamic of identity and gender, my research focuses on the consequences of dominant social identities for the composition of self-identities and argues that self-identity is consequential for effecting transformation in social identities.

While controversial, artificially loosening self-identity from social identity enables the researcher to focus on the self-identity of single women and to realize that, while influenced by social identities, self-identity is conceptually different. Composed of elements serving to produce a personal, coherent narrative of self, self-identity is the arena in which the capacity for agency and innovatory action can develop. Self-identity is less influenced by roles, occupations and stereotypes than is social identity. Rather, values, choices, prioritizing, planning and devising life plans contribute to the composition of self-identity. In observing the elements of self-identity in women's narratives, the researcher can also discern resistance to dominant conceptions and attempts to articulate new conceptions of womanhood.

But neither does the model ignore social identity, including consequences of ideologies, group identifications, valued and stigmatized identities for conceptions of what it means to be a woman in contemporary Irish society. These consequences are apparent in women's perceptions of heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood as a culturally dominant stereotypical conception of womanhood. For example, for Mel, womanhood is based on a 'natural' imperative to reproduce. Because she is not married and does not have children she feels personally deficient and that others 'look down on her'. Being single means

... that I am different. What is wrong with me that I cannot get married? Looked down on. Women should get married. Women should have children. It is so natural to do so. (Mel, Partner-Seeker, 44 years)

Similarly, Fiona, a 34-year-old career woman, regards singleness as somewhat 'selfish', particularly for women. She finds it difficult to reconcile her single identity with her woman identity. To be a woman means 'giving' and 'sharing' with family and children. For her being single and '... being a woman, it was nearly selfish. That I should maybe think of sharing something with somebody else and maybe should be giving time to family and children.'

Women engaging with this stereotypical conception of womanhood are deeply aware that the everyday, continual interrogation of their 'marital status' is due to the unacceptable social identity of singleness that marks their lives. Commenting on the constant questioning of her singleness by family, friends and strangers, Siobhan observes

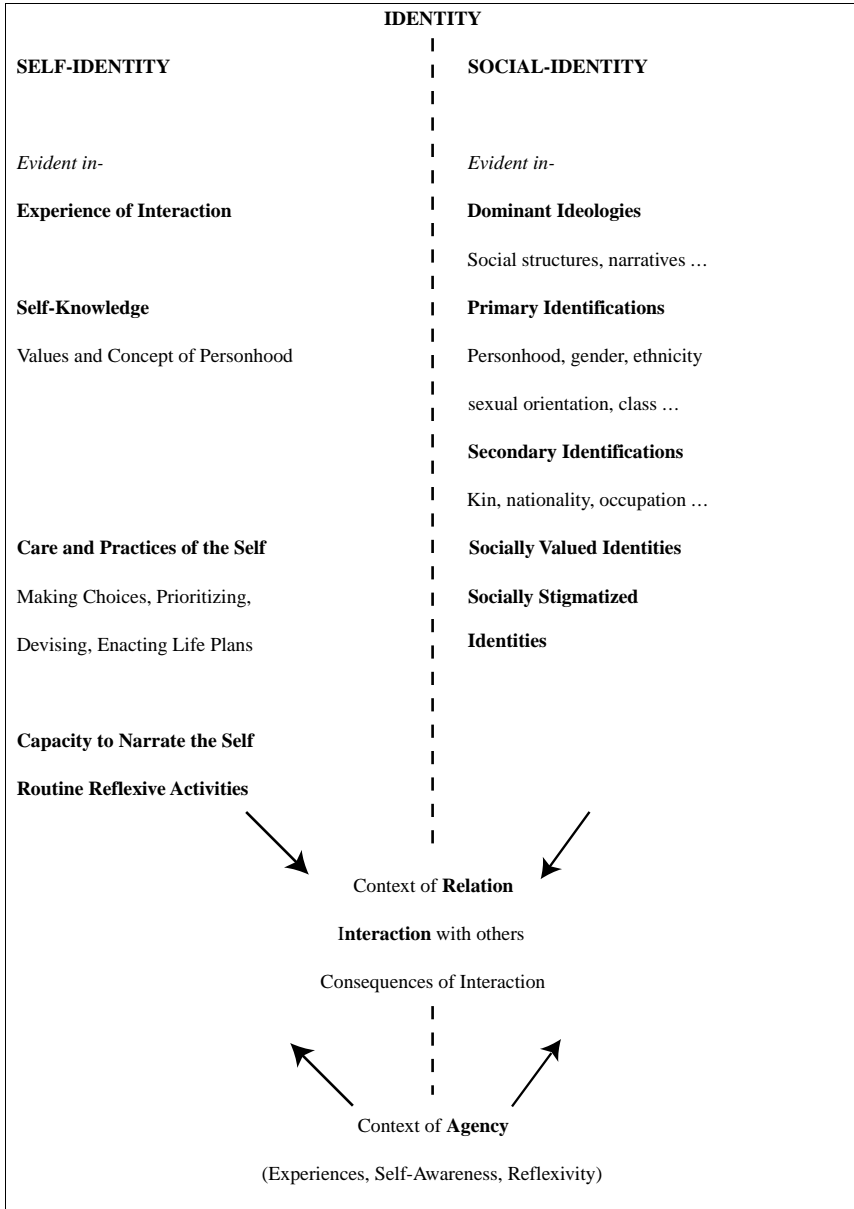
The unspoken expectation in society is that you will marry unless you have stated that you are a homosexual, which I am not ... you are seen as something of an aberration the older you get ... they would say 'she is a spinster'. They would note that. Whereas the norm is that you would be a married woman. So somewhere along the line you have failed to meet society's expectations of you and there might be 'why is this the case?' That is meant by asking me questions, I would be aware of that ... (Siobhan, Partner-Seeker, 37 years)

