

THE INDEPENDENT WOMAN

Ideology is released into society like a colourless, odourless gas. It is embedded in newspapers, advertisements, television programmes and text-books - where it makes light of its partial, perhaps illogical or unjust, take on the world; where it meekly implies that it is simply stating age-old truths with which only a fool or a maniac would disagree (de Botton, 2004, pp. 214-215).

Statistically Speaking

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the numbers of women choosing a life other than that bound by domestic responsibility, as was the experience of their mothers and grandmothers, are growing. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics's past four censuses report the trend away from marriage over at least the past 20 years although it remains a significant relational experience for most women (ABS, 2007a). That is, the majority of women do marry or otherwise commit to a permanent relational interdependence but many return to independence through separation, divorce or widowhood. The same trend is apparent in Europe (Eurostat, 2011), the United Kingdom (Office for National Statistics, 2011), and the United States of America (Lofquist, Lugaila, O'Connell, & Feliz, 2012).

In Australia in 2006, nearly a quarter (24.36%) of all household types accommodated one person (ABS, 2007b). The single-person household is reported to be the fastest growing household type (de Vaus, 2004a; Mackay, 2005) with almost one in 10 people living on their own (de Vaus, 2004a). The same trend is evident elsewhere, e.g., in the US, where nearly a third of all households shelter sole dwellers (Heller, 2012).

Fertility in Western countries is also decreasing (e.g., d'Addio & d'Ercole, 2005) although, in Australia, 2009 data show only slightly decreasing fertility for most fertile age groups from a 30-year high the previous year. "The proportion of ex-nuptial births has been increasing since the 1950s, and has risen strongly over the past three decades" (ABS, 2010, p. 13), to 35% in 2009, although the percentage of those without acknowledged paternity has decreased. While many of these babies are rendered illegitimate by being born to *de facto* couples, an increasing number are born to women who choose to bear and raise children alone. Arguably, it is the freedom brought by financial independence that enables women to satisfy their maternal aspirations without committing to a possibly unsatisfactory interdependence with the child(ren)'s father.

While the data now report *de facto* marriage that reduces the independent population to 40.8% of all adult Australians (ABS, 2012a), they do not distinguish relational status by sexual orientation, which means,

unfortunately for clearer delineation of women's lives, that homo-, bi-sexual experience is lost through aggregation with the heterosexual into one population.

Ideologically Speaking

To quote Vaclav Havel (1991) "The primary excusatory function of ideology... is to provide people, both as victims and pillars of the... system, with the illusion that the system is in harmony with the human order and the order of the universe" (in Jost & Hunyady, 2003, pp. 111-112).

Ideologies are fundamental organisational systems that structure our social worlds. They are sociocognitive, social, discursive constructs embedded in notions of morality about good and bad, right and wrong that determine the acceptability or otherwise of beliefs, behaviours, attitudes and values (van Dijk, 1995). "They are more or less egalitarian and oriented towards minimising or maximising differences and reducing or encouraging society's status and power hierarchies" (Nafstad, Blakar, Carlquist, Phelps, & Rand-Hendriksen, 2007, p. 315). Put quite bluntly, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force" (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 48). Often characterised as "false consciousness" (Mills, 1997), ideologies structure our reality, imposing meaning on our social environments (Moscovici & Duveen, 2000).

The ubiquity of power-based ideology legitimises inequality, serving, it is suggested, a palliative function for those disadvantaged by their status (because it is "natural") as, at the same time, it rationalises the privilege of the advantaged (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). Yet, precisely because it is a social construct, ideology is not necessarily fixed for all time. Political, economic and social systems evolve; in the past decades communism, for example, has been replaced by adapted free market principles in Russia and China and the shaky foundations of globalisation have become apparent, attracting increasing protest within major participating nations from activists who prefer to think they live in a society rather than an economy.

Patriarchy. The sheer size of the independent female population, you would think, might normalise independence as a valid social condition. Instead, public discourse constructs them as deficient, even while achieving in the public sphere, because they live outside an ideologically-mandated nuclear family model.

The dominance of man over woman (and child) as head of a family, a community, a country and the divine has had ideological legitimacy, in the societies from which Western culture grew, since pre-historic times.

