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Courting Trouble:

A Qualitative Examination of Sexual Inequality in Partnering Practice

A dissertation presented

by

Holly Wood

To

The Harvard University Department of Sociology

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for the degree of

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Courting Trouble:

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Abstract

Sociology recognizes marriage and family formation as two consequential events in an adult's lifecourse. But as young people spend more of their lives childless and unpartnered, scholars recognize a dearth of academic insight into the processes by which single adults form romantic relationships in the lengthening years between adolescence and betrothal. As the average age of first marriage creeps upwards, this lacuna inhibits sociological appreciation for the ways in which class, gender and sexuality entangle in the lives of single adults to condition sexual behavior and how these behaviors might, in turn, contribute to the reproduction of social inequality. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 88 primarily straight men and women between the ages of 25 and 35, this dissertation examines how single, college-educated adults factor marriage into their life-planning strategies and how, in turn, life-planning strategies influence partnering practices. Aiming to better understand how a relatively elite group of adults partner after college, interviews explore in detail respondents' sexual and romantic expectations, their experiences with dating and relationship formation, and their desires for future family life. Although college-educated men and women widely share similar desires for professional accomplishment, marriage and family, they commonly diverge in perspective with regards to how and when these events should unfold across their adult lives and what they must do to ensure their success. Much of this project therefore examines how these gendered perspectives towards life- and family-

planning can generate sexual conflict between single men and women. Analysis identifies several dilemmas that gender conflict routinely creates in the lives of those seeking to partner and how these dilemmas are anticipated and resolved in practice by women's unequal accommodation. This study concludes its contribution by exploring how normalized gender inequality in the partnering process may contribute to and reinforce gender inequality more broadly.

Acknowledgments

Writing this dissertation transformed me from a scholar into a fighter. Being a graduate student can be likened to meat being pounded thin by too many hammers—the process leaves you feeling flat, defeated and overly tender to criticism. My chair, Professor Jocelyn Viterna, met me at my personal nadir, my flattest, and buoyed me not with sympathy but with the steady camaraderie of a veteran, ally and friend.

Gratitude is also owed to Kathy Edin, from whom I learned practically everything I know about interviewing. By the time I proposed this study, I had behind me several tours of interview duty under her aegis. While I entertained many doubts about my ability to complete this dissertation project, never once did I waver from my conviction that in-depth interviews can reveal dimensions of social life hidden or obscured by other methods of sociological inquiry.

Considerable intellectual debt is owed to Sandy Jencks. Sandy's patient perspective and kindness have been vital to my becoming a sociological writer. Whatever else I may accomplish in this life, the world will have Sandy Jencks to blame for helping me to realize how careful writing is the bridge between sociology and the larger struggle for social justice.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

> The question is: what sexuality are women to be liberated to enjoy? Merely to remove the onus placed upon the sexual expressiveness of women is a hollow victory. … Without a change in the very norms of sexuality, the liberation of women is a meaningless goal. Sex as such is not liberating for women. Neither is more sex.
>
> - Susan Sontag (1973:188)

For many middle-class youth, no event in the modern landscape animates the threshold between adolescence and adulthood as vividly as the college graduation ceremony. Each spring, on campuses nationwide, faculty and families assemble to commemorate graduates' transition between life chapters. And on this day, students receive commencement advice from the most prestigious names an institution can summon. From novelists to movie stars, guests of honor offer each fresh batch of graduates their hard-earned wisdom on the subject of becoming an adult.

Boundlessness is a common theme in graduation speeches. Speakers encourage young adults to bravely explore the world and fiercely pursue their dreams without apology. In 2012, serial entrepreneur and literal rocketeer Elon Musk rallied the graduating class of CalTech to imagine their future without limits: "[Y]ou guys are the magicians of the 21st century. Don't let anything hold you back. Imagination is the limit. Go out there and create some magic." In her 2011 address to Barnard, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg declaimed similarly: "You're going to find something you love doing, and you're going to do it with gusto. You're going to pick your field and you're going to ride it all the way to the top."

But to her rocket analogy, feminist business icon Sandberg added a grounding caveat: "[I]t's a bit counterintuitive, but the most important career decision you're going to make is whether or not you have a life partner and who that partner is." Mark the symbolic juxtaposition: where Musk advises the "guys" of male-majority CalTech to brook no impediment to their life's moonshot, Sandberg warns graduates of a prestigious women's college to consider how future partnerships can either make or break their ambitions. Musk speaks of boundlessness—Sandberg adds precaution.

The gendered contexts surrounding these speeches show that while much is anticipated from all graduates, partnering poses such a unique threat to women's life chances that they bear warning of it even on their college graduation day. Both in this speech and in her best-selling book *Lean In* (2013), Sandberg alludes to a well-established body of research detailing the known obstacles career women must overcome in their efforts to attain gender equality with their male partners and peers as wives and coworkers. Recognizing relationship inequality between men and women as one of the biggest impediments to women's professional success, here she sensibly cautions ambitious women against choosing unsupportive partners. But following her reasoning to its logical conclusion, a sympathetic but critical listener might then also ask: if gender inequality in relationships is so widely detrimental to women's life chances, how much power do single women genuinely have to preempt inequality when trying to partner?

ANOTHER PROBLEM IN WANT OF A NAME

For the first time in the nation's history, the majority of births to new mothers today occur outside the context of marriage (Cherlin, Ribar and Yasutake 2016). But while non-marital childbearing is now the statistical norm, it nevertheless remains rare among women with college degrees. Among graduates, fewer than one out of ten births occur outside of

marriage (Hymowitz, Carroll, Wilcox and Kaye 2013). Among white graduates, this number drops to roughly two out of a hundred (Carbone and Cahn 2014).

Marital childbearing among the college educated is no accident. College students and recent graduates tell researchers that they believe it most prudent to defer family formation until after they have solidified themselves personally and financially (Gerson 2009; Cherlin 2009; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Arnett 2004). Generally, this strategy pays dividends: those who marry and parent in their thirties report higher incomes and greater levels of life satisfaction than do those who conceive children outside of marriage in their twenties (Hymowitz et al. 2013). In fact, so advantageous is this family-formation strategy that some scholars believe it is now an elite class practice, contributing—at least partly—to widening household inequality in the United States (Carbone and Cahn 2014; Cherlin 2009; McCall and Percheski 2010; Mare 1991).

Yet, no matter how propitious marital childbearing may ultimately prove for college graduates, the ability to postpone family formation is nevertheless conditioned by gender. While young men with lofty ambitions may plan on deferring family commitments for years—even decades—two gender-specific conditions constrain young women's family-planning horizon: the increasing risk of infertility and the sexual depreciation they anticipate in the eyes of men as they age (Illouz 2012; England and McClintock 2009). These conditions entangle to pose a gendered bind: while believing it best for their future family to delay childbearing for marriage and it best for themselves to delay marriage until they feel professionally and financially secure, ambitious women also fear that delaying family formation too long can threaten their chances of partnering and parenting. Considering these constraints, many college-educated women aspiring to marital childbearing reason that they have only a brief window after college in which it is optimal to partner and plan their life's ambitions accordingly.

Unfortunately for women trying to keep their family-planning on schedule, love is notorious for going off script. Booksellers stock shelves laden with sympathetic advice for women coping with involuntary singlehood during the years many had expected to be married and having children. Author Liz Tuccillo addresses her own feelings on the matter plainly enough in her best-selling dating guide, *He's Just Not That into You* (2006[2004]):

> I'm just going to come right out with it: There aren't that many good men around. Statistics prove it, articles and books have been written to verify it, and women would be happy to testify under oath about it. ... Oh, wait, there's this one as well: A lot of men want to date much younger women, so as you get older, there are even fewer men that want to date you. … So yes, it seems logical, reasonable, and down right savvy for all the fantastic, smart, healthy, funny, kind women out there to start thinking about lowering their expectations. Because I don't know about you, but I hate being single. ... I hate my birthday because I'm still single. I hate having to think about possibly becoming a single mother because I'm single. Have I made myself clear? (143-144)

Dreading a life without the love, companionship and intimacy a marriage and family are imagined to provide, Tuccillo asks her readers if it is not better, under these unequal conditions, for single women to dim their relationship aspirations so as to partner while young than it is to risk missing one's opportunity to partner altogether and aging alone.

Women's concerns surrounding marital timing are further compounded by the popular discourse surrounding their "biological clock," the widespread belief that childbearing becomes risky and difficult after age 35 (Twenge 2013; Lewis and Moon 1997). Routinely, medical experts cited in books, newspapers and magazine articles advise twenty- and thirty-something women to plan their lives in anticipation of their womb's impending obsolescence. For women crossing into their thirties still partnerless, abiding by this timetable means entertaining the possibility of elective single motherhood. But with only 24 hours in a day, two hands, one income and anemic public support for single parents, even college-educated women with solid career prospects fear that they alone would struggle finding the time, money and energy necessary to bring up children to middle-class expectations. The generalized anxiety surrounding the decision to become a single mother in one's thirties is so

familiar to middle-class audiences that it is often dramatized for comedic effect in popular movies such as *The Backup Plan* (2010) and *The Switch* (2010).

Given the apprehensions many feel about marital timing and single motherhood, single women often seek expert advice on how to partner with marriage-oriented men. But a cursory sampling of what this wisdom entails reveals how insidiously the culture industry works to normalize gendered double standards in sexual life and women's accommodation of them as common sense. In *Marry by Choice, Not by Chance* (2014), self-styled "Princeton Mom" Susan Patton admonishes readers for not securing a marriage proposal while in college, what she considers women's peak "husband-hunting" years. Patton warns twenty-something women to marry now or expect panic:

> Let's face it: By the time you are thirty years old, your marriage prospects will have diminished dramatically … and when you're thirty and still hope to have children, a distinct panic will start to set in … By your mid-thirties, the men whom you'd be most interested in marrying (successful men in their mid- to late thirties) are already married, often to women younger than you. (28)

In *Marry Him!: The Case for Settling for Mr. Good Enough* (2011), therapist Lori Gottlieb dispenses a similar admonition, claiming that single women over 30 have few attractive opportunities for marrying if they want to start a family before turning 35. Her titular advice? Settle—the sooner the better.

Like this, across hundreds of pages, read by millions, these titles offer women the same general stricture: marry young—and don't be picky—or else prepare to face life without a partner. Guised as well-intentioned guidance offered by concerned professionals, cultural texts like these naturalize and reinforce for women the idea that gender inequality between men and women in the partnering process is inevitable and incontestable. While little girls may dream of one day having it all, single women are advised it best to curb their expectations if they are to make family possible in the brief window of time afforded to them.

Feminist theory advances by politicizing the banality of women's gender oppression. By problematizing the mundane, feminist researchers find substantial evidence of gender stratification in the everyday decision-making and household practices of couples (e.g. Sassler and Miller 2011; Tichenor 2005). Although feminist theory suggests that gender inequality affects singles as well as couples, save for a few notable exceptions (Lamont 2013; Bell 2013), empirical research is thin in explaining how young women navigate singlehood in the years between college and marriage. Scholarly reviews across disciplines locate a disquieting lacuna in the literature regarding the specific processes by which single adults over 25 form sexual relationships (Sassler, Michelmore and Holland 2016; Shulman and Connolly 2013; Surra and Boelter 2013; Sassler 2010; Crawford and Popp 2003). While feminist scholarship shows how gender inequality emerges in marriage, research cannot appreciably show how women negotiate gender inequality in their efforts to marry.

While family scholars ask if marital childbearing is becoming an elite practice contributing to class stratification, what elite singles must do in order to partner before marriage is largely absent from our theorization of family inequality. Though the record sales of self-help books hardly serve as a satisfying metric, the success of the genre speaks to the gendered frustrations straight women experience while trying to marry men across their late twenties and thirties. This study thus advances feminist theory by examining how gender inequality conditions partnering practice and asks by its conclusion how women's accommodation of inequity in the partnering process may reinforce stratification more broadly.

STUDY DESIGN

On average, young people coming of age today will spend more of their adult lives single before marrying than their parents or grandparents (Klinenberg 2012). Modern theorists further believe that in contrast to earlier generations, young people are afforded

unprecedented autonomy to plan their sexual lives and identities (Beck 1992; Giddens 1992; 1991). Yet, social science lags in mapping the politics of this new freedom, in articulating just how intersectional inequalities such as gender, race and class overlap to condition the exercise of sexual liberty in an unequal society.

Although college-educated adults comprise less than a third of the population, their marital homophily is recognized as one of the strongest drivers of household stratification (Carbone and Cahn 2014; Cherlin 2009; McCall and Percheski 2010; Mare 1991). Though qualitative investigations offer rich insight into the ways precariousness and deprivation condition the partnering strategies of disadvantaged adults (e.g. Silva 2013; Edin and Nelson 2013; Gibson-Davis, Edin and McLaughlin 2005; Edin and Kefalas 2005), we know less of how privilege affects the partnering strategies of those more advantaged. While college graduates enjoy the greatest odds of marrying and of marital childbearing, little is understood of how they form relationships and plan for their families after college. If modernity promises young adults autonomy from traditional constraints, sociology knows little of what those with arguably the fewest constraints are doing with such unprecedented freedom.

Further motivating this investigation is feminist standpoint theory (Harding 1991; Collins 1990; Smith 1987) which contends that men and women—occupying gendered positions in a world organized by gender stratification—perceive the same world differently. When men and women imagine their future lives, they likely anticipate unequal opportunities and attend to gendered risks when planning their partnering and family strategies.

Because both class and gender condition perspective, this study uses qualitative methods to learn how single, college-educated men and women think about sexual opportunity and partnering in the context of their own lives during the decade their cohort is most likely to marry. In Boston and San Francisco, I conducted intensive interviews with 88 unpartnered, primarily straight men and women between the ages of 25 and 35 holding at

least a Bachelor's degree. Responding to flyers detailing this study's purpose and eligibility criteria, subjects volunteered to participate in a confidential discussion on the matters of singlehood, dating, sex, relationship formation and their relationship history (for further details of methodology, please see Appendix A). This purposeful sampling strategy of a specifically privileged group aims not to predict their behavior but rather to better understand how this group navigates singlehood in such a way that makes marital childbearing their most likely family outcome. This strategy is especially useful for showing how male and female college graduates who desire similar family outcomes nevertheless plan their pre-marital years differently, anticipating gendered inequality in sexual and family-planning opportunity.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

In launching this study, I intended to investigate how single people date after college. Although I found many studies asking college students to describe how they think a date works and other studies asking couples to recount how they met, much of the actual practice of modern dating appears to have evaded academic inquiry. While in *Decoupling*, Dianne Vaughn (1986) thoroughly dissects the socially complex process of relationship termination, I found no comparable vivisection of coupling, the equally complex process by which adult singles meet, connect, and form relationships. Because the act of partnering is so often taken for granted in social research, much of the available literature on the subject of dating cannot explain how it relates to couple formation, marriage or the family-planning process. Nor can it speak to the volume and extent of inequality and conflict that singles might encounter while trying to partner.

By addressing this gap in our understanding, this study offers to sociology some qualitative insight as to how singles couple today. Although the majority of college-educated men and women aspire to an egalitarian marriage (Gerson 2009), I find that as singles they pursue different strategies in their efforts to date, mate and partner across the lifecourse.

While aiming to give sympathetic space to both men's and women's perspectives, I show that their divergence presages gender conflict as incongruous expectations clash in heterosexual practice. Therefore, in my analysis, I mark and contextualize for feminist critique women's common strategies for resisting and circumventing the sexual dilemmas that they anticipate as routinized, naturalized and normalized aspects of heterosexual partnering.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In Chapter 2, I show that as social expectations to marry relaxed across the second half of the twentieth century, singlehood gradually shed its stigma for the middle class. Today, singlehood is increasingly typical for adults across their twenties and thirties (and beyond). While much is known of how single students navigate sexuality in the context of college, less is known of how single graduates navigate sexuality after college, between the ages of 25 and 35, the years most marry and form families. I argue that this empirical lacuna stymies sociological theory, occluding from our understanding how class and gender inequality are expressed as singles try to couple. I close this chapter by outlining the analytical objective of my dissertation: to advance feminist theory by deepening sociology's understanding of heterosexual partnering as a complex social process that contributes to gender oppression.

Chapter 3 centers on men's perspectives towards partnering in the lifecourse. Feminist scholars recognize that heteronormative gender ideology presses men to pursue two contradictory models for adult manhood: independent bachelor and breadwinning father (e.g. Gerson 2009; 1993; Connell 1987). How do men resolve this contradiction? The single men whose voices are highlighted in this chapter believe the answer lies in splitting their post-graduate life-planning into two serial epochs, each defined by a distinct sexual ethos. I describe the sexual reorientation men anticipate as they transition between these stages as men's *adult switch.*

In Chapter 4, I explore how single women strategize their sexual life-planning. Fearing that men's hearts grow colder as women grow older, women admit that their partnering strategy is conditioned by their fears of a gendered double standard towards aging. Moreover, many worry that their chances to conceive will plummet after age 35. Thus, anticipating gendered deadlines for partnering, women construct what I call the *reverse timeline:* a highly regimented sexual itinerary for accomplishing their family-planning goals through their twenties and thirties.

Chapter 5 problematizes maturity as a gendered social construction. In the context of this study, both men and women observed that, as a group, men tend to demonstrate greater ambivalence towards relationship formation and long-term commitments during their twenties than do women. To explain this difference, both often called upon a sexist stereotype that casts men as naturally less equipped cognitively, developmentally and physiologically than women their own age to maintain committed adult relationships. This belief that men and women are inherently and essentially different with respect to desire and willingness to commit themselves fully to relationships poses obstacles to women hoping to partner with men their own age before turning 30. Exploring this dilemma, this chapter examines the discursive myth of gendered maturity and its role in reproducing age asymmetry in heterosexual partnering outcomes.

In Chapter 6, I argue that dating is work. Under that premise, this chapter shows how gendered orientations towards partnering in the lifecourse manifest gender inequality in dating labor. Despite its idealized connotations, most adult men and women are of the same mind about partnering: investing energy, time, resources and emotions trying to meet strangers after college with little chance of romantic connection makes dating a frustrating endeavor. However, life-planning orientation predicts how motivated and willing adults are to invest in the legwork that modern dating requires. While most of the men interviewed

describe themselves as receptive to romantic possibility should it arise spontaneously and serendipitously, they nevertheless assume it premature to make dating a top priority in their twenties given its high opportunity costs and their long horizon with which to partner. In stark contrast, their female peers feel they have no time to wait for romantic serendipity, fearing themselves in their twenties to be quickly approaching family-planning deadlines. As such, I find women more motivated to prioritize dating over other activities and invest themselves heavily in trying to partner during the same years that their male peers appear most ambivalent. This chapter unpacks this asymmetrical division of dating labor and its implications for gender inequality at this consequential stage of the lifecourse.

Chapter 7 focuses on single women's perspective navigating extrarelational sex between relationships. Two-thirds of the women interviewed described themselves as generally uninterested in having casual sex. Of the prospect, many said sex outside of relationships made them feel vulnerable to sexual objectification and emotional disposability. Nevertheless, most women also believe that sex is an important aspect of dating, necessary to test relationship compatibility. But because so many still believe it is men's prerogative to propose commitment, navigating sex while dating poses for women a difficult bind: while working to build intimacy with men they desire as committed partners, women fear connecting with men who may enjoy their sexual companionship while dating but who ultimately prove disinterested in partnering. This chapter therefore examines the emotional acrobatics women perform while navigating this confusing dilemma in their pursuit of partnership.

Finally, Chapter 8 crystallizes the feminist objective of this project: to elucidate hidden ways in which women find their sexual freedom constrained by gender inequity in partnering practice. In investigating how they partner, this study uncovers how young women coordinate their life-planning strategy so as to preempt and mitigate gender conflict,

accommodating with their sexuality gender conditions that they feel are unequal but seemingly inalterable. In this way, this study confirms feminist suspicions that rather than democratize heterosexual relations, sexual liberation generates altogether new contexts for struggle between genders. Thus, this final chapter closes with a critical discussion of what an examination of the partnering practices of elite singles can tell us about the gender politics of contemporary heterosexuality and its implications for future research.

While imagining elite partnering contributes to class inequality, researchers know relatively little as to the work that partnering entails in the everyday lives of college-educated singles. As this project investigates these efforts, it provides evidence that much of the forethought, planning and discipline that elite family formation requires appear unequally shouldered by single women, years before they meet their husbands and marry. By contextualizing how, when and where gender conflict appears in college-educated women's efforts to couple and marry, this study will therefore thicken sociological understanding as to how class and gender intertwine and reproduce inequality in sexual practice.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Marriage remains a highly valorized and sought-after life-planning goal by the majority of teenagers and young adults from every background in the United States (Hymowitz, Carroll, Wilcox and Kaye 2013; Kefalas, Furstenberg, Carr and Napolitano 2011; Cherlin 2009; Carroll et al. 2007; Waite and Gallagher 2000; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin 2000). However, though most will marry, today's youth tend to marry later in the lifecourse than their parents and grandparents. As this trend continues, young adults will spend a greater proportion of their post-adolescent lives unpartnered than previous generations (Klinenberg 2012).

With adults spending more of their lives single, family formation patterns become more heterogeneous. For the first time in recorded history, the majority of first-born children in the United States now arrive outside of the context of marriage (Cherlin, Ribar and Yasutake 2016). However, the college educated buck this trend with 92 percent of first-born children delivered by graduates arriving within the traditional context of wedlock. This striking divergence prompts family scholars to theorize that marital childbearing is becoming an elite practice, reserved for the highly educated (Cherlin, Ribar and Yasutake 2016; Carbone and Cahn 2014; Sawhill 2014; Hymowitz et al. 2013).

However, demographic analysis can only observe this divergence in outcome, it cannot explain its causes. While interview-based research reveals insight into the ways in which disadvantage conditions the sexual life-planning of poor and working-class adults (e.g. Silva 2013; Edin and Nelson 2013; Edin and Kefalas 2005), little parallel inquiry investigates

the sexual life-planning of those more privileged. While much is known about the sexual decision-making of students *attending* college (Wade 2017; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Freitas 2013; Kimmel 2008; Bogle 2008; Holland and Eisenhardt 1990), less is known of their sexual practices after graduation. Reviewing the literature on the subject of relationship formation in adulthood, scholars warn of an epistemic gap regarding the partnering practices of college-educated adults after the age of 24 (Shulman and Connolly 2013; Surra and Boelter 2013). With most college graduates marrying in their late twenties and beyond, this missing inquiry means scholars cannot explain how or why college-educated adults approach marital and family planning differently than their less educated peers.

THE SALIENCE OF LIFE-PLANNING FOR THEORY

Scholars of modernity (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991) recognize that young people today find themselves unprecedentedly responsible for authoring their own biographies. Where older cohorts more or less inherited their way of life from their parents and religious strictures, today's youth have comparatively more autonomy to make lifestyle decisions. Because of this, many social commentators posit that the reason why some groups fare better than others can be explained by their greater life-planning prudence. In particular, the judiciousness of college graduates in their life-planning is often taken for granted. However, little is understood of how graduates actually navigate many major life decisions in the years after college, especially with respect to how they seek partnership, marry and have children. Missing knowledge begs an empirical question: how do single graduates who want to marry and have children find committed partners after college?

Secondly, many youth scholars believe college graduates delay marriage and family formation to maximize life chances and outcomes (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Freitas 2013; Kimmel 2008; Blatterer 2007; Arnett 2004). Reasoning that those freest from interpersonal constraints are freest to exploit emerging opportunities, these scholars posit that

young people maximize flexibility by eschewing and deferring permanent commitments such as marriage and family. However, insofar as social inequity conditions opportunity, not all groups enjoy equal flexibility to delay.

Specifically, feminist scholarship recognizes that systemic sexism condition women's life opportunities (Fraser 2013; Ridgeway 2011; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Mitchell 1971). While delaying marriage and childbearing may appear universally beneficial and rational to scholars, delay nevertheless poses unequal hazards to men and women. As intimated in the previous chapter, many women fear that delaying marriage and childbearing into their thirties can jeopardize their chances of starting a family, threatening both their fertility and attractiveness to men as wives. Recognizing this gendered disparity in the realization of sexual opportunity, I then ask: do men and women who expect to marry and start a family differ in their sexual life-planning after college? Would this divergence in life-planning strategy create gender conflict in heterosexual interactions? If so, how is such gender conflict resolved in sexual practice?

By problematizing the sexual life-planning processes of the college-educated, I raise questions largely absent in our present theorization of gender inequality. In exploring how heterosexual graduates navigate sexual life-planning after college, this project thus illuminates some of the ways in which gender, sex and class intersect to reproduce inequality between men and women in sexual practice. However, for these findings to be contextualized for theory, it is first necessary to review how heterosexual partnering practices have evolved across recent history. This review thus surveys how scholars have studied and continue to examine the evolving premarital practices of middle class heterosexuality.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This review of the literature on the subject of middle-class partnering is partitioned into three sections: its normative history, contemporary practice, and theory. Because

partnering and marriage practices are conditioned by historical and cultural context, the first section contextualizes how life-planning expectations changed across the past century. Towards this end, this section illustrates how norms regarding dating, courtship and premarital sex evolved in reflexive tension with the deinstitutionalization of marriage across the latter half of the century (Cherlin 2004). Here, I clarify how the definitions for partnering practices such as courtship and dating have changed in meaning and application over time. This section concludes by offering a definition for dating that more accurately reflects its use in modern practice.

The second section reviews what is known about how today's college-educated adults navigate heterosexual partnership between adolescence and marriage. However, field reviews recognize that the majority of scholarship on the subject suffers from its focus on the sexual attitudes and practices of students attending college. Because college is itself an institution contextually different from the rest of adult life, I believe it is theoretically problematic to generalize from the beliefs and practices of college students to the wider adult population. Thus, this section is partitioned to consider: firstly, how young adults approach partnership within the institutionalized setting of college; and secondly, during the years between college and marriage. Rather than theorize young people as being on a linear trajectory from singlehood to marriage, this section considers the heterogeneity of sexual attitudes, projects, relationships and experiences that researchers can expect to observe among young singles in their twenties and thirties. I conclude both sections with critical consideration of how scholars believe sexual inequality to condition partnering practices at each stage.

The final section builds a bridge from this scholarship to the empirical aim of my project. At present, the thinness of applicable study leaves scholars unable to know much of how young adults partner during a critical stage of the lifecourse—namely the years young adults are most likely to marry. While feminist scholarship recognizes gender conflict in

women's experiences of college and marriage, it is difficult for feminists to know where this gender conflict occurs during the years in between. As my project addresses this gap, this section therefore reviews briefly how feminist scholars theorize gender inequality in heterosexual relationships and explores how this theory informs my investigation of singles navigating sexuality after college.

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF PARTNERING BY CHOICE

The Origin of Dating

As a premarital sexual practice, dating has evolved considerably from its social origins. Historian Beth Bailey (1988:22) finds that the first colloquial use of the term "dating" served as a euphemism for prostitution during the early 20th century. Later, the term unflatteringly described the social practices of working urban youth. Living in overcrowded apartments, tenements and boarding houses, working-class parents lacked the space and resources to entertain daughters' callers in the home like the middle class. Their cramped circumstances drove working-class youth to break with parent-led courtship convention but women's comparatively meager earnings made them reliant on working boys and men to make commercial amusements such as nickelodeons, speakeasies and soda shops accessible. Though typically chaste (except for the threat of sexual violence), Bailey observes that this peer-regulated practice of dating more advantaged families condemned as low-class, likening women's dependence on men for dating expenses to prostitution.

Setting out to study the middle class in its natural habitat, sociologists Helen and Robert Lynd (1929) examined social life in Muncie, Indiana, a town they believed typical of the early 20th century. In their ethnography of "Middletown," the Lynds observed premarital sexuality as tightly regulated and supervised by parents. Boys, girls and even unmarried adults could expect only to meet platonically in public settings where their interactions could be chaperoned and monitored. Men could "call" upon young women at their homes, but only

in the presence of their families. Indeed, only by announcing to his community his earnest intentions to court could a suitor expect privacy—but only so far as the parents' front porch.

Yet, by 1924, the Lynds observed the once maligned practice of dating being adopted by an expanding middle class. With public high school recently universalized, adolescents realized new opportunities to meet each other and socialize without parental oversight. The widespread adoption of the automobile by middle-class families afforded them further social autonomy. Within a decade, the Lynds watched students break formal courtship convention to attend school dances, share bottles of Coke and frequent Muncie's nine movie theaters without adult chaperones.

Bailey (1988) posits that the practice of dating became culturally normalized as adolescence emerged as a distinct lifestage. Teenage identity, which was neither childhood nor adulthood, developed its own sexual telos separate from adult expectations of marriage. While courtship signified one's intention to commit to a lifelong partnership, dating signified one's intention to avoid committing. As sociologist Samuel Lowrie (1951:337) observed of the practice:

> Dating [offered] a relationship expressing freedom, lack of commitment or public obligation for any sort of future action … [T]he rise of the term 'dating' is a reflection of the freedom of the young to associate in pairs without others—parents or the community—assuming or insisting that merely because they are dating they have further responsibilities to each other or to the community. Such freedom is what distinguishes dating from courtship.