On being asked was she married, Kitty reflects

Immediately, I felt kind of condemned. 'Oh you should be married. You look like you should be married.' Neighbours ask 'Any sign of you getting married?', friends inquire 'Are you doing any line?' It seems to be the in question. And I know I do it myself to single girls that I would know ... You would be wondering are they single or did they get married. Or it seems the natural thing to assume that everybody grows up and then gets married. It saddens me to have to answer no to it. No I am not married. No I haven't got anybody. That saddens and annoys me ... (Kitty, Partner-Seeker, 31 years)

The model used to explore the intrusion of stereotypical conceptions of womanhood into women's lives emphasizes self-identity with four constitutive elements (see Figure 1): experiencing the self in interaction with others, developing the capacity for self-knowledge, devising care and practices of the self, and being self-reflexive. These elements can be apprehended in women's narrative accounts of their lives. The remainder of the article demonstrates how these elements can be used to sensitize researchers in observing women's self-identities.

**FIGURE 1**  
**An Investigative Model of Identity Composition and Change**



*Experiencing the Self in Interaction with Others*

The first element of self-identity is based on the experience of interaction with others, invoking the idea of constant awareness of the consequences of interaction, which in turn affects the sense of self. The individual is conscious of how others perceive and experience her in day-to-day communication. This consciousness (evident in the ability to make inner representations of self and in the consideration of personal significances that are meaningful to the individual) can provoke contemplation and reflection about the self as subject.<sup>13</sup> Feelings of shame and of diminished personhood can ensue but the possibility for transforming self-identity can also emerge from consciousness provoked by the experience of self in interaction with others. This element also connects to the concept of social identity: how others interact with an individual can be overlaid by their perceptions of what they consider her social identity to be. Though she is a particular, unique individual, others first perceive a person as a woman, then as belonging to a particular ethnic group or social class. In this instance her gendered, raced, classed, social identities structure others' interactions with her and consequently are significant for the composition of self-identity.

For example, Margaret, a 56-year-old single woman, is acutely aware that others perceive her as not having completed the rites of passage which would enable her to claim adult identity.

They feel that because you have not married you never seem to have left your childhood, when you have grown up . . . they are laughing at you and will really laugh at you . . . it can be hurtful . . . people still think you are a child. That you will not have advanced in mind at all, just because you didn't marry. Your body developed but your mind never grew up and you are still that little baby there. (Margaret, Partner-Seeker, 56 years)

Similarly, Bridget recounts that she is still perceived as a 'girl' by her mother. Diminishing the claim to adult womanhood is a perceived feature of others' interactions with single women.

In the eyes of my mother . . . I am still a girl and that comes across very strongly and I vehemently hate that. And also that it is not enough to be in a relationship, that until you have the baby, you are still a girl, no matter what age you are. (Bridget, Partner-Seeker, 32 years)

Similarly women talked about their invisibility in their families, and parents' preferences for married daughters and sons. Katie, aged 45, living with and caring for her elderly mother, talks of her mother's affection for Katie's sister who is married to a successful businessman and has a large family. 'She is the daughter that is doted on and I am the maid . . . my mother has more respect for the one that is married.' Likewise, in her



work life, Emer, 33 years, feels that 'If you were married, people would take you more seriously.' As an unaccompanied female she is uncomfortable socializing with male colleagues and rarely attends business lunches; she feels that her singleness negatively influences how business colleagues perceive her.

Women were also acutely aware of others' perceptions of single women as either asexual, sexually available to men or identifying them as lesbians. Kitty describes an interaction with a man who in a public setting asked her about her sexual life.

A stranger asked me when I last had sex and why it had been so long since I had sex and I like a fool answered him. You know I was so pissed with myself that I did answer him. I should have told him to mind his own fucking business. But it was like I had to prove myself in some way, that I wasn't a frigid little virgin that never had a man in my bed and I was so mad at myself for answering him. (Kitty, Partner-Seeker, 31 years)

Social identities for single women revolved around stereotypes of fussy, selfish, choosy, particular, spinsters, women who were dried up, 'staid, old, not living', single women who hated men, old maids, wallflowers, women who were left on the shelf and who had 'something wrong with them'. The experience of the self in interactions with others was influenced by the fact that a gendered, stigmatized social identity of singleness continued to intrude, underpinning a more valued conception of womanhood tied to heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood. Thus not only one's social identity, but also single women's self-identity is subject to constant scrutiny, surveillance and sanction. For example, each woman I interviewed had a repertoire of stories for different social situations, explaining why they were single. Stories ranged from preferring the independent life, not having found Mr Right, memories of broken romances in the past, claiming the priority of caring for others, career or education in their lives, being incapable of long-term relationships or representing singleness as 'something that just happens' (see Byrne, 2000c). These stories, combined with other strategies, reduced stigma and helped manage face-to-face interactions but self-identity was undermined. Women were aware that working to increase the acceptability of singleness as a social identity would require change at the level of the self. Cara signalled that she herself must accept her singleness prior to societal recognition of singleness as an acceptable social identity for women.