Inextricably linked with the accumulation and protection of wealth and power, the patriarchal system is predicated on masculine qualities of physical strength and bellicosity (Armstrong, 1993; Taylor et al., 2000) that define the feminine as the subjectable Other. While class plays a major role in individual men's access to valued resources, gender affords men at all tiers of the social structure status over women (Hepburn, 2003; Pollert, 1996).

Of major concern to patriarchy has been the management of women's fertility (Rowbotham, 1999) so that man's labour and its rewards benefit his bloodline rather than that of another man. To maximise exclusivity of access to a woman's procreative potential, the fundamental unit of social organisation across millennia has been *the family*. While women may have had varying degrees of social independence and influence in a patriarchal family structure, sexual freedom was never an option. This was particularly so in societies where marriage was an alliance between families of the ruling, craft or merchant classes; that is, where women were commodified for gainful exchange. In such a social structure, women who are unmarried – especially those who do not want to marry – are anomalous, even regarded with fear and hostility by those for whom marriage, or at least conventional sexual attachment, has high ideological value (Mitterauer & Sieder, 1982).

The family is afforded normative status through institutionalised public and corporate policy, reinforced by mechanisms of transmitting popular culture such as the news media, advertising, film, television, music and literature (Amador & Kiersky, 1998; C. Anderson, Stewart, & Dimidjian, 1994; Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Chandler, 1991; Chasteen, 1994; DePaulo, 2007; Schwartzberg, Berliner, & Jacob, 1995; Stein, 1976; Whiteley, 2000). In recent decades, the family model has been allowed some flexibility to accommodate increased rates of informal (*de facto*) marriage and blending of households as parents divorce and remarry. However, the model remains the aspirational template, latterly also for the homosexually interdependent, underpinned by norms of romance and pair-bonding.

Marriage has been described as “a vow of togetherness” (Scruton, 2006, p. 19), the purpose of which is to ensure social reproduction, the socialising of children, and the transmission of social capital. Based in heterosexual desire, it regulates sexual expression, fosters the accumulation of property (Lantz, 1982) and is suggested to have a civilising effect on men who otherwise may exhibit dangerous antisocial behaviours that threaten the social order (Wilcox, 2006). In an argument for the institution of marriage, Wilcox (2006) noted that the married in the United States enjoy more than 1,000 rights and benefits denied to the unmarried. His explanation for its weakened popularity is that availability of contraception

has reduced the role of marriage as the only acceptable avenue for sexual activity.

The family is thought to be the repository of all social, emotional and intellectual gratification, the site of the perfect romantic relationship promising emotional warmth and stability, and the source of financial and societal security (Bickerton, 1983; Chandler, 1991; H. James, 2006; Langford, 1999; Penman & Stolk, 1983; Schwartzberg, et al., 1995). Yet, despite its ideological dominance, anxiety about the family is constant and protection of its status fierce although it might be more accurate to locate the anxiety in perceived threat to patriarchy. While contemporary marriage, or less formal romantic union, is framed and desired as an all-embracing partnership, it is a patriarchal presence in that partnership that affords the status. To be otherwise successful, including with child-rearing, does not have the same value if achieved outside the patriarchal model. Indeed, a family unit containing dependent children that is without a male and female adult dyad is thought inherently flawed (Hepburn, 2003; Scruton, 2006).

The price of independence. Concomitant with privileging the couple has been disadvantaging those living outside its catchment. For example, policy privileging couples and families includes taxation and superannuation concessions and family benefit support that has been described as “a huge transfer of income from people without children to those with children” (Uren & Colman, 2005, p. 19). In Australia, these include family tax benefits, child care benefits, child care rebate, a baby bonus, a large-family supplement, and a multiple birth allowance, although it should be noted these many of these benefits are available to single-parent families. A survey of household income and labour dynamics in Australia (HILDA) reported that couples are least likely to experience poverty; with categories of independent households shown to be most at risk (Headey & Warren, 2008). Working-age lone-person households receive comparatively little financial assistance and a higher percentage of independent working-age women than men were income poor, their situation showing the least improvement between the 2001-2005 comparison years. The elderly and lone mothers, who might be heading a family but whose doing so outside the patriarchal model continues to be socially censured, also experience chronic poverty. A subsequent revisiting of respondents found poverty levels of lone-parent families were rising and that they, followed by working-age singles, reported highest levels of financial stress (Wilkins, Warren, Hahn, & Houng, 2010).

