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What Does It Mean to Be Never Married in Later Life? Application of Phenomenology in an Aging Study

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Abstract

The growth of the aging population and the increase of age at marriage will result in a rise in the number of never-married people in the future, although there is not sufficient qualitative evidence on this emerging phenomenon. The present study aimed to explore the lived experience of never-married older adults. The lived experiences of 12 never-married older adults were collected using an in-depth interview. The hermeneutics method of Van Manen was used for identification, description, and interpretation of emergent themes. Reflection on the lived experiences of the participants uncovered six themes, including: feeling of independence, combating loneliness, moving up to self-development, feeling of regret and loss, close relationships with friends and relatives, and being annoyed of stigmatization. The findings of the present study, which illuminate the hidden aspects of never-married older adults' lives, can be used by healthcare professionals such as psychotherapists, and also by social workers. It is recommended to study the process of being unmarried in later life and factors influencing it using grounded theory.

Keywords

singleness, never married, older adults, phenomenology, aging

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The growth of the aging population and the increase of age at marriage will result in a rise in the number of never-married people in the future, although there is not sufficient qualitative evidence on this emerging phenomenon. The present study aimed to explore the lived experience of never-married older adults. The lived experiences of 12 never-married older adults were collected using an in-depth interview. The hermeneutics method of Van Manen was used for identification, description, and interpretation of emergent themes. Reflection on the lived experiences of the participants uncovered six themes, including: feeling of independence, combating loneliness, moving up to self-development, feeling of regret and loss, close relationships with friends and relatives, and being annoyed of stigmatization. The findings of the present study, which illuminate the hidden aspects of never-married older adults' lives, can be used by healthcare professionals such as psychotherapists, and also by social workers. It is recommended to study the process of being unmarried in later life and factors influencing it using grounded theory.

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The proportion of aging and never married individuals is growing in the world. Evidence shows the phenomenon of staying single in later life is complex, multidimensional and culture-based. Most of the available studies on the life of never married older adults are quantitative and focus on limited areas such as physical health issues. As a result, many aspects in the life of never married older adults remain obscure (Hamedanchi, Khankeh, Momtaz, & Zanjari, 2020).

There are millions of people around the world who have passed the average age for marriage and are still single (Hermalin, Beth Ofstedal, & Tesfai, 2007). In addition, the number of older people in general is increasing due to their longer lifespan and better hygiene (United Nations 2020). In 2019, 703 million people in the world population were 65 or over. This number is expected to reach 1.5 billion by 2050. The portion of the population of 65 and over

was six percent in 1990, while it increased to nine percent in 2019 and is projected to rise to 26 percent by 2050. Globally, this means that one out of six people will be 65 and over by 2050 (United Nations 2020). Along with general aging, there are indications that the population of never-married older adults will continue to grow. It is estimated that more than 10 percent of women and more than nine percent of men over 65 will be unmarried in some countries such as South Africa, Singapore and Brazil by 2025 (Hermalin et al., 2007).

Prior research studies on the life of the never married older adults have not resulted in consistent findings. Some researchers like Gubrium (1975) believe that never-married older adults are a distinct group within each society, who tend to be isolated throughout their lives. Some other studies indicate that these individuals experience lower levels of life satisfaction and happiness compared to their married counterparts (Ward, 1979; Williams, Zhang, & Packard, 2017). However, these findings are not consistently supported by other studies. There is evidence indicating that never-married older adults have strong social and family relations and benefit from greater educational and professional opportunities (Fengler, Danigelis, & Grams, 1982; Taylor & Ford, 1983). It has also been reported that voluntary singlehood in later life is associated with independence, self-fulfillment, and autonomy (Timonen & Doyle, 2014). A qualitative study on life experiences of never-married older women by O'Brien (1991) showed that the participants were realistic and positive, relied on their inner strength and determinations, and expressed few regrets about the past.

