

## INTRODUCTION

This monograph is from my doctoral dissertation *Single women: Transition in theory and practice* that was undertaken at Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia and completed in 2012. My thesis, in essence, asked why psychology treats the single woman so badly, a question generated by an extensive review of literature that found a divide between a vibrant, rich area of singles studies and an absence of attention to single women in mainstream psychological theory. What there was, in established journals, implied pathology and deficiency to explain why women might remain, or return to being, unmarried?

To answer my question, I analysed public, private and academic discourse about unmarried women from feminist and Foucauldian perspectives that are interested in the discourses of power relations that constitute cultural knowledge and truth about women's lives, the social representations that construct historically contingent subjects and their positions in our realities. Integral to Foucauldian analysis is the genealogy of a discourse, the evolution of power/knowledge relations through discursive re/construction.

So, how had psychological discourse evolved to determine that women's unmarried state was symptomatic of a malaise? It may come as little surprise to learn that early theories about women in nascent psychological science reflected the cultural milieu in which they were based. Just as matrimony and maternity were the epitome of women's cultural identity in the nineteenth century so, too, were they confirmed, by the science of the day, as women's natural destiny. But, to my surprise, I found that matrimony and maternity were still assumed as inevitable and desirable for women - indeed, fundamental to their positive adjustment and adult identity - in the twenty-first century adult development textbooks from which I sought relevant academic discourse.

If there had been little progression in psychological thought about women's behavioural possibilities since the nineteenth century, then, and no objective basis for gendered assumptions about adult development, my task became a review of the genealogy of *cultural* discourse about unmarried women that had generated the *scientific*. It quickly became apparent that social organisation over millennia was both a construction, and a constructor, of institutional theology. Religious discourse defined the moral boundaries for social groups and prescribed appropriate behaviours for individuals within those groups. At the same time, the boundaries and prescripts were not immutable but adapted symbiotically to shifts in the dominant ideology of an era - the world views of religious authority and the social elite moved in self-validating tandem.

From the advent of patriarchy, the removal of women from full participation in public life was mirrored in the gradual removal of the feminine from the divine in Western thought. From time to time, economic or political circumstances allowed a resurgence of the feminine until patriarchy reasserted itself as the natural order. The same pattern has continued since the Enlightenment, when purported fact has overtaken faith as an organising principle in an increasingly secular world although faith still assumes a strong validating role in the world's affairs. Not only has the feminine been afforded less value than the masculine, it has had much greater limitation placed on its possibilities. As noted above, marriage and maternity remain the idealised epitome of women's identity, so much so that the Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, was pilloried for embracing neither.

### **Purpose**

When I began my doctoral research, I had not expected to journey across millennia to find the root of societal antagonism to the unmarried woman. Nor had I thought to find a close relationship between her agency and the public interests of politics and economics, or to understand much more deeply the symbiotic relationship between patriarchy and organised religion. My reading brought a much clearer perspective on the origins of misogyny and its impact on women as individuals and collectively, and on everything categorised as feminine by our culture.

In the following chapters, I will argue that denigration of the feminine, with particular reference to the unmarried woman, is vital for patriarchy's survival. I will describe mechanisms used to achieve and maintain normative status for dominant patriarchal ideologies that structure our society. I hope to persuade you that these ideologies are both flawed and transformable to sets of beliefs that benefit us all and that we all may embrace.

### **In/ter/dependence**

One of my first decisions was to find an alternative to conventional marital status categories to differentiate between unmarried and married women. This is because *married* is the default position of adults in Western culture, idealised as the fundamental unit of social organisation, with those not so engaged described in a range of deviations from that norm, such as the categories used by government agencies for demographic data collection. *Single*, *divorced*, *separated* and *widowed* measure distance from the marital norm analogous with widowed at one standard deviation to single at three. Rather than perpetuate the inequality inherent in our institutional discourse, I developed the notion of *in/ter/dependence* (see Figure 1) to:

- (i) reduce the clumsiness of having to list categories of singleness and coupledness except where one of these is being specifically discussed;
- (ii) neutralise the ideological values weighting the power relations of women’s marital status; and
- (iii) formally apply, through categorisation, the notion of relationship interdependence, which is the phenomenon identified in relationship and family literature, discussed in the next chapter that gives health and wellbeing advantage to married couples over other adults.

<b>IN/TER/DEPENDENCE</b>	
Independence	Interdependence
always single separated divorced widowed	married de facto married <b>Living Apart Together (LAT)</b>

*Figure 1. In/ter/dependence*

I will use this terminology where I can although the literature I reviewed often was quite specific about subjects’ in/ter/dependence status and I will defer to those descriptors when they are available.