Other policy found to disadvantage independent women has included the built environment (Chasteen, 1994), discriminatory work practices (Wilkins, et al., 2010), salary levels and work conditions (Bellas,

1992; DePaulo, 2007). Discriminatory practices in the provision of goods and services include the single person supplement (or levy) applied to hotel and other accommodation costs, ineligibility of the independent for subsidised memberships where the second of a couple may join at a discounted rate, lower couple or family insurance premiums than for the independent, and exclusion from promotions rewarding couples or families.

The demand for relationship category is perhaps the most pervasive reminder of the independent woman's socially compromised status. With *married* the default option, the unmarried are regularly asked to self-classify into sub-categories of independence for a purpose that is not always obvious. While such demographic categorisation may be applied to planning and providing social infrastructure, there are many instances where it is irrelevant; for example, when the information sought is actually how many incomes support a household to better assess a credit application, or when age and likelihood of use may better inform consumer research. Social classification allows society's ideological gatekeepers to exercise authority over how populations may be divided, who is allocated to which subdivision, and what this might mean for distribution of social resources (Beattie, 2007).

While independent women may be unaware of, even accepting as natural, the institutionalised discrimination described above, they are very aware of that experienced in social settings (see DePaulo, 2007b; Reynolds, 2008). The stigma of singleness is the corollary of a socially dominant ideology of marriage and family as the living arrangement of first choice (R. Bell & Yans, 2008). Independent women invariably report their feelings of exclusion from couples society, particularly evident following the loss of coupled status through separating from, or the death of, a partner (e.g., Amador & Kiersky, 1998; Brehm, Miller, Perlman, & Campbell, 2002; Byrne, 2008; DePaulo & Morris, 2004; Penman & Stolk, 1983; Stein, 1976).

Ideological Validation

Over millennia, a primary mechanism for legitimising prevailing ideology has been organised religion that embeds notions of the naturalness of current social organisation in the omniscience of a cosmic power.

Prior to the Enlightenment, institutional religion was the source of knowledge and authority channelled from deities whose will mirrored the organisational structure of their believers and whose patronage favoured the strong (Armstrong, 1993; Baring & Cashford, 1991; Forth, 2008). Mythology validated political systems (Graves, 1973; Osborn & Burgess, 2004), past and present, and religious discourse dominated daily life. From the Enlightenment, science has sought the role previously played by

religion in structuring social organisation although faith has not yielded easily to purported fact, as evidenced by the debate between theists and atheists in the first decade of this century.

Religious belief has two fundamental functions (arguably shared by science). Firstly, it provides an explanation of the mysteries of life and the afterlife, and of physical and social environmental events and features that otherwise have no obvious meaning, such as natural disasters or infectious epidemics. Further, it provides a means of trying to minimise these through propitiation to their creator. An example is the commonly reported bargaining through prayer at times of crisis where if God will allow or prevent something happening, the petitioner will or will not do something else. The second function of a religious system, referred to above, is to provide an ideological blueprint for social structure and organisation. This was originally achieved through interpretation of signs and symbols by the ordained, selected for their role by formalised ritual, revelation, or self-appointment. As a religious system becomes established, original interpretations are reinforced as precedents and built upon for succeeding generations of the faithful.

The universality of humanity's search for higher truth that gives meaning to our lives and worlds has interested scientists in the neurobiology of religious belief. Centres and pathways have been located in areas of the brain, associated with networks enabling intent and emotion, abstract semantics and imagery, that are activated by thoughts of God and religious experience and which are suggested to demonstrate an evolutionary adaptive function for religious belief (Kapogiannis et al., 2009; Snyder, 2008). That is, the behaviours manifesting religious belief work to support perpetuation of a social group and the genetic line of its individual members. While these behaviours generally are discussed in terms of morality and altruism (Snyder, 2008), they equally could be those that proclaim a group's superiority through its special relationship with a deity, or privilege individuals or a class of members within a group. These sorts of behaviours are likely to demonstrate aggression and hierarchical control rather than co-operative selflessness.

From the Enlightenment, the role of religion in regulating society waned as science moved "truth" from faith to fact. Science transcended the church as the holder of knowledge, ostensibly free of moral, political and social values (Riger, 1992), albeit with a new form of "fathertongue" (Smith, 1990) that continued to subjectify populations into familiar positions. For example, women's function as breeders and carers physiologically and psychologically unsuited for public life was legitimised (Morrow, 2000), predominantly by medical science (Harrison, 1995) that inflicted treatments that now might be regarded as punishment for women who failed to embrace their assigned roles (Ehrenreich & English, 1978).