In practice, dating before World War II arguably had little to do with sexuality, as sex was still largely reserved for married adults. From the perspective of teens and college students, being seen dating at this time served primarily as an index of social popularity and had not usurped the expectation of courtship as premarital partnering practice (Bailey 1988; Waller 1937; Lynd and Lynd 1937). Though both sexual violence and intimate touching ("petting") undoubtedly occurred on some dates, as a practice, premarital intercourse

remained strictly taboo and would not become convention until the 1960s (Coontz 2005; Bailey 1988).

"Going Steady"

World War II marked a shift in attitudes towards premarital sexuality. Policymakers seeking to return the nation to normalcy after the war proliferated pro-family subsidies, including the G.I. Bill, furnishing veterans the means and cultural encouragement to secure a middle-class lifestyle unprecedentedly early in their lifecourse. According to family scholar Stephanie Coontz (2005), those men who failed to marry young in light of these concerted efforts often suffered stigmatization and ostracization from peers, family and community alike. Thus, in the post-war zeitgeist, the vast majority of America's middle-class youth would marry a "steady" they met in high school or college soon upon graduation (Reiss 1961).

The glorification of the nuclear family after World War II had a dramatic impact on teen's sexual practices. By 1950, "going steady" had supplanted the competitive dating complex for teens and college students (Bailey 1988). Unlike dating, which previously signaled distance from marriage, the practice of "going steady" intentionally mimicked the institution. Symbolically marked by its own iconography such as promise rings, fraternity pins and varsity jackets, the normative practice of "going steady" carried many of the social expectations of courtship: loyalty, monogamy, and commitment. However, unlike traditional courtship where couples' families regulated the practice, steadies—specifically women—would find their conduct heavily surveyed and policed primarily by high school or college peers.

According to Reiss (1961), despite increasing access to contraceptives, a powerful double standard nevertheless curtailed women's sexual freedom. Girls and women rumored to engage in sex outside of a relationship would find themselves denigrated and publicly

shamed. Yet, with a steady boyfriend, women's premarital sex could be rationalized to judgmental peers under the romantic guise of passionate love and the assumption that the couple would soon marry.

Dating under Deinstitutionalization

If the golden era of the nuclear family encouraged marriage-like partnering practices among teens, its subsequent collapse during the mid to late 1960s again precipitated radical shifts in attitudes towards premarital sex and partnership. Surging divorce rates, beginning in the 1960s and leveling off at about 50 percent in the 1980s, challenged the general advisability of early marriage (Coontz 2005). Economic stagflation and rising housing costs drove millions of housewives into the workforce as second earners, normalizing the expectation that both middle-class boys and girls would pursue careers outside of the home (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988).

By the 1970s, adult singlehood became normalized for both men and women. Contraceptive use rose across this decade as the stigma of premarital sex dissolved (Coontz 2005; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels 1994). But with millions of young adults leaving behind families, schools and religious communities to establish careers in burgeoning urban centers, this generation broke with the religiously organized networks their parents and grandparents had relied upon to meet each other. In this way, the enterprise of partnering became increasingly individualized. Commercial industries such as nightclubs, singles bars, personal advertisements and matchmaking services grew to accommodate the changing sexual needs of young professionals and to service their search for partnership (Slater 2013; Illouz 1997; D'Emilio and Freedman 1988; Bailey 1988). While specific technologies, venues and services changed in fashion over time, dating in practice would expand during this decade to describe the varied strategies single adults use to seek each other out for sexual connection and partnership.

If courtship refers to the institutionalized set of practices by which religion, community and family regulated sexual reproduction, modern dating evolved as traditional authority over sexuality unraveled. Many sociologists reasoned optimistically this would allow sexual relations between men and women to become more equalized and democratic (Cherlin 2004; Schwartz 1994; Giddens 1992). However, while the deregulation of sexuality may offer men and women new sexual freedoms, feminist research found that these freedoms carried new risks that were unequally distributed by gender. In the following section, I examine what sociologists know about how singles partner today and what these findings suggest about the sexual politics of contemporary singlehood and partnering.

CONTEXTUALIZING PREMARITAL SINGLEHOOD TODAY

Statistically speaking, most people today spend the first decade of their adult lives unmarried. In 1960, the median age for marriage in the United States was 23 for men and 20 for women and only two in five adults under the age 30 were unmarried (Cohn, Passel, Wang and Livingston 2011). As of 2012, the median age for first marriage is 29 for men and 27 for women, respectively, while four out of five adults under the age of 30 are unmarried (Wang and Parker 2014).

Scholars believe this longer marital horizon affords young people greater latitude than previous generations in how they organize their sexuality through the lifecourse (Carroll et al. 2007; Blatterer 2007; Arnett 2004). However, the increasing duration of singlehood makes studying it more complicated. While scholarship has provided growing insight into the sexual attitudes, beliefs, motives and practices of college students, these findings are not generalizable to older graduates or those who do not attend college. Scholars have largely neglected the social processes by which college graduates navigate sexuality in the years between college and marriage. Anticipating this as a concern for theory-building, this section reviews the literature of premarital sexuality across two stages: college and post-college.

College Singlehood

Life and family-planning

Marriage remains a major life goal for almost 9 out of 10 high school seniors (Bachmann, Johnston and O'Malley 2011). In their life-planning projects, college students say they intend to delay family formation until after they establish their postgraduate careers and that they anticipate forming egalitarian, two-income households (Gerson 2009; Friedman and Wiessbrod 2005; Barnet, Gareis, James and Steele 2003). Yet, despite a seeming convergence of attitudes and expectations about marrying, researchers find family-planning among young adults varies by gender, specifically single women's anticipation of sexual inequality in marriage and family life (Gerson 2009; Stone and McKee 2000).

Several studies investigate how young people plan their transition from adolescence to marriage, finding these strategies different for boys and girls. Patterson and Forbes (2012) asked high school students to pen essays describing how they imagine their lifecourse will play out to age 40. Teenage girls commonly describe choosing college majors and career tracks in woman-dominated fields such as nursing and teaching because they believe these fields best accommodate working mothers by offering ample parental leave and the scheduling flexibility necessary to raise children. Conversely, their male peers typically described male-dominated college majors and career tracks. In their essays, boys did not express concerns that they would need to interrupt these careers for paternity or would require career flexibility to accommodate parenting. Kathleen Gerson's (2009) investigation of adult attitudes towards marriage and family echoes these findings. Despite professing a preference for marital equality and two-income partnerships, men commonly betrayed an underlying expectation that their future wives would accommodate family needs. This suggests that single men anticipate a gendered division of labor years before they marry.

Perhaps because of this, while most men today express a desire for marital equality in the division of family labor, most women do not yet expect to attain it (Fetterolf and Eagly 2011). In other qualitative studies like these, young women, most often as students, describe making conscious educational, professional and lifestyle tradeoffs in anticipation of a future imbalance in the division of marital labor (Gerson 2009; 1985; Orrange 2003; Spade and Reese 1991; Maines and Hardesty 1987). These studies reveal life-planning to be an often obscured but nevertheless consequential dimension in the reproduction of gender stratification. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I extend this problematic of gendered life-planning and its sexual consequences.

Marital timing and the hookup culture

Middle-class college students often tell researchers that they no longer expect to marry a classmate but instead expect to meet their future spouse after graduation (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Freitas 2013; Kimmel 2008; Bogle 2008). This is a sharp shift in orientation from a previous generation of college students, as ethnographers found most female undergraduates expecting to meet their husbands on campus through the 1980s and 1990s (Glenn and Marquadt 2001; Holland and Eisenhardt 1990). With marital expectations subjectively tabled in college, therefore, ethnographers now find students' enthusiasm for couple formation in school today fairly mixed.

Several investigations find that many students believe college to be an inappropriate time to form committed relationships. Many middle-class students tell researchers that they believe romantic attachments inhibit the personal and social development students hope to achieve while attending college (Freitas 2013; Bell 2013; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Kimmel 2008; Arnett 2004). With this perspective, students tell researchers that they believe college sexuality occurs primarily outside of relationships and that campus life is dominated by what many call the "hookup culture" (Wade 2017; Freitas 2013; Garcia, Reiber, Massey

and Merriwether 2012; Kimmel 2008; Bogle 2008; Stepp 2007). A hookup refers to a full range of sexual practices, from kissing to intercourse, that occur between partners outside of a committed relationship (Paul, McManus and Hayes 2000). According to a survey of over 14,000 students across 19 institutions, 72 percent of college students report having at least one hookup while in college (England and Thomas 2006). England and Thomas (2006) further find that although most relationships that begin in college originate as a hookup, the vast majority of hookups do not result in a relationship .

However, there is also substantial evidence to suggest that while hooking up is common, the claim of a "hookup culture" may be exaggerated, the product of pluralistic ignorance (see Wade 2017). Several studies cite women's (and many men's) desires for committed relationships while attending college and their expressions of ambivalence about casual sex (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Bogle 2008; Stepp 2007). According to one recent study of undergraduate attitudes (Bradshaw, Kahn and Saville 2010), 95 percent of women and 77 percent of men say they would prefer dating to hooking up. Surveying 500 undergraduates, Owen and Fincham (2011) find 65 percent of women and 45 percent of men say they hoped that their last hookup encounter would translate into a romantic relationship. According to Armstrong, England and Fogarty (2009), 69 percent of students report having at least one relationship lasting six months by the end of their senior year.

The conflicting nature of this evidence suggests that no one practice dominates campus sexuality, although it may appear to students that hooking up is all there is. When surveyed, students reveal that they pursue a variety of sexual relationships throughout college and that their desires change over time. However, it might also be inferred from the ethnographic investigations cited above that the process of relationship formation is complicated by the heterogeneity of sexual conventions on college campuses.

The gender politics of college singlehood

Evidence suggests that gender inequality affects how men and women navigate sexuality in college. Women consistently report feeling less sexually satisfied by their hookup experiences than their male peers (Armstrong, England and Fogarty 2012; Wade and Heldman 2012; Shukusky and Wade 2012; Kalish and Kimmel 2011; Bradshaw, Kahn, and Saville 2010; Paul and Hayes 2002). Furthermore, much of the sex described during these hookup encounters is phallocentric, premised on men's initiative and focused largely on men's orgasm and pleasure (Kalish and Kimmel 2011; England, Shafer and Fogarty 2008). Generally, women report feeling less comfortable than men hooking up and more likely to feel shame, guilt and regret afterwards (Regnerus and Uecker 2011; Lambert, Kahn and Apple 2003; Paul and Hayes 2002).

The subjective inequality described during hookup experiences raises interesting questions about the politics of sex on campus. Socially, students describe powerful double standards in how hooking up is received among classmates (Armstrong et al. 2014; Allison and Risman 2013; Kalish and Kimmel 2011; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Kraeger and Staff 2009; England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2008; Hamilton 2007; Crawford and Popp 2003; Risman and Schwartz 2002). After hooking up, men find they gain social status, esteem and validation from peers. Conversely, women fear stigma and find their reputation and status on campus is negatively affected after hooking up. Several studies cite the Greek fraternity system on many campuses as especially instrumental in perpetuating this sexual double standard (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Armstrong, Hamilton and Sweeney 2006).

Women further report that their experiences are heavily affected by the threat of sexual violence on campus. Troubling investigations find ongoing evidence of women feeling pressured into hooking up or having sexual boundaries disrespected by male partners during an encounter (Wade and Heldman 2012; Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008). Several studies

report female students sharing advice and strategies on how to avoid sexual exploitation and offering each other mutual support in the prevention of sexual predation and assault on campuses (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Bogle 2008). At the institutional level, this sexual conflict observed by researchers and not unmitigated by campus officials has the psychic effect of making female students feel as if the harms of sexual objectification, humiliation, harassment and victimization are inevitable, pervasive and inescapable aspects of college life that they are personally responsible for evading (Bay-Cheng 2015; Kimmel 2008; Aosved and Long 2006; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2004).

Post-college Singlehood

Why delay marriage?

As of 2010, the average age of marriage is 29 for men and 27 for women; college-educated adults marry later: men at 30 and women at 28 (Payne 2012). Scholars offer several overlapping theories that they believe explain why college-educated adults, as a privileged group, defer both marriage and family formation. Some argue that the increased complexity of the knowledge-sector job market demands further human capital investment and argue that this causes young people to defer marriage (Goldstein and Kenney 2001; Bloom and Bennett 1990; Becker 1981; 1973). However, others argue that a human capital theory of sexual decision-making is insufficient to explain changes in marital timing (Sassler and Goldscheider 2004; Mare 1991).

Researchers have also proposed several other theories to explain marital delay. First, Jeffrey Arnett (2004) proposes that "emerging adulthood" is a new lifestage, distinct from either adolescence or adulthood. According to Arnett, "emerging adulthood" is characterized by its experimental ethos which makes commitment seem unappealing. Others hypothesize that highly educated young adults defer commitment because they expect to marry only after they feel confident in their self-actualization and development, a complicated process with

which they believe commitment can interfere (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Cherlin 2009; Blatterer 2007). A third theory posits that while today's youth may aspire to marriage, they cannot readily afford the middle-class standard of living they believe requisite to start a family (Silva 2013; Gerson 2009; Smock 2004; Côté 2000). These are not mutually exclusive theories but each implies a slightly nuanced subjective orientation towards the prospect of commitment as an explanation for marital delay.

A competing explanation may be that young adults are not necessarily evading commitment. Rather, the process of partnering may have become more complicated. Though they may not ultimately marry their first few partners, most adults will have experienced several sexual relationships of varying depths and durations by their late twenties or early thirties (Bell 2013; Shulman and Connolly 2013; Furman and Shaffer 2011; Cohen and Manning 2010; Raley, Crissey and Muller 2007; Shulman and Kipnis 2001). Despite high rates of relationship dissolution, individuals may begin these relationships with the hope of marrying. Moreover, most couples today expect to marry only after several years of premarital commitment and cohabitation (Sassler and Miller 2011; Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2007). Thus, young adults encounter greater romantic friction and a greater number of relationships than previous cohorts, contributing to delayed marriage.

What is dating?

Many assume couple formation begins with dating. Eaton and Rose (2011:843) define dating as "a publicly-expressed practice undertaken by romantically-interested partners for the purpose of getting to know one another better." But as I have noted above, dating also refers to all the work singles perform searching for partners. Thus, in practice, dating conceptually covers considerable sociological territory. I will use this section to briefly unpack its dimensionality as it has been explored in recent scholarship and identify where scholarship and theory fall short in examining these practices.

How do singles meet? Often, sociologists and demographers answer this question by asking how couples recall meeting each other. Fowler and Christakis (2009) found that over half of U.S. marriages originated through an introduction from a friend or family member. This finding is confirmed by Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012). In their survey of 3,000 partnered adults, a third report meeting their partner via friends, ten percent through family, and fewer than a tenth at work. These authors contend that as fewer people meet their partners in institutionalized settings such as school or church, more couples find each other on the internet. About a fifth of their couples report meeting first online, about the same percentage as report having met at bars, restaurants or in other public settings. However, while it is helpful to know the contexts in which couples recall meeting, sampling on their success obscures the social fact that people neither date nor partner with everyone they encounter in these settings.

With the exception of so-called "speed-dating" events (Finkel, Eastwick and Matthews 2007; Fisman, Iynegar, Kamenica and Simonson 2006), systemic ethnography of adult dating practices is scarce. In Fisman et al. (2006), speed-dating analysis generates aggregate findings such as men basing their selections principally on women's appearance and women basing theirs on men's intelligence. But because speed-dating events are commercially organized by third parties, it is difficult to generalize from these studies to how dating works for the vast majority.

These approaches to studying dating leave many unanswered questions about how singles navigate their social world in search of sexual partnership. In lieu of observational or narrative inquiry, researchers deduce dating practices from hypothetical scripts, by surveying people about how they believe dating works (Eaton and Rose 2011; Laner and Ventrone 2000; Rose and Frieze 1993; Gagnon and Simon 1973). These studies find the scripting of hypothetical dating is heteronormative and thus highly gendered, especially when compared

to the more egalitarian dating expectations of gay or queer singles (Serewicz and Gale 2008; Klinkenberg and Rose 1994). In analyzing these scripts, researchers find men generally assigned agentic dating responsibilities such as: asking women out, choosing activities, paying costs, and initiating sexual contact. Conversely, convention assigns women more passive role, namely waiting and reacting to men's overtures.

Many of these script-based studies do not sample a wide range of adults but rather survey only college students, many of whom are still in their teens (e.g. Jackson, Kleiner, Geist and Cebulko 2011; Serewicz and Gale 2008; Bartoli and Clark 2006; Laner and Ventrone 2000). As students today tell researchers they do not believe formal dating occurs on college campuses (e.g. Wade 2017; Bogle 2008), theories that generalizes from surveys of undergraduates seem especially problematic. How college students think a date works or even ideally should work likely changes as they develop relationship experiences and skills beyond college.

Recently, publishers have entrusted academics with the ostensible task of explaining modern dating to confused lay readers. In *Labor of Love: The Invention of Dating* (2016), Moira Weigel offers a historiography of courtship and concludes that the normative gender scripting that once traditionally scaffolded dating practices has largely dissolved in modern practice. In *Modern Love* (2015), comedian Aziz Ansari joins sociologist Eric Klinenberg to survey focus groups as a way to compare present dating practices. They find that the internet and the explosion of opportunity it makes available to young people greatly complicates the process of partnering. However, the book's strong focus on the impact of consumer technology makes it appear as if dating is ultimately mediated by the internet, making face-to-face interaction between prospective partners seem merely incidental. Both books conclude that dating is more complicated today as singles seek each other out largely without the benefit of tradition, family or community. As traditional courtship conventions and norms

collapse, young people must figure out for themselves what dating is as they go along and as communication technologies rapidly evolve. I examine the effects of this observed anomie on adult dating strategies and practices I examine more deeply and critically in Chapters 6 and 7.

The gender politics of post-college singlehood

Though research on how adults navigate the partnering process after college is scant, existing research does evince gender inequality in the experience of singlehood. As noted above, studies of dating scripts find the practice still informed by gender stereotypes and heteronormative expectations. Moreover, studies show that single adults, as a social category, face discrimination, stigmatization and stereotyping that escalates as they age (see DePaulo 2006). However, women report experiencing these harms earlier than their men, reporting feelings of shame, frustration and insecurity regarding their unpartnered status soon after college (Sharp and Ganong 2011; 2007; Reynolds, Wetherell and Taylor 2007; Reynolds and Wetherell 2005; Bryne and Carr 2005). Many of these investigations illuminate twenty-something women's anxiety that social stigma will increase should they reach their thirties unpartnered. In his analysis of dating site Okcupid.com, site founder Christian Rudder (2014) observes age discrimination as gendered in practice. Men, no matter their own age, discriminate heavily against women older than 30. Women, on the other hand, demonstrate a preference for men within five years of their own age, no matter what their age may be.

The diversity of sexual experiences and relationships that most adults navigate before marriage challenges the traditional conception of adult sexuality as a linear trajectory from singlehood to marriage. However, little is known of how graduates pursue partnership after college. In the following section, I consider how feminist inquiry can help illuminate this process and address this gap in the literature.

PATRIARCHY WITHOUT PATRIARCHS

Undoubtedly, the deinstitutionalization of marriage affords both men and women greater latitude to experience sexuality outside of matrimony. Yet, gender inequality stubbornly persists. Thus, a major puzzle for feminist scholars is identifying how gender inequality is reproduced in sexual practice *despite* the decline of patriarchal institutions. In this concluding section, I explain how feminist theorists apply Michel Foucault's (2008) theory of governmentality to explain gender domination in modern heterosexual relationships and how it might be further deployed in theorizing the gender conflict experienced by straight women seeking partnership.

Heterosexual Double Binds

Scholars believe gender ideology impels gender enactment and performance from individuals in virtually all facets of everyday life (Ridgeway 2011; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999; Butler 1990; Connell 1987; West and Zimmerman 1987). Feminists argue that heterosexuality is a durable ideology that normalizes, ritualizes and eroticizes gender inequality between men and women in sexual relations (Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Ingraham 2005; 1994; Langford 1999; Jackson 1999; Butler 1990; Benjamin 1988; Bailey 1988; Connell 1987; Rich 1980; Gagnon and Simon 1973). Actors internalize a conception of heterosexuality premised on the ideological conviction that men and women are naturally different, perform different roles in sexual relationships and that love is made in their complementarity (Swidler 2001; Ingraham 1994; Cancian 1987). As I will show, these gendered expectations for heterosexual love pose problems for women who desire gender equality.

As Marilyn Frye (1983) observes, women's sexual liberation is conditioned by ongoing gender inequalities latticing society. In her useful simile, the constraints modern women experience are likened to a birdcage: while surrounded by theoretical choices and

opportunities, women are figuratively barred from escaping gender oppression by overlapping, systemic constraints. These bars are experienced for women as double binds, situations "in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation" (3).

A classic double bind posed by heteronormativity is the durably inequitable division of domestic labor shared by dual-income couples. Because cleaning, childcare and household management are traditionally typified as feminine, heterosexual husbands often refuse to perform them. If they are to achieve household equality and work-life balance, working wives must challenge their husband's gendered assumptions, risking marital conflict, jeopardizing his ego, his affection and even the marriage itself. In practice, wives commonly acquiesce, doing more work around the home while also sublimating the strain and frustration of performing a daily double shift (Tichenor 2005; Komter 1989; Hochschild 1989).

Like this, expectations for love pose many similar dilemmas for straight women who acquiesce to gender inequality, cognizant of the ramifications for resisting its unequally gendered regime. For example, Ellen Sieg (2007) found that young British women desire more emotional communication from their boyfriends. But rather than risk upsetting men by asking them to perform emotional labor typified as feminine, women convince themselves that such desires are naive and thus temper their desire for intimacy. Because convention prescribes men the prerogative of proposing marriage, women who desire to marry their partners wait to be asked despite the discomfort and anxiety of waiting, for fear of undermining men's tacit authority (Baker and Elizabeth 2013; Lamont 2013; Sassler and Miller 2011). Teen girls who believe libido is gendered—natural for boys but taboo for girls—worry that expressing sexual desires will make them seem unfeminine and thus undesirable and so conceal from their male partners their authentic tastes, preferences and needs (Tolman 2002). What makes these cases similar is the fact that male privilege emanates

not from specific men, *per se*, but from women's internalized beliefs regarding the tacit rules of heterosexuality. In each case, women *deny themselves* equality, believing it is better to suffer in silence than it is to jeopardize their relationship by challenging men's gender assumptions.

In the lives of middle-class women, marital timing poses to women a major dilemma. On one hand, college-educated adults today tell researchers that they believe premature romantic commitment has the potential to undermine the identity development, autonomy and professional flexibility thought necessary to achieve upward mobility and cement class status (Settersten and Ray 2010; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Cherlin 2009; Blatterer 2007; Arnett 2004). College-educated women, in particular, espouse strong beliefs that it is best for them to establish careers and secure financial independence before marrying, largely rejecting the dependence and vulnerability enshrined in the traditional role of wife (Bell 2013; Gerson 2009).

On the other hand, countervailing gender beliefs that women's attractiveness diminishes as they age limit women's ability to defer marriage in order to achieve financial and social independence like their male peers. Women cite beliefs that "good" women marry before age 30 and that unpartnered women over 30 are imagined to share the stigma of failed femininity (Sharp and Ganong 2011; Reynolds and Taylor 2005; Byrne and Carr 2005; Chasteen 1994). Though its actual basis in biological fact is contested (Twenge 2013; Frank, Bianchi and Campana 1994), the metaphor of the biological clock describes a widely-held belief that women's attractiveness to men wanes as their fertility declines through their twenties and thirties (Lewis and Moon 1997). Twenty-something women are therefore advised by family members, medical experts, dating gurus and popular media alike to partner and marry soon enough to complete childbearing by age 35 (e.g. Selvaratnam 2014; Gottlieb 2010).

If deferring marriage and childbearing allows college-educated adults to securitize and shore up class privilege, how are the gender politics between men and women affected by women's unequal capacity to delay? Conjuring game theory, some sociologists theorize that men's greater ability to defer commitment while accumulating status and resources increases their leverage in heterosexual negotiation with women (Illouz 2012; Martin and George 2006). However, how this imbalanced opportunity structure manifests privilege and conflict in the sexual lives of single men and women respectively has not been much studied empirically. This theorized conflict between men and women would occur during precisely those years in which knowledge of their interaction is the thinnest. This project aims to be among the first to provide qualitative research to answer this empirical question.

Feminine Governmentality

Michel Foucault (2008; 1978) recognized that power traditionally regimented the social order hierarchically from top to bottom. Premodern power exercised control via institutions such as the State or Church that succeeded in forcing subordinates to obey formal laws, enforcing these rules through physical force and formal sanction. According to Foucault, the modern innovation of power is the proliferation of strategies and technologies that enlist subjects to internalize norms, expectations and fears, thus enacting upon themselves the rule of self-government. Modern power thereby erects a discursive regime throughout society wherein subjects learn to order themselves from the inside out without the need for power to dictate subordinate behavior. This learned self-discipline Foucault called governmentality.

In this fashion, feminist scholars believe that as premodern institutions that once regulated sexual reproduction wane in their efficacy, gender oppression is maintained as women learn to police themselves. Per Frye (1983), women anticipate their own constraints and learn to fear tacit risks and sanctions. Feminist scholarship thickly documents myriad

examples of women's anxious attempts to master their own behavior, appearance, expression, and self-presentation in compliance with prevailing gender expectations (e.g. Gill 2008; Milkie 1999; Bordo 1993; Wolf 1991; Bartky 1990; Butler 1990; West and Zimmerman 1987; Hochschild 1979; Goffman 1977; 1976; 1959). And although many challenge and resist the objectification and marginalization of self enshrined into feminine expectations, all women must confront a social world wherein women's refusal of gender enactment in life risks opprobrium, ostracization or deprivation (Ridgeway 2011; Bourdieu 2001; Lupton 1999; Butler 1990; Frye 1983). For straight, college-educated women who feel their life's achievement is bound to the accomplishment of marriage and motherhood (Cherlin 2009), the sanction they fear is specific: men can refuse her love and the requisite commitment necessary to form a normative, middle-class family (Illouz 2012; Bartky 1990; Barrett and McIntosh 1982).

As Jessie Bernard (1972) cautions scholars to consider, the fact that straight men and women marry each other at equal rates obscures the inequity of their experiences marrying each other. Because women's accommodation of systemic sexism is so often practiced as self-denial and emotional sublimation, the everyday harms of gender inequality are not always immediately apparent or legible to researchers. Arlie Hochschild's (1989) couples claimed their marriages egalitarian. Only with ethnographic investigation did she ascertain the actual inequity of modern marriage and thus revealed to sociology the ways working wives concealed their marital inequity despite ostensible sexual liberation. This begs the question: if women practice inequality upon themselves in the context of marriage, what of the labors women conceal in their efforts to marry?

If sociology finds that gender inequality compels women to deny, sacrifice and narrow themselves *within* relationships for the sake of maintaining love, feminist inquiry asks: for the sake of *finding* love, how might straight women manage the gender inequality

they anticipate and experience *between* relationships? How do single women submit themselves to tacit patriarchal expectations in their efforts to partner? What risks do women anticipate should they fail to comply with these expectations?

In the chapters that follow, I answer these questions by investigating the labor of finding love in the long shadow of marriage. Like Hochschild, I find single women's partnering labors eclipsing those of their male peers across their twenties. In my efforts to make sense of this asymmetry, I catalog some of the costs of sexual inequality borne silently in the everyday lives of single women in their efforts to partner. In this way, I reveal the political dimension of a process largely missing from sociology and offer empirical fuel for future feminist theory.

CONCLUSION

As young people spend more of their adult lives unmarried, we know increasingly less about their sexual subjectivities, experiences and projects during these vital life-building years. Though we know most college graduates will marry, we do not know the process. We know little of how middle-class single adults today practice sexuality, date each other, form relationships and ready themselves for marriage and family after college. To wit, while we may know how men and women "do" gender (Wester and Zimmerman 1987), we know less of how young graduates "do" sexuality in years between college and marriage.

When trying to understand why some suffer poorer life outcomes than do others, researchers tend to scrutinize the decision-making of the disadvantaged without applying the same degree of critical scrutiny to the decision-making of those more advantaged. Though we should continue to investigate how low-income and systemically disadvantaged adults make sexual decisions under social duress, we should not neglect in our study those living free from such constraints. Otherwise, theory tautologically presumes that the privileged make

prudent life decisions by virtue of their privilege, without furthering our understanding of what this prudence entails or requires.

Our lack of understanding of how privileged adults partner during pivotal years of the lifecourse stymies our ability to theorize the ways in which sex, class and gender intersect in the reproduction of inequality. If sexual opportunity is conditioned by sexism and classism, as social theory would suggest, we do not sufficiently know how these forces affect the partnering strategies of college graduates. Insofar as gender inequality narrows and constrains women's ability to make a life on a level with their male peers, this lacuna requires feminist redress. By investigating how single adults think about and pursue partnership in their life-planning, the project that follows sheds necessary light on the everyday problems of partnering presently obscured to social theory.

CHAPTER 3: THE ADULT SWITCH

Scrubs is a medical comedy aired on NBC from 2001 to 2010, that centered on J.D., a single, white, male doctor in his late twenties. In an episode called, "My Day at the Races," J.D. anticipates his 30th birthday. The spin of the plot revolves around his feelings of inadequacy for not having made more headway on a list of personal accomplishments he had hoped to achieve before turning 30. From what the viewer is told during the episode, this list includes sleeping naked on a hammock, inventing a cereal, learning a foreign language, and running a triathlon. Of these, he decides to run a triathlon with only a few days remaining before his birthday. He achieves this with seconds to spare when his ex-girlfriend, Elliot, literally picks him up and carries his limp body across the finish line.