What I would love would be if being single was OK. If society would allow people to be single . . . I could argue that must come from in here first and I probably have a conditioning that makes it difficult even for me to allow single to be OK. (Cara, Career Woman, 39 years)

*Developing the Capacity for Self-knowledge*

The second element of self-identity concerns knowledge of self, knowledge of own values. Self-knowledge involves being conscious of the self, being aware of own limits and potentialities and in having a concept of personhood. Self-knowledge is knowing who one is, having the ability to describe oneself to others, being able to talk about one's self to oneself. For example, this element alerted me to the 'significances' of what is valued, cared about and held dear in women's accounts of themselves.<sup>14</sup> What emerges is that self-identity as a single woman is based on distinct values that laud independence and an autonomous orientation. Independence, being 'strong', valuing self-reliance and the desire for autonomy are intertwined in women's views of themselves.

I don't have a problem with being single. I think I have an awful lot of advantages with being single. It supports my want for independence . . . I think you would need to be strong because I mean that in lots of women there is a huge sense of dependency on a man, on a partner . . . You know I think oftentimes it is a sense of vulnerability in women that they just need to latch onto somebody. (Colette, Partner-Seeker, 37 years)

I suppose I am a strong person . . . I only rely on myself. I am very independent and I don't make a decision based on what some one else may do for me . . . I do it myself. (Eleanor, Career Women, 32 years)

In her desire for autonomy in her life, Siobhan ended an intimate relationship because she felt that her sense of independence was compromised.

To be independent . . . it means being able to stand on your own, not feeling that you are lacking in anything. That you are complete and able to stand on your own, even through strengths and weaknesses and ups and downs . . . I attach some kind of . . . importance to being on my own and able to stand up and able to manage and get things done, on my own. (Siobhan, Partner-Seeker, 37 years)

Among the three groups of women in the study, though all valued independence, there were differences in their orientation to autonomy. Carers, by virtue of their older age-profile and long number of years spent caring, were more used to being single, more comfortable in provisioning and planning for self-sufficiency. While some felt lonely, isolated from other people, they more commonly continued to live alone when the person for whom they provided care died or entered a nursing home. If single independence is measured in terms of duration, being alone and presentation of self as single, then carers collectively show a strong orientation towards autonomy. Career women had experienced achievements in their careers, successfully running businesses and gaining professional recognition in their field, achievements that they said would have been incompatible

with the demands of marriage and motherhood. Career women, though they liked to share their domestic space with others, are attached to the single way of life and aware of the material and emotional benefits of being unattached. This category positively identified themselves as single, regarding singleness as a viable alternative identity for contemporary Irish women. In contrast, those women seeking an intimate partner, though attached to independent values and describing themselves as self-reliant, self-governing and self-directed, did not wish to spend their lives alone. Their orientation to autonomy is altered by their desire for an intimate sexual relationship with another. In focusing on the capacity for self-knowledge as a constituent element of self-identity, I learned the importance of independence as a value and autonomy as an orientation shaping single women's lives.

### *In Care and Practices of the Self*

The third element, care of the self, has a different emphasis to self-knowledge; it is focused on caring about the self and the activity of caring for the self: practices of the self, with their material and non-material dimensions. They involve caring for the self, looking after the body and its needs, attending to emotions, feelings and affections, thinking about one's psychic and spiritual life.<sup>15</sup> In the interviews women talked about their sole responsibility for routine domestic maintenance, often physically challenging, or their concern about emergency situations, or plans for who would care for them should they become ill. Women also talked about measures to ensure personal safety, and security issues when socializing and returning home or holidaying alone. Some women who had previously lived alone consciously decided to share domestic space with others; partly to alleviate the sole burden of shopping, cooking, cleaning, and repair work but also to provide companionship and communication with others. For Eleanor, age 32, living with others was 'healthier': she felt she was becoming 'neurotic' about her living space. Kelly too noticed that when she was living alone

I was very strange. People would come in to visit, put the cutlery back in the wrong place, put the cup down without the mat – but you do, you do get strange. I noticed that. It was a conscious decision that I was going to get somebody in. (Kelly, Career Woman, 36 years)

Care and practices of the self are also evident in the capacity to make choices, to take responsibility for and exert control over one's life, to prioritize and devise life plans. They are intimately involved in composing, sustaining and changing self-identity and social identity. Focusing on them not only alerted me to the extensive daily work involved in

provisioning for the self, economically, domestically and emotionally, but also to single women's conceptions of themselves as independent individuals seeking meaningful relationships with others. Those single women who are content with their singleness nurture the relationships of choice that sustain single self-identity and avoid relationships which undermine single self-identity (see Byrne, 1999). For example, the strength of women's attachment to their families of origin depended on whether parents and siblings supported or undermined their singleness. Celie speaks about the good relationship she has with her parents and sister, receiving comfort, support, attention, security, protection; she in turn looks after and cares for her parents.