From a public health perspective, studying the life situation of never married older adults is important. Some research suggests that this group has a higher incidence of frailty and disability (Liu & Zhang, 2013; Thompson, Theou, Karnon, Adams, & Visvanathan, 2018; Trevisan et al., 2016). Kramer et al. (1985) indicated the rate of cognitive impairment increases with age and that it was higher among unmarried older adults. A higher prevalence of Mild Cognitive Disorder (MCI) has also been reported in never married older men (Petersen et al., 2010). A recent study by Moudi et al. (2020) suggests that being married is associated with a higher level of quality of life among older adults. While married individuals might be supported by their spouses and children in old age, a large proportion of never married older adults live alone without receiving enough informal services from family (Fengler et al., 1982; Hermalin et al., 2007). Older people who live alone have a greater chance of being admitted by emergency rooms and being visited by a general physician (Dreyer, Steventon, Fisher, & Deeny, 2018). It has also been reported that the rate of depression and chronic conditions is significantly higher among never married adults, and they need more care support (Musić Milanović, Erjavec, Poljičanin, Vrabec, & Brečić, 2015; Ng, Santosa, Weinehall, & Malmberg, 2020; Williams et al., 2017). Accordingly, singleness seems to be more problematic in later life in particular for those older adults who live in developing countries which lack adequate access to formal health care services.

Both aging and marriage can deeply influence different dimensions of human life. According to the life course theory, human development is a lifelong process, and any important event in childhood and adulthood might affect human development and aging. Pathways influencing the life course are greatly dependent on historical and geographic contexts (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). As marriage is an important event in the life of any people, an older person with lifelong singleness may have different lived experiences. Since there is a limited number of qualitative studies on never-married older adults and there are noticeable gaps in the existing data, this phenomenological study aimed to explore the meaning and structure of being unmarried in later life.

Methods

There are a variety of qualitative methods such as ethnography, content analysis, and narrative studies which investigate human experiences. However, only phenomenology focuses on the lived and primal meaning of experiences (Van Manen, 2017). Those phenomenological methods which rely on pure description, strongly influenced by Husserlian phenomenology, are called descriptive phenomenological methods, while other approaches that incorporate interpretation of phenomena, as informed by Heidegger and other hermeneutic phenomenologists, are called interpretive or hermeneutic methods (Davidsen, 2013). Epoché, also referred to as bracketing, is a principle in descriptive phenomenology, and means setting aside all presumptions and prejudgments about the phenomenon under investigation to have access to a bias-free description of reality from an objective perspective (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Alternately, in interpretive phenomenology, presuppositions or expert knowledge of the researcher are valuable, and theoretical orientation or conceptual frameworks are also considered. Since interpretive phenomenology is capable of going beneath the surface and uncovering the structure of complex phenomena (Neubauer et al., 2019) such as singlehood in later life, a hermeneutics method addressed by Van Manen (2016) was used in the current study. Van Manen recommends six activities for exploring the structure of lived experiences:

- (1) turning to the nature of lived experience;
- (2) investigating experience as we live it;
- (3) reflecting on essential themes;
- (4) the art of writing and rewriting;
- (5) maintaining a strong and oriented relation;
- (6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (pp. 31-33)

Although Van Manen describes these activities separately, he cautions: they cannot be performed in isolation as a mechanistic set of procedures (p. 30).

Turning to the nature of lived experience

An early research activity, recommended by Van Manen (2016), is to choose a phenomenon which interests us and commits us to the world. He explains that phenomenological research cannot be disembodied as it is always connected to a real person in a particular context of individual, social, and historical life circumstances (p.33). He also focuses on the importance of phenomenological question and believes that it is not enough to write down a question at the beginning of the study. The research question should originate from our personal existence and the core of our being (pp. 43-44).

The first researcher of the project was a PhD candidate with MPH in gerontology. This study was part of a Ph.D. project approved by the ethics committee of the University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences (Registration number: IR.USWR.REC.1398.014).