### **Structure**

Beginning with a snapshot of independent women in the twenty-first century, I situate antagonism to their relational status in its perceived threat to patriarchal interests. The trends to women’s independence are contrary to those of dominant social ideology although consistent with a neoliberal ideology that privileges the market, privatisation, deregulation, consumer choice and individual autonomy. Domestic independence may be thought a natural consequence of the liberation movements of the past 50 years (Heller, 2012), although the co-option of “freedom” in the service of capitalism is not necessarily replicated in the personal. While the options afforded individuals by neoliberalism to “be anything you choose” (Jane’ in Walkerdine & Bansel, 2010, p. 495) have widened the range of subject positions possible, that of being sexually attached remains mandatory for social inclusion.

Social classification is a political act (Beattie, 2007), creating divisions that become embodied in populations, weighted by values that situate demographic groups within the body politic. It is an inherently ideological discourse that creates then positions categories of social being. Because it is discursive, subject positioning is not fixed for all time, although, as will be seen, some ideas are very resistant to change.

Those ideas most resistant to change are the “truths” that discursively shape society. Social construction, for millennia, was the province of institutional religion that mandated the options open to women, working symbiotically to validate patriarchal privilege. This role was complemented, then usurped, by an empirical science that, from the Enlightenment, has used method and measurement to structure “truth” embedded in perpetuation of social institutions and power relations (Foucault, 1980).

Beginning with the earliest religious discourse, I trace the evolution of Western institutionalised misogyny from the Palaeolithic. Our understanding of social structure at that time must be extrapolated from archaeological images, which show strong evidence of the feminine in both the temporal and the divine until patriarchy arrived from the East. Gradually, over millennia, the feminine was devalued, in the Hebrew and Greco-Roman cultures from which Western culture evolved, with misogyny writ large in religious and other discourse. Towards the end of the Greco-Roman era, women’s fortunes began to turn, allowing them greater participation in public life albeit within a patriarchal framework that did not tolerate relational independence. The other great influence on Western tradition was Celtic culture. While men headed Celtic families and tribes, the feminine was treated with great respect and women were expected to participate fully for the common good.

At the beginning of the Common Era, early Christianity, too, offered women participatory roles in the new religion, facilitating a growth in the creation of communities of women who embraced celibacy to better serve their god. The internal politics of the burgeoning religion, however, soon imposed a misogynistic theology that denied women’s agency in the church through re/interpretations of early writing and preaching which reinforced notions of the feminine’s subjection to the masculine.

From the Mediterranean region, my attention turns to Northern Europe, specifically to Britain, as I map the development of the Western tradition in the Anglophone world. Possibly because of their Celtic traditions, coupled with Christianity’s idealisation of celibacy, independent women not uncommonly held prominent positions in Anglo-Saxon England, especially those in monastic communities. After the Conquest, however, primogeniture became the norm and women’s influence was limited to the men in their immediate family. Of all independent women,

widows enjoyed the greatest freedoms although, when circumstances allowed or demanded, all women took advantage of opportunities for self-sufficiency.

The industrial revolution and the emergence of Enlightenment science brought a profound shift in women's lives. Mechanisation took work that they had previously done and denied them access to the new modes of production that were thought inappropriate for, or unmanageable by, women. With avenues of employment closing to them, and the pool of potential husbands reduced through war and the straitened economic circumstances brought by capitalist efficiencies, women began looking elsewhere for means of self-support. As in previous times, many women chose to move to where work was available except now their options extended to migration from, rather than within, Britain to parts of the world where their labour, and presence, was needed.

One of these destinations was Australia, colonised in the eighteenth century for penal settlement. It took some decades before both convict and free migrant women gained some respect in their new environment, and relational independence was never an easy option. Women's workplace participation fluctuated over the first couple of centuries of European settlement until the liberation movements of the mid-twentieth century, and the growth of the consumer society, gave women increased access to a share of the benefits of economic participation. As always, taking full advantage of the opportunities available to them, women are increasingly visible in positions of influence. (At the time this monograph was written) the Australian heads of state were women, although this was not the evidence of an egalitarian society it might have seemed with the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, subject to regular denigration, and personal insult, for choosing to live her life free of marriage and maternity to better participate in the public arena - as the early Christian women chose to do.

In my conclusion, I review the genealogy of misogynistic discourse and women's constant resistance to its intent. The power relations around in/ter/dependence are in constant flux, stirred by the struggle for women's access to economic independence and relational choice in which misogyny is a fundamental narrative. The ubiquity of this discourse demonstrates its validating function for Western social organisation.