I have lovely parents. It is a home not a house. They are very supportive in whatever I do . . . I have a sister . . . without her I would not survive. They are very important to me . . . Mine is a very loving environment, definitely. It is very easygoing, you can relax and you can still go out and enjoy yourself and come home anytime you like . . . They would never interfere but at the same time I know they are concerned . . . When I come home every evening my dinner is ready for me. I am spoilt. In return I am very good to them. (Celie, Career Woman, 36 years)

While some studies have identified leaving the parental home as a key developmental task necessary for single women to symbolize to others that they are mature adults (Blanchard, 1985; Haravan, 1982), devising and choosing familial relationships may also indicate maturity. Some women's mutual attachment to parents and siblings could be interpreted as a sophisticated wish for relationships that do not compromise but rather affirm single self-identity. This form of 'kin-keeping' familism, emphasizing attachment to family of origin, arguably supports single self-identity. This contrasts with heterosexual familism that emphasizes separation from family of origin and is demonstrably hostile to single identity.

As indicated above, other single women perceived that they were treated as 'second-class', 'invisible', less important than married sisters and brothers. Their accounts of family life stressed acrimony between siblings, hurtful or demeaning remarks about their singleness or childlessness and important events in the woman's own life not celebrated by her family. In response, these single women retained only ritual contact with parents and siblings, revealing little about their lives.

'Care and practices of the self' also emphasized choices women made – for example in their work careers.<sup>16</sup> They either prioritized commitment to careers over intimate relationships or admitted that work practices did not allow personal time to establish and maintain intimate relationships with others (cf. Gordon, 1994). Commitment to developing and succeeding in a career was perceived as involving long-term dedication to work, demanding time, energy and money. The women in this study perceived

career and marriage/motherhood as either/or options. Accounts of their educational and career development reveal prioritization of nurturing independence and self-development. Concern with personal growth, challenging oneself and confidence in one's own judgements permeates these women's accounts of their working lives. Brenda, age 31, described how she 'discovered herself' through her ambition and testing herself in her career. She felt that she was no longer 'shy and reserved' but 'confident and ambitious'. Similarly, Fiona, age 34, said 'I always have to have a goal and stretch myself . . . I am happy being active or moving on.' Eleanor, age 32, described herself as a 'calculated risk-taker' who is 'not afraid to make choices or change'; she makes business decisions herself by 'thinking things through all the way'. Achieving ambition, financial independence and gaining control over one's life were key to women's sense of personal and professional success. Fiona had realized that she felt constrained by social expectations that womanhood was achieved through marriage and motherhood and not via a career.<sup>17</sup> She had to reflect on herself as a person, on what kind of person she thought herself to be, so that she could set aside conventional expectations and fulfil her career ambition. She severed all possibility of intimate, sexual relationships when deciding to commit herself to establishing her own business.

I did not want that distraction . . . I decided that I have to prove something here . . . I am just going to get stuck into this, I don't need any distractions. (Fiona, Career Woman, 34 years)

Emer, age 33, like the other career women, stresses ambition and hard work.

I am ambitious, yes. I have worked hard for it and I think it is something I have always wanted and I have put an awful lot of work into it, so I am ambitious. (Emer, Career Woman, 33 years)

I suggest that in viewing themselves as ambitious, willing to invest time, energy and resources in personal careers, valuing independence and making non-traditional gender choices, single women present themselves as self determining agents. Their choices and practices in career are oriented towards autonomy. The career women articulated a representation of themselves as successful, competent and dedicated to their careers. They affirmed themselves in their work, speaking about skill and proficiency, capacities for hard work and professional attitudes to work. For many, commitment to and satisfaction with working life was integral to self-identity and personhood. Kelly, age 36, remarked, 'Well I suppose my work is my identity . . . It is like what makes me, me . . .' Cara, age 39, said ' . . . and I am lucky that in my job I can get highs that I used to get in relationships . . . the job gives me such satisfaction.'

Women consistently differentiated between commitment to career and commitment to marriage/partnership and children. These women did not perceive themselves as able to satisfy the obligations and responsibilities of both. For them, being single is axiomatic to being a successful career woman. Also, having a self-identity that is defined by orientation to a career implies a conception of self as a woman that is arguably a form of resistance to the highly gendered conception of womanhood with which they grew up.

### *Being Self-reflexive*

Selfhood can only be experienced and felt by the individual subject. This subject can narrate that experience, thus expressing own self-identity. Through the medium of self-identity, the self becomes tangible to self and others. In turn, the tangible, observable self offers a basis from which interpretations about identity can be made by external observers (such as social researchers). In reflexively speaking about their singleness, that which marks women off as different from others, the extent of women's identity-work emerges.

The fourth element I wish to emphasize is the concept of reflexivity. For the individual woman this involves considering the first three elements and attending to the information about the self as subject that they generate. This information provokes contemplation and consideration of the self, which can be a potent source of change, but can also be used to justify and maintain stasis in self-identity.