As the researcher worked with older people for several years and was never married at middle age, several questions were raised in his mind including: “How does it feel to be single in later life?” “What does it mean to be a never married older adult?” and “What is the nature of remaining single in later life?” The researcher tried to answer these questions throughout the study. Van Manen (2016) also recommended us to consider our understandings, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories instead of bracketing them (p. 47). For this purpose, the first author summarized the related theories and studies and conducted an integrative review of the literature on the phenomenon. This review boosted our knowledge about the phenomenon and

revealed that only a few studies have focused on the meaning of “being never married in late life” (Hamedanchi et al., 2020).

Investigating experience as we live it

In the current study, we collected lived experiences using individual interviews with eight never-married women and four never-married men 60 and over selected by snowball purposive sampling. First, we recruited initial participants who were 60 and over, never married singles with adequate mental and physical capabilities for interview, then requested them to introduce other older adults who had the criteria.

Each participant was informed about the aim and process of the study, and the written informed consent was obtained in advance. The time and place of the interview were appointed by each participant. Primarily, the initial question in the interview sessions was “What is it like to be a never-married person at your age?” Later, the researchers determined important areas in the participants’ experiences, and asked more structured questions about “relations with family and friends,” “spending time at home,” and “social activities.” Each interview lasted about 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews were terminated after 45-60 minutes; a second interview was arranged to prevent each participant’s exhaustion. All the interview sessions were voice recorded and transcribed. We continued the interviews with special attention to the aim of the study, which was exploring the nature of the phenomenon as the participant lived it. In addition to interviews, the first researcher wrote anecdotes of the participants’ life stories to make their lived experiences more comprehensible. As Van Manen (2016) believes, these anecdotes can play an important role in illuminating the covered-over meaning of utterances (p. 119) and can be used as a tool for exploring lived experiences (p. 115). One of the participants also provided us with her written poems, which vividly represented her feelings and emotions; these poems has been also used for thematic analysis and hermeneutic writing in our project. A sample anecdote is provided in here:

She began living with her aunt when her parent divorced, because she felt her mother did not pay attention to her. Some years ago, after her aunt's death, she experienced a great deal of suffering and loneliness. Although she feels alone, she prefers to stay single and believes that she is too old to look after another old person.

In the current study, we continued collecting the subjects’ lived experiences until we made sure that we could answer the study question and explain the structure of the lived experience under investigation.

Reflecting on essential themes

The next research activity suggested by Van Manen (2016) is “reflecting on the essential themes”. He considers themes as the structure of experience (p. 79) and a way of capturing the phenomenon (p. 87). He also suggested three approaches for isolating themes: holistic approach, selective approach, and detailed approach (p. 93). On the other hand, the hermeneutic circle suggests that the entire text cannot be understood without reference to individual parts and vice versa vice versa (Grondin, 2016). The recommendation of Schleiermacher (1998) was also used to obtain a better understanding and interpretation of lived experiences. He suggested to read through and interpret a text to reach an approximate overall interpretation of the text, and then, to apply this interpretation to each part to refine initial interpretations, which, subsequently, provides a better overall interpretation (Forster,

2017). Therefore, both the holistic and detailed approaches recommended by Van Manen (2016) were used and followed. In this project, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and read several times. We used a holistic approach to determine the fundamental concepts of the texts and then applied a detailed or line-by-line approach. This circle continued, again and again, to reflect on essential themes and reach a balance between the parts and the whole.

The art of writing and rewriting

In hermeneutics, writing is not only a supplementary activity but a producing one (Van Manen, 2016, p. 126). In this study, processes of writing anecdotes, memos, descriptions, and interpretations of lived experiences were adopted from the beginning of the research. The task of writing and rewriting continued, and manuscripts were edited continuously to have a transcript, which can connect us to the nature of lived experiences.