Scrubs' J.D. is juxtaposed to Elliot, whom viewers know to be his gendered foil: a female doctor approximately the same age, in the exact same career, having finished the exact same education, having started her medical residency on the same floor at Sacred Heart Hospital at exactly the same time as J.D. Where they differ is in how they approach relationships in their late twenties. J.D. is portrayed as commitment-phobic, passing through a succession of girlfriends, leaving them when they speak of deepening commitment or marriage. In contrast, Elliot is fixated on marriage and often portrayed as anxious about being single and childless. While J.D. enjoys being single, Elliot suffers repeated romantic heartbreak over the course of the show's nine seasons. J.D.'s flight from adult responsibility and preoccupation with having a good time is the driving force of much of the show's comedy until the final season—when he ultimately marries Elliot. Though they ultimately arrive at the same marriage, their premarital paths are far from equitable.

To open this study, I asked respondents of both genders a few questions about adulthood. I asked how they might define adulthood and how well they believe themselves to be living up to their own definitions. Most respondents felt that they had more to do before they would feel comfortable classifying themselves as adults. This presented me with an opportunity to follow up by asking what they imagined was still left for them to do before they would feel comfortable claiming the mantle of adulthood. How men and women diverged in their responses to this question is the subject of the next two chapters.

This chapter explores how a sample of college-educated men think about sexuality and relationships in their life trajectory. I investigate what groundwork single men believe they must lay down if they are to become husbands and fathers, as most expect. What I learned from these men is that most did not think their twenties the appropriate time to prioritize partnership.

But this does not mean that these men were more promiscuous or sex-driven than their female peers. Contrary to the urban bachelor stereotype, I found little evidence that men resist marriage to indulge in casual sex with a wide variety of partners. Instead, I found men preoccupied with nonsexual commitments—to their careers, their social calendar or their hobbies. So preoccupied that men say flatly that they do not want to invest scarce energy on relationships at this stage of their lives. While men describe themselves as receptive to meeting the love of their lives should she walk in the room, if they're anything like J.D. on *Scrubs*, it will take many seasons of prioritizing other life goals before they want to marry Elliot.

RETAINING THE OPTION TO BECOME AN ADULT

While men's lack of maturity is a gender stereotype, I did not expect adult men to so readily describe themselves as immature. When men described what being an adult meant to them, they often described an adult as someone who takes on social responsibility and is

committed to the welfare of others. But when asked if they themselves fit this definition, many men said they had not come to that place in their lives where they feel ready to shoulder responsibility or commit themselves to others. In the future, men anticipate a reorientation in their priorities that will make them feel more like an adult. But most men in this study, aged between 25 and 35, say they have yet made this switch.

Consider 28-year-old Tom. Tom is a committed weekend athlete employed at a startup in San Francisco. In his interview, Tom admits that he feels that through his twenties he has actually *regressed* since college from meeting his criteria of adulthood, becoming less interested in commitment and responsibility over time. After several years of living with his college girlfriend, their relationship ended and Tom moved in with three of his best friends. After several years of the bachelor lifestyle, Tom describes himself as generally contented. Though he describes himself as open to a relationship, he also says he is hesitant to change his situation or priorities to accommodate a partnership. Here, Tom explains his feelings on the subject of adulthood:

> I kind of view adulthood as these governors [sic] that are put on your life. You stop being selfish. You stop being impulsive. You stop going out as much. … For me now, I can kind of do whatever I want whenever I want without thinking of anybody else. And that in itself makes me—it makes me feel less, like, adult. And more still like a kid. Because I don't have to answer to anybody. I can do what I want. It feels like less responsibility. Maybe that's the word for adulthood—responsibility. It's a big word. There's a lot you can unpack from that, but maybe to sum it all up, responsibility and accountability and reliability. All that other stuff you just sort of don't think about when you're single. You just worry about yourself.

For Tom and for many others like him, a critical reorientation from self to others is still as somewhere over the horizon. An adult is someone Tom still expects to become, but not yet. Then, he expects to marry and have children. For now, however, Tom's biggest concern is Tom.

When Kevin, a 31-year-old writer from San Francisco describes what adulthood means to him, he compares himself to a friend whom he describes as "a tier above" himself. He explains:

> For me, there is no consequence if I just want to stop working and work on a project that doesn't affect anyone else. So his [adulthood] is clearly something different and I don't know what to call it. It is very different. My friend just left his job for a startup and he is having to think about putting food on the table for his kid and he has a baby on the way. There is this whole layer of responsibility that is clearly either categorically different or a tier above where I'm at in my version of adulthood.

In his interview, Kevin explains that he has no strong desire to be in a relationship, marry or have children at this time. Like Tom, he describes himself as being motivated by other goals that he feels would be hindered by commitment to others.

What I call the *adult switch* refers to men's belief that masculine adult development is achieved across two separate epochs, the first focused on the self and the second focused on others. In the first stage, men like Kevin and Tom believe that they are not yet adults precisely because they do not yet feel a strong desire to form attachments to others. Adulthood is, for these men, defined as the desire to live for the benefit of other people. Randy, 27, for example, believes adulthood to be a "mental state" he defines as "taking on and completing responsibilities towards others." Carl, 29, says he's come to understand adulthood this way:

> Holly: So adulthood is a fuzzy concept, what does adulthood mean to you?
>
> Carl: It means being more selfless, doing things, being aware of how other people are experiencing me and the world and trying to be more thoughtful of how my actions impact them and what I can do to support them.

Richard, 27, echoes:

> Holly: Adulthood is a fuzzy concept, so how would you define it?
>
> Richard: Adulthood—I think responsibility is a big part of it. Taking responsibility for yourself and for the obligations that you have for other people.

In this way, men anticipate that their orientation towards such attachments will switch and that they will one day become more willing to take on other-oriented responsibilities, duties and obligations that they associate with being a husband and father. In men's calculus, putting off marrying for a few years to focus longer on the self will not jeopardize their chances of marrying or having a family. In fact, given their self-diagnosed immaturity, delay strikes them as responsible. How, then, do men expect to navigate these pre-switch years?

THE LATITUDE OF GUYLAND

For most young men, their sexual subjectivity could not be accurately described as marriage-oriented, as they do not yet consider themselves ready to marry. Though most men expect to marry, at present they believe that there is something constitutive to be gained from the experience of being unpartnered. In his study of young men, sociologist Michael Kimmel (2008) describes this lifestage as "guyland," the official province of bachelorhood. During these years, men expect to accomplish intense personal goals (triathlon-training was frequently mentioned) and make spontaneous decisions, such as quitting their job to travel the world, that they believe would be reckless, irresponsible or simply self-indulgent were they in a committed partnership or family.

If becoming an adult means becoming accountable to others, then many of these men say they are not yet ready for that. Jamie, 25, admits he is avoiding it:

> Holly: How do you think you compare to other people your age—transitioning into that adulthood path?
>
> Jamie: Like I said, I am actively trying to avoid it, so I don't know. Most of my friends are dirty punker kids, so they aren't doing so hot of a job on themselves. I'm barely considered the most adult of my friends even though I don't want to think of myself that way.

Men anticipate relatively few consequences or sanctions should they spend their twenties prioritizing themselves. In fact, many genuinely believe avoiding relationships is the most

responsible course of action, as they do not yet believe themselves ready to invest themselves in the way that they believe a committed partnership deserves.

Men earmark these years to focus on masculine achievements they believe they cannot achieve later. Xavier, 27, says he likes his lifestyle where his only obligations after work are to seek out fun with his male friends:

> Xavier: I live with three other guys right now and we still live like bachelors. My lifestyle is not that different than when I was 22 because we go out, we drink—we probably drink less, more hungover—but the general lifestyle is similar.
>
> Holly: What is that lifestyle?
>
> Xavier: Work hard, play hard, basically. We definitely go hard on the weekends. We have a lot of fun, drink a lot, do drugs sometimes, but then on the weekdays we are on the grind. It's like we … can basically be described [as] trying to get somewhere in their professional lives but don't let that get in the way of general happiness like going out and having fun. Does that answer your question?
>
> Holly: I get it but what I'm trying to understand—what it is that is bringing you happiness on the weekends? What is the aim?
>
> Xavier: Unexpected stuff, things I could not have anticipated on Friday morning. I really enjoy that kind of like, "This is happening, let's go. Let's go to this bar. Let's go to this club, meet somebody new. Let's go talk to someone we might not normally talk to." A big part of it is definitely new experiences.

Ray, a 29-year-old graduate student, spoke at length about the feeling that he had missed out on what he believes to be a critical stage of masculine development by returning to his hometown after college to help his parents pay down their mortgage rather than pursue a bachelor lifestyle in a city like many of his friends. The way he tells it, he feels he missed completing a to-do list for manhood:

> Ray: All the things that happen in your twenties, the bars, I didn't have it…
>
> Holly: What do you think is the authentic male twenties experience?
>
> Ray: Sure. Getting drunk a lot. Getting into some kind of fight. Getting into some kind of idiotic trip to Vegas. Some crazy threesome or not. The possibility of it. ... Hanging out with your guy friends and doing something stupid with guns. Yeah, exactly, all the dumb shit for lack of a better word … But it's like a lot of cruising bars … Maybe I should have joined a frat in college.

While the specific activities guyland entails vary between men, the unqualified latitude to experience them many men feel they must have during this first stage of their post-college lives. Otherwise, they fear, like Ray, that they will miss out on definitive experiences.

TABLING COMMITMENT

During their twenties, many men commonly spoke of commitment as a handicap, something that would hinder their opportunities and thus diminish their life chances. Anthony, a 28-year-old graduate student in Boston, says of commitment: "Part of me is terrified by commitment to anything. Whether it's a relationship, signing contracts, for a lease, anything from a cell phone to taking a job in another place. Any sort of commitment makes me feel a little off." Filmmaker, Carl, 29, says he attributes his professional success to the capriciousness that only comes from not committing to any path:

> In my mid-twenties, I hadn't made any decisions in my life. Nothing major, everything was sort of a matter of fact or the path of least resistance. What seemed most rational or logical, I had never put that much thought into my life decisions including what I studied in college, where I went to college, what I did after school. It was all sort of whatever came up and it seemed like an easy option.

While few men could be described as rudderless as Carl, maximizing optionality by minimizing commitments is a major life-planning strategy these single men describe for their twenties.

For many men at this stage, relationships threaten one's self-conception as independent. Single men in their twenties often described themselves as being in the process of proving that they can be alone, establish a career and demonstrate autonomy—characteristics indicative of masculine identity achievement (Kimmel 2008; Connell 1987). Here, Jamie, 25, betrays his sense that young men who organize their lives to accommodate a relationship cannot be described as either masculine or independent:

> I would like to coincide [sic] masculinity with independence a lot, not that women are not independent, but I think you could have all the bacon in the world and steak and hardwood floors or whatever but like if you're like some whipped, dependent sucker who does whatever your girlfriend tells you to do you are not masculine.

> Independence is huge. Strong will power, not that girls can't have them, but when I think of masculinity I think of complete self-reliance. The ultimate masculine man should be able to be dropped somewhere and survive. Build a shelter and survive. I would probably be bad at it.

Thus, while few men in my study were as hostile towards the idea of relationships as Jamie, many men did convey the belief that having a girlfriend or wife would impinge on their independence and flexibility. Chris, 25, says he could not consider marriage at present. In his mind, a wife would inhibit his ability to seize opportunities:

> Chris: I'd have to be set in my career and know what I'm doing to not have any other goals that marriage would hold me back from.
>
> Holly: Such as?
>
> Chris: If I was offered a job in another country, another state … Like it's tough to visualize something outside of a job, but if someone asked me to go on a two-week trip to go hiking in Alaska or something like that, like, a wife would be like, "No, you need to be here for me."

Walter, 29, too, explains that he believes he is single in large measure because relationships require compromises that he is unwilling to make at this time:

> I generally find I am largely single by choice. Most of the time, when I date, I find that I'm forced into making compromises that I don't think are that beneficial for myself … [For example,] I travel a lot. So if I find that I'm in a relationship that doesn't allow me to travel ... I generally feel like it is a sufficient enough of an impact on my freedom that I will chose not to continue with the relationship.

Given their need for maximal autonomy, men say it is more prudent to defer forming relationships in the first place than it would be to risk interpersonal conflict.

While a popular stereotype suggests that men are ambivalent towards commitment because it curtails their sexual freedom, when given the chance to explain their resistance, most men listed the *nonsexual* opportunities they imagine relationships inhibit. For men in this position, commitment means voluntarily sacrificing the flexibility, opportunity and latitude that many believe is necessary to succeed. However, no men in this study described themselves as having abandoned commitment indefinitely. Instead, by tabling attachment,

men believed they position themselves to have the best of both worlds in the same life—bachelorhood and then family.

WHAT, MEN WORRY?

While many men express a strong desire for marriage and family, few at the time of the interview have formed concrete plans for how and when they will accomplish these goals in their lives. Raffi is an information technologist who lives in Boston. Although he considers marriage a major life goal, he admits that at age 27, he has not yet given much thought to when he should marry and considers himself presently unconcerned with the matter:

> Holly: How important is getting married to you?
>
> Raffi: I think it is out of one to ten being the most important, I'd say it's an 8.
>
> Holly: So it is important to you?
>
> Raffi: At some point.
>
> Holly: At some point?
>
> Raffi: I don't really know when is the right age. Some of my coworkers are from the Midwest—her and her husband got married at 24, 22. Now, here [Boston] it is not that common to get married so young. So I don't feel like there is a lot of pressure yet. Maybe 30 to 35 is the right age. I haven't really put a lot of thought into it.

Byron, 28, likewise lists marriage and children as important life goals. However, when he describes his life-planning after college, he, too, admits to not having given their execution much thought:

> Holly: You are 28 now. What did you think being 27 would look like when you were a senior in college?
>
> Byron: Honestly, I was so focused on 22, 23, I wasn't even thinking that far ahead. I hoped to have some level of job success but I hadn't thought that far ahead. Especially since my life has been somewhat unpredictable. And, you know, when I'm 22 and when I think of where I was five years ago, I never thought I would be where I was when I was 22. So to me, I didn't see the point in looking five years ahead. I was so set when I was in high school on moving to DC for college and doing political stuff and then I got to college in Arkansas and then so things change so much so quickly that I can't think what is happening five years ahead let alone one year.

At 29, Walter admits that when he graduated from college, he did not anticipate being in a relationship before turning 30:

> Dating has never been a significant, important part of my life. It just never even struck me as something that would happen before 30. … Honestly, when I was senior in college, 30 wasn't even on my radar. It's weird. You just turned 20 and 30 seems so far removed when you are in college.

In stark contrast to their female peers who say they expect to marry by age 30, many college-educated men admit they dedicate very little time or energy to thinking about marriage. Patrick, 35, says this fairly explicitly:

> I just don't think it feels like there is any pressure [to marry]. There is no social pressure, no internal pressure. Not much. Maybe for some people but it is not something, as a guy, you have to spend a lot of time thinking about. There are lots of other things to focus on. I don't know many girls who have not like at least invested some of their time thinking about it, wondering about it, reading about it.

For many young men in their twenties, family is not imagined as something that necessitates forethought or planning. Phenomenologically speaking, then, men do not experience being single through their twenties with the same sense of temporal anxiety as their female peers, described in detail in the following chapter.

KEEPING IT CASUAL

Contrary to the stereotype, men's ambivalence towards commitment does not necessarily imply a preference for a hedonistic stream of casual sex partners and one-night stands. Instead, when asked what they did desire, many described an ongoing sexual affair with a female friend that they believed could provide them with both regular physical and emotional companionship but without the expectation of relational permanence and obligations that they associate with romantic relationships. Men often described wanting more than anonymous sex but something short of commitment. As Chris clarifies:

> Holly: What is your goal for dating right now?
>
> Chris: A little bit of fun and not have any attachments.

> Holly: So tell me a little bit more about what that means.
>
> Chris: I mean it is always fun to flirt and for someone to think highly of you and even in a surface way it just makes you feel good. So in that sense I'm not too interested in hooking up with a million girls but one girl who doesn't take it too seriously.

Chris goes on to describe his ideal dating partner as someone "I'm comfortable with, who I enjoy hanging out with but I'm not in love with." Prior to the adult switch, men in this way describe themselves as seeking affairs that very well fit the definition of being casual and temporary. Sam, 27, for example, says that although he has no interest in a relationship at this time, this has not stopped him from dating in the hopes of connecting with women who share his desire for sexual friendship:

> Sam: Here's my challenge: in the past year up until the last few months, I wasn't open to being in a new relationship.
>
> Holly: So you were going on dates without that intention?
>
> Sam: Yeah. I'm a pretty honest person, so I think I'd be pretty explicit. I'm underwater with work right now. We're going to grab drinks. I'm not trying to be in a relationship. We're casually dating, I guess? Sex is probably part of it. Sex is a big part of it. I'm sure there's some emotional connection there, as well. It's nice to be with the opposite sex. Even if it's for drinks casually but you know you're not going to be exclusive. Like I wasn't open to something that got more serious. ... It's not purely sexual, even with those women I did happen to sleep with, that's not where I was getting all the joy. It's fun to go out with someone. ... It's just fun to go out with somebody. That's why I didn't do more dinners or formal dates. It was always just like, "Let's grab drinks."

Although Sam makes effort to inform his partners of his limits and expectations beforehand, other men admit they have not been so forthcoming in their past dating experiences. Tyler, 32, reflects how, during his twenties, he frequently ended affairs with women that he thought were edging too close to commitment:

> I would date a girl and things would show signs of getting serious and I would usually back off. I would get creeped out and back away and do the vanishing act. Most guys at that age do it. It doesn't make it okay or justify it. Looking back on it, I wish I hadn't been that way but at that age everyone expects it. ... Reflecting on it now, I feel crappy about it, most guys in early twenties once something casual starts showing signs that it could get serious, once the woman is getting more interested in commitment, I feel a lot of guys that age will back up and move on.

Men readily admit that negotiating the terms of these casual affairs is difficult in practice and so many simply fail to reveal their disinterest in commitment until the subject is first broached by their partners. Patrick, 35, recalls one such experience:

> I have been in this scenario which I did not even realize that I was treating it a lot more casually than the other person was. So it sucks because you do come to realize it. … You assume that other person has the same level of investment and then you come to understand the hard way, always, that it wasn't the case. … You can completely have your blinders on and that is a very frustrating experience but you know it's very easy to misunderstand what the expectations of the relationship are.

For this reason, many admitted that in their efforts to eschew commitment during this stage of their lives, they have often cycled through several casual affairs like these, frequently ending them when they feel their partner becoming too attached for comfort. How this sexual pattern is anticipated and navigated by women is a subject I examine in great detail in Chapter 7.

WOMEN FROM MEN'S STANDPOINT

Men are not oblivious to how gender unequally conditions how men and women can approach the life-planning project. This final section explains how straight men perceive women's orientation towards singlehood, partnering and family formation as being different than their own. I asked all respondents to compare and contrast how they believed men and women as groups navigate their twenties and thirties. Questions I asked included: Do you believe men and women have the same things to accomplish in their twenties? Who do you think has an easier time coping with being single at your age: men or women? And lastly, why do you think men, statistically, marry at later ages than do women?

Many men believed that women naturally desire relationships more than men. Because teenage girls reach puberty several years before men, men assume women more prepared to take on adult responsibilities at an earlier age. As Chris, 25, states: "I don't think it's a secret: guys probably want to go out more. ... I think it's natural that girls usually are a couple years ahead of men in maturity so they are probably thinking about marriage more than guys." This belief that men and women have fundamentally different orientations

towards maturity, partnering, and commitment in their twenties poses a heterosexual dilemma I problematize in Chapter 5.

Beyond essentialist explanations, men intuit that women's position is contextually different than their own. Jamie, for example, recognizes that both women's limited fertility and a gendered double standard of aging together constrain women's life-planning prospects:

> I don't know anything about the reproductive system but you know certain women's biological clocks can start getting those urges to settle down like the late twenties—30 is when it starts for some people. I had an odd friendship with someone older, who was maybe 33, and she was already on the verge of not being able to conceive because her eggs were not viable. She got her period earlier in life and her whole sexual aspect started earlier in life and her body went earlier for her. I wouldn't be surprised that that is something girls worry about because their window for opportunity is limited. For the social side of it, I have seen TV shows where girls are planning about how they age and they don't age as gracefully as guys that whole—we all fantasize about youth. So everybody is looking at young girls but George Clooney is hot and he's old. Those two reasons play some part for it.

Byron, described above as fairly blithe about his own life-planning, notes that his female peers must be far more careful and strategic about how they coordinate their own twenties if they desire the same things as he does, namely marriage, children and family:

> Holly: Do you think single men and single women have the same things to worry about accomplishing in their twenties?
>
> Byron: Women for whom having children is a priority, they are more focused on establishing career stuff earlier because when they have kids, it's going to affect that. Whereas men don't have the same thing to worry about.
>
> Holly: How does that affect dating?
>
> Byron: I think also men, for better or worse, take things more casually. They get married older. They are not in as much of a rush whereas they might date casually with no intention of a relationship. … It's less common to see that attitude in women.

Tyler observes that, at 32, he is spared the inquest he imagines experienced by women his age:

> I don't think there is as much pressure on us to have a girlfriend, to get married, to have kids. I think that is something that hasn't changed much in the last 50 years, There is still a lot of pressure on women from female friends and mothers, grandmothers, aunts asking, "When are you going to settle down?," "Do you have a boyfriend yet?," "When are you going to have kids?" So in that sense it is easier on

> men because we are not nearly as pressured by other men or women as to why we are single, or when are we going to have a girlfriend or anything like that. The pressure is more on women in that sense.

To some degree, many men sympathize with women's family-planning constraints, societal pressures and their limited horizon for partnering. They recognize that straight women are not afforded the same latitude that men enjoy during their twenties with which to organize their life projects while expecting to achieve similar goals.

Men commonly identified a cultural double standard in aging biased in their favor. Men believe that as they age, younger women will continue find them attractive in a way that know they do not reciprocate towards older women. Here, Kevin explains:

> Holly: So do you think men and women are raised with the same expectations of finding love in their twenties?
>
> Kevin: No, I feel like I have about 5 more years. Even now [at age 31], I don't feel like I'm at a disadvantage. I feel like I'm behind, but if I just compare myself to 25-year-old guys, I feel like I clearly have an advantage over them. I'm older and I know more … so probably I'm more responsible because I have made mistakes and learned from them. For me, a 31-year-old male, I aspire to partner with a 25- to 30-year-old woman ... It's not disadvantageous [for me] to date girls in that age range where it would be the complete opposite and difficult for women.

This double standard affords men several benefits in their partnering outlook. First, because men take it for granted that their partners will be younger than themselves, they assume that their pool of potential partners will grow as they themselves age. Men also believe that aging also works to their advantage, making them more attractive to younger women who find their own male peers too immature to date. In this way, men generally have a far more relaxed attitude about aging into their thirties unpartnered than their female peers who they believe see their opportunities shrink as they approach 30.

Though men say they want to have children, many single men in their twenties and thirties say they do not wish to adopt the family-planning constraints of their female peers. By presuming that they will partner with women younger than themselves, preferably women still in their twenties, men believe that they can in this way avoid sharing in women's

reproductive anxieties. John, however, stood out among male respondents for trying to synchronize his life-planning to the same constraints he expects his future partner is now facing:

> John: In my grand scheme of things, I'm going to be married and have kids. … You know out of college with your first job, it's hard not to think about that stuff and so I feel I want to look for my wife, ultimately. It's not like the clock is ticking, I'm only 25, but at the same time the clock is ticking and I'm 25.
>
> Holly: Tell me more about this clock—what's your clock?
>
> John: The clock for me is—I don't want to be too old when I have kids so that I'm 50 when they are 10. So I feel like I want kids in my low thirties, that would be ideal for me. My wife would—my future wife—her biological clock is ticking, so they say 40 and below is the best, healthy age for that. So in a way, the clock is ticking and but it's not that I feel pressure, it's just in the back of my mind.

Unlike most other male respondents, John did not take it for granted in his family-planning that he would marry a younger woman. Assuming that he will marry a woman approximately his own age, John therefore is planning his life as if his future wife's reproductive constraints are his own. John is unusual in this study in that he did not take it for granted that the double standard of aging could be used to buy him more flexibility in his life-planning project and afford him several more years of bachelorhood. Instead, John is alone in demonstrating gender solidarity with the life-planning constraints of his female peers, for a wife he has not yet met.

CONCLUSION

Ulrich Beck (1992) famously articulated that life-planning is a dilemma of modernity. Where institutional life-planning convention no longer makes sense, individuals must find personal solutions. One such biographical solution I observe among college-educated men is what I call the adult switch. Men now believe adulthood is best achieved across two partitioned epochs. In the first epoch, men resist what they see as rigid commitments in an effort to retain the flexibility that they believe is necessary to build a good life. In general, only after men feel assured and secure in having developed themselves do they expect to feel

ready to commit fully to others. This switch in life-planning prerogative many say is a necessary precondition for them to seriously entertain the prospect of marriage.

While this sounds responsible and even optimal given the stakes, when compared to women's situation, men's advantage within the heterosexual arrangement is clear. Whether they recognize it as privilege or not, men do understand that they enjoy more latitude with which to plot a lifecourse than their female peers. Men in their twenties and early thirties do not widely fear that deferring commitment in order to maximize their life chances will diminish their opportunities to partner in their thirties. Instead, men generally believe that they will likely become more attractive to women as they age (up to a point) and as their careers become more secure. In men's minds, marriage and family are perceived as being inevitable, a matter not of if but when. The confidence that men have in their ability to defer marriage allows them to approach sexuality as young men casually and lightly relative to their female peers whom they imagine must be more strategic.

Straight men thus experience sexuality differently in their twenties than their straight female peers. They occupy different, unequal positions in the heterosexual matrix, and from these positions they construct divergent sexual strategies. How women strategize their life-planning in relation to the sexual inequality they anticipate is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: THE REVERSE TIMELINE

While obviously a cultural trope, the biological clock is discursively real and is placed prominently in America's social imagination. Women's declining fertility is so widely recognized as a constraint on women's life-planning that it offers writers a stock comedic device on virtually any television show featuring a professional woman vaguely in her twenties or thirties. *Friends*, a hugely successful comedy that aired on NBC from 1994 to 2005, centered on two twenty-something friends, Rachel and Monica living in New York City. In an episode called "The One Where Everyone Turns 30," Rachel, turning 30, is dejected, feeling that as a single woman without a child she is missing her chance at having a happy life:

> Monica: Rach, you're in a great place in your life. Come on, you've got a great job! Good friends…
>
> Rachel: ... Look, y'know I know my life's going pretty well, but I look around and I just see so many people who've accomplished so many other goals by the time they're thirty.

What goals does she mean? Later, Rachel is given a gag birthday card intended for grandmothers. After opening it, Rachel is reduced to tears at the unintentional reminder of her unfulfilled goals. "No, I know, because to be a grandmother you have to be married and have children and I don't have any of those things." After departing to her room to cry, Rachel returns with resolution:

> Rachel: Okay! Y'know what? I realized it was stupid to get upset about not having a husband and kids. All I really needed was a plan. See I wanna have three kids … I should probably have the first of the three kids by the time I'm 35 which gives me five years. … So, if I wanna have my kid when I'm 35, I don't have to get pregnant until I'm 34. Which gives Prada four years to start making maternity clothes! Oh wait, but I do want to be married for a year before I get pregnant… No, so I don't have to

> get married until I'm 33! That's three years, that's three whole years—Oh, wait a minute though. I'll need a year and a half to plan the wedding. And I'd like to know the guy for a year, year and a half before we get engaged… Which means I need to meet the guy by the time I'm thirty.
>
> Ross: Which is fine! Because you just turned—(*Removes two candles from the cake*)—twenty-eight!
>
> Rachel: No! Ross, no! It is not fine! Eh-eh-according to my plan I should already be with the guy I wanna marry!

The episode ultimately concludes with her ending a casual affair with a younger man, saying: "I just think I'm past the point where I think I can, y'know, *just have fun.*" Instead, Rachel's story reminds the viewer that if women want to marry and have children after 30, she needs to hustle before her time runs out. In order to start a family, she can no longer have fun. After all, at 30 and single, she's already several years behind schedule.

ANXIOUS ENOUGH?

Ominous as they are ubiquitous, titles such as Selvarantnam's *The Big Lie: Motherhood, Feminism and the Reality of the Biological Clock* (2013) warn professional women not to "wait too long" before having children or else risk infertility. Throughout the text, Selvarantnam castigates a straw woman who she sees as being misled by feminism to believe she can defer childbearing to focus her twenties and thirties on literally anything else. But are women being misled?

In my study, I found absolutely no evidence suggesting that single professional women are ignorant that their time to conceive children is limited. Women spoke candidly of having been exposed to years of media, literature and experts advancing the message that fertility should be the organizing concern of a thirty-something woman's sexuality. Shows like *Scrubs* and *Friends* taught them that they should be panicked at the prospect of turning 30 without a husband. Much of the world, it appears, is conspiring to remind them of their reproductive limitations—despite feminism.