Of the 30 women interviewed, five women did not want to accept their singleness as a basis for either their own self-identity or social identity. While recognizing the benefits of independence, all five were anxious to be married/partnered, seeing this as a route to validating their womanhood and adulthood to themselves and others. In contrast, 25 women referred positively to being single, as they spoke about the losses, gains and competencies that accrue from 'going it alone'. Of these, 10 women thought that singleness was an oppositional identity to marriage; though keenly aware of single stigma, they were prepared to consider singleness as an alternative social identity for women. Being at variance with others, feeling like outsiders, feeling less valued, excluded, with a perception of self as 'different', is most salient in these women's views of themselves. While acutely aware that in others' eyes they may have failed to meet the standards of womanhood, this is a standard they reject for themselves. These women said that 'they choose to be single now' and were willing to try and accept their singleness to a greater extent than heretofore. In reflecting whether or not she accepts her singleness, Emer muses

Do I accept it? I do. I want to accept it very much. I know that I am certainly an awful lot happier now than in a lot of relationships that I have been in. I

---

love, I love the evenness of it. I'd be very slow to give that up. (Emer, Career Woman, 33 years)

The remaining 15 women believed that ideas about womanhood were changing in Irish society, comparing their mothers' limited options with the range of possibilities for being a woman now. Aware of the existence of single stigma, they confidently predicted that singleness would be an acceptable social identity for women in future.

It is easier to be single now and people can choose to be single . . . And I would say that a lot of people would not like this view that women can choose to get married or not. Women can choose to live with somebody . . . Women can choose to have a family or not. They can make all these decisions now and still keep going. (Katie, Carer, 45 years)

I could list at least two or three dozen women who are not married between the ages of thirty and fifty . . . I believe we were the kids of the sixties and we found a certain independence, not totally reliant on having appendages of a husband . . . there is a certain amount of independence among us . . . there is a certain belief in independence. (Lily, Partner-Seeker, 43 years)

Seven of these women were strongly committed to living as independent women, to challenging oppression and inequality for themselves and other women. Women identified the Women's Movement and feminism as critical in publicly challenging dominant social identities for women and as legitimating alternative values informing self-identity and social identity. Believing that they themselves are responsible for who they are, for the direction of their lives, for values and relationship choices, they refuse to accept external criteria such as marital status as bases for identity. For example, Siobhan believes that she alone is responsible for her self-development, happiness and security. Her valuing of equality and diversity for self and others is reflected in her preparedness to actively work for political change. She is involved in the women's movement, trade union movement and extensive community work. Refusing to be excluded, aware of her own needs and interests, she notes

I think it is something of taking on responsibility for furthering the things in your life or your environment that you think are important . . . something you should do and is worthwhile doing . . . I mean I am a woman, so that is why women's things are important to me. I am an employee so that is why the trade union is important to me. All of those things, they are generally to do with myself but they are an extension of my own self, and I am willing to take on things which will not only benefit myself but benefit other people. (Siobhan, Partner-Seeker, 37 years)

This group of women built life-styles, made choices and fostered relationships that enabled and nourished distinctive self-identities rooted

in a positive conception of self as single. For a number of these and other women in the study, this involved struggle; for example, their singleness influenced a decision to enter therapy. Bridget, for whom age 30 was a 'positive' benchmark, said that through therapy she wanted to 'own myself more' and 'be more supportive of myself'.

I am who I am and I don't want to change that . . . I find I am much less critical and more explorative . . . I take life seriously, but not so seriously at all. It just feels a bit easier. I don't have to give myself such a hard time around it [singleness]. (Bridget, Partner-Seeker, 32 years)

Lily had been in therapy for more than 10 years and described herself as having a public and private identity, one 'strong' and 'arrogant', the other 'caring and sensitive'.

Since I started doing a lot of work on myself, that arrogance, that harsh facade has begun to diminish, to more softness and I like myself. I like that part of me. (Lily, Partner-Seeker, 32 years)

Therapy, women said, helped to recognize patterns in their lives of which they were previously unaware. It also helped to relieve the pain of periods of 'divine discontentment'. Psychotherapeutic reflection was used to engage with the question 'who am I and where do I fit?'

The investigative model allowed me to see that most of the single women in the study were prepared to engage with the question of who they were. Though they described themselves as 'outsiders looking in' or 'non-conformists', for some these were preferred positions, from which the mainstream could be observed and criticized. Refusing to be marginalized and excluded, combined with an orientation to diversity and a willingness to name and claim themselves publicly as single women, women sought to re-position single identity as one of a range of possible social identities for women. Perceiving the self as different to others can lead to isolation and stasis, limiting the capacity for innovatory action. Perceiving possibilities for the self as choosing one of many diverse ways of being places the responsibility for change on the capacity for being oneself.<sup>18,19</sup>

## ASSESSING THE MODEL

The model is intended primarily as a guide for conducting investigative field work of self-identity and social identity. Disentangling self-identity from social identity is conceptually difficult: thus, for the purposes of empirical work, self-identity can be 'loosened' from social identity and the self-identity of others can be made known to the researcher. I have



concentrated first on elements implicated in the composition of self-identity *and* which can be observed in an individual's account of her life. As an empirical guide, this was helpful. The elements in the model reflect an interactionist/social constructivist conception of womanhood: crucially, they bring single women's self-identity clearly into view. The model enabled me to access evidence that single women are actively engaged in composing self-identities that are not posited on heterosexual familism but based on their experience of being single in contemporary Irish society. This is a significant personal achievement for women but is also of ideological import in actively challenging and transcending dominant social identities for women.