Maintaining a strong and oriented relation

Van Manen (2016) suggests a relation between theory and life (p. 135) and states that tendency to abstract is a common problem, which can result in losing touch with the real world (p. 139). To prevent this problem, in the current study, we frequently referred to the participants' statements to keep the textual product close to the world of the participants. All texts and themes were reviewed by two supervisors and one co-supervisor to ensure that they are not merely abstract ideas and that they are oriented (aligned with the research questions), strong (clear enough to enable the reader to understand and feel the lived experience), rich (concrete enough to cover all aspects of the phenomenon), and deep (conceptual structure beyond immediate experiences).

Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole

A phenomenological research needs to avoid losing insight into the aim of phenomenological research, which is to construct an argumentative text with a dialogical structure (Van Manen, 2016, p. 33). Although there is no need to structure the text in a specific way, some approaches have been introduced by Van Manen (2016) for organizing and structuring research studies (p. 168), including thematic, analytical, exemplificative, exegetical, and existential approaches. He stated that none of these approaches are exhaustive; therefore, a combination of them can be used (p. 173). In the current study, we basically used the thematic approach for the main body of the text, which is divided into parts based on the emergent themes. We also used the exemplificative approach in each section with respect to the participants' variations (e.g., sex and employment). For example, how does a retired man experience singleness in his later life? In discussion we used exegetical approach for comparing and adding knowledge to the previous similar studies. We constantly measured the overall design of the text and revised it until the end of the research process.

Researchers have varying views regarding trustworthiness in qualitative studies and no single model can be employed to ensure trustworthiness in different methods (Leung, 2015). In summary, in addition to the six mentioned recommendations by Van Manen (2016), close attention was paid to rigor expressions addressed by De Wit and Ploeg (2006), which included balanced integrity (balance between the voice of study participants and the philosophical explanation), openness (orientation and attunement toward the phenomenon of inquiry), concreteness (connecting readers to a context in everyday life), and resonance (impressive effect of reading the study finding upon the reader).

Results

The participants in the current study included eight women and four men as Iranian never-married older adults. The youngest participant was 60 years old, and the oldest one was 78 years old. Four women and two men had university education, four women and one man had a high school diploma and one man had primary school education. Three women lived with kin, (brother, sister or mother) and the rest of participants lived alone. Most of the participants (7 women and 2 men) were retired and were drawing a pension. Except for one, those who were not drawing pension had relatively good economic conditions and did not have complaints about financial problems. All participants had their own house or apartment. With regard to their life stories, the participants also mentioned the cause of their singleness. One of the men and four of the women indicated that they had chosen singleness based on their own decision (voluntary singleness). Three participants (two women and one man) had part-time jobs.

Reflection on the collected lived experiences through conducting in-depth interviews with the participants uncovered six emergent themes, including: feeling of independence, combating loneliness, moving up to self-development, feeling of regret and loss, close relationships with friends and relatives, and being annoyed by stigmatization.

Feeling of independence

All the participants in the current study considered the state of “relying on nobody” as their own independence, which resulted in more peace in their life and kept them away from the tensions of being married. This independence provided the grounds to keep their personal integrity against social stigmatizations and motivated them to take part in social activities with more self-confidence. The retired women stated that if they did not work, they could not achieve independence, and consequently, they would have to become married. All the women, particularly those with voluntary singleness, regarded independence as the most important advantage of singlehood in later life, while the men put less emphasis on it. Five of the participants had the experience of early employment and financial independence because their family had faced serious problems (bankruptcy, divorce, or death of parents), or their parents encouraged them to stand on their own feet from young age. They were also pleased with their situation that nobody made decisions for them and they did not have to check anything with anyone. Most of the women looked at marriage from a feminist aspect and believed that they would have to be an obedient person if they were married.

Participant 6 (female), narrated her early independence story:

I am one of those people who stand on their own feet from childhood and work at a young age. I am used to this life. When I began to work, I was a very young child, but I felt responsible for my family, because my father had been bankrupted. There were people in my life who wanted me to get married, but I preferred to continue my own way, and I did.