On paper, Paige fits the picture of success as an executive at a billion-dollar company based in San Francisco. But at 34, she would be the first to tell you she did not plan to defer childbirth for the sake of building her career. Instead, she says she spent her twenties trying to marry and become a mother by age 30. “That’s about how long you can push it to be in the safe zone for being able to have kids,” says Paige. “That’s just the biological reality that everyone walks around knowing.” What got in the way? Paige said she never found herself a partner who wanted children and now worries that her advancing age is making it that much harder to find one.

> What’s especially sad is that it feels like I’m floating into deep space. Not only is it hard to find a partner, now there’s this unfair age thing which I can’t really control so I have to hope that somebody meets me and thinks I’m really rad and not willing to care about that.

While inarguably successful across a number of metrics, Paige worries that no man of her caliber who wants to father will desire a woman her age. Despite her long efforts to evade this fate, Paige worries that when she turns 35, she will be shut out of the dating pool completely.

THE REVERSE TIMELINE

While the biological clock is a cultural trope and the woman desperate to have children before her clock “runs out” is a stereotype, its power has a profound effect on women’s life-planning projects. Even if one’s personal fertility is as unique as one’s own body, the belief that women’s fertility ends at 35 motivates many women to ensure their childbearing is completed well in advance of its deadline. If the latent gender inequality of reproduction is inevitable, this chapter asks, How do women who want children then navigate their sexuality with reproductive constraints in mind?

The *reverse timeline* is the term I use to describe women’s patterned reconciliation to the constraints imposed by the biological clock in her life-planning. If women believe 35 is a definitive reproductive deadline beyond which they believe fertility becomes risky, middle-

class women I interview strategize their sexual biography so as to evade such risks. In order to have children, middle-class women expect first to be married, as Rachel does in the vignette above. They then draw up a plan for when they expect marry so as to complete their childbearing by age 35. While it sounds self-explanatory, when women explain the reverse timeline, they reveal how extensively the biological clock truly rules their life-planning.

Women typically worry that marrying after 30 would force them into a position of having to rush through important life decisions. Reckless decisions in love and fertility, many women know, can lead to serious—and permanent—life consequences. Many express a concern that their shrinking horizon of opportunity places them in a position where having children in the idealized context of marriage might mean having to commit to a partner before feeling truly confident in his capacity as a husband and father. Women say it would be safer to meet and begin dating the man they would marry well in advance of turning 30. Sophie, 27, tells me: "I always thought I'd get married in my early thirties. So 27? But I thought at least by 27 I would be in the relationship that I would know would lead to marriage. I didn't think I'd be single at 27." Thus, women often speak of 30 feeling as if it were a deadline for marrying. Molly, 25, tells me that she has four years left to marry:

> Something that can develop into the future, marriage, kids. I've been a nanny for so long. I see how families are and that is totally my end goal. I had a huge family growing up. All my friends are having babies. I'm not in a rush but I have to find someone to start dating so I can get married in four years. I'm not getting any younger.

Julie, 26, echoes this exact perspective: "I want to be married by the time I'm 30, so if I'm 26 that gives me four years to meet someone and you want to be engaged for a year."

The expectation that women should marry before 30 if they are to conceive responsibly before 35 generates anxiety for single women of this age. River, 28, tells me that she had planned her life expecting that 30 would be her deadline not only for marriage, but for everything. Though she holds a master's degree from an Ivy League university and is

pursuing a promising career in the heart of the tech industry, River fears turning 30 and feeling like a failure:

> So I'm 28. I just turned 28 in September. You feel like 30 is coming closer and closer … 30 feels like some kind of death knell. Like 30 is just supposed to be this deadline where you are supposed to have achieved everything that you are supposed to be … so every single minute that you are getting closer to 30 you start thinking about things that you haven't done, especially the things you thought you were going to achieve when you were fourteen or fifteen or whatever. Yeah, so that is where the ticking time is coming from.

Moreover, River fears that beyond 28, her desirability to the class of men she hopes to marry will plummet:

> When I think about marriage, I think about when I imagine myself to be the most attractive. And girls peak at mid-twenties … it feels like every single day I'm becoming less and less marketable and in terms of my chance of me finding someone great is ticking away. So this would be the last prime moment that I could have to be desirable or marketable to the opposite sex to get married. It is almost like if I don't do it now, if I wait until I'm thirty I'm probably not going to find someone great.

As River contemplates the next few years of her life, she regards them apprehensively.

There is so much cultural meaning invested in the idea of the reverse timeline that failing to find a life partner by 30 compromises one's view of oneself as a successful woman. Says Sophie at 27:

> [Marriage is] like this looming institution. I'm not going to lie, I definitely had thoughts where I walk to get coffee and I think to myself—should I be concerned? Everyone around me is either in a long-term relationship, engaged or soon-to-be married and I am completely and utterly single. Is something wrong with me?

In the minds of several twenty-something women whom I interviewed, to still be single after 30 would be to prove themselves failed women. River says this fairly explicitly when I ask how she would feel were she still unpartnered in 5 years time:

> At 33, I think my urgency would be through the roof. I would feel like I failed at some important part of life. … I would feel like maybe I think in some ways it goes back to self blame, the only reason why I'm not married or in a relationship is because of something that I am doing wrong. ... Did you not better yourself in some way? Did you go down the rabbit hole? I would probably have a lot of self-loathing.

When young women think about what their lives would be like should they find themselves still unmarried after 30, the outlook of many is fairly bleak. Bethany, 25, believes she would be deprived of a happy life:

> I'm not dating anyone seriously which doesn't at this point make me nervous but you know I think if I'm 29 and still in the same boat I'll start to feel nervous [that] I won't get to enjoy the things that make you happy on the personal side of things.

Fiona, 25, says that failing to marry by 30 would leave her feeling devastated. By 34, she feels she would have no choice but to settle or resign herself to being alone for the rest of her life:

> I'm going to be probably pretty devastated. … It might get to a point that I would feel that I just need to settle with someone who pretty much does most things for me. If I'm still single at 34, I'm really going to have to settle then. I do feel I would have to. I need to be with somebody. I can't be alone for the rest of my life. It is just not something I can do.

According to this testimony, many women who aspire to marry and have children anticipate major consequences escalating should they fail to follow the reverse timeline and marry before turning 30.

As I will explore in the following chapters, women will expend considerable energy trying to beat the reverse timeline. With subjective deadlines quickly approaching, women in their late twenties and early thirties say that their present sexual decision-making is informed by their concerns surrounding marital timing. Here, I describe briefly how women discipline their partnering strategy in the future perfect tense.

First, women say they are not simply choosing between attractive men to date, they are trying to choose attractive men who could also become their husbands. While this perspective seems like common sense and even prudent, it diverges from men's more cavalier attitude towards dating and choosing partners. Rather than avail themselves of all available partners who appear attractive and likely to provide pleasant company, women say they try to date only men who they expect to be good husbands and fathers—a strikingly narrower pool.

"In terms of my dating life," says Catelyn, 29, "I think I always think about what kind of dad someone would be when I'm dating them, that is definitely something on my radar. ... If I didn't think someone was going to be a good dad that is someone I wouldn't want to be in a relationship with." Towards this end, women disciplined and narrowed their partnering desires far more severely than their male peers who expressed casual ambivalence regarding their dating outcomes.

When talking about their dating criteria, women reveal that they feel unable to date casually in their late twenties like men. The cold calculus demanded by the reverse timeline affords little time for caprice. At 27, Laura says dating anyone whom she does not feel she could eventually marry feels "like a waste of time." She adds, "Not to say that I would know in 6 months [of dating] that I would marry somebody but I feel like because I am older now—math starts to come into it." Echoes Daphine, 29:

> I get really scared of wasting my time. Which is one of those phrases that you read about women saying and I'm like embarrassed to be one of the women saying them, but that is how I feel. I don't want to waste my time, you know, dating someone for 2 or 3 years and end up being in my mid-thirties and single.

Having such a limited window for partnering, women in their twenties often describe their past relationships that did not result in marriage as misspent time: "[My last relationship] started to feel like a long-term potential, marriage—that was a possibility—so to start at square one was a lot of pressure," Elizabeth, 26, explains. "I lost time."

Regardless of when or if these women actually marry, most who want to have children say they had expected to marry by age 30. Women adopt the logic of the reverse timeline in a determined effort to avoid the gendered risks associated with delaying marriage and childbearing into their thirties. With their strategy laid bare, women express concern that prolonged singlehood will render them increasingly less marriageable in the eyes of eligible men, affording them fewer opportunities to marry and jeopardizing their chances of marital childbearing. While in the previous chapter I document men's beliefs that marital delay is

personally beneficial, I find very little evidence that would-be wives and mothers in their late twenties and thirties share the sentiment.

MISSING THE REVERSE DEADLINE

For unpartnered women over the age of 30, missing the deadlines imposed by the reverse timeline brings unwelcome feelings and self-criticism. Though most women over 30 make peace with still being single in a way younger women find hard to imagine, they nevertheless experience high levels of insecurity, anxiety and self-doubt regarding their unpartnered status in the context of their thirties. Here, Paige, at 34, elucidates the emotional suffering involuntary singlehood engenders in her life:

> Holly: If I were to interview you 5 years from now, how would you feel if you were still single?
>
> Paige: … It feels like death. It feels like a death sentence. I'm doing this meditation on loneliness which I started doing—it's like—it's like a podcast and they do these different meditations and they have one that just popped up on loneliness. And I said perhaps I should do this one. And exploring why is that just so terrible. Why is that awful for me? I just don't like it.
>
> Holly: But you seem to have a lot of intimate friendships...
>
> Paige: It's not the same. You have friends who are like, "we should do something this week." It's not the same. It's not like going through life with somebody. It's just lonely. Nobody to really know you. It's like not being known.

When I asked Paige to expound more about these feelings of loneliness, she told me about a recurrent dream that analogizes to her feelings profoundly:

> You might like my rocky planet dream. This is a sad dream. ... I probably had it 5 times which is a lot to have a dream over and over again. … I'm sitting there in outer space on orange dirt and rock. And I'm sitting there by myself with my little space helmet on, just listening to my breath. ... Just sitting there on my planet and I'm all by myself and I'm looking out into black space with distant stars and I can remember waterfalls and people laughing and sprinklers and lush forests [but] all I have is this rocky planet. … Now I've been floating for a while. I'm 34 and I'm going to be floating into deeper and deeper space because there are these odds against me. I'm slowly less and less likely to ever find a planet. That's how it feels, how the loneliness feels. The fear of being 39, I'll have been floating in outer space for how many years [by then] and my chances are going down of ever finding another planet. How's that for depressing?

Paige's vivid account captures a concern many women in this study share: as peers partner, women without partners will become isolated in an adult world oriented around couples and families. For many single women in their mid-thirties, the pain of this isolation is sadly already well known.

Like Paige, these women describe having to discipline themselves and work at not feeling dysfunctional or flawed for not meeting the deadlines of the reverse timeline. Paige mentions during her interview that she practices meditation and cognitive behavioral therapy to calm the anxiety she associates with loneliness. Zoe, 33, is finishing a doctorate degree, but says she looks at her peers' marriages and finds herself wanting:

> I'm a failure in most any domain where I don't feel like I'm where I should be … I certainly think as I got in my late 20s and as so many of my younger friends got married, it was kind of like, wow, what is wrong with me? So I do think it is something I think about a lot.

Zoe describes having to talk herself down from these feelings, reminding herself of all that she has achieved so as not to succumb to a sense of failure. This talk of emotional suffering speaks to women's experience of singlehood as *feeling* starkly different than the nonchalance described by their male peers in the previous chapter.

But rather than allow themselves to become consumed by grief, women begin disinvesting in the reverse timeline by embracing a new identity other than that of a future wife. Specifically, it appears that once women pass 30, they grow more accepting of the reality that marriage may not happen in time for them to achieve the normative triptych of career, marriage and family. While women still hope to meet, partner, and marry men during their thirties, they begin to reconcile themselves to revised lifeplans. Consider Maggie, 33, who describes herself as actively dating in search of a partner with whom to start a family and have children. When I ask if she would consider having children within the next ten years should she find herself still partnerless, she flatly refuses the prospect of elective single

motherhood. “Having a partner is so important. I don’t want to do it by myself.” Conversely, women like Catelyn, 29, have already begun to set in motion their backup plans:

> I really want to be a mom, that is a really important life goal and unlike finding a life partner, being a mom is something I do have control over. So talking to my gay friend he will be a sperm donor for me someday if it came to that. So, okay, if I'm 34 and I don’t have a partner, I'm really starting to think seriously about being a single mom because that is really important to me.

Like Catelyn, those who are steadfast in their desire to have children must now begin to strategize the process by which they will become mothers should they find themselves unpartnered at 35, the end of the reverse timeline.

At 35, Lea is the oldest woman I interviewed and is considering artificial insemination as a way of starting her own family without a partner. Here, she speaks of her feelings of alienation becoming more intense over time as she felt herself increasingly alone as her friends partnered:

> So I feel somewhat at a loss in being single than I felt in my twenties. It’s a very different world. And it’s a different world than dating now than in my twenties. Because I’m 35 now. So singlehood is much more intimidating. I think when you’re amongst your peers and you’re amongst a larger population you kinda feel fine being single. It’s much more freeing, it’s much less isolating than when the pool is getting smaller and smaller. Suddenly it makes you look at yourself in a way you didn’t before. That part is not necessarily I think healthy.

For Lea, becoming comfortable with the idea of starting a family on her own required a complete revaluation of marriage and family:

> Holly: How important is eventually getting married to you?
>
> Lea: It’s so not as in the forefront to me now. It’s not so much about marriage as having a kid. [Having a kid] is to me more important now. That has shifted. I don’t necessarily need to get married before I have a kid. I would rather have a child and get married later. Whatever it is, getting married is not in the forefront as it used to be.
>
> Holly: When did that shift happen?
>
> Lea: It was like a ticking clock. But the shift happened after a partner and I broke up. One of my major fears then was: “When we split up, how am I going to meet someone later in life?” [Because the way I saw it then] all of a sudden my window is getting smaller and smaller. But it became clear that it’s not necessarily about the

> partnership—that's a societal thing—it didn't matter to me. I just want the family. That's more important sooner than later. That was probably when it shifted.

Lea says that, like her, single women in their thirties must adopt wholly new expectations for family formation and draw up new terms of success qualitatively different from those with which they were raised. Here, she explains the confidence she has developed since embracing her new project of becoming a single mother:

> It's funny because [getting artificially inseminated] throws this normal track of meeting someone totally off whack and throws you into a whole other pool of how people perceive you and how you perceive yourself. It's like this unknown territory and you can feel like a victim. Like, "Why me? Why is this happening to me?" Whatever. You have to get past that and it's liberating. Whatever. Who the fuck cares? Now, this is where you're at: you can either choose to figure out the reasons why you're still single, or you can try to figure out if you want to have a family, go ahead and do it.

While Lea at 35 has since disallowed herself from feeling flawed or unworthy for being partnerless, however, even she will admit that this new resolve did not come easy. She describes having to first overcome considerable trepidation to embark on a new identity and lifeplan divergent from that pursued by most of her college-educated peers.

Closing out the reverse timeline unpartnered involves the often unspoken but nevertheless emotionally painful work of deprogramming one's self of conventional expectations. For women who expected to become first wives and then mothers years before turning 35, not becoming those means becoming someone else. Women in this position have to reassess their self-understanding and as they do this, they begin to entertain new lifeplans that they would not have considered earlier, when they felt themselves having still more time to find a partner on schedule. What this process entails, how it feels and where it takes women in their thirties and beyond is an explosive process of lifestyle reorientation and emotional retooling. However, I believe given the small size of my sample and the limits of my design, only future research can fully explicate the effects of this disruptive transition on the self-consciousness of single women as they transition into their late thirties and forties.

MEN FROM WOMEN'S STANDPOINT

Like men, women perceive major gender differences in how college-educated professionals organize their life-planning projects. At the most essential level, women know that their male peers recognize no parallel biological constraint to childbearing. Lacking this condition on their life-planning strategy, women assume that men experience far less social pressure and anxiety surrounding marital timing and family-planning. At the societal level, women recognize that men do not face down a double standard for aging and do not feel, as women do, that their sexual opportunities diminish as they age.

Women accurately believe that with this more open horizon, men enjoy a more casual perspective towards partnership and marriage:

> I think women seriously feel their clocks ticking and are like, "Oh my god, babies." They're like on a hunt to get it done sooner. Guys are just like, "Whatever. I want to play the field." They're guys. (Sophie, 27)

> Guys, they don't have a biological clock. I feel like guys have way more options. They can date younger women, older women, no one says anything. They can wait until they are forty to have a kid and it's cool. With us it's like "Oh my god, I'm not married and I'm 30 or I'm 35 and I haven't had a baby!" (Lacey, 26)

> They're like, "I want to use my twenties to have fun," "It's okay if I'm however-old and don't have a partner," [or] "Yeah, I want a baby but not till I'm 40." Most women are not hoping for a baby at 40 so there is not quite that internal pressure or societal pressure to quote unquote settle down. To be committing to someone. (Catelyn, 29)

Furthermore, women believe that society treats single men in their twenties and thirties differently than it does single women:

> It doesn't make any sense but I think it's more acceptable for a man to be single than it is for women. [Women] have until 35 or 40 and they have to pop out a kid if they want to and that's women's role to make and take care of babies. So I think I feel like there's more pressure on women in society to be in a relationship. (Emma, 29)

> People perceive a single guy at 33, "Oh, he is focused on his career, whatever, at some point he will settle down" and a woman they think "Oh, you know, I'm sorry that she hasn't gotten married." (Zoe, 33)

Compared to themselves, women believe men are afforded greater latitude with which to explore their sexuality, experiment with alternative lifestyles and securitize a career before they begin to feel normative pressure to partner and marry. This affords men mental and emotional ease in their twenties that many women do not share.

A handful of women mused that men's commitment to the gendered breadwinning role in marriage causes them to rationalize marrying later and marrying younger partners. Alayne, 30, a law student, reflects on how she believes that subscribing to traditional role expectations affects partnering strategy in the lifecourse:

> I do think we still have social norms that prescribe how we approach things. My guess about that is that it's more of a male thing to not want to get married until you know that you can provide for a partner. And there's a lot of masculinity tied to being able to be the head of a household, being able to take care of yourself and your wife. … I think that is something that pushes that back in a different way than it does for women. He might be saying, "Yes, I want to be able to support myself and my family," … I think [women are] more open to the idea of, "Ok, we're on our way there. Let's grow to it together."

Here, she specifically references a sociological study herself, *The Unfinished Revolution* by Kathleen Gerson (2009), to explain why she believes men approach marriage differently than do women:

> There are really interesting studies even among our generation where guys say they like the idea of a partner who is a wage-earner. If given the option would you stay home or would you want your spouse to stay home? They would almost always want their spouse to stay home and for them to be the breadwinner. I think, you know, they still have these really traditional expectations of what a relationship looks like and what a marriage looks like.

As Alayne observes, men's underlying commitment to breadwinning in marriage runs counter to the interdependence that she and many other women I interviewed desire in marriage. As I will explore further with Alayne in the next chapter, she says she would greatly prefer to marry a man her own age at a similar stage of career development. She does not particularly relish the prospect of partnering with an older man, who she recognizes might be more successful than she but, also, she assumes, less flexible with regard to

accommodating her emerging career. In this way, corroborating Gerson (2009), I find many college-educated women discomfited by their male peers' presumption of future breadwinning and express worry that it will frustrate their efforts of achieving gender parity in their relationships.

Citing these dissimilar expectations for partnering and life-planning, women perceive emotional distance separating them from their male peers at this stage in the lifecourse. From their perspective, they see men their own age pursuing goals and lifestyles they view as foreign:

> Men they don't even cope with [singlehood], they celebrate it. What they want right now is not what women want. … They probably enjoy being single more than women. (Marissa, 25)

Compared to women, men are afforded more degrees of freedom in executing their lifeplan and thus women expect men to experience less anxiety, less inner turmoil and less insecurity than they do during the same years of the lifecourse. The consequence of this mismatch for heterosexual partnering I explore more fully in the following chapter.

CONCLUSION

In comparing the life-planning projects of college graduates, I learn of gendered expectations towards marital timing. Whereas men feel their time to partner and father as virtually boundless, women perceive their opportunity for marriage and family narrowed by fears of infertility and diminishing attractiveness. In this way, college-educated women describe their life-planning strategy as being heavily determined by gendered deadlines.

In stark contrast to their single male counterparts, I find little ambivalence among single women as to when they should marry. Instead, college-educated women largely shared similar timeframes for when they believed it best to marry—before turning 30—so as to responsibly conceive their children well in advance of their turning 35. From their standpoint,

the reverse timeline affords little room for delay—single women who plan for marital childbearing expect to meet their children's father ideally no later than their late twenties.

What is perhaps most interesting for feminist scholars to consider is how women's attitudes towards singlehood and family formation change across their twenties and thirties. In a heterosexist culture where *both* the single mother and the childless woman are ostracized and devalued next to the married mother, many girls and women who aspire to good womanhood predictably plan lives around the expectation of marital childbearing. As I will show in later chapters, single women will expend considerable effort trying to partner according to the reverse timeline. But as women advance past the age they had expected to marry despite these efforts, some single thirty-something women begin reevaluating their beliefs as to what constitutes good womanhood. Several begin pursuing alternative pathways for starting families, either alone through artificial insemination or with platonic friends. As women who were once firmly committed to marital childbearing begin to prepare for life outside the context of marriage, this moment of personal transition presents for feminist researchers an excellent opportunity to better understand the emotionally complex process of unraveling from years of gender socialization to affirm new identities outside the roles of mother and wife.

CHAPTER 5: THE MATURITY GAP

Actress Zooey Deschanel stars as Jess Day, a school teacher living in Los Angeles in a long-running Fox network sitcom called *The New Girl*. The pilot episode opens on a 30-year-old Jess walking in to find her live-in boyfriend cheating on her, catalyzing a breakup and her relocation to a new apartment with three single thirty-something men to become the titular new girl. The show's plot centers on Jess's experiences dating as a single woman as she transitions into her thirties.

In one episode, Jess hesitantly agrees to go on a date with the father of one of her students. Her hesitation? He is 12 years older than she is and considerably wealthier. Here, she tells her best friend Cece about her hesitation to date 42-year-old Russell:

> Jess: I would never go for that guy. […] Because he's the type of guy who has a linen closet and a towel warmer. You know me. I'm only attracted to guys who are afraid of success and think someone famous stole their idea. I like an underdog.
>
> Cece: Spencer didn't even own sheets.
>
> Jess: Yeah, he slept on a pile of washcloths.
>
> Cece: Can I say something you're not gonna like? [...] Maybe Russell intimidates you because you wouldn't take care of him. He'd take care of you and that just terrifies you.

What towel warmers and linen closets signify to Jess is not made apparent in the episode, but Jess is nevertheless shown intimidated when visiting Russell's large, well-furnished house. Jess makes several anxious jokes that demonstrate her awareness of the class and status distance between her and Russell. But her friends encourage her to disregard these feelings and date him despite her reservations.

In the same episode, one of Jess's roommates, Nick, a thirty-something law school graduate underemployed as a bartender is shown in dialogue with his friend, Dirk. Here, Dirk explains why he, a college professor, prefers dating women ten years younger than he is:

> Dirk: Girls our age, what do they want? They want us to wed them. Sire their children. They want you to have a bed frame. They want you to eat off plates. Girls in college all they want you to do is tell them that their photography has potential.
>
> Nick: Don't they hang out with guys their own age?
>
> Dirk: Hung with a 20-year-old dude lately? Trust me, they are setting the bar very, very low.

Nick is later shown kissing an undergraduate woman, shouting "Twenty-year-old girls, they think I'm awesome!" Meanwhile, Jess, returning from an awkward date with 42-year-old Russell, announces bitterly to Nick that being 30 sucks, that her heart hurts and that she will die alone before crushing the undergraduate's plastic cup on his forehead.

Despite their comparatively similar positions, Jess and Nick receive wildly dissimilar dating advice from their friends. Jess is encouraged to resign herself to the status inequality between herself and an older man because men her own age, who include her roommates and a visiting college professor, seemingly struggle with adult partnership. Meanwhile, Nick is encouraged by said college professor to capitalize sexually on the status inequalities between him and an undergraduate. A critical viewer asks: what messages does this vignette send about the sexual politics of gender, age, relationships and maturity?

PROBLEMATIZING THE CONCEPT OF SEXUAL MATURITY

Adulthood as a social construction is interestingly contested within lifecourse scholarship. In the standard conceptualization of adulthood employed by social researchers through the 20th century, young people attained adult status by marrying, parenting, achieving financial independence, and professional achievement (Modell 1989). For most of the past century, these models assumed men typically met these markers by their mid-twenties. (Women were exempted from lifecourse modelling because of historical sexism.)

However, fewer people appear either willing or able to marry by their mid-twenties today (Hymowitz et al. 2013). Among scholars, there is a theoretical contest to offer persuasive social, sexual, economic and psychological explanations for why college-educated adults seemingly fail to marry on their parents' timetable. On one hand, some scholars argue that young people defer marriage in part because they are in pursuit of a new, in-between identity that can neither be defined as teen or adult. This is the "emerging adulthood" thesis of psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2004), the most popular theory adopted in the literature to explain marital delay. Others counter this explanation, arguing that social and economic changes in society complicate the transition between adolescence and adulthood, making it harder for a greater number of young people to meet normative, middle-class expectations for marriage and family formation by one's early twenties (e.g. Silva 2013). Still others posit that young people may be rejecting traditional expectations for marriage and family altogether in favor of new, autonomous lifestyles (e.g. Blatterer 2007; DePaulo 2006). Why college-educated young people today marry later is therefore an empirical question with many competing answers.

Yet, often trivialized or even missing from this debate regarding explanations for marital timing—a negotiated outcome between two consenting adults—is the confounding sexual dilemma of gender inequality. Psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982) argues that by modeling the lifecourse of men, lifestage theories tend to occlude and thereby depoliticize gender conflict through the lifecourse. Theoretically, straight women who desire marriage sooner than their male peers would struggle to marry according to their timing preference if straight men desire later marriage. This possibility of life-planning incongruence is raised in several studies that show women in heterosexual couples wanting to marry sooner than their partners but waiting, often for years, for their male partners to propose rather than either proposing themselves or seeking out a different partner (Lamont 2013; Sassler and Miller

2011). Though these couples may ultimately share the same marriage, they tacitly agree to marry on men's scheduling preferences. Although Arnett (2004) recognizes there to be gendered differences in marital timing preferences among his twenty-something respondents, this divergence he frames as an individual concern to be resolved privately. However, as marriage is an outcome negotiated between two people, these differences in expectation pose a gendered dilemma men and women may be unequally able to resolve in partnering practice.

As I have illuminated in the previous chapter, women's reverse timeline and its attendant constraints very much condition their life-planning expectations. Most single women say they are not intentionally delaying commitment or marriage. Just the opposite, most say that being single in their late twenties and thirties has them feeling behind in achieving their life-planning goals. In contrast, as shown in Chapter 3, men do describe themselves as fairly indifferent with respect to when they marry in the lifecourse. Facing unequal constraints for family formation, men and women who desire marriage and family nevertheless plan to partner in life very differently.

However, when asked to explain why they believe each gender approaches marital timing so differently in life, both men and women subscribe to a neurosexist myth of gendered maturity. Because girls reach and complete pubescence earlier in their teenage years than do boys, adults of both genders believe this maturity gap reaches beyond adolescence. Men's relative immaturity is thought to explain their greater hesitancy to take on adult responsibility and commit to partners through their twenties and into their thirties. Neuroscience continually debunks the myth of gendered brains, especially for adults who typically complete cognitive development by age of 25 (see Fine 2010 for review). However, this explanation that men and women somehow continue to mature at different rates through their twenties and thirties is often used to rationalize and reproduce age asymmetry in sexual

selection as common sense. Thus, this chapter critically examines the concept of gendered maturity and its role in reproducing and masking gender inequality in partnering practice.

AGE BUT A NUMBER?

Age offers an interesting metric around which adults wrap considerable social and sexual meaning. One unique requirement of virtually all online dating services is that users bracket their search parameters by age. Not only must online daters make their own age public, but they must also further specify the age range of other users with whom they would welcome connection. In practice, it takes only a second to tell Okcupid.com that you, as a 30-year-old user, want to see only the dating profiles of other users between the ages of 27 and 37. Because of this, most online daters have to ask themselves in the process of creating an online dating profile: How old is too old for me? How young is too young?

While perhaps all single adults have to reflect on age as a factor in their sexual decision-making, online dating literally requires it. Because the majority of my respondents have used or are using online dating, many respondents have in this way been primed to consider the relationship between age, dating and sexual desirability. Asking respondents to reflect on the meaning of their specified age range, then, reveals considerable insight into the sexual politics surrounding gender, age and, as I will show, the concept of maturity.

In my interview design, I pursued three avenues of inquiry that I thought would generate thick discourse on the subject of age and its relation to gender. First, I asked respondents to tell me the age bracket they felt comfortable dating within and then to explain to me the rationale for the construction of this range. For the majority of respondents familiar with online dating, many knew which range they used to browse dating profiles online. Secondly, I asked both men and women why they think women are so often given the advice in the media and by family and friends to date older men. Lastly, as noted in previous chapters, I asked respondents to reflect on why they think men statistically marry slightly

later in life than do women. From these answers, I identified themes that suggest gendered stereotypes surrounding age and maturity informing sexual strategy and selection for both men and women. These answers intimate gender conflict between men and women being resolved by strategic age discrimination on both sides.