Analysing women's narratives showed that self-identity for single women is not a matter of being defined in relationship to others (as wife, as mother, as daughter) but rather is defined by oneself in chosen relationships with others. This is a composition of self that represents a paradigmatic shift in conceptions of womanhood. It is a movement from a passive, dependent, over-socialized, non-individualized subject with little control over the direction and activity of her life to womanhood as active agent, as autonomous but connected to others in accordance with the woman's own values.

The analysis also revealed that all the women interviewed consistently value their independence, their single life-styles; most are attached to their single self-identity. In composing a coherent self-identity not based on marriage or motherhood, the self is revealed as the locus of change as single women challenge dominant social identities and heterosexual familist-only ideologies in their everyday, extra-ordinary lives. Once singleness is used as a basis for self-definition, the potential is created to transform women's social identity. Transformative single self-identity is realized by the capacity for being one's self, enabled by reference to own values which allows fundamental re-working of others' familial, marital, sexual and economic stigmatizing constructions of single women. The centrality of wifehood and motherhood are challenged by naming the single identity and working to move singleness from a marginal, outsider position to a place where it becomes one of a number of diverse identity options for women.

Making autonomous choices, living as a single woman, are acts of political and ideological resistance. The evidence from this study underlines the importance of achieving an autonomous self-identity in order to resist and challenge dominant social identities. Being 'an outsider looking in' can be a powerful place from which to initiate change at the level of self, with and for others, allowing transformative woman identities to announce themselves. This has collective consequences for the structure of gender relations and significant implications for our understanding of womanhood and what it means to be a woman in contemporary Irish society.

## NOTES

Thank you to Ricca Edmondson for editorial assistance and to two anonymous referees for responses to this paper.

1. The idea of the 'great story' comes from Geertz (1973) and Myerhoff (1974), the latter who identified the 'great story' as a '... cultural macrocosm that provided a history, a personal story of individual experience and an orderly interpretive framework for meaning' (Prell, 1989: 248). Myerhoff interested in the fit between an individual's life story and the great story, was concerned with how those with no access to a great story become 'active constructors of their own place in society' (Prell, 1989: 251) and the pivotal role of the self in constructing identity and meaning.
2. Barret and McIntosh (1982) regard familism as 'the propagation of politically pro-family ideas' (p. 26) based on an ideology of biological essentialism which seeks to justify and legitimate social and gender inequalities.
3. O'Connor (1998) identified caring, reproduction, familism, love, sexual attraction and 'women's place' in paid employment as themes informing dominant concepts of womanhood in Irish society.
4. Commenting on the lack of Irish research on sexuality, Inglis (1997) argues that the Catholic Church's monopoly over sexual discourse has deterred social scientists from reflecting 'critically on the creation of our personal and social being' (p 7).
5. While there has been some work on the impact of ideologies of nationalism and concepts of 'Irishness' for feminism and womanhood (see Coulter 1993, Lentin 1998), there is no major feminist, sociological analysis or study of the dominant identities for women (motherhood, heterosexuality, on being a wife) in Ireland. Associated research work in which conceptions of womanhood are deeply implicated, has been about those who are regarded as problematic (e.g. women seeking abortions, single parenthood, women living in poverty), (see Conlon et al., 1998; Conroy Jackson, 1987; Daly and Leonard, 2002; Hyde, 1996).
6. For an analysis of patriarchy in Irish society see Mahon (1987, 1994, 1995).
7. The stigmatization of singleness and single women's responses to stigma formed part of this investigation as did the meaning of singleness to women and the significance of their relationships with family, friends and lovers for self-identity. See Byrne (2000a).
8. For a contemporary sociological analysis of identity see Jenkins (1996).
9. Both difference and similarity need to be considered in the composition of self-identity and social identity, as comparison with others invokes the process of social categorization in the conferring of identities.
10. The category 'single women' is often regarded as heterogeneous consisting of ever-married (widows, divorced and separated women) and never-married women, older and younger, with and without children, living with others or living alone. In initial conversations with women I was guided by women's own understanding of 'true singleness' as 'not married' and 'absence of intimate, sexual relationships'. Thus, in the context of a familistic cultural setting, I invited women who were never-married, without children, who were not cohabiting nor members of religious organizations and who had passed the local age of marriage to participate in the research. For an overview of the participatory research methodology utilizing a relational research design and the Voice

