



# The terror of the single old maid: On the insolubility of a cultural category

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## SYNOPSIS

Contemporary feminist research is highly preoccupied with dismantling social categories and challenging binaries which have long underpinned social thinking. Surprisingly, such deliberations have left the nexus of age and singlehood resistant to deconstructive analysis. Addressing recent literature on age, feminist theory and singlehood we are concerned with re-evaluating the image of the old maid alongside the omnipresence of age and ageism in current discourses on singlehood, family life and intimate relations. Drawing on a content based analysis we argue that single women are faced with a triple disfranchisement based on their age, gender and single status. We further argue that the aging process of single women should be viewed as a situated symbolic practice disguised as a natural imperative, and not as it is customarily grasped, as a given biological category. Thus, this paper is set to critically revisit the authority of age and ageist practices by offering a new conceptual lens through which a revised feminist sociology of singlehood and age could be developed.

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## Introduction

The blatant contradiction that exists between the terms “old maid” and young age is not merely an anecdotal item in the flippant lingo of contemporary popular culture, but rather a significant cue for understanding the rudiments of the tenor of our times. Despite dramatic changes in family lifestyles coupled with the growing numbers of single women, the well-worn myth of the aging single woman as a miserable yet horrifying old maid appears to resist such trends. Rather, it persists as a naturalized, undisputed and insoluble cultural trope. Indeed, cartoons, jokes and horror stories about “old” single women are widely accepted and disseminated, as a caution to women concerning the specter of being single in old age and what may loom ahead for them. In that light, aging single women are often the subject of caustic remarks, sardonic humor, patronage and scorn, as posing a constant threat of pervasive perversion to the normative societal order.

This paper asks, what gives this powerful stereotypical image so much discursive force and makes it so defiant to

resistance and deconstruction? This is brought to the fore within the Israeli context, in which this stereotypical label is also created and regulated by heteronormative and familial beliefs. These beliefs convey constricted conceptions of female subjectivity, and hence sanction those who fail to conform to their logic. In Israel, marriage and motherhood are rendered as intelligible forms of subjectivity, construing in turn dominant sets of hierarchies and the normative codes of an “imagined normality”. In such a pro-marriage, pro-natal, age-obsessed and youth-oriented culture, the only licensed desire of a single woman in her “prime years” is to unsingle (DePaulo, 2006) herself before it's too late.

Addressing recent literature on age, feminist theory and singlehood, we investigate the ways in which ageist and sexist constructions of age form prevalent understandings of late singlehood. We argue that single women above a certain age are faced with a triple discrimination, based on their age, gender and single status. Our intended contribution to the feminist and social study of singlehood and age theory then is twofold. First, it aims to contribute to the existing literature on age studies, gender and singlehood by highlighting the prominence of age as

a social marker in structuring subjectivities of women, rather than as a structure of fixed relations. Second, it seeks to develop an analytic framework within which conventional conceptual modalities of age, the life course and women's singlehood can be identified and demystified. Drawing on a content-based analysis of internet columns written by and about single women in Israel, this paper critically reexamines the deeply-embedded authority of age in the discursive structuring of singlehood and women's life trajectories.

Hence, one of this study's main points of departure lies in the manner in which the language of age guides common-sense understanding about "aging single women" within the context of the strong familial social order in Israel. In addition, the study explores how the predominant cultural perceptions of age appropriateness, age segregation, age norms and ageism play a crucial role in the construction of late singlehood and gendered timetables in general. Thus, we argue that ageism and age-based discrimination do not necessarily apply merely to the social category of old age and old people, but are practiced at different stages of the life course.

Our analysis, therefore, seeks to propose a new analytical perspective from which prevalent perceptions on age identity, age norms and age relations could be placed in context. We are particularly interested in how identity vectors such as age, gender and relationship status converge. We find that questions such as *Why are twenty and thirty plus single women depicted as old?* and *Why are thirty plus married mothers represented as "young mothers"?* are illustrative questions that emphasize that single women are aged by a culture which is determined by culturally-framed expectations. In a similar vein, we wish to understand the discursive process which causes single women to "age faster"; how do single women "age" differently from coupled and married ones? These queries reflect our line of inquiry, which views aging as a gendered and a heteronormative based process.

Ageist assumptions also tend to prevail in popular discourses about late singlehood and the categorization of "aging single women". The transformation, from an allegedly positive or neutral status to a negative one, demonstrates some of these widespread and rarely debated discursive principles. Our data analysis shows that ageist and sexist assumptions create a powerful discursive instrument for the regulation of behavior and expectations from single women nowadays.

A fundamental assumption of this paper is that the discourse of singlehood is age-consumed; in that respect, the notion of age serves as a significant and crucial total parameter in the construction of the social category of singlehood, and with the concomitant representations of being an "aging single woman". By initiating a much-needed interdisciplinary scholarly discussion, we further argue that the aging process of single women should be viewed as a socially situated symbolic practice and not – as it is customarily grasped – as a given biological category. Following this line of analysis, we explore the discursive effects and implications of representations of age and ageist perceptions on the social category of singlehood and in particular on the stigma of the "old maid".

### Theoretical background and setting

The growth in the number of single-women households in Israel has led to a growing interest in their every-day lives. Most

of the studies conducted in Israel thus far have emphasized that long-term singlehood is still far from being considered a legitimate status, and is subject to significant social scrutiny (Engelberg, 2011; Hacker, 2001, 2005; Lahad, 2009, 2012, 2013; Saar, 2001, 2004). Despite the rapid changing of forms of family, marriage and motherhood still play a pivotal role in shaping the identities of Israeli women. The family-centered order of Israeli society and the proactively pro-natalist climate is evidenced by recent studies that show that Israeli women marry relatively earlier, bear more children, and divorce less than their western counterparts (Portuguese, 1998: 62). Moreover, the state of Israel provides generous funding for infertility treatment technologies and has been known to have the highest number of fertility clinics per capita in the world (Kahn, 2000; Portuguese, 1998: 154).<sup>1</sup>

According to the Israeli feminist scholar Daphna Hacker, being a mother is viewed as a condition for a full life (Hacker, 2001); as a result, single and childless women are the subjects of a constant social scrutiny (Donath, 2011; Hager, 2011; Lahad, 2012). Evidently, Israel is not the only place in which single women are scrutinized and criticized, and one can find similar findings about single women worldwide. Indeed, one of the central aims of scholarly literature concerning single women in recent years is to respond to this kind of criticism, and deflate(?) some of the stereotypical attitudes attached to single women (Byrne, 2009; Chandler, 1991; DePaulo, 2006; Lahad, 2013, 2014; Reynolds, 2008; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Trimberger, 2005). Most of these studies reveal that despite the fundamental changes in family life that have occurred over the last thirty years, most of the historically-noted stereotypes towards single women remain as relevant as ever. A considerable number of studies have disclosed that single women are still very much represented as lonely, miserable and ugly (for example, DePaulo, 2006; Lahad, 2013; Trimberger, 2005), or stubborn and overly selective (Byrne, 2008; Lahad, 2013, 2014).

In her analysis of single women in popular culture Anthea Taylor (2011) proposes that the study of single women opens a window as to how heteronormative and patriarchal frameworks operate in new and sophisticated ways. Inspired by Taylor's study, we contend that current categorizations of the "old maid" are deeply embedded within the context of heteronormative culture. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (Berlant & Warner, 1998) have famously defined heteronormativity as:

"The institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as sexuality – but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment. It consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations—often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions" (1998, 548).

The privileging of heterosexual and familial bonds has the pro-active force of structuring normative understandings about

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