WOMEN: BETWEEN IMMATURITY AND INEQUALITY

Most women say they would prefer to date a man their own age, neither much younger nor older than themselves. Women often idealize an arrangement where they will partner with a man their own age with whom they can develop their identities, careers and lifestyles simultaneously as a status-equal couple—a model of concerted, mutual growth. But as men readily admit in Chapter 3, many during their twenties do not feel it appropriate for them yet to take on the responsibilities they associate with adulthood, specifically commitment to others. Both men and women believe that this demonstrates men's relative immaturity. Women say this poses for them a dilemma while dating. If they are to partner in their twenties, women feel that they must choose between two suboptimum outcomes: seek emotional parity with older men while navigating age, status and professional inequality or seek status equality with peers while navigating emotional and life-planning incongruity.

Though college-educated men expect to partner with younger women, many college-educated women enumerate reasons why they hesitate to date older men. First, many believe that dating an older man means jettisoning their ideal of building a life in tandem with a partner their own age. Older men are imagined as having already built their own lives and as likely to be less flexible in accommodating change. Relatedly, women in my study expressed concerns that older men would be professionally more established, accomplished and wealthier than they and that this status asymmetry could easily translate into power inequality within the relationship. "I know there's all this weird power stuff around older men and younger women," says Lilly, 25, of her reluctance to date older men. "Men already have

more power in our society—especially older men." Women thus fear that dating an older man could create relational conflict that they, being lower status by virtue of age, income and gender, would be expected to accommodate.

On the other hand, women see men their own age as reluctant to partner. At 25, Kathy in Boston says she hopes to soon marry. She has little interest in casual dating and no interest in casual sex. But Kathy says she is wary of dating 25-year-old men who she believes are unlikely to share her relationship and life-planning goals: "I think they would be worried about being rushed into commitment," she says. "It is in their best interest to be with as many people as possible." Alayne, a 30-year-old law student, agrees with Kathy. While Alayne says that while she would agree to date men as old as 35 without hesitation, she hesitates to date men five years younger, or Kathy's age. "A 25-year-old guy is still kind of young and figuring things out in my book," she says. "Given that I'm really finally acknowledging to myself that I'm interested in pursuing a long-term serious thing, it's less likely that that's going to happen with somebody around 25."

In this way, women describe themselves as caught in a bind. Virtually no women believed they could partner with men younger than themselves, who they assumed would be not only disinterested in commitment but especially disinterested in dating an older woman. But choosing between older men and men their own age means navigating serious tradeoffs. How women negotiate these tradeoffs, I examine below.

Avoiding Immaturity

Women's desire for age equality in their relationships is tempered by the presumption that their male peers are unlikely to share in their life-planning timeframe. Daphine, 29, says she searches for men between the ages of 28 and 37 when logged into OkCupid, a free online dating site. She says that she would not be much interested in meeting men even two years year junior. "Men are just ready for things later in life and I think they mature a little slower.

And so the chances of meeting a 27-year-old who is interested in getting serious is just probably not very high," she explains. "Being ready for a serious relationship or a relationship that's going to lead to marriage? I think it comes later for men than it does for women, usually."

When women say they are selecting men on the basis of their "emotional maturity," what they express is their desire to date men who both *can* be and *want* to be good partners and husbands and parents at this stage in their lives. Many women look to their own male friends and question their readiness for partnership. Marissa, 25, agrees with Kathy and Alayne and says her male friends would make for poor boyfriends:

> Men feel entitled to sow their oats so they are foolish sometimes because they feel it is their right as a 20-something man to be just like sleeping with whoever they want to and not be tied down. … Guys I know my age are not in a position to be a good boyfriend and that's their fault. They could grow up. But I don't think that they are inherently bad. It is just the circumstances in their lives right now are not conducive to being a good boyfriend and I think they can grow and change and be excellent boyfriends but not right now.

Brie, 28, tells me that based on her past experiences, she no longer finds herself willing to tolerate immaturity in her relationships with men. For this reason, she is unwilling to date men younger than herself:

> I find that I've always been fairly mature for my age and I've always dated up. I tried to date younger—it's just they want to go out and get shitfaced all the time. They don't want responsibilities or to be tied down. Sure, you have all this stamina, but do you even know what you're doing? I don't have time for that! I'm done training. I think that's the deal. I want one who comes pre-trained.

Here, Paige, 34, explains that assessing men's maturity is of the utmost important to her:

> I think that women are more mature than men. We grow up faster. I often feel older than my male peers. I think a woman is able to have a healthy relationship before a guy is. Able to have the difficult conversations. Wanting to settle down. More empathetic. More connected to the person opposite of them. Whereas, I think men are more self-centered when they're immature.

Discerning maturity is important for women who do not feel themselves to have either the time, desire or emotional bandwidth to date men whose lifestyles still center on themselves.

Avoiding Inequality

Subjects of both genders describe their twenties as an unsettled time where college graduates anticipate having to change careers, relationships, locations and even life trajectories altogether as they work to establish themselves. Cognizant that they are also developing, changing and learning in their twenties, when women spoke of what they wanted from a relationship, they often said they would greatly prefer a companionate partner to grow and adapt *alongside* and *with* them so that they can offer each other mutual support. Moreover, women further insisted that they could not share men's privilege of waiting until life's muddy waters settle before committing to another because their deadlines for partnering and reproduction are inflexible. Paradoxically, waiting until circumstances are ideal for family formation is not an ideal option for aspirant women.

Because most single women want to partner sooner rather than later, they acknowledge that directing their dating efforts towards finding older men may be a more expedient, rational use of limited time. However, women accept this conventional wisdom reluctantly, explaining that they are nevertheless conscious of the tradeoffs they would have to make partnering with older men. Of dating men five years her senior, Chloe, 27, a lawyer based in San Francisco balks, "What can we possibly have in common? I think of myself at 22 and I barely have anything in common with me at 27." Some women even highlighted early widowhood as a tradeoff associated with dating older men. Zoe, 30, for example, says, "I think for myself in terms of marrying someone so much older that men die earlier so if we have kids how old is he going to be when we have the kids?" Clara, 25, says, "My mom is dating someone 15 years older and that is just stupid. You're going to be a widow! Why would you want that?"

As Kathleen Gerson (2009) observes in her study of young people's marital expectations, the women I interviewed want to achieve equality in their relationships. "I want

two drivers—not one driving the car and me in the passenger seat," says Gabriella, 27. "Not him deciding on things but us coming together, to be on an equal plane." For this reason, women emphasize that their ideal partner is a man their own age who they feel is going through similar life experiences. Alayne, 30, finishing law school, says she is trying to find a professional partner like herself but who is not yet so established that he is inflexible:

> I like the idea of somebody who is in my age range. … [I]n the place that I'm in right now, I need to have a fair amount of flexibility in my life moving forward. Not knowing where I'll end up getting a job, I have this idea that somebody in that age range [between 30 and 35] is early enough in whatever career that they have that they are still willing to have some flexibility if they needed to but is also at a point where they have a career.

While women worry that men their own age may not be ready to commit, committing to older, more established men risks lifestyle incongruity from the start.

Many recognized that age asymmetry in relationships generates problems that in heterosexual relationships are normatively resolved and accommodated by younger women's adaptation. Reflecting thoughtfully on her parents' marriage, Aileen, 26, says she fears that dating an older man would mean risking the emotional, social and sexual inequality that she recognized between her parents:

> My dad is 13 years older than my mom and I feel that had an effect on the things they decided to do. My mom—she can go out and do things, but she doesn't because he's done. I don't like that. I want to be with someone who is closer to age with me because we see life in similar ways when you're in the same age bracket. With someone ten years older, they've already been there, done that. And sometimes that can come off as a bit condescending.

Other women struggled to believe that a partner older than themselves would see them as an equal. Says Jane, 25, on the prospect of hypothetically dating a man in his thirties:

> I would not feel comfortable. I would be scared that I would be a little girl in the relationship. I would worry that there is little room in that for an equal relationship. If I felt we were equal what does that mean about his maturity level? For me there is no way I could date someone much older than me and feel like we are equal because of the places we are in our respective lives. … It wouldn't feel equal.

Bianca, 27, says similarly:

> Bianca: It does feel kind of weird. Then it feels like I'm dating my dad. Also I'd worry how I would relate to him. Especially in terms of life stage. We would be in very different life stages.
>
> Holly: Why is that a concern?
>
> Bianca: Because I think I'm worried about it not being equal. I don't want to be treated or seen as naive. Or for that relationship to be a mentor/mentee relationship where if I'm still going through and figuring out and trying to decide how I want to live my life and he feels like he already knows how to live life. In that way, I would be seen as a naive girl who is still trying to figure it out.

Women thus anticipate that their chances of experiencing condescension and marginalization are higher dating older men than they would be if they were dating their peers.

But just as they expect themselves to become more professionally established and financially secure as they move into their thirties, college-educated women in their twenties imagine older men as being more established and secure than themselves at present. From women's standpoint, age asymmetry therefore challenges their ideal of shared growth and interdependence. Professional distance between partners strikes many women embarking on their career paths as a breach difficult to close.

Kathy, 25, describes herself as only just beginning her career as a children's therapist in Boston. Though she wants to marry soon and fears men her own age too immature to date, she nevertheless worries that having to date older men is going to be emotionally challenging for her. "Going back to that empathy thing that I value, [older men] wouldn't be able to reflect on where I am because they are so past that." Lilly, 25, is presently working as a waitress in Boston while she searches for a professional position. She says she would feel uncomfortable dating an older man she presumes would be more established in his career trajectory. "It's nice to be able to relate to somebody who is going through a similar stage of life as you are and is familiar—who know what it's like." Women imagined that partners too dissimilar in age would struggle to communicate and would enjoy less intimacy than couples more similar in age.

The concept of maturity for women is inextricably bundled with concerns about relational equality, emotional security, and intimacy. But men's gendered life-planning poses a dating dilemma for women. While dating older men promises a pool of men more likely to share their family-planning priorities, it also poses a series of tradeoffs between emotional maturity and status inequality. Thus, while their male peers take it for granted that they will date twenty-something women when they are in their thirties, twenty-something women themselves express serious reservations about this presumed arrangement but see few alternatives.

MEN: A STATIC WINDOW

Men of all ages in this sample commonly drew a similar range of ages of women with whom they would ideally like to partner: 22 to 30. Allowing for some exceptions, the logic men used to rationalize their partnering preferences was linked to two age-related concerns. First, men believe women become more aggressive in their pursuit of a husband and family as they approach 30 and still more as they approach 35. For this reason, most men who described themselves as presently ambivalent about commitment admit to discriminating against single women in their thirties when partnering. Secondly and relatedly, men often presumed that women their own age are more mature than they. Men expect that women have little patience for immaturity and this would invite conflict into their relationships. For these reasons, men believed they were better suited to partner with women younger than themselves who they believe would be less motivated by commitment and marriage.

Avoiding Constraint

In their discourse surrounding women's age, men anticipate their female peers' reverse timeline. Often referencing the experiences and anecdotes of their sisters, past girlfriends or female friends, men commonly sympathize with the anxiety and pressure they imagine their female peers to be facing while dating. "If you're a girl and you're 25, here's

good news! You still have a lot of options at your table. If you're 27, you have to think about it a little harder. When you're 30, you get whispers," says Ray, 30. Alejandro, 25, tells me that he anticipates that his opportunity to partner will increase as he moves into his thirties and becomes more successful. For women his age, he anticipates precisely the opposite:

> As a man, if I'm sitting here and my girlfriend and I are both 30, and I chose to end this relationship, she's going to be in a tough place and my options don't get worse. I'm probably making more money than I was when we started dating and I'm probably better-looking. All of these things that make you more desirable as a man over a period of time make you less desirable as a woman.

While many offered sympathy for women's position, they nevertheless admit to often discriminating against women on the tail end of the reverse timeline. Few wish to curtail their own horizon of opportunity by partnering with women limited by such constraints.

While most men I interviewed expect to become fathers, they do not imagine their fertility to be as limited as women's. Seeing their life-planning as open-ended, single men can literally romanticize possibility. From men's perspective, committing to a woman whose life-planning is inflexible and admittedly coordinated by deadlines means losing degrees of freedom. Because partnering with women in their thirties would mean voluntarily conceding such privilege, many men admit that these women are thus unattractive as partners.

For example, Byron, 28, expresses his preferences for dating women between the ages of 22 to 32. At face value, Byron's age preferences portend an open mind towards dating older women. But he qualifies his upper bound by then telling me that he is unlikely to partner women who expect to soon marry and have children:

> Part of it is hedonistic. I realize when you are married, the stuff that you do changes and right now I really enjoy the life that I live. I love going out and partying in the city and traveling to exotic places and that is the type of stuff you can't do when you have kids … I want to keep living the life I'm living for at least a few more years.

Thus, while Byron is willing to date older women, he does not foresee himself partnering with them—a critical distinction.

Similarly, Dirk, 28, thinks that by women his own age are already too preoccupied with starting a family. Having reservations about commitment, he worries that falling in love with an older woman, one closer to 35, would create a great deal of interpersonal conflict for him, forcing him to make life changes sooner than he would prefer. Though Dirk considers there to be positive benefits to dating older women, he ultimately agrees with Byron that partnering with an older woman would mean adopting an older woman's family-planning constraints as his own. Dirk says he would not find being in this position appealing:

> She's probably going to want to turn 29-year-old you into 35-year-old you really fast. That would be my guess. Personally, if like I was going to be dating an older woman, I imagine her wants and needs would be a lot different than a 28-year-old woman. She'd probably want kids more, if she didn't have them. I don't know, to be honest. There's probably a plus side to it, too. If she's 35 and has been working that whole time, she's probably advanced some in her career and she's approaching life with a mature eye. But at the same time, I would be wary of the 35-year-old baby-crazy because that's a whole different flavor than the 28-year-old baby-crazy.

While men understand women's constrained position, avoiding becoming attached to constrained women struck men as common sense.

Avoiding Maturity

Young men commonly recognize themselves as fitting stereotype of being commitment-phobic (see Illouz 2012). But they also suggest another explanation for why they are single: immaturity. Many men at the time of the interview described themselves not ready to meet the expectations they believe mature women have for partnership. For example, Xavier, 27, says he would be interested in dating women between the ages of 23 and 35. However, in the same breath, like Byron, he calls himself a "young 27" and predicts relationship failure if he were to try to partner with someone older:

> I don't really buy into that cultural standard that younger women are the ideal and after 30 there is something wrong with a woman. That is bullshit. I wouldn't have a problem dating an older women but I think I'm a pretty young 27. It's not like I'm opposed to it but it just doesn't work out.

When I asked Walter, 32, what age range he said he would consider dating, he considered himself to have no limits. However, in practice, he says that he has only ever dated younger women. He says that he would be reluctant to date even women his own age because he perceives them to be operating on a different "wavelength:"

> As I've gotten older, [my tendency] is to date people three to five years younger. I think part of that is that most of the girls I meet my age tend to be a little bit more perhaps professionally focused and a little less whimsical than people younger [than me]. People who are younger are more around my wave length about travel. Sort of being very up in the air about their professional life and just being, "Oh, yeah, I want to go travel for a month, too. Let's go do it. But my job won't let me go so I'll just quit." And that is much more my attitude.

Tyler, 32, says that when he created his OkCupid profile, he did not want to date women older than himself. He explains why:

> Part of it is men don't like to date women older than themselves because they might be more grounded and it might be intimidating to [men] to know that someone might be better educated or further along their career or they might own their own place or business. These things that [men] themselves don't have yet. … I feel like some men don't want to date an older woman because they have more to show for their age than they do.

According to Tyler, men would prefer not to date women who intimidate them by being wealthier or more accomplished than they are. This, he presumes, is common sense.

If the socially constructed concept of adult maturity is employed by both men and women to measure single adults' willingness to make lifestage transitions such as marriage and family formation, both agree that, comparatively, men demonstrate less maturity than women. Believing gendered maturity is the product of inherent and physiological sexual difference, men believe it inevitable that men and women would partner differently across their twenties and thirties. According to men, strategies for partnering through the twenties are thus best gendered: men delay and partner with younger women, women hurry and partner with older men.

In this chapter, I find that *both* men and women share similar reservations about dating older partners. Both fear that the younger partner in an age-asymmetric relationship

must negotiate interpersonal status anxiety. However, men believed that adapting themselves to meet or accommodate the expectations of more mature partners defied common sense. Instead, men expect to date younger women with whom they expect emotional parity. As Tyler makes clear above, this common sense strategy of dating younger women conveniently affords men the added benefit of avoiding precisely the status insecurity many of their female peers fear they would experience dating older men.

CONCLUSION

Though there is little difference between men and women in their desire to marry and form families, men and women see an unequal horizon of opportunity for marrying through the lifecourse. As Chapter 4 argues, the reverse timeline is evidence of women's calculated adaptation to many anticipated constraints. As Chapter 3 argues, men's relative ambivalence towards partnering in their life-planning is evidence that men anticipate having fewer constraints. Therefore, attitudinal differences towards marital timing between heterosexual men and women reflect the inequality of their family-planning perspectives.

Both men and women attribute the source of this divergence to a gendered difference in maturity. As noted in Chapter 3, many men believe that because girls pass through puberty earlier than boys, this explains why women desire emotional intimacy, relational commitment and marriage at earlier ages than their male peers. As men equate adulthood with a desire to take on interpersonal responsibilities and obligations, they believe women's greater desire for marriage and family demonstrates their greater maturity.

However, while men and women face unequal constraints that might explain differences in life-planning perspectives, that both nevertheless attribute these differences to maturity is gender essentialism. Psychologist Cordelia Fine (2010) soundly debunks this reasoning as neurosexism, the attribution of behavioral difference to the myth of gendered brains. The myth of a maturity gap may be benevolent towards women, characterizing them

as more mature and more prepared to take on adult responsibility years before their male peers, but this stereotype nevertheless occludes the gender inequity of their position. It obscures the reality that women do not believe that they can get what they want: age symmetry.

The discursive mythology of a maturity gap extending into men's twenties obscures and naturalizes the reproduction of gender stratification in sexual practice. Ultimately, women's sexual desire for concerted growth and mutual development in her relationships is countered by men's expectation of prolonged immaturity and their expectation to marry younger women. If women desire commitment from men they consider their status peers in their twenties, this myth responds that women want too much and should instead partner with older men. If women do attempt partnership with men their own age and find themselves frustrated or poorly treated, men absolve themselves of personal accountability, believing themselves still too immature to partner. Under such conditions, heterosexual common sense continues to be women's reconciliation to male privilege in partnering practice.

In this way, the social construction of maturity masks gendered double standards. To state the feminist dilemma plainly: the notion shared by many that men need many more years with which to mature than women normalizes and naturalizes gender inequality in sexual practice with no better logic than that used by parents to apologize for their sons' inappropriate playground antics—boys will be boys.

CHAPTER 6: WHY DATING SUCKS

In my investigation of modern partnering practices, this analytical dilemma quickly emerged: if *most* subjects say they dislike dating, is it recreation or labor? The distinction is theoretically important for sociology. If dating is described as *feeling* like work and the work is performed unequally across genders, then the gendered imbalance of dating labor is suggestive of heterosexual inequality. Yet, the most popular definition of dating used in the literature makes no distinction, defining dating simply as "a publicly-expressed practice undertaken by romantically-interested partners for the purpose of getting to know one another better" (Eaton and Rose 2011:843). As I argue in Chapter 2, this definition is deficient, failing to capture the full dimensionality of modern dating. By framing dating as a dyadic interaction between two partners, this definition misses the full complexity of efforts that singles describe having to make in order to find partners to date. Specifically, it obscures much of the legwork dating entails in practice.

The social definition of dating is stipulative, changing in meaning not only across history but also across the course of a lifetime, as individuals' sexual goals and projects evolve from adolescence to adulthood. Because respondents cannot be assumed to share a universal definition for dating, feminist standpoint theory offers a useful and productive solution: allow dating to be subjectively defined. Towards this end, I asked respondents to describe for me their personal dating goals and the activities they perform in the hope of reaching them. As I demonstrate in previous chapters, men and women, as groups, vary in their motivation to partner by age. I find that men and women demonstrate unequal

willingness to perform dating labor through their twenties. In this chapter, I explore this gender imbalance in dating labor and its implications for partnering outcomes below.

WHEN DATING BECOMES WORK

Before any two people can form a relationship, they must first meet. Thus, in my interview design, I ask respondents, "How do you meet people to date?" Sometimes, this question revealed interesting anecdotes. Alejandro, 25, describes recently dating his driver in San Francisco:

> She was driving the Uber I was in and she actually asked me out which is funny—it never happened before. … We ended up having really interesting conversation so when we got to my place, she turned off the meter and we ended up having another half-hour conversation just sitting there in the car and she asked do you want to go get coffee or something?

For most respondents, Alejandro's surprising brush with vehicular serendipity strikes them as an ideal way to meet attractive singles in the city. But even Alejandro admits that his brush with luck is so rarely experienced that the anecdote is spoken of as the stuff of legend among his friends. As many subjects tell me, meeting attractive singles rarely seems to happen the way it does in the movies.

Organic vs. Online Dating

Marissa is a 25-year-old administrative assistant who expected to marry her college boyfriend after graduation. When that relationship ended, she found herself single and wanting again to be in a relationship. But after many months of trying to find another partner in vain, Marissa realized that finding single men to date in Boston is itself a major occupation:

> I thought to myself that everyone else seems to do it. I'm sure it will happen for me. It's only now that I'm starting to realize that it isn't going to fall into my lap. … I have to try to meet new people. … [but] I don't know how you meet people otherwise besides going to bars—but I don't know what bars normal men go to. … College doesn't prepare you for dating in the real world because the real world is not like college.

Marissa admits, “Part of the reason I decided to do OkCupid [a popular online dating website] is because I had no idea where to meet people.” Jade, a 27-year-old graduate student in Boston shares a similar perspective:

> I literally never meet anyone in the real world. That’s how it feels. So it’s all online dating and that to me is sad. There has got to be a place where you can meet people in real life! I’m sure if I went to the bar—but I don’t want to pick up drunk dudes! I’m not really sure where someone like me would meet people on a day-to-day basis.

Though both work on college campuses where ostensibly many single men work and study, Marissa and Jade feel that the so-called real world in which they live offers few situational contexts for meeting single men in their everyday lives.

Yet, meeting someone in real life is the ideal for most respondents. A full *third* of my sample used the specific adverb “organically” to describe how they would prefer to meet dating partners. “I want to meet someone more organically, either through a friend or out somewhere,” says Nicky, 34, but she notes, “that’s really hard to do.” By their late twenties and thirties, respondents begin to feel as if they know most of those in their extended networks and that their chances of meeting other singles serendipitously are few and far between. Albeit romanticized, waiting for Cupid’s arrow could have them waiting single for a very long time. As I will illustrate below, willingness to wait is determined by life-planning perspective.

The Social Chill of Consumer Tech

The popular adoption of consumer technology inhibits opportunities to meet people “organically” in public settings. In the public and semi-public spaces where urban singles spend their days—subway platforms, libraries, coffee shops, pubs, grocery stores, waiting rooms, check-out lines, etcetera—subjects describe themselves as being surrounded by other adults singularly engrossed in smartphones, laptops, tablets and ebook readers. With young people so digitally occupied, connection seems impossible. Dirk, 28, in Boston, paints a

vignette of how he experiences handheld technology restricting his social opportunities to meet people:

> We're so plugged into the internet and plugged into more instant gratification. For example, if you're going to a bar and you get there 30 minutes early, what are you going to do? Pre-cell phones, you were going to talk to people or talk to the bartender. You were going to occupy your time. Post-smart phone? You're less likely to look up. You'll take care of an email. You'll do some things you'd never be otherwise able to do. … Even if you turn your phone off and say to yourself, "Screw this. I'm going to talk to someone." But then you look around and everyone else is plugged in, plugging away. What am I going to do? I feel like that hinders the randomness in a way. I think, ironically, a lot those people there on their phones are trying to meet other people when the other people are right there!

Older respondents agree that the rapid adoption of consumer technology has dramatically altered the public landscape. At 34, Lea tells me that she believes such technology has made talking to other people much harder since she graduated from college:

> People are losing their ability to small talk and meet casually. That's how you meet people. Casually. You meet people sitting on the bus. On the street. Those are the casual occurrences. That's how you're drawn to people. People don't do that anymore. They're tuned out. They have headphones on and they're on their iPhone. I think we're losing the ability to interact with other people. And to me, that's pretty devastating.

With everyone so engaged, no one feels as if they can connect. Though respondents say they would much rather prefer to meet singles offline, they concede that, despite their best efforts, they find offline connection increasingly rare because of the internet's increasing ubiquity.

When Dating Becomes Like Recruiting

After several years of being involuntarily single, 34-year-old college counselor Nicky says she is still searching for the man she would marry. Towards this, she invests considerable effort, estimating that she spends between 15 and 25 hours a week using online dating websites, attending groups, and scanning social calendars for events where she might meet someone new. But all this effort with little to show for it has her feeling defeated:

> I've tried joining [a hiking club] ... a few Meetup groups … [but] it hasn't been the experience I've been hoping for as far as providing the opportunities to potentially meet someone. But I keep trying to push myself to do those things in addition to online [but]-I feel like I have exhausted everything.

For all this work, Nicky reports having been on only two dates in the past year. At 33, Adrian says he, too, wants to soon marry. After turning to online dating for help, he now likens dating to sales recruiting, the practice of sending out many inquiries in the hopes of landing a few leads:

> I would say—and it sounds pathetic—it's very much like sales. It's a numbers game. It's catching people at the right time. It's more of that than anything else. … I know it sounds terribly unromantic to compare recruiting to finding the person you love but it is very similar. When I send out a message [on OkCupid], I look at a profile of someone I am attracted to then I will pick something out of their profile and say, "Hey," or whatever and you have to send out ten or twenty messages to get two responses. So you are getting ten percent responses and then you figure one will drop off and they don't always result in dates. So it takes time.

When Adrian goes home after work each day, he describes spending at least an hour sitting down to read profiles of single women across Boston. He composes messages to a few from dozens read each night. If he is lucky, he says he may receive a reply that might generate for him one first date a week.

Why Not OkCupid?

Neither Nicky nor Adrian are unusual or outliers. No matter which sites or apps they report using, both men and women who use online dating very commonly report spending about an hour a day signed on to their preferred services. Much of this work entails browsing user profiles and exchanging messages. Though all of this work may be conducted online, it nevertheless requires a considerable investment of time and emotional energy for an uncertain payoff.

As much online dating labor can now be done on one's smartphone, singles say they often log on to an online dating service, such as Tinder or OkCupid, when they are waiting in line for groceries, taking a cab, eating lunch or—as more than one admits—sitting on the toilet. Over the course of a month, an hour a day of online dating taskwork easily adds up to the equivalent of taking on an unpaid part-time job—to say nothing of the still further offline

dating search singles report in the so-called real world. With so much time spent in this way, respondents say they often feel compelled to break from online dating—at least for a time—as it can easily come to consume much of their day and cognitive bandwidth.

Another significant reason singles tend to dislike online dating is a sense shared by many that online dating is too much like online shopping. While they may not diagnose the problem as commodification themselves, respondents nevertheless feel uncomfortable at the prospect of browsing through people like products and realizing that they are being assessed in the same way:

> I have told my mom this: [online dating] has completely ruined dating. There are so many options out there. The internet makes finding people so much easier. There are millions of people at one click. You search through profiles like shopping and adding people to your cart and, "Oh, wait! This one is so much better!" It has created so much competition that people go on a date and maybe enjoy themselves and then will go back on a website because there might be something better. (Gabriella, 27)

> You can just sign on and be bombarded with profiles and pictures and you have all these people looking at you and it is almost over-stimulation, like a paradox of choice. You have so many choices, like going to the store and picking toothpaste—whitening or enamel strengthening? My buddy and I have talked about it being similar to catalog-shopping. (Tyler, 32)

The effect, as some note, is the feeling that online dating may generate more dates but that having met online, these dates feel less significant than those sourced offline:

> Whenever there's more accessibility and more options, I think the value of the connection decreases. Which isn't to say that people are trash, it's just there is a difference between walking five miles to meet someone and you meet and have fun and everybody is in love and it's great [versus] I look at 47 profiles while I was eating my spaghetti and french fries. There is a difference. (Grey, 26)

While most respondents use online dating to augment offline dating efforts, few say they revel in the way it IT influences their perception of people and the value of connections generated online. After a few weeks of using a service, few describe the online dating experience as still being fun; many liken it to a chore, much like reading email. When dating is made to feel more like shopping, it feels to many less romantic and thus less likely to find

them love. For this reason, though many recognize online dating is destigmatized, efficient and convenient, they would nevertheless prefer to meet people in "organic" settings.

As Romantic as a Job Interview

Whether a couple meets online or offline, a first date is typically the last. Respondents who describe themselves as actively dating say they typically go on about two to three first dates a month with two to three different people. Rarely do these first dates translate into a second. No matter how highly a site's algorithm matches a couple or how well a mutual friend believes they'll get along, interpersonal chemistry is difficult to predict.

