

**‘Ms-Understandings’? : A Discourse Analysis of the Talk of Older Single Women**  
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**Abstract**

Older ‘never married’ women are often identified as a ‘problem group’. Frequently characterized in stereotypically negative terms as loneliness, risk, and vulnerability, singleness is often considered ‘bad’ for health, especially for women who remain single. From a critical perspective, the implications of this for occupational therapy (OT) are multi-dimensional. Where marriage and motherhood are taken-for-granted life trajectories, older single women are marginalized, which affects assessments, interactions, and outcomes of care. By theorizing singleness from a social constructionist perspective, by attending closely to language and issues of identity, and by tracing out the connections between women’s accounts and broader social and cultural beliefs and values, this thesis contributes to a ‘critical OT’.

Drawing on a theoretical blend of constructionist thinking established in social psychology, the talk of lifelong single women is considered from the critical/discursive psychological perspective. Employing interpretive repertoires, subject positions, and ideological dilemmas as analytical tools, the question explored by this thesis is ‘What interpretive repertoires do the speakers draw upon, and what strategies do they use to negotiate their identities?’

The available speaking resources were found to be strongly polarized into two repertoires: ‘singleness as deficit’ and ‘singleness as freedom’. The identity negotiation strategies employed by the participants included anticipating criticisms and objections to mild positive claims about the freedoms of singleness, rhetorically distancing themselves from damaging

associations generated from the deficit repertoire, and troubling the applicability of the category 'single', which involves implementing discursive 'tricks' to close down conversations.

In order to improve the quality of care for older single women, the profession of OT needs to recognize how socio/cultural discourses about singleness significantly shape research, theory, and practice. This thesis thus has important implications for critical OT, OT policies and norms of professionalism, and to the micro-politics of everyday OT practice.