- Centered Relational method for analysing women's narratives, see Byrne (2000b).
11. Single women are the subjects of much public interest and sociological research. Classical published accounts include Adams (1976), Stein (1976), Bernard (1972, 1981), Cargan and Melko (1982), Chambers-Schiller (1984) and Allen (1989) among others. Recent studies of singleness and the single life include Vicinus (1985) and Gordon (1994). For Irish sources, published and unpublished, see Curtin and Varley (1987), Duggan (1993) and Byrne (1997, 2000c). See also Scholars of Single Women Network Website, <http://medusanet.ca/singlewomen>.
  12. Given the present emphasis on introducing an empirical and analytical model to guide investigative field work and to alert researchers to elements (the composition and production) of self-identity in women's narratives, it is beyond the scope of this article to demonstrate the explicit influence of these theorists on the model or to dwell on the limitations of their conceptions of self and identity (see for example Burkitt, 1994; Joas, 1998; Olivieri, 2000). For a useful and critical discussion of the 'slippery' conceptions of self, subject and self-identity in sociological and philosophical writing see Olivieri (2000). She argues for the need to produce recognizable, working concepts of self and agency from a postmodern perspective for use in sociological research.
  13. See Taylor's formulation of personhood, in which the idea of human significances is important. Human significances '... are understood as valuations ... Guided by these valuations we choose. And so we have the capacities definitive of a person; self-awareness, values, choice; and from all these the ability to make life plans' (1985: 276). Human significances also involve 'strong evaluation' (p 267): in not conforming to public evaluations of human significances and the relevant standards, the individual is judged as wanting, subject to scrutiny and assessment, while the ends (significances) remain intact. The self-aware person who chooses 'wrongly' is judged harshly; the personhood of the individual who does not share others' agreed standards of what it is to be a person is itself questioned.
  14. Taylor (1985) argues that an individual becomes conscious that an event, belief, interaction, way of being, has particular meaning for her; in this awareness, her sensitivity to the 'significance' is altered. Taylor's formulation offers a re-working of the concept of agency to include not only self-awareness and choice, but also an insight into the connections between self-awareness, significances (values), choice and personhood. He directs the gaze towards the inner life of the individual motivated to reflect on her self, to re-consider the significances that are meaningful to her.
  15. Translating Foucault (1988a, 1988b) somewhat, his suggestion that we examine the practices and techniques through which individuals actively fashion own identities is useful. Individuals autonomously construct their day-to-day existences via 'technologies of self' which include material practices in the 'art of living', as well as a 'spiritual' concern for oneself and concern with self-knowledge (see also McNay, 1992). In the pursuit of knowing 'who I am and where do I fit', Foucault advocated the radical composition and re-composition of the individual by herself, struggling against 'forms of subjection', against regulated identities.
  16. The ten 'career women' who participated in the study, most of whom were under forty years old, included entrepreneurs and retailers, managers of large business or financial organizations, professionals offering legal,

- medical or public relations services. Seven of the ten were self-employed. Compared to the other two groups interviewed, carers and partner-seekers, career women were younger, higher earners and had higher educational, training or professional qualifications.
17. O'Connor (1998) has identified the 'degendered worker' among new definitions of womanhood emerging in Irish society to also include the family feminist and the acceptance of 'difference'.
  18. For Mead (1934) the capacity for being oneself arises from 'individuation' as opposed to 'individualisation' which refers to the extent to which a person deviates from societal expectations or determinants (see also Habermas, 1992).
  19. Two other aspects of the model need to be explained (see also Figure 1). The *context of relation*, as I describe it, is the fluid boundary between self-identity and social identity composed by and through interaction with others. Through individual agency, changes may be wrought in social identities: hence the model attempts to account in some form for the potential impact of the individual on the social. Secondly, the *context of agency* is a feature of experience; to realize it and make its meaning clear to ourselves requires narration. The context of agency also accommodates change in the composition of social identities, made possible over a long period of time, through the efforts of individuals.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, Margaret (1976) *Single Blessedness: Observations on the Single Status in Married Society*. New York: Basic Books.
- Allen, Katherine R. (1989) *Single Women/Family Ties: Life Histories of Older Women*. USA: Sage.
- Barret Michelle and Mary McIntosh (1982) *The Anti-Social Family*. London: Verso.
- Bernard, Jessie (1972) *The Future of Marriage*. New York: Bantam.
- Bernard, Jessie (1981) *The Female World*. New York: The Free Press.
- Blanchard, Irene (1985) 'The Development of Self-Esteem Among Women Born in the 1930s Who Have Never Married', unpublished PhD thesis, School of Social Science, Syracuse University, New York.
- Bonds-White, Frances E. (1987) 'An Exploratory Study of the Adult Development of a Group of Never Married Women from 22–82', unpublished PhD thesis, Temple University, PA: USA.
- Burkitt, Ian (1994) 'The Shifting Concept of Self', *History of the Human Sciences* 7(2): 7–28.
- Burnley, Cynthia (1979) 'Selves, Careers, and Relationships of Never Married Women', unpublished PhD thesis, (Sociology), University of Tennessee, USA.
- Byrne, Anne (1997) 'Single Women in Ireland: A Re-Examination of the Sociological Evidence' pp. 415–30 in A. Byrne and M. Leonard (eds) *Women and Irish Society: A Sociological Reader*. Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications.
- Byrne, Anne (1999) 'Familist Ideologies and Difficult Identities' pp. 69–90 in M. Cohen and N. Curtin (eds) *Reclaiming Gender: Transgressive Identities in Modern Ireland*. New York: St Martins Press.
- Byrne, Anne (2000a) 'Single Women's Identities in Contemporary Irish Society', unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Government and Society, University of Limerick, Ireland.