The reason a first date fails to lead to a second is rarely because the date is described as bad. Rather, dates most commonly fail for a lack of a connection between partners, a missing spark. Consider Alejandro's account of a recent first date:

> I went on a date with this girl last week who, when I first met her, I thought she was really cool. I was pretty interested. … [but] like that date, there was nothing wrong with it at all. We had great conversation. She's smart, pretty. We went to the same school for undergrad, so it's like we have enough in common. ... She is an interesting person. A cool story. She works on paper and the conversation was fine but there wasn't a spark. I wasn't like, "Wow, I really want to spend more time with her."

Missing a spark is rarely the fault of either party but, nevertheless, its absence is sufficient to cut the connection. Thus, while bad date stories may be fun to tell, bad dates seem uncommon. Respondents instead describe most of their first dates ending like Alejandro's: a pleasant evening on the whole but not an encounter likely to be repeated.

Given this high rate of turnover, the first date feels very much like a formal job interview. Says Lilly, 25, about meeting men on OkCupid, the first date is framed as a test of in-person compatibility:

> I'm doing it entirely through OkCupid. Someone asks someone out on a date. You don't have mutual friends you might meet through. That's the weird thing about it. We don't even know each other. We have no history. We have no reason to be interested in each other except about what we said about ourselves. We think we might get along and have a good time and that's the reason we're on this date. It feels unnatural but I guess that's how it's supposed to be.

On first dates, respondents describe feeling as if they are being evaluated, judged and likely rejected for the role of partner. Jane, a 25-year-old graduate student in Boston, tells me that after several years of dating after college, the prospect of a first date no longer excites her. Far from feeling romantic, to her dating now feels perfunctory and performative:

> It seems standardized: you go for drinks; you screen them to make sure they are not going to murder you; then you flirt and you either go home with them or you don't. But I find dating, on the first date, I don't know this person. It is incredibly anxiety-producing. On a date, I don't put my real self forward. Like I said, I feel like I'm on a job interview. … I feel pressured to perform in a way that I don't normally feel.

As such, a first date demands extensive impression and emotional management (Hochschild 1979; Goffman 1959). Like Jane, respondents feel that they must comport and govern themselves in a way that they believe others will find attractive, desirable and ultimately lovable. This emotional discipline is, simply, a form of work.

The cycle of searching for connection in this way only to miss it repeatedly is often described as emotionally draining:

> How many times can you make the same conversation?: So where did you grow up? Where did you go to school? How many siblings do you have? … [and so] there are only so many times you can go out on first dates where [you have to tell yourself] Ok, well, that didn't work out and now I have to learn about another person and another person. It can be mentally tiring. (Tyler, 32)

Molly, 25, a nonprofit creative director in Boston, admits that the process of going on first dates feels so anhedonic that she likens it to taking on a second job:

> It's a lot of work. It's a full-time job. It is just hard for me to get excited for it right now because I've done it so much. I haven't had that exciting feeling or gone on an awesome date in a long time. It's almost like more work and now I just want to go home, to the gym and then bed at 8.

Here, Sophie, 27, tells me pointedly why she thinks dating sucks.

> Holly: What do you think is the best part of dating?
>
> Sophie: Dinners? I have no idea. I think dating sucks, actually.
>
> Holly: Tell me why you think dating sucks.

> Sophie: Because it's contrived. I feel it's really contrived. … Yeah, it's great to *meet* guys and actually get to know them on a one-on-one conversation, but I have the sense really soon if they're viable. … It's tiring, and I feel like everyone puts up a front, a little bit. I don't know who you really are. Are you putting on a front? Are you actually crazy? Is this the *Matrix*? Is this all a waste of time?

"It is so frustrating and so emotionally exhausting," Mattie, 26, tells me. "If there was one emotion I could pull from it it would be that it's exhausting. I just find it to be draining, the whole process."

Described as *dating burnout,* singles say they often reach a point where they feel they must cease dating altogether, unable to continue summoning the emotional energy all this work requires. As Jade, 27, describes:

> Dating burnout is when you're just tired of going on first dates. You're tired of talking about the same small-talky shit. You're tired of getting dressed up to go impress someone new who probably is not going to be that impressive themselves. You're tired of going on dates with guys you're not interested in or going on dates with guys you are interested in but aren't interested in you. I think those are the big things that burn you out in dating. … We're all miserable! The thing that is unfortunate is that there is a lot of us who are successful, educated, decently attractive women and it's like impossible to find men. We're all in this same boat where we're like what the hell. Or we go on dates and we're putting up with the same stupid shit from different men.

Because young people of both genders churn through so many first dates in precisely this fashion, dating burnout is thus a common emotional consequence of modern dating.

As described, online dating tends to yield more first dates than singles report finding offline. While more efficient, online daters find these gains in efficiency offset by the lack of chemistry and connection they frequently experience on first dates. Because so few first dates translate into second dates, respondents who date online have low expectations for them. Yet, respondents who desire a partnership realize few offline alternatives for meeting people and continue to date online despite its emotional toll.

HOW GENDER MATTERS

Both men and women cite similar frustrations with modern dating and recognize that dating labor drains emotional, mental and financial reserves. But where they part, as groups, is in how necessary they believe dating work is at this stage in their lives. Willingness to perform dating labor is unsurprisingly linked to one's life-planning schedule, which I argue is heavily determined by gender. Among women interviewed for this study, over three-quarters described their primary dating goal as finding a committed relationship that could soon lead to marriage (or a permanent partnership). On average, these women described spending at least one hour per day on the project of dating, efforts that add up to 30 to 40 hours a month. While the men who shared women's intention to find their life's partner estimate that they spend a similar amount of time dating, these men comprised only a quarter of male respondents.

As noted in Chapter 3, before their adult switch, men often admit to breaking off sexual relationships with women that they believe demand too much commitment and close them off from other opportunities. This perspective extends to dating labor. With so many competing demands on their time, energy and attention, men for whom family formation is not an immediate life-planning priority say they have little motivation to date. Although many of these men describe themselves as interested in meeting women and dating casually, they also describe themselves as generally unwilling—at least at this stage of their lives—to keep dating when it loses its recreational appeal, causes them to miss out on other activities or begins to feel like work.

For their part, twenty-something women do not enjoy dating more than men. Nor do they suffer less from its opportunity and emotional costs. But unlike men, they do not feel as if they can table dating without jeopardizing their chances to partner as they age. Thus, in striking contrast, while the majority of men in their twenties believe they should limit their

time dating to prioritize other concerns, the majority of women in their twenties worry that they must table other concerns to dedicate still more time to dating. The remainder of this chapter unravels how this unequal perspective manifests gender inequality between men and women measured in dating labor hours.

Men: It'll Happen When it Happens

Prior to the adult switch, when men consider themselves not yet ready to marry, men say they spend little time finding dates or dating. As Walter, 29, states cleanly: "I spend 0 hours trying or thinking about dating or putting energy into it. And I don't use online dating." Jamie, 27, stresses that he presently has little interest in going out of his way to search for women to date, prioritizing instead skateboarding and practicing his guitar:

> Holly: How many hours a week do you spend trying to meet people?
>
> Jamie: Average of one. … During the week I don't go out. I come home and go skate the ramp, or practice guitar very committedly. So one hour would be going out with my buddies to party. And we're there for three hours and I find a girl to talk to for maybe 15 minutes or something. So, it is not at the top of my priority list.

Abe, 26, says he does not want to be dating. Though he did create an online dating profile, he soon changed his mind: "I will usually spend a day or two looking at profiles and then think even if these people messaged me, I don't think I would bother arranging to meet up with them just because I don't care right now and then I deactivate it." In this way, the majority of single men sampled report spending no more than one hour a week, on average, in the effort of dating.

Many men in this position admit quite freely that they felt dating to be a waste of time. Says Zachary, 32:

> Why waste your time? People spend all this time and energy doing this for their happiness where they could be happy on their own. They could spend their time being productive helping people, cure cancer, or do something that matters instead of, like, trying to get a high off of somebody. If something happens, it happens. Better than going to the clubs and mass-bombing people on OkCupid.

Because the majority of men sampled at this age describe themselves as relatively ambivalent about relationship formation in general, investing too much effort in dating work struck them as irrational. Better, says Zachary, to wait for romantic connection to happen by chance. Many men believed love best when it happens serendipitously and that forcing love to happen by searching for women to date strikes them as desperate and unromantic. On the subject of finding love in the lifecourse, several men echo Zachary and tell me verbatim: "It'll happen when it happens."

With this casual perspective, single men say they can afford to table dating when it becomes inconvenient. For example, at 28, Byron says that although he would like a girlfriend, he also describes himself as reluctant to spend more than an hour a week trying to meet women. Explaining this perspective to me, Byron says, "Right now there is so much other stuff in my life, it's is not a huge priority. … Once I finish training for this marathon, I might step it up more [but] there are so many other things I am trying to do." Byron admits that training for a marathon ranks above dating work in his allocation of time, energy and resources.

Other men believed that because they can date and marry later, they can afford to invest themselves fully in their careers in their twenties and even their thirties. For instance, Sam, 27, is a startup founder in San Francisco who says he has no time for a relationship. Sam recognizes that his intensive commitment to building his company makes it virtually impossible for him to commit to anything else. Because he is admittedly preoccupied with his work, he cannot imagine investing in the extra work that finding a partner entails:

> I feel like my mind is almost always on work. I try to work on it. I do yoga and do other things to try to be mindful, but I think really investing in relationships is a conscious effort. …[I]t's one of those things where a serious relationship right now in my life? I'm tabling it. I put it off to the side. I'll do that in a bit. Right now I'm focused on this other stuff.

On the whole, few men believe that prolonging singlehood into their thirties will upset their family-planning calculus or that aging past 30 will make finding partners more difficult. Like Sam, the majority of men interviewed regard dating labor as something they can schedule, table, delay, and put off if other things, especially their careers, demand their time, energy and attention.

Yet, about a quarter of men did describe their dating goals at the time of the interview as marriage-oriented. In stark contrast to most of their peers, this group describes their dating efforts as intensive and purpose-driven. John, 25, introduced in Chapter 3 as uniquely motivated to partner, says he spends anywhere from eight to ten hours a week attending events with the expressed hope that he will meet single women to date, such as karaoke and trivia nights at local bars. At 27, corporate recruiter Philip says he is ready to marry and so spends at least ten hours per week on the project of dating. Likening dating to professional networking, Philip describes his efforts to women thus:

> I did OkCupid. I play sports, social leagues. And after that it's just a matter of going out seeing shows. Wally's [a Boston bar] has no cover charge, so anyone I meet at Wally's has an appreciation for good music … Just go, don't say no. You don't say no to any invitations. You just put yourself out there. Along those lines: skiing, hit the slopes meet some people. Then, like professional networking, just go. If you don't have a physical reason not to go, then go.

Men who say marriage is on their mind generally estimate that they typically spend at least an hour a day trying to date. Thus, at least where time expenditure is concerned, men who identify themselves as marriage-oriented invest considerably more effort dating than men who do not consider marriage an immediate priority.

Women: Racing the Clock

At 28, River describes her singlehood feeling like a "gnawing thing" she must soon change by investing in dating:

> I think that for girls, it is something they think and worry about it constantly. That is a deep fear. It is a fear of "I am single and I need to figure out a way to get out of this singlehood." Almost to say that being single is something negative and they need to

> change it as soon as possible. Whereas with guys, it's just an annoyance, like, "I kind of wish I had someone to hang out with on Saturday. It's kind of boring to see a movie by myself. I guess it would be nice if a girl was with me." But it is not a gnawing thing that keeps them up at night. It's just like, "Yeah it would be nice." Just like I would say, "Yeah it would be nice to have a dog. It would be really nice."

Also 28, Dylan says she spends much of her free time after work trying to date: "I don't think a guy sees [being single at 28] as a 'I-need-to-fix-it' scenario," she says. "And a lot of girls, this is when they feel they need to start fixing things."

At the time of the interview, 80 percent of the single women I interviewed described finding a long-term partner as their primary dating goal. A typical case, Daphine, 29, says she spends at least one hour a day using the online dating site OkCupid. These efforts generate for her about one date per week. Including the time spent on this date, she then estimates that her time spent dating, per week, clocks in between 13 to 15 hours—or a lowball estimate of 50 hours a month. Catelyn, 29, who also relies chiefly on online dating, estimates that she spends a similar amount of each week: "The amount of time I spend [dating] seems to shift around from is it messaging people, looking at profiles, working on my own profile versus actually spending time with someone in person—I feel like maybe like 10 to 15 [hours]."

A counselor in Boston, Elizabeth, 27, tells me that her only dating goal right now is to find love in a committed relationship. When I ask her to describe her efforts to meet this goal, she explains that the project consumes her weekends and evenings:

> I feel like it's always on my mind to some degree, even when I'm going for soccer. I still am conscious of who's there. Like, I ask "Are there any interesting guys?" I don't even want [to think like] that, it's almost like a burden. I don't want to think about this but I do. I'm always like this is an opportunity and I can't let an opportunity go by.

Though Elizabeth admits that she cares little for drinking, she struggles to know where else to meet young, single men outside of bars. However, going to bars feels to her much like a chore, as in her late twenties she finds fewer friends willing to accompany her:

> I get frustrated with my friends sometimes because they are in this long-term relationship … [they are] more willing to stay at home because she doesn't feel the

> same pressure to go out and meet a guy. … I get why she doesn't want to. *It's not like I want to but I have to.* (Emphasis mine.)

Despite exacting little pleasure from her efforts, Elizabeth says she invests at least ten hours a week trying to meet men.

Because dating effort generates little success, women find their work and the attendant frustrations often trivialized by others' incredulity. As a 26-year-old teacher in Boston, Gabriella says she spends at least an hour a day trying to date. Here, in addition to OkCupid, she catalogs her efforts to meet men over the past year:

> Holly: So what other things have you tried to find dates?
>
> Gabriella: Reaching out to friends to see if they have any single friends, and they say, "Oh, no, we don't know anyone." I have met one person in a bar once and that didn't work out. And a few weeks ago, too, I was conversing with someone and exchanged numbers and that didn't amount to anything. … I'm so busy at work. I am swamped as a first year teacher in high school. It is a lot of planning and a lot of hours to put into it. I want to try to meet up with a group, volunteering, but I haven't had the time to figure it out. So for me, online dating is convenient. It's just there. I don't have the time except at 11 at night when I'm done planning so I search the profiles…

Despite her busy teaching schedule and her persistent efforts to meet men, Gabriella says her mother nevertheless offers her little sympathy. She warns her that if she does not partner soon, her friends will leave her behind:

> I feel the pressure from my mom to get married and have kids. She will say I'm almost 30 … while other people have boyfriends and are getting married and are settling down and are having kids, do you think they will talk to you in a couple of years when you're going to be in two different place? You, single, and them married? … I think she thinks I am doing this on purpose. I tell her how hard it is. I do go out. I'm on a dating website. I actively try to meet people and I do stuff and go out with my friends. So I think, partially, she thinks it's me. She will say over and over again, "You need to be more social and expand you social group. Why can't you meet anyone? Everyone else did!" And I'm like, "I don't know! Maybe they got lucky?"

Like Gabriella, women often report feeling as if partnered friends and family members do not fully appreciate how much legwork and emotional investment modern dating actually entails.

Women's efforts to meet single men to date often include online dating, but they also seek out other means. Women describe taking night classes, joining professional clubs and

sporting leagues and attending cultural events. They also often describe making less formal attempts to increase their chances of meeting single men, such as spending their evenings and weekends in coffee shops, scheduling outings with friends to bars and clubs, and hosting dinner parties in the hopes that single men would be invited by guests. But these additional investments of time, energy and money offer little guarantee of producing dates, let alone relationships.

Dating work at this level of intensity—for both men and women—often leads to burnout. At 29, Catelyn—who estimates she spends 40 hours a month trying to date—speaks of how dating without connecting wears down her emotional reserves: "Having a lackluster date and feeling discouraged and keeping up the energy," she pauses, "[I have to tell myself] there are other people. It's okay. And not letting that be a downer beyond just that one night and not letting [resentment] grow beyond." Though, of course, men describe having frustrating dating experiences, women's greater frequency and volume of effort at younger ages has them suffering disproportionate emotional costs, which they attribute to dating through their twenties. Women describe themselves as embarrassed to be spending so much of their free time, income and emotional energy on a process that has yet to pay off. Yet, if they are to meet their life-planning goals, these women feel they have little choice but to keep working.

CONCLUSION

Because college-educated women feel great pressure to marry by 30, women in their twenties divert a great deal more of their energy, emotion, attention, time and resources than their single male peers towards dating. For their part, men describe themselves as relatively ambivalent about relationship formation and thus less willing to do the work that modern dating seemingly requires. These attitudes are, unfortunately, two sides of the same

heterosexual coin: men stand to benefit both from their deferral and from women's greater investment in dating labor.

Compared to women in their twenties, twenty-something men say they feel more at ease prioritizing their careers, cultivating new skills, and maintaining their social connections over dating and finding partners. This lopsidedness in dating motivation and effort may contribute to the reproduction of gender inequality in other areas outside of sexuality such as career investment, stress management and emotional well-being among professional singles. Though immeasurable in this investigation, men's privileged strategy may pay off in career, health and social dividends. At the very least, tabling dating affords men many hours a month that they can invest in pursuits that they find either more enjoyable or more personally beneficial.

At least anecdotally, women who spend several years dating with little to show for it appear more likely to express symptoms of chronic loneliness and depressive burnout, evidenced in admissions of low self-esteem, self-doubt and diminished levels of self-efficacy—factors which could affect health, workplace performance and professional development. Many potential research questions emerge when dating is imagined as a form of labor, especially when such labor is found unequally performed by men and women during an important stage of adult development.

CHAPTER 7: FUCKING HELL

In *Girls*, an HBO series airing since 2012, Lena Dunham stars as Hannah Horvath, a twenty-something college graduate living in Brooklyn. Many scenes in the first season depict Hannah having adventurous sex with Adam, a twenty-something artist living in Bushwick. But the nature of their relationship is ambiguous, even to Hannah. “The thing is I have absolutely no sense of how he really feels about me because when we are together, he's so there and he's so present,” says Hannah to her friends. “And then he disappears for two weeks and doesn't answer any text messages. And I feel as though I invented him.” Though sexually involved for several months, Hannah and Adam have yet to discuss with each other the nature of their affair. Though this ambiguity causes her to feel unease that she readily admits to her friends, she feels unable to speak of it to Adam himself.

In an episode called “Hannah’s Diary,” Adam mistakenly sends Hannah a photo of his erect penis that he intended for someone else. After Hannah shares the photo with her friends, they speculate that Adam likely intended the photo for another woman he was sleeping with besides her. This upsets Hannah enough that she resolves to end her ambiguous affair with Adam:

> Hannah: I don't think we should see each other anymore. And it makes me feel stupid and pathetic to get a picture of your dick that I know was meant for someone else. And you didn't even bother to explain because I made you think that you don't have to explain...
>
> Adam: What are you asking?
>
> Hannah: I'm not asking anything. I'm really not asking you for anything. I have never asked you for anything. I don't even want anything, okay? I respect your right to see and do whoever you want. And I don't even want a boyfriend.

> Adam: What do you want?
>
> Hannah: I just want someone who wants to hang out all the time and thinks I'm the best person in the world and wants to have sex with only me. And it makes me feel very stupid to tell you this … but I also don't wanna share a sex partner with a girl who seems to have asked for a picture of your dick. … I really care about you. And I don't want to anymore, because it feels too shitty for me. So I'm gonna leave.

In this exchange, Hannah is revealing several things about her emotional state. Though it is confusing from the viewer's perspective to see Hannah deny wanting a boyfriend at the same time she describes herself as essentially wanting one, her denial is telling. In the time she and Adam have been seeing each other and sleeping together, she has been working to make him think that she is indifferent about starting a relationship so as to not make him feel cornered. When Adam asks her what she wants, she struggles to answer, still worried that explicitly asking him to be her boyfriend would be seen as asking him for too much.

This vignette begs questions: First, why does Hannah feel that she must perform insouciance for Adam's benefit, despite the frustration and discomfort it causes her? Second, why should she feel so stupid for telling Adam that she wants a relationship? Lastly, how typical is this scenario in the lives of women trying to partner?

WHEN SEX GETS MESSY

In *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Anthony Giddens (1992) argues that modernity affords women greater sexual opportunity outside of marriage and monogamous relationships. Using standpoint methods, I ask unpartnered women how they perceive and navigate this ostensible freedom. In my interviews, I asked female subjects to indicate their interest in casual sex (defined broadly as sex occurring outside of the context of a committed relationship) as a dating goal at this time. On a scale of 1 being not interested at all and 10 being very interested, more than half said they were completely uninterested in pursuing nonrelational sex (indicated by an answer of 1 or 0), with two-thirds of women's responses falling in the range between 1 and 3. While an appreciable number of single women enjoy

having casual sex while dating, these responses indicate that the majority express little enthusiasm for it at this stage in their lives.

By age 25, most adult women sampled described having past sexual experiences both within and outside of the context of a committed relationship. Though most feel that casual sex is a fine pursuit for others (sexual tolerance), it is not something many desire for themselves (sexual preference). Ironically, they are so tolerant of casual sex that several admitted to feeling as though their disinterest is something they should try to fix. Here, Daphine, 29, explains:

> Daphine: I went through a period when I first moved to the city and was newly single. I thought maybe it was something I could do. This is what people are doing. But it's not for me. It didn't make me feel good. It made me feel insecure and emotional.
>
> Holly: Why did it make you feel insecure?
>
> Daphine: Were they going to call? Did they like me? What did they think of me? I just learned that [sex] was something I was going to do if it was with someone that I was really interested in and trusted, whether or not it became a relationship. Not where [he's] like, "I'm never going to call you again after this."

Like Daphine, after experimenting with casual sex earlier in life, many admit it is no longer something they wish to pursue while single. As Lea, 34, affirms: "Been there, done that. No. Not anymore. ... I never really have been able to be very casual about sex."

Casual sex as a social construct can be loosely defined as sex that occurs outside the bounds of a romantic, committed relationship. However, within the context of this study, women vary in their subjective understanding of the term. For some, all sex outside the scope of a committed relationship is considered casual. For others, casual sex refers only to sexual experiences where one does not expect to see their partner again. Interestingly, many women believe that sex had in the context of dating—before a relationship is formed—did not constitute casual sex despite technically occurring outside the context of a relationship. Between celibacy and committed partnership, single women who say they do not pursue

casual sex nevertheless describe negotiating many shades of sexual intimacy between relationships.

Because what constitutes casual sex is subjectively determined, this chapter examines three specific sexual scenarios where single women most commonly navigate sexuality outside of the context of a committed relationship. These scenarios include: the one-night stand or hookup, sexual friendship, and sex while dating. Below, I will explain how women think about and navigate each scenario, focusing critical attention to the patterns of gendered conflict women recognize in each context.

ONE-TIME ENGAGEMENT

The "one-night stand" or "hookup" is a sexual arrangement that typically precipitates from an encounter with a relative stranger or loose acquaintance under the pretext of ephemerality (and quite often inebriation). Stereotypically, the affair is brief, usually lasting a few hours with the tacit expectation there will be no reunion. Of the three types of nonrelational sex women describe as most common, this type is typically described as the least desirable.

While most women admit to having this experience, only a handful of female respondents described having more than two such encounters since college. In other words, when adult women in their twenties and thirties recount all the sexual partners they can recall in their sexual history, one-off affairs are typically rare. Helen, 26, says of her only experience: "I think it was pretty terrible. It was like, okay, this is awkward. [It was an] 'I'm-never-doing-that-again' kind of thing."

At this stage in their lives, many women say one-time encounters offer little appeal. Even among the minority of women (about a third of the sample) who say they are receptive to casual sex, most qualify their enthusiasm, typically excluding the one-night stand, anonymous sex, or any other variety of one-off affairs with a relative stranger. For example,

although Alayne describes herself as very interested in casual sex in a general sense, she is expressly uninterested in one-night stands:

> Holly: On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being very interested, how interested are you in pursuing casual sex in the meanwhile?
>
> Alayne: 8 or 9? … At this point I'm not interested in—I don't want to go have a one-night stand. That's not interesting to me right now. So it depends on the level of casual sex we're talking about.

At this stage of their lives, these women say they usually turn down solicitations from men for this kind of sexual encounter.

Women catalog a host of overlapping reasons as to why they reject these affairs, including: safety concerns, fear of feeling objectified or humiliated, lack of emotional trust, and low expectations for sexual satisfaction. For some women, the fear of potentially developing feelings of affection and attachment for a sexual partner who cannot or will not return them is offered as a major reason why they avoid hookups, even with men they may have known for only a few hours. Here, Chloe, 27, describes how she felt during her one and only experience with a one-night stand:

> Chloe: One-night stands? [...] Those don't work for me. ... Too many emotional attachments that crop up when I have sex with someone. Even on a one-night stand.
>
> Holly: Have you ever had that?
>
> Chloe: Yeah.
>
> Holly: How'd that go?
>
> Chloe: It was awful. I was traveling [and] we met in Italy. We met some random guys who were having breakfast. ... We hung out with them all day and I hooked up with one of them. And then we left the next day. It made me really sad.
>
> Holly: What made you sad about it?
>
> Chloe: It's hard to describe. It's not a longing. Just—I felt a lot of emotions. A lot of attachment towards this man who I did not know. Who I'm not going to see again. That was not good for me. … It seemed like something that would be fun and spontaneous, but I'm not fun and spontaneous in that way and now I know that. Lesson learned.

Sophie, 27, says that for her, personally, not only does she fear contracting a sexual infection from a stranger, she also fears catching feelings:

> Holly: Regardless of what your dating goals are right now, how open are you to casual sex?
>
> Sophie: Not very open. It's not because I'm weirded out about it or religious or whatever. I'm actually a full believer if you want some sex, just get some sex. It's like going to the gym. Sometimes you just need some sex. It's healthy. It's fun. It releases stress. Go for it. But personally, I don't want to go for it because I actually know how emotional I am and as much as my brain goes "no, no, no," I do get a bit emotionally attached. I'm actually kind of scared of STDs, too. I know there are condoms, but still.

Women feel that the situational logic of a one-time encounter forestalls the emotional bonding most women interviewed believe makes sex satisfying, enjoyable and desirable.

Moreover, feeling like one is being pursued for a one-night stand and nothing more is described by many of these women as objectifying and even humiliating. Alayne describes the feeling as "demoralizing." Sandra describes it as "degrading." Several likened it to feeling as though they were being solicited for unpaid prostitution.

Many recount experiences where a past casual encounter left them feeling what they described as being "used for sex." In context, women described feeling "used" in situations where their partner's conduct made them feel disposable or interchangeable—like an object. Lilly speaks to these feelings poignantly in her telling of a recent dating experience:

> It's confusing when guys say they want to date casually, do they really mean they just want casual sex? What are you really looking for? ... For example, there's this guy I've been on two dates with. He was like, "Oh you should come over afterwards." I was like, "Oh, I don't know." And [then] he's like, "Let's walk around and think about it." I eventually went over. We hooked up. We didn't have sex. It was fine, nice overall but he made a couple of comments that made it seem like sex was more of what he was interested in. We were lying in bed and he was like, "This is a nice way to spend my Saturday night." Like I could have been anybody. Then [he also] said "Oh it's so nice to lie naked next to someone." I was like, "Someone? I can just be anybody?"

Solange, 26, explains that she is no longer as interested in one-night stands after a particularly demeaning encounter:

> I did have a one-night stand with a guy that was unbelievably degrading. And I am so shameful about it that I don't usually tell people about it. It is because I felt like I allowed him to use me. I did not want to feel used.

Elizabeth, 27, recounts her past experience with hooking up in college to explain why she avoids these kinds of encounters: "I don't get satisfaction from that. That it is not enjoyable. It was fun at the time, in the moment, but I came away feeling worse. I want to be invested in someone who is invested in me. … I want to feel totally valued so I don't want to put myself in a position where I feel used." This pervasive fear of being sexually objectified casts a pall over how many single women navigate sex between relationships.

Though I did not ask specific questions regarding sexual violence, at least one in five of the women volunteered that a past incident of sexual assault colors how they now think about casual encounters. Julie, 26, describes a singularly traumatic experience that has left its impression on her sexual decision-making going forward:

> Holly: Have you ever had sex with someone you had no intention of ever seeing afterwards—like a one-night stand?
>
> Julie: Yes, my friend and I were roofied, in DC. We went to a bar that we always go to. We drank a lot then. We met these guys at the bar who were in the Army. They bought us shots and my friend said, "I'm going to get sick." She went to the bathroom and she threw up. And we still had the drink that we bought ourselves and I remember saying, "I'm hammered." We went from 0 to 60 in minutes. We got separated. One of the guys walked me home. I wasn't raped. I remember it being consensual, but I remember stopping it at one point and saying, "What am I doing?" I don't know if it was them that roofied us or the bartender. That was the only time.

Another female respondent recounts a dating incident where she felt sexually violated. In her words, she "had a diminished capacity to consent." She explains, hinting that her boundaries were crossed. "He never asked. It's hard [to talk about] because people see consent as black and white. Was it enthusiastic consent? No." Because fears such like these linger in the background of women's sexual calculus, several felt strongly that sex should only be risked in a context where mutual trust is assured. As Sandra, 27, opines:

> Sex doesn't have a role outside of a relationship for me. I don't think you should engage in sexual acts with someone unless you have a good reason for it. I don't think

> you should be having sex with someone you don't care about. ... If you're going to put yourself out there for somebody, then it should be for the right reasons. If you're using sex to just get off, that is what masturbation is for.