As with religion, science assumed power over our everyday lives through its technologies (Walsh, 1988), discounting our experiential knowledge (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002) by becoming the holder of truths, the new religion and justifier (Sampson, 1977).

Wellbeing studies. An example of science's continued normative function is that of wellbeing studies. Under this rubric, a body of knowledge has been developed about the health, happiness and economic benefits for the married, measurably more so for men (e.g., Brehm, Miller, Perlman, & Campbell, 2002; Flood, 2005; Gardner & Oswald, 2004; Gray, de Vaus, Qu, & Stanton, 2010; Hahn, 1993; Michael, Berkman, Colditz, & Kawachi, 2001; Stack & Eshleman, 1998; Wilcox, 2006) against which the single-again and, to a lesser extent, the always-single compare unfavourably.

Verbrugge (1979) and Murphy and colleagues (1997) authored two very influential papers, both of which initially found always-single women to be the healthiest of all marital groups. However, to ensure consistency with "the conventional pattern of higher morbidity among the never married, compared with the married" (Murphy, Glaser, & Grundy, 1997, p. 163), both authors aggregated populations of always-single women in the general population with those requiring institutional care, so reducing the overall health status of always-single women to below that of their married peers. Verbrugge (1979) suggested non-institutionalised always-single women's health reflected contentment with their status and expressed surprise at the deleterious effect of marriage breakdown on women's health.

A higher incidence of ill health among the single-again is a common finding in wellbeing studies, attributed to (i) risky lifestyles associated with the assumed distress of their marital situation, (ii) pre-existing poor health that caused their marriage dissolution, and (iii) lack of caring and economic benefits of cohabitation (Murphy, et al., 1997; Verbrugge, 1979). Gardner and Oswald (2004) reported enhanced risk of premature death for widows, a population found to have higher risk of late life dementia if widowed at mid-life, than their already susceptible unmarried peers (Håkansson et al., 2009; Helmer, 2009). Contradicting these findings, a protective effect of living alone came from the Nurses Study (Michael, et al., 2001) and from an Australian report on loneliness (Flood, 2005), with the protective effect strongly associated with active engagement with community, family and friends.

A robust relationship was found between previously-married women's premature mortality, illness susceptibility and a range of distress indices that measured self-reported high stress levels, low social role value and low self-worth, the negative impact of which was exacerbated by low incomes (Gardner & Oswald, 2004). This research did not consider

attitudes to marriage as a variable although negative effects of marriage dissolution might be expected where individuals accept the ideological values governing social control and regulation ascribed to marital status and where adjustment of their social role was involuntary (Anson, 1989; Davidson, 2007; Thoits, 1992). That is, failure to retain, or resume, membership of a normative group with high social value would have greater deleterious impact on individual wellbeing for those unable to adapt to its loss.

In Australia, a survey of groups at extreme ends of a subjective wellbeing (SWB) index found that those with high scores were characterised as having high household income and an intimate partner (Cummins, Walter, & Woerner, 2007). Those at the low end were unemployed with very low income, and were not cohabiting, unless with dependent children. The exception was, contrarily, high wellbeing of widows including those on low incomes. The authors emphasised that no one characteristic could determine group members' wellbeing status, two or more working synergistically were needed. An earlier report from this source noted the high wellbeing status of financially strong lone dwellers (Cummins, Woerner, Tomy, Gibson, & Knapp, 2005) and that "negative effects of separation and divorce can be substantially reduced by a decent household income" (Cummins, et al., 2005, p. 54). Financial security was also cited as a determining variable in married couples' wellbeing along with good health, both thought more likely to be found in marriage (Stack & Eshleman, 1998).