Participant 3 (female), who was satisfied with not having marital challenges that women usually face expressed:

In people around me and in my family, it is always women who have to climb down and scarify their wishes...well. I am just happy that I don't have these things in my life, I arrange things on my own will and don't have to get permission from anybody.

Combating loneliness

Although all participants agreed that they spent longer time alone compared to others, they experienced it differently. Those participants with voluntary singleness were adapted to living alone and accepted loneliness as a part of their life. However, those participants with involuntary singleness, particularly the men, believed loneliness as the most bitter experience of singleness. The women could appropriately fill their time by having close contact with a large number of friends and family members. Although the men could effectively combat loneliness by engaging in work, they started to feel serious loneliness after retirement or work detachment. Thus, it appeared that disengagement from work was much more problematic for the men. This sense of loneliness did not motivate the participants to become married in older age. The men believed that they were too old to have a new family, and the women were afraid of losing dependency and taking a new role as a nurse for an older husband.

Participant 9 (male), described his feeling of loneliness, which was exacerbated after work disengagement:

I felt much better when I was working. I do my affairs and have my personal routine now. But when I am away from the community, I feel dump and lonely. I try to fight this feeling, but a person who is isolated faces loneliness, because man is a social existence. He should live in society and be involved in a community...

Participant 11 (female) stated:

Silence is devastating (pause). When you get on in age, you feel you have never lived because everybody should have children and a good companion to talk to. Even if you are a doctor, you have a position, or you have lots of wealth, you cannot forgive yourself. You need a person to speak to.

Participant 7 (female), who was voluntarily single and worked as a part-time employer claimed that she enjoyed spending time alone:

Sometimes I feel I am more comfortable when I am alone, when I come home from a party, I think to myself ...wow... home! sweet home! How comfortable. Let's relax a bit.

Moving up to self-development

All of the participants in the study had to rely on their abilities and stand on their own feet since a long time ago. They were reluctant to ask help from others, even their family and close friends, and had to improve self-efficacy to work out their problems in difficult situations. They had to identify and employ their abilities and be emotionally strong enough to overcome the lack of spouse and children in their life. Although early independence resulted from unwanted situations for some of the participants, they regarded it as an opportunity to use their talents and grow capabilities. They could also find their own identity and keep their integrity against the norms of society which were different from their lifestyles. Most of them believed that their self-sufficiency was a result of independence and living alone, which gave them an opportunity to move toward self-development. The collected lived experiences indicated that they constructed their own new meaning of life, which was not easily sensible for others.

Women with voluntary singleness did not believe that the presence of a husband in their life could resolve all their problems and make them happy.

Participant 1 (female), said:

I learned to deal with any situation in my life. When I realized I had cancer, I did not tell anybody anything. I did all the necessary things and even made an appointment for surgery, and then told others about it. It caused an uproar among my friends and my family. They asked why I didn't tell them sooner, why I did all those things alone. Why I didn't tell them when I went for a biopsy? But I don't think I did a wrong thing.

Participant 3 (female), denied the necessity of a spouse for her personal development:

People say a husband and wife complement each other, but I believe that a single person can even have higher levels of spiritual strength. I have witnessed this in our family members. But others don't like our singleness, they think we are incomplete people. I am saying that if a person doesn't want to grow his/her mind, it will make no difference if he/she is single or married. But others think that we have lower intellectual abilities than them.

Feeling of regret and loss

The participants in our study experienced different levels of regret and loss. Those participants who had chosen singleness as their preference did not show much regret about the past and put more stress on their present time and future. On the other hand, men and women who remained single involuntarily, frequently flashed back to the past and expressed their regret. Their sense of loneliness and also experience of chronic diseases in later life exacerbated their feeling of regret and loss.