Thus, in addition to the aforementioned concerns, the systemic threat of sexual violence significantly dampens women's enthusiasm for casual encounters.

When talking about one-night stands and hookups, women describe various fears of rape, sexual objectification, violation, violence, sexually contracted infections, humiliation, and emotional futility. Most said they do not expect the pleasure they might experience during these encounters to outweigh the attendant risks. However, a third of the sample nevertheless say they will sometimes seek out nonrelational sex under very specific conditions that they believe can mitigate these hazards. In the following section, I look at how women secure these conditions through sexual friendship.

SEXUAL FRIENDSHIP

The second category of nonrelational sex, sexual friendship, is often described colloquially as a "friends-with-benefits" or "no-strings-attached" relationship. Unlike the one-night affair, which is characterized by its brevity, spontaneity and impulsiveness, this kind of sexual scenario is characterized by its premeditation and duration. Under ideal conditions, this scenario is characterized by mutual consent as both partners negotiate shared terms for the affair. For example, if couple's sexual friendship is to have "no strings attached," participants must discern early what "strings" will imply. Without the benefit of established convention, the terms of these types of sexual arrangements cannot be assumed *a priori.*

Outside of a relationship context, many women prefer sexual friendship to one-night stands. Though they recognize that this type of liaison, by design, stops short of romantic love, women expect to feel parity, trust and security with their partners. As Grey, 26, describes, "I still have my reservations, [but] just about sexual activity with somebody you

won't see again. I would be more interested in a friends-with-benefits situation, with somebody I trust. It is really important that I trust someone if I'm going to be sexual with them."

Where these affairs go well, this scenario is idealized by women precisely because it offers a safe context in which to experience both physical and emotional intimacy between relationships. Women seem most receptive to sexual friendship after breaking off a long-term relationship, when they feel not yet able to move on to a new relationship but still feel a strong need for touch, affection and sexual companionship. Sophie describes one such experience fondly: "It wasn't about the hooking up. It was that we were really trying to care for each other *and* do it—it was like two friends who ended up hooking up with good intentions that didn't blossom into a steady, scheduled dating situation." For many women, emotional intimacy is described as a critical feature of what makes this kind of sex enjoyable and satisfying. Paige, 34, describes having to end one such affair because she felt her partner unable to offer her this emotional support:

> This guy's strategy was that he wouldn't pay you any compliments. I would say nice things to him and he'd say thanks. Or he would not say anything. And like that felt weird to me. Like it started to feel like I was being used instead of being mutually respected. Admiring but not going anywhere relationship. So eventually we had a conversation about it. And he's like, "I don't compliment someone if I'm having casual sex, otherwise they get invested." I said that makes me feel like crap. And he said, "I guess we're not good casual sex partners." So we stopped.

Though uncommon, several women report still being friends with partners long after they have ceased being sexually involved with them.

Nevertheless, women say that the circumstances necessary for this type of relationship to succeed are rare. Women say they must work hard to ensure that they, as women, are fully respected as equals when negotiating sex outside the context of a committed relationship. For example, Alayne, 30, describes having to rebuke a sexual friend for treating her with less consideration than she felt she deserved:

> We have been hanging out for a few weeks and he came over and we were going to go to a movie. We had sex and I made some comment about not wanting to miss the movie. He's like yeah, yeah we will. Then I said, I don't just want to be the girl you just have sex with every so often. That doesn't mean I want to have a serious relationship with you, but I want … that the person who I am sleeping with to be communicative to me.

Most who enjoy these types of affairs say they would quickly end one were they to perceive themselves being disrespected or "used" for sex by their partner.

Interestingly, women describe the ideal partner for these types of affairs as being "emotionally unavailable," or, more accurately and precisely, unavailable for a committed relationship. Several women report having such an arrangement with an ex-boyfriend, men with whom they remain on amicable terms, where trust, sexual compatibility and mutual body knowledge could be counted on in the absence of viable relational compatibility. For example, Amy, 26, says of sexually reconnecting with an former boyfriend:

> I guess, technically, getting back together with an ex-boyfriend that you knew you didn't want to be in a relationship with long term—that can be classified as casual sex. I was ok with it because I was at a really comfortable place in that I knew I wasn't getting back into something—I wasn't getting in too deep. I knew I wasn't going to get emotionally hurt at the end.

Women say selecting men who they already know they would not want as partners helps them feel more relaxed with the muted romantic expectations they have for this type of arrangement.

Many women believe sexual friendship can offer pleasure and intimacy while mitigating many of the risks associated with casual sex in other contexts. But in order to preempt these risks, women initiating a sexual friendship work hard to establish them on terms that ensure parity, mutual respect and emotional authenticity. Because establishing a sexual friendship affords the chance to first discuss and consent to the terms and context of the arrangement, women say they are more able to enjoy casual sex without fearing judgment, objectification or rejection. As Brie, 28, describes:

> [With dating] there's all this—you don't want to seem too clingy … there's always this dance that happens. … Whereas in an arrangement situation, you're like, "Dude, what are you doing right now? You want to come over? Awesome." There's none of that pretense. There's no game-playing, which I'm not a fan of anyway, but it always seems to wiggle its way into relationships.

But as Brie intimates, without this opportunity to first discuss the arrangement, however, women feel markedly less secure navigating sex in other contexts. How women experience sex in the context of dating—where initial negotiation of relationship intentions is considered taboo—is discussed below.

SEX WHILE DATING

The majority of single women I interviewed—two out of three—say they do not pursue or tend to enjoy sex outside of the context of relationship formation. On dating sites, at bars, and during much of their everyday life, women regularly reject most of the opportunities for casual sex made available to them. While appreciating the ostensible freedom to enjoy a variety of sexual encounters across their young adult years, most nevertheless imagine few circumstances where nonrelational sex appeals. For these women, nonrelational sex poses too many risks and too few rewards to make it palatable.

For most women I interviewed, sexual desire and emotional intimacy go hand in hand. Though they believe women should feel comfortable having consensual sex in any context, for their own part, the majority says they would not enjoy having sex outside of a relationship. As Kathy, 25, explains: "It's not that I feel like [women who have casual sex] are loose, amoral or anything like that; it's more of a feeling that that is not a choice I would make and it is hard to see what they are getting." Without some kind of emotional connection, many did not believe such sex would be pleasurable for them. Sophie, 27, explains: "[Casual sex] is not fulfilling for me. You don't know if there's chemistry and it just sucks because it's just sex. Sex is actually awesome when there are feelings and chemistry behind it."

When women recount their sexual history, they typically describe their experiences with casual sex as being few and far between. Instead, the vast majority of their sexual experiences occur either within the context of a relationship or within the context of dating, somewhere between a first date but prior to relationship formation. Alicia, 29, for example, counts herself as having 40 sexual partners over the course of her sexual career, 34 occurring outside the context of a committed relationship. However, here she explains that the vast majority of these experiences occurred while dating:

> That true one-night stand, no-foundation, sleep-together-the-same night? Two times. Other times, it's generally like going out where I'll be seeing someone. I don't want to call it dating if it's less than a month. … I might sleep with someone on the second date because I want to see if we're compatible. … It's a serious act, we need to be respectful and health conscious and all that but I would rather learn earlier whether or not how the physical chemistry is so maybe we only sleep together two or four times, but generally it's always more than once.

While Alicia has had many more partners than the median for my sample (only a handful of female respondents could recount more than 12 sexual partners in their lifetime), her ratio is nevertheless typical. Most women say the majority of their sexual experiences between relationships occur in the context of dating.

Women generally did not regard sex while dating as either casual or recreational, but as instrumental. Sex while dating serves as a means of assessing emotional and romantic compatibility. For example, Daphine, 29, tells me she considers sex to be a necessary test of relationship compatibility:

> Holly: How many partners have you had sexually since you lost your virginity?
>
> Daphine: Like 8?
>
> Holly: And how many of those were in relationships?
>
> Daphine: I wasn't in a relationship with any of them when the first time happened. … That's sort of a test on the way to a relationship. What's the sex like?
>
> Holly: How many ended up being relationships?
>
> Daphine: Like 3 or 4.

To hear women like Alicia or Daphine talk, pre-commitment sex serves a major purpose in the modern partnering process. “It’s such a huge part of a relationship; and connection is knowing how you can connect sexually,” says Daphine. “I would not want to commit to someone if we had horrible sex.”

Fucking Hell

While establishing sexual compatibility may now be considered a necessary aspect of relationship formation, women say they do not typically discuss their relationship expectations with their dating partners before having sex. When negotiating sexual friendship—when women know they do not want to start a relationship—women say it is imperative that both partners disclose their intentions from the onset to prevent miscommunication and hurt feelings on either side. However, when women *do* want a relationship while dating, they say that expressing their intentions might jeopardize their chances of partnering. Here, Lacey, 26, describes this paradoxical fear plainly:

> Lacey: [On a first date] I don’t know what you're coming to the table with. You don’t know what I am coming to the table with and we could be coming to the table for completely different things and we never verbalized them so neither of us knows what we are talking about.
>
> Holly: Why can’t you verbalize them?
>
> Lacey: If I went on a first date and said, “So I’m really looking for a boyfriend; if you're not looking for a girlfriend then you should just leave.” And I don’t want to scare this guy off. Maybe he is looking for a girlfriend and maybe he wants a girlfriend after three months or something like that. You are sort of like—you don’t actually want to say that because you don’t want to scare someone away.

Researchers note with concern that despite the liberalization of sexual mores that supposedly grant women more power to negotiate their sexual affairs, the scripts heterosexual partners rely on to regulate sex, love and romance remain stubbornly gendered (Eaton and Rose 2011; Bryne and Carr 2005). As per these scripts, men and women tend to concede to men traditional prerogative in relationship formation. Widely imagined as romantic common

sense, many believe it is the man's role while dating to broach commitment at each step of a relationship, from initiating couple formation to marriage (Lamont 2013; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Sassler and Miller 2010).

Women tempted to propose commitment themselves often stop short for fear being imagined by their partner as pushy, hysterical or desperate as unmarried women are so popularly stereotyped. For example, in the popular sitcom *Friends*, thirty-something Ross Gellar bitterly complains to his friend Phoebe that the woman he is dating breached gendered protocol by asking about their relationship status:

> Ross: Also, [she] wants to have the conversation about where the relationship is going.
>
> Phoebe: Ugh! Women!
>
> Ross: I know! I know! Why do you guys need to have this conversation?! Huh? I mean no self-respecting man would ask a woman, "So, where is this going?"

Ross takes it for granted that *his* desire should pace their relationship. While expressing his indignation, he implies that women who defy this male-privileging convention while dating are not "self-respecting."

Fearing exactly this reaction, women navigating sex while dating often experience a double bind. Few relish the prospect of becoming sexually involved with a man only to learn after several weeks or even months of dating that he is uninterested in starting a relationship. Yet, women worry that broaching the subject of a relationship themselves would appear too forward, perhaps even desperate and cloying. Though most single women I interviewed date with the hope of entering into a long-term partnership and expressly do not want to be having casual affairs at this stage of their lives, this is exactly what they feel they cannot say to the men they are dating.

Because of these fears, women say they feel compelled to keep to the traditional gendered scripting of relationship formation even as other sexual mores and expectations

change. Like Hannah in the vignette above, they admit to concealing their true desires and feelings, waiting for their male partner to disclose *his* intentions first. Molly, 25, describes this as "limbo time [where] you don't want to sound crazy by saying you want to be with him." Chloe 26, says, "I feel like you put up a front. … You say you're cool with not having a label, being kind of fuzzy. 'I'm not going to call you my boyfriend, don't call me your girlfriend.' But if that's not what you want, you should be comfortable saying that, but I feel there's pressure not to."

Thus, while women may freely consent to having sex while dating before committing to a relationship, they often describe feeling powerless in the context of dating to negotiate the conditions and expectations of their arrangement. For example, Gabriella, 26, describes recently dating a man she had met on OkCupid for several months. After several weeks of feeling neglected and unsure of his intentions, she confronted him only to find out that he assumed theirs was a casual fling:

> It was funny because when I brought it up and said, "Yeah, I feel like you haven't been responding to my messages and putting effort into this." And he was like, "Wait, I thought you were on the same page!" And he started crying and he felt bad. In his mind, he thought, "Oh, I thought we were just doing this for fun." ... He just assumed but we never talked about it.

Predictably, she felt humiliated and hurt by his presumption. As she says, they never talked about it.

Like Gabriella, women often endure weeks and even months of such normalized ambiguity while dating before growing so frustrated that they eventually break convention to inquire about their partners' romantic intentions. Catelyn, 29, describes one such experience:

> For example, the guy that I have been dating off and on for two years ... I was seeing [his visits] as relationship-growing types of things and that is not what they were. And I only found that out by asking. Saying, "This feels really intense to me. Are we? What is going on?" Then finding out that we weren't on the same page.

Hannah, 25, describes herself being floored when the man she considered her boyfriend of nine months told her that he never considered them a couple:

> I would like to think that if I had actual feelings for somebody and I brought them up and they were like, "No, I want to keep it casual." Ideally, I would end it. Because ain't nobody got time for that! You know? … I don't want to waste my time. I just wasted nine months in this shitty relationship [where] the whole time he's all, "This has so much potential! Blah, blah, blah. I see a future! Blah, blah, blah." Then nothing! And then he was like, "Actually, I was never romantically or emotionally invested in this." And I was like, "Oh, would have liked to know that six months ago!"

These anecdotes reflect perfectly the latent fear women share when abdicating to men the traditional prerogative of relationship formation while dating. Women worry that they will become emotionally attached and perhaps even fall in love with their partners only to have it revealed too late that their partners had no intentions of coupling. When this happens, not only do women feel heartbroken and humiliated, they feel that their time and emotional labor have been wasted. Had their partners expressed disinterest in commitment from the onset, these women imply that they would not consented to the arrangement. But without new dating conventions that prioritize the transparency in intention and expectations, this dilemma women so often encounter while dating is likely to persist.

CONCLUSION

Although sexual liberation affords single women greater sexual opportunity outside of marriage and relationships, their actual experiences navigating this freedom reveal many obstacles still inhibiting the realization of gender equality in the sexual realm. Ostensibly free to pursue a variety of experiences, women must do so while negotiating the possibility of violence, objectification, and marginalization from their sexual partners in all contexts. By their mid-twenties, the majority of single women interviewed for this study say they manage these risks by avoiding sex outside of relationships altogether. After college, almost none say they still pursue one-night stands or hookups.

Though they are a minority within this sample, some women still welcome casual sex under specific circumstances. However, even these women admit that their enthusiasm is tempered by the paucity of male partners with whom they expect to feel trust, safety and

respect outside of the context of a romantic relationship. Given these necessary preconditions, women open to sexual friendship say that finding a partner who does not make them feel objectified or "used" for sex is often just as hard as to find as a romantic partner. Thus, while an appreciable minority of single women say they sometimes desire sex without commitment, their terms are far from libertine.

Contrasting how women navigate sexual friendship with how they navigate sex while dating reveals how powerfully traditional courtship convention continues to regulate relationship formation. While having sex before committing to a relationship may no longer be considered taboo for women, they still feel that breaking gender protocol to broach commitment is. When women do want a relationship while dating, they feel caught in a bind, fearing that to disclose their intentions before their male partner would risk his disfavor. This chapter explicates the consequence of this bind: women work to suppress their feelings and desires while dating to accommodate an inequitable gender arrangement that grants men prerogative in relationship formation.

As sexual mores evolve and opportunities for casual sex proliferate, the rigidity of courtship convention inhibits the realization of gender equality in partnering practice. If dating is to become more equitable, both men and women must be willing to buck romantic common sense and challenge gendered stereotypes that privilege men. What a more gender-equitable protocol for dating might look like is explored more deeply in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

Perhaps it is because college graduates tend to fare reasonably well across so many life outcomes that university commencement speakers so often liken them to rocket ships blasting off in pursuit of personal success. Rallying Barnard graduates to reach as far as their dreams can carry them, the 2011 commencement address delivered by feminist business icon Sheryl Sandberg hardly strays from convention. Yet, as I noted in my introduction, while Sandberg's speech evokes boundless horizons, she nevertheless warns women that gravity is gendered: "[I]t's a bit counterintuitive, but the most important career decision you're going to make is whether or not you have a life partner and who that partner is." Alluding to decades of research on the subject of gender inequality in marriage, Sandberg hints cryptically that the biggest threat to a woman's launch is very often the man sharing her bed.

For a graduating class of college-educated women, Sandberg models success in both her professional and family life. Yet, in a speech on the subject of women's success, Sandberg attributes much of her own happiness and professional achievement to the emotional and domestic support she received from her husband, David Goldberg. She warns that without a partner as committed to marital equality as Goldberg, working wives and mothers will likely struggle pursuing their professional ambitions outside of the home.

After Goldberg's unexpected death in 2015, Sandberg became profoundly sensitized to the difficulties working women face raising children without a partner. Addressing this painful subject on Mother's Day in 2016, Sandberg admitted to having long overlooked the uniquely constrained position of single mothers. "I think we all owe it to single mothers to

recognize that the world does not make it easy for them," she wrote in a post on Facebook. "The odds are stacked against single mothers in this country."

Young women inherit a world where gender domination in domestic life is still so common a problem that feminists warn them of it on their college graduation day. Meanwhile, single motherhood is described as being so challenging that even millionaires struggle with it. So although young college graduates are encouraged to shoot for the moon, young women are warned of how integral partnering will be to their success.

With the stakes so high, female college graduates demonstrate a level of heed in their family-planning strategy unmatched by their male peers. While both men and women in this study widely expect to balance professional careers with marriage and children, they diverge in how each anticipates partnering will happen after college. As the latter half of this project shows, this incongruity in perspective creates sexual conflict between single men and women. While many studies demonstrate how gender inequality works in relationships, my study shows how many single women work to accommodate gender inequality in their efforts to partner.

In this chapter, I briefly summarize my findings and explain how they enrich our understanding of gender inequality in partnering practice. Towards this end, I focus my concluding analysis on three areas where I believe further inquiry will prove most vital: the life-planning process, the division of dating labor, and the negotiation of sex between relationships.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF GENDERED LIFE-PLANNING

In the abstract, college-educated men and women share similar goals for marriage and family formation—specifically marital childbearing. But as groups, they diverge along gender lines across their twenties in how and when they expect to marry. While a fourth of the single men in this study described themselves as actively seeking marriage, the sizable

majority expressed indifference towards marital timing. Feeling that they stand to lose nothing by waiting, most felt it imprudent, even unromantic, to force the hand of fate by actively searching for a life partner.

Many men spoke of prolonged singlehood as being personally beneficial, affording them the flexibility to take chances, try new things and immerse themselves fully into projects and professions that they believe would be more difficult to pursue in a committed partnership. Consider as an archetypical example of this perspective the case of startup-founder Sam, 27, who wants to marry and start a family but readily admits to tabling both. As startups typically require enormous commitment from their executives, Sam says he allows himself virtually no time for friends, let alone dating. But Sam believes he can afford to commit himself fully to his career without fear that such delay might jeopardize his chances to partner and have children. He entertains little doubt that when his company is stable and he has time to partner, women of childbearing age will find him just as—if not more—desirable as a husband and father.

With women, however, marital timing proved a major concern. From doctors, family and media, women hear seemingly endless reminders that their fertility drops across their thirties. Almost as often, women report being told that men of all ages prefer to date women in their twenties. Thus, unlike men, women's life-planning strategy—the reverse timeline—is profoundly attuned to the gendered deadlines of sexual depreciation and infertility. The inequity of overlapping constraints that women negotiate when planning their lives is perhaps one of the most consequential yet still underappreciated aspects of gender inequality for feminist scholars to consider in our theorization of modern patriarchy. While men perceive their time to partner and parent as virtually boundless, this study shows how women's perception of family-planning as constrained conditions not only their partnering strategy but also their perception of life opportunities.

Consider the case of Catelyn. During college, Catelyn had seriously considered becoming a doctor after graduation. However, she ultimately decided against medical school because she did not want to juggle the intensive demands of the residency requirement during the same years she expected to be raising young children. Opting instead for nursing school, Catelyn hoped that a nurse's flexible schedule would allow her to both treat patients and care for her children. Catelyn chose a less prestigious career path precisely because she believed the compromise would be of most benefit to her future family.

As Eva Illouz (2012) theorizes, single women striving to meet middle-class expectations for family formation can perpetuate unequal gender expectations upon themselves, even in the absence of a partner. Like Catelyn, most women expected to be married by their late twenties and raising children by their early thirties within the context of a two-income household. Anticipating this schedule, younger women aspiring to motherhood may lean away from industries and professional trajectories that they believe would be incompatible with their constrained timeframe for childbearing. While recent research finds little evidence that family-planning expectations affect the college major choices of students (e.g. Cech 2015; Cech, Rubineau, Silbey and Seron 2011), future research might consider how gendered family-planning schedules affect educational and professional decisions after college in ways that could, in theory, contribute to gender inequality in individual life outcomes.

The second implication of gendered life-planning for feminist scholars to consider is the process by which unpartnered and childless women exit the reverse timeline. For many women crossing into their thirties involuntarily unpartnered and childless, missing normative deadlines for family-planning milestones can trigger tremendous feelings of shame, failure and self-doubt. While I suspect that most women in my sample will likely still marry and probably go on to have children (albeit older than they originally expected), it is apparent in

these interviews that they challenge decades of class and gender socialization when they consider having children outside the context of marriage. Catching these women at this moment presents feminist researchers with the opportunity to better understand how elite women challenge what "good" womanhood will mean outside the anticipated contexts of wifehood and motherhood.

Future feminist inquiry would benefit from investigating how single, college-educated women's views towards marriage and family change over time with the benefit of life experience. For instance, despite planning her career to anticipate motherhood in her twenties, Catelyn finds herself single and childless at 29. With two long-term, committed relationships behind her, she knows now that love is fragile. Rather than risk her fertility waiting to see if her next relationship progresses towards marriage, Catelyn has been discussing with a gay male friend how they might raise children together platonically, without marrying. Though she admits this is not her ideal scenario, she finds empowerment in its possibility. Catelyn's story begs questions of when and how other single women adjust their expectations for marital childbearing across their twenties and thirties.

My ability to generalize how women loosen themselves from the reverse timeline is limited. The women I interviewed were of childbearing age and therefore felt it premature to completely surrender the expectation that they will still partner and bear children in marriage. Women older than 35 and divorced women likely feel differently about the prospect of non-marital childbearing than never-married women in their twenties. Moreover, because my sample is purposely drawn from liberal cities, it may be easier for single women living in Boston and San Francisco to imagine family arrangements that counter traditional convention than those living elsewhere. How age, relationship experience and geography condition the way single women renegotiate their family-planning strategy as they transition from their twenties into their thirties is an open question I readily concede to further empirical study.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF UNEQUAL DATING LABOR

In Chapter 6, I explain that both men and women agree that dating entails a great deal of work. On top of the investment of time, money and emotional labor that going on a date entails, searching for prospective partners is often described as the most laborious aspect of modern dating. While those who want to date expect to put in the work, those ambivalent about partnering feel it irrational to spend too much time trying to date.

Because I found women's desire for partnership stronger than in their male peers, I found willingness to perform dating labor largely determined by gender. Women make dating a priority, expending considerable time, energy and emotion searching for potential partners and meeting them for dates in the hopes of finding intimacy and lasting connection. Measured in time, women searching for a relationship estimate that they spend an average of seven to ten hours a week dating, efforts that amount to at least an hour a day.

For their part, only a quarter of the single men sampled consider dating a priority. For this minority seeking a relationship, they report spending about an hour a day dating, comparable to women seeking the same. However, most men say they spend little time dating, reporting no more than an hour a week in the pursuit of new partners.

Single men spend less time on dating, granting them more free time than their female peers. This inequality in reported hours is not trivial, amounting to nearly two months of full-time employment a year. While Sam, noted above, admits that he does not date to allow himself more time to invest in his company, I do not know what other men do with this extra free time or to what end. However, time-use methods could provide insight on this disparity and shed light on how women's greater time investment in a generally low-yield process may contribute still further to gender inequality in life outcomes.

That the division of dating labor is this unequally borne begs questions that I cannot satisfyingly answer with this limited study. While sampling only singles between the ages of

25 and 35, it is possible that I pooled a subsample of involuntarily single women most eager to marry and a subsample of voluntarily single men less interested in partnering. Had I included in this study coupled subjects and then compared their dating effort prior to meeting their partners, I might control for this disparity in intention and find greater equity in dating labor exercised between genders. On the other hand, I might also find that men who desire a relationship spend less time dating than their female partners precisely because the pool of single women eager to partner is far more crowded than the pool of comparably eager men. Nevertheless, the possibility that women spend more time dating to achieve the same partnering outcomes as men warrants further investigation across a larger, more heterogeneous sample.

Beyond concerns of time-use inequality, everyone who dates invests a great deal of emotional energy into the process. For their part, women often attribute to dating symptoms of emotional burnout, fatigue, depression, anxiety, and insecurity. Future researchers might employ psychoanalytic methods that can better measure the effects of heavier investment in dating labor on women's mental health and emotional well-being.

THE DILEMMA OF NEGOTIATING SEX BETWEEN RELATIONSHIPS

Anthony Giddens (1992) predicted that as traditional regulation over sexual conduct weakened, a flourishing of new sexual expression would occur outside of the context of marriage. But as such liberation frees singles to pursue any number of sexual opportunities, no one can any longer presume others' sexual intentions. Singles seeking a relationship when dating can no longer presume their partners share their expectations.

As Chapter 7 shows, partnering is awkward for many women because as sexual mores may change, dating etiquette itself remains stubbornly traditional. Specifically, heterosexual courtship convention dictates male prerogative in proposing relationship formation. For women becoming sexually involved with men they are dating, this presents a confusing

double bind. While women who do not want a relationship feel it necessary to express their intentions plainly before becoming sexually involved to stave off ambiguity and miscommunication, women who do want to partner keep mum and suffer uncertainty. Women who want a relationship worry that to break courtship convention would invite reproval, triggering a host of negative stereotypes painting single women in their twenties and thirties as clingy, codependent and desperate to marry and have children.

For want of new partnering conventions that prioritize intentional transparency while dating, women abide by antiquated norms that disadvantage them in practice. It is clear that in keeping to traditional convention, women do not feel as though they are on equal footing with men when dating, especially in the process of relationship formation. While women consent to having sex while dating, they do not feel empowered to negotiate the terms of their arrangement outside the bedroom. Showing how women govern themselves around this bind exemplifies the analytical goal of this project: to show how common it is for single women to reinforce male privilege and visit gender oppression upon themselves when trying to partner under conditions of normalized gender inequality.

In this way, the sexual democracy Giddens forecast is hampered by lagging courtship norms. Fortunately, the ethical framework of mutual consent relied upon by many polyamorous adults could provide a much-needed corrective. When talking to prospective partners, many polyamorous adults consider it an ethical imperative to disclose their intentions and nontraditional perspective towards sexual relationships and monogamy before engaging in sexual relations (Easton and Hardy 2007). In turn, they proactively inquire about their partners' intentions and perspectives to ensure they can meet each other's needs and honor each other's boundaries. I believe this ritualization of mutual consent can potentially flatten the inequitable power dynamics created by traditional courtship convention as dating expectations change and sex becomes more casual.

Practically speaking, however, for this practice to take hold among straight monogamists, activists must first politicize the obsolescence of courtship convention. For women and men to approach each other as sexual equals in a world where many varieties of relationships are now possible, this outmoded convention for relationship formation—where men pursue and court women—must be challenged and replaced with new practices that prioritize mutual disclosure, consent and emotional authenticity. Future research could assist in this political effort by exploring further how non-monogamist and queer adults work to level interpersonal stratification when forming sexual relationships so that these practices might be held as ethical models for more equitable heterosexual practice.

RECOGNIZING THE STANDPOINT OF CONSTRAINT

While sociologists believe marital childbearing is becoming an elite family practice reserved for the highly educated, this study shows that many of those elite women who aspire to motherhood do not see feasible alternatives for family formation outside of traditional marriage. Certainly college-educated women have greater means to live independently outside of marriage but even two-income couples today struggle to raise children without shouldering considerable stress and sizable debt. Few women—even those with advanced degrees and good jobs—believe raising children to middle-class expectations is something they can afford on their own. Albeit advantaged in their educational attainment and career prospects, college-educated women eyeing the class ladder recognize that they stand little chance of making it very high as single mothers.

Short of a revolutionary overhaul of domestic policy that better supports working single parents and facilitates nontraditional family arrangements, raising children in the relatively privileged context of a two-income marriage offers far more appeal to professional women than most imaginable alternatives. In order to ensure this outcome, college-educated women discipline their lives through their twenties and thirties to accommodate future

expectations for middle-class family formation. This discipline entails their sexual practice. When women speak of taking dating seriously, they speak of it as work necessary to make that family possible. Because they fear their chances to attract husbands dwindle with age, they prioritize commitment in their youth rather than risk delay. Because they worry that their time to conceive is finite, they may even jettison relationship ideals and settle for less than they want from life to ensure that they can still mother on time.