- Byrne, Anne (2000b) 'Researching One An-Other' pp. 140–66 in A. Byrne and R. Lentin (eds) *(Re)searching Women: Feminist Research Methodologies in the Social Sciences in Ireland*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- Byrne, Anne (2000c) 'Singular Identities: Managing Stigma, Resisting Voices', *Women's Studies Review* 7: 13–24.
- Cargan, Leonard and Mathew Melko (1982) *Singles: Myths and Realities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Chambers-Schiller, Lee Virginia (1984) *Liberty, A Better Husband: Single Women in America, The Generations of 1780–1840*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Conlon, Catherine, Evelyn Mahon and Lucy Dillon (1998) *Crisis Pregnancy: A Report Presented to the Department of Health and Children*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Conroy-Jackson, Pauline (1987) 'Women's Movement and Abortion: the Criminalisation of Irish Women' pp. 48–63 in D. Dahlerup (ed.) *The New Women's Movement: Feminism and Political Power in Europe and the USA*. London: Sage.
- Coulter, Carol (1993) *The Hidden Tradition: Feminism, Women and Nationalism in Ireland*. Cork: Cork University Press.
- Curtin, Chris and Tony Varley (1987) 'Marginal Men? Bachelor Farmers in a West of Ireland Community', pp. 287–308 in C. Curtin, P. Jackson and B. O'Connor (eds) *Gender in Irish Society*. Galway: Galway University Press.
- Daly, Mary and Madeleine Leonard (2002) *Against All Odds: Family Life on a Low Income in Ireland*. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.
- Duggan, Breeda (1993) 'Single Women', unpublished MA Thesis, University College Cork, Ireland.
- Enoch, Louise (1987) 'Never Married Women: A Study of Adaptation', unpublished PhD Thesis, Smith College School for Social Work, Northampton, MA, USA.
- Foucault, Michel (1988a) *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 3. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Foucault, Michel (1988b) *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. in LH Martin, H. Gutman and P. Hutton (eds). London: Tavistock Publications.
- Fulcher, James and John Scott (2003) *Sociology* (2nd edn). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Geertz, Clifford (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Giddens, Anthony (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gordon, Tuula (1994) *Single Women – On the Margins?* London: Macmillan
- Habermas, Jürgen (1992) 'Individuation through Socialisation: On George Herbert Mead's Theory of Subjectivity', pp. 149–204 in Jürgen Habermas *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays* (trans. William Mark Hohengarten). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Haraven, Tamara K. (1982) 'The Life Course and Aging in Historical Perspective', pp. 1–26 in T.K. Haraven and K.J. Adams (eds) *Aging and Life Course Transitions: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*. New York: Guildford.
- Hartz-Karp, Janette F. (1981) 'Never Married Women: The Experience, Expectations and Effects of Never Marrying and Role Adaptations to a Negatively Evaluated Status', unpublished PhD Thesis, University of California, USA.
- Hyde, Abbey (1996) 'Unmarried Pregnant Women's Accounts of their Contraceptive Practices: A Qualitative Analysis', *Irish Journal of Sociology* 6: 179–211.
- Inglis, Tom (1997) 'Irish Sexuality', *Irish Journal of Sociology* 7: 5–28.
- Jenkins, Richard (1996) *Social Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Joas, Hans (1998) 'The Autonomy of the Self: The Meadian Heritage and its Post-modern Challenge', *European Journal of Social Theory* 1(1): 7–18.

- Lentin, Ronit (1998) ' "Irishness", the 1937 Constitution, and Citizenship: A Gender and Ethnicity View', *Irish Journal of Sociology* 8: 5–22.
- Mahon, Evelyn (1987) 'Women's Rights and Catholicism in Ireland', *New Left Review* 116: 53–78.
- Mahon, Evelyn (1994) 'Ireland: A Private Patriarchy?' *Environment and Planning* 26: 1277–96.
- Mahon, Evelyn (1995) 'From Democracy to Femocracy: the Irish Women's Movement', pp. 675–708 in P. Clancy, S. Drudy, K. Lynch and L. O'Dowd (eds) *Irish Society: Sociological Perspectives*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- McNay, Lois (1992) *Foucault and Feminism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Mead, George Herbert (1934 [1967]) *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. (ed. C.W. Morris). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Myerhoff, Barbara (1974) *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- O'Connor, Pat (1998) *Emerging Voices. Women in Contemporary Irish Society*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- Olivieri, Helen (2000) 'Postmodernity and Notions of the "Self": Developing a Working Account of "the Self" for Field Research', *Self, Agency and Society* 3(1): 21–43.
- Peterson, Nancy (1981) *Our Lives for Ourselves: Women Who Have Never Married*. New York: G.P. Putnam's and Sons.
- Prell, Riv-Ellen (1989) 'The Double Frame of Life History in the Work of Barbara Myerhoff', pp. 241–58 in The Personal Narratives Group (eds) *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Sawicki, Jana (1991) *Disciplining Foucault, Feminism, Power and the Body*. London: Routledge.
- Scholars of Single Women Network, <http://medusanet.ca/singlewomen>
- Stein, Peter J. (1976) *Single*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Stein, Peter J. (1981) 'Understanding Single Adulthood', pp. 9–21 in P.J. Stein (ed.) *Single Life: Unmarried Adults in Social Context*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Taylor, Charles (1985) 'The Person', pp. 257–81 in M. Carrithers, S. Collins and S. Lukes (eds), *The Category of the Person, Anthropology, Philosophy, History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vicinus, Martha (1985) *Independent Women. Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Dr Anne Byrne is a sociologist working in the National University of Ireland Galway. Her research interests include women's identities, participative research methodologies, group work and community relations. Address: Department of Political Science and Sociology, National University of Ireland Galway, Galway, Ireland. [email: AnneByrne@nuigalway.ie]