Participant 11 (female), described her feeling of regret and loss in this way:

When I feel lonely, I wish I was married, I envy that I don't have my own family and children as a motivation in my life. I feel like that.

However, participant 4 (female), who was a voluntary single believed that singleness was not a serious matter in her life, and she did not feel that she had lost something important:

Singleness has not affected my career. I have always been a successful person who has been respected by the close friends and family. Their admiration makes me more determined and gives me a sense that I have not made a mistake (to remain single).

Close relationships with friends and relatives

One significant emergent theme in this study was the experience of close relations with family and friends, which efficiently helped them to overcome loneliness. Almost all the women benefited from large social networks with their old friends and had regular meetings with them. Most of the women stated that they had close connections with friends. On the other hand, the men had not established such large social networks. They had contact with a few friends and did not meet them on a regular basis. They mostly relied on contact with their close family members rather than friends.

One important concept which is directly related to social relation is providing assistance to others. Almost all the participants had a strong commitment to provide assistance to people. This characteristic helped them to strengthen their connection to the society, give meaning to their lives, and protect their identity against social stigmatization. In some cases, they adopted children whose families were not able to look after them.

Participant 4 (female), explained how she helped a young adult with intellectual disability:

One of our relatives has a son who has a mental disability. He is 27 years and his father is not a responsible person. So he lived with his grandfather. When the grandfather passed away, there was nobody to accept the child. I brought him to live with us, and he is living with us now.

The eighth participant (female) described pleasant moments that she experienced with her friends:

I have a good feeling when I am out with my friends. I have a monthly pension, and I am not worried about the expenses. When we go on a trip, it refreshes my spirit. But when I am alone, I sink in my thoughts. There should be a person to speak to. Can I speak to myself?

Being annoyed by stigmatization

Although a majority of our participants reported stigmatizations as an unpleasant experience of singleness, it did not influence them similarly. Men and women with voluntary singleness, particularly those who had talked about self-development, did not pay much attention to negative views of other people about their singleness. On the other hand, women with involuntary singleness were, to some extent, influenced by negative words or behaviors of others, which sometimes resulted in the feeling of grief and loss. Stigmatization was experienced by the participants in different forms. Most of them stated that people stigmatizing them were not their close friends or relatives, and yet they assumed that they had the right to ask other private questions about the reasons for being single. Some of the participants had frequently heard offensive words from people, claiming that singleness in older ages was against the norm of the society.

Participant 4 (female), mentioned an instance of being insulted by others because of being unmarried:

Once someone showed me and said: “poor woman, she has not got married yet.” I don’t know who a poor woman is, me or her? I am an educated person who has spent all her life helping others. I lived in the community as a decent hardworker, and she married several times, but does not even have a good manner. Which one of us is a poor woman?

Conversely, participant 3 (female), who emphasized her independence and self-development said:

Some people pay too much attention to others' words. What other people say is very important to them. But I live for myself and not for others. It is not important for me what others say at all, because living alone was my own decision.

Discussion

In the current study, we investigated the lived experiences of never-married older adults using a hermeneutic method to explore the meaning and structure of the perceived phenomenon among the participants. Reflection on the collected lived experiences revealed six emergent themes. The first and second ones, that is, “feeling of independence” and “combating loneliness”, are strongly supported by other phenomenological and qualitative studies on older and middle-aged never-married adults. Independence and autonomy were reported among older adults who had chosen singleness in the qualitative study of Timonen and Doyle (2014), which is in line with our findings in the present study. Daiter (2010) argued that independence could provide a comfort zone, which is necessary for older people who want to remain single against the norms of the society. She also concluded that this independence starts in childhood and continues as autonomy and self-reliance in older age. The concept of early independence was also frequently reported by the participants in our study. Although, in the qualitative study by Fuller (2001), focused on African-American never-married women (aged between 33 - 48 years old), participants who had experienced freedom and independence from responsibilities and obligations, expressed that the absence of a permanent mate is a significant disadvantage of singlehood. This concept was not a significant finding in our study. In addition to cultural difference, greater age of our participants might be the reason for this difference. All the participants in the phenomenological study by Eum (2005), examining never-married women over 40 years of age, agreed that independence gave them enough power and freedom to overcome physical and emotional problems.