Partners provide the strongest support unless none is forthcoming, when lack of support from the person from whom it is most expected is the most damaging to personal wellbeing (Cummins, et al., 2005). Contrary to other findings (e.g., Flood, 2005; Michael, et al., 2001), the always-single were found to have less support than the married, and from fewer sources, a finding possibly explained by the results not being disaggregated by gender although it was noted that men's wellbeing was more like to be adversely affected by living alone, unlike their female peers who were suggested to be more resilient. Although the nuanced results in themed sections of the reports made overall summary very difficult, marriage was strongly supported as optimal for health and wellbeing with commentary such as "Living alone is a poor option for people younger than 66 years. It is likely that people with low wellbeing live alone either because they have recently broken from a relationship or because they cannot find a partner to live with them" (Cummins, et al., 2005, p. 86) and "What seems more clear is that not having a partner in middle-age is generally quite catastrophic for personal wellbeing" (Cummins et al., 2005, p. 87). Yet subsequent discussion of a U-curve in the always-single wellbeing data suggested the purported reduced wellbeing of the

unmarried at midlife may reflect the normative nature of coupledness during reproductive years that excludes the independent from mainstream (i.e., nuclear family) interests. The report also makes explicit that single-living should not be thought due to personal deficit.

A similar conclusion could be drawn from a meta-analysis of SWB research that identified methodological limitations in the corpus, such as “the almost exclusive reliance on cross-sectional correlational designs with inadequate tests of causal hypotheses” (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999, p. 277) or lack of independent corroboration of SWB. While noting that demographic variables contribute, at most, 20% of variance, a positive relationship between marriage and SWB was confirmed. However, that “the effects of marriage on SWB depend on how typical one’s situation is in one’s age cohort” (Diener, et al., 1999, p. 291) again points to the impact of compliance with an ideologically mandated couples culture on individuals’ subjective assessment of wellbeing.

Social engagement and intimacy are well understood to be significant factors for individuals’ health and wellbeing (e.g., Diener & Seligman, 2002; H. Lee, Jang, Lee, Cho, & Park, 2008). However, intimacy is more likely to be defined as a marital relationship than that with a platonic confidant (e.g., Brehm, et al., 2002), and the link between happiness and marriage assumed rather than demonstrated. For example, a regularly-cited paper seeking to explain a reduced correlation between marriage and happiness concludes “it is still not certain that marriage ever typically had strong positive effects on the personal happiness of married person in the United States, *but it probably did*, and if so, those effects *apparently* have waned considerably in the last few years” (Glenn & Weaver, 1988, p. 322) [emphasis added] before nominating an ideological shift to individualism as the cause. Failure to differentiate between marriages of high and lesser marital satisfaction masks a higher incidence of depression reported by wives, and husbands, in unsatisfactory marriages (Earle, Smith, Harris, & Longino Jr, 1997; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Ussher, 2011). Disparities in the literature that find greater happiness for always-single women have been explained as being a corollary of wives’ disappointment in a marriage that fails to comply with egalitarian sex role performance (G. Lee, Seccombe, & Shehan, 1991), presumably subscribed to by wives but not their husbands. Such failed expectations and disinclination to support patriarchal gender relations are thought responsible for women’s increasing reluctance to marry (Lewis, 2001). Another factor may be a reduced “economic imperative to heterosexuality and marriage” (Rich, 1980, p. 634), more prevalent in earlier times when marriage offered greater financial comfort for women than was possible from income levels thought appropriate for women living independently (Burns, 1986; Delphy & Leonard, 1992; Hahn, 1993).

Disagreement is evident between supporters and doubters of marital advantage about the degree to which again- and always-single people enjoy social support and engagement, the former conflating lone living with loneliness. With solitary pleasures defined as a cultural sin (Pamuk, 2007), the ascription of loneliness has a markedly moral significance to do with how individuals should be living and when they should feel lonely (Wood, 1986). Despite evidence that women living alone report no significant difference in support and friendship to that of their cohabiting peers (Flood, 2005), their domestic situation in itself signifies distress to marriage proponents. Yet the behaviours important to intimate friendships are similar to those of romantic relationships (Oswald, Clark, & Kelly, 2004), with, arguably, friendships more likely to satisfy emotional need (Taylor, et al., 2000) than a possibly unattainable conjugal ideal (Gillis, 1985; Langford, 1999). Of greatest significance for their wellbeing may be a sense of mastery and control over their lives enjoyed by those who have chosen to live independently (Keith, 2004).