While scholars frame marital childbearing as an emergent class privilege, the reverse timeline and the work that women must perform to keep to it speak to a gendered double standard in family-planning expectations among college-educated singles. In striking contrast to their female peers, the college-educated men interviewed for this study often spoke of marriage and fatherhood as being inevitable and certain to eventually happen in their lives. While men may not always enjoy being single, they do not widely share women's anxious disposition that prolonged singlehood across their twenties and thirties could harm their chances of starting a family. While many frame marital and childbearing delay as beneficial, affording college graduates more time to dedicate themselves to other life-building pursuits, men's greater sense of ease with delay should be recognized as a privilege not equally extended to their female peers.

Many social theorists believe that as traditional patriarchal institutions that once organized sexual life weaken, women will enjoy greater power to negotiate their sexual affairs on equal footing with men. But as Eva Illouz (2012) theorized, while such deinstitutionalization may loosen sexual mores, it does not necessarily lessen the binds that condition women's sexual choices. In a historical context where young adults are imagined freer than ever to plan their own lives, feminist inquiry must now turn to consider how, despite ostensible freedom, this planning is conditioned by gender inequality.

APPENDIX A: STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The process of partnering is often taken for granted by lifecourse and family researchers. In demography, marital timing is commonly framed as an individual preference or decision—one is thought to decide when it is best for themselves to marry. Yet, marriage is conditional, presenting itself as a possibility to individuals only after a partnership is formed. When marriage is framed as a choice, it obscures the work and the cascade of intervening circumstances that must happen before anyone can decide to marry.

In heterosexuality, this work that partnering entails is the joining of two gendered lives. While a heterosexual couple can aspire to gender parity within the context of their relationship, the social world individuals navigate as singles in pursuit of such a partnership remains characterized by gender stratification (Illouz 2012; Ridgeway 2011; George and Martin 2006). While college-educated men and women are most likely of any of their peers to marry, the conditions each must navigate so as to marry are not necessarily equitable. Straight women likely experience more social friction than straight men navigating systematically unequal conditions. However, if the social process of partnering is so often taken for granted in social research, so too is the conflict women negotiate in their efforts to partner with men.

My aim with this study is to analyze the process of partnering from the standpoint of singles so that the challenges and obstacles they face while trying to form relationships might be better incorporated into our theory of gender stratification. Using qualitative interview methods, I investigate how gender influences the ways in which straight singles think about relationships, family-planning and romantic commitment in their twenties and thirties. Specifically, my analysis pays heed to the ways in which gender influences subjects' perspectives on partnering. Below, I detail my methods for this project.

SAMPLE DESIGN AND RECRUITMENT

For this study, I pursued a purposive sample (Patton 1990:169) towards the end of answering my research question: how do young, straight, college-educated adults partner in the lifecourse? There are two reasons to consider the partnering practices of college graduates as vital to our understanding of family inequality. First, marital homophily among college graduates is considered a major driver of household inequality (Carbone and Cahn 2014; McCall and Percheski 2010). Secondly, while there is an extensive body of qualitative research investigating why poor and disadvantaged adults do not marry before having children (e.g. Edin and Nelson 2013; Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLaughlin 2005; Edin and Kefalas 2005), few studies employ these same methods to question how it is that college graduates deliver virtually all their children in the context of marriage. At a time when non-marital childbearing is now the norm for most new mothers in the United States (Cherlin, Ribar and Yasutake 2016), the marital childbearing of college-educated mothers is now the aberration in family formation that scholars must explain. While it is known that college graduates typically realize privileged family outcomes, what is not well understood is how, as singles, they approach partnering in the lifecourse so as to ensure these outcomes.

Between 2012 and 2014, I interviewed 88 college-educated volunteers in the cities of Boston and San Francisco. I chose these two cities as research sites for several reasons. First, both house multiple white-collar industries employing large numbers of young, highly educated professionals. Second, both are generally recognized as socially liberal and tolerant cities where sexual expression—in all its potential manifestations—is least likely to be sanctioned. In other words, I chose cities where both single men and women can anticipate a great deal of latitude and opportunity to pursue sexual connection outside of the context of marriage without fear of stigmatization or ostracization. If deinstitutionalization truly frees young people to pursue a sexual life of their own choosing, they would be freest to choose in

these cities. I further presumed in selecting these sites that a socially permissive culture would most readily provide volunteers of both genders who feel comfortable speaking frankly about their private sexual desires, expectations and experiences with a stranger within the context of an academic research study.

I recognize a purposive sampling strategy invites bias into my analysis. However, if my research motivation is to better understand specifically how single college-educated adults partner in the context of their own privileged milieux, a purposive sample best serves the needs of this inquiry. Because my sampling criteria is deliberately narrow and my recruitment strategy geographically limited, I do not claim my sample representative of the general population of single adults.

However, comparative qualitative research like this conducted across a variety of contexts may yield evidence that the process of partnering is conditioned by geography. As Cahn and Carbone (2010) observe, men and women marry and start families at much earlier ages in conservative regions, specifically the Southern and Midwestern states, than those living in coastal cities. It is likely that a similar study querying single college graduates living in conservative regions would find that they think about singlehood, partnering and dating much differently than do their similarly educated counterparts in liberal cities.

Because of the implicitly sensitive nature of an interview about sexuality in the lifecourse, I relied on several strategies to recruit volunteers. Primarily, I relied on poster recruitment, placing flyers (see Appendix B) with the study's intentions, eligibility requirements and contact information at bookshops, coffee shops and laundromats in residential neighborhoods throughout both cities. The flyer announced, "Singles needed for study on singlehood, dating and courtship" and described the interview's intent and scope: "to explore how individuals feel about their time being single. Participation entails a casual, conversational interview where we will discuss your experiences, concerns and hopes for the

future." Eligible and interested volunteers then emailed a dedicated study address through which a confidential, in-depth interview was scheduled at a safe, convenient location (most typically a coffee shop). To supplement this flyer-based strategy, I also asked for word-of-mouth recruitment assistance, giving flyers to study participants and colleagues in each city to distribute to a single friend meeting my study criteria. To reduce network bias, I recruited only one volunteer from each source.

In designing the qualifying criteria for my sample, I aimed to recruit single college graduates during the years they are most likely to marry, between the ages of 25 and 35 (Hymowitz et al. 2013; Payne 2012). Volunteers qualified if they held at least a Bachelor's degree. The flyer specified that single for this study's purpose meant not currently in a committed, formalized relationship with another person at the time of the interview. While the vast majority of respondents have never married, one man and two women had been divorced. Only one respondent, one of the divorced women, had a child. Meeting this eligibility criteria, recruitment yielded 88 volunteers: 52 women whose ages averaged around 27.5 and 36 men whose ages averaged around 29. I interviewed all volunteers who qualified. Personally, while I do not believe myself in a position to judge physical appearances, I have no reason to believe my sample atypical in beauty or attractiveness.

Prior to the interview, I asked respondents to identify in their own words their own gender, race and sexual orientation on a form designed expressly for this purpose (see Appendix D). The majority of respondents identified as white. For women, the racial breakdown for volunteers included: 35 white (67%), 7 Asian (13%), 4 Hispanic (8%), 3 multiracial (6%), 2 African-American (4%) and one respondent chose to describe themselves as "Other." For men, the breakdown of volunteers included: 32 white (89%), 3 Asian (8%), and 1 African-American (3%).

Most respondents identified as heterosexual. Among women, however, two identified themselves as bisexual (though both described never yet having dated or been otherwise sexually involved with women). All men interviewed for this study identified as straight, save one respondent who identified himself as "asexual-ish" but who described himself as nevertheless interested in romantic connections with women. I had intended to build a stratified sample of respondents, with 40 men and 40 women, 20 of each in each site. However, far more women volunteered for this study than men and male respondents proved far more challenging to recruit in both cities.

In addition to holding traditional four-year college degrees, half of the women and roughly a quarter of the men either held or were in the process of attaining an advanced degree at the time of the interview. Respondents held degrees from a variety of public and private universities from all over the country of various tiers of selectivity and prestige. Volunteers further worked in a variety of professions, including law, information technology, engineering, finance, real estate, business, sales, merchandising, management, marketing, counseling, nursing, and secondary or higher education.

Harvard University requires all investigators conducting research with human subjects, including interview-based studies, to undergo National Institute of Health ethics training and submit their research design for institutional review. Required by this procedure is the procurement of informed consent at the onset of each interview and the assurance that volunteers' rights be honored in accordance to NIH ethical standards. During the consent protocol, respondents are reminded of the voluntary and confidential nature of the interview and of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Only one respondent made this request for withdrawal. This request has been honored and they do not count among the 88 cases sampled for this study.

Great care is taken to protect the confidentiality of respondents. Towards this end, pseudonyms are used both during the interview and in study documentation. Because data security is a modern research risk, I relied on analog documentation methods for collecting identifying information (see Appendix D) so that no names or address information are connected to digital recordings, transcripts or any other digital data. For the purposes of this study, all identifying information is contained in a physical binder secured in a locked desk drawer to be destroyed at the completion of all analysis.

Though the recruitment information and consent procedure warned respondents that the interview would touch on sexual subject matter, I took care to warn respondents during the interview itself that they were free to skip questions that made them feel uncomfortable or anxious. I hoped this strategy would provide sufficient forewarning to respondents with any biographical history with abuse, rape or other sexual trauma who might experience distress at such questioning. Though several respondents did share their experiences with sexual violence, no one declined to answer questions regarding their sexual experiences.

APPROPRIATENESS OF METHOD

The objective of this study is to better understand how young singles approach partnering in the lifecourse. Because sociologists have every reason to assume the sexual field singles navigate in search of partnership is stratified by gender (Illouz 2012; Green 2008; Martin and George 2006), researchers should assume perspectives, motivations and expectations to vary across genders. Standpoint theory greatly broadens our understanding of social experience by compelling researchers to consider not only how inequality affects behaviors but also how individuals unequally situated vary in interpreting an unequal reality (Harding 1991; Collins 1990; Smith 1987). Towards this end, I rely on an in-depth interview method that I believe grants unique analytical access to sexual subjectivity.

Kathy Edin and her colleagues (Edin and Nelson 2013; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin and Lein 1997; Edin 2000) have long exercised the spirit of standpoint theory by using interview-based approaches that I have modelled herein. These interview-based studies prove invaluable to urban scholarship because they generate thick, context-specific understanding of how intersectional disadvantage conditions the perspective and life-planning strategies of the inner-city poor. In an effort to understand how gender inequality affects those relatively more privileged, I developed a semistructured interview guide investigating college-educated singles' perspectives towards life-planning, sex and partnering (see Appendix E). I believe the guide is the most crucial element in my research protocol. Its open-ended questions elicit from respondents critical reflection of their own lived experiences, their social milieux and personal desires. I designed the interview to take approximately two to three hours to complete. By interviewing both men and women, I am able to compare and contrast responses to the same questions by gender.

I segmented the interview into six parts. First, I asked respondents several questions pertaining to their working definition of "adulthood" and how they judge themselves against this personal construct. If respondents feel that they have yet to attain adult status, this module then asks what they believe yet still must happen before they can feel themselves "fully" adult (and whether or not feeling adult poses a concern at this stage of the lifecourse). Then, I inquired into their views towards marriage. If a subject desired to marry, I probed for further detail as to the type of person they would like to marry, why they would prefer marriage over cohabitation and when they feel it best to marry. The third module investigated respondents' efforts to partner in the past year, including questions pertaining to their dating and sexual experiences. This module also asked respondents to describe their current goals for dating (marriage, long-term commitment, sex, recreation, etc.) as well as their efforts towards meeting them. A fourth module asked how respondents regarded gender's role in

sexuality, focusing on how respondents think men and women compare within their peer milieu with respect to partnering and marriage opportunity in the lifecourse. The fifth module asked respondents to discuss their views towards sex outside the context of a committed romantic relationship. The final module documents respondents' sexual biography, documenting each committed relationship respondents experienced since graduating from college. This last section concludes by asking respondents to describe how they anticipate their sexual biography to play out across the next decade.

Despite nominally similar life goals, men and women describe gender-variant strategies and expectations for dating, partnering and family-planning. Open-ended questions encourage serious reflection by respondents that can be clarified and expounded upon with follow-up probes to encourage still further contemplation. These responses lend considerable insight into how volunteers endue singlehood, sex, dating, relationships and marriage with meaning and feeling. This research strategy of reflective interviewing is vital to furthering scholars' understanding of how actors metabolize reality into action and make sense of their social worlds (Lamont and Swidler 2014).

CODING AND HYPOTHESES

From the first few interviews, I generated two major hypotheses about how men and women approach singlehood and partnering:

1. Straight men and women construct gendered schedules for achieving marriage in the lifecourse.
2. These discordant orientations must be resolved within the same heterosexuality creating gender conflict in relational, dating and sexual negotiations.

During the interview process, I made note of repeated phrasing respondents used to describe their experiences and perceptions navigating sexuality in the years between college and marriage (e.g. "dating burnout," "biological clock," "emotional immaturity"). Seeing these

emic codes coalesce across varied biographies and geographic sites convinced me of the systemic reality of the problems these phrases described.

Strauss and Corbin (1997) recommend axial subcoding to facilitate cross-sample comparison. My code categories record how positively or negatively men and women describe feeling about the six major themes addressed during the interview: adulthood, marriage (or lifelong committed partnership), dating, relationship formation, nonrelational sex, and sexual history. To organize cross-sample comparison of these codes, I used a software package, MaxQDA, which allowed me to tag and recall passages across interviews fitting my coding schematics.

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT FLYER

Singles Needed

for Study on Singlehood,

Dating and Courtship

I am seeking singles between the ages of 25 and 35 who currently live in the Bay area. Respondents are eligible to participate if they have obtained at least a Bachelor's degree and are currently not in a committed relationship. The intent of this study is to explore how individuals feel about their time being single.

Participation entails a casual, conversational interview where we will discuss your experiences, concerns and hopes for the future at a place of your choosing (typically a coffee shop, park or public library). This confidential interview typically lasts 90 minutes and no identifying information will be used.

As thanks for your participation, you will be given a $5 Starbucks giftcard. Respondents often find that the interview is helpful in that they rarely have a receptive audience to discuss these matters candidly and most genuinely enjoy the experience.

To volunteer for the study or for more information, please email Holly at courtshipstudy@gmail.com. I am happy to answer any questions you may have regarding my study.

Thank you!

Holly Wood, PhD Candidate
Harvard University
Department of Sociology
33 Kirkland Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

APPENDIX C: STUDY PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND

	Pseudonym	Age	Sexual Orientation*	Racial or Ethnic Categorization*	Occupation
MEN					
Boston					
1	Chris	26	Straight	White	Private Equity Analyst
2	John	25	Straight	White	Product Engineer
3	Jaime	25	Straight	White	Research Assistant
4	Anthony	28	Straight	White	Grad Student
5	Phillip	26	Straight	White	Recruiter
6	Dirk	27	Straight	White	Medical Salesman
7	Raffi	27	Straight	White	Network Administrator
8	Zachary	32	Straight	White	Systems Administrator
9	Patrick	35	Straight	White	Research Coordinator
10	Peyton	34	Straight	White	Systems Administrator
11	Adrian	33	Straight	White	Program Manager
12	Brian	32	Straight	White	Software Engineer
13	Frank	31	Straight	White	Engineer
14	Garrett	28	Straight	White	I.T. Technician
15	Tyler	32	Straight	White	I.T. Technician
16	Randy	26	Straight	African-American	Research Fiscal Officer
17	Abe	26	Straight	White	Admin. Assistant

SF

18	Carl	29	Straight	White	Filmmaker
19	Walter	29	Straight	White	Writer
20	Ray	30	Straight	Asian	PhD Candidate
21	Ai	33	Straight	Asian	Systems Administrator
22	Richard	27	Straight	White	Analyst
23	Kevin	31	Straight	White	UX Researcher
24	Jude	25	Straight	Asian	Unemployed
25	Brody	27	Straight	White	Analyst
26	Alejandro	25	Straight	White	Venture Capitalist
27	Sam	26	Straight	White	CEO-Startup Founder
28	Neil	30	Straight	White	Startup Founder
29	Lyle	30	Straight/Asexual	White	Programmer
30	Xavier	27	Straight	White	Political Organizer
31	Tom	28	Straight	White	Sports League Manager
32	Ethan	28	Straight	White	Producer
33	Bruce	26	Straight	White	Financial Analyst
34	Byron	27	Straight	White	Market Researcher
35	Dean	33	Straight	White	Marketer
36	Seamus	31	Straight	White	Electronics Engineer

	Pseudonym	Age	Sexual Orientation	Race	Occupation
WOMEN					
Boston					
1	Laura	27	Bisexual	White	Library Paraprofessional
2	Kathy	25	Straight	White	Child Therapist
3	Anrika	25	Straight	Asian-American	Nonprofit Chief of Staff
4	Solange	27	Straight	White	Graduate Student
5	Beth	31	Straight	White	Administrative Assistant
6	Marissa	25	Straight	White	Faculty Assistant
7	Sandra	27	Straight	White	Political Consultant
8	Emma	29	Straight	White	Researcher
9	Lilly	24	Straight	White	Waitress
10	Jade	25	Straight	White	Higher Ed. Administrator
11	Elizabeth	26	Straight	White	Counselor
12	Lea	34	Straight	White	Teacher
13	Marquita	28	Straight	Hispanic	Asst. Manager
14	Clara	25	Straight	White	Graduate Student
15	Aileen	26	Straight	Hispanic	Graduate Student
16	Julie	26	Straight	White	Financial Analyst
17	Mattie	26	Straight	White	Higher Ed. Administrator
18	Jane	25	Straight	White	PhD Student
19	Molly	25	Straight	White	Creative Director
20	Lacey	26	Straight	White	Marketing Manager
21	Gabriella	26	Straight	White	Teacher

22	Maxine	29	Straight	White	Higher Ed. Administrator
23	Gray	26	Straight	Black	Legislative Researcher
24	Nicky	34	Straight	White	Student Advisor
	SF				
26	Hannah	26	Straight	White	Community Manager
27	Scout	26	Straight	White	Writer
28	Angela	25	Bisexual	Asian	Technical Support Engineer
29	Sarah	30	Straight	White	Graduate Student
30	Maggie	33	Straight	Other	Project Manager
31	River	28	Straight	Asian	Recruiter
32	Zoe	33	Straight	White	Post-Doc
33	Fiona	25	Straight	Asian	Public Relations
34	Maya	28	Straight	Latina	Higher Ed. Administrator
35	Bethany	23	Straight	White	Social Media Strategist
36	Catelyn	29	Straight	White	RN
37	Calista	32	Straight	Asian	Specialist
38	Brie	28	Straight	Multi-racial	Admin
39	Alicia	30	Straight	White	Product marketer
40	Judith	29	Straight	White	Journalist
41	Sophie	27	Straight	Multi-racial	Marketing
42	Lorraine	28	Straight	White	Personal Assistant
43	Claude	27	Straight	Hispanic	Product Manager
44	Bianca	27	Straight	Asian	Marketing Associate
45	Betty	26	Straight	White	Writer

46	Amy	26	Straight	White	Non-profit
47	Paige	34	Straight	White	Product Manager
48	Dylan	28	Straight	White	Buyer
49	Alayne	30	Straight	White	Law student
50	Chloe	27	Straight	Black	Attorney
51	Helen	26	Straight	Asian	Law student
52	Delphine	29	Straight	White	Rating Specialist

APPENDIX D: INTAKE FORM

Name: _____

Birthdate: _____

Alma Mater: _____ _____ **Year**: _____

Post-Grad: _____ **Year**:_____

Gender: _____ **Sexual Orientation**: _____

Race: _____

Occupation: _____

Phone: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____

Mom's Phone: _____

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introduction

1. Adulthood is a fuzzy concept. What do you think being an adult means today?
2. Tell me how adult you feel today.
3. Tell me about anything you feel you still need to do or accomplish in order to feel more like an adult.
4. Tell me about when it clicked (or will click) for you that you *were* an adult.
5. How do you feel about being single right now?
6. Does being single ever affect how adult you feel?
7. Five years ago, did you anticipate being single at your age or did you think you'd be married? TMMAT. (*Tell me more about that*)
8. Do you think being in a serious relationship plays a role in *becoming* an adult or do you think you need to be an adult *before* you can start a serious relationship? TMMAT.
9. What role, if any, do you think marriage plays in adulthood? TMMAT.

Marriage

I'm going to ask you some general questions about marriage and your thoughts about it.

1. Why do you believe people today get married as opposed to just living together indefinitely?
2. In what ways does getting married change a relationship?
3. Is marriage something you want for yourself?
    a. Tell me why or why not.
4. How would you feel if you never got married?
5. How do you think your life change if you were married?

    a. How would your day-to-day life be different?

6. When do you think will be the optimal time for you *personally* to marry?
7. Why do you think women get married at earlier ages than men?
8. Tell me about anything you still think you need to do, finish or accomplish before you'd feel ready to marry?
9. Do you feel like you still have to become someone you are currently not before you can marry? TMMAT.
10. Do you feel like you have control as to *when* you'll get married? TMMAT.
11. Have you always wanted to get married as much as you do now or has this changed for you over time? TMMAT.
12. Do you have friends who are anxious about getting married? Tell me about them.
    a. What are their concerns? Do you share some them?
    b. Do you have any friends who don't want to get married? What do they think?.
        1. What do you think about that?
13. Describe for me the kind of marriage you envision for yourself. What does it look like?
14. Think about a fictional couple that you admire. Who are they? What aspects of that couple do you want for your future relationship?

Dating History

Whether or not you're actively dating now, I'm going to ask you some questions about your dating history since you graduated from college.

1. Many people tell me they didn't really date until after college. What do you think have been the biggest lessons you've had to learn since you started dating? TMMAT.
2. Tell me about the bits of dating advice you've collected over the years.

3. When people have given you advice about who to date, what kind of person do they typically describe would be best for you to date?
    a. What age range do people recommend you date? Why do you think these ages?
    b. How likely do you think it is that you'd start a relationship with someone 5 years older than yourself? TMMAT.
4. If you had to count, how many first dates would you say you've been on since you graduated from college?
    a. Where have you generally met these dates?
    b. How do you feel about approaching a person you don't know well for a date? Has this changed over time?
5. Would you describe finding dates relatively easy or difficult since you've graduated college? Tell me why you think that is.
6. How does the dating scene here compare to other cities you've been?
7. Let's talk about the role technology plays in all of this. Do you think all the technology we use today makes it easier or harder for people to date? TMMAT.
8. Where do you think people most commonly meet after college? How have your experiences with these places been?
9. Do you feel like a person has any responsibilities towards a person they are currently dating but with whom they are not in a committed relationship? What are these?
    a. How do you feel you've been treated by people you've dated but were not committed to in the past? TMMAT.
10. In the past, when you have found yourself developing feelings for a person, has it been easy or difficult for you to transition from dating to being a couple? TMMAT.

a. **If Difficult**: Tell me more about why you think it's been difficult to make that transition. (How did this make you feel?)
b. Who do you think generally has more power in deciding whether or not you're in a relationship: you or your partner?

11. Do you feel at this point in time you have all the interpersonal skills necessary to make for a healthy relationship or do you think you're still working on that? TMMAT.

Dating Present

Now I'm going to ask you some questions regarding the last year.

1. Would you describe yourself as actively dating right now?
    a. **If no:** Tell me more about that.
    b. **If no**: When do you think you stopped dating?
    c. **If no:** Do you think you'll be trying to date within the next year?
    d. **If no**: When do you think you'll start dating again?
    e. **If yes:** People date for a lot of different reasons. Tell me what are your goals are for dating right now?
    f. **If yes:** Describe for me the ***person*** you'd most like to meet right now. Has this changed over time?
    g. **If yes**: Describe for me the ***relationship*** you'd most like to have right now. Has this changed over time?
    h. **If Yes**: Thinking back on the last year, describe for me all the things you've been doing in order to find a person you want to be with.
        i. Do you think you could be doing more to meet this person?
        ii. What else could you be doing that you aren't doing?
2. In a typical week during the past year, how many hours per week do you think you spend dating or trying to find someone to date?

    a. Walk me through how you spend this time.
3. How many first dates have you been on in the past year?
    a. Thinking back, tell me the story of who arranged each of these first dates and how they went.
4. A lot of people use online dating these days. What are your thoughts about it?
    a. Are you currently on an online dating site? What site?
        i. If a friend asked you whether you would recommend the site, how would you describe your experience?
        ii. Are there many people who you could see yourself dating for the long-term on that site?
        iii. What age range are you looking for on that site? Why?
5. A lot of single people tell me they want to have an equal partnership but don't really explain what that means. What do you think it means?
    a. Is that something you want for yourself?
    b. Do you think equality between partners is important for a relationship? TMMAT.
    c. Do you ever worry about being overpowered by a partner in a relationship? TMMAT.
    d. Describe for me the person you would need to be with in order to have an equal relationship.
6. Tell me what you think is the best part is when it comes to dating, in general.
7. Tell me what you think is the worst part when it comes to dating, in general.
8. Would you continue dating someone who told you they just wanted to "keep things casual" and not start a relationship with you?
    a. Have you ever done this in the past?

b. Have you ever said this to someone you were dating but did not want to be in a relationship with? TMMAT.
c. What does it mean to "keep things casual?"

9. Tell me about the things you've done in the past to make yourself more attractive to the opposite sex.

Gender and Peers

Now I'm going to ask you a few questions about what you know about the dating world in general.

1. Have you ever experienced the quality of your friendship network changing in any way as your friends pair off into couples? TMMAT.
2. Do you have any single friends who really like dating? What do they like about it? What about you?
3. Do you have any single friends who really hate dating? What do they hate about it? What about you?
4. Do you feel like men and women are raised with the same expectations when it comes to finding love in their twenties or do they differ?
5. Do you think men and women your age feel the same way about casual sex or do they differ? TMMAT.
6. Do you think men and women your age feel the same way about starting long-term relationships or do they differ? TMMAT.
7. Do you think men and women your age feel the same way about being single? TMMAT.
8. Do you think people treat single men differently than they do single women? TMMAT.

9. Do you think single men and women have the same things to worry about in their twenties? TMMAT.
10. Do you think men and women who are looking for a long-term relationship experience the dating scene the same way? How do they differ?
    a. What do you think women's experiences are like?
    b. What do you think men's experiences are like?
    c. Who do you think has more options when it comes to finding commitment-minded partners? What makes you think this?
11. If a woman's magazine writer asked you for the best piece of relationship advice you could give to women about men your age, what would it be?
12. If a men's magazine writer asked you for the best piece of relationship advice you could give to men about women your age, what would it be?
13. Do you think men and women have different rules to follow when it comes to dating? Tell me about those.
14. How do you think dating has changed for women in the past twenty years? What about for men?
15. Do you think men and women have equal power in making decisions when it comes to starting relationships?
    a. What makes you think this?

Sex

Now, I have a few questions here about sex.

1. Do you think you could decide whether or not you want to be in a relationship with a person before you've had sex with them? TMMAT.
2. If you had to count, how many sex partners have you had since you lost your virginity.

3. Regardless of what your other dating goals are, how interested are you in pursuing casual sex right now?
    a. How has your interest in this changed over time?
    b. Have you ever engaged in casual sex? How do you feel about that now?
4. How do you tell if a partner is only interested in seeing you for casual sex?
    a. Is this a concern?
5. Have you had a "friends with benefits" situation with someone who you knew you didn't want to start a relationship with? Tell me the whole story
    a. What about with someone with whom you *did* want to start a relationship? Tell me the whole story.
    b. Many people tell me that it's difficult to be on the same page regarding expectations in these types of relationships. How have you gone about making sure you are on the same page when you are not officially a couple? Do you feel responsible for your partner's feelings in these scenarios?
6. Have you ever find yourself having sex you don't want to have in order to keep someone around or make someone interested in you? TMMAT.

Romantic Biography

Now I'm going to ask you about all the people with whom you've been in a relationship with since you graduated from college. I'll be writing their first initial to keep track on a scrap piece of paper. In describing each relationship, I want you to describe for me the following:

- How you met your partner
- The entire process by which you came to be an "official" couple.
- If you've ever been in love, tell me when in those relationships you realized you were in love.

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about each of these relationships.

1. Did you ever experience the "are we or aren't we" phase of dating? TMMAT.

2. Tell me how you came to feel like you wanted to start a relationship with each of these partners.

   a. When you were first getting to know one another, what about them made you think they would be good partners?

   b. Since college, have you ever wanted to start a relationship with someone who didn't want to with you? TMMAT.

3. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the best possible, how would you rate how your past partners have treated you during the relationship?

4. How have you handled these breakups?

5. Reflecting back, what major lessons about yourself and relationships have you learned from these relationships?

6. What fears do think you might have about falling in love again or are you ready to love again?

7. What do you think you've learned from your past relationships that will make your next relationship stronger?

Future

Now to wrap up, I'm just going to ask you some questions about your future.

1. If I were to interview you again 5 years from now and you were still unmarried, how do you think future you would feel about that?
   a. What about ten years?
   b. How likely do you think it is that you'll marry within the next five years?
2. Is conceiving your own children important to you?

a. **If Yes:** When do you think will be the optimal time in your life to have children?
b. **If Yes:** What do you think you still need to do or accomplish before you can have children?
c. **If Yes:** How would you feel if you could not have your own children?
d. **If Yes:** If in 10 years you were still single, would you go ahead anyway and have children? TMMAT.

3. There's a lot of questions I might not have asked that would tell me more about you. Do you think there are any questions I didn't ask you that I should have?

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