Blai (1989) argued that although every person could experience loneliness in their life, it might be experienced differently since it is a subjective feeling depending on time and place. He also reported that those living alone for a long time may even experience less loneliness in later life compared with other older adults. In the current study, the participants also reported different levels of loneliness. The employed people, particularly women with voluntary singleness, could significantly overcome the sense of loneliness by spending a long time with friends and colleagues. Some of them had even experienced spending time alone at home as pleasant moments. Meanwhile, loneliness was experienced by the other participants, particularly the retired men with involuntary singleness, as a devastating feeling. In parallel with these findings, the results of Dykstra’s study (1995) confirmed that people with negative attitudes toward singleness experienced a higher level of loneliness in their later life. Loneliness modified by a close relationship with friends and family was reported among never-married older women in the phenomenological study of Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon (2014). Moreover, the findings of studies by Schwartzberg et al. (1995) and Lewis and Moon (1997) indicated that never-married women strengthened their social relations to prevent loneliness. Windsor (2012) mentioned a larger network, including friends and neighbors, which could play a compensatory role in providing support in never-married adults with no spouses and children.

The results of the current study showed that the voluntary single participants experienced singleness as an opportunity for their self-development. In Daiter’s study (2010), working out problems independently was reported as a core aspect for single participants to learn about life. Overwhelming challenges provided them both pleasure and sense of control and also reinforced in them a sense of self-sufficiency and self-reliance coupled with a sense of doing something important and meaningful. The results of a phenomenological study by

Dalton (1992) on never-married women showed that singleness resulted in self-acceptance and self-reliance in the participants.

Loss and grief related to lack of a permanent partner or children have been reported by never-married men and women in qualitative and phenomenological studies by Lewis and Moon (1997) and Fuller (2001). Although the involuntary single participants in our study expressed some feelings of regret and loss, it is not a general outcome. One reason for this difference might be the higher mean of age in our participants. In this regard, the female participants believed that they were not much different from their friends because many of their friends were living without their husbands and children in an empty nest. Gubrium (1975) argued that singleness could be an advantage for one in old age because they would not experience bereavement due to the death of the spouse; thus, they may experience less grief compared to their married counterparts, theoretically. A lower reported sense of loss and regret among the older participants in the current study can be explained using gerotranscendence theory indicating that older people experience a shift in their perspective, from a materialistic and rational view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally associated with more satisfaction in their life (Tornstam, 2011). The findings of Jasper's quantitative study (2018) confirmed that gerotranscendence during later life in unmarried older adults including never-married ones improved psychological well-being and could be included in supportive programs. The findings of Ward's quantitative study (1979) on 9,120 individuals including 162 never-married men and women over 50 indicated that although being never-married was a disadvantage for happiness, this disadvantage was mitigated in older participants.

The results of the current study did not confirm the idea of Gubrium (1975), who suggested never-married older adults tended to be lifelong isolated. Participants in the current study, particularly the women, insisted on establishing a connection with friends and family and considered it as an important factor to prevent the sense of loneliness. Rubinstein's studies (1987, 1991) indicated that establishing strong relations with others was important for never-married older adults. Nearly all the participants in the qualitative study by O'Brien (1991) on the never-married older women maintained strong family ties and were satisfied with their relationships with friends. Providing assistance to others helped the participants in our study to make these connections stronger and give them a better self-image. Some participants in the study of Lewis and Moon (1997) stated that helping others gives meaning to their life. The findings and the results of Ward's study (1979) confirmed that having close relationships with friends and voluntary activities were stronger predictors of happiness in never-married older adults compared to their married counterparts.