Possibly because of the design limitations mentioned above, SWB studies rarely discuss factors that may mitigate findings of marital advantage. For example, the adverse effects on women's well-being brought by marital dissolution are comparatively short-term, associated with the immediate effects of their changed status (Feldman, Byles, & Beaumont, 2000; Mastekaasa, 1994). One study found that two years after their divorce women reported less depression, less anxiety, less alcohol consumption, fewer health problems, increased pride in their financial and emotional independence, and greater happiness than before (Morrow, 2000). Less positive outcomes of coupledness include a "broken heart" phenomenon that sees elevated mortality immediately following the death of a spouse (Jagger & Sutton, 1991; Shek, 2003) implying an interdependence that carries risks along with benefits. For the unhappily married, the purported benefits of marriage are replaced by misery and adverse health status (De Vogli, Chandola, & Marmot, 2007; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Another study found long-term adverse effects including feelings of social isolation for older divorced women who remarried, more so for those who did not remarry or who had been widowed (Gray, et al., 2010). However, the authors interpreted the greater wellbeing for the woman who did not remarry as a process of "habituation" (i.e., a numbing of the distress), rather than an embrace of independence.

The authors of a report of an eight-decade long study of health and longevity found "a huge difference" (Friedman & Martin, 2011, p. 117) when their findings of the impact of in/ter/dependence were further analysed by sex. It seems that "women who could thrive in a good marriage tended to stay especially healthy, but many of the rest were better off single" (Friedman & Martin, 2011, p. 119), describing advice that marriage

was necessary for longevity as flawed, incomplete and its role in health severely distorted if used as an independent variable. For example, women who divorced and stayed independent enjoyed greater longevity than those who remarried, as did the always-single.

In her review of wellbeing studies, Bella DePaulo describes in depth the assumptions and methodological flaws in the studies promoting marriage for individuals' health and wellbeing (DePaulo, 2007). These include the exclusion of the unhappily and once-married from research populations of the currently married (the other side of the coin described above where the unmarried in institutional care are included in populations of the always-single) to validate claims for the benefits of marriage, evidence that happiness ratings rise around marriage then return to pre-marital levels, the greater reliability of data from longitudinal rather than snapshot studies, and that women's health seems to remain independent of in/ter/dependence status.

As can be seen, rather than marriage *per se*, it seems likely that associated wellbeing is determined more by the degree to which individuals subscribe to the couples culture and their ability to resist systemic devaluation of their lifestyle choice should this deviate from patriarchal prescription. By this I mean that women whose marriage has ended involuntarily through the death of their husband or by an unwelcome divorce may be adversely affected by the loss of a social identity that they valued for the inclusion it afforded to the ideologically mandated couples culture. For women whose identity is internally grounded, independence has a value that protects against any personal sense of inadequacy associated with their in/ter/dependent status. However, the example of the wellbeing field demonstrates the drive by science to protect the institution of marriage by "proving" interdependent privilege and independent pathology.

Ideological Adaptation

Integral to capitalism's growth is its increasing dependence on women's labour and commodity consumption (Mohanty, 2003). Liberated from inevitable domestic servitude by contraception, education and vocational availability, Western women have increasingly entered the paid workforce and assumed independent consumer status. Concomitant with capitalist growth has been the emergence of a neoliberal ideology that privileges the market, privatisation, deregulation, consumer choice and individual autonomy over community. While the coexistence of individualism and family values may seem antagonistic, it could be argued that, functionally for capitalism, the family is an individual marital consuming unit rather than an extended network of DNA-linked relationships. Further, discourse of choice, diversity and individuality has been coopted in the service of

consumption and is manifest in the range of domestic arrangements, such as blended or same-sex unions, rendered acceptable by their approximation to the heterosexual nuclear family (Budgeon, 2008; McRobbie, 2009).

The rise of neoliberalism, and an associated increase in women's financial independence that supports their self-sufficiency, has seen marriage redefined as a romantic partnership of equals, evolved from previous models of wife as subordinate helpmeet to husband provider. Patriarchy's response to women's elevated status, however, has been to exploit and subvert the advances made in the past decades (Faludi, 1992).

One strategy to perpetuate patriarchal gendered relations has been cultural hypersexualisation, an inflated discourse that pervades all public space. Romance and the search for love have declined in competitive potency against the rise in women's educational and vocational aspirations (Rudman & Heppen, 2003). They have been replaced by a discourse that defines sexual attachment as a physiological necessity rather than capability and sexual activity a recreational pursuit, guided by media depictions of sexual performance (aka love) that privilege male power (Cancian, 1986). Evidence from the medium of popular music includes increased sexual display by female performers, through pornographic imagery, over the past decade (Levande, 2008). Lyrics across all genres are dominated by themes of male power and the objectification of women, with women's identity linked to sexual attachment to the extent of self-devaluation to maintain that attachment (Bretthauer, Zimmerman, & Banning, 2007). The irony, at a time of their greater participation in society, may be that women have internalised the male gaze as an organising behavioural principle, now believing that their pseudo-masculine attitudes about recreational sex are self-generated, signifying equality and freedom (Gill, 2003). Yet models of current feminine and masculine sexual behaviour may be no more than an adaptation of the gendered patterns of social organisation that maintain patriarchal authority and interests. If there is less financial need for the independent woman to seek masculine support, hypersexualising the social world provides an alternative mechanism for keeping the female gaze on coupledness, and the status it affords (Hollway, 1984). It also perpetuates continued subordination of women (Levy, 2005) through, particularly, independent women's compliance with this definition of freedom that pathologizes sexual restraint (McRobbie, 2009), signifying a very limited liberation (Foucault, 1980).

In her review of theories explaining the omnipresence of sexuality in contemporary Western culture, Attwood (2006) lists a series of signifiers for women's sexual expression: *sex is stylish, a source of physical pleasure, a means of creating identity, a form of body work, self-expression, a quest for individual fulfilment* (Attwood, 2006, p. 86). Women's sexual

desirability, circumscribed by cultural markers for appearance and behaviour, has become an important measure of their value; their sexual disinhibition a product of aspirations to an adult status still defined by masculine standards (Levy, 2005). As Gill (2003) reminds us, definition of women's heterosexual expression remains the province of men, even as demonstrating their lust-worthiness remains the province of women (Levy, 2005). The sexual desire of women deemed unattractive by appearance or age, or a preference for celibacy, attracts negativity across all media that transmits and reflects social mores. This extract is from crime fiction.

Girl? She's pushing forty, make-up not quite concealing the fan of lines flanking each eye, such marks of age seeming all the more pronounced by her trying to act like she's still twenty-two... trying to look like she belongs among the lads-mag spank-bank nymphettes, but managing instead to resemble their embarrassing aunty, the one who is single, increasingly desperate and whose lack of a significant other is most manifest in her having nobody to tell her she shouldn't dress like that any more
(Brookmyre, 2006, pp. 79-80)

Although there is academic debate about whether sexual uninhibitedness reflects a neoliberal discourse of women's choice and freedom or a return to the female objectification feminists identified and contested in previous times (Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010), it is inarguably to male advantage that women understand their value to be their sexual attractiveness to men. 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.

Summary

The above discussion considered the function and adaptability of patriarchal ideology in relation to regulating possibilities for independent women and some of the mechanisms instrumental in its perpetuation. The cultural imperative to couple should see independent women rendered dysfunctional by self-pity, self-doubt and self-criticism (C. Anderson, et al., 1994), adversely affected by the pity and patronising attitudes of the interdependent (DePaulo, 2007; La Barre, 1972). Yet, always-single women in the general population report high levels of health and wellbeing. Many widows choose to remain so (Talbot, 1998) as do many single-again women (de Vaus, 2004b) after the trauma of their relationship ending has passed. Why, then, is relational independence not a desirable cultural option for women? Further, why is it targeted with

manifest hostility by cultural media and by science that is prepared to massage its data to make its point?

The answer to these questions becomes apparent through mapping the gradual removal of the feminine from both spiritual and secular potency. We will see how this is accomplished by an increasingly misogynistic discourse to justify women's subjection to men, and to marginalise those women who live independent of domestic cohabitation with men. Our review will take us from pre-history to the emergence of Christianity in the Common Era. The belief systems I discuss are those relevant to present-day Western culture: those from the Near/Middle East, the nursery of Judaism, Christianity and Islam; the Greco-Roman pantheon and myths that still speak as metaphors in the twenty-first century of our era; and the Celtic traditions that assimilated with Christianity in the Middle Ages. This framework is supported by Graves (1972) who demonstrates an Aegean influence on Hebrew, Greek and Celtic mythology, the latter through invasion and trade, and argues its Mother-and-Son mythological tradition is fundamental to Roman Catholicism, if not Protestantism. The influence of the ancient Near East, and Greco-Roman eras on current European culture is also noted by Bahrani (2001) in her examination of the lives of Babylonian women Before the Common Era (BCE), Lerner (1986) in her majestic construction of patriarchy's construction, and Vivante (2006).