There is much evidence that never-married adults, particularly women, experience social stigmatization (Eum, 2006; Fuller, 2001; Perry, 2012; Schwartzberg, Berliner, & Jacob, 1995; Silverio & Soulsby, 2020). Never-married older women are exposed to a higher level of stigmatization, and even, offensive labeling (Aiken, 1995). Almost all the participants in the present study experienced social stigmatization due to their singleness. Accordingly, the results revealed that social stigmatization remarkably influenced women, particularly those with involuntary singleness, resulting in a feeling of regret among them. In many societies, women are expected to become married, have children, and look after their families; women who do not follow the mainstream are exposed to social stigma (Ang, Lee, & Lie, 2020; Harris & Hill). Goffman (1963), who developed the stigma theory, believed that people with attributes, behaviors, or reputations against the norms of the society are vulnerable to be classified by others as undesirable, rejected stereotypes.

Erikson (1998) introduced eight stages in life for psychological development. Accordingly, successful completion of each step is necessary to achieve favorite development in the next stage. The seventh stage of the Erikson's theory emphasizes on generativity in middle age, which includes establishing and guiding the next generation. The eighth stage

refers to identity integration in older age, when people look back on their lives and achievements. Erikson (1994) argued that parenting is not the only way of generativity in the seventh stage. Childless people can apply this drive to “other forms of altruistic concern and creativity through which many absorb their kind of parental drive” (p. 138). Maslow (1981) explained how the individuals may choose different ways to satisfy their needs for self-actualization. For instance, one may desire to take a role as a mother, and another person may focus on art or invention. Despite living alone without spouse and children, participants in this study made great efforts to provide assistance to the others and felt this can give a meaning to their life and protect them against stigmatization. These findings, which are in line with the theories introduced by Erikson and Maslow can be applied by the psychotherapists to encourage never-married older adults to get involved in voluntary activities in order to boost their identity integration and self-actualization.

Statistics shows that the number of never-married older adults is sharply growing in Iran. This growth is faster, particularly among women compared to overall growth of older population (Hamedanchi, Momtaz, Khankeh, & Zanjari, 2020). The permanent celibacy age in Iran has been reported as 50 years indicating that the chance of marriage is very low in the population over 50 years of age (Mirzaii, 2012). According to the 2011 census, there were 152,178 never-married adults aged 50 years old and older. This population was increased to 219,614 people in the 2016 census showing 44.4% rise (SCI, 2017). The findings of this study illustrating a clearer image of the life of always-single people and their challenges, can help the younger never-married cohorts to make decision about their future marital status with more knowledge.

Our results indicated that most of the participants were not willing to get married because of different reasons. For example, women believed that with marriage, they would have to look after an old person and men stated that they are too old to take more responsibility. Meanwhile, based on the results of a study on the Iranian older adults who got married at 60 years of age and later, 60% of the subjects reported high and very high marital satisfaction (Zarei, Abolfathi Momtaz, Sahaf, & Mehdi, 2019). This shows the need for more attention by policymakers to facilitate marriage in later life.

Conclusion

Never-married older adults may experience singleness in their later life differently. Based on the findings of our study, men and those with involuntary singleness are more prone to have unpleasant experiences and feelings in their aging. However, women, particularly those with voluntary singleness and a history of early independence, can better overcome such challenges.

The themes and the characteristics of participants in this study do not necessarily predict any direct causative relations. Therefore, we recommend future researchers to investigate the process in which a person remains single until old age, using grounded theory. Studying this as a process can help the authorities to identify and plan for eradication of the obstacles hindering marriage and resulting in growing phenomenon of being never-married in later life. It is also suggested to boost social networks for single retired men to prevent their loneliness. The results of this study disclosing some hidden aspects in the life of never-married people can assist professionals such as psychotherapists, as well as social workers in care services, to have a deeper understanding of the structure and meaning of singleness in